

# Cheryl Brown

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Dr. Cheryl Brown is an Agricultural Economist at West Virginia University. Cheryl believes that local food opportunities can create a parallel economy where people have more control over their livelihood and local businesses. She pays special attention to the community building aspect of farmers markets. She stresses the importance of collaborating and communicating between local food, farmers markets, and emergency food providers to build a strong community and food system. Cheryl's story highlights how she has broken out of the traditional economist frame by using qualitative research to learn more about the connections between West Virginia's emergency and alternative food systems.

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I'm an associate professor at West Virginia University (WVU) in the area of Agricultural and Resource Economics. I've been here 13 years. I did my undergraduate work in Agricultural Economics at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and then I did my PhD work at the University of California at Berkeley. I finished in 1997 and went to Southeast Missouri State where I taught for five years. Then I came here to WVU. I teach *Marketing Agricultural Products*; *Agricultural, Environmental and Natural Resource Policy*; and a class called *Sustainable Living*. I also do a career development course with undergraduates in our majors. Right now, the Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) is the only project I'm involved

with. I was doing a project in Behavioral Economics through the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) where we did some work with a dietitian, and did some stuff in high schools looking at the setup in the cafeteria, but that finished. I had a grad student who surveyed farmers through a Southern Agricultural Research and Education (SARE) grant, and I've had SARE grants in the past. Right now the AFP, because it's so big, is pretty much all I'm working on.

My interest in food policy goes way back. I managed a food co-op in the 80's, and I was a back-to-the-land person in the 70's. So I've just always been interested in alternative food since even the early 70's—the whole brown rice, granola, tofu, hippie thing. Even at the co-op in the early 80's we bought food from local farmers, and it just seemed good and high quality. Then when I went to college, which I didn't do until my 30's, I wanted to study the intersection of food and environmental issues. I don't know as to how that led me to local food. It has a lot to do with food democracy, co-ops, and people buying food from people who they know and supporting small local businesses. Not even local food, but where are your dollars going? I teach a class called *Sustainable Living* where we talk about consumerism, the type of society we want, and how the type of economy we create is related to that. It matters where you spend your dollars.

My interest in agriculture along with my thoughts about economics and food markets and studying alternative economies probably led to local food. I try not to shop at big box

stores. I think local economies should come first. I was interested to know who owns and controls the businesses, and where the capital is coming from. My passion for co-ops and people-owned businesses; worker-owned businesses; consumer-owned businesses, led me to local food. I'm also passionate about small farms related to food and agriculture. It seemed like there are such ways for small farms to make inroads into the whole system. In selling commodities you're a price-taker, so you have to differentiate your food, your products, to make any money. The whole small farm viability means you need to sell into different markets. I sort of see local food as a parallel economy that we're creating where we have more control over the local businesses. It probably has to do with my views on capitalism. It seems like that's where we get so many externalities. I've read a lot about the philosophy of that, even in reading Adam Smith, the "invisible hand" guy, who talks about very small communities where the people who were running the economy lived there and suffered from the externalities they had created while he was discussing the "invisible hand". Now we have a system where there's no accountability through the global economy, and that's why the local food system brings it back to where I think it should be. Local food is an easy thing because there are connections with the farmers so you can really see where you spend your dollars and what it impacts.

farmers markets are more than a market; they really are a community space that's being created where people come together more than just to buy food. I think that is really

interesting, especially for us as economists. I did a paper with David Hughes on “Evaluating the Economic Impact of farmers markets Using an Opportunity Cost Framework” where he said, “Well they buy at farmers markets and they don’t buy at the grocery store so it’s just an equal exchange.” But I’m like, “Oh the products at the farmers market, they aren’t even the same as at the grocery store!” That includes the fact that you go to the farmers market because you run into your friends and hang out and there’s music and belly dancers and face painting for the kids, it’s not like going to the grocery store. I don’t even have the same mindset. So I think this community creation aspect of farmers markets is really important.

