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Remarks, Don Villarejo, December 10, 2012

First, thank you to Marc Schenker and Sandy Freeland, organizers of this event, and to the sponsor, the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety. Special thanks to John Howard, Luis Magana, Judith Redmond, Lupe Sandoval and Marc Schenker for your kind words.

I also want to thank my wife, Merna Villarejo, for her patient support during the many years in which I have sought to promote social justice and enlarge participation in our democracy.

The key to my work has been the exceptional support and collaborations with staff, co-investigators, consultants and members of the Board of Directors of the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS). Could everyone who, at any time, worked for CIRS, whether as staff, co-investigator, consultant or member of the Board of Directors, please stand to be recognized?

To all of you, I salute and thank you for your dedication. My efforts at CIRS benefitted immeasurably from your contributions.

Marc Schenker has asked me to confine my remarks to my involvement with agricultural worker health and safety. I will do so but with reflections on the development of my work in that topic.

After some five decades of seeking to always look forward, I've reached a point in my life where I have begun to look back and reflect on lessons learned. I was trained as a physicist and pursued that discipline for more than a decade. But I found myself increasing unsatisfied with my work, and eventually realized that an academic career was actually not a good fit. I wanted something more, something that was directly connected to social change. And so I jumped ship. But as a physicist I learned some very valuable skills: analytic problem solving, the importance of objectivity, reliance on direct observation and primary data, hypothesis testing, and quantitative reasoning skills.

Imagine being able to begin a new career with a blank slate and to have an opportunity to design a work plan for the indefinite future. That's what I had in the summer of 1975 when my family and I moved to Davis. I was seeking to bring the world of ideas and research to the world of political action and social change. By ideas and research, I mean developing information that should rely, as much as possible, on direct observation and primary sources as well as meet the rigorous tests of contemporary scientific discourse.

After more than a year of listening and learning from community leaders and others throughout California, as well as volunteering with the farmworkers movement, I joined with Paul Barnett and Cathy Bertolucci to initiate the California Institute for Rural Studies as a private, non-profit, research and education institution, and, as well, to start up a non-profit, membership-based, advocacy organization. I volunteered to take responsibility for CIRS as Executive Director.

Over the next several years, CIRS developed and articulated its Statement of Purpose.

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“We seek to build a society that is ecologically balanced, socially just and economically sustainable. We believe that this can only be done through the expansion of political and economic democracy.”

My journey with NIOSH’s agricultural health and safety program began in 1990 with the invitation to join Marc Schenker and others to plan for what is now the WCAHS.

But participation took an unexpected turn. In 1992, I participated in the NIOSH-sponsored National Symposium on Childhood Agricultural Injury Prevention in Marshfield, Wisconsin. At the meeting, Marilyn Adams made a presentation concerning the loss of her 11-year-old son who suffocated in a gravity flow wagon of shelled corn on her family’s farm.

Ms. Adams presentation triggered a memory of a traumatic experience I had as a foster child when I lived for a few months on a family dairy farm in southern Minnesota. As was the case for much of rural America in 1944, the place lacked electricity, or running water, or indoor plumbing. But the farmer and his family were hard-working and kind to me. I learned how to muck the stalls of the dairy barn and to prime a hand pump to get water flowing, among other skills. When the silage was harvested and chopped to be blown into their silo using the PTO of a tractor and huge tubing, I was sent into the silo with a pitchfork. I was instructed to spread the incoming silage as uniformly as possible and not allow it to pile up below the tubing. But as a boy of 7 years old, I was unable to keep up with the incoming flow and I couldn’t stop the pile-up. And then a miracle happened: the incoming silage plugged the tubing all the way back to the tractor. Suddenly, everything stopped. I was rescued and was safe.

The experience of living, even if only for a short while, on a farm operated by the farmer and his family was invaluable. Although I didn’t fully understand it at the time, I learned that everyone who performs crop or livestock production tasks on a farm is at risk of injury or death, whether it is a farmer, an unpaid family worker or a hired worker. All are farm workers at risk.

