

Title of recording: NFWM Interview with Dominique Aulisio on August 17, 2011

Title of Series: National Farm Worker Ministry 2011 Documentary Project

Interviewer: Ryan Nilsen, NFWM-NC Summer Intern through Duke Divinity School

Interviewee: Dominique Aulisio, NFWM-FL YAYA

Date and time: 5:45PM on August 17, 2011

Location: NFWM Office in Orlando, FL

Length of Interview: 48 minutes and 19 seconds

Length of Transcription: 10 pages

Transcriber: Kelley Morgan, ed. Ryan Nilsen

Name Abbreviations:

R= Ryan Nilsen

L= Dominique Aulisio

NFWM = National Farm Worker Ministry

YAYA = Youth and Young Adults

AMA = Active Women's Alliance / Alianza de Mujeres Activas

FLOC = Farm Labor Organizing Committee

CIW = Coalition of Immokalee Workers

UFW = United Farm Workers

EPA = Environmental Protection Agency

Interview Summary: In this interview, Ryan Nilsen asks Dominique Aulisio about how she got involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry YAYA program, how her beliefs and values have affected her involvement, how she has been impacted by her involvement, and what she would say to people who might be thinking about becoming involved. In her responses, Aulisio discusses meeting Dolores Huerta, her Catholic upbringing and Catholic social teaching, YAYA work with Florida farm worker organizations AMA and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and also the FLOC in North Carolina. She also comments on student organizing, connections between women's and gender studies and the farm worker movement, NFWM board meetings, and her plans for the future.

R: This is Ryan Nilsen. I'm sitting with Dominique Aulisio, at the National Farm Worker Ministry office in Orlando, Florida. It's August 17th at about 5:45 and we'll talk a little while.

R: So, Dominique, how did you first get involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry?

D: My first time coming into contact with the National Farm Worker Ministry was my freshman year, the second week of school. I went to a talk about labor rights; that's all I knew, and it turns out that Dolores Huerta was giving the talk. I actually asked her in friendly conversation before the talk who she was and where she was from, and she explained to me that she helped co-found the United Farm Workers Union with Cesar Chavez. She was super sweet and patient, and at the event, Larisa, the organizer with National Farm Worker Ministry came to invite students to come and participate in an upcoming march and she was really wonderful; she spoke with a lot of passion, and she asked if any students would be interested in forming a group, to mobilize other students to participate in the march, and to support farm worker campaigns. And, so I jumped on board everything that I heard Dolores say, and Larisa had said, definitely moved me, and I was already really interested in.... I grew up in the Catholic Church and had had opportunities to work with the farm worker community in Lakeland, where I'm from, and I jumped at the opportunity to help mobilize people to that march. It was a Coalition of Immokalee Workers' march in Miami, against Burger King, and after that, Larisa really stuck with me, and she was coming from Deland at the time, from the office over in Deland, and we started slowly but surely building a group that wanted to continue to support the campaigns National Farm Worker Ministry was working on, and that evolved into the Orlando YAYA chapter that is doing really well now, and I think, has done a lot of great work supporting the local farm worker organizations here, and the national campaigns that we support.

R: Cool. So when you say, everything that Dolores Huerta and Larisa were saying at that first meeting, you said that it moved you. What sort of things do you remember?

D: I honestly really don't remember what they said, but it was enough to get me involved. I think, I mean, yeah, so I'm sure that what they said was brilliant, but....yeah, I don't know.

R: That's cool. You mentioned growing up Catholic and that having exposed you to farm workers in some way before. How have your beliefs and values, whether they're Catholic or not, affected your interest in the ministry?

