

McCabe Coolidge

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Plenty!, Floyd, Virginia

McCabe Coolidge is a co-founder of Plenty!, a grassroots organization providing programs to provide access to fresh, healthy food to families and individuals in Floyd County, Virginia. Apart from working towards eliminating food insecurity, McCabe is committed to building a healthy and supportive community with his neighbors. He thinks that the biggest challenge is that most of the people do not have a full understanding of food insecurity and that it exists in the county. Besides focusing on individuals and families, his goal as an organization is to continue to build relationships with people experiencing food insecurity and making a difference in their lives. His Plenty! co-workers and volunteers give him hope.

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We, as an organization, are in the middle of a transformation right now. We are trying to have a structure that works, and that isn't all dependent on Karen and I, who are the co-directors of 'Plenty!' We are working on job descriptions right now. Mine has to do with the Plenty! food bank and farm. The way I link those two up has to do with how we focus on the needs of the people. That keeps expanding. I love how the future is evolving and pressing itself on us. I think that's where I deviated from my MBA. That curriculum really had a lot to do with strategizing how to get there. This one, working with Plenty!, is a process, and we're all uncomfortable and awkward while we move forward. Often times it's fun, but we're not

quite sure where we are going. I can tell you what we think, but that's not the end of the story. No one gets a promotion.

For many years I worked in Asheville, North Carolina, as an AIDS case manager. Karen and I also worked in two sister organizations trying to get good food to people who had AIDS. That wasn't easy. We couldn't find storage. The Presbyterian Church offered some, and it was a really small pantry. Many of the folks I was working with and living with died. That was a very difficult journey. We were to let go and then go take on new clients and new people. It was four to five years of not much hope. Since then the people who are HIV positive are living longer, but I was on the cusp of that.

I wanted to see something progress for the longer term. Was it going to be this? I had no clue. All of this just came down from heaven from what I can tell. I am proud of having an MBA in marketing research. I never worked for GM or Ford, but I've got that methodology, which taught me to always look for the niches. So I looked for the segment of people who are not being served. If I were on Wall Street, I would be a very wealthy person. But in Floyd County, it has to do with who is not getting served, literally. This is a food desert. We know there are people that don't have access to healthy vegetables.

What turns me on is that there are 2000-3000 people in this country that could use more food. I have a "longer term" look at things. I mean, beyond my life time, I can see out there how this farm starts and then a sister farm starts. It's like a puzzle with the pieces falling

together. It's not the whole picture yet. When you hear excitement in my voice, it has to do with seeing beyond the end of the year.

The word "community" to me implies an exchange of equals. That means I have to look to the other to be the source of my community. There's this exchange that I want to see happening. Exchange is when you give to me and I give to you, and it doesn't have to be produce. I'm going to strain this through the people who come through the door. One guy that we've been giving fire wood to brings in plastic sacks in which we put produce to send them out to people. Another guy has some tomatoes that he'll bring in, in July. He'll receive a lot more than that when he's going out. We got an ironing board one day. The next day someone came in and needed the ironing board. It can be as simple as that.

Food insecurity is not going away. We are going to be food insecure for a very, very long time. But underneath that is a community. Underneath that template is the interaction of folks who care for each other. That's called community. It would mean that people are relying on neighbors. We happen to be the neighbors. The question is, how do we, in an insecure food system, rely on them so that it's not one sided? The quick answer is, that I utterly depend on them for conversation. I rely on them to tell me their news. Sometimes they gift us with what others have gifted them. I really like metaphors of food security along with pictures and images of what we are talking about. I know what I mean by it.

I know people that don't have enough food to eat. I even know people that may have enough canned goods but not enough produce. To me that's big-time food insecurity. There are levels of that that I'm dealing with at all the time. In the winter I may be able to give you beans, rice, tuna, pasta, and pasta sauce, but I know what's best for all of us, which is more produce. I happen to like the term "food insecurity." I happen to think that it goes across the board. It's not just poor people that have this.

