

Debbie Lineweaver

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Southwest Virginia Fresh (SO Fresh), Virginia

Debbie has a love for preserving open space and rural communities. She took initiative to start SO Fresh in southwest Virginia, and has been committing her time to volunteer to get the organization off the ground and established as a non-profit. SO Fresh is building connections between growers and consumers and other organizations in the region to promote the local foods economy. The rural miles between people in the same community is both a treasure and a challenge to SO Fresh's mission. It is difficult to get people in one room when they live an hour's drive from each other and perhaps do not have Internet. Yet Debbie sees these connections as a key piece to food security.

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I'm the Chair of the board of directors for SO Fresh. I've been here for five years, as long as SO Fresh has existed. We started out as Pulaski Fresh, and had that identity for two and a half years.. We were under the Chamber of Commerce here in Pulaski County as an initiative of the Chamber of Commerce. The intention was eventually that we would go independent, but when we did we had too many people who thought, "Well if you're called Pulaski Fresh, it must just be for Pulaski County, right?" That was never the intention, so we changed the name to Southwest Virginia Fresh, SO Fresh for short. So the name changed but the group is the same and the purpose has always been the same. The board is a working board, and there are now seven board members. There is no staff, so this is strictly all volunteer work. We all kind of pitch in as things need to happen, from if you're having classes who brings the coffee pot all the way to what our mission and our strategic plan is.

I have a work situation that allows me a lot of flexibility in terms of time of when I do something; it can be the middle of the night. So because of that and the fact that lots of different things need to be done, I will take responsibility for a lot of coordination. The chair logically should keep up with everything that's going on and make sure that nothing falls through the cracks. We try to make sure that we have enough people to do this project, and this project, or this project. And if we don't, I do it. You know, you make a flier if nobody else can do that. But there are a lot of things that we've done throughout the years. It is fairly consistent in terms of education, marketing, and networking. That's not changed, but of course the details, the delivery on the ground can be so many different things. And should be.

From the beginning, we have looked at education as a key piece and so we have done lots of classes over the years in a variety of ways. We started out with a series of workshops that collectively are very similar to the Growers Academy that the Catawba Sustainability Center is doing. In fact we talked about recreating that and heard a lot about the Growers Academy so in order to do it this fall, I called Josh at the Grower's Academy and said, "Would you all like to bring your program further south?" I didn't see any point in our recreating that again, and they no doubt had current experts and so forth. The class didn't make it in the fall, but we're trying again during the winter in Wytheville. By the way, it was done in the winter and was very well received by participants.

Throughout the years we've done children's programs and consumer programs and producer education. Everything from here's how you plant a seed to entrepreneurship. So all of

those classes have come through. We have done a lot of tabling at festivals. Debbie Gardner here at the Draper Mercantile (the Merc) is so interested in finding local foods, and so we became associated with her. As the Merc developed she gave us an incredible boost in terms of a place to do things. If we were having events she would say, “Why don’t you put up a smorgasbord of stuff made from local foods?” She would invite us in and she really gave us a place to plant our feet, and I cannot begin to appreciate that enough. For years here at the Merc we actually had our Blossom and Grow Spring Festival, and we’d have kid’s activities that centered on growing things, learning vegetables, and so forth. The key piece of that was an opportunity for producers—especially small ones or just individual people trying to get started—as a way to market what they’re doing. And it was free; they just set up the table. Our view has been that one of the things that local foods offers is the story behind where the food comes from—the person and the farm. That’s what you have to sell that traditional food systems don’t provide. But you need to have a forum to connect the people that way, so we do those kinds of things.

We’ve begun recently to work with other groups like the Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) and Appalachian Sustainable Development. I don’t think the name has been developed yet, but there’s a grant program with Pulaski, Montgomery, and Giles counties now working on agriculture issues and we’ve been part of that. We’re just trying to reach out to other groups. What we’ve now dared to branch into is bringing other local foods groups together to talk about what we can do together or what they need. We’re also working on calendars where these groups can coordinate so

that they don't have festivals or classes all on the same day. This is throughout southwest Virginia. That's the intent. We had a couple of day gatherings where we all came together and said, "Okay what do we need to do?" And SO Fresh is working on a website now that will have producers listed from all over southwest Virginia and a calendar that will coordinate those.

In our view, we've shifted to fill what looked like a hole in the system, if you will. We try to pull who's out there together so that we're strong as a region. Not as a county, not as three counties, but as a region. It seemed like a niche that SO Fresh could and should fill because there are a lot of groups that are delivering on the ground services like classes or farmers markets or whatever, and we've done some of that and we'll do that especially in areas where none of that sort of thing is going on, but what we need to do is promote other's work. So we are looking at a way to promote the entire region and to help the entire region wherever it's needed. That's become our mode of operation in the last couple of years, but we still have classes.

