

Rural Roots Rising Episode 6: Feeding Our Communities -- Transcript

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Narrator (0:05): Welcome back to Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project! If this is your first time listening, Rural Roots Rising is a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. Today's episode, "Feeding Our Communities" explores how rural people are organizing throughout this pandemic to meet immediate needs while also working toward a different food future.

Harry MacCormack (0:41): We need to think about the health of our personal and whole ecosystem in terms of the smallest things that really control everything. We're kind of guests here.

Martina Leforce (0:51): We wanted to go back to the heart of how this started, which is about a community wanting to grow food and being told they couldn't. Food should be treated as textbooks for children. This should not be something that we even question. If we have public school, there should be public food programs available for every child regardless of their income.

Narrator (1:12): My name is Sasha Blankenship and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. If you think you hear an accent, well, you aren't wrong. Before starting with ROP I lived and organized in Kentucky. I was raised in a small rural community in Eastern Kentucky of about 200 people. Like in Oregon, people in my hometown, and across the country, are concerned about how to keep our families and neighbors fed. Food: its quality, access, and the way it is cultivated has always been the center of our communities. And our very survival depends on it. Today we're talking with Harry MacCormack and Martina LeForce about working together to get quality food to those that need it most.

MUSIC

Narrator (2:06): When I first heard about Harry MacCormack, I was drawn to the stories of his decades long commitment to growing and distributing food in rural communities across the Willamette Valley. Based in Benton County, Harry has played a key role in creating Ten Rivers Food Web, First Alternative Food Co-Op, Sunbow Farm, the Corvallis Farmers Market and Oregon Tilth. Basically, if you want to know about the history and continuation of sustainable food systems in the Willamette Valley, you should talk to Harry. We talked on the phone shortly after this pandemic started shutting down public gatherings and the first thing I wanted to ask him was, "What motivated you to dedicate your whole life to supporting local food access?"

Harry MacCormack (2:55): Well, I think it's a combination of things. I grew up in World War Two in a rural community in upstate New York. There weren't any box stores yet. There wasn't any freeways yet and of course, it was Eisenhower who brought all that in. And it all changed in a

matter of five years. And then my dad moved us to California because he put the IBM plant in San Jose and we moved into Santa Clara Valley, which at that time was known as the fruit basket of the world. And there was starting to be in the late 50s, with that scale of agriculture, the delivery systems that were worldwide, but we were just experiencing the first inkling of these box store type mentality. And what I experienced in Chenango Bridge, where I grew up was that we went from Victory Garden consciousness and people, the whole community growing food and sharing food. We had people that were growing veal, people were growing chicken, and egg people. And it was everybody in the community was part of this. And that was pretty common throughout at least rural upstate New York and I think across the country.

Narrator (4:04): What Harry experienced in his childhood home in New York state was not unique to his area. Victory Gardens were a nationwide effort to reduce pressure on the public food supply and boost morale by planting and tending home gardens, or in some cases, small private farms, during World War One and World War Two.

Harry MacCormack (4:23): And five years later, it was not common at all because everybody had gotten used to the box store, warehousing and shipping mentality. So I think we have three, two or three generations now that only have that knowledge of how systems can function that, you know, you go to the store and it's on the shelf.

Narrator (4:48): After graduating from Berea College in Eastern Kentucky, Martina LeForce spent several years away before returning to the town of Berea to put down roots with her family. I met Martina after she moved back to Berea, and know her as a fierce food advocate and community organizer, with a deep understanding of how food access is just one part of a much larger and deeply rooted problem. We spoke over Zoom about how she got involved in making sure that everyone in her town can get quality food.

Martina Leforce (5:19): For me growing up with a single parent mother, who is working at minimum wage factories, having to pull 10-12 hour shifts and barely making it. Food security was just constantly an issue. I mean, I grew up as one of those kids going to the food banks. Waiting at the mailbox for the - back then it was food stamps, actual stamps, to arrive. I didn't even have my first fresh blackberry until I came to Berea College when I was 19. And it's ironic in a way, because I grew up in Illinois. So you know, this area that's considered this breadbasket, and there used to be tons of family farms, but what we saw was consolidation after consolidation. The area of Illinois that I grew up in was actually an old strip mining town. So we saw the extractive industry happening there 60-70 years ago before mountaintop removal was even actually really a thing. And so, you know, you're surrounded by these cornfields and soybean fields and hogs, but they're owned by the same companies, and you just see this rotation happening. But in terms of people actually growing food in their own yards, I didn't really know anyone who was doing anything like that.