We started out about five years ago with something called "Empty Bowls." It's a big fund raising project. The proceeds go to the "Backpack Project" in this county so that kids can go home on weekends with food. It was a big success. Karen found that these farmers and gardeners had surplus and so we began contacting them. That's how "Portable Produce" got going. We started getting in this produce. We had to rent space and buy a cooler. It kept growing and growing and growing. Finally, we said, "we needed more space and a food bank. We needed some assurance that there's going to be some food for everybody."

The food bank came into being because of two things. One was the need of food in the area and other was that there was a food bank in Willis, south of town, that ran out of food and ran out of money. Unfortunately, we didn't know that ahead of time. Eventually they were gone. What happened to all those hungry people out there? Nothing stepped in to replace them. We thought of having a food bank where we could keep in touch with food pantries more frequently. There were four food pantries in that area. There's one out in

Check, which is north of town. It's a church group pantry. They are open once a month for about two to three hours on a Saturday. We started a relationship with them to give them food that we can easily give our surplus so that they can have food every Saturday. The underlying issue is that there is much more hunger in this country than we knew about. That's true every year. Every year there's more demand.

The other thing that happened was we began to hear from Community Services and Social Services that they could use produce and groceries, too. That included the Health Department, two medical clinics, and the Learning Center, which is a GED program here in the community from the New River Valley Community College. On Mondays I take food out to these organizations. Now at this time of year it's surplus bread, sometimes a little bit of produce. But as we get into the growing season it's better. One of the doctors at Tri-Area Health prescribes vegetables and sends her people down to us to get surplus vegetables. That's really cool.

The food bank is a great idea. I'm glad we have it. We are running out of space. But it's different than "Portable Produce" where people go out and take food to somebody. People might come in with their kids or uncle. Usually someone is driving them there; often they don't have their own car, but they got a ride in. They are in a neutral territory. At Plenty! more interaction can happen. There's a little bit more time. It's a little more than knocking on the door and telling them what kind produce is in the bag that they're getting today. We get

to ask them, "What do you want?" Peanut butter, for example, is high on the list. We ask them, "Do you have dogs, cats, etc.?" We began to get a fuller sense of the individuals and families that come in. Some people are disabled in some way, but many are just working poor. They are on the rough end of an economic stick, and for many it's been years since they've been that way. I personally don't see how it's going to get better. If something touches them, sometimes they cry or turn aside.

When we started up the firewood project, people came in extremely thankful. It's been a long winter here. We cut cords of firewood and gave it out. Getting to know people a little bit more personally means a lot to me. The downside is we haven't had enough to offer. When we say, "What would you like?" Sometimes we just don't have anything like it. In the best of all worlds, we'd be supplied by a supermarket and it would be filled with things that people can choose. Another thing that is really important to me is that we don't keep score. We don't have any records about how often you've been here or what all you've received or if you are really poor or if you're taking us for a ride. We don't keep score.

The food bank officially opened right around Thanksgiving 2011. We are up over 90 individuals and families. This is not "Portable Produce" where we have volunteers to take food out. These people find a way to get to town. That led us to ask questions like, "We have that many people? What are we going to do?" We're not getting that much more produce from the existing farmers and gardeners. A friend of ours at Fertile Crescent Farm said, "Why

not a 'Plenty!' farm? A farm to really start upping the ante on how much we can get going." We talked and talked. Then he found a piece of land right up the road for us. At the beginning of this year, 'Plenty!' owned a farm. Adam and Darby, of Fertile Crescent Farm are responsible for that farm. They will be the farm managers. We're hoping that they will get roughly 70% of the produce for sale. They will give the other 30% to Plenty! It's a wild experiment. We can see down the lane that two more farms are going to crop up in the next 5 years. What we're doing is building in predictability.

