

Jessica Crum

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Jessica recently completed her Master's degree at West Virginia University in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics. She has been working in the West Virginia region of the Appalachian Foodshed Project with Dr. Cheryl Brown, focusing on the way in which farmers markets intersect with the emergency food system. Jessica conducted statewide interviews with market managers and shared the challenges and possibilities that came out of that process. She is hopeful that her findings will be used by a number of organizations in West Virginia, to help share how farmers markets and the emergency food system do indeed have synergy in the region.

Keywords: emergency food system, justice and fairness, farmers' markets; WV FoodLink

Right now I am a graduate research assistant at West Virginia University, and this is my second year doing that. I work under Cheryl Brown in Agricultural and Resource Economics. As a graduate assistant I mostly work on the Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) research for Cheryl and also assist her with a little classroom stuff like taking attendance, but the bulk of it is doing hands on research with market managers of farmer's markets in the state. The goal of this research is to ultimately try to see if their farmer's market is intersecting with the emergency food system; do they donate or sell any of the leftover produce? I haven't actually finished the research. I've done all of these interviews but now I need to code them and everything. I have pretty much interviewed every

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farmer's market manager in the state of West Virginia excluding maybe five. I called each one of them starting last summer and did a 20-minute interview asking them food security type questions. Ultimately the goal of the interview was to see if their farmer's market was intersecting with the emergency food system. The plan from there was to see "Okay, who is intersecting, who is connecting, and who is not and how can we get these groups to connect more?" So that's my spring job.

A little background about myself is that I grew up on a dairy farm in Maryland, so that kind of really got me into the issue of food security. Growing up on a farm is where my love of agriculture and food came from. I was aware at a young age of our role in the food system. In addition, we usually had excess vegetables in the garden, extra milk, and anything else my grandmother had cooked or baked. We did not have a lot of money but food is something that we gave away through donations or to friends and family and did not think twice about. I can't remember my grandmother complaining or being very strict about many things but she always would say, "Nobody deserves to be hungry."

But then when I went away to college I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I thought for a period of time I wanted to be a dentist, so I was a biology major at West Virginia University, and then my dad lost his job. I heard about this program called the Common Market Program, where West Virginia will give you in-state tuition based on a certain degree that you pick, so I picked Agriculture Business and Rural Development and it was a nice fit since I grew up on a dairy farm. I

was like, "Alright, I can do this and my credits switch over" and it was the best thing I ever did. I loved all the classes. I took a sustainable living type class and I was like "Oh my gosh this is awesome." So I graduated in 2012, and went to work for a federal government contractor. I was pretty much an administrative assistant and it was a good job but I was like "Oh my God I went to school and did all this cool stuff and I really wanted to work with agriculture, but I'm not doing anything but filing papers all day." So then I went back to West Virginia to an awards ceremony in April of 2013 and I ran into Cheryl Brown. I was talking with her, kind of telling her that, "Oh yeah, this is what I do. I'm not super happy about it but it's better than nothing" and then she asked me to come to a meeting in West Virginia and she said, "I will give you a graduate assistantship if you help me with this project. I think that you would be a really great fit." This all happened in April, and I was so down. I took the GRE in May and was enrolled in school by July. It was a whirlwind, and it was the best thing that I ever did. I feel like I have an opportunity to finally do what I want to do when it's all said and done, so it's good stuff.

When I went to West Virginia everything was so different there. They're just so behind where I'm at in Maryland if that makes sense at all. And just really seeing it, I really want to research it further to see how can I help these people. I knew kind of all the Appalachia jokes that people have, but there was a trip that I went on this summer for the purpose of doing some of the interviews and I went out to Boone and Mingo Counties in West Virginia and that was the first time I really saw these places. The AFP is affiliated with the West Virginia Food Link Project and Bradley Wilson runs

that. Food Link is pretty much an online thing for people to go online and see like, "Oh food pantries are here, farmers are here, these farmer's markets accept SNAP and WIC." It's a pretty cool thing. So Bradley was making a trip down to Mingo County and I was like, "Alright do you care if I tag along so I can do interviews?" We were driving along on the highway, and then it turned into back roads and on these back roads the people literally live in trailers, and it looks like they don't even have running water in some of them. It's just a totally different way of life, and I was like "Oh my gosh!" That was like my moment, when I was like "Oh my gosh!" No one can explain that to you. You have to see it for yourself. Going there reminded me of when I took a trip on a cruise ship to Honduras when I was in the seventh grade. It was so poverty stricken, and my trip to Mingo County was comparable to that, I was like, "Oh my gosh." That was a turning point like, "Okay, this is serious. I really do care about this, and my heart is in it now even more."

