

**Amy Little**  
**Policy Director**  
**Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group**  
**Narrator**

**Ron Kroese**  
**Interviewer**

February 10, 2016

**Amy Little—AL**  
**Ron Kroese—RK**

**RK:** This is Ron Kroese. I am in Washington, DC today. It's February 10, 2016, and I have the privilege right now to interview Amy Little. She today serves as policy director for the Northeast Sustainable Ag Working Group, but has had a long history of working as an organizer in the sustainable ag and sustainable food movement. So, I'd like to start these interviews with hearing all about what got you into it. I mean, all the way back to your childhood. Why did you get interested in sustainable ag and food, and where did you grow up, where did you get your education? So take off with that.

**AL:** OK. My interest in sustainable agriculture actually came through my rebellious nature. I always had a very rebellious nature. I grew up in a non-religious household, but very strong values of equality, love of nature, and service to humanity, the importance of community. Being very rebellious, in my teens I ended up leaving high school to go and protest, and I got very involved in doing non-violent civil disobedience.

**RK:** About the war in Vietnam?

**AL:** No, I was a little bit young. That was when I was in my early teens, but very exposed to it in my house. We were, you know ... my dad cried for days when King was shot, and every day we had the news on—the shootings at Kent State and all of that was very high in my family, in terms of we need to be aware of what's going on, and we have to do something about it. So having a rebellious nature, being a teenager, that meant doing things that might not have been so great for me, but it was finding activism that gave me the focus I needed, and so I became very focused on being an activist, and I went to college, worked on the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) amendment, was fighting for solar energy issues in New Hampshire, and as a student was very active in alternative energy issues and protesting nuclear power plants. When I was still a minor I was doing civil disobedience, and there were times when we would be arrested, sitting in front of steamrollers that were going to do the nuke plants, and because I was a minor I didn't have to stay in jail, so I'd go and get some of the press together and do some stuff. So, anyhow, I became very radicalized in the civil disobedience work that I did, and following college ...

**RK:** Where did you go to college?

**AL:** I went to college at a small university in New Hampshire called Franklin Pierce College. Being that I had dropped out of high school, I didn't have a lot of choices about where to go to

college. But I had a great time there. I had great radical professors that talked about socialism, democratic socialism. But it did give me a good base there in New Hampshire to fight the Seabrook nuke plants. From then on, everything was a base for making social change. Anyhow, when I finished college I went from flunking out of high school—because I basically dropped out—to graduating summa cum laude and getting a triple major in history and political science and philosophy. So I started ... I joined the Citizen Energy Labor Coalition as an organizer and I canvassed all over the country, going door to door on local issues with Citizen Action and Clean Water Action, and training people to do this, and then training organizers to mix issues with action in terms of grassroots lobbying. So we'd get grassroots participation, and that became more of how do we take this issue work into the electoral arena. So we started doing a lot more in elections and after a few years I was on the national staff of Citizen Action and Clean Water Action, and helping state organizations identify strategic ways to win on state issues, local issues, and we also worked on some national issues together. The Superfund, the federal EPA program that requires polluters to pay for their cleanup, to protect water supplies—this is a story that an action we had, we had all over the country—this is with John O'Connor, who was Carolyn Mugar's husband. He was running the National Toxics Campaign, and she was starting Farm Aid. We had collected water samples all over the country and had these press conferences with people bringing their polluted tap water to these trucks and we had this thing called the Superdrive for Superfund, and they all drove to the capital and that was when Jim Florio introduced the Superfund legislation, which ended up winning the Superfund. That was the kind of organizing I was doing with Citizen Action, and ...

(6:07)

**RK:** Did you get any training in organizing? I'm talking to a number of people that are organized that had been so part of the movement.

