

2nd California Community Food Security Summit
June 10th Panel Notes

**Farming for Social Change: Activist farmers addressing hunger and
improving community food security**

Panelists: Judith Redmond, Fullbelly Farm, Guinda, CA; Maria Inez Catalan, Catalan's Laughing Onion Farm, Salinas, CA; Shyaam Shebaka, Ecovillage Farm, Richmond, CA
Moderator: Jared Lawson, Community Alliance with Family Farmers

Note taker: Amanda Shaffer

How do we keep farmers, farm workers, sustainable agriculture, etc., part of the Community Food Security dialogue? It's important to help people understand where their food comes from.

Judith Redmond

Today at the plenary there were some questions about food cost and food access that I think are very germane to this conversation. I am the owner of Full Belly Farm, a very diverse organic farm, one of the oldest in the state. We are very committed to addressing issues of hunger in the areas where we sell our produce (Northern California). It is clear to us that on a global level agriculture farmers are not addressing issues of hunger and nutrition. Clearly those are areas where we are failing and we need to address hunger and nutrition head on. I am going to describe a few programs at Full Belly Farm that help improve access to healthy, organic food.

1. Direct donations

- a. *Food Bank pick ups from Farmers' Markets* - All three farmers' markets that we go to have pretty well developed efforts by food banks to come to the farmers' market and pick up food that the farmers don't sell. Many farmers support it.
- b. *Senior Gleaners* - A local Senior Gleaners group makes a trip once a week with their big truck to all the organic farms to pick up food that the farms have set aside. The Senior Gleaners in Sacramento deliver to 150 different charities in the Sacramento area.

2. Donations in combination with CSA support

- a. *CSA membership donations* - The most interesting partnerships are between our CSA membership and Full Belly Farm. We have 600 subscribers, and a weekly newsletter where we describe what's going on at the farm. More and more we are focusing on connecting to our membership and explaining to them the ongoing challenges we face, as well as our values around issues like food security. Because of this expression of our values, our membership has come to understand that there is sort of a platform/network here that is trying to figure out a new way to have a food system. I think it's a very powerful thing to have that many people coming together with common values. The first program serves a clinic for low-income women with cancer. When families go out of town they donate their box to the clinic, or they can pay extra on their bill. Our membership donates 4 boxes of food a week to the

clinic and the farm donates one. So every week the women can get produce from our farm in addition to their treatment. It has made a huge difference in the lives of these women, which is one of the reasons our membership is really excited about it. That's one example of something a CSA can do.

- b. *Involvement of local churches and other organizations* - One of the members of the CSA is a member of a local church. Her church was talking about how the congregation could address social justice issues in their community. There was a woman who was a member of our CSA who thought that food was a social justice issue. The congregation had a hard time agreeing and understanding, but once they decided to focus on it, they formed a connection between our farm and this local organization called Loaves and Fishes. Loaves and Fishes is supported entirely by donations from the public, and provides 2 meals a day, transitional housing, showers, etc. for people in need of support services in Sacramento. The church makes a collection once a month and people are asked to donate \$14 for a box of produce, and we add 10% on the cut as a Full Belly donation. Then we call Loaves and Fishes and ask them what they want, and we make the delivery to them. The network of our membership has been translated into the food for this little organization that is serving food to people in need in Sacramento. The director of the organization is really excited about it.

3. Agreement with Alameda County Food Bank –

We have an agreement with a food bank that allows us to deliver fresh fruits and vegetables in Oakland and Hayward. It started about a year ago. We get paid wholesale prices for the majority of what we deliver. The seniors program is made possible through an arrangement that was funded by the Goldman Foundation and a City Commission on low-income seniors. The shelter deliveries are funded by block grants from the city of Oakland. They often deliver to shelters of men getting out of jail, women escaping domestic violence, etc. Nearly always, the food banks only receive donations of canned goods. They say they have never seen fresh fruits and vegetables at their program before.

One really interesting thing that we learned from this program is how out of touch younger people are with where their food comes from. The seniors are all living in subsidized housing, food preparations is difficult for a lot of them because of health problems, and the majority don't have ovens, blenders, toasters, etc. If they are lucky, they might have a hotplate. The people at the shelters are mostly young, the majority are men. Unlike the seniors, the shelters have kitchens, and often have a staff member who can cook for them. Interestingly, the seniors are wildly excited by the deliveries. The largest is to East Oakland Senior Center where lines of people there waiting for the truck and people are asking, "Are you the lady with the vegetables?!" People want to unload the truck, they can take some of the produce and send it back with me with a card thanking me. They don't need any lessons about how to cut collard greens. They grew up eating fresh fruits and vegetables, cooking, gardening, etc. In the shelters it's been really hard to get people to eat the vegetables. A little bit of a lesson about what we've lost in our culture about how to eat and cook. Tomatoes and asparagus were still a hit in the shelters, but that's about it.