D: Sure. So I guess my whole belief system is definitely shaped in the Catholic Church. My family is Catholic, and I went to a Catholic school from the time I was in preschool to 8th grade, and I was really involved with the youth ministry during high school, and I was definitely really drawn to liberation theology, to the Catholic social teachings, and my mom, actually, when I was in high school, she participated in the Just Faith program as a participant and then as a co-instructor for the course. So we really had a...kind of...um.... our household and my school, some of my teachers were really great places to learn about injustice and the Church's position on inequality and to learn about some of the really inspiring activists in the church, like Oscar Romero, from El Salvador, and Dorothy Day, and....so..... And through our church, there was, and still is a farm worker

ministry with some of the different Catholic churches in my area that, basically, just provide basic services, and they do a couple of events every year welcoming farm workers back when the season starts, the migrant farm workers in the area, and just providing, like, there's always free food at the event, and there's clothes, and different household supplies, and so it's mostly charity and social services, but it was an opportunity for me to see the huge need in the community. I had no idea that that type of poverty existed, really crushing poverty, within our own Catholic community. During high school I had volunteered at a few of the events with the farm worker ministry and that was definitely something that had a huge impact on me.

R: Do you think you could say why you chose to get more involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry rather than the Catholic Church in college?

D: Yeah, I mean, so, when I...hmm.

R: I guess I was assuming that you weren't also involved....

D: I wasn't.... I guess..... I mean, when I got to college..... I had always been really passionate about social justice, but that became my focus. In high school, I was definitely more focused on theology, and when I got to college, I had some life changes that made me feel like anything that we were doing in the church that wasn't focused on working toward ending the injustices that were to me so overwhelming, um, I felt like that wasn't where I needed to be, and so I kind of searched around a little bit and didn't find what I was looking for with the campus ministry at the time. It's definitely changed a little bit since then I think, but, at that time I was still really focused on action. That's just me, that's where I was at at the time because obviously a lot of activism is supported by the really wonderful spiritual community, but that's just how it worked out for me.

R: Cool. Can you share with me a specific memory, maybe, about your early involvement with the ministry after that first event where you met Dolores Huerta and asked who she was?

D: Um....

R: You can take some time, too.

D: Yeah, I know, I was like, trying to think, before I came..... Okay, I will talk about our first bicycle delivery. That was probably a year later. So up until that point, we had been.... The first thing that we were working on after.... The CIW march was in I think, November, and we were working on a petition to have the EPA ban methyl iodide. That was really exciting because it was a wonderful outreach opportunity, so Larisa and I.... I went with her to St. Augustine to reach out to people there, and we had other students getting petitions signed. So that was, like, a great opportunity to outreach and do something that was just so simple and clear-cut that we were and are still using this incredibly dangerous chemical that is so harmful to everyone who eats food and to the farm workers. So that was a project that was great because we had really clear goals and

it was just so simple for people to understand and get involved in. Um, so the bicycle delivery I wanted to tell you about, I think it probably was a year later once we had a YAYA chapter going. The bicycle project is where we find or we have people donate bicycles. Many of them need to be repaired, so we have volunteers repair the bicycles. It's a great way to recycle the bikes that otherwise would probably end up in a landfill, and we also love it when people give bikes that are in working condition. That's very nice also. And then we talk with a local farm worker organization who can identify people in the community who really need a bicycle, and we make a community event out of it, and we've now donated over 250 bicycles, maybe more than that, and we've held a lot of these community...usually we share a meal and have a community conversation, and then we distribute the bikes. So the first one was with the Alianza de Mujeres Activas, in Seville, which in English is the Active Women's Alliance, and we call them AMA for short, and it was very exciting because they have a really strong community. All of their meetings took place at the house of Ana Laura, who is the president of the organization, in the pavilion that the community had built next to her house, and if I remember right, it was a potluck and we all brought food. They probably made food also, though, and it was so exciting for them to invite us into their community. It was a really special experience; we brought a group of students from Orlando, and... Seville is a little teeny tiny rural community that's pretty isolated; to them, I remember Ana Laura was saying, like, you know, Orlando feels like another world because it's pretty far, and especially, one of the reasons the bicycles are so necessary is because a lot of the farm workers there and people in the community don't have driver's licenses because of their immigration status, or they just simply can't afford a car, and so they end up walking everywhere; there's not an accessible grocery store. We heard stories about pregnant women walking to the hospital in Deland, which is, like, miles. It's, like, 30 minutes driving. It's far. Walking to the hospital is ridiculous. And, you know, anytime someone, whether it's taking their kids to the doctor or to get groceries, they would either have to walk or find a ride. So it was a really needed service, but just the experience of sitting down with the ladies..... that experience for me was one where I felt like the barrier between communities was really tangible. I think that for the students coming from Orlando, there was definitely, you know, they felt really uncomfortable and out of their element because all of a sudden they were the minority stepping into somebody else's community as a guest, and they had the opportunity to feel like, "Okay, I don't know what the cultural norms are here, and I don't really know anything about these people's lives, and I don't know, you know, maybe how I'm supposed to act, and I think that all of the assumptions that middle-class students hold about farm workers.... That's what created such a tangible awkwardness, and also the language barrier, of course. But we had really intentional little breakouts, like we had the community discussion together and then we put a translator with small groups of people to make sure that everybody felt the ability to communicate, and one of the main goals was just to hang out and give people the opportunity to say, "Hey, OK, like, this is fun, easy, and...farm workers are people just like us, and like to have fun and do the same things that we do," because the sad reality is that a lot of people don't understand that, and even though I wanted to understand that, I had to say for myself that, like, I've undergone, like a 360-degree transformation since that first event, as far as being able to respect farm workers as people and hang out and understand, we're all really exactly the same. It's just, I think, a