We also have a gleaning project that we just called proposals for in West Virginia. We have some money from the AFP to give to farmer's markets to see what kind of gleaning program can they come up with to donate to food pantries or soup kitchens. That will tie in eventually with the farmer's market interviews. I'm really excited to see what happens with these grants we give out, and that will kind of tie into the end piece of the farmer's market interviews. Like "Okay so we know who is and who is not donating leftover produce to the emergency food system, but how can we encourage them to do that and what ideas can they come up with?" So I'm excited for that. All of

this obviously relates back to my thesis, and I would really like to see that the farmer's markets implement these and use them long term; that it's not just a short-term thing.

Cheryl has influenced me in so many ways. She's like my source of knowledge; with food security stuff, with my diet. She's so great. And I would also say that my mom and my grandmother have a big influence on me. They taught me go after what I believe in and not settle for anything less.

Cheryl is just so grounded. I get so into something and sometimes it's nice to be able to talk to someone who has a general background of what's going on, but is not in that moment and can give you a nice outside perspective. There were a couple interviews that I had and they went really terribly and I was so upset. I was like, "Oh my gosh, oh how am I ever going to finish? And I'm letting Cheryl down." And I would go and talk to her and she would say, "You need to calm down. This is life, that's going to happen." She's so much help.

Bradley Wilson has also been helpful as an outside resource. He's very knowledgeable about the emergency food system in West Virginia so he's been a great help. Bradley has a FoodLink meeting every Friday in the morning and there's a group of people that work all the time on FoodLink. Bradley is an assistant professor and the FoodLink Director. So I attend those meetings and during the meetings we just kind of chat and people bring up like, "Oh I read this journal article and it was really great and this is what I learned from it." Just going to those weekly meetings has been really helpful, and he also taught a food justice course last spring semester. In the course we

pretty much read a book a week. We read *Sweet Charity*, *Weighing In*, *Hunger: A Modern History*, *Together at the Table*; I know there's more but those are the ones at the top of my head. *Weighing In* was really awesome. We had to do a little essay on each book, like pick a quote what does this mean? How does this tie into other books we've read? And things like that. Doing those readings helped me so much to have a really strong understanding of the emergency food system and how it works and how there really are a lot of injustices in it. Like yes it is a charity that's doing a great thing, but there's also a lot that's questionable I guess. Food pantries were never intended to be "life-lines", they were only intended for short term use. With that being said, the foods typically provided are unhealthy like pasta and canned goods. At some pantries people cannot just go and get food, they have to fill out intake forms and go through this long process. This, I believe, is to cut down on "double dipping" or people going from pantry to pantry to collect free food. I feel that most people are not going to "double dip". If someone is hungry they should be able to get food, no questions asked. They should not have to go through a dehumanizing process to get the food they need, especially in a country that is so rich in agricultural commodities. So it was really great to do that class because I know that I would have never read all of these books or even had an idea of what they were. So having that background was awesome. It was my favorite course that I ever took in school. And my boyfriend Drew is great for knowing that I'm crazy and its okay. One of many, many crazy moments happened last semester. Cheryl had emailed me saying that I needed to update my farmers market excel list. The one I was using was outdated and did not include all the

markets. This meant I would have to reorganize all my spreadsheets and create a few new ones. In addition, I had more markets that I needed to interview. This news made me really stressed out. So, a minor melt down ensued, complete with crying, ice cream eating and a needed bubble bath. Drew had just moved in with me, and I'm sure was like "OMG, this is insane". If he did feel that way he never showed it. He is very good with Excel, so after I had gotten out of the bath, I went into the study room and found him looking over my spreadsheets. He was like "Babe, this is an easy fix. I'll help you; just tell me where you want things to go and what needs to be added in." Together we fixed the Excel spreadsheets. He made me feel exponentially better, and I am so lucky to have him.

There was a point when I went to the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture conference last year, and that was a point for me where I was like "Oh my gosh there are so many people that care about the same things that I care about. This is so inspiring." And I guess the next turning point would be when I finished with all my classes and had nothing left but this research and my thesis to work on. So the beginning of January when I was like "Alright, I'm going to get this done, I need to get cracking".