To get the best profit and highest price doesn’t lend itself to low-income people having access to this premium high quality local food. That’s always been such a conundrum. I don’t know if you’ve heard of Hardwick Vermont. There’s a book called, “The Town that Food Saved.” Everyone was so excited that they’d figured it out. It turned out that basically they were producing high quality foods and selling those into Boston and New York and making a lot of money, but people in Hardwick were still shopping at the IGA and getting their produce from California. They didn’t figure it out. The conundrum is how do you get high prices for farmers and have low-income people buy the products. That whole conundrum is interesting to me, and what do we do about it? Are there ways to connect the local food movement and people who are hungry and food insecure? And how do we help them and connect them? I don’t know what the answer is, but looking at that to me is really

interesting. Maybe it does get down to the whole jobs thing. If people had higher paying jobs and more money they could buy whatever food they wanted, and they could pay more and better food. How that fits into our food system movement is a question.

My motivation to join the Appalachian Foodshed Project is an interesting story. I have been working on small farms and local food stuff for quite some time. I did a survey back in the early 2000's about that, so I've been interested in that topic. When I moved to West Virginia I was working with a guy who worked for the Natural Resource Conservation Service and was very interested in food security. He was working with a group called "Heart and Hand", which has a food pantry and a really interesting community market where they used to sell consignment food that farmers bring in. So I was working with those folks and this guy, when the Global Food Security grant call came out. This was the first one that said building local and regional food systems could be one of the topic areas for the AFRI [Agriculture Food Research Initiative] grant proposals. Jason Teets said, "We should do this! But it has to be multi-state and multi-institution." So we were sort of batting ideas and thinking of who we could partner with when Virginia Tech called because Matt Benson was in the PhD program there and he got his MS from WVU. So I knew Matt, and Matt was working with Kim Niewolny, and they had a project idea going and needed multi-state partners. So Matt said, "Oh, call Cheryl at West Virginia University!" That's how we got connected.

In terms of the project, we haven't really talked much directly with farmers, more with farmers market managers. We did just do a presentation at the Small Farm Conference that we have every year in West Virginia that the extension service puts on. We were doing a workshop on this idea of gleaning with farmers markets. I was just thinking, "I hope some people come!" We had a great turnout. The room was almost filled. A lot of people were interested, and lot of farmers market managers came to that workshop to hear about gleaning and wanting their communities to make these connections. They hadn't thought about it before. They were like, "Oh yeah, we could work with the food pantry and see what they need." That was great, I was thinking that in terms of market managers. There was a whole conference track in farmers markets in getting vendors and public relations and I thought, "Oh, we'll be lucky if we get two people to come to our presentation called, "Gleaning and Donating to Your Food Pantry." So in a way that was an "aha" moment in that these farmers market managers really did care and wanted to see if they could set something up. Some of them aren't sure if it could work, but the coolest thing is they're willing to try. The community creation aspect of farmers markets is really important. We don't know how to measure it and what the value of that is, but that's why thinking about food pantries, the role of farmers markets, and how we can connect in our communities is really interesting. I saw that in the workshop where the farmers market managers came and asked, "What is this gleaning you're talking about? We might want to do that in our community because our

farmers market is already such a community entity and that would make that circle bigger.”

That was really cool.

One thing we have done here in West Virginia with the AFP is provide community enhancement grants for groups and organizations to implement food security projects in their own communities. We gave out \$20,000 worth of grants, and just did another round of funding for \$30,000. So now we’re doing these gleaning projects. Sometimes just a little bit of money out in the community lets us try some things and some ideas, so having a grant project where we were able to funnel some money through the communities has been very useful and helpful. I’d encourage more grant teams to write that type of stuff in where you get money and then get it out to community members. I know that for West Virginia, because of the way our AFP budget ended up working out, we’ve had more money to do that with than the other states. I consider that a success that we’ve let groups out in the community to try some new ideas.