**AL:** Yes, lots of training. Lots and lots of training. In fact, I want to get back to the Midwest Academy style organizer training, but before that, when I was working with the Citizen Labor Energy Coalition, we had an association of organizers and canvassers where we were sort of writing contracts for staff at citizen action groups. Not just Citizen Action with a capital C and A, but other groups too. We did this with NARAL—the National Abortion Rights Action League. We did this with some labor groups that were working on particular plant closing legislation and things like that. There was lots of environmental groups we contracted with, and with this outfit, our whole reason for being was training organizers, and in terms of not just external strategy, but how do people work together, how do you build coalitions? How do you do the grass roots and the grass tops? How do you mentor others? We always would say—each one teach one, and we really took that to heart, and at the time my two big mentors were Heather Booth and Barbara Helmick, and Heather—most people who know about what goes on in the activist world know Heather. She was one of the key people. And SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, very active in unions. She was one of the kitchen cabinets for Barack Obama, a very astute woman. So she was a big mentor to me, and this woman, Barbara Helmick, who was one of the leading gay rights activists during the later part of the century, and we were really the first professional association to negotiate for health benefits for domestic partners. We were really on the cutting edge of having great advocacy organizations, have professional staff, so that people could be really working on the stuff and making a living. We were fighting for

living wages and working conditions and there we were doing it for these activist groups. So that was part of the training. Part of it was we taught people to every day do training. Every day bring a new tool out of the tool box and try to use it. And then getting to the Midwest Academy—Heather Booth started the Midwest Academy. In the '70s and '80s there was a lot of training we did, and a lot of that was great. It was about power relationships. We empowered a lot of people in how to come up against the city council, how to push through a bill, either on the local or the state level. There wasn't a whole lot of training on the national stuff, but Citizen Action was doing that alongside Midwest Academy. A lot of that was the Saul Alinsky-style stuff. But it's evolved over the years. Later on after I left that world, I was hired for the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, which, actually, was I was hired for the Dialogue.

**RK:** That was what—late '80s, right?

**AL:** Early '80s. Just getting back to the training question—after that I went on to work as a partner with Citizen Action and the Midwest Academy to do a lot more electoral training, and that's when I went on to do work on presidential races. I worked on the Gore—this is the non-coordinated Campaigns, doing civic engagement, voter registration, turnout, and what we called roundtables, is getting the various non-coordinated interested groups who wanted to win in a democratic election, wanted to win. So we would bring those roundtables together and make sure we had the bases covered for either voter registration or turnout on issue-oriented memberships. Like Citizen Action would have a membership and we would tie an issue, like those members would come in on, say, healthcare issues is a big issue we worked on, energy issues, and so there was a lot of way of tying those issues to a candidate in an uncoordinated way. So we did a lot of that. Just back to me and the training piece—we kept doing a lot of training, and I had 11 states that I was responsible for, in the Kerry cycle. Then beyond that, I worked in the field in Ohio for Obama. I was the field director for something called Vote Today Ohio, where we did the early voter program for Obama in Ohio and there's a story, a little back story. Just like Shirley Sherrod I got blogged about. We had 100 percent turnout before election day in our targeted districts in Ohio. That was amazing. I mean, we had 100 percent of the Somali community in Ohio, which is huge, had voted. A hundred percent turnout, and this is before election day.

(12:40)

**RK:** Wow.

**AL:** Yeah. The Republican National Committee had hired a blogger in Pennsylvania to do a lot of what they do, which is raise questions about people who are working. They thought Ohio would be ... McCain and Obama were in a dead heat—they thought it would be close, and we need to do something to throw a wrench in it, and they had picked, at the time, Acorn had been doing amazing work on voter registration and turnout and voter education on issues of homelessness and poverty and engaged access and so because they were on the roundtables I'd had put together—you know, the coalition work—I had been named, because I was currently an advisor to a congressperson who I had run his election. This is ... I'm skipping around, but anyhow, I don't know how I got to that, but ... yeah, I missed a few elections in there. When I was with Citizen Action I worked on the Wellstone race.

**RK:** Oh yeah?

**AL:** Yes, I canvassed, I brought Paul Wellstone door to door in Minnesota. That was so fun. I spent a lot of time in Minnesota—I loved it. I worked on the Harkin race and Lautenberg and I went out and did some stuff on the Boxer race and ... yes, that was so fun, working on all those different elections. Anyhow, the blog thing happened.

**RK:** So what happened exactly with the blog thing?

**AL:** The blogger had accused me of voter fraud and the same thing as what was happening with Acorn. It got picked up, the blog got picked up by Fox News in the Hudson Valley where I was the senior advisor to the congressman there. Somebody had quoted the blogger and that got picked up as news. It really wasn't news, it was a fabricated thing. To make a long story short, the county prosecutor back in Ohio needed to stick us with something, so he found something to stick us with. But the real upshot is we won Ohio by a landslide. [Chuckles] I learned so much doing that; it was a great Campaign. Working with Barack Obama was amazing. I had already ... when he was a senator he had helped with some of the voter registration. We had really targeted the African American vote and Latino vote in a number of states in the Midwest, and he came out and worked with us on that. It was a great thing. I got to be a partner with him as a senator, and it was amazing to then go work and get him elected as president. Following that I came back to work. I missed a few things in there, a bunch of elections I worked on that were crazy, really fun. I came back to work in the sustainable ag. That was right at the ... just following the merger of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, and SAC, the Sustainable Ag Coalition, and that merger is what created NSAC.

