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

Interviewee: Suzanne Darweesh, NFWM board member representing the Orange County Interfaith Committee to Aid Farm Workers

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Transcriber: Amy Markin, ed. Ryan Nilsen

Name Abbreviations:

R = Ryan Nilsen

S = Suzanne Darweesh

NFWM = National Farm Worker Ministry

UFW = United Farm Workers

FLOC = Farm Labor Organizing Committee

Interview Summary: In this interview, Ryan Nilsen asks Suzanne Darweesh, former NFWM-CA staff person and current NFWM board member, about how she first got involved with NFWM, how his beliefs and values have affected his involvement, how he has been impacted by his involvement, and what he would say to people who might be thinking about becoming involved. In her responses, Darweesh discusses her involvement with California Migrant Ministry in the 1950s and 1960s and early support of the UFW, local church support and conflict with her ministry, the Biblical challenge to care for the poor and oppressed, the Taco Bell boycott and related Coalition of Immokalee Workers campaigns in California, and current legislative campaigns in California. She also comments on heat-related deaths of farm workers, NFWM and UFW fundraising, the Dream Act, and her more recent protests of Chase Bank in related to the Farm Labor Organizing Committee's Reynolds campaign.

R: This is Ryan Nilsen sitting with Suzanne Darweesh. It's August 25th and we're in Portland, OR at the National Farm Worker Ministry board meeting and I'm just going to ask you a few questions. We're sitting in a dorm room at Portland University having a little conversation.

So Suzanne- will you tell me about how you first got involved in the NFWM?

S: It was my first job out of Seminary in 1959. I was actually hired by Doug Still although I knew Chris Hartmire but because he was a year behind me in Seminary, not that he was younger than I was but because he had done his Navy service and so that made him 2 or 3 years after he would have started normally.

So I was just coming out for a summer job. I had a brother who lived here with his family so I thought this is a good chance to see him and his family and to find out more about farm workers and so we had a group of students and a team and we were assigned to Sebastopol, which is north of San Francisco and we slept in the Methodist church, in the basement of the Methodist church there and used their kitchen to fix our meals and I remember that Charlie Schultz came over to see us and welcome us because at that time he lived in Sebastopol and he was a member of that church. You know he's the guy who wrote Peanuts.

R: So how did you first learn about the Ministry- when you were in Seminary?

S: In seminary- yeah. I thought I was just coming for the summer but then I got hooked and I stayed. There was an opening in Corcoran so I went to Corcoran and spent all my three years- the rest of my 3 years there in Corcoran.

R: So why did you stay?

S: Uh- I think, I think I was, I'd learned just enough about the issue of farm labor and what desperate lives they live and how rejected they often are by the communities in which they work and how desperately they wanted to put down roots and have a place to live and keep their kids in school all year instead of being migrants and following the crops. They were looking for health care and housing and education just like most families are. The only problem is that the churches were full of growers and they didn't want them to stay; they wanted them to go on to the next town. They didn't want to be responsible for them. Corcoran was a like a mill town, a cotton mill town, and the whole community was dominated by J.G. Boswell Company; there were a couple of smaller cotton companies- Saliers and I'm drawing a blank on some of the other names, but J.G. Boswell was the big one. And his company really dominated the town- the political system, the school board, all the businesses I mean everybody worked for him or wanted to please him.

R: So some of those early dynamics when you first started working with the NFWM- do you feel like they've changed over the years?

S: Oh they've changed greatly! Not that the conditions have improved that much but - our job- the job of the staff had changed dramatically while I was there because Doug Still applied for a grant to give us training in community development and whereas when I first came we were kind of like "the Lady

