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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein Honoring Civil Rights Leader Cesar Chavez”

MRS. FEINSTEIN: Mr. President, today we honor the life and legacy of Cesar Chavez, a great champion of civil rights and workers' rights.

Cesar Chavez was one of our nation's strongest advocates for social justice. He believed that the men and women who bring us the food we depend on deserve a safe work environment and a fair wage. He fought for America's farmworkers – men and women who worked so hard to provide a decent life for their families – and challenged all Americans to recognize their plight.

On this day, 77 years ago, Chavez was born at the Yuma, Arizona farm his grandfather had homesteaded in the 1880's. Like many families during the Great Depression, his family lost their farm and began years of migrating from town to town throughout the Southwest in search of steady work.

Chavez began working at the age of ten. He attended school when he could – thirty-seven different schools, in all – before abandoning his education after the eighth grade to help his family.

In 1945, he joined the Navy, serving in the Pacific just after World War II. Upon returning to the United States, he lived in several different Southwestern communities before settling in East San Jose.

It was there – as he worked in the apricot orchards – that he decided to devote his life to tackling the injustice that so many migrant workers lived under.

In 1952, Chavez became a full-time organizer with the Community Service Organization, a Mexican-American advocacy group. In this position, he organized farmworkers in California and Arizona, worked to stamp out racial discrimination, and built the influence of farmworkers through voter registration drives.

His activism led him to establish the National Farm Workers Association in Delano, California in 1962. The new organization eventually became the United Farm Workers of America, the first union representing farmworkers in the United States.

Under the leadership of Chavez, the United Farm Workers successfully improved the oncedismal working conditions for hundreds of thousands of farmworkers throughout the nation. These efforts brought safety improvements, pay increases, benefits and job security to workers who had been among the most exploited.

The union's efforts also brought attention to the health problems facing farmworkers, including the exposure to harmful pesticides that affect workers and their children.

An adherent to the principles of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Chavez used nonviolent means to bring about these changes including economic boycotts, marches, civil disobedience, and fasts.

Chavez once declared to his followers, 'Nonviolence is our strength.' This message still rings true as the official slogan for the United Farm Workers Union.

A winner of the highest civilian honor our nation can bestow – the Presidential Medal of Freedom – which he received

posthumously in 1994, Chavez was a true American hero.

He was a hero because he spoke up for so many who could not be heard.

Chavez once commented, "It's ironic that those who till the soil, cultivate and harvest the fruits, vegetables, and other foods that fill your tables with abundance have nothing left for themselves."

His life and this day remind us that as a society we have a responsibility to protect the rights of all Americans.

As Cesar Chavez often said, "Si se puede!" Yes, we can!