César E. Chávez National Monument

YourGuides Tour Transcript

1. Welcome

Here we are at César E. Chávez National Monument, and this area is known as Nuestra de la Paz or simply La Paz, and it's over a hundred acres, and this is where César and Helen and plenty of the United Farm Workers and their supporters lived, worked, raised their families and educated themselves. It's also the place where César and his wife, Helen, are buried here in the memorial garden. During the 1970s, his was the hub, his was the headquarters of the United Farm Workers movement, and that's part of the reason why we declared it a historically significant National Landmark.

2. Villa La Paz

Here we are in front of the North Unit. It functioned as an educational center in the 1970s, and it was a Montessori school here, and people came here from all over to learn the kind of tactics and negotiating strategies of the movement. But it wasn't just for the movement that they learned all of these different skills; they learned it to better themselves. But that wasn't where the history with the Chávez family started with this North Unit. Helen Chavez actually came here as a young child in the 1930s. She lived in Delano and county nurses would go around doing kind of welfare checks to check on the children, and they found that she was suffering from malnutrition. She was sent all the way out here to the Tehachapi Mountains to get better.

3. Paul Chávez remembers his mother's history with La Paz

My mother had always gone with him when he was in the CSO before he began his work with the union. He organized 22 chapters of the CSO, many times moving the family every year. And so, you know, we lived in places like San Jose and they did work up in Dakota up in the east bay. They were down in Riverside, in Oxnard. And my mother was always there moving the family, keeping up with the newest campaign. When my father told her that he found a new home, a new place, she was excited and she asked, “Where is it?” And he said, “In Keene, a little town Keene.” And then he says, “You know, at the old Stonybrook TB Sanitarium.” And my mother looked and she says, “I'm not going.” And he says, “Come on Mama, you know, I need you to come.” And she goes, “I'm not going to go to that place,I have bad memories.”

Well, as it turns out as a young girl, my mother was interned here in this hospital for about a year and it was a horrible experience for her. She remembers nurses being mean, and she talked about hearing coyotes yelping at night and sleeping under the beds, and it was just a terrible time for her. And so she was hesitant. She said she wasn't going to come. Well, you know, after about three months or so, she relented and she gradually moved up, but it was interesting though, that, you know, after she moved up and she began to live here, and this became home, this place that had once had these terrible memories for her was transformed into this place that was full of life and provided a lot of good memories and happy times for her.

Later on in her life, you know, we would try to get her to go places, to visit family or to take a ride, and she'd always say, “No, no, no, I'm good. You know, I don't want to go any place. I'm fine.” And, and so it got to a point that, you know, we had an inside joke amongst brothers and sisters, we would laugh and

say what a stubborn woman, you know; our father couldn't get her to come and we can't get her to leave. But you know, this place really did change in my mother's eyes.

4. Visitor Center

Here we are in front of the César E. Chávez National Monument Visitor Center. It used to function as administrative offices, but now it's our Visitor Center. But inside we still have César's office, just like he left it.

5. César E. Chávez's Office

Here we are in César's office. It's pretty much just like he left it back in 1966. You can see his notes scribbled there, maybe some things he was thinking about or strategizing about. And here he had his chair. A lot of times he brought this collapsible chair, it was a rocking chair, to help with his back. When he was younger, he did that farm work, and a lot of it was with short handled hoes, and they were almost torture instruments, in a way, if you were made to use them, because if you had to stoop down for 10 hours a day over and over and over, I could probably only do it for maybe a minute. But your back would start to hurt, especially days and months at a time.

César fought to outlaw this farming tool and he was successful, thankfully, but that wasn't the only kind of injustice or harsh treatment that farm laborers received in the fields.That wasn't all that Caesar was fighting for. There were other things like not having water in the fields or not having bathrooms in the fields. And if they did leave to go use the restroom, it took a little bit of time because it was actually not near one, so they could be fired for that. They could be fired because the wind blew the wrong way. They had no rights. They had no rights to unionize, to get together, and they had really low wages as well. All this on top of the fact that their housing was really terrible. All of these indignities and ways that César's brothers and sisters, not just in the Mexican American way, but just in the fellow human way, were made to suffer just for trying to make a living the same way that he did when he was younger, and his family did when they were younger as well.