Bountiful" type- we had a storeroom full of clothes and food stuffs in the Latino Methodist Church and people who were in need would come to us for it and I had two Church of the Brethren boys who were young men who were working with me; they were conscientious objectors and they ran the boys club and um, we also had- we did a teenage club together. Tried to offer educational type programs and fun programs- as well- fun events. And we were able to get some of the churches to donate their facilities. The teenage club met at the Presbyterian Church in Corcoran. And the Methodists- as I said, let us have their store room and several of our teachers were recruited from the various churches like um- a sewing teacher, a nutrition teacher. This would be with the adults- primarily women, actually. And then after we had this session in community development with Fred Ross, Sr.- have you heard of him? He, of course, was trained by Saul Alinsky and Cesar Chavez also gave us some training - we went to visit him. He was working for the CSO at that time- Community Service Organization. And so when we finished that our jobs just changed dramatically and instead of doing- it's not that we gave up Sunday school and vacation bible school, but we added a lot of other things to our job like visiting folks in their homes and finding out what they really wanted- what they needed for the community to offer them and what they were looking for. And we registered a lot of people to vote and then we embarked on a campaign for public low-cost housing and we won! I mean not single-handedly; there were a lot of people involved in this campaign all over the county but public housing did go up in Corcoran. So for me that was a good thing; for the churches it was a little hard to take cause that wasn't what they thought the migrant ministry was all about. You know how if you give a basket of food at Thanksgiving or Christmas- you feel good. You think you've done a really good thing. But you haven't changed the structure at all in terms of - it's just a one day event. The good doesn't last very long. You feel good but- you shouldn't because it's such a brief fleeting thing. Um - after we won the campaign for public low-cost housing, the Presbyterian Church in Corcoran- and I am Presbyterian, their Session voted to withdraw their support of the Migrant Ministry so that was a blow to me! And to the Migrant Ministry as well, and I decided that my service was no longer going to be valuable there.

But this was 3 years- this didn't happen overnight!-So- at the end of three years I left and I went to work for Church World Service in Algeria and I didn't come back to this country because I met my husband overseas and married and lived in Baghdad for 10 years and came back in '75 and then slowly began to get more involved. Have you heard the name- Jean Giordano? She was head of the Orange County Interfaith Committee to Aid Farm Workers for many years and so it wasn't long before I met her and also the Kennedys founded our committee- what are we in- our 46th year? Our 47th- I think? And so with Chris and Jean and Artie Shrank and some of the folks that have been with us for a long time and so we would have fundraisers twice a year- once for the Union. Well- the Union hadn't been formed way back then- you know- it was in the process in the late 60's and early 70's. And so we did two fundraisers- one for the Union and one for the Ministry. And then in between we tried to do advocacy and Jean and Roy, her husband, would have us out leaf-letting in front of grocery stores. They were carrying grapes or lettuce that we wanted them to boycott so we tried to put pressure on them- and that kind of activity.

R: When- as you describe that that shift in the Presbyterian Church at least the one withdrawing their support- were there others that stuck with you and the Ministry-more generally in these kind of movements?

S: Yes- the Presbyterians were the only ones that- whose Session actually took a stand. That's also because of the way these churches are governed- where the Session has a lot of power whereas say in the Presbyterian Church of the Episcopal Church; it's the Bishop or the District Superintendent that has the power. None of the ministers took a position against us- I think they understood what was going on but it was hard to educate their congregations into what was our role as Christians vis a-vis the farm workers. So-

R: Can you tell me a little bit more about that- how you see your beliefs- or what it means that this is your role as Christians to do this kind of work?

S: Well- um, [Phone rings. S answers, and R stops recording for a moment.] I'm sorry...you asked me about how I see my Christian faith vis-a-vis farm workers?

R: Impacting your work with the NFWM...

S: Well-um- I don't know how I got this feeling but if there's injustice towards anyone, if people are treated poorly, I feel that it's our role to do something about it, and I think the Bible especially the New Testament, is full of Jesus' instructions to care for the poor, to care for the oppressed and um, that we just can't turn our backs on people who are struggling and living such miserable lives and it makes me very angry and upset that we're still fighting some of the same battles this year- that we fought so many years ago when I had my first job- like pesticides for example. I mean and stoop labor and inadequate labor and heat-stroke! I mean these are things we shouldn't have to be dealing with. If fifteen farm workers die in the fields of California because of lack of water or heat exhaustion- there's something wrong with this picture! I mean California has the best laws in the nation but they're not enforced because we have thousands of farms and we don't have enough inspectors. And we never will have because of our budget crisis and our priorities and where we put money. So I think, as Christians, we need to support the Union. That doesn't mean unequivocally. I mean, if they do something that's wrong we would say something about it. But I see that as the only means to ensure that farm workers work under decent living conditions and I just think it's very important.

