

## Living Models: Food Justice Panel

Facilitator: Hana Tanberg

Presenters: LETS GO Chicago and Appetite for Change

### **Panelist Intros**

Zoey Halliman (sp?): I've been a community organizer for about 12 years. I'm from Buffalo, NY, a great post-industrial underdog city. When you grow up in a rustbelt city that has been ravaged by corporations, it moved me to want to be an organizer. Corporations don't care about us, we need to learn to do things for ourselves. I did block club organizing and then got engaged with the Massachusetts Avenue Project, a youth food justice project. That was where I first got introduced to food justice. Before that I was focused on housing and jobs. I got involved with them over a summer working with 50 youth growing on almost an acre of land. It was an incredibly transforming experience. Growing food for the community. Teaching youth to have agency by growing things. **Making connections with rural farmers. We need each other to provide food for us.** We grew about 45,000 lbs. of food a year.

Then I moved here. I got introduced to Michelle at Appetite for Change, where they were having community dinners to talk about issue. The Fresh Corners project, that I manage, is a three year project to build the capacity of local growers. We're working with about 8 growers to grow their capacity to serve local markets. We're also doing policy work to make it easier for small growers. And doing a campaign to bring people together to recognize the importance of local food systems.

Molly Costello: I'm really glad we're in a circle. The first time I got involved with urban agriculture was 6 years ago in Chicago. I was invited to a community garden vigil for a garden that was on the property of my university. They demolished the garden in favor of a condo development that never ended up happening. It's still a gravel lot today. But around this issue, some really exciting organizing happened to make a new garden come to life. That was just my first taste of this.

Later on, I got involved with a local United Methodist church in Rogers Park where the deacon was interested in using what little land they had to connect children with the natural world. We built a garden on the front yard of the parsonage.

We don't have as much vacant land as you see on the south side of Chicago, but we have a lot of the same problems: violence, food insecurity, etc.. We started asking, within a neighborhood with such limited open space, how do we build a food system? What we came to do was start a yard share network. We realized that there was land in the neighborhood that wasn't being used, we just needed access to it. So we began asking our neighbors if they would get on board.

Our first year, we got one yard donated where we began growing food on about 1000 square feet. The next spring, we went door to door asking people to donate their land. Some people were like “NO!”, other people said, “yes, this sounds awesome”. So we built 5 more gardens and started trying to connect growers to those spaces.

Some of the other elements we brought to this was seeing a lot of elements of the community garden movement privileging white people and not really working to ensure access to marginalized groups and we also wanted to make this about placemaking.

We now have 7 yards that are a part of the network. At our peak, we’ve had somewhere between 25 and 30 people engaged in the gardens, a number of which come from our Children’s Garden program where we are connecting families to the land. We’re in our third year and really thinking a lot about how to keep it sustaining.

What do you think needs to happen around our food system? What vision do you have for the future?

Zoey: I think the Twin Cities, and I have most of my experience in Minneapolis, is a great place for local food, but I think the markets for access, especially to become more than a consumer, are very limited. I think we need to figure out how to share resources, in particular with low-income people and people of color. I think there’s a lot of urban farming and hobby farming that is being done by white affluent people. And they have the means. Maybe don’t have to work a second job to pay their bills. And that’s not something everyone has the ability to do. I’m lucky because I get paid to do food justice work. I think a lot of people can’t afford to do that.

It’s hard to talk about food not in the context of the economic system we live in. It’s set up to benefit a small subset of the population. The food system is set up modeled after that. It’s for people that can go to large grocery stores, that can spend a lot of money.

Things that are needed are access to land, particularly for low income people and people of color, support with insurance, training, distribution, help with markets, and cooperative education (much more fair and just way to do business).

Molly: I’m here because I don’t really know. It’s a large question and I think it’s different for large scale and small scale things. I’ve been sitting lately thinking about how I’ve been pouring a lot of energy into my neighborhood and I’ve been thinking about other beautiful organizations growing food with young people, primarily of color, and thinking about how much food we’re growing and the challenge of getting access to markets. The farmers’ market two blocks from us has some big barriers to access. A new community garden that was starting by a large outside org. won’t let us sell starts from our greenhouses there. What we need now in the neighborhood is the infrastructure to be marketing the food. We need to be moving forward with concepts of local farm stands, the policy work to make that sustainable, and greater access to land. We also are starting a cooperative focused on stormwater management and have been playing with the idea

of how we can incorporate our food growing project into the cooperative. It's beyond profits, it's about each other and how each of us are doing.