Our mission is to promote the local foods economy throughout southwest Virginia. The focus is on local foods, which in my view is a piece of food security. I would assume food security is also canned goods. If you want people to be able to eat well you don't base it just on local foods maybe unless you live in California or North Carolina. But I know with AFP, for example, the movement is to really focus on local foods because logically that has potential for growth. Even for people to grow their own food—those kinds of things. When I think of food security it is a broader piece so that your faith-based groups are not going to turn down canned goods or something bought out of

Kroger. They're not going to turn that down when they've got folks coming through. So it's a bigger piece, and the local food is a small piece. SO Fresh didn't start out at all as thinking about food security so much as thinking about, "If you're growing it and I want it, but we don't know that each other is here in the same county, then you need to bring together those consumers and producers." So that was the first real objective, and the vision goes on and on.

I think probably a consistent trend for me is a love of rural communities and our local economies. Not to exclude the rest of the world, because that's stupid, but just that you should try to strengthen the community where you live and anything to do with rural communities and preserving space—the farmland, the forest, the water. Those are things that are of interest to me. I started out with this saying, "I know where I can get eggs and I know where I can get beef and chicken, but there have to be more producers where I live than I know about." I just happened to have learned about these people. So I'm on my chiropractor's table one day, and we're talking about stuff, and I find out about somebody else. And I'm thinking, serendipity is not a good business model so maybe we need to know about each other in a more organized fashion. And so that's what motivated me to get started. Just to say, "If there are people here who are working hard and would love to sell their goods, and I'm interested in buying them." But if we don't know where to find each other, things don't work well for either of us. So why don't we do that? And that's where it started and it has mushroomed into a bigger perspective. There's things that people could do to supplement their income, or as a full livelihood. Why do we have folks next door to me so to speak

working really hard to ship their stuff to northern Virginia, or to Kansas or whatever, and then I buy it when it comes back around? So I think being local and caring about rural communities and open spaces is for me what was behind all of this.

My husband and I have a business called Full Circle Conservation Tax Credit. We are conservation consultants who help landowners determine whether or not conservation easements are good for them by making sure that they have facts instead of hearsay, and then if they choose to do that we help guide them through that as much as they need it. In the state of Virginia there's a tax credit for donating land, and it's usually more than most anyone has to use themselves. And it has an expiration date. So they can sell that credit to other taxpayers if they want to. And so we help them find buyers and sell their credit. And that's when we get paid. And if we don't do that piece, the rest of it we call the volunteer side of our business. And that's okay. You just kind of let the chips fall where they may. We look at it as a full circle because once landowners know that there is a way for them to sell that tax credit, and their neighbors know that, or someone else knows it then that person with land may choose to do a conservation easement. The whole cycle beings again because all of the factors are working together. When you do a conservation easement, you give up development rights forever, and land is retirement for a lot of people. It's something they want to pass on to their family perhaps for all sorts of reasons, so to give up the development rights to not be able to lop off 5 acres off of your 100 acre farm gives you pause when you're sitting around the kitchen table trying to decide whether you really want to sign this away or not. And so the state

government will provide a little bit of incentive. You still give up a great deal financially, but for some folks you get enough in terms of some tax benefits and credit. Your standard of living is such that you think you can live with that and that makes you feel more secure and consequently you say, "Yeah, I want to do this". You don't do a conservation easement if you want the maximum financial benefit out of your land. I would never advise anyone to do that.

My husband and I donated conservation easements ourselves at a time when the transferrable tax credit had just come into legislation so nobody knew anything about it. We were sitting there and there was no one to help us with it and we figured it out and finally later said, "You know we have a lot of intellectual capital here, and if we are ever lucky enough to buy another piece of land we would like to be able to do this again". We ran into a lot of folks who said, "I don't have time to do this myself" or, "I can't explain it to people." It seemed like there was a need for folks like us so we said, "Let's do that," because it goes back to rural communities, and water and wildlife habitat and so forth. All of these things that we've loved for years and think are important.

So I don't come from the food security point of view. I mean I used to garden and can and that kind of thing, but nothing in agriculture. My background is psychology, and I taught at New River Community College for years and worked as a trainer and coordinator in industry, and spent some time out in Yellowstone doing field research. There's a thread. To me it's a love of land and space and wild places and so forth, even though I didn't grow up in wild places, but just going into

the woods was a big deal. Sitting by the river was a big deal to me, which was not necessarily what my family did other than when we went on picnics into the mountains. When I look back, it felt right.