One thing we’re doing with the AFP enhancement project money is we’re taking \$11,000 and we’re going to give it to four farmers markets who applied for a grant. We only had four applications so we decided to give it to all four because they all have different ideas and they’re going to try working with a food pantry in their community to get fresh produce to people who go to the food pantry. SNAP benefits don’t last a whole month so at the end of the month people tend to be out of food and go to the food pantry to get boxes and cans

of food. The idea is to try and get more fresh produce into the food pantry. We're trying to get the farmers markets to think about how to help the really food insecure folks, once the SNAP benefits run out by connecting to food pantries. One of the requirements for them is to apply for this grant money we're giving, which is \$3,000, to three markets. One market didn't ask for that much. We required that they already identify an emergency food system provider, like a food pantry, and have them agree to be part of this project. They're going to set up a system over this coming season to figure out how they can get stuff that's left over at the end of the day. A couple of the markets are going to do a donation station idea, so that someone like me who's got more money could buy two heads of lettuce, or two heads of cabbage and donate one to the donation station, and then the food pantry would come and get the food, or the farmers market would take the food to the food pantry. So in that case it's more of a charitable act on the consumer's part versus the farmers. Also, the idea is that if farmers have stuff left over at the end of the day that they might just take home and compost then they could also donate that. That'll get some of this local food into the food pantries.

We're thinking that these projects might have an impact on the way farmers think about working with low-income communities. One farmers market manager in particular is hoping that might be the case, and that the farmers may be aware that there's a food pantry

in town, but they don't know what they're doing and this connection will help them know and learn more about what's happening in their community. That is the hope.

I did meet with one of the groups, the woman who wrote the grant for them and was doing some of the work. It was nice to understand where they're going. I don't know if they'll come back to us again or not, especially if we don't have any money to give them. It could just be a one-time thing, and we'd have to work to keep that connection going. I think they will have more things for what they're trying to do that could help them in the future. We have a cool thing in West Virginia called "Try This." This is a grassroots conference where people doing work in communities get together and say, "Here's what we're doing, and you can try this!" One of the projects we funded went to that conference and was planning to go again. They were a food pantry who bought just a handful of CSA shares for low-income families. The head of the project went to this conference and said, "Hey you could raise funds and then purchase CSA shares and try to get other donations for funds for other CSA shares." And I think people thought, "Oh low-income people don't know how to cook with vegetables." She found that they were going on the internet and looking for recipes, and the farmer was saying, "Well is it okay what we're giving you, do you want something else?" And they were like, "No it's okay, we're learning about new stuff!" and they were willing to try new vegetables. There's the stereotype that this wouldn't be the case, but it turned out to be wrong. So I think for the groups to share what they're doing among themselves is very

important because one thing I've learned in all my work is that people listen to their peers, and even farmers.

I can go tell them about record keeping because I've been harping, "How do you know if you're making money at the farmers market? You haven't been keeping track of your labor costs to go there—it's taking eight hours of your time." But when another farmer says, "I quit going to this one farmers market because I realized it cost me more than I was bringing home," then they listen. They didn't listen to me telling them that. The work we did was the inspiration to go pay attention to that, and then they learn among peers. I think that's really important. I won't feel bad if no one pays any attention to me after this project, but if they go out and tell each other the cool things they did and what they learned, I think that will be more valuable. If I can help with that, then I see that as sort of my role. I mean I want to help, but I don't want people to think that they have to come to some expert and ask. They can learn from each other.

As part of her thesis project and the AFP, my graduate student Jessica is calling farmers market managers in West Virginia asking them questions about food security in their community and how they view it, and what their farmers market is doing about that. It's been interesting because a lot of them are saying, "We don't see that as our responsibility. Our farmers markets are created for farmers to sell their products and try to get a good price. There's other people doing the food security thing, it's not really our responsibility." That to

me is interesting because they aren't seeing the farmers market as part of the whole system. People still don't understand that idea of community food security and how it all fits together. It's been interesting that she's been finding that they do think of low-income consumers somewhat, but they think of it in terms of the SNAP program and getting an EBT machine so they can get the electronic benefits. They are trying to encourage people who get SNAP benefits to come to the farmers market and spend their money there instead of going to a grocery store.

One interesting thing is that some of the farmers are also very low-income. In West Virginia, 95% sell less than \$50,000 per year, and something like 80% sell less than \$25,000. We're talking part time, supplemental income for some of these farmers. There are some that are trying to do this for a living so they may think, "I can't afford to. I need to get the highest price and not worry about low-income consumers unless they can pay my price." SNAP does allow that. You pay the same price with your SNAP benefit instead of with your dollars, so it's been interesting to see what they have to say.