Today in Minnesota and other Midwestern states, children under age 12 are not allowed to work in silos. Nevertheless, just in the past five years, 14 teenage workers have died in silo accidents.

When I think back to how I learned to bring direct observational investigation to support advocacy, it was not from books or from study. Rather, it was also from direct experience. In 1958, the student chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at the University of Chicago undertook an effort to challenge racial discrimination in Chicago housing. Chicago was then, as it is today, the most racially segregated large city in America. The NAACP students sought a white student couple to assist in a project to expose the degree of racial discrimination in private, off-campus rental housing referrals in a listing service maintained by the university. Merna and I volunteered to be a white couple to help in this effort. The project was simple. First, a black couple would knock at the door of a listed dwelling, most often being told the dwelling had already been rented. Then, Merna and I would shortly follow-

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up by knocking at the same door, most often to be offered the rental, which we would politely decline. Finally, a second black couple would seek the rental, and most often were refused.

The information generated by this conceptually simple effort became the focus of a demand by the student NAACP chapter that the owners of all properties seeking to be listed in the referral service sign a non-discrimination agreement. Eventually, we picketed the campus to reinforce the seriousness of this request.

Thus, I learned about sample frames, sampling methodology and applied sociology from Sam Greenlee and Larry Landry, graduate student activists with the NAACP long before I even knew the meaning of these terms.

In both of these examples, as the philosopher John Dewey has observed, experiential learning in which the participant is emotionally affected is one of the most powerful educational methods. I never forgot these experiences. In retrospect, from the modest project with the NAACP I also learned that demands should be directed to those who actually have the power to enact change.

As many here are fully aware, America's farm laborers are a socially vulnerable population: low-income, ethnic minority, mostly recent immigrants, many lack authorization for U.S. employment, having low educational attainment, with limited English fluency, ineligible for nearly all needs-based government programs, and often without any social support. Thus, determining the current health status of the hired farm worker population is an important research objective for understanding their occupational health. And so CIRS undertook the California Agricultural Workers Health Survey (CAWHS), the first large-scale, cross-sectional health survey to include a comprehensive physical examination, funded by a grant from The California Endowment. Shortly after the first results became available in 2000, I made a presentation in the eastern San Joaquin Valley town of Cutler, one of the sites where the study was conducted.

The presentation of CAWHS findings was made to the Board of Directors of The California Endowment (TCE) in a church in Cutler that had been arranged by Joel Diringler and Mario Gutierrez, program officers of TCE. The pews of the church were filled with local residents, most of whom were hired farm workers. I recognized this to be an extraordinary opportunity to apply the lessons I had learned over the years. After presenting the scientific findings, which were quite stark, one of the board members asked me directly, what can the foundation do? Without missing a beat, I demanded \$50 million in new grants to fund interventions to improve the health of hired farmworkers in California. Bob Ross, the Executive Director of the California Endowment, was somewhat taken aback by my indiscretion, but the funding was eventually approved, both for expanded support to clinics as well as funding for organizing and advocacy.

Some of you are aware of the challenges that Merna and I have faced during the last 14 months. Today, in the midst of so many friends and colleagues, I feel physically strong and optimistic. As I see it, we have a much greater possibility today than we did before November 6 to

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fundamentally change U.S. immigration policy. First, we should and can get the Congress to approve the Dream Act. Recently, hundreds of young dreamers met to chart their path of activism for the next several months. Second, I think comprehensive immigration reform is within our grasp in the next few months to provide a path to citizenship for millions of undocumented workers in the U.S. Lastly, I'd like to join a million or more of people like us in a March for Justice in Washington, D.C., to show the breadth and depth of support for this goal. Now is the time to fix our immigration system and bring justice to everyone. It can be done!

Thank you all for your participation in today's celebration.