

Debbie Hillman, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

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Remote over Zoom

DH=Debbie Hillman

AA=Anneliese Abbott

AA: All right! So this is Anneliese Abbott on June 24, 2021, and I am doing an interview with—

DH: Debbie Hillman.

AA: So thank you Debbie for being willing to interview today! So why don't you start with telling me a little about your background and how you got interested in organic and sustainable agriculture, and what you've done.

DH: So I'm a baby boomer. I'm 70 years old. But I'm an urban person. I was born in Chicago and I grew up in Chicago, and I've lived most of my life in the Chicago area. But I've always been attached to the earth, which I think most people are. And some people lose it, and some people, it was just very important. My parents always took us camping, and we were out in nature. We'd go hike in the forest preserve. So nature was just always very important to me. And as I was growing up through high school and college, I certainly imagined myself as part of the back-to-the-land movement. I never actually did move to a rural area in that sense, but we do have land in urban areas.

And so finally, in my late 20s, I just started gardening for people without much professional experience or training. I just sort of had a natural affinity. And I got lucky because one of my first clients was a professional gardener and designer. And so she mentored me as I took care of her garden as she was getting older and not able to do it herself. So after a couple of years, I had a number of clients. And I went on to have a career in professional gardening for 25 years in the Chicago area, taking care of people's yards, designing, and planting gardens. And so that's how I came to actually know something about soil and plants. Does that answer the question? (2:39)

AA: Yeah, it does. Thank you very much. So do you want to talk a little about your gardening business and how long you did that, and maybe some of the highlights of that?

DH: Well, as I said, it was mostly, since I live in a suburb of Chicago, a very urban suburb right outside the city, my clients were mostly my neighbors and referrals. But I also had a couple of friends in the landscape business. They had actually a couple of very large clients. They ended up specializing in golf courses. They did not do the turf management. But they would design gardens around the country club house. And so those actually were very lucrative because you could charge just about anything and they would take it. But most of my clients, as I said, were

residential in my neighborhood or nearby. And mostly they just wanted maintenance. They just wanted someone.

My career took off at the same time that people started using landscape services that were very cut-rate. People would just want somebody to mow their lawn and clean up the leaves in the fall, clean up the beds. But it turned out that a lot of those landscape crews were not well-trained, and they just did it for very cheaply. It was sort of like an outdoor cleaning service. And so when homeowners would become frustrated, they would pull out their perennials, or they would prune their shrubs really horribly. They looked around for somebody else who, number one spoke English, because the crews mostly spoke Spanish, which is nobody's fault. But there was a huge communication problem. And so people were looking for someone who they just could communicate with and who would be more of a gardener than an outdoor cleaning crew.

So I ended up, most of my clients still kept their lawn services to do the lawn. But after a few years I really put my foot down in terms of cleaning up the leaves in the fall. Because I said, "You can't do that. That's next year's soil. That's the soil of the next few years, of the future. We have to leave the leaves." And so that's when I started writing an annual column that I would send to my local newspaper, and every year had the same title: "Leave the leaves." And it would be encouraging not only clients but other people in my community. And then my letter to the editor got picked up by a couple of national media outlets one year, like in 2005 or so. Because every community in the United States was having the same problem. Every year, urban areas and suburban areas were just being stripped bare of all the leaves and the stems and the seeds and the insects that the land had produced that year.

And that's the piece that really has meant the most to me in terms of organic and sustainable, is the soil, is replenishing the soil, not interrupting the webs of life, the diversity of microorganisms. And so that really has been—leaving the leaves. I suppose if I gave myself a slogan, my business a slogan, it would be, "Leave the leaves." And I still write about it now. In fact, the *New Farmers Almanac* this year published a version of me saying basically the same thing. But it's just good horticultural practice. It's good farming practice. It's good ecological practice that we need to keep our organic matter where it's produced. Falling leaves, just let them fall. And that doesn't mean that we didn't rake them up off the lawn or the sidewalk. There were practices, and I would show the landscape crews how to rake them into the beds. If they didn't do it, then I just told the homeowner, "Just have your lawn service do the lawn, period. I'll take care of the leaves." And that's what I actually ended up doing. I like raking a lot. That was always a very meditative chore for me in the fall as well as the spring.