**RK:** Right, and I think that happened around 2008-2009, if I remember those ...

**AL:** Yup, yes. It happened while I was working on the Obama race, so I was not present during that changeover. But right after the changeover happened, NSAC hired me to do a little bit of training, and I was back in the sustainable ag world again, very happily working on these issues. So for me, if I look at the things that have always gotten me the most motivated and excited and understanding strategically how to build power is the whole coalition. It's like multi-interest, multi-issue. We're not going to go about making change one issue at a time. It's not just peace. It's not just prosperity. It's not just farmer viability. It's not just saving the planet from our destructive forces. It's bringing it all together and trying to make power changes. So it's huge. [Chuckles]

**RK:** I'd like to go back, then, now, to the National Dialogue, kind of when you got into the "aggie" side of it and the work you did in pulling the Campaign together with the respective ... kind of describe the landscape there and what the Dialogue was, because I really haven't gotten a lot of people talk very much about that, so that would be great if you could.

**AL:** It was very exciting. When I was hired ...

**RK:** By whom?

**AL:** I was hired by a group of folks that included ... it was Ferd, Chuck Hassebrook, Loni ...

**RK:** Loni Kemp?

(18:27)

**AL:** Yeah, and I don't know ... there was a team, but the interview ... oh, Hal Hamilton at Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky, at the time, and Tim—I can't remember his last name; he was with the Dairy Farmers Organization, part of National Family Farm Coalition. They had done a search and they had got a lot of people who knew agriculture, and I didn't know ag policy hardly at all. I mean, I had, when I was with Citizen Action we had done some foreclosures, penny auctions and things like that, but my heart is really into agriculture, but I didn't know much about policy, but I remember clearly an interview. Chuck kept getting at—well, how do you build power? How do you build power? I'm like—OK, so I can learn the ag issues. I loved that, I loved what I knew about them, but here's the way you build power. And so I hope that answers your question. So the Dialogue, so they hired me, and there was this Dialogue. I'm like—Dialogue—that's a non-starter. We can all dialogue. But we quickly did this focus of ... there was a little, small amount of money to have meetings, and quickly the focus became what a Dialogue can do, and that was to bring different voices together. And it was so exciting, it was like in many areas ... MSAWG had been very good at this. The SAWGs, the kernel of the SAWGs had just begun, and they wanted to do this, but it was a way to bring farmers and the environmentalists together, to agree that stewardship is what farming is about, and getting the environmentalists to be partners with the farmers. We knew farmers were always at the heart of what we were doing. We knew we had to broaden that base, for one thing, but we also had to speak truth to power, which was that farmers do, they are environmentalists, they do care about the environment. And then there was also the food interests—nutrition. Not so much nutrition, but at the time it was more food quality. We had to start thinking about the problem of food insecurity. So we'd bring some of those folks in. Extremely exciting—we have this pot of money, and we have these people who want to figure out what are the common things we can do, so we had these Dialogues around the country, and I remember going to ... looking at the picture, how we were going to build a farm bill Campaign. Really, it was hard to do a farm bill Campaign—this is the way I saw it—we had to do this farm bill Campaign, and these were the tools. It's the Dialogue and then we're going to have an issue agenda, and then we're going to like do some advocacy. And some people thought, well, the Dialogue is so that we learn from each other, but I think part of why they hired me was because I wanted to go and like—what's the action? What's that going to lead to? So I went, in the Dialogue, I went around the country, and we had a couple of years process, we had Dialogues, then we had a big national meeting, and then we had more Dialogues, and then we did put a platform together, and then we started working the platform. But the Dialogues were amazing. It wasn't just me, but starting out I went around the country with Chuck and Ferd and the MSAWG folks behind me, setting up these Dialogues, and we were fortunate that this thing that we called the National Sustainable Agriculture Coordinating Council—those are the folks that hired me. They had gotten the money to hire me, and they had raised the money for the Dialogue. And that thing quickly dissolved once we were ready to have a Campaign. But I went around the country, sometimes with Chuck, sometimes with Ferd, pretty soon it became with SAWG organizers, whoever was around on a local level that we could work with. And it was so great—the SAWGS were like ... I mean, aside