Right now, what we get in to the food bank depends on who brings the food in. Most of the weeks in the summer we have something or the other, but it's been very lean the last several months. Hence, we'll be planting winter squash and plants that grow in the fall. We want to have produce around the year. I am not sure as to how many years or months that's going to take. We want to have more than beans and rice for people. I was thinking like, "We've got a farm that belongs to Plenty!" I can see people who have physical ability to plant blueberry bushes. I can see people harvesting apples and squash on a much larger scale than the little community garden that we have." That's pretty cool. I don't know how to arrange transportation for that. You are catching us right at the brink of something brand new. It is because we're just getting the land plowed. Nothing has been planted yet, but we've got plenty of ideas.

The church pantries are good partners in this. Aside from our farm, one of the things that we started is a relationship with the Methodist church. We helped them start a little garden at the Pastor's back yard. You might think that's small, but how many pastors in this county have gardens? We're going to have a little tour in the next few months. We're going to go to that little garden, the farm at the Plenty!, and another little kitchen farm that we're starting out south of town. It's on an ancient land with an ancient house.

I'm just hoping that all these efforts bring us to a different sense of a different kind of community here in Floyd. There are a lot of people in this county who are quite well off, but there are more who are not. I would say there are several. We could help people learn how to grow their own vegetables. So we are starting container gardens this spring. There's going to be gardens at two or three elementary schools. We will be teaching people as to how to do some physical activities related to gardening. It might bring them into the community garden. We might take them out to the farm. Transportation is a very difficult issue. Part of our goal though is to develop some sense of self-sufficiency. People can feel good about a tomato they have growing on their deck.

The other goal that Plenty! has to figure out is how to continue to have a relationship with these people. It's not like a give-away program or an anonymous thing. We would like to check in to hear about the kids, etc. Let me tell you about one of the things that happened recently. I just love it to death. In our newsletter it's called "Scent of Cinnamon." I

was buying bags because I had gone to Feeding America. This is a place in Salem where you can get inexpensive groceries in a big warehouse donated by Wal-Mart, Kroger, etc. I was getting these bags because I had bought 100 cans. I thought that was going to be great, but they were restaurant sized cans. I expected 10-12 ounces cans. I didn't know what to do.

Alexis, the Plenty! AmeriCorps volunteer, had a great idea of opening these cans and pouring the contents into plastic freezer bags. The idea was we'd have little plastic bags in our freezer full of pasta sauce. But in the meantime, I was in the under 20 checkout line and the woman cashier asked "What are you going to do with those bags". I told her the story like just now. She said, "Oh we're just starting a new church out toward Willis and we have a lot of families that are really hungry." On her name tag it said "Cecelia, Bilingual."

Through Cecelia, I found out that there is a Hispanic church starting up! We have been able to start a relationship with them, and they've come by twice now; once last week and once this week. They come into our food bank to get food for their church families. Now I want to be there for that! To me, that is making that connection. It's not anonymous. It's a niche in the sense that it's really hard to reach out to the Hispanic community in this county. Now we got a foot in a church. That's going to lead us to something.

The food bank wasn't my idea. I think I'm a minimalist, and Karen is even more frugal. But it became obvious to a bunch of the volunteers that we just needed a lot more space and so they pushed us. It was a surprise to be pushed because I see myself as leading. But

that whole thing got pushed. Adam and Darby from Fertile Crescent Farm said, "Plenty! really needs to think about having its own farm." That was another push. That it works is rewarding. The food bank works. People come in one day, return the next week. They come in like "Hey. How are you doing?" Everyday there are people coming in who need food. Today, the Plenty! farm had a guy up the road who volunteered to plow and disc an acre of land. He'd be out there 6 to 8 hours. He goes to a Brethren church, up there on Beaver Creek. Maybe that will be an "in". What I do is just listen, see what they do, how they do it, and what they enjoy doing. Somehow we can get them involved. There is a fairly large influx of early retired and retired people in this county. They are no longer working what they use to work. They don't know how to find community through their job, kids or spouse. I'm watching that. They are like, "Oh, I didn't know you worked with Plenty!" I reply, "Oh yeah, I do." In this way they can make some contact and grow a sense of belonging. In a rural county that is really tough. People are well isolated down here. There are long driveways, miles away.