So I did that for 25 years. I retired from gardening around 2007 when I started working on food and farm policy, which of course includes leaving the leaves. Does that answer that question? (8:50)

AA: Yeah. Thank you very much. That's really great about leaving the leaves; I love the way that sounds. That's a cool slogan. So that tells me a little about your methods you used. Is there anything else you want to talk about your landscaping and gardening methods, and kind of how you developed them, and what influenced you to develop them the way you did?

DH: Well, I always thought of myself as an organic gardener. And organic always meant to me, reading Rodale's *Organic Gardening*, or Sir Albert Howard's *Agricultural Testament*. I don't know if he actually used the word "organic." But his intention was to be sustainable and keep the cycles of life going. So I always thought of myself as an organic gardener, although I never

really advertised myself as that. To me, organic was doing things the way nature did it. But I was very adamant about not using poisons of any kind. I never used any pesticides at all. Once in a while I tried Roundup on a couple very invasive plants, but it was just a horrible feeling of being around poison, having to dress for it and be armored and be careful. And I just, I think poisons of all kinds, I stayed away from them completely. And I understand, if I were producing food—which I wasn't, I should be clear that most of my gardening was ornamental. Most of my clients were not interested in food. I always asked them if I were designing the garden, I always asked them if they wanted some herbs, or we could try a fruit tree, or if they wanted a vegetable plot that they could take care of. But most people at that time were not interested. People were busy with their careers and family. And they just wanted their yard to look nice and be taken care of.

So most of my work was with ornamental plants of all kinds. So if I were a farmer producing food, where I needed the crop to be healthy and not have diseases and pests, I understand the need for spraying or some other integrated pest management, and minimal use of poisons. But I think homeowners these days are supposed to be the biggest users of herbicides and pesticides. Because they're not trained in how to do it. They just go to the hardware store or Home Depot, and they buy Roundup or some pesticide. And they just use it indiscriminately. So I think that's a major area where we really need public education. But I never used anything, except once I tried horticultural vinegar, because that's very strong vinegar that was supposed to kill the weed I was trying to get rid of. But that was just as not fun and it didn't really work. Maybe I didn't apply enough, or frequently enough. So I just gave up on all of that. I don't know if I answered that question.

But I did want to talk about poisons. I was always clear from the very beginning that I didn't want to use that. And I didn't. I was able, and I tried to stay away from synthetic fertilizers. I did fertilize the gardens that I took care of, but I tried to use natural-based. Mostly my thought was that if we leave the leaves every year, the land will fertilize itself. Now granted, I live near Lake Michigan, which is an old lakebed, and it's very sandy soil. And it's not very fertile soil to begin with. I definitely had to use fertilizers. If I was planting a new garden, I would get compost, like mushroom compost, which I think is mixed with manure, horse manure mostly, I think. And you can tell from my answers that I am not well-trained, and scientists listening to this conversation might think, "What is she talking about?" And that's true. There's just so much ignorance on all of these things. These mushroom composts would be shipped hundreds of miles, then after we used it for a few years in the Chicago area, there would be talk that mushroom compost is overloaded with salt and not good for gardens. And so we would try other things.

And of course over the years municipalities have tried to sell their sewer sludge. That's a big problem. We do need to figure out how to get our waste products back to the soil, but right now our waste products, our human toilet waste products are mixed with drugs. Just something that whoever listens to this at some point might be very interested in. The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, which is in charge of the water in the Chicago area, the commissioners say very publicly, they cannot get the drugs out of the water. By drugs, they mean prescription drugs. They mean like maybe opioids, or anti-depressants or something. Those drugs are in the water. And I can certainly understand why farmers might not want to apply that sludge to their farms. But this is a huge area, because our sewage is actually also contains a lot of good nutrients, I think. I don't know what the answer to that is. (16:42)

AA: Yeah, that's definitely one of the big dilemmas. One of those things that's not easy to answer.