from MSAWG, the other SAWGs—Northeast SAWG, the Intermountain Western SAWG, California SAWG, Southern SAWG. It was great—like suddenly there’s money for them to get together and talk about food systems. They were on the cutting edge of talking about food systems, and here was a way that we are going to build coalition. We’re going to build networks, going to build coalitions. We’re going to spread—it’s not just farm viability, it’s not just protecting the water supply or the soil, you know. It’s not just how do you pay your farm workers and make a living. It’s not just all we have ... every corner in the city of New York is just a bodega or a gas station. It’s all of it together, and that was building a base, and so the Dialogue gave us a way to infuse the SAWGs with that. And in addition, with my focus on bringing in more national partners—I mean I knew it wasn’t just going to happen with the choir, those few of us who were really working on these issues. We had to extend it. So there was National Family Farm Coalition, National Farmers Union, NRDC, Sierra Club. We got those groups in Washington to give us their sort of membership lists out, so we’d bring those people in. So we were really working to build a coalition and a base of activism and the Dialogue was very much about that. Now some people might look at the Dialogue as, well, this was a way that we’d come up with an issue agenda, which is true. But it was really structurally, in terms of building a movement, it was the block-by-block, brick-by-brick, working around the country, of bringing people up to speed, giving them something to work on together, helping them understand that they’re allies, not foes, and that there are a lot of good things that we can agree on. I was talking to some of these young folks, the organizers at NSAC. Sharp, like smart, like so incredible, about this, and they wanted to know from me what put things over the edge. We have a local food movement. OK, if you subscribe to movement being something that’s not ... it’s out of your control. So the work on local food and sustainable farming that’s got a social element, an environmental, conservation element, and an economic element. That was a huge organizing project that people had, and it built this infrastructure so that when new tools, like the internet, came on, new interests, like food scares and health—you know, the health reports would come out, and these new ... those things helped push it over the edge. It went over the cliff, and it became the local food movement. I keep emphasizing, it was by design—it wasn’t just cultural evolution. There are lots of evolutionary factors that contributed, but people worked hard to build those building blocks and design new power structures and worked to get them, so the Dialogue was a good beginning of that.

(27:23)

**RK:** There’d already been quite a bit of progress made with the ’90 Farm Bill, and then taken that to the next level.

**AL:** The problem is that the ’90 Farm Bill was ... there was, from my perspective, NSAWG, and SAC as sort of the advocacy part of them, was really good at doing the policy wonking and the analysis—I shouldn’t say wonking—the analysis. From that there was outreach to other players around the country to develop some talking points on policy and the seed of the Dialogue was started. When I came on the first thing I was handed was proceedings from discussions among these various groups about what we might look at in terms of policy to support sustainable food systems.

**RK:** So what it really amounted to, you came on more for the field work, in the field to build the support.

**AL:** Yes, most of that ... I mean there was, we had to refine a lot of those policy options, and we did that. So I came on to do this field thing, and when I came on it was so clear. I remember Chuck saying to me—so we have Ferd on the Hill, and we've got the Campaign in the field, and you guys go! Take off! And Ferd and I were partners. It would be like Ferd had the Hill thing, and Ferd would always say—Amy, we need to get pressure here, we need to raise ... get ... you know, it can't be just me on the Hill, I need this ... and everything. So without a formal arrangement—there was not a formal arrangement, except that Ferd and I were on the phone practically every day. We had no internet, we had no way to e-mail, and we built this thing. On here, in Washington, Ferd became the go-to person for policy analysis on what's possible, what's ... folks from USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) would ask him all this stuff. People in the field ... here I am, like we're really building this thing out. We had the first real list ever on ... really, oh, we had to build a list! Where are all the co-ops, food co-ops? You know, at the time there were a few farmers markets. All those farmers markets, we got them in. We even went as far as PTAs (Parent Teacher Associations), because school food's always been pretty bad. [Chuckles] So we really went out. We were like—let's get a lot; let's broaden this thing out. And then do the depth, so it was breadth and depth, building more high-quality contacts on the targets. And so Ferd and I would go, we'd do these little road shows, and Ferd was like not only in the Midwest any more, and he went on. We had ... there's a lot of stories I can get to, but getting back to your question, which I can't remember what ... [Chuckles]

(30:57)

**RK:** I was just wondering what farm bill that particular effort was targeting. We talked about that for the '95 Farm Bill.