really sad reality of our society, and you HAVE to have events like that and intentional spaces for people to get together and get to know each other in order to destroy those assumptions that really do keep us divided.

R: You say that you've had a really significant change in your perspective through some of the awkwardness, in realizing the barriers between these communities. What do you think is the general effect for other students? What have you seen? What kind of changes have you seen in other students through these kinds of experiences, meeting farm workers?

D: Um...well, I don't think everyone was as clueless as I was. At this point, we have, like, the Orlando YAYA chapter is pretty diverse; we have a wonderful group of people from all walks of life, who, um, you know, some of them, some of the other YAYA chapters are from farm worker families, have done farm work, you know. So not everyone came in like I did. [Laughs.] Of people who were there at the beginning and have stuck with things, definitely.... I don't know.... I mean, I guess this is a conversation that's not that easy to have, and I can't really speak for people. But, I guess I can observe that other members of the chapter definitely, who, maybe felt really uncomfortable trying to initiate a conversation with a farm worker, or with anyone from another culture who speaks a different language, because I think the language barrier is very uncomfortable for a lot of people. So I see that they feel comfortable approaching people and asking about their lives and trying to get to know them as people. And, as far as the women in AMA go, we have created such a wonderful relationship with them. I feel like I'm welcome in their community whenever we go, and since then, we've co-sponsored a soccer game fundraiser together; that was a blast, and it was YAYA playing against AMA, and we've really created a wonderful partnership with them, and I mean, wow, thinking back to that first event we did with them, we've come a really long way. Actually, I see the picture from the soccer game on the wall here.

R: You could take your picture with you as a reference.

D: Yes, sounds good.

R: So you mentioned campus education events, like policy work, the bicycle project. Do you think that the things that you've mentioned are a pretty good description overall of what YAYA is doing, or what your experience has been, working with the National Farm Worker Ministry? Are there other aspects that you haven't mentioned?

D: Yes. Definitely, in the past couple of years, we got really involved in the fight for ag jobs and for immigration reform, and then in the past legislative session of Florida against the Arizona-style anti-immigrant legislation, and through that, we, uh, ended up organizing rallies, some of them co-sponsored with organizations, but some of them rallies that we organized ourselves and we mobilized other organizations in the community to come out, and so I think that engaging with our representatives and working with the farm worker organizations in the area to make those protests happen, doing follow-up work, some of the follow-up lobbying, that was work that was both

really crucial and a really wonderful opportunity for people in the chapter to grow as activists and to kind of realize our potential, to realize our power in the community, I guess the power of the community to make noise, get our message out in the media, and show that there is a really, um, viable farm worker and immigrant rights movement in Central Florida. The work that we did and the skills that we carried through from that is a really important part of YAYA.