6 - Philosophies of the Movement

Here we are in the library section of César's office, and there are a lot of books here. There are books from Budgeting to Cooking, especially vegetarian cooking, all the way to books from people like Mahatma Gandhi, and Gandhi was a well-known pacifist, and César was as well. On some of my field trip programs, one of my students asked me, he said, "What were some of the weapons that Caesar used to fight for the farm workers?" And I thought to myself, "Oh no, have I been putting forth the idea that Caesar was combative?" But he did use a different type of weapon; He used the weapons of knowledge and the weapons of pacifism.

7 - Memorial Garden

Here in the Memorial garden we also included a fountain, and it's not just a beautiful, relaxing fountain. It has five parts going down into that pool, and that's in recognition of the five recognized martyrs of the United Farm Workers Movement. The United Farm Workers Movement is also referred to as La Causa or "The Cause." And those people were of different faiths, of different walks of life. Some were Jewish, some were Muslim, and some were Christian. Some were not even farm workers, and I really think that that's an important point for people to kind of start to think about, that not only Mexican American farm workers were fighting for this cause. Those weren't the only people that cared about it. It started to explode into more of a humanitarian effort and I think that really reflects on César, because César didn't only care

about himself or the people that were like him. He cared about all humans. He was a pacifist and he wanted the best for everyone. And he was very much about love. Even though he would fight for other people's rights, and he wouldn't be fighting with his fists, he would be fighting with his determination and sometimes his words as well.

8. Paul Chávez remembers laying his father to rest

When my father passed away it was a complete surprise to all of us. His parents, my grandparents lived to close to a hundred years of age, each of them, and we figured that, you know, because of my father's diet and his yoga and just how active he was that he would be here forever. So when he passed away we were all shocked because he was 66 years of age when he passed away. I remember my mother coming to us and telling us that his wish was to be buried here in La Paz, and that she was fine with that, with the condition that we never leave him. And what she was saying is that, you know, if we're going to bury him here, then we gotta make sure that we stay here. And so of course we agreed and we made the arrangements to bury him here. Well, as it turns out, his specific wish was to be buried in a rose garden where his German shepherds had been buried. He loved those animals. So I remember after the public ceremonies and the private burial, we sat down and we began to take a look at, you know, what we had on our hands. And the fact is, is that he was buried in probably the worst place here at the National Chávez Center. It was in a skinny rose garden where traffic would come in and it would leave through there, and it just wasn't much privacy. And I remember talking to my mom and saying, you know, “Do you think that maybe we could maybe bury him on a hilltop and do some kind of inspirational setting?” And she laughed, and she said, “No, that was his wish to be buried there.” And then she went on and she says, “You know, and I also think that your dad wanted to be buried there because he wanted to see who was coming to work late and leaving early.” So those were some of the early considerations on how we ended up with where we're at today.

9. Garden of the Southwest

Here we are in the Garden of the Southwest. It's in dedication to César’s birthplace in Yuma, Arizona. He was born in 1927, and he had a relatively stable childhood. His family owned some land there, and they owned a farm store on that land. So he remembers his childhood in Arizona as a pretty happy time. But after some financial difficulties, they lost that land, and because of the great depression in 1929, work was really hard to find. So their family moved to California to look for jobs. They found it in the agricultural industry, being migrant farm laborers. So it wasn't a very stable or steady job. So that started the era of César’s life of moving around a lot, and it introduced him to that farm labor life that he would be intertwined with for the rest of his life.

10. Anthony Chávez remembers his father's walk to work

My father would get up very early in the morning, very early in the morning, and do different things. He would do yoga. He would host a radio show from his kitchen table. We hooked up a machine with headphones and he would do an early morning show. But when he would walk in the morning to his office or, he would walk up to the hill to meditate, it was always the same route. He would come this way with his dogs, Boycott and Huelga, his German shepherds, walk to work down the hill and up to his office. And a lot of times he would use his back door. There were stairs that went up and they're not there no more and they were kind of like, strategically placed. You had to know where to step or else the thing would fall apart. He would walk up it and you would see the boards.. But most of the time he would go to the front office, but it was always this route he would take. Even when he went to the top of the mountain to

meditate it was always this route. And that route would take him pretty close to where he lays today, him and my mother lie today, on his way up to the hill to meditate.