**AL:** OK. I just have an interesting ... I really believe that in that Campaign we achieved a benchmark, like a game changer, a benchmark that never going back to what we used to be. This was during the Gingrich Congress, and every anti-environmental measure was—oh, you can't tell me what to do with this tree in the backyard, you can't tell me what to do on the farm. You can't tell us how to spend our corporate money to do x y and z. And there was this Gingrich Congress, and there we were winning on conservation issues. It was huge, and I mean it wasn't just on the external front that we won because we had built power, OK, and that was understood. You don't beat Newt Gingrich's wave—I can't even remember what his whole ... he had some slogan about takings, about not, you know, some slogan about how it's either the environment or the economy. But there it was, everybody recognizing that our advocacy won in the most anti-environmental Congress that we've seen in I don't know how long. But also internally—Ferd and I, we were like—wow, we got something here. And it wasn't just me and Ferd. There was like amazing, I think of, like, some of the people working for the SAWGs. Rene Robinson and Loni was right there with us the whole time. She had become ... she and Chuck were co-chairs of the Campaign. And Hal Hamilton was right up there, Michael Sligh. We had this ... I remember we [Chuckles] we had formed this like think tank. It was Kathleen, myself, Michael Sligh, Chuck and Ferd and a couple of others—Hal Hamilton and Mark Ritchie, and we were like ... the whole idea of the think tank was like how to push our work over the edge to become a

movement. And I remember we'd have these funny meetings and we'd look at each other and say—well we're not free, you know, and we're actually doing this. We need more of what we're doing. We walked away and saying—we don't really need a think tank. We need to go get money to do more of what we're doing. And there was a time not long after that where we went and we had partnered with ... there was a funder who had said to me and Ferd in a meeting. I don't know if Ferd was actually in that meeting, but Chuck was obviously there, and Loni, who said—I'll give you four million dollars to do this. Because we had, we knew that we were on the edge. We knew that we were on the verge, and we needed to do more. There was momentum, we needed to fund that. And so we were like—OK, four million dollars. So he said—here's \$20,000, or, I don't know, it was something like that. It was more like \$20,000, to put the plan together, which we had a plan, but to put a more refined budget together. We did that, and we had some great meetings, and we had the plan and were ready to go with it, and we all come to Michigan and we were told—well, we are going to give this money to this man named Dee Hock, who, you know, was the VISA brainchild, and he had this thing called the “chaordic” process, which is the marriage of chaos and order. And he picked eight people, all white, to do this thing. It was unrelated to the movement, to the infrastructure we had, the advocacy we were doing. The foundation and the grassroots, and our golden child on the hill, Ferd. It was unrelated to that—it was unbelievable! I know Shirley Sherrod, how we ended up like protesting beyond belief and at least got Shirley to be a part of that. I don't know if you got to tape Shirley, but ... anyhow, that was ... there were quite a number of incidences where the funders were scratching their heads. I couldn't figure it out. I mean, this kind of organizing was happening on other issues. This is like ... I'd seen it, this is like what what we're doing, building power, building alliances, we're building bridges, we're linking arms, we're getting all these, the fringes, in, because they're not really the fringes, they're part of the whole. And anyhow, there are other funders that the same kind of thing happened. Either they said that we weren't asking for enough money or we didn't have big enough vision or they wanted to see us map out how we were going to take over or, you know. And we were being real, like, you know, this is building block stuff. There's interesting stories about that. So, where are we on your questions? [Chuckles]

(36:550)

**RK:** The work of the Campaign, including how it ultimately translated, then, into bringing the more power that could be used by Ferd and the folks working on Capitol Hill.