The connection with the farm and the food bank community has been wonderful. They really seem into it and are trying to find more grant money. People otherwise wouldn't have access to this food, and they like it because it's making them healthy. We have structural problems in our food system, and none of these programs really deal with those issues, but they do give people more control and access, and strengthening that network and making that connection, is a very important first step.

Questions from the audience:

Q. Do you have a website, and what would a box of veggies look like?

A. www.fullbellyfarm.com We actually don't deliver individual boxes. A box was the initial idea, and some people are unhappy that it's not individual boxes, but it was a way to explain it to people who are giving the \$14 a month so that they could picture it. It's still \$14 worth of produce, but we don't divide it up by boxes.

Q. How do we make connections between farmers and social justice? Does a small scale farm actually have enough produce to donate?

A. If you can sell everything you are growing, that is a great thing. The produce that is being donated is from the farms that are focused on only selling really high quality produce and they aren't going to take it back and sell it if it doesn't sell at the market that day, so they donate it. We need activists to become farmers and farmers to become activists, and I think there are many efforts to do that, so don't be too depressed. Maybe we need to have a farmer on the CAFJN steering committee.

Maria Inez Catalan

Maria Inez Catalan was at the rural development center training program in Salinas in '95. She was interested in starting her own CSA and has since started a cooperative with another farmer and her four children, running the Laughing Onion CSA. And she's been involved in a lot of other things as well.

Deborah is going to help with translation.

I'm going to tell you a little about my story. I am a third generation immigrant. My father immigrated here as contracted labor worker and my mother 27 years ago. I arrived 17 years ago with four children. Just like any immigrant, you come to work in the fields. I worked where there were pesticide applications and many risks. I had a niece who was born without part of her nose. Another nephew that was born with two lungs that weren't fully developed. We weren't very informed. The doctors would murmur in low voices that maybe it was because they had drunk alcohol. They talked about it in the hallways, but not upfront. And it's difficult to convince the government that they have harmful dirty agriculture. They have a lot of money.

I figured, there has to be another way of producing food. My mother is disabled all her life because she has worked in these fields. Someone mentioned to us that there was a livable development center and we went out of curiosity. I have always been very

curious, asking a lot of questions. I learned a different way for producing food. In reality, us Latinos are agriculturalists and understand the organic method, because that is what we do. We would have beautiful harvests. I remember planting the peanut fields. He would integrate animals into our agriculture. He didn't need chemical fertilizers. Here, I had to do with different regulations. I am very happy to have Judy as my model, now she is my competition!

But it is something very difficult to remove ourselves from our world or niche that we have been accustomed to as Latinos, because according to big corporations we are only good for labor. It's really hard to be able to pack a box of broccoli in one minute. I know because I've done it, but we are good for more than just packing. We are good for helping the community and protecting our water and resources.

I got to train for three years to learn how to harvest, cultivate, drive a tractor. They showed me the basics of food production. I learned about the CSA from Judy and I was happy because I wanted to learn how to work and produce food for my people. I did everything I could to cultivate, work the land, produce food for my people, and when I came to sell lettuce to people they said, "why I am going to buy my lettuce from you when I work in the lettuce industry?" It continues to be a major roadblock in my community. People who bought my products were people who were educated and informed. I continued to work for a broker for about 3 years. Unfortunately, about three years ago they had a bankruptcy and they never paid us.

Two years ago I made the decision that I need to educate my community, I began working with schools, CAFF, People's Grocery, children, etc. talking to people about organic production, taking them on farm visits. For me the most important thing was to educate and produce for my family.

We now have a 15 acre CSA with 150 subscribers. We work with schools and churches, and we also collaborate with non-profits, such as the Homeless Garden Project in Santa Cruz. We are trying to educate the Latino community. I am the first Latina woman that has successfully done a project like this. I've represented Latina women at a conference in Washington, DC. We assist folks that are disabled or can't afford food and we take the boxes to their home. We are probably one of the very few, if not the only, farm that has information about CSAs in Spanish.

My four children also work at the farm. My daughter who is 17 years old works on the computer and writes up letter to the subscribers. She thinks she's the owner now because she always knows who is going to pay and who is not going to pay. My oldest son likes to sell in farmers markets, and the second likes to irrigate. The youngest loves to be on the tractor—he lifts our beds, sometimes crooked, but he loves it.

I was discouraged at first, I was a single mother who didn't speak English, alone, but now I've learned from ALBA. When I first started off I figured out how much I paid myself at the end of the week and turned out to be .65 an hour. I only had one farmers' market in Salinas and I would sell about \$40. Now I have a contract where we give them low

prices so they can give it back to the community. For example, a basket of strawberries in the market is going to cost \$3.00 but we sell it to the community for \$1.50. That's my life--to help educate my community and provide affordable food. It was quite a disaster at the beginning, but now it's well organized.

The name (Laughing Onion) is odd for Latinos, but what happened was a university student came and did the onion and the design and the name and everything. My kids where like yuck, an onion, but what could we do?