Audience question: Who are the co-op members?

Molly: We have three projects under the umbrella of LETS GO Chicago: the Rogers Park Yard Sharing Network, a worker cooperative, and our children's garden program. The members are the members of our organization.

What is your business model?

Zoey: Being a project that is meant to provide resources for three years and do some systems building, make investments in local farms, and do some policy work, the first piece is just basic business planning. Figuring out what your costs are and what you stand to gain. Money isn't the most important thing, but it is important. The labor, the sweat, all that goes into growing food, it costs money. The beautiful thing about co-ops is that the money goes to the workers. We have given about \$14,000 in training and inputs for nine growers. We have some limitations put on us by the foundation. We can't pay for everything, which is really hard for us. The initial piece is understanding what people are spending and what they stand to gain. Thinking about your labor and time and not just your inputs is really important. We've been mentoring people with this. The co-op thing is the other part and it takes a lot of work. You are starting a business with a GROUP of people. It can take a long time, it takes a lot of meetings. There can be a lot of fighting and then you get back together. It's not easy at all, but it is worth it. It's the closest thing I've seen to "fair business" and I've studied community economic development models for ten years.

We're a non-profit so we're thinking about "how do we support people's businesses".

Molly: So we kind of don't really have a business model. The yard sharing network has been a project of LETS GO Chicago, which is an extremely self-funding grassroots organization. Most of us don't get paid most of the time. We started the yard sharing network as a food justice project and our main goals our accessibility and community. We used a Kickstarter campaign to start the project and that helped us build some gardens. We also have a sliding scale for plot rental that runs from \$0-100 that people can choose to contribute to help fund the network. Last year, we started a micro-CSA, just 5 members, that brought in a little more money for the project. We grew about 1,000 lbs. last year and we hope to be growing more this year.

We are focused right now on figuring this model out because it relies on a lot of volunteer labor. There's a lot of work that has to go into the relationship building piece of this and that takes a lot of time. Relationships with growers, relationships with homeowners. We're looking at expansion of the CSA as one possible approach to raising more capital. To do that, we need more yards. The church that we work out of also has a large roof space that we've discussed expanding to.

Zoey: One of the things that we dealt with from last year to this year is really coordinating the growers for sales. It's a big project. Without having complete and total control over every single

farm, the process of taking inventory, calling the vendors, and making sure stuff can get harvested and to them is difficult. It takes a lot of time. There's a lot of trust building that has to go around it. And there's a cultural thing too. People are concerned about how they're gonna make it. When you're struggling with how you are going to make it, it can feel leisurely to spend time trying to figure out how to work together with others. So some of it is just trying things (e.g. "Can we do this on a Monday?")

Working with the access to land piece, a lot of our growers don't own their property. Altogether, we're only working with about 1.6 acres.

It takes time getting people to think about working together.

Audience question: Where is your funding coming from?

Zoey: We got a three year funding agreement from Blue Cross Blue Shield that came from a tobacco settlement. One of the categories is Healthy Eating and we're a part of that one. The perspective that we come from is we have to have a different strategy than telling low-income people what to do (e.g. "you brown people just need to eat more kale"). We're thinking about how people need to have more power or control over systems. We're pleased that Blue Cross Blue Shield is diving into that and that it's coming from more of a social justice perspective. Also convincing policy-makers that the systems we have are not just. It also makes us need to look at the bigger food system, which has never been set up to benefit the majority of people on this planet. That's something that needs to be talked about and be at the center of the conversation.

Sam Grant : One of the things on the idea board is to create a multi-farm local CSA. We have a network of 25 urban farms. We're building the capacity of our 10 black farmers to build that CSA and working with local consumers, who already don't have access to good food, to form their own association to buy that local food. The industrial food system has industrialized our consciousness.

Michelle: If the people rise up and say, I might be using my EBT every month, but I'm going to spend it on local food that my neighbors grow, we can create a new system.

Audience question: What is the revenue model for Appetite for Change?

Michelle: We do community workshops. We've also been asked to go outside the community where people will pay for the workshops. We also recently took over a shared commercial kitchen and are opening a cafe.