At present, we've got over 100 volunteers who are creating community. We have an annual gathering. I think we had about 100 people who showed up for that. It was great fun! I sometimes don't know how the volunteers find their way to Plenty!. I'm thinking about this woman who is taking care of our paper work. She's really getting things nailed down so that there are files and procedures. She just walked in one day. Karen was there and they had a

cup of tea and she said, "I'm a scientist, but I want to do something that's a lot more personal." I don't know how Karen picked up on it, but she did.

There was another person who lost his job, and he was at retirement age. He said, "The heck with it." He didn't want to work at Wal-Mart. I didn't know him, but heard about him. I went and knocked on this door, literally, and found him. I brought him over. He's a ball of fire. He's got all kinds of building skills.

Another person just simply liked working around people that didn't involve his head, but liked to do more with his physical abilities. We got him everywhere for pounding this, nailing that, or putting this up. I don't think there is an answer to the question as to how we attract volunteers. I just think it's the grace of god; a piece of bliss comes our way. We are lucky. We have a good reputation in town. People hear about us and trust that they're going to be well cared for and that they will find meaning in this work. I don't know who is going to come through that door. Most of the people I am thinking about right now were not volunteers four to five years ago. Something shifted in this past year, like they came to move us into a new century.

We have very loyal volunteers. Some of the ones that are still with us just want to take food out to people they know—their people. Don't ask them to come to a retreat or a business meeting. Otherwise they will be like, "No, done that already. I just want to be with

my people.” That’s how they say “my people.” I am like, “No problem! I don’t want to take your people from you.” So that just works out great.

People continue to give us ideas, which is rewarding. They are like, “Have you ever thought about—?” There’s a woman who’s going to take on her whole trailer park. Basically, there’s going to be container gardens at her trailer park out in Copper Hill. She’s got everyone signed up for a container garden. That’s great! I didn’t think about a community of container gardeners.

I have developed insights because we are on the ground, and we’re going out daily and seeing people who need food. I know people don’t really understand the problems. When I talk about this with friends and colleagues and newcomers, they don’t know this to be true. They don’t know the people that we take food out to. I took one guy out with me because he was the kind of person who said, “Why don’t they work for a living!” It just frustrates me. He’d also say, “What are they going to do to help you?” I thought to myself, that’s not how this works, and so I took him out. He’d never been inside a mobile home before, ever. That was a brand new experience for that guy. This one was really bad; it was south of town. We reflected on the way back as to what that must be like for him. He said, “The work I’ve done all my life didn’t take me here.” I gave him a couple of questions to reflect on. One was like, “What did you feel when we walked inside that trailer?” It was a mess. “What do you want to say now?” Those were my two questions on the way back. He

said, "Well I'm not feeling a great pressure to judge these people." He met them. That's really good. That's a challenge. How do you move a continuum of people that have done well all their life to be mixing with people who have not done well, for a variety of reasons and make it work? That's a long term question and a long term endeavor. Yet I love it! I learn so much from people, by sitting with them and listening to their stories.

The other insight I can offer has to do more with me getting tied up with the practicalities and not really sinking into the dignity of work. No matter what it is like. I'm thinking of the guy who offered to plow the land today. I'm thinking of this one woman out in Indian Valley who is unable to work due to some mental incapacities. But she takes great care in cleaning up and doing some cooking and taking care of her mother. There's a lot of dignity in taking that lens off that says, "You're poor, and I'm not" and just say, "This is dignified work to take care of somebody in the home."

For me, the challenge is to step back. I should sit down and spend some time. People really like how much I get done, but there's a downside to that. I'm not always pausing and digging in deeper. I'm not always reflecting on how I'm feeling about things, and how I think others are doing. I have to keep finding bridges to keep going over to be with the person on the other side. I don't want to get too busy in all the planning that I've been talking about to miss out on that. With all the planning, I am missing out on that.

Another challenge, in reading a lot about farming, is co-ops and community gardens. We really have the tendency to compare ourselves with things that are bigger. Things that are grant funded or with lots of big donations. We're about ready to start our first ever fundraiser. We've never even asked for money before. It comes but we haven't asked for it. We don't have to be a big deal. There's a farm somewhere around here called "Small Potatoes." I love that name.