I guess another thing that's exciting me right now is what we're working on related to our Community Food Security Assessments (CFSA), which is what Brad Wilson in the Geography Department is doing. He is looking at the emergency food system and the food pantries and soup kitchens, and that's a whole area I don't know anything about. I think the CFSA is a good story, because that relates to local food. I went to one of the focus groups we

had after all the data was gathered about where the food pantries and soup kitchens are and where they buy their food. They aren't really thinking about the alternative or local food movement. They might shop at the farmers market personally, but they don't see a connection between them. They're trying to get cheap food because a lot of these are charitable organizations; a lot of them are faith based organizations. In fact, my nickname for them is, "The Church Ladies" because it's all women, and they either are retired or don't have to work. So they volunteer their time to work at the food pantries. Here in our county they get together to coordinate food drives and that sort of thing, but they haven't really been thinking about how we could get food from local farmers, because they never operated that way. They get their food from the statewide food bank, stuff from Kroger and Walmart, stuff that's out of date or almost out of date, banged up boxes, cans and stuff like that. They're not thinking in terms of community food security and how the production of food could be related to that. In West Virginia, that's understandable because when you're talking about an old, burned out coal mining town, people may have had gardens and probably a lot of them did, but we don't have an agricultural base in some of those communities. Now there are parts of West Virginia that are very agricultural. They aren't always thinking of growing food here, and that there are people who need food, and how do they get those two to work together. Instead they are thinking, "I need to get cheap food because I have poor families

who run out of food stamps at the end of the month and we need to give them something to eat.”

Thinking about this part of the project, I think it is important to say that the CFSAs were challenging because at first we weren't sure what we were going to do. I'm an economist so I think in terms of quantitative data gathering. We started looking at poverty levels, income levels and participation rates in the profiles. You gather a bunch of data and look at it and analyze it. But how to bring in the community part has always been a challenge for me as an economist by using the secondary data or the data that I get from surveys. I don't go sit down in focus groups and talk with people or try to get community partners involved. So we were having these big meetings with all three states and all these community partners. I know Virginia Tech was very challenged because their group was like, “We want to do this!” and I was thinking, “Well that's not CFSAs,” and it became apparent that each state was going to have to go its own direction with those.

I had put a lot of money in the West Virginia part of the grant for consulting to get someone to help with the assessment because it was just me, but I didn't even know who to get to help, or what to do, so that was a challenge. I was glad that the other states didn't figure it out right away either and leave me behind going, “Hey, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here!” I had known Brad Wilson for a long time, as long as he had been here at West Virginia University. He's a lot younger, and he had always been interested

in food justice, but we'd never been able to connect. Finally, we were able to connect on this project, and he was doing something that for me I thought fit as a CFSA. What a relief to have someone who could move forward to do something that seemed relevant! Then we talked about the parallel food systems, and it took off in a way that I think we're both pleased with as far as gaining an understanding of these two food systems and how they work. But that was a challenge, and I know it was a challenge for the whole project. I know Michelle at NC State was like, "What are we doing with the CFSAs, how are they going to work, and who is going to do it?" and I was asking the same questions. We were supposed to start those the first year, and that year came and went without anything. I was getting nervous; I think we all were, but it worked out fine. That was a big challenge. We're still trying to think about how to bring this all together!

To try and bridge this gap between quantitative and qualitative analysis, I had my graduate students take a class in qualitative methods. I also read a book that Kim Niewolny gave me about community-based participatory research. So now at least someone would have an idea, because I'd never taken a qualitative methods class. In marketing you do focus groups so I had some idea, but then I still was like, "Let's analyze the data. But what data? You just have conversations with people, that's not data!" Yeah, that quantitative/qualitative difference is a challenge, but I'm open to other stuff. I am interested in behavioral economics, which is not quantitative. Maybe that will let me think more.

