

# COMMUNITY FOOD WORK THROUGH STORY: POSSIBILITIES FOR HOPE AND TRANSFORMATION

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“I think that this project really shows that this work has to be benefitting all of the key players. The storeowner has to be making money off of it; it has to be at a price that the people are willing and able to pay for it, and then it needs to be reliable. I think food system work is very segregated, like “We’re doing it for obesity,” and “We’re doing it for farmers rights.” And then, “Well, we’re doing it for animals rights.” It’s like “No, no, we’re all doing the same thing”. If we could just find some common language and start breaking down some of those barriers...

...Like who doesn't want healthy corner store options that the owner is making money off of? The more money she makes the more taxes she has to pay, and the more we get that money back. So it's like every single avenue. The more healthy food she sells the more healthy food she can buy. The more healthy food she can buy, the more farmers get to produce them. It's like there's a whole cycle of people who are being affected. But because we so often only think of: "You only care about it being low calorie. You only care about it being local. And you only care about, whatever." You know, we're all working towards the same thing. Our partners can really look like anything as long as that common goal is shared."

# Appalachian Foodshed Project

- ◆ Address issues of **community food security** in West Virginia and the Appalachian regions of North Carolina and Virginia.
- ◆ Using a community-based research approach, enhance the work in the region by creating a **network** of community members, farmers, policymakers, non-profits, and institutions to collectively improve food access and availability while also enhancing viable food economies.
- ◆ Partnerships reflect a wide range of practices and social agendas that emphasize the **complexity of food system politics in rural Appalachia**: history of resource extraction, socio-political isolation, farming heritage and cultural independence, hunger and food (in)security, and calls for social justice.

# Community Food Security

- A condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice (Hamm & Bellows, 2003).

# Whole Measures for Community Food Systems

(Abi-Nader et al., 2009)

## **Justice and Fairness:**

- Provides food for all
- Reveals, challenges, and dismantles injustice in the food system

## **Strong communities:**

- Improve equity and responds to community food needs
- Contributes to healthy neighborhoods

## **Vibrant Farms:**

- Support local, sustainable family farms to thrive and be economically viable
- Protects and cares for farmers and farm-workers

## **Healthy People:**

- Provides healthy food for all
- Ensures the health and well-being of all people, inclusive of races and class

## **Sustainable Ecosystems:**

- Sustains and grows healthy environment
- Promotes an ecological ethic

## **Thriving Local Economies:**

- Creates local jobs and builds long-term economic vitality within the food system
- Builds local wealth
- Each member had to define each measure and propose ideas to improve the food system



# Stories of Community Food Work in Appalachia

Opening Space for Storytelling and Learning

- ◆ Community partners eager to create a regional network yet struggle with the process of crafting and weaving their work and actions together.
- ◆ Initiative launched in VA and grew to WV and NC.
- ◆ Facilitated through the *Food Security and Resilient Communities* graduate course (spring 2013; 2015) and VT AFP team.
- ◆ Create/sharing narratives or “stories” that illustrate the lived experiences of activists, educators, farmers, and practitioners who are involved in Appalachian organizations and groups that are working toward food system change in the region.

# Community Food Work (Slocum, 2007)

Holds an inclusive meaning that embraces several interconnected domains and processes that constitute alternative food system efforts, those that focus on:

- ◆ ***farm sustainability*** – related to connecting small-scale farmers to markets
- ◆ ***nutrition education*** – with emphases on the prevention of diet-related illnesses
- ◆ ***environmental sustainability*** – related to the development and support of more ecologically sound agricultural production
- ◆ ***social justice*** – which consists of a bifurcated approach—producer/worker rights and hunger/food insecurity

# Why Narratives?

For some, food insecurity is a profound issue that cannot be “solved” with uniform solutions or technical answers

...but rather by systems and spaces of integration, coordination, and experimentation that are geared toward the emergence of new possibilities.

(Niewolny & D’Adamo-Damery, In Press)

# Why Narratives?

When facing a complex problem like food insecurity, “seeing” the system “better” means reading a multiplicity of realities and generating new ways to engage them...

- ◆ Encourages the weaving together of personal stories and strategies of community food work
- ◆ Lends to regional understanding and collective action for community food security
- ◆ Helps to humanize the “wicked problems” of our food system and create new possibilities (Hamm, 2009)

# Narrative Inquiry

- ◆ Narratives as both a *process* of reflection and reflexivity through storytelling and the *products* of engaging with the everyday knowledges of community food work.
- ◆ Participants involved in the initial design of questions/prompts
- ◆ AFP Narrative Protocol<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ 90-120 minute semi-structured process with prompts
- ◆ Transcribed, edited, and read/”analyzed”
- ◆ Vetted for public sharing and reading

(Connelly & Clandinin, 2005; Peters & Hittleman, 2003; Peters et al., 2004; Richmond, 2002)

<sup>1</sup>Niewolny, D’Adamo-Damery, N. D’Adamo-Damery, P. & Landis, 2014; Virginia Tech IRB #13-264

# Narrative Process

- ◆ Her/his/their past experiences in the community and/or community food work to situate knowledges and realities.
- ◆ A current illustration of community food work in the region that is significantly meaningful
- ◆ Future hopes, aspirations, and intentions for their community food work for local and/or regional change.