DH: Yeah. And then there's, I'm on a few national listservs, food and farm listservs. And there's a farmer from Washington State, and he's just adamant about fighting Seattle's desire to spread their sewage sludge on Washington farms. And he's sending out petitions, and meetings, and protests. But we have to figure out what we do with the sewage. Here in Illinois, actually the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District actually owns a lot of farmland in Illinois. And I think that's where a lot of our biosolids end up. (17:46)

AA: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. Definitely an issue that hopefully we'll come up with a solution to. So is there anything you want to share about your philosophies, how you developed them, what influenced them, the philosophies that went into your organic landscaping and leaving the leaves, all that?

DH: Well, as I said, I think my main parameter was to follow nature's way. And doing things nature's way in the Midwest meant doing things the Midwestern way, whatever that meant. To try and plant natives, which in our world where people are so enamored with rhododendrons or Japanese gardens or English cottage gardens, people were constantly trying to get me to replicate those kinds of things. And you can do it up to a point, but it's still not the same as what the Japanese can do in Japan and the English can do in England. So I really gravitated toward the landscape designers that were known to be Midwestern, like Jens Jensen with his prairie style. Which was also very distinctively his. His designs are not what you would see in the middle of some wild prairie. But I think he did what humans do best in our relationship to nature. We take elements of nature and we highlight them and we make them into our own.

But design was not my strength. I was really more into maintenance. Just taking care of the soil and the weeds. And the holistic lifestyle. So for example, I have never owned a car. People might think that a gardener would need a car, or a truck. But in an urban area, I was able to have my business with a bicycle and a cart. Yes, I had deliveries, and they came by truck, deliveries of compost or plants. But mostly for me getting around, it was my bike and my cart. And sometimes I actually took public transportation with a shopping bag of tools. Because I just figured out how to do that. I personally had no machines that used fossil fuels. That was always very important to me. I wanted to do the work, I wanted the exercise. So actually part of my lifestyle philosophy being a gardener was, I didn't have to go to the gym after work, because I had already done my exercise. And it's proved to keep me very healthy. I was outdoors in the "fresh air" in an urban area, which is not always fresh. But that's also true of rural areas I think these days, where if you live near a CAFO the air is not so great.

So my gardening job, my work, definitely reflected a desire to live a holistic life. The same thing with my own healthcare. I tried to avoid Western medicine or drugs. I haven't even taken an aspirin for decades. And I think just having that healthy lifestyle, being a gardener and eating pretty decently, enabled me to be okay.

I think you also were looking for any religious or other cultural. One thing, I'm a very spiritual person, but I'm not a religious person. I call myself a "secular Jew," and there are many of us in the United States, where we definitely identify as Jewish culturally, but not religious. But there's an element in Jewish history that I think is important to this conversation, because when Jews were forced to leave Palestine or Israel or whatever you want to call that region 2000

years ago when the Romans took it over and we were just dispersed to many parts of the rest of the world, especially Europe, we were not allowed to own land in any of these countries. And so I don't know whether all Jews share my connection to the soil in the same way. I think mine doesn't only come from my Jewishness, it just comes from me being me and me being a woman. Women, I think, understand that the earth is our mother. I certainly ascribe to that.

Another influence for me has been feminism. I am a totally radical feminist in terms of my rights don't get compromised for anything. And I actually believe that women have certain kinds of authority and wisdom that are necessary for healthy people and healthy communities, which has been oppressed for at least 2000 years, including by patriarchal religions like Judaism and Christianity and Islam and others, most religions are patriarchal in my opinion. So part of my belief system in trying to be a good caretaker of the land and caretaker of all of us comes from that feminism, where I know intuitively—although I'm always willing, for people who question my actions or behavior, but I think women naturally want to take care of everybody. And so I would say radical feminism.

And that includes women's spirituality, like wicca and herbalism, which is not so much a religion, but it is, most herbalists I know are very spiritual. And so for a long time I have subscribed to the newsletters from the Wise Woman Center in New York and a couple of others. I just learned a couple of years ago that in Wisconsin the Midwest Women's Herbal Conference is held every year. And they do wonderful things, especially with mushrooms and fungi. So I'm anxious to learn more about what they do, since this is practically in my back yard.