The message I am sending to the Latino community – is there is an alternative (organic). I am trained to know the health risks and what the pesticide symptoms are. When we arrive in this country we are taught that eating hamburgers and pizza are the best thing you can give your children, because we didn't have it. We used to eat squash, and more vegetables. So I teach nutrition for children. It is also about a mentality that we have--I want to change that, so people will eat healthier.

Shyaam Shebaka

Founder and director of Ecovillage Farm, born and raised in Arkansas, public health professional for 28 years, member of Food First, Ecological Farming Association and more.

I have spent the larger part of my adult life in urban areas, but I come from a farm labor background. We thought we were farming because we would get up in the morning and take a truck to pick cotton and get paid .30 an hour. As a result of that experience I didn't want to have anything to do with farming. I went into public health, and I still say I'm in public health because I think giving people good food and control over their lives is the best medicine you can give them. I worked at Berkeley for 28 years in the chronic disease section and I think they are not as progressive as they think they are.

I got involved in urban agriculture because there were so many young people into drugs and other such activities. There was so much racism, and these kids had such limited resources. We would go around and clean up vacant lots and turn them into gardens, work out a deal with the owner, and then after a while, the owner would decide they wanted their lot back. After doing that for 3 or 4 years, I got frustrated. I retired from the city of Berkeley, and this large piece of land opened up. I didn't have any available cash, but I asked the owner to hold it for three months, with a 10,000 down payment, and they did so at the reluctance of the real-estate person. But I did close escrow at 650,000 about a year ago.

It's not just about growing healthy vegetables. Given the state of people living in urban areas, low-income, people of color, we need to deal with issues of racism, we need to create new leaders for the world. At the helm we have a drunken sailor, so we need to change leadership. Ecovillage is about getting people to work together across cultural income and race lines, using the framework of saving the environment and the people in

it as a way to accomplish that. Some of our programs will allow young people to get involved and have skills that are an alternative to the opportunities presented to them, gangs, prison, low-wage jobs. One of the things that is clear to me is many of the churches that have programs where they bring food to people, bring the food then they leave. We want to be the people who teach people how to catch the fish, not the ones giving them the fish to feed them for a day.

questions:

Q. How do we end up growing a better world?

A. That's where we are starting off from, and I know that people in the rest of the world are doing that too. I've done a lot in Africa and there are people from all over the world dealing with the same issue that we are dealing with in East LA and East St. Louis. Once we recognize that, hopefully we can figure out a way to work on this together. I suggest that you be cautious when people come into the community with all the answers. Demand that they work with you from a place of equal respect. No matter how poor a community is, they know what they need. There is no reservoir where all knowledge exists.

Q. Could you talk a little about the food production?

A. On the 5.5 acres that we have, we are using that as a platform for educating, not just growing. Foster parents and their children are coming on Saturday to have a "From Garden to Table" workshop. They are going to harvest the food they grew on our site, and we're all going to prepare the food together. We have a kitchen on site. We have an orchard, some chickens and sheep a couple rabbits.

One of the things we are trying to do is keep it simple. People were talking about sustainable agriculture and I didn't know what they were talking about. A lot of people won't get that, but we still want them to know how to grow their own fruits and vegetables.

Q. Who do you work with?

A. We are diverse and flexible, we do programs with schools, with seniors, for the last three months I've been working with the foster parent group. They also wanted to learn parenting skills so I used the principles of Quanza in relation to George Washington Carver to teach parenting skills in addition to gardening. People don't talk about people like George Washington Carver. If he can do it, you can too. I feel very strongly that I learn best by doing, if I get involved by doing I can grasp it much easier.

Q. Where does your funding come from?

A. Wherever we can get it! We have been successful. I don't believe in the concept of self-sufficiency. So let's figure out how to do things cooperatively. I write grants. I think we narrow our potential when we only ask for funding—seek resources. The money will come, what you need is the idea and the people committed to it. One thing about funding: beware of people who want to come in and write a grant on your behalf. I'm interested in developing leadership so people can write their own grant. Otherwise you are doing nothing but continuing to exploit those communities.

Q. What is your website?

A. www.ecovillagefarmcenter.org

Q. How is the eco village organized? Are people living there?

A. We will be hosting some interns this summer, but we are not able to accommodate a lot of people. The idea is to visit it and then take it back to their community, not live there.

Q. What do you think about terms like “food insecure” or hungry?

A. We are managing our society crisis by crisis. The model of food security is based on this exploitative model. Our new models of community need to change, where we don't have all these divisions of class and caste. For example, every school should be a farm.

Q. What will the next generation of farmers look like? Do you have a feel for how the Ecovillage will facilitate that?

A. If you can make someone recognize that you are responsible for your well-being and food is near the top of the survival list, then that's all you need to do to develop new leadership. A real problem is our school system. The curriculum is really irrelevant to our lives. That's why farming and gardening is important. We have to take responsibility for it all! The system is working for the people who control it.