**AL:** Right. So understanding that we had to build a broader base, that was what had been missing and needed. We knew that that worked on other issues. And so we had to do ... so when the Dialogue had gotten to a certain level in having an issue agenda, a) we knew we didn't have a broad enough base to win. Farmers advocating for farmers is a good thing, but having others advocate for farmers, people who cared about nutrition, public health, access, food security, racial issues, other inequities—we needed more of a broader base. And so the SAWGs was one way to do that, and so we really helped the SAWGs build within their region more of a broader base. But we went after groups that hadn't previously been in. I remember having conversations with my steering committee—Loni and Ferd and Chuck and Hal and Michael and Therese was there at one point, and Robinson, like some of these folks. I was talking about the Community Food Security Coalition. I had reached out to the Community Food Security Coalition and said—join our effort, the farm bill. We have to do this together. And they were like—how did they get

on? And I was like—well, I did the outreach, and they're hooked in and we're working together. Rural Coalition. Lorette, you know, with the Rural Coalition, they had really done some great work in working with small NGOs on rural issues that weren't sort of the same, albeit sustainable agriculture issues, that a lot of the sustainable agriculture—we'll just leave it at that. She had made a lot of inroads with very diverse communities. Native Americans, other tribal folks, tribal folks that went beyond our borders.

**RK:** You mean ...

**AL:** Lorette and the Rural Coalition. I mean, at the same time we had, for example, the Mississippi Southern Cooperatives who were part of the Campaign. They were also very much a part of putting the Rural Coalition together. I had always been committed to working for racial equity, deciding that here is another element that we needed to bring in if we were really going to make this principled, honest, and value-driven and broad, we need to include that. And it's not just for the effectiveness—it's also what we valued. I really believe in organizing you've got to get to the heart of it. You've got to like people's interest and value, not just economic interest. There was a number of outreach steps that we had done to build that out, and I think there was a lot of head scratching. How did these people get in here? How did these people get in here? In that point in my career, I was into—let's just get it, let's get as much as we can. And while that was very sloppy, it made for a lot of advocacy on common issues, because in some cases this was the first time some groups were asked to weigh in with farmers. Or farmers asked to weigh in with social justice people. I remember drawing upon other contacts I had had when I worked on other Citizen Action stuff—AFL and some of the racial equity groups and some of the Citizen Action groups. And they didn't understand that, many of them. Very focused on, in a lot of cases, urban. Because that's where a lot of ... there's power and money there. So helping to get those groups that might not otherwise take up food-farm issues take them up, at least weigh in. And that weighing in really gave a lot more weight to the advocacy. And there were times when Ferd would say—oh, how are we going to get this guy and how are we going to get that guy? And we might have had nobody there, but with the help of the SAWG organizers, which we had actually along the way ... I don't know if I said this, we had gotten some funding. I went out to each of the SAWGs to help them hire staff. I'm like—we got money for you to have policy staff. They'd hire policy staff, and I had like regional field organizers, and they worked for the Campaign, working for this great advocacy on the Hill, but also if there was a place where we didn't have anybody, we'd go find them. And sometimes that meant calling my friends at AFL-CIO and saying—is there anybody on the Trades Council who we could contact? Or it was talking to some of the folks I knew from Citizen Action, and it's like social justice people there. And it was a great way for the SAWGs to recruit more local, community, food interests, farm interests, local economy folks into it. And that whole thing just multiplied, and that's how we were able ... I mean, I could ... I don't remember the exact votes on particular things, but there were quite a number of votes where Ferd and I would be like—Ferd would tell me—here's where we need pressure. OK. Then we'd go out and figure out how to apply pressure in those districts. Those folks that came in, they stayed in. It made it very messy when we came to the merger. SAC had been a very formal and clear structure for MSAWG, and it had to be that way. Then there was the Campaign which was scattered all over the place. We had a real focus on what we were working on, but we just kept multiplying. We had this giant database. We had over 2,000 established groups that were saying—I'm signing on to the Campaign. They signed on and

said—yes, I want to receive action alerts—yes, I want to do advocacy. We had a list of things they were going to do, and of course it was a database nightmare, figuring out how to ... but we divided those up, I picked people in the regions, I gave them those things, and we had a real focused work plan. But there were a lot of people all over the place, and there was not a formal endorsement process. We did have issue committees, and those issue committees, the same model went over to NSAC and that really helped, those issue committees working deep on the policy analysis part, and from that policy analysis, we were able to take ... what the Campaign would do is take that policy analysis, and with my grassroots team figure out how do we say this in a language that's going to inspire action? We need to simplify the language—not dumb it down in any way—make it in a form that could be picked up by the press, that could be easily repeated, that could be written in a postcard as easily—because back then we didn't have e-mail [Chuckles]—as easily, and written in a letter, and it's going to echo the policy analysis. Then the policy in the issue committees—and that was really advised by Ferd; Ferd was on all the issue committees.