So those are some of the cultural and other influences. (26:56)

AA: Yeah, thank you! Thank you for sharing all that. So you've already partly covered my next question, which was any personal perspectives or views you might have on the connection of organic agriculture or landscaping like you did to a broader historical or cultural context. Or involvement in other movements. And you've already covered a lot of that. But is there anything else you want to add to that?

DH: Well, I guess I should highlight that being a baby boomer, I grew up with the environmental movement. Which I think a lot of us now call the climate movement. But we called it the environmental movement. So I would be remiss in not at least mentioning that, that a lot of the context of my life and my work certainly came from protecting wilderness. And of course not using poisons, and trying to reduce our garbage, reduce landfills. And of course, now it's the overuse of plastics. I have no clue what we're going to do about plastics. But that's all part of the environmental movement, or the climate movement.

And the other thing, too, of course is social justice and political justice. Which is really what I'm working on now. Since I retired in 2007 from being an active gardener, I now do work on food and farm justice. That's what I do all day, every day, 24/7. My own website is called "Food, Farms, and Democracy" because I think if humans don't pay attention to all three of those things, we're going to continue to make stupid decisions. And that got us into this place in the first place, and by "this place" I mean climate warming and extreme weather, extreme economic disparities, because we don't live in a real democracy. So I've actually spent a lot of time thinking about what democracy is and how that works within the food and farm system. So that's what I do now. So I think that's important to mention, at least. (29:57)

AA: Yeah, thank you. Did you want to share anything else about your involvement with the social justice and food justice, like you were saying? Because I have a question here about involvement in organizations, and so it sounds like you pretty much weren't that involved in organizations before that, but now you're involved in this? Or were you also involved in organizations earlier on, too?

DH: I've always been a community activist, but on a very grassroots level. I always went to city council to talk about something or another on different areas of life. Tenants' organization, housing, transportation, and things like that. But it wasn't until I started—well, I think that maybe this is a good context. In the beginning of the environmental movement, which was maybe the end of the '50s, '60s, '70s, and then the first oil crisis and oil shortage was in '73. And people really started thinking about, "Oh my god, the United States needs to be more energy independent." Because at that time we were getting so much of our oil from Venezuela and the Middle East. But at the same time, people in the environmental movement were thinking more along the lines of conservation and how not to use so much energy, or to work on renewable energy.

So Evanston, the town that I live in, Evanston, Illinois, which is also the home to Northwestern University, has always been, I would say leaders, or maybe some of the first people who would create programs and policies around environmental issues and energy issues and things. So Evanston in '74 created what is still called the Evanston Ecology Center. And the Ecology Center does exactly what it sounds like it is, nature programs, it has energy programs. It runs the community gardens that exist in Evanston, and there's a lot of those. So I wasn't involved so much as a member or leader in those early years, but that set me up for later when my daughter became older and I was not so much tied to just work and being a mother.

So I would say in the late '90s, in 1999 a second wave of environmental groups started happening in Evanston here. And it also became called the Network for Evanston's Future, and it was a group of groups, it was a coalition. One group was working on transportation, one on energy, and then in 2005 a friend and I created what we ended up calling the Evanston Food Policy Council. Which sounds very official, and it was totally grassroots, totally unofficial. We didn't ask anybody's permission, we just said, "This is what we're going to call ourselves, this is what we're going to do." And what we did was just start talking about all of the issues around food and farming.

At that point I still was not quite understanding that democracy was a thing that we needed to actually talk about. But the word "policy" sort of implied that. And I was always a policy person. If we as a policy decide that we're going to do something, or if we don't decide we're going to do something, we still need a place to decide together. Which is government. And to me that's democracy, is the place where all the adults come together and make good decisions hopefully for all of us. Of course it doesn't work that way, but I still was very optimistic in 2005. And I still am. But I've learned how the system works, and I now know better how to work with it.

But anyway, we created the Evanston Food Policy Council in 2005. And we had a long list of things to talk about. And we had lots of people coming to all our monthly meetings. But we didn't really know what to do. We didn't really know what policies to promote, what could we do on a local level, state, or national. And so we started showing films. Because that was a way to get good audiences. And then we would have a discussion about the film. And they were

all food films. “The Future of Food” I think was the first one that we showed. And I can’t even remember all the other ones, there were so many.