It's like the pastor who invites people over to see her little garden. Maybe we can help her put a garden behind the church. There's a good space back there. The Mormons heard about the Methodist cutting firewood, and so they joined in. They told us about a big food bank in Greensboro called "The Bishop's House." I hope to get down there because they will give us a \$1000 worth of groceries. There's a lot of these little endeavors, here and there, scattered around. I love it.

I think part of the challenge that we are having is in figuring out as to what to say about these endeavors. Are they under an umbrella that we can describe yet, or are they still evolving? We need to stop comparing ourselves to all the other people. That is just not a win-win situation. I think we're doing quite well with what we do. But then you think you can do much better. But we take baby steps.

I am glad that Plenty! is like small potatoes, that it's part of our mission. We want to be present to these people. It's not to get more food to more people. Unfortunately, I do say

it that way sometimes. That's like admirable, and it might get more money in because there are hungry people in Floyd. We need to get more food to more people. We are trying to get to know more people who are hungry. That's quite different. Food is the vehicle, and it's essential. It's an honorable act that we are up to, but it's not just the act.

The basic lesson is to find organizations that don't have role model distinctions, such as "client." If I hear "client" then I already know there is a "one-man ship" going on. I want to work with organizations where everyone is on the same floor together. The second thing is to look for small circles. I really believe in small circles. I worry when organizations are so big that you have to find your spot on an organizational chart. I want your experience to be really personal and with someone, like me, who you can reflect upon this with. It's not just enough for me to do the work and then go home. Karen and I start every morning by sitting right here to reflect. If we didn't do it, we'd be running off to do what we had to do. We need that pause.

The third lesson is don't think anybody knows it all. You are listening to my story, and I didn't know any of these things three to four years ago. If you were to have said "farm, elementary school gardens, the food banks..." I would have said "huh?"

The fourth lesson comes from thinking about where we live. Well, the first thing that I learned when we first moved up onto the Blue Ridge Parkway is that we sit in our own watershed. That turned my thinking around. We found out that we don't get water from

anybody. Our water is in this county, in a bowl, which runs from this river into the New River and down into the Mississippi. We are responsible, or irresponsible, for the water. I've had this really wonderful feeling of, we are all connected. In fact, when I was sitting with the farmer yesterday morning, we got to talking about the water. The problem is we got too many people coming in and the water aquifer is going down. He's lost 50 percent of his aquifer in his life time.

People are moving here because they are risk takers. This is not an easy county. It's a risky county in terms of weather and topography. Because of this snow, people are going to have some trouble getting home. People who are coming over for dinner tonight, they might not make it. If you move here, you are probably going to be taking some risks to get to know people and to find some endeavors that you like. There's no gated communities, one golf course, and there's no movie theaters. We are really dependent on each other. I don't know how that's going to work out, but no one is going to save us, that's for sure. I like that it makes it raw and insecure at times. I couldn't move to Blacksburg. It's too big, and you have a dominant institution there. In Asheville, the dominant institution was the hospitals. Here, we don't have anyone dominating us. I mean, we don't have to pay attention to and watch out, be careful about, and so forth.

Karen is really devoted. I think she's going to do some oral history with the old timers on Sunday. We need to know that. One of the guys who is a historian, and who teaches in

Radford, says you can divide this county into two chapters: before electricity and after electricity. Karen wants to get to the people who were here before electricity. What was the community like then? How does that impact us now?