And I feel as Christians, we all eat. And so- we have a stake in the way our food arrives on our table or in our grocery store and it's a- it should be a concern of ours. I don't want to eat food by people who died to pick it! And I don't think anybody does- if they really knew about it- if they could go out and visit the fields and see what it's like out there under the hot sun picking grapes or tomatoes or what have you. Um, it's not a job that anybody would really crave. I don't see a long line of people waiting to get these jobs. So I think the conditions should be better.

R: So how do you talk to Christians that are more of the persuasion of that Presbyterian Church that you mentioned when you're representing the Ministry or just yourself as a person of faith?

S: Well I think that's a hard question. Because I think most Christians have a generous heart and if a need is presented to them they want, they want to help. If you needed food or you needed furniture, if you needed clothes, the churches are ready to help. It's only when it gets a little bit more complicated and we're asking people to work on advocacy, to work for justice, that it's hard to get people to understand what that means- and that it might mean walking in a march up the 5 freeway to Sacramento or demonstrating in front of Governor Brown's office- doing something to call attention to the plight of farm workers. They are our, they are our brothers and our sisters- our fellow human beings. And their lives are just as valuable in God's sight as ours- I think. I don't like this "we and they" mentality. I mean- "us against them." We're all together in this world.

R: You mentioned earlier that there are some things that you feel haven't changed- that you're fighting some of the same battles as decades ago. Are there significant progresses- improvements that you've seen - either in the lives of farm workers or the whole climate in which this conversation happens over the span of your work with the Ministry?

S: Well- they got rid of the short-handled hoe for one thing; that was progress. But it seems to me I read somewhere else that they have something else that involves stoop labor so it's not completely obliterated. We still have these struggles with stoop labor and working in the hot sun, inadequate shade. It's hard to provide shade in the fields, I mean they need the sun for the products to grow- for agriculture and so to provide shade is not easy- but it's the law in California. In North Carolina you have the problem of the pesticides, too, don't you, with the tobacco workers?

R: That kind of leads into another question. Through being exposed to what's going on in NC and FL and all these other regions- through support meetings and travels that you've done, I'm sure, how do you see the work of the Ministry and the farm worker union you've been involved with in California as unique?

S: As unique?

R: Yeah- or are there aspects of it that are particular to...

S: Well- there are aspects that are satisfying. One recent one was that we were part of the delegation that went to see the British Counsel in Los Angeles, and um- she was very receptive and then the British-American tobacco company in London agreed to sit down and meet with FLOC and look into the conditions of farm workers there. That's always exciting when you win a battle, although it's not won yet, but it's, it's moving in a good direction.

We were involved in the Taco Bell boycott for the Coalition of Immokalee workers because the headquarters for Taco Bell are in Orange County, in Irvine, CA. And that was a very long and hard struggle. The workers would come out in the spring when they could get time off from their jobs in the field and they would do marches and prayers and fasting and sit-ins and all kinds of things and I remember one year I felt terrible because it rained! They had canopies up and tents to sleep in at night and the police made them take it down and they got soaked and some of them got sick. It was, it was awful. Um, but eventually, and we had, we had prayer services every night to encourage the fasters and

so on, right out on the street. So it was a great educational tool as well. I mean we invited people from the churches to come and see what it was all about and get to meet the workers. And several churches housed the workers when they weren't sleeping out on the street. The Congregational Church and the Presbyterian Church of Anaheim also housed workers one year. The Saint Mark Church of Newport - Beach, also housed workers. And we had this great letter about what we believed in and Taco Bell wouldn't even unlock the door to accept our letter. We had to slide it under the door. [Laughing] Can you believe that?

And, anyway, after they agreed to pay a penny a pound more to farm workers- tomato pickers -and establish the code of conduct- then Burger King and McDonalds and Subway fell in line- did the same thing- not in that order. I'm sorry- I've got the order a little mixed up. And the large catering, food catering services- but the supermarkets still haven't agreed to do this with the exception of Whole Foods. I think, the large supermarkets have not agreed. So there are plenty of battles out there.