Ultimately, we did learn how to connect our informal discussions and events with policy. And we actually borrowed the idea from Madison, Wisconsin, because Madison had passed a backyard chicken ordinance. And then somebody did a film about Madison’s process, I think it’s called “Mad City Chickens.” And so we got the film director and the filmmaker to come down to Evanston and show the film. And we had a discussion. We had a full house, 125 people coming to see the film. And we said at that moment, “Okay, we in Evanston are going to create a committee to write a backyard chicken ordinance for Evanston. Does anybody want to join?” And the rest of the story just wrote itself. Because we had a whole bunch of people sign up to be on the committee. It took 13 months to actually pass the ordinance, which was about twice as long as most of the committee members thought. But as a policy person, I know these things take a long time. And 13 months isn’t bad, actually. And so we passed that ordinance, I think it was in 2010.

The next step, which actually took place in 2007, is that we started talking to our state legislators about the issues. And again, we still didn’t have a policy that we wanted to promote. We did not go into our state representative’s office and say, “This is what we want for you to do; write a bill.” We just went in and spoke to her because she had a great reputation, she was a great legislator. And at the end of the first meeting, which actually was in 2006, she said, “Keep talking to me, but show me that this is a large coalition.” So the next meeting, which was about 3 months later, at the end of 2006, or the middle of 2006, I brought some people from the Chicago area. Not just my hometown, Evanston, but from the larger metro area to show her that this was a large coalition. Which already existed in the state of Illinois. There were lots of people working on food and farm issues. And so at the end of the meeting we still didn’t have an agreement as to what we wanted to do. But she said, “Keep talking, and show me it’s a large coalition.” And this is worth emphasizing.

So in October of 2006, which as you know is harvest season in the Midwest, we had farmers driving like 2 ½ hours from central Illinois to come to my state representative’s office in Evanston, Illinois because we had done our homework. We had been meeting with farmers, we had been meeting with the other people in the larger coalition. And the stars were just aligned. And we, there were about 10 of us at that meeting, we filled a small conference room, Julie’s office. And Julie Hamos was my state representative at the time. And at the end of the first hour, she said, “Okay, I’m still not hearing what you all really, really want to do. So this is what I can do for you, this is what a legislator can do. I can create a two-year task force, and you all write a report. What should Illinois do to rebuild our local food system?” That much she knew, and we were all in agreement. We wanted more of the food dollars that consumers were already spending, we wanted them to be spent on the Illinois farmers and processors and meat lockers. We wanted that money to stay in Illinois.

And so we had a two-year task force. The bill was passed unanimously because there was no money in it. And the interesting thing is that the task force, the name of the task force was Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force. And when we were lobbying the bill—and I don’t know if you’re really interested in this—but when we were lobbying the bill to every state legislator in Illinois, some very conservative legislators and very progressive ones, they would look at the name, “Illinois Local and Organic,” and the first question was, “Do you want to mandate that every farmer grow organically?” And we would say, “No. We’re saying local *and* organic, or local *or* organic.” But we wanted the task force to promote both. So that’s why

we got a unanimous vote, because we were very clear that we did not want to mandate any certification of anything. We wanted to encourage Illinois farmers to grow for Illinois consumers. And so whatever Illinois consumers were willing to pay for, if Illinois farmers wanted to grow that, that was sort of the big idea there.

So anyways, we had a two-year task force. That was a big learning thing for me. And at the end of it we had a really good report, which I think is still a really good plan, the Illinois Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Plan. So when you ask about was I involved in any organizations or in leadership roles, I was the coordinator, one of the coordinators of that task force. And then of course it was my state representative who had written that legislation. So that was one of the leadership roles that I took. I was also a board member of The Land Connection, which is a nonprofit here in Illinois that promotes family farms and healthy land. I don't know what their mission statement says these days, I'm not sure if it's committed to organic or sustainable, but their implementation is definitely in that direction.

