

Remarks > Arizona Hunger Summit April 28, 2017

I began life on a hill top 80 acre farm in Central Iowa. We raised nearly all of the food we ate from the thick cream skimmed from the milk we sold to the vegetables from our large garden, fruit was gleaned from neighbor's trees. Protein came from the livestock my father raised; pheasants he hunted and fish came from our pond. By the age of three, I was in charge of feeding the chickens and gathering eggs. We belonged to the Maxwell Farmers Coop. Harvest was a community effort sharing labor and equipment. Our life & neighbors were the picture of community food security. We moved from that farm in 1959 and my Father managed large hog farms in Iowa & North Carolina.

Twenty years later I saw my first Food Pantry. I was the wife of a troubled Vietnam Veteran struggling to survive in the Houston area. A neighbor took me to apply for Food Stamps. I was informed that it would be 3 days before I could pick up my stamps at the local post office. I was out of food. The caseworker assured me she had a solution, they had just opened a food bank & I could go home with provisions for myself and my children. They walked me down to look through the windows to see what a good job they had done gathering all the food. There was only one problem, she discovered no one knew where the key was. They couldn't give me a food box. The neighbor gave me \$5 to feed my children for the next three days. She was also my only transportation and took me to the store. At that moment, my life was the picture of hunger and food insecurity.

The next step in my journey took me back to Eastern North Carolina a year later and a job with Kroger's for six years. I learned first-hand about another sector of the food system in those years. One of the most painful things I did was dump edible food that I knew someone needed. There were no pantries to take the food. We were occasionally allowed to give out of date bread & produce to feed animals, but giving it for human consumption was against corporate policy even if there had been a food pantry.

I moved to Oregon in 1985 and began the part of my journey that brings me here today. The first two years were rough and my family and I received our first food boxes. After being injured 3 months into the best paying job of my life, I worked with the local community action agency to find a job. That job was a VISTA

position organizing a firewood gleaning program which transitioned into spending 12 years as the Volunteer and Gleaning Coordinator for the Regional Food Bank. The gleaning groups were low income self- sufficiency groups. For the last 19 years I have worked for the Oregon Food Bank working with low income gleaners and growing our community food system program. As a volunteer I chaired the local Community Services organization in my rural community that operates a food pantry, kids clothing closet & sponsored our low income gleaning groups. We built a new building in 2001 for our programs and opened one of Oregon's first shopping pantries.

I have been an observer and participant in community food systems all of my life. For the past 30 years, I have participated in and observed food banking and food assistance programs. I have stood on both sides of the food pantry counter and served in the role of supporting all types of food assistance programs.

Food banking started simply right here in Arizona and spread across the country. People were hungry, food was going to waste. Food would be recovered and "banked" to be withdrawn by those in need. A simple idea with complex implications that no one could possibly have predicted. Feeding America reports that their network of 200 Food Banks helped provide food to more than 46 million people through 60,000 food pantries and meal programs in 2016. Food banking is no longer a simple act of charity. We have assumed responsibility for the health and nutrition of 1 in 7 Americans. We have too often made the claim we could end hunger. The reality is food boxes will never end hunger. They may help for a few days, but the underlying situation that brought that person to the food pantry will not be changed because of that food box.

It is clear that we must continue to provide our core services. By default, society and government have chosen Food banks and their broad network of partners to feed the hungry in our nation with no real resolve to address the issues that could end hunger. Federal food assistance programs have diminished in value while food banking has grown into an established institution. That being said, according to Bread for the World 19 out of 20 grocery bags of food assistance in the US come from Federal programs. We must dispel the notion that we are the solution to hunger and food insecurity in this country.

Oregon Food Bank began the transition beyond the food box in the early 90's. Our mission statement was amended to include "eliminating the root causes of hunger". We took our first steps into public policy and advocacy, nutrition education and community food systems followed within the next decade along with garden education programs. We have added health care partnerships in the last few years offering online training to health care professionals on hunger & food insecurity and working with clinics to provide food security screening followed up with appropriate referrals. Our last strategic plan resulted in a new call to action for us & our Statewide Network "Food Today, Food Tomorrow; Food for All". For the first time I feel like we have a cohesive vision for the future that brings all of our programming together to serve those in need and the greater community in the best way possible. We were able to do that because of what we have learned from our work.

**We need to listen and investigate:** Numbers and statistics can frame our work, but they do not tell the whole story. Through our Voices focus groups, Hunger Factors surveys, FEAST community food system events and our grassroots community food assessments, "Conversations Across the Food System" we heard from people in need and the communities we work in. We ask questions and explore the implications.

**We need to facilitate community or work with partners who do:** We create spaces where people can talk to each other about food and food systems. Through FEAST, our community food systems organizing program we have worked with over 100 communities in Oregon to create plans for a food systems that recognizes the community's assets and creates a vision to build food security. FEAST has led to creation of new Farmers Markets, new food systems organizations and brought together partners with diverse interests in the food system. The FEAST model is in use in at least 15 states across the country.

**We Advocate:** Through our Voices Focus Groups we learned what issues were important to the people we serve and shaped our advocacy to address them. We have taken on issues from raising & indexing the minimum wage, regulating payday loans, EITC as well as supporting funding the statewide food network. We are currently working on housing issues. We do this work by organizing tours of our partner agencies for policy makers and creating opportunities for the

recipients of our programs to communicate with their representatives. The volunteers that come through our Volunteer Center are encouraged to engage in advocacy activities. We strive to involve all of our recipients and partners in advocating to fight hunger and poverty.

**We are sourcing food strategically:** We have made the decision to say no to soda, candy & chips in most cases. We are carefully evaluating the cost of all types of food recovery and making decisions to use our funds for the most nutritious foods. Our Network partners are raising funds to purchase CSA shares for pantries in their local areas supporting local farmers and facilitating community relationships.

**We are the core of the Network of the Regional Food Banks in Oregon:** The 21 RFBs in Oregon have been working together for over 30 years. They meet quarterly acting as a “Community of Practice”. Having a statewide network has helped us advocate for funding, gives us power with the legislature, and strengthens our voice on behalf the people we serve.

**We support Community Food Systems work statewide:** In partners with Oregon State University Small Farms & Community Food System Center we serve as the backbone organizations for the Oregon Community Food Systems Network. OCFSN consists of nearly 50 CFS organizations from across the state.

**We are inclusive and value all of our partners:** Our donors & partners come from all parts and scales of the food system. We seek to serve as a bridge between all these sectors.

### **What is left to do?**

We have to think harder about unintended consequences. Does Harvest Share negatively impact a healthy corner store? Will a mobile food pantry compromise a rural grocery store?

What is our future? Can we use our know-how & resources to support the food system in different ways? We have been observing an ever changing food system for five decades. How do we use that knowledge?

We need to recognize that food insecurity is not just a condition of hunger and poverty. And that is not only those in need who do not know how to cook.

## **What lies ahead?**

We have an aging volunteer base serving a younger and more active population. That aging population will soon be in need of our help as they face rising health care costs. We will need to change our hours and means of service to best meet the need. Every year brings new food handling and safety challenges that make our work more complex and challenging for volunteers. One of the most important issues we face is how we measure success. Increasing pounds & people served does equal success in fighting hunger and food insecurity.