So when I moved back to Berea, when, after I had my son, was also a time that my sister became addicted to opioids. She was a nurse working in a hospital. And within a year, her entire life completely fell apart. And suddenly my mom was having to take care of her children. She

became a grandparent raising grandchildren. We're trying to get her in and out of rehabs. So just kind of crisis after crisis. And so when she moved into a housing authority neighborhood and things started to stabilize, we were able to meet a lot of the residents there. And learning that a lot of them wanted to actually grow food, or they used to grow food, but they couldn't now because of where they lived. But then, when they wanted to grow food, they were told that they couldn't. They were told that gardens were ugly. They were told that if they wanted produce, why didn't you just go to Walmart where you get your videos. You know, once we realized that we wouldn't be able to start a garden. Then we learned about this program called this USDA Summer Food Service Program.

Narrator (7:23): Martina had seen this program in action at a local library all summer, serving meals to kids. The USDA Summer Food Service Program is federally-funded and run by the state government to serve free healthy meals and snacks to children and teens in low-income areas.

Martina Leforce (7:42): And so I asked them, How are you doing this? Like, how are you paying for all this food? And it was the only open site that we had in Berea. We're a town of 15,000 people. And what I was told was, well, we get our food from this county school, and it's a USDA program and it's reimbursed. And so then I thought, well, what if we could maybe start by serving meals to kids in this neighborhood? You know, like, even if we can't, you know, grow food with them right now, what if we can at least, help make sure that they have the nutrition that they need, especially during summer months when EBT benefits start running out rapidly. I mean, the average household food budget increases by about \$300 during the summer months for an average family. So, that was another heartbreaking moment where I approached the Housing Authority. And I asked, I had a church named Union Church, the Madison County Public Library and the community school all wanting to support this work of just setting up essentially an outdoor picnic site where kids could get free food and books during the summer. And we were told no. A resident went around and provided a survey to all the residents there. Just you know, very basic one of "would this help your family, how many kids live in your, in your household?" Well, then the Housing Authority director went to every door, gave a survey. And the number that she came back with was three. Somehow we had 26. And somehow we had, she had three, and I'm not wanting to villainize her at all, I just think it's a matter of how disconnected people can become. If you're not from the neighborhood and from the community, it's really hard to know what people need and want. No one's gonna know better than the people who live there. I was just frustrated. You know, I was so mad and heartbroken. It wasn't just about my family anymore. It was about all these families in this neighborhood.

Narrator (9:30): What Martina was seeing was an exact manifestation of what Harry and others that have been working in food justice had been warning us about for years. Lack of food access leaves already struggling communities even more vulnerable during tough times. It intensifies and maintains unethical power dynamics. Feeding our communities isn't just about accessibility, it's about interconnection, dignity and ultimately - survival. There are few things

more powerful than a community working together to nourish each other no matter what crises are going on around us.

Harry MacCormack (10:14): We need to think about the health of our personal and whole ecosystem in terms of the smallest things that really control everything. We're, we're kind of guests here. Now the stresses that puts on a food system are really interesting because we've set up this marketing system that is totally reliant on trucking and warehousing. And it's totally vulnerable because of that. And even more so it's set up on not just the trucking and warehousing here, but the trucking and warehousing in places like Asia, to some extent Europe. And one of the first things to go when Asia got sick was the Port of Long Beach where they laid off 50% of the workers about two months ago, because the stuff wasn't coming in through the port and now you can see it not happening on store shelves. A lot of the American products that are on our food shelves are coming actually out of China and Korea in places like that, Vietnam, and that stuff isn't happening. So setting up a local food system that can feed our individual microbiomes, in a really healthy way, is paramount. And doing what we have to do to stay alive, and I think we should organize our communities around that.

Narrator (11:32): As Harry and Martina shared more of their work with me, I started to realize that what makes their projects so successful is their ability to adapt to the needs of their community. It's about knowing seasons and time frames and connecting across communities - how cities and small towns can work together to help meet mutual need. It is never a one size fits all solution, and the plan has to be carefully formed by the people most impacted for it to be successful. For Martina, this meant working with Grow Appalachia.

Martina Leforce (12:11): I found out about Grow Appalachia, I went on their website, I called to meet with the director, he invited me to his office. I can still remember the day pretty clearly, it was pretty intimidating. But then when I came into his office and he saw how much I cared about this, and he was just like, "I can't really give you very much money. You know, we don't really have anything to throw at this right now. But you have our support. And we'll help in any way that we can." So we just started working over the course of that year together to look at what kind of in-kind resources and assets existed at Berea College. How can we build partnerships? So within a year and a half, we actually created an entire program, where we were going to be working at 26 different sites all throughout the community. We're going to be working with Berea college interns and student labor, church volunteers. The food was going to be made at Berea College dining services. We were able to use Berea College motor pool vehicles and every community is different. Like different communities are going to have different assets they can tap into. And that's just what ours was. So that first year, we served 16,000 meals at 26 different sites, at parks, at churches, at camps. And then wanting to still dig deeper, we wanted to go back to the heart of how this started, which is about a community wanting to grow food and being told they couldn't. Because it's one thing to have an immediate hunger relief issue. And it's amazing to meet that need. I think the most basic thing is food should be treated as textbooks for children. This should not be something that we even question, If we have public school, there should be public food programs available for every child regardless of

their income. Because that is the basic equalizer between all people I believe. And also it's the base level of the hierarchy of needs. How are we going to grow our brains if we don't even have enough food to literally build the protein to do it?