And then I'll just say one other thing that I've been involved in since about 2017 and '18, which I'm still excited about. It's taken a little while to take off. In 2017 the Organic Consumers Association, which is a national organization that's been around for a long time, has a huge membership—started getting more into regenerative agriculture. And they started creating regional groups around the country. And they created one here in the Midwest, I don't know if you know Regeneration Midwest, but that's what it's called. It includes twelve states, which I think is a terrific geography, because it's basically the upper Mississippi watershed, which I think it's very logical to have a coalition in that territory. So we have a listserv which is pretty active, and we were able to get a grant for a two-year research project, which is happening. I'm not formally involved with that grant, but I've been helping make connections and finding farmers and other people that they can interview. So I don't have any formal title with either the listserv or the coalition or this research project, but I can think that I have been helpful in certain ways. And I'm still excited that one of these days those twelve states will really start working together on local food systems. So maybe that's more than you wanted to know. (45:44)

AA: Thank you very much. So my next question is on perspectives on organic certification. And I know you weren't really involved in either the certification process or actually growing certified crops or anything. So just curious if you have any perspectives on that. If not, we'll move on to the next one, because I know that might not really be applicable to you.

DH: Well, as you can tell, I have a lot of opinions. And I actually have thought about this. I've thought a lot about labeling in general, not only organic or biodynamic, but in the environmental world there's LEED certification for buildings and things like that. And it's helpful for consumers up to a point. But the organic certification as it was developed—which I didn't realize until fairly recently, like 2010 or so—that number one, USDA certified organic was only approved in 2000. I thought it was much older than that. Because the word “organic” has been around for so long. And then it wasn't until 2010 that I understood that organic certification was a marketing label. It wasn't like an FDA label that said, “This is absolutely 100 percent pure” whatever the FDA approves, medicine or something, that you can't adulterate medicines or something. But the USDA organic certification was a marketing tool. Which I don't really understand it. To me, marketing and advertising is all about telling lies, frankly. What kind of lies will consumers believe so that they'll buy my product?

So I think that was a mistake from the beginning. And I think that's what's caused all the problems since then. So people understand that the organic label does make money, whether it's accurate or not, especially as applied to hydroponics or CAFOs. And I think that's a huge problem. So I definitely support organizations like Real Organic Project, or Rodale's Organic Farming Association that is promoting stricter standards. On the other hand, I totally understand why farmers wouldn't want to go through all that process. It's an incredible process and paperwork. And when not everybody is doing it, doing organic, it's a problem.

So one other thing that I would say, which also I learned just a couple years ago—and this is a problem with a marketing label—is that if it was the FDA label, I think that if a farm was certified organic under FDA and a nearby property owner was causing problems for a certified organic farm, either through the water or through the air, or whatever, I think the FDA would have some kind of authority to protect the organic certification. As it is, organic certified farms are not protected at all from their neighbors. I mean, CAFOs are constantly being approved without any concern about nearby organic farms. And pesticide drift and all that. So I may be out of my league here a little bit, but I think that's a problem. And it's just something that I think about.

So probably I don't have much else to say about organic certification. It does seem that the groups that are out there don't work that well together, like Cornucopia and Organic Eye and Organic Consumers Association, and as I said Real Organic Project and Rodale's Organic Farming Association. And they're not—most of them are not out there trying to get the public's attention. Well, the Organic Consumers Association certainly does. But I don't understand why the Organic Farming Association isn't more out there in front of the public. But that's just an observation that I'm making, so I probably don't have too much more to offer on the labeling. (51:26)

AA: Thank you for sharing your perspective on that. And then similarly, I don't know if you had much involvement with the agricultural universities at all. Is there anything you want to share about your perspective on the relationship between the agricultural universities and organic/sustainable agriculture? If not, we can move on to the next question.