# Narratives in Central Appalachia

- ◆ 36 narratives across 3 states
  - ◆ NC (9)
  - ◆ WV (9)
  - ◆ VA (18)
- ◆ 18 additional narratives from Phil D'Adamo-Damery's dissertation: "*Ontological Possibilities: Rhizoanalytic Explorations of Community Food Work in Central Appalachia.*"

# Reading of Narratives

## ◆ Reading for lines of sameness

- Related to AFP's inquiry of understanding the everyday experiences, practices, & strategies in the region.

## ◆ Reading for spaces and instances of ontological unsettling, of affect, or curiosity

- Related to AFP's inquiry of generating imaginative dialogue and new possibilities in/through complexity. (Mol, 1999; Law, 2008)

# Experiences of Community Food Work

- ◆ Community gardens
- ◆ Farm-to-School
- ◆ Farmer's market
- ◆ Farmer education
- ◆ Food councils
- ◆ Food & farm policy
- ◆ Food pantries
- ◆ Food hubs
- ◆ Healthy corner stores
- ◆ Rural development
- ◆ Senior citizen advocacy
- ◆ School gardens
- ◆ SNAP/WIC education
- ◆ Youth development

- *Vibrant Farms*
- *Healthy People*
- *Thriving Local Economies*
- *Strong Communities*
- *Fairness and Justice*
- *Sustainable ecosystems*

# Working in Complexity

- ◆ Partnerships
- ◆ Networking
- ◆ Facilitation
- ◆ Capacity building
- ◆ Shared and just decision making
- ◆ Funding and resource leveraging

- *Grassroots activists and organizers*
- *Nonprofit and faith-based organizations*
- *Governmental decision makers*
- *Farmers*
- *Extension*
- *University faculty*

# Strategies for Change and Community Transformation

- ◆ **Warrior work:** focuses on contesting inequitable, dominant structures (*the work of resistance*)
- ◆ **Builder work:** the creation of new initiatives, models, & programmatic possibilities (*the work of reconstruction*)
- ◆ **Weaver work:** develops strategic & conceptual linkages between “warrior” & “builder” work (*the work of connection*)

(Stevenson, Ruhf, Lezberg, & Clancy, 2007)

# Elizabeth Spellman

Elizabeth combines her farm experience, environmental and agricultural law degree, and admiration of the land in her work as executive director of the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition. Amongst other efforts, she is trying to build a social and physical network to transport food to markets across the state. Elizabeth believes food hubs are a revival of farmer cooperatives and a viable business and marketing model for small farmers. She sees the work in West Virginia reflecting food sovereignty discourse. She presents questions of scale as a challenge for the future because West Virginia is a heterogeneous state.

Keywords: *West Virginia, aggregation and distribution, food sovereignty, coalition, food hub, local food economy*

Elizabeth's full narrative: [Elizabeth Spellman](#)

<http://blogs.lt.vt.edu/niewolny/elizabeth-spellman/>

# Brian Jacks

Brian Jacks is currently an Associate State Director of AARP Virginia. He is primarily engaged in alleviating immediate hunger needs. He has an inclination to work towards food and nutritional needs of senior citizens. He wants to see AARP join the crusade against hunger by utilizing its resources, expertise, and assets to be a catalyst towards seniors' issues of hunger. He is also hopeful that food councils can play a role in successfully driving out hunger and food insecurity. Brian stresses the importance of the community in playing a role in developing a food secure, healthy food system.

*Keywords: food council, facilitator, hunger, senior citizen, Virginia*

Brian's full narrative: [Brian Jacks](#)

<http://blogs.lt.vt.edu/niewolny/brian-jacks/>

# Narrative Products

- ◆ Website & PDF availability <http://blogs.lt.vt.edu/niewolny/>
- ◆ Course work and community work
- ◆ AFP social media (Blog Posts, Facebook)
- ◆ Analysis for AFP final report
- ◆ Niewolny, K. & D'Adamo-Damery, P. (In Press). Learning through story as political praxis: The role of narratives in community food work. In Sumner, J. (Ed.), *Learning, food, and sustainability: Sites for resistance and change*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan.
- ◆ Next steps...
  - ◆ Community readings
  - ◆ Compilation publications
  - ◆ Additional narratives

# Narrative Products

- ◆ Building relationships with a diversity of stakeholders to understand their experiences of community food work.
- ◆ Creating new possibilities through a generative process of telling and sharing stories of our work.
- ◆ Informing a regional strategy that is reflective of a flexible and emergent theory of change
- ◆ Making space for dialogue that humanizes the realities of food insecurity in the food system.

“I am looking forward to not being so mad about decisions that are made for me instead of with me. I’m excited about that. I really do want to live in a world where we are more valued; especially these huge populations of people who are suffering from these systems that we’ve created. You can’t put blame on a person who is operating in a system that’s holding them down, whether that is ageism or poverty or racism. I’m looking forward to those things being a little less heavy on everything that we’re doing. I mean we already do value people; we just do it wrong. The wrong people are getting paid the wrong amount of money for the wrong things. And not everyone. There are a lot of people out there making good dollars, and they should continue making it, but where do we place value?”

“The other surprising reward is that people continue to give us ideas.”

# Thank you

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[www.appalachianfoodshedproject.org](http://www.appalachianfoodshedproject.org)

[Community Food Work through Story:  
Possibilities for Hope and Transformation](#)

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