Zoey: One of the things that I've seen as a challenge with CSAs is the funding mechanism for that. A lot of people who participate in CSAs have \$300 or \$400 to give in the winter. Middle income, upper income, affluent people can do that. For most of the people that we want to get the food to, that's not a possibility. We have to think about the mechanics of it. You also get into the conversation about having a share and using all that food. We have large populations of

people--among everybody in this country--who are doing convenience eating. That's what's great about the community dinners. We need to bring back the culture of growing from scratch. If we don't do that, the growers are going to keep selling to people in other communities. We need to be building on the demand side.

Audience response: I think you hit on a lot of good stuff. With the CSA, it helps the low income farmers. We need a different model for low income consumers because the low income farmers need that up front payment and the CSA does that for them. Another thing, make value added products. We live in a cold climate so we need that food preservation.

Gabrielle Hinahara (Grand Aspirations): I worked at a farm in western MA near UMass-Amherst where a local credit union had a low-interest loan for people to take out money to pay for a CSA. Another farm I worked at had a sliding scale CSA. In Madison, WI, we have a growers co-op that is working on figuring out a lot of the same things as Appetite for Change.

Sam: started a credit union but middle class bias by credit unions. push state credit unions to reduce their risk and use their financial acumen to assist low-income people.

Audience question: Culture shift needed around cooking your own food. is this shift made more challenging through the fragmentation of our workforce. everyone's work schedule is different. family dinners are fragmented. what challenges do you see that presenting to this culture shift?

Zoey: I go through this challenge. Working to get people to see that all meals don't have to take a long time. A variety of meals and snacks can be made with basic apparatus like a range. We have to find more ways of promoting and facilitating. Talking to people about what they should do doesn't work. Provide experiences where they are doing these things without being paternalistic. Have people cook together. Share recipes. Food is connected to labor, environment, it is a place where people can come together to talk about other problems. We need to be better at having solidarity across movements. We need to have better hours at jobs. Food justice advocates need to fight for that too! Everything is connected.

Paris: It was our grandmothers that did a lot of that work in the kitchen. Women fought to not have to do that work. And not have to can. Now women are doing more than that. More than that plus. Engage men to do more than that. If you want to have kids and be a part of this movement, you have to figure that out too.

Michelle: Work to educate specifically with women with kids under age of two. Education needed to shift model. They have to be able to bring their kids to everything. Kids can learn then too. When you empower each other in your own community and not wait for someone else to lead the change.

Gabrielle: Cooking and community and teaching each other is really important. With time demands and work schedules, homecooked meals are not always practical. Growing the family so that more people are involved in it. Coop meal for 30 takes 3 hours. Cooking for 4 can take

an hour or two. Building larger supportive communities make things more realistic. Excited about coop movement on multiple levels.

Hana: Questions? 5 min left.

Key: Excited about the movement. Single mom. Want my daughter eating healthy. I cook everything from scratch. Even at daycare. Want to use my EBT to the best of my ability.

Peter: I reflect on how much I as a local food advocate sometimes succumb to fast food/processed food because we are so busy. Work on campaign or cook a meal?

Anna: Earlier I heard Sam Grant speak about personal and social healing and fusing those two. Expressing my solidarity in finding a balance between the two. Social organizing can depend on the self care.

Zoey: Community dinners. We were excited and overplanning. One person had us step back, make space to eat together, and let things grow organically. Organizers working all the time need nourishment. Have to trust things will happen. Not enough hours in the day. Community building is very important. Eating good food is very important. Good things will come out of that. Community Cooks is a great place to see the model. Not programming. Allows space to get to know people, talk to people, and eat. Start something yourself once a month.

Audience member: Northside of Minneapolis, when you look at the source of the bad things, you see the youth. When you speak to the young boys and teenagers, the topic of need is money. Somewhere along the line, they aren't getting their needs met. They feel they need materials things that may or may not be needed. It becomes competitive. I've introduced young men to gardening. They're screaming, just show me. We didn't garden in NJ. My parents did in FL and GA. But the baton wasn't passed on. Appetite for Change is creating that outreach and change. They just bought a kitchen. To show a young man how to plant a seed and grow food. If we plant a seed and go after those youth that are so bold to do things that aren't right, to turn that into helping yourself, knowledge. I want to see corner stores again. Have youth deliver it front door. Creates that sense of community again. Know each other by first name. We can't forget about these "others".