11. Helen's Park

Here we are in Helen's Park, and it's called Helen's Park after Caesar's wife, Helen, because she loved to spend time out here. She liked to hear the birds chirping, feel the breeze, and we do have good weather out here most of the year. So she would hand water all of her plants, taking care of them and her children asked her "Mom, do you want to put in a sprinkler system? It'll save you so much time." And she said, "No, you're going to take away my job" because she liked to be out here with nature, just like César liked to be out here with nature. And maybe she didn't want to climb to the top of a mountain or go out adventuring, but she loved to be outside for as long as she was able. This place also represents community and coming together. There was a time when this area had over 200 people living here; volunteers for the UFW. And during holidays or during barbecues, everyone was invited. Everyone. That door was never closed during those times.

12. Eloise Chávez remembers her mother's garden

This place meant the world to my mother. She had her roses out here, she'd come out and she'd do her watering, she would take care of them. And she always made sure this place was kept up because when we had first holy communions, baptisms, baby showers, the house was so small, so this is where we would congregate. But one of the biggest, biggest things that would happen here would be our Easter gathering. Of course Easter always started with Mass, and then they'd have a softball game, and there were a lot of children, so my dad always made it a point to include the kids. So he said, "Well, we're going to have a kids' softball game and we'll have an adult softball game." He always included everyone. So after they did that for a couple of hours, my dad played on both, he pitched for both teams, and he always wanted to be the winner of whatever he was doing. And after that, we'd come here, they'd have a big Easter egg hunt for the kids, and then we'd have a big barbecue. And my parents always invited people that lived here, that didn't, that couldn't go home to families, who didn't have families. We would used to open the place up to others than just the family. My mother loved a T-bone steak, and of course my dad was a vegetarian, right. So you know, after they'd prepare the meal, we'd all sit down to eat. We always said grace before a meal. So my dad knew that my mother loved meat, especially steak. So when she first would cut her steak, he'd go, "Oh, that poor little cow." She'd look at him and he would not let her eat her steak and peace. He wouldn't. I said, "Dad!" he says, "I'm just teasing with her." She'd look at him like, "Don't even go there César." But yeah, he would always tease her about eating meat because she was not a vegetarian and she was not going to be a vegetarian.

13. Chávez Home

Here we are in front of the Chávez home. When César started to get some kind of name recognition, and started to really organize people to make change, when people would look forward to meeting him, they thought that he must be this huge imposing figure, probably living in a huge house with maybe many cars, but he was a humble man and his humble home matched him. Even though he did have pride in himself and pride in his family, he wasn't about material things. And he did have a large family as well. He had eight children, but by the time they moved to this house here only a few of them were still living with them, the rest were adults. So this is just a two bedroom. They joke that it's a two bedroom mansion here at La Paz.

14. Paul Chavez recalls his parents decision to live a humble life

When he decided to give up the most secure life he ever lived, he was living in east Los Angeles. He was the staff director for a Latino community rights organization, the CSO, and he was living a middle-class life. You see pictures of him, he looked like Clark Gable. He had his Brooks Brothers suits and ties, and little pencil mustache, and his hair was slicked back. And even back then he used to smoke and he had his cigarette cases with the monograms. He was driving a Volvo. How many Chicanos are driving Volvos in the late fifties? Well, that was my dad. He was on a course to a comfortable middle-class life. But this idea that farmworkers continued to labor under difficult conditions and for terrible wages, he was never able to reconcile himself with the idea that he would be doing that while people continued to live the life that he'd lived. And so him and my mom made the decision that something had to be done about it. My mom would talk about the times if he would come home from trips with the CSO and he would tell her “I drove through the Central Valley and I saw people working the fields, bent over all day in the hot sun, in terrible conditions. Somebody should do something about it.” And she would listen because she agreed, because she lived the same life. But she said that it got old after a while. And it got to the point that one day when he came home and he said that she looked him in the eye and she said, “Well, why don't you do something about it?” And then he says, well, you know what that means?” She goes, “I know what it means.”

It meant that they would give up the most comfortable life they had. They had eight children, right? The oldest was 13, I believe, the youngest was still in diapers. They would give up the most comfortable and secure life they'd ever lived. They would return to the fields. My mother would have to go back and work in the fields, not only to put food on the table for her kids, but to get my dad gas money so he could drive up and down the state talking to farm workers about this idea that they could organize a union for farm workers and make a difference.