The interviews I'm doing are with farmer's market managers. They are a series of 15 questions and then sub questions under each one depending on what they answer. Ultimately the goal of it is to see if there is any intersection with the emergency food system. Are they donating to food pantries or soup kitchens? Have they thought about it? If they are what barriers are they facing

to do that? We also ask a couple other questions, like, "Do you guys accept SNAP/WIC?" Things like that. I feel like I'm not the end, but I am. I have conducted 73 interviews with farmer's market managers in the state of West Virginia. I would say 90% were done over the phone. I would say maybe five were in person. Hopefully the end result is once we figure out what's happening in West Virginia in terms of farmer's markets and the emergency food system, then we can kind of divide the plan up for what do we want to do next. We've got the AFP grant going for gleaning at farmers markets, and probably a couple other grants will come out of my thesis and this research. Currently a farmer's market gleaning project has developed through my research. The West Virginia Farmers Market Association and the Appalachian Foodshed Project are launching a program to explore and encourage best practices for connecting WV markets to the emergency food system that serves the food insecure in their communities. Through a competitive application process, three West Virginia farmer's markets will be selected to participate in the Farmer's Market Gleaning Project during the 2015 market season. Participating markets will receive up to \$3,000 in funding to set up gleaning programs at their markers. I would love, and feel that there is a great potential, for more gleaning grants to come from this research, similar to the one listed above.

There were a few interviews that were like "Wow, that was a great interview. That was really insightful." For example there was an interview I did with a lady who was the market president and a vendor in a county way south, and she said, "No, we don't per se donate to the emergency food system but I know our market's really small and I give my stuff away at the end of the market. I know

it's a small town I know who needs food and doesn't have it and I just give what I can." I thought, "Wow, that's so awesome." And she said that there were other vendors at her market that would do the same as her. She was like, "It's a very small market" I can imagine a handful of vendors. She said, "The majority of us get together and you know, hand out what we can." There were a few other interviews where that was the same mentality that these managers have. They would say, "We can give what we can. We haven't organized a gleaning program per se, but that's what we're ultimately already doing." So that was really cool to see that, "Okay the majority of people in the state care." And I had a couple kooky ones that stick out in my mind. One interview that comes to mind is an interview with a woman who answered all my questions to the best of her ability. When I asked her one of the closing questions, she answered it and then made a complete 180 and started talking about aliens and spirituality. I have also had a few that went on very long discussions about the government and GMOs. I must admit that while I did lose control of these interviews and the interviewees went completely off topic at points, I do feel that they speak volumes about the real concerns of real people.

I would say that my biggest surprise was that I just assumed that people didn't care that they weren't donating. Farmers work hard and they don't necessarily have to donate, so I was really surprised to see that's not the case in most places. Most people are willing to donate. The biggest barrier that I've found so far is for the most part they just don't have enough left over to give, and that's why. But they give what they can. That was a nice surprise.

I guess I haven't really seen it yet, but the most rewarding part of this project is that this grant is coming out mostly because of the work that I'm doing, you know? And that's just a really good feeling because I know that these people who are applying for this care. I've established that from my interviews, and I know the people will use the money from the grant and really come up with some great ideas and hopefully they'll be long term and they really will make a big difference in West Virginia's food security. So that's a good feeling.

I would say the interview process has been the most challenging piece. I'm a very sensitive person and I would get my feelings hurt really easily at time throughout this whole process- whether it be in an interview that did not go according to plan or even getting critiques from colleagues. It took me a while to grow a tough skin and be like ultimately, there's nothing you can do about the interviews, and your colleagues are just trying to help you and get you to grow. But that was difficult to understand.

Ultimately I think that through graduate school I've just grown to really love and find the importance of food security. I'm just fascinated with it and it's so important. I just can't imagine not being able to eat when I want to or eat what I want to. Having that kind of realization really just drives me forward and motivates me to think "Okay, we need to figure something out to help food security."

In the beginning of this process, I was very unorganized and would try to take on too many interviews in a day. My biggest piece of advice is to develop a schedule. Once I did that then I would

only do three interviews in a day maximum. I would also practice reading my script beforehand so I wouldn't get confused. Those two were really big helps. And also I kept a call log, and reading over that call log the next day to see like, "Okay who should I call back? And what numbers didn't work?" is something that I didn't do in the beginning and I should have and that was helpful. There would be places that I called like five times and didn't hear anything, or I'd speak to someone and they were just very unreceptive to doing the interview or just weren't interested, so that was like "Oh bummer, this stinks." So I just had to have a positive attitude. I do know now to not try to put off work. For example, there would be times when I would call to schedule an interview with a market manager and I'd get them, and they'd answer and they'd say "Oh hi!" and I'm like "Can you do an interview?" And they would say "Yeah I can do it now" and I would say "Actually I'm only interviewing on these days, could I schedule one for you?" And they'd say yes and give me a time, and then when I would call them on that day they wouldn't answer and I'd be like "Oh my gosh, I just should have done it then." So that was something that took me a while to catch on to, because I guess I'm stubborn like that. Oh for some of them it took me so long. Because some of the interviews were with Extension agents that were vendors or worked for a market or somewhere else, and so they'd be at this office one day, and then I'd call the next day and they'd be at another office. I was like "Oh my gosh". Cheryl would say "Just keep trying until this day" I'm like "Okay." But I wouldn't call them everyday. I'd limit it to like three times a week because even that is almost harassing them. So it wasn't until the end that I started saying, "Oh you can do it now? Cool let's do it now."