I just finished that on Saturday- on Sunday, speaking to a group about these various issues. They weren't necessarily Christians, it was Women For [unclear], but they're a progressive group of women so they were very sympathetic to the situation. I don't know that I have the answer how you convince people who are naturally opposed or don't see that as the role of the church or the role of Christians. I think sometimes we look at our faith and our role, too narrowly. And we think it's just between us and God- our spiritual lives but it's you know- we're all God's children and it should all go out- horizontally as well as vertically.

R: The way you said a minute ago- the way the Presbyterian church- and I must confess I am Presbyterian as well

S: Oh- are you?

R: So I'm curious, how this work and some of the comments you're making about the church, churches seeing things too narrowly... I don't know- over your time with the NFWM- how has your relationship to the Presbyterian Church, in particular, um, changed or developed?

S: It was a big blow to me- I admit it- what happened in Corcoran. And as a result, although the Methodist church was very welcoming and the Episcopal church was very welcoming, and I went back to Union that summer to take some more classes and...

R: Union in New York?

S: Union in New York.

R: That's where you went to Seminary...

S: Yes- and I was invited to go to the Episcopalian headquarters and um, and they wanted to know all about what happened and so on. And their Rector, the Episcopalian Rector in Corcoran was very supportive. So-you know it just varies from place to place and depends a lot about the personnel who are involved. But while I was over-seas, I was in Muslim countries all that time, so it was easy to turn my

back on the church. Although I did, I did find a church that I worshipped in while I was in Baghdad, but we lived in a village for some time while my husband did his village service and I never saw a church and I didn't really care. And happily now I'm an elder in my church and I - it's a very progressive church and we have a very active Peace and Justice Committee and that church is doing all kinds of good things and it makes me very pleased.

R: How has your - how have you changed or been impacted by this long-term work with the farm worker movement through the NFWM?

S: I think after what happened in Corcoran I was very reticent to speak up for several years and gradually that's changed. I'm not such a scaredy-cat anymore- I'm more vocal. But, I don't get into arguments with people; I just try to point out things. If people are receptive- great! If they're not- that's too bad, but we had prayer vigils at our church for the farm workers who died. Let's see- that wasn't last summer; that was the summer before- two years ago. And we're doing the fundraiser for the Ministry in my church again- this will be the third year we've done it. And the pastor's very supportive and there's a guy there who's a great chef and he prepares the meal and he sees that as his gift to the Ministry and so he - because of his contribution and the support of the Peace and Justice committee, we're able to give all the money we take in to the Ministry. That's not the case with the union fundraiser because we usually have it in the union hall and we have to pay for the union hall - we have to pay for the chef and there are a lot more costs involved. But still people are very generous. People donate the flower centerpieces and we have a group that does music for us and occasionally we'll find somebody who will print the newsletter for us and we're trying to send it out by email more to save postage and printing costs. We're getting a little smarter.

R: Will you share a story of a particular meaningful experience that you've had with the farm workers themselves- like in a labor camp or through your experience with the Ministry?

S: I just remember living in Corcoran how welcoming and hospitable people were and how generous. With whatever people had they were willing to share and they were so grateful for your interest and your concern and the Corcoran experience was kind of long ago. I remember families and I remember certain children but I don't, I'm having a hard time thinking of a specific story. Ahh. I remember - this isn't a farm worker, this is Dr. Bruce Jessop from Stanford, was doing a study of health care in the farm labor camps and he's a great doctor- a very compassionate doctor and he was really concerned about healthcare for farm workers but if you mentioned to him that maybe we should have clinics that serve the farm workers and they should be free for everyone- he would back off and say, "That's socialized medicine." Thank goodness we have more clinics than we used to- but still they're not, they're not accessible. They're not where they ought to be. I think about if you listen to the stories of those farm workers that died, they died mostly because there wasn't a clinic nearby or the contractor- the boss wouldn't call for an ambulance or wouldn't provide transportation to a clinic or mis-diagnosed what was happening. They don't have first aid things there. And they don't have water- and they should. I mean the penalties should be stiffer. This, this young woman, I'm drawing a blank on her name- Maria Isabelle? Um who died at 18 years old? I mean she was young and healthy. She shouldn't have died- but there wasn't water. And when she fainted- they didn't take her anywhere. By the time they got her

to a clinic, her fever- or her temperature was something like 106! I mean- it was, too late! It was inexcusable.