So he understood the enormity of it. But I think that when she challenged him, really, she was telling him is that “I'm with you if you want to do this,” because she grew up in the same conditions with my father. She had to drop out of school in the eighth grade because she had to help her mother feed her brothers and sisters. She lived in a converted horse barn and she understood the dignities that people faced. And so when my father said he wanted to do something about it, she was game because she was cut from the same thread.

15. Anthony Chavez remembers his father’s cars

So this car has been, it's been sitting here since my father passed in 1993. He had several cars and a Crown Victoria, a nice car. He had some St. Regis vehicles that were more powerful cars, elegant cars, relaxing cars. My uncle, his brother, always talked about diesel vehicles. He drove these two vehicles. And he made a bet with my father, and my father didn't believe in him. So he made a bet with my father saying that he could drive from Mexicali, Mexico to El Paso, Texas for less than $10 a diesel, that my dad would have to get one. So it happened. But my uncle traveled on the south of the border where diesel was like 5 cents a gallon, and so he beat my father's bet. But anyways, my father ended up liking that bet. My father got a, it was the late seventies, early eighties, Delta 88. It was diesel. Not only did it have the manufactured tank, he had tanks in the trunk that would carry an extra 20 to 30 gallons of diesel. Extra.

So, you know, I would drive my father around sometimes and he asked me to drive into Phoenix one day so that. Okay. So we're driving to Phoenix and we get to Phoenix, and we turned around and we start coming home and I'm noticing the gas gauge is not moving. I said, Dad, I don't know if this is working.” “Oh, it's working. I told you this car is great. The mileage is fantastic.” I said, “Okay”. So I said “You know what dad, just to make sure, I'm going to stop and I'm going to put some diesel on it just to make sure.” So we pull over to the gas station and we're now three quarters of the way through the trip. We've gone to Arizona, to Phoenix, and we're back around the Palm Springs, Coachella area.

So I get out and I put gas in it, and it keeps clicking off, clicking off. I look at the pump, I was like, “$7?” I open up the tanks in the trunk and they're still full. He goes, “Didn’t I tell you?” I said, “You're right. You're telling me.” So, I mean, after that point, I remember the organization went out and bought - all the vehicles were diesel. You know, Paul drove a diesel. I drove a diesel. And for the organizers, they bought maybe 30 or 40 diesel Rabbits. And plus we're getting like 60 miles to a gallon. So that's when he fell in love with diesel, and he was a big believer of his doubt to 88.

16. The Hub of the House

Here we are in the living room of the Chávez residence. And this functioned kind of like the hub of the house, especially when César was home. He was out a lot for work, for organizing for the cause, but when he was home, he made the best of his time here.

17. Anthony Chavez remembers family gatherings

This is where everything happened. My father wasn't here very much. He was always traveling. But when he came, this is where we would be. We gathered around, he tell us about his trip and ask us how things are going. You know, just, family talk, family talk about my mom and us. A typical Christmas and this in the house was my father - we would open this up and they would put the presents in there, and it'd be wall to wal, curtain to curtain, ceiling to ceiling. The kitchen would be packed and we would have tamales cooking, and there'd be a Mexican chocolate going, and drinks, and there'd be kids everywhere. We'd be hanging over the hallway door, looking in, and my father would pick a couple of, uh, grandkids, his grandkids, to help him, be his elves.

So my father would sit on the chair and they would handle the presents. And he would read off every single present “To so-and-so”, “To Mom”, “To so-and-so,” “To Dad”, and “Anna to Bertie”. And we would sit there and wait until everybody opened their presents. And we’re talking maybe, forty people in here. Forty people. Maybe more because of nieces and nephews, boyfriends and girlfriends would come over and it would be packed. You could not, once you sat down, you didn't get up. That's what it was. So, I mean, that was a great time for my father because his kids were here and especially his grandkids. All right. That was a special, special time for him to sit down and play Santa Claus. And he wasn't around as much. It was amazing to see how the kids would react to my father. And it was just like glue. They didn’t get to see him much, so they saw them, they really took advantage of it.