I haven't thought about who my mentors have been before. I can't say that I've had mentors that led me to this. It's just sort of there, and we've just always grabbed things and gone with them. I know I've headed down different paths, but I think my husband is definitely the most influential to me because he's always been an outdoor person, has always lived in rural communities, is always seeing the need to take good care of places where you can in order to have wildlife habitat, agriculture, clean water and air. He has such a knowledge base. He reads a lot; he experienced a lot, and so he pretty much took an inclined person like me and dragged me into that world. I still look to him for information and for knowledge, things that he knows.

I went to the Chamber of Commerce here because I thought I wanted to start with people who pull together consumers and producers, and I needed some legitimacy. I didn't know anything about the Chamber, but just that it was a respectable organization in this county so I thought, "Okay let me go and see what they think about it because it is business that we're talking here, too." And of course as I learned, most chambers don't focus on agriculture, but this one is open to that. The executive director, Peggy White, listened and said, "Yeah let's take that to our board." They made their offices available, and we just started calling people. I called the producers that I knew and said, "We want to bring consumers and producers together; would you come to a meeting? Bring anybody you think might interested in this." We probably had 20 people the first few times, and they

were just remarkable. Folks were so knowledgeable about growing, especially about growing produce. They were also into the idea of spreading that knowledge around. And just by great good luck I guess we just ended up with a lot of folks who really knew a lot and were really motivated. It was just like they needed a moment for that to come alive, and one of the first things that was discussed in the first or second meetings was, "We need to have an educational component. We need to start there. We need to educate people on how to grow, to understand it's not as tough as they might think it would be, or just to do a little to give them the confidence. We need to educate consumers about why local food has advantages for various reasons whether it's contributing to your local economy or freshness or nutrition or whatever." Frankly it was not anything I had even thought of, but it makes sense.

Those discussions started very early, and we're trying to provide marketing opportunities to producers. Those are the two key pieces. Then that initial piece of who's here and how do we know each other so we can buy from and sell to each other to promote the local economy, the networking. Those three things—connecting, educating, and marketing—came up very quickly, and we just had a lot of energy behind that. And the Chamber of Commerce now runs The Marketplace, the farmer's market in Pulaski, which is pretty unusual for chambers to focus on agriculture as a key piece of their business view.

Now with every group you start out with, however many you start out with, by the second meeting you know it's going to go about in half or a third eventually. So our first board had 11

people on it, and essentially it was the people that kept coming and were the most motivated to keep growing and go further. We still have three of the original board members, including myself.

The only role I ever thought I would play in this is that maybe I can do things that need to be done outside of the agricultural knowledge and economics and all of that, and so I tried to just help organize things. We began to do a lot of events so that people knew we existed. So that was a lot of our focus for a long time. That started in January of 2010, and by the next January we were conducting classes and we used a lot of the people associated with the initial group as instructors because they had that knowledge.

We brought in Virginia Department Agriculture and Consumer Services and others to talk about entrepreneurship and regulations and so forth. One of the board members that we've had in the past was from Wytheville, and she was so excited about all of this so she became a part of the group, which gave us a reach into the next county. So you begin to take advantage of that. I think the consumer and producer composition of SO Fresh was a really good thing to do. We spent years saying to people, "No we're not starting a farmer's market, no we're not a growers guild." It seemed like an odd combination to people that we were at least equally full of consumers who didn't garden, who didn't know squat about anything along those lines perhaps, and those who were experts. I think it's yet to be seen how beneficial and how long lasting this organization is, who knows. I think that composition of really diverse pieces of knowledge in various peoples heads and organizations has been a strength because you need the agricultural knowledge, but often the

growers and producers will say, "I don't want to have to organize things," and "My business is not my forte, but I want to be in business." It's like musicians. A lot of extremely excellent musicians and singers don't have the foggiest notion or don't want to have to deal with how to market themselves and be able to make a living doing those things. They're two separate skills. So I think that configuration seemed like a really natural and good game plan. It just seemed to make sense and at that point. We might have said, "Well maybe it should just be a producer's guild that markets themselves." Yet at this point five years later, I think it's a good game plan. I really do.