Having completed most of the interviews and having this grant money, it makes me feel like so far it's been a success, and it drives me to keep doing what I'm doing. Like "Okay, good feedback." I feel like just understanding the current model of what's happening in West Virginia is going to help food security. What is happening with farmer's markets and even with the emergency food system in their separate states is important for understanding food security as a whole in the state, because nothing can really be done until you understand it as a whole. I think this research shows the importance of having community food security; the importance of having a community and the benefits of it. The importance of having people to rely on and what I've found through this is that farmer's markets build those relationships. There are people that I spoke to that go on about the importance of the market as being a place to purchase local foods, but also for people to come and catch up and I thought that was really cool.

Community food security is all people with different backgrounds and perspectives coming together and encouraging and teaching each other and helping each other to grow healthy communities that have local foods. Not only that but also people engage each other. It's community development, economic development, health and nutrition, anti-hunger, food access, social justice, environment and agriculture. But even though people with differing backgrounds and perspectives are brought into this conversation, they all keep the same goals in mind. I think these goals are to support access to food as a basic human right for all, eliminate hunger and food insecurity, build more local and regional food self-reliance and thriving local economies. We need to create a more

democratic food system that gives communities a greater role in deciding how their food is produced and distributed, make the food system more equitable and socially just, and develop environmentally sustainable food production and distribution systems. We need to teach young people skills in food production, to connect them to other community issues through food, and to preserve and celebrate diverse cultures through food. A healthy community is one that has the economy to support all of the people in it, obviously has access to foods that are culturally and nutritionally appropriate for everyone, and there's activities and the environment is healthy.

I feel like Appalachia is a region that is an afterthought to most of the U.S. so this research is so important for them. It's a challenge to get the rest of the United States to care. It seems like everyone that lives in Appalachia cares, but we need to get all the others on board, if that makes sense; and more supportive. In order to make a change we need to get support from the outside. So if Appalachia wants change, they need the support of their fellow states. We need to become relevant. We have a lot to offer, but we are under-recognized and under-appreciated. I feel like maybe this will not only bring them ahead of the game, but they can be a leader almost in community food security and it will just really give them the push that they need. There are a lot of people with great hearts that care about Appalachia based on my interviews with the market managers, and they really do want to see Appalachia grow and become really prosperous, and just having a lot of people is 1) part of community food security, but 2) important to see the success of it. And it's beautiful here. I think there was a study that Cheryl was involved in that showed there is a

good amount of farmland that's just completely unused because of the mountains or whatever it may be.

It gives me hope from doing the interviews and going to conferences; I've presented the gleaning PowerPoint at the small farms conference in West Virginia, all of the positive feedback that I get back from attendees or people passing through give me hope that "Okay, these people really care and if people care and want change, they'll get change." In order to make changes, in this case with the food system, people need to come together and make a plan, start small and then work towards larger goals by changing one condition or aspect at a time, and get others to support and join towards the cause.

I would love for all of the farmers markets in the state to have their own gleaning program, donating leftovers to food pantries and soup kitchens that are healthy so that low income people will then have better access whether they go to the food pantry or they go to the farmers market and use SNAP. That would be awesome.

The next thing for me is to finish my proposal, because I'm that far behind, and start analyzing the interviews. I need to figure out how I'm going to use this data in my thesis. Because I am an economics person, I had to have my committee agree to allow me to have a qualitative thesis, which is not typical, but given the nature of the interviews I don't know how I could really turn that into quantitative. So I don't know right now. I need to figure it out really fast.

I am looking forward to seeing what happens with this gleaning grant. I'm really pumped about it and excited. So I presented at the small Farms conference a gleaning PowerPoint that had some models of different gleaning programs that other farmers markets across the Unites States were using, and I'm really interested to see if farmer's markets here take some of those models and use them or if they will create their own or make a blend of two models.