Relationships have been an important aspect of our AFP work. My first graduate student Mary Oldham, is a really good thinker. She is from Morgantown. She'd been in the Peace Corps and her undergraduate degree is in environmental science. Mary came back and showed up at my door and said, "I need to learn economics." She was working in Honduras with farmers and felt they needed to increase their understanding of economics and be more market-oriented. That was interesting. She came on board at the beginning of the AFP and she worked here for two and a half years. I kept her around as long as I could, then she had to go have a life. She got a SARE grant to do research that I thought was important to the local food system building piece of the AFP. She mostly did a survey about farmers' plans to expand or sell products because there are so many small farmers, and we need more products in West Virginia. The University would buy stuff and the hospital would buy stuff, and there's just not enough product—not enough farmers. Her work was important in that and giving us insight into which farmers are going to expand and sell. She found that some are interested, and some people are like, "I'd rather give it away." We need to do a follow up study with those folks to see what's going on with that. That was an important relationship.

At the beginning it was just the two of us. It has been great to meet people in my state that are doing good work. One person that comes to mind is Jean Simpson who is in Charleston and runs a program called "Manna Meal." They have a soup kitchen that's open

365 days a year. It serves breakfast and lunch to anybody who walks in the door. We had a meeting there and we all ate our lunch there and she came to Blacksburg a couple times for our search conference and capacity building forums early on. So that was a good relationship.

We also have people like Kim and Susan from Virginia Tech, and Michelle and Angel from NC State. They are in different disciplines. Working with people in different disciplines is always a challenge, but fun because they think differently and you learn different things. They don't always understand what we're talking about as economists, but that's okay. So those have been important relationships too.

Brad Wilson in Geography has been the one doing the on-the-ground work with the CFSAs. He had done some emergency food system focus groups before I got him involved in this project, and so then he did a follow up and I went. I was meeting people for the first time at those. Jessica has mostly been talking to the market managers. Another important relationship has been with Kelly Crane, who was one of our West Virginia community representatives on the AFP management team. She just moved to Oregon. She was the Executive Director of the West Virginia Farmers Market Association. They've been involved in the AFP since the beginning, but it took us a long time to figure out how to get them involved because of this conundrum with farmers trying to get the highest price, and how that fits into community food security except for having more farmers, more production, and

more food. She's been a good person to push that. She asks, "What about farmers? What about production? We need more production." So I've appreciated her always pushing that and bringing that up. Then she pushed a gleaning project and trying to get those pilot projects too. That's been important.

One lesson I took away from this project so far is to be patient. It's going to take longer and be more complicated than you think. Another thing is keep an open mind, because like what I've learned from the emergency food providers is that there's stuff going on out there that I don't understand. People that are in the food insecure situations don't really understand their own situation. Gaining that understanding is important. It is hard for some of us who have never been in those situations. I've learned some of that too from Darcel who is from the North Carolina AFP team. She is a proponent of listening to people who are really food insecure. I appreciate her, and I think we need to think about that too because as academics we don't always get out in the community. That's been a big learning experience for me that I appreciate. I would tell people, "Find out what's really going on, don't just assume from your academic perspective."

One very strange "aha" moment in relation to farmers was when I was on a bus tour for the National Value Added Agriculture conference up in Pittsburgh. I was in the bus with the farmers and an extension agent who was also a farmer. She said that some of the farmers don't want to donate their food. They say, "Let those people get a job and get some money

and buy some food. Why should I give them the food that I've worked so hard to produce?"

To me, that was a shocker, because I realized, "Oh yeah, there are people out there with that attitude." They don't want to help people because they think they should just get a job, and it's not their role to help them. That wasn't an "aha" moment in terms of how things would work. It was more of an "aha" moment of, "Oh, there's a challenge that I sort of dismissed because I assumed everyone wants to help poor single moms." That's not all who is poor, but a lot of times that's the case, and so that made me think, "This is harder than I thought it was."