DH: Well, I actually do count as many of my colleagues in terms of food and farm policy and food and farm justice, a lot of academics and a lot of departments and a lot of various institutions. And I absolutely count Extension as huge allies. But the only thing I really have to say is that universities are in the same place that everybody else is, including farmers and including just real people. It's like, where's the money going to come from? And so Extension sold out a long time ago. I mean, Extension is where all of the industrial agriculture was promoted, especially in Illinois anyways. Extension used to be, Extension and Farm Bureau used to share the same building until I think there was some kind of lawsuit that said, "No, you need to separate." But I don't think in reality they really separated. And Farm Bureau, I would say the public doesn't know enough about Farm Bureau to understand that Farm Bureau is a big problem in terms of organic and sustainable agriculture. They give lip service to climate stuff, but they're all about the money. And they're in bed with agribusiness. And that carries over to Extension and it carries over to other academic institutions and departments.

So that's why I now, in 2021, work a lot on money and banking policy. I mean, I'm happy to answer any questions about that, because it's not only related to agriculture. But that is the problem in the United States right now. It's our corrupt, non-democratic money and banking

system. And that's affecting all of us, especially the academic institutions. But I'm a big supporter of the theory behind Extension. I love that it was Abraham Lincoln that created the USDA and called it the "people's department." Maybe he was just using that as an advertising slogan, I don't know, but it sounds good. And I still think we can believe in that. (54:52)

AA: Thank you. And then do you want to share anything about your perspective on past and current trends in organic/sustainable/regenerative agriculture, whatever you want to call it? Including, do you have any opinions on why things are so controversial, or maybe the most important aspects of history to preserve and the most important lessons to teach younger generations?

DH: Yeah. I was surprised at that phrasing, that organic and sustainable agriculture is considered controversial. I don't think from the public's opinion it's at all controversial. It is controversial according to agribusiness and the way our food system and monetary system has been set up. But I don't think that's a legitimate controversy. I think we need to have, that our agriculture needs to be organic. And not necessarily certified organic, and I would say "small o" organic. But sustainable. Again, working with nature instead of destroying it. So I don't think that's controversial from the public's perspective. And maybe that's what we need to do more educating on, is that farmers didn't need to do what they did, what they were encouraged to do in terms of turning real farming into industrial farming, in terms of monoculture and growing for export as opposed to growing to feed themselves and their communities. So this is why I still think working on local food systems is high priority in terms of the trends. I haven't changed, I've only deepened my commitment in that sense to local and regional food systems.

In terms of the most important aspects of history to preserve, and we talked about this a little bit last time, we need to learn more about indigenous farming in North America or in the United States. We need to learn what they did. And it may not be even farming, it just might mean survival or land stewardship. But they certainly had some ways of living that supported continuity and sustainability much better than what we're doing in the industrial food system. So I think that's sort of an untapped resource. Because I think there are more and more indigenous people that want to share. There are more and more indigenous young people that want to learn their own farming practices, survival practices. And hopefully they'll share it with the country at large.

I think one of the really great things that's come out of this food and farm movement, which I—this is my own personal marker—but I think that this version of the food and farm movement started in 1985 with the first Farm Aid concert. I think the national attention that Farm Aid brought to the problems that farmers were having, because that's when farmers really started losing their farms for no fault of their own, for the most part, as I understand it. So I think one of the—and just so that Farm Aid for me is a marker of the beginning of the food and farm movement, because it was a farmer and consumer coalition leaving out all the middlemen, and it was an urban-rural coalition. And I think that still exists, and I think that's still growing even though not fast enough.

But one of the best things to come out of the local food movement, or whatever you want to call it, is the farm to school program that is being promoted primarily through the National Farm to School Network, which is an organization that's actually headquartered in Chicago but has senior staff all over. And the farm to school might be a bad name, because it doesn't explain exactly what it is. This is for people who might not know what farm to school is. It actually has

three components. It does start with getting fresh, healthy food from local farms into the school cafeterias. That's the real farm to school part. But the other two parts go hand in hand. It's creating school gardens and school farms right at the school so that the students start developing living skills and practical skills and real knowledge based on the real world, not just on books or computers. And the third aspect of farm to school programs are food system curriculum in every single grade, so that every year a student would study the food system as appropriate to whatever grade they're in. And I think this is a more holistic understanding of the world, because the food system, if people really think about it, the food system is the entire earth. Period. It's the air, it's the water, it's the soil, it's the biodiversity. And so the more students learn about how all the parts of the food system work together, I think that's invaluable for future generations.