For example, if we say, "Okay we want to have education for everybody, what do producers need to know? What would they come to a class for?" If we didn't have producers in the mix then we would have to go do some research to find some way. If we've got producers there they might know, and they also are connected to other producers and so they say, "Okay these are the things that confound us." And then consumers say, "Well I just want to have freshness" or "Oh gee you don't have strawberries all year long?" These things that sound kind of dumb, but I don't think the producers would have often said, "Well if they know who I am, if they know about our farm, if they know how we got started, this makes people want to buy from me more." The consumers can tell you that. So I think virtually everything we've ever done has been a combination of always trying to have the perspective of at least those two sides of things.

It was hard to find producers. There's a greater market for people who would like to buy local foods than there are people producing local foods in this area. I think if you were to get to Abington

you have a longer growing season, and people have evolved more into that, then you have more producers. That surprised me. I figured there was no way that I already knew most of the people in one town, but I almost did. Which is kind of weird.

I was surprised at how much work and knowledge it takes to have even one county let alone a larger area know that you exist as an organization. We had to do a lot of our own marketing. You think, well how do you become known? If you get out of your own mind where “This is what we do, and what we think about, and this is great and everybody we talk to likes it” because that’s like 30 people. It doesn’t work because most of the people don’t have the foggiest notion of who you are. So the amount of presence that you have to create, and knowing how to do that, was surprising. I think not knowing how to do that as rapidly, or as well as far as where you reach out, was a definite weakness. Peggy White did a lot to push us saying, “You need to have a booth at this place, you need to be doing something here, and get people on your mailing list. You need to show up at a lot of places.” It’s exhausting. I think at one point I figured that it takes like 30 man hours to just show up with a booth somewhere and then tear it down and get it back. Combined with all of the other things that you might want to be pursuing, that’s a lot of time. So every time you see somebody that hauled in a table and put up some stuff and say, “Well that wasn’t hard”—yeah right.

I think another thing that I really hadn’t thought about initially was just the cost of doing those things and the fact that we had no money. We had *no* money. I mean zero. But we had this group that was so motivated and so interested in this, by great good luck in a way. We targeted

people to come to the meetings and they targeted other people that they knew. People were very generous with their food and with their time. Just making copies of things to hand out to people is not cheap. I didn't really think too much about needing to look like we knew what we were doing; like where our handouts didn't look like we wrote things down on a piece of paper.

I think we should have gone for 501c3 status sooner. We just got it. We couldn't seem to stop ourselves long enough to pull through that paperwork and that form. We were saying, "Yeah, but we need to get this class off the ground. We need to *do* things, concrete on the ground delivery things." We can't quit doing that or it looks like we're not doing anything while we spend time going through bylaws and all of that. We did do some of that before, but it wasn't as complete as you should have it if you're going to make that application. So ultimately we kept doing on the ground delivery things: marketing opportunities, classes, kid's activities, and festivals. Last year we said, "We're going to quit. We are not going to do that." We still did a few classes. We couldn't help ourselves, but we quit showing up at everything in order to give ourselves time to put a good structural foundation into the organization.

You can't apply for grant until you're a nonprofit. I think that's the biggie. For people who want to contribute and be able to write it off as a charitable deduction you need that. This is sort of an unspoken thing, but I also think that once you have that it appears that you're legitimate and you're going to last, that you have some durability. It's almost a subconscious thing. but you take it more seriously. It's like being accredited or something, but when you're in an area that there's no

accreditation you need something that says to people at various levels or people like the feds or IRS, that somehow you pass muster as a serious organization. So I think in hindsight we should have done that sooner.

I don't know if it's Appalachia or just rural places in general, but I think the advantages here are that there are a lot of people who are still connected to the land who appreciate the vistas and the fact that agriculture goes on, and that they have a place to do that. Whatever the rural culture gives people. I think there is the advantage that when you're talking about food that came out of the garden, or that your neighbors brought over and gave you, people still remember that and it has this warm fuzzy feeling. You literally have the land that's open to do it, and I think there's a connection. Marketers of all types of food try to create an emotional response in us with these lovely pictures of fresh foods, or this landscape vista, or the farmer with the straw hat or something that makes people feel all warm and fuzzy. A lot of people have no clue what that reality looks like, but it still taps an emotional response that makes this attractive. In this part of the country you literally still have a lot of that land and a lot of people who grow things. It's not some distant memory. Also you have the potential to grow because there is space.

On the flip side, the distances between places is a challenge. When you've got open space and you've got a place to have a meeting or a class, you have whole realms of geography from one point to the other and people have to travel 30 or 50 miles to get to those places to have the education or to go to the festival or whatever. The beauty is that we have those spaces that you

have to traverse; the down side is for certain kinds of things it makes a long trip. So people have to really, really want to, or they have to have a schedule where they can spend that much time traveling to a class or a festival or a market.