MUSIC

Harry MacCormack (14:08): At Local Grains and Beans we did our grain and bean project here in Willamette Valley back in 2008. We started it and we had 40 farms that started growing grains and beans organically. We have a once a year, fill your pantry event. That we started it here in Corvallis, and now there are similar events in Eugene and Portland and Hood River, and that's an opportunity for small farms to unload storable products, so people can store them in their homes for the winter, including grains, beans, edible seeds, root crops, you know, like that.

Narrator (14:48): Can you tell me more about the fill your pantry event, like what does that process look like?

Harry MacCormack (14:54): So what we do is we rent up space at the fairgrounds. We have small farms, many of them participate in farmers markets. It's an event that's oriented around shifting your thinking in November or early December to: what do you got to have for three or four months that you could help farmers get out of their storage and keep in your storage. Because most farmers, small farms don't have enough storage to keep onions and potatoes and wheat and stuff like that. There's a pre-order system. It's all done on computer so there's it's all pre-ordered and the pickup day is the big event that kind of looks like a farmers market but what it really is is people coming in and picking up their food, and it's all organized through a front desk and you pick up your sheet and you go around to the vendors and pick up your food and there's people there volunteering to help you haul it out to your vehicle. [LAUGH]

Narrator (15:49): The many changes in food systems that Harry had seen over the years, and the community transformation that Martina had been so carefully tending, faced serious challenges when the news of the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread. When I saw pictures of the empty grocery shelves across the country, I remember thinking, "well surely this is something happening in cities, it's not happening in our small town." But then when I went on our weekly shopping trip, I saw aisle after aisle after aisle of empty shelves, and honestly, I wasn't really entirely sure what to do. Thankfully, others in the community were prepared to support my family and those like mine.

Martina Leforce (16:37): So yeah, I was sitting in Native Bagel and we got the email that the college was closing and during lunch there I was meeting with a staff member at the community school. And we were getting ready to get planned for a summer gardening camp and a junior farmers market that was going to be at the school. And we looked at each other, and we tried to carry on with the meeting, even though it suddenly got really quiet and people just started kind of leaving the restaurant. And then I walked, you know, I ended up walking back to campus. And I'm thinking in my head, "what does this mean for summer?" Especially because it's student driven in many ways, like Berea college students are the drivers of this work during the summer

months. And I'm walking and I'm thinking about just logistics. And I'm realizing "Wait a minute, if Berea College is closed, so is the community school. They're going to be closing any moment now." And surely enough, within a couple of days they had but as soon as the college closed, I contacted the Superintendent and the Family Resource Officer there and I said, "I think that we need to go ahead and be meeting right now proactively. Because if this is something that's going to happen, the USDA might make it to where we can actually still serve kids during the time of this closure, this is going to be treated as an emergency, I think."

When we first got started, there was this big gusto. Once we were approved to do this, we had sponsored programs from all over the state who were getting their buses and they're going to do a mobile meal route and they were going to do home deliveries, But within about a couple days of operating, I realized this is not a tornado. This is not a hurricane. This is a virus. This is a pandemic. And what that means is that every single point of contact that we have, and every person who's an asset is also a liability, because we're all potentially carriers. It puts the families at risk. If a driver even was to catch COVID, to get diagnosed, that person's now been in contact with how many hundreds of children? We have to make sure that we are protecting children also because of the number of grandparents who are raising grandchildren in our community. Some people are thinking "oh, well as long as we keep, you know, our son or daughter away from Grandma and Grandpa, they'll be safe." That's a very narrow lens to look at a family dynamic and what makes up a family in our communities. Many of our grandparents also serve as babysitters and caretakers for our children.

So now how it looks is we have two entirely different teams that are working, they don't have contact with each other. That way we can make sure that one team has two weeks off, another one has two weeks on. This protects them and also it makes it to where we have a backup crew, basically. So one benefit of what we're doing is, people are actually able to continue working during this time instead of having to collect unemployment, which some were worried they wouldn't even be eligible for. Because they're, we're able to pay them to make these meals. And it's been a learning curve. You know, it's, it's been a very steep, quick learning curve. My family that I started this work for in the first place, the only time I see them now is when they're picking up meals at the school. And of course, my mom, being who she is, she's picking up meals for her entire neighborhood and dropping them off at their doors, because that's who we are. That's who we were before this happened, and it's who we are now and it's who we're going to be afterwards, too.