To me, trying to bring local food, farmers markets, and emergency food providers together to even think about each other existing in the same community, yet going on paths where they aren't intersecting, is a fascinating challenge. How do we get them to even be aware of each other and think about ways that they can work together? Maybe farmers have lower quality produce that would be fine for food pantries, like potatoes, where it doesn't matter so much what they look like. How could we be working together and talk as a community about where the food's being produced and how much it costs the farmers to produce? To talk about how much they're paying at the food pantry for potatoes, and where they're coming from, and what that means? We should just get them to talk to each other, which they are not doing so far. Even our research has been two parallel paths where Jessica is talking to the farmers market managers, and the geography students are talking to the

emergency food assistance providers. We're sort of hinting that the other exists and asking, "What do you know about it?" We haven't brought any groups together yet. I don't know if that will even happen before the AFP is over, but I know Brad and I are talking about how we can maybe write grants for the future. The food pantries have budgets and they go buy food. Even food from a food bank has to be purchased, even though it's really cheap. Maybe there could be a way they buy from food co-ops. I don't know where it will go, but that's what I think will be really interesting work.

Brad and I were talking about potato farmers who sold to one of the food pantries. I think the farmers would sell to whomever would buy their products, especially wholesale. If the main market of the small farmers in the local food system is to sell retail, then they're used to that retail price. To get them to take a wholesale price, they have to have the volume to where they can't sell it all at the retail price. So they're looking for other markets, and I think we can make it so that their marketing costs are really low. If you're taking your food to the farmers market there's a lot of cost: marketing, transportation, time, and your display and packaging and all of that. If it could be wholesale and the food pantry had someone that came out to your farm and picked your potatoes to where your costs are really low, even if it was volunteers that came out to the farm and picked seconds out of the field so you didn't even have to harvest them, your cost reduces. Basically, farmers will be selling potatoes that they would have left; they wouldn't even bother harvesting because it wasn't worth it. I think

farmers should do that. Even from your profit motive that would make sense. But we don't have any food pantry volunteers who want to go to the farm and pick the potatoes at this point, when they can buy cheap bags of potatoes from Walmart or wherever. So it hasn't come together, but we are moving forward with framing issues and getting the farmers to see how it can help them through the low costs maybe, and a product they wouldn't get a higher price on anyway. That's a conundrum, too.

Talking across disciplines has been inspiring. Big problems of food security and poverty are going to take people working across disciplines. So working on a project for five years makes me more comfortable in doing that, and understanding the need of communication in a better way. One little thing we've done in this project is to learn this process called dynamic governance for decision making. This is where you try to get something done, just get a proposal out there, get a project going. Don't wait till it's all thought through and perfect. That's been really helpful for any work I wish to do in the future. I've taken dynamic governance to the board of the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition, and said that we're going to use this. People have been very receptive to the dynamic governance process because it replaces Robert's Rule of Order, which is old and archaic and cumbersome. Doing something different seems more positive and less adversarial as a process.

I would encourage more economists to work in an interdisciplinary way and not be afraid of the community involvement. We always think, "Oh, that taints some of the research." This has been really good for me to realize that's not true. If you want to do work that's really going to impact the community, instead of just writing papers that maybe nobody will ever read or won't ever help people, then I think getting out in the community is really important.

The idea of trying to change the world motivates me to keep doing this work. Really, I mean trying to create different economies, communities, and trying to make people work together. Actually, I just saw an inspiring film Wednesday night called "The Cherokee Word for Water". It's about Wilma Mankiller. She was the first woman to lead the Cherokee Nation. It was about the work she did in community organizing in really poor native communities in Oklahoma. They worked with people and got people to have running water in their homes. The idea of making changes that really help people's lives is what inspires me to keep doing this work.

Five years from now, I'd like to see something come of all we've talked about with the two different food systems: the emergency food system and the alternative food system. I would like to see them working together, understand each other, talking to each other, and trying to figure out ways so that there can be true community food security and not just helping the poor with whatever food Walmart wants to give them. I'd like to see them figuring out the community part. I think this project will start that. I see my role as both an

economist and an advocate, partly through my work with the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition because it's working in both realms, or in the production side in the development of the local food systems. We are working to get grant money to facilitate some of the conversations and projects with the emergency and local food system. Then in five years I might be thinking about retiring.