It seems like certain nights of the week are what people can work in. Weekends are so valuable. There's another piece. Everybody's lives are pretty full of lots of stuff so if you're going to add something, it's kind of a big decision. Saturday is a day off from work, and they have all kinds of other things to do. So if you want them to come to your class or your festival or your workshop, they have to work it out. They're all willing to do that, but maybe not all in the same Saturday.

I think people like the idea of supporting local things of all types and I think we have the land and enough of the climate that you can actually remember doing it. You can remember having fresh corn out of the garden or you can go down to the farmers market and know the guy 5 miles down the road who is selling. Again, I think this is specific to a rural place, but so much of marketing talks about using social media, talks about having a website, talks about email, talks about all these things that make it easy for people at great distances from one another to communicate. And so the fact that we of course have that in this region is a strong thing as well. The flip side of that is that there are still lots of places in this rural region where folks have to go to town to get a signal to use their computer or their phone, so they don't use email much. It's just the geography I think. So that's a disadvantage in the sense that not everybody is tied in to technology. The other thing is that some people just don't use technology. So we're going to have this website where you can find whatever

food you're looking for, but not everybody can utilize it, or even wants to. They don't want to. They don't see it as important or they don't want to get in the middle of all that. Their life is full as it is, and I think that we have to respect that. So when it comes to marketing, when it comes to connecting and networking, you can't only talk about technology. There are very successful big farmers in this region who don't use email and don't have a website and who don't want to. They're doing very well thank you very much. And they really are. I mean you've got farmers along the whole gamut, but they're doing it. It's not like, "Oh they could make a living for their family if they did this." Nuh-uh they're doing very fine. They know their stuff, they're busy all day. It's all working for them. Why in the world would they then want to do this other technology thing? I think that's a challenge in this area because there are enough people who automatically think of technology as the connector, but then you're going to leave out a bunch of people.

I would love to see this organization serving all of southwest Virginia in whatever way those different areas need to be served, but still focused on local foods. I've often said that I'd like for us to be all things local foods. Meaning that if somebody is looking for information on how to grow something or if they're looking for information on where to find chicken or they're looking for seeds or they're looking for the organizations in their area that they could become associated with, that we would have that information. We would be a repository of the producers, the organizations, and the research at Virginia Tech—of all the other pieces of food security folks working in that.

I'd love it if we had an office where somebody was actually employed and a place where someone could call and say, "I know this is a crazy question but I can't figure out where to find eggs and I live in such and such a county and I'd love to do that" and we'd be able to say, "Well go to our website and you can find it here" or we look it up. Or someone asks, "Do you have a certified public accountant (CPA) who knows anything about nonprofits? We need to apply for 501c3." "Well where do you live?" "We're down here in this point or we're up here in this point." "Here's who you could call in that area and see who they used." Or we might even have a list of CPA's that specialize in nonprofit status. That there would be a repository, if you will, of information that almost any question that another local food organization or producers or consumers or food security people have could be answered on our website or someone we could call. If someone says, "I'm looking for certain kinds of seeds." We could have a listserv and say, "We'll put it out on our listserv and there's a good chance that a couple people are going to answer and they're going to be able to talk to Joe Schmo who just called and asked for that."

The likelihood that you're always going to have everything that anybody would ask for is a super vision. To direct them to where they could find it sounds far-fetched, but that concept would be a way to connect, and a way for organizations to work together so that they don't overlap when they don't mean to. If they want to do the same thing, fine, that's their choice, but if they're trying to collaborate or at least not overlap things too much, that's the model we are ready to do.

We're already working on a youth in agriculture initiative where we're trying to research schools and youth programs in agriculture so that schools or program coordinators can see, "Oh we don't have to reinvent this; they're doing this neat project over there that we would like to re-create over here." What I would like to see the organization doing too is keep running classes. We've helped Dublin Middle School start a consumer science class where they're going to grow tomatoes. They're going to harvest them and then they're going to cook with them, and possibly, if they harvest enough someday and have excess, and all of that meets their standards of learning and all kinds of other things, that they could actually then sell it and do a little entrepreneurial thing. Once you tweak that and get the kinks out it could be a model that's shared with other counties and other schools. They can have somebody to call at this school who actually went through it, and they'd be willing to do that. We don't want to get into public policy, which is not unimportant, but that's not where we see what we're doing. We see making it possible for people to deliver on the ground deliverables and actually make local foods work in this region and strengthen the whole region. I think a vision should cause you to reach beyond anything you ever thought you could do.