R: Is the.... I guess the growing as an activist and the educational process developing skills.... Do you think that Larisa and the people on staff are intentionally trying to develop those skills in youth and young adults? Or is that just what happens when you get thrown in, when you really are working in these campaigns?

D: No, definitely. We definitely are intentional about it because, I mean, the idea is that everyone who touches us feels empowered to mobilize others and to get stuff done, like make change happen. So, yeah, Larisa is the most wonderful, incredible organizing trainer, I think, that I have ever had the joy of being in organizer training with. She has created several trainings working on skills from recruiting to working with the media, how to run a meeting where you delegate tasks, and follow through with them, which, you know, those are the essential parts of organizing a rally, how to delegate and work as a team, and make sure that everyone follows through with their piece of the event, and the planning. And of course we always had support from the staff, both here in Florida and St. Louis, the national office. But yeah, that's a really intentional piece of YAYA's developing leadership.

R: You're mentioning this, kind of, national picture. What's your relationship with the national office and what's going on in other regions of the country?

D: Um, I think it kinda just depends on what's happening in the farm worker movement. I mean, obviously, when it comes to May and FLOC has been organizing their action at the RJ Reynolds Shareholders' meeting....

R: Can you tell me about that?

D: Yes, I can. What do you want know about it? [Laughs.] I mean, at that time of the year, we're definitely way more in touch with people in North Carolina and the Board of National Farm Worker Ministry, and the staff, have always been really supportive, in helping us financially get up to North Carolina. We've been able to bring a really nice sized group, local churches in North Carolina lend a hand, to make it happen, to give us a place to stay up there. So, for example, with the AgJobs campaign, trying to get that legislation passed, to give farm workers a pathway to citizenship, we were in touch with the UFW and also talking to Virginia a lot about that legislation...sorry, the National Farm Worker Ministry director, Virginia.

R: With these experiences and what's going on on the national scale, in North Carolina, and in other parts, do you have an impression or a strong idea about how Florida is

distinct, maybe the history of Florida, or the contemporary issues in Florida, how the National Farm Worker Ministry's work here is unique?

D: Well, definitely what we're doing with YAYA is unique to Florida, um, and I would really love to see it happen in other places where we, uh, I mean, I know out in LA, I unfortunately don't know much about the work in LA, in that office, but I do know that they have had some youth involvement over there, and in North Carolina also. But I guess as far as focusing on building chapters of young people who are organizing their own events and in some cases developing campaigns and partnerships with farm worker organizations, that's been unique here.

R: Cool. I think you may have answered this, uh, to some degree, but what would you say has kept you involved with the ministry in the last...you said 5, 4 years?

D: 4 years, yes. Obviously, relationships are always very important. My relationship with Larisa as the organizer, with the other staff people, with other people in the YAYA chapter, and with the farm worker organizations and individual farm workers here in the area... But I think, also, I love National Farm Worker Ministry because I think the mission of supporting any farm worker organization who is organizing to change their lives, to improve their workplaces, is just...the mission is so important and we are really unique as an organization and, man, the board members are just awesome! The board members of National Farm Worker Ministry have been around in the farm worker movement forever, right? You know, they were hanging out with Cesar Chavez back in the day, and they have so much historical memory, they're so genuine in their passion for the farm worker movement. Being around them is just a 100% affirmation that this organization has got it going on. And then, also the urgency that National Farm Worker Ministry brings to our work. You know, if you care about something, you need to be around other people who are willing to put 100% into the work and of course are willing to, you know, put in the extra hours. When there's an opportunity, whether it's, you know, the company is about to speak with a farm worker union and we need all of...everyone out making phone calls and petitions, whatever the situation is, like, the sense of solidarity and the willingness to jump in when needed, is really important to me.

R: That's really...what you were just saying is really exciting to me, especially 'cause I'm going to my first board meeting next week.