18. Eloise Chavez remembers family visitors

My sister and I used to take care of my mom. When her health declined she couldn't really do much. So when I would come to relieve my sister, first thing I do is look at the picture and I'd say, “Oh, okay. Julia was here.” My mom would say, “How do you know?” I says, “Because she's moved her picture right in the front.” So you could always tell who was here last. It's like, “No, Nana, you have to have - you know I’m your favorite - you have to have my picture here.” And my mom would say, “I don't have a favorite. You're all my favorite.” “No, Nana, tell the truth.” “I'm telling the truth!” Anyway, so that's the thing with the pictures.

19. Anthony Chavez remembers the family importance of religion

One of my brothers or sisters bought the first cross over to my mom. At my father's death they gave it to my mother to show their faith and my mother and father's faith in the religion as a tribute to my father. Well, when we were in Galena we were close to the church. And when we moved up here it was far and we had a priest live onsite for a number of years who would give Sunday services here. And for my father,

when my father was on the road, that's one thing when he had security guards or his lead team would find, is a church. So if he was on the road on his Sunday he would make it a point, schedule permitting, to be at church. When we were home with my mom, they would have services here in one of the buildings. Actually in the audio/video room of the center was a conference room where there was an administration building before, and there's where they used to have Sunday services, and we would attend our Sunday services. Our children were taught the catechism from a retired nun, ex-nun who lived on site. And so our kids made their first communions here onsite.

20. Eloise Chavez remembers her father's morning routine

My dad, I remember also, I stayed here one time, and I'm an early riser. And so I got up, I thought, "I'm going to make my coffee" because everything was quiet, I thought they were asleep. So I get up, I get up and I walk and this wasn't here yet. And I look, and my dad's standing on his head. He startled me. And then he comes down and he's laughing. I said, "Dad, what are you doing?" He was doing yoga. He used to get up and do yoga before he'd go to the office. He says, "I saw that look on your face. I couldn't help it I had to just come down." And I said, "You startled me. I thought you were sleeping." He says, "You're not the only early riser." I didn't even hear him get up.

21. Cooking and Community

So here we are in the kitchen and this was kind of Helen's domain. She was always cooking something because having eight kids, and being on a budget, and having a big community around here and being so giving, he always wanted to give through cooking. She was a fantastic cook as well, even though when César asked for her hand in marriage to her family, they joked "Fair warning, she doesn't know how to cook." But he said, "That's okay, we'll learn together. We'll teach each other." And that's what they did. They also had to kind of relearn how to cook when César decided to become a vegetarian.

22. Eloise Chavez remembers her mother's cooking

There were times that she'd be here, she'd be sitting down. My dad would call her and say, "Helen, I just finished a meeting and there's about 10 people were coming over for dinner." She would look like, "Okay". And I kid you not, she could put something together every time. And my dad was always so generous about inviting people over to eat, or even she she'd say "César, I don't have anything. I can refry some beans and I can fry some potatoes." "It doesn't matter. Whatever you have is what we're going to eat." And so that's what it was.

23. Paul Chavez remembers how La Paz transformed

I was a sophomore in high school when we moved here. We grew up in Delano, but we moved here during my sophomore year in high school. And it was a big change because the Central Valley by that time was a place that had seen a lot of conflict and the student activism was really high on campus. Large Latino and Filipino and African American populations. And when we came here, we came to an area that was pretty rural, pretty Anglo, pretty white. And so there was some acceptance there by a lot of people that had to be done. But as time went on, we made friends and our kids had made friends and we would become part of the local community.

But at first it was a difficult time. Growing up here in La Paz was a different thing. There was people from all walks of life and there were farm workers who were working for justice, and there was religious folks, there was Protestant ministers and Catholic priests, and there was nuns and there was activists and Chicano nationalists, and there was just a whole different group of people. And then there was always

interesting visitors coming in. So what we grew up in was a community that experienced us to a lot of different types of folks and a lot of different ideas. As a teenager growing up, it was a pretty stimulating environment, and I think that it was that setting that gave my father a lot of nurturing and supported him in the work that he had to do.

24. Place of Peace

César Chavez raised his family here, worked here, and it was very important for him to have this place of peace, because every time he left this area, it was struggles. It was boycotts and picket and sometimes people even trying to threaten his life. But here he was mostly safe and it was in the mountains. You can hear the birds chirping maybe, and it was close to nature, which is something that kind of revitalized his soul. And he knew that that was important for him.