R: The migrant deaths, or the farm worker deaths that you're talking about from the heat exposure- is this something you see as having emerged in the near past? Is this a relatively new phenomenon or has this been around for a while?

S: I think it's been around for a while but they just started keeping track of those deaths in the past few years. I understand there are two this year- I haven't heard the stories of the two that died- I mean the circumstances. I'm not up on that. I'm sure Virginia is- and Lucy because it's California.

R: What's something you would say to people who might be interested in getting involved with the NFWM today?

S: Well- to begin with- the UFW makes it very easy to be on their email list and they send out pleas for advocacy usually every week- sometimes twice a week. And all you have to do is punch in that you want to take an action on that issue. It's very simple; they make that very easy. Of course, letters are worth more than an email and a hand-written letter hand-typed, not a form letter, is worth more than a form letter. So that's something churches can do- individual Christians can do. And I think politicians keep track of the number of letters they receive. And, of course, a phone call is worth even more and I think they keep count of those and it influences their decision. But gosh, we really bombarded Governor Brown with that Fair Treatment for Farm Worker Act and I can't believe - he must have gotten a lot of calls on the other side. That's all I can think of- because -well- you don't remember, but when he was Governor before, he set-up a Farm Workers Relations Board in California. But that Board was only as effective as the people that were appointed to it and so while I hate to sound partisan, while we had republican governors, mostly they were people who represented the growers on that board. And so But when Governor Brown was governor before, he appointed people who understood the problems of farm labor and it was more effective. So I was really unprepared for him to veto it. And the only thing I can think of is that this all happened at the same time as our budget crisis and trying to get together and compromise on a budget was so stressful and so difficult and um, I don't know whether he couldn't concentrate on two things at once, or if he signed that bill he'd have a harder time getting republicans to sign the budget? I would give anything to know. Maybe there is somebody who knows- but it's not me.

R: So what do you think is the next step?

S: Well that's one for us in California- that's obviously the next step and that's why workers are out there walking as we speak and marching to Sacramento. I think they plan to arrive in Sacramento on September the 4th and I guess the Legislature's passed it again. They've passed it at least 5 times- both branches- largely on partisan lines. But Governor Schwarzenegger vetoed it at least three times- maybe four, but I know at least three. And now Governor Brown has vetoed it so they're ready to try again. And at the same time- we've been working on The Dream Act- that's another thing that Christians can get involved in because that involves kids who were brought here by their parents. They didn't know what was happening to them and they've shown potential and they're doing well in school and they should have a chance to an education and they will help all of society if they are educated and able to

contribute to our culture. And, of course, we need to do the immigration bill as well. And Ag-Jobs Bill- there's plenty of work. No end of issues.

R: Plenty of work to do. Well- is there any other comment you'd like to make or story that you'd like to share?

S: I wish I could think of something funny or amusing....[laughing] I remember being out in the parking lots, leaf-letting and Roy Giordano telling if people were harassing us and telling us we weren't supposed to be there, and so on... I guess the law has changed since then because Roy was telling us that the parking lots were public property and you can do anything you want to here- I mean you have the right to leaf-let and so on, so long as you don't obstruct entrance into the store. But now they are ever so much more careful about where people stand and when we were demonstrating against Chase Bank, JP Morgan and Chase Bank, because of FLOC in North Carolina, they only wanted us on the sidewalk and they were watching us from inside the bank to make sure we didn't leave the sidewalk. And once we were in front of Whole Foods and they called the police on us. So there are some amusing incidents. They didn't do anything; they just told us to stop.

The entrance to so many, in California, the way shopping malls are set up- the parking is in the middle. And the entrances to the stores are off the parking lots so there's not a sidewalk that you can stand on that's "so called" public property now, the sidewalks are on the outside; they're too far from where the people park and walk in. So if you were standing out on the sidewalk you couldn't reach anybody. That's a little bit frustrating.

R: Well- I don't have any other questions; I know that you've had a long day. If you'd like to add anything else, I think that would be great we can close up.

S: Wind things up?

R: Yeah

S: If I think of something tonight or tomorrow - I'll tell you.

R: So this is it for now. Thank you so much for your time.

S: Thank you for waiting for me.

R: Yeah- [laughing]

End

[37:11]