D: Oooh, you're going to have fun; they're so cool.

R: Well, I've heard that consistently. So you've mentioned several campaigns, policy and kind of consumer campaigns that you've worked on through the National Farm Worker Ministry, YAYA. Can you share with me one of those that felt particularly successful, in whatever way you would define the success?

D: Sure. Okay, so definitely the farm labor organizing committee, their campaign with RJ Reynolds, Reynolds American Tobacco, has been a campaign that's really important to me, and to our chapter because they're on the ground organizing.... Okay, first the

history of FLOC as a union is really incredible, you know, they developed the corporate campaign style when they decided to take on Campbell's soup in the late '70s, I think. They started that campaign, as far as going to the retailer or the...how do you call it... the processor of the food was coming out with a finished product that people could boycott. So now it's RJ Reynolds tobacco, and again it's a brand that people can connect with; a lot of people do. Of course, they say "Oh yeah, I smoke Camels," they can connect with the brand and can understand how the lives of farm workers are connected to their own lives. So of course the campaign style is wonderful and brilliant, and just... I love supporting FLOC because Baldemar, the president of FLOC is so accessible, and is such an amazing leader of the farm worker movement historically, and the organizers of the union are so accessible, and we have the opportunity to really hear about what's going on on the ground, where they're going and knocking on doors and talking to farm workers and asking them to join the union, and we get to hear about the work that they're doing on the ground to improve farm workers' lives. So then that makes all the work that we do talking about the human rights abuses in tobacco fields and this campaign against RJ Reynolds, that makes it so much more relevant to us because we've talked to tobacco farm workers, we've talked to the union organizers, and then of course the situation in North Carolina is just really miserable and urgent. There've been 9 deaths in the fields over the past 2 years due to heatstroke, and RJ Reynolds is making absurd amounts of money. They've profited, I mean, what, it's like, over 7 billion dollars every year or something ridiculous like that. So, yeah, I think that FLOC doesn't have the kind of support and recognition that they should have, even among people who care about farm worker issues in Florida, not a lot of people that we talk to have heard of FLOC. I think union people remember the Mt. Olive campaign that they did with pickle, or cucumber, workers, but it's really important for us to be talking about the FLOC campaign and what's going on in the tobacco fields because not very many people here know about it. And it's really exciting, I mean, I'm really confident that they will win and it's going to impact the lives of a lot of tobacco farm workers, when they reach an agreement.

R: Where do you think that confidence comes from, that they'll win?

D: Oh, because they won their other campaigns, and they just don't stop until they win. [Laughs.]

R: On the other side, have there been experiences you've had that have been discouraging, or, kind of problematic?

D: We of course always have experiences that, you know, set us back. For me, maybe... I don't know. I really truly enjoy taking bad experiences and saying, OKAY, what did we learn from this? How's it going to make me a better organizer? How's it going to strengthen our organization when we figure out what went wrong, and how we can change it, and turn it around. I feel like National Farm Worker Ministry and our YAYA chapter really attract positive, wonderful people, so it's really easy to do that when you're around people who say, You know what? Our work supporting farm workers is more important than any little drama that we have or any setback that we've had, so let's figure out what we need to do to move forward. So of course, there's always...someone

doesn't come through, like they said they were going to, or organization, there's a miscommunication, or whatever, but...you know.

R: Does the work itself, or have your stances through the National Farm Worker Ministry, been controversial through other areas of life, in your family or in your church or school?

D: For me, no, not so much. My family is very supportive, um, I think. I was a women's studies major, so I worked that out really nicely. My faculty were always very supportive. The women's studies department, you know, the goal is to understand oppression in the world and figure out how to eradicate it, so it was a wonderful choice of study for me, with the activism that I was doing. What allowed me to be so involved with YAYA during college is that I had a really wonderful scholarship that actually paid all of my bills. So that took all the conflict out of my life because if I had had to be working at the same time that I was so involved, it would have been a lot harder. However, there are plenty of people in the chapter who did work, you know, 1 or 2 jobs as well as being very involved in YAYA, and taking classes. But that was, for me, what really gave me a lot of opportunity to be involved.