We went off on our first annual Plenty! retreat in November of last year, 15 people showed up. These 15 were people that were doing substantial work for Plenty!. The reason for the retreat was to answer to “What do we need here to let Plenty! continue to do this work and be supported? What infrastructure do we need?” It’s evolving now. We have infrastructure. We’ve got a mission statement and a whole new programmatic structure that we’ve never had before. We have gardens and farms. We have people who are populating these positions, not Karen or McCabe. Our structure is catching up with reality. We’ve clumped them, our activities and programs, and given those captains. They are relating to each other as a small group. Up here is someone who’s taking responsibility to see that things are getting done. Ironically, we just had a reunion of that group on Monday. A total of 12 people showed up and it was great fun. They’ve got a position and they like doing that. We came to celebrate that. Before this retreat, it was Karen and McCabe looking over, like, 25 different things. Well, I’m exhausted. That doesn’t work for me anymore. Karen has more of a managerial repertoire about that than I do. It just tires me out keeping up.

I know you can’t really point out the impacts unless you look at a piece of paper and look at organizational structure, but it really has impact. It’s going to carry us. Well, it’s carried

us to the point where we are going to start applying for a 501(c)3 status. I was against this for all these years. Yet after seeing how much is going on, I thought that we should have a structure. Last year, someone on the advisory team said, "Well, McCabe, you've got to look at the issue of succession." I went, "Me?" We have to see if this organization continues on beyond Karen and McCabe, or at least McCabe. I want it to, so that's providing a push for some foundational work. I find this to be the most difficult work so far with Plenty! I just don't like it! I was working on the mission statement, organizational structure, and job descriptions. I was like, "Just send me out to a garden, to take some produce out to somebody."

Of course it's the people that we work with that give me hope. It's also, like sitting right here now, even though it's snowing out, and the farmer has gone home with his tractor, I can see this happening. In each quadrant of this county we are going to have a farm. I don't know who's going to own it, that doesn't make any difference to me. I got out toward Indian Valley to meet Wallace; he's a guy who owns a farm. He's too old to do much with it. What gives me hope is that people will step forward.

Sometimes people have seen things in me that I haven't seen in myself at all. I really appreciate them. Those people helped me along the way and showed me when my frustration was ok but not necessary. One example would be Peace Corps. We were trained in what was called community development, which was basically marketing in a community basis. It was to shed some light upon what's going on, what needs to go on, what's missing.

My Peace Corps representative said, "You can do this." I barely spoke Spanish. It was really hard. He said, "Keep sniffing around and walking around." It worked. It took a fair number of months, which, made me highly anxious. He saw stuff in me that I didn't know about. He helped me believe that I could go into a very different culture that was also poor and make some things happen. That's one of my mentors.

Another one of my mentors has to do with theology. I have a theology degree, and along the way I've had two good professors who told me, "Stay there!" My faith has to do with growing theology from the soil up, or from the earth up, rather than a theology which is top down. Maybe the Pope has changed, but Rome traditionally has decrees that come down from the Papal office. I'm really interested in what the people are doing and saying. I wanted to know as to how their faith leads them to work. I wanted to make sense of their faith and work. Ironically, one of my mentors, unofficially, was a Roman Catholic priest in Bolivia. He was a worker priest. He taught me how to do it. He took me with him. It was a very hopeful experience in a very hopeless land.

The third piece has to do with a bunch of training I've done through different mentors around integrating the body, mind and soul. I am strongly committed to the concept of a healthy body and mind. I also believe in a healthy source of wisdom. Whether it's weeding things or planting or plowing or handing out food, it's all physical. You might think it's mental

but, I come at it physically. It's the sharing that happens between two people, which is the essence of what gives them life.

Dorothy Day of the Catholic Workers is one of my mentors, even though I never met her. Early in the 30's, during the depression she saw poor men and women on the streets and began organizing around housing and food kitchens. I just love the fact that she was with people. They were not like her, because she had a college degree. Well, she chose to live that way; she chose to be with poor people.

Another set of mentors are the everyday people I hang around with. Each person is a mentor in a special way. I also wish to slow down, and listen without my screen of judgments. I've worked in soup kitchens. It's not easy. I think everybody who is poor needs to have dignity and to be respected and listened too.

Well, we got our foot in the door. That's the best I can say. Usually people have the idea that if you work with Plenty! you are going to have fun and meet people. It's not like signing up a lot of sheets, filling out forms. Basically, we are very person oriented. There are a couple people there that are pretty interested in doing work with us.