I also think the money and the banking system is really important. Because that's the piece that has actually distorted our whole food system. And I'm happy to go into details, although I'm not an expert.

And then the third thing I would say in terms of teaching future generations is women's public authority. Women have to reclaim their authority and say, "This is what we know as women, as mothers, as grandmothers, as people who birth the next generation and breastfeed the next generation and teach the next generation and are nurses." Women have to reclaim their authority. So I personally am in favor of trying to codify women's public authority, like turn the whole House of Representatives in Congress to all women. I don't know if that would go over with the rest of the country. But that's the kind of thing that I think about, because I think women need to reclaim their authority.

On the flip side, and I have to thank my former state representative for this observation, Julie Hamos, the one that wrote the Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs bill. We were invited to speak at a conference in Chicago in 2007 as the bill had just gotten passed. And so everybody was sort of excited about it in Illinois, and so we were invited to speak. And as we were sitting there on the stage before the program began, Julie leaned over to me and said, "The people in here are mostly women." I said, "Well, you're right." And so I actually, later in the event, after our presentation was done, I went to the back of the room, and I counted all the people in the room. I already knew there were about 200, because that's how many people signed up for the event. And how many of them were women, and how many of them weren't. And for the next year or so, at every event I went to, I counted. And so I no longer bother counting anymore, because it came out to be the same. I say with complete confidence, if you go to any event in the local food and farm world these days, it's 70 to 80 percent women. No matter what. And so food policy councils, which are sort of my major interest, and it's a place where we promote democracy in the food and farm system, 70 to 80 percent of the people involved in policy councils are women. Period. So women are already taking their authority. They're just not messaging it as women yet. But I think that's going to come.

I did want to say one other thing. I'm not sure where this fits in, but it was in the last question in my notes anyways. I think Carolyn Raffensperger, and I don't know whether you know her. She's Fred Kirschenmann's wife. But she founded a wonderful organization, Science and Environmental Health, something like that. She has emphasized from the beginning of her work the precautionary principle. And I think that is absolutely key towards sustainable agriculture. And the precautionary principle is basically the same thing that doctors are supposed to avoid. First, do no harm. And that's what the precautionary principle says. The first thing that you do is basically nothing because you don't want to harm anything. And then if you feel like you actually have to do something, whatever that is, deal with a pest or disease or increase your

yield or something, then ask yourself, “Am I doing any harm to anything?” other than, I guess, the insects involved. So I really thank her for putting that on our radar. I don’t think we talk about that enough in the food system and environmental movement. But I think that’s what the sustainability movement is all about.

AA: Thank you. So that’s pretty much the end of my questions, unless there’s anything else. Is there anything else you want to share to wrap up with, or is that about it?

DH: Well, I want to say that this year, after the pandemic, after we were all on lockdown and winter and everything, and once the growing season started in Chicago, it sort of officially starts around St. Patrick’s Day, the ground is workable on March 17 and things start growing. I was amazed at how much everything grew. I don’t know why that is, because we haven’t had a lot of rain. But the weeds were just growing like crazy. And when I say weeds, I look at weeds as edible weeds, or medicinal weeds. And weeds are actually good things. So I was happy to see that things were growing. And it wasn’t just the weeds, everything else was growing too, the lawns and the perennials and the trees and shrubs and everything. And then earlier last week the landscape company that takes care of the property on which I rent a little coach house, they got out their pesticides or their herbicides. And they sprayed all the weeds in the cracks in the sidewalk and the areas where they didn’t want the weeds. And I was so depressed for 24 hours, and I’m not prone to depression at all. But that made me so sad, to think that, here I spend my whole life working on this, and I don’t think I’ve made any dent in our general consciousness. And I just felt really bad that all that, those lives, those green things, those green beautiful growing things, with all different shapes of leaves and flowers, they were just killed. And it was a slow death. It was not pretty to watch. So I just want to, I guess, end on that. We’re not done yet. I’m not done yet.

AA: Well thank you so much, Debbie, for taking the time to do this interview. (1:11:36)

DH: Well, I hope that’s useful. I enjoyed the process.