R: In our previous conversation, you talked a little bit about your future plans over the next year or so, in Colombia, and potentially some schooling, I guess, graduate school that you might do in the future. Has your experience with the National Farm Worker Ministry helped to form those decisions in concrete ways, the way you think about your future?

D: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I definitely am who I am now because of National Farm Worker Ministry, because of all of my experiences, I think. I mean, I'm going to be living in a rural community in Colombia, as a human rights accompanier. They are a peace community resisting displacement by the paramilitary, and I'll be going with Fellowship of Reconciliation. To me, it's the same thing, same work. I'm just going to be in a different country. For me, it's like taking the work that we're doing here and, it's a really exciting opportunity for me. There will be supporting campesinos who plan to stay on their land, and a lot of times we'll be working with campesinos who've been displaced from their land, and were farm workers before in their home countries, and are here in the same situation, trying to just protect some basic rights. Also, as well as people who have been here for generations and are kind of in similar situations, as far as being really marginalized, in their own country. So yeah, I see it as definitely an extension of the work here and really connected to it, and then whatever I do in grad school when I get back will be focused on how I can be most helpful in building community power.

R: Nice. What would you like to say to people who might be interested in getting involved with the work of the National Farm Worker Ministry today?

D: It is NOT optional. We ALL eat, and we all have so much to benefit from.... I mean, it is optional, of course, but you know, the opportunity to get to know farm workers, like, who pick our food, it's such a gift for the person who thinks they're helping out, because

we always find out, okay, this has changed my life. I have learned so much about how the world works, how oppression and greed work, how the powers that be, how much energy they put into keeping us divided and keeping us from getting to know farm workers. Yeah, I think the sense of community that we build among supporters, who are all getting to know each other working to support farm workers, and then also the relationships we build with farm workers, are just incredible, and I really wish for everyone that it would be a part of their lives.

R: Do you have any other stories or comments that you'd want to add?

D: Hmm.

R: You can take a minute.

D: I feel like, right now, I've been definitely feeling like...the oppression that we're dealing with is really overwhelming, like, the situation that farm worker communities are in right now is really overwhelming, you know, with the anti-immigrant...all the hateful laws and just, the climate, the enforcement, and then I've also kinda been seeing the effects of the really broken education system. The problems that we're facing, that we're trying to band together to fight are so huge, and I feel really fortunate to be around people that really understand this, but we choose to take things one piece at a time, and work on concrete campaigns that we know really do improve farm workers' lives, and also contribute to.... I think because farm workers are really the most oppressed workers in the states as a group, or at least one of the most oppressed groups. When we support their efforts to organize and gain dignity in their lives, our work goes far in changing the scope of our country as a whole and making our communities healthier.

R: How do you think the oppressive forces you're mentioning, I could see it in your face, how do you think they're different today? Are people just more organized in expressing them, or is there a different kind of oppression?

D: I don't know. I think maybe it's just that I'm realizing it more now. I don't think they're really different. I think that people in power, people who own agricultural companies, people who make our laws, which a lot of times are the same people, really just don't give a darn about poor people, they don't care about people who pick food, people who are doing the jobs that, of course, we all depend on, and to them, people's lives are completely expendable, and they don't care if kids grow up without a chance of making it to college, if they grow up dropping out of high school to work in the fields, or if they are born with birth defects because their mothers were exposed to pesticides. So I don't think that's changed at all. Lately I have seen the effects more personally, and it's so important to have community. Somebody has got to throw some resources at these people who are really intentionally ignored by people in power, and to also just, like, be there emotionally and, um, be a support system. I think that's the most important part of our work, to be friends and to be actually there for farm worker communities, in a real way.

R: Great. Was there anything else you wanted to add?

D: Nope, that's it. [Laughs.]

R: Well, thanks for sitting with me.

D: You're welcome.