MUSIC

Narrator (20:16): For Harry, rising to meet the moment like this pandemic means passing on the skills and resources he has worked for, for decades. He's been looking toward and preparing for the future and the inevitability of change for a while now.

Harry MacCormack (20:33): I'm 78 years old now, most time, five years ago, we turned the farm over to a younger couple who weren't, they met here on the farm, actually. So one of the ways to make these things happen is, we're in a time of transference, right now. Three of the major

farms right here in our community have transferred ownership in the last year. And then ours was earlier than that. So to support these new younger people that are coming in and encourage them and keep that, what there is of a local food system going is very important. To keep our local co-ops going or whatever kind of local food stores you've got that are buying locally. To keep those going and to support them is very important.

Narrator (21:17): This way of thinking ahead and planning is one of the things that has made Harry such an effective organizer. This moment, and so many moments before, continue to challenge us, and hopefully - encourage us to do better.

Harry MacCormack (21:33): Well my view of this whole thing is that, if it doesn't change people's reality, something's wrong. I think this is as big a shock to human perception in general as the... it wasn't really considered a shock, but during that period when we first saw the planet from outer space, and we looked back at the planet and saw that it was this little blue ball out in the middle of space. We'd never seen that before. And that changed people's perception of who we are. Now, what happened after that, is we continued on with this destructive mode of living on this planet, some of us, a great many of us worldwide, changed our ways of interacting. I've written books about this. One of the ways we changed our ways of interacting was we began to recognize because of the science we had, that the soil for one, was made up of massive amounts of microorganisms, that they were really running our whole soil and if we want a highly nutritious food, we had to deal with the microorganisms in a very positive way instead of the way that was happening, which was, and still is generally, pouring chemicals and toxins onto the soil. And along with that, in a contemporary sense, the last 15 years, we've learned that we as humans, aren't just bodies with egos running around. What we mostly are is microorganisms, our microbiome, which is very reflective of a soil microbiome. As modern people we haven't learned that lesson, that if we don't get that out of this, and out of the whole climate change that's going on, which is simultaneously happening in the middle of all this, we're not going to be around as a species very long.

Narrator (23:24): Food insecurity isn't new. It didn't start with panic buying and hoarding because of coronavirus. I shared earlier that I met Martina several years ago - well, I met her because I couldn't afford to feed my kids in the summer, and like so many others, we needed help. And just as it isn't new, it won't be going away once this is behind us either. The worldwide pandemic merely exposed how fragile our food distribution infrastructure is. Once this crisis is over, how will we collectively challenge the very systems that created such inequality in the first place? For Martina's part, she's been working to do this with Grow Appalachia for several years now.

Martina Leforce (24:16): These issues have been a crisis before this crisis hit, in terms of people having access to food. Suddenly, we're all on the same level playing field, it feels like a little bit. It's no longer this isn't the program for "these kids". This is the program now for everybody. It's not a program, it's just an entire effort and an initiative. And our work is to support people to grow as much food of their own food as possible. When they get to a point where they're able to grow enough for themselves and their families or learning how to cook it. Then also, it's trying to

support them and maybe joining the market to sell that, to sell that food. So we provide garden grants and funding to community organizations and different counties to give families the resources that they need to grow food. And then also we have a farm production plan program where we work with small farmers to help them develop economic and also actual farming practices that are scale appropriate for where they're at.

So really, what we've done is, we look at the work that's already happening in the community, and then we're approaching these, these folks and asking, "Hey, could you plug that into this neighborhood?" Two years ago, we would not have had the capacity as a program to have done what we're doing right now with the COVID-19 response. There's no way I could have mobilized an entire initiative like this in three days, no matter how good the paperwork looked, without those partnerships already in place. Our most important piece of this is that this is not what Berea Kids Eat is doing. This is what the community of Berea is doing.

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Narrator (25:54): You have been listening to "Feeding Our Communities," the sixth episode of Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project. This monthly radio show and podcast is created by and for rural Oregonians - with an occasional visit from other rural communities like Berea, Kentucky - who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. Do you have comments, questions, or reactions to what you just heard? Tell us what you think at info@ruralrootsrising.org

If you feel inspired by this episode to work on issues of food access and distribution, reach out to us at office@rop.org to connect with your local ROP organizer! To find more information about this episode, including more information on USDA grants and a recording of our online rural strategy session "Feeding Our Communities Through Pandemic", visit ruralrootsrising.org

In this episode we featured music from the Road Sodas, [Sam Gleaves](#) and Deborah Payne.

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