(46:14)

**RK:** Yes, Ferd played a role in the NSAC issue committees.

**AL:** Yeah, yeah—but there was the Campaign very loose and ever-widening. The edges just kept going and that was kind of an uncontrollable thing. And that made it extremely hard to manage the Campaign, and I think that challenge in managing the Campaign went on to become one of the challenges in keeping the Campaign together, but it also presented NSAC with the challenge of NSAC needed to have a clear endorsement process, a clear what it means to be a member, what it means to do advocacy together, united on an issue. So the togetherness and the united thing had been there. The formality of it needed refinement. It was always clear. I mean right from the beginning when they hired me, it was clear that we had to have this grassroots thing to unite the whole thing. And it was still clear that that was the model that was going to work, and that's why the Campaign and SAC had to merge. And when it became hard to manage the Campaign, further down the road after I had left, a lot of the groups that were part of the SAWGs had seen—wow, it had really worked with the Campaign and SAC working together—let's make that formal, and let's see if we can get Ferd to work for all of us on the Hill and get a way so that those partners in the Campaign can have a formal structure.

**RK:** Just to get it into the kind of a chronological framework, when did you leave then?

**AL:** OK, I left just after the turn of the century.

**RK:** You were with the Campaign as the director ...

**AL:** Nine years.

**RK:** ... nine years, yeah.

**AL:** Yeah. It did change when I left. When I left we had ... I was originally hired just to work on the '95 Farm Bill. The idea was that this was going to end after the '95 Farm Bill, but we were

all looking around and saying—why should we end this? We got new things. This is a whole new wave. I mean, policy-wise there is a menu of fantastic—small—fantastic programs to push the ball forward towards an agriculture that is going to feed us. These fantastic programs were the result of our work, and there were people who never had worked together who were like—oh! farmers and the conservation thing. Yeah! This is a no-brainer. Social justice—we're talking about social justice is like the foundation of the rural economy is agriculture, and those are social justice issues. Everybody was like—why would we not continue with this, and so after the farm bill we set up a more formal structure. Still, out of bounds of being too formal [Chuckles], but we set up a more formal structure and continued our work. When I left there was a difference in leadership style. So managing the Campaign was challenging, and Kathy Lawrence, who is very skilled at managing organizations, she had to rein it in a little bit.

**RK:** She took over after you left?

**AL:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. But she had a different style. My training and MO in organizing is to really lift up. That was what I wanted to do. I wanted to give voices a loudspeaker. I wanted to lift up the voices of what was there. I remember going around all the time going to SAWG meetings. SAWG meetings after SAWG meetings a year ... month after month after month, just living out of a suitcase for years, and them saying—so what are you going to say? And I'm like—this is your Campaign—you're going to say it and lift up those voices. So we did that all over the place. And Ferd and I, we were a partner in that. And Kathy—at the time Ferd was under pressure. We had a very tight, informal arrangement, the Campaign, NSAC. Because there were so many more people working on this, they were beginning to have funding issues. Organizations had to make more clarity on what they were working on. The age of the internet had hit. There was ... because the Campaign for the '95 Farm Bill was really in a campaign mode, it was just like an election—when you're on a campaign you throw it out there—you just keep throwing it out there. That was over. It wasn't like throwing it out there anymore, it was like circling the troops a little bit. And so taking that external need with the internal of having a different style of organizing, the Campaign changed a little bit, and following that, there was changes in how the organic program was dealt with, with the Campaign. It was decided to take that out of the Campaign. But the organic program was—just like many other issues, a great story of how we took on organic in the Campaign. There wasn't very big, from my perspective, desire for what to do about organic, because, as we know, the organic label was just authorized, and it was like—what is this going to be? And a lot of people didn't want to go there. I just knew—we have to go there. First of all, a lot of our people are in it, but second of all, there's got to be integrity in this, and this is a part of sustainable agriculture. It's not all of sustainable agriculture, but this is a really important part. So we took it on and we launched that great Campaign. I remember I had hired my very good friend, Liana Hoodes to help me on an administrative level, and she's a great organizer. I quickly gave her more responsibility and said—you're going to chair the organic committee, and we devised this Campaign to get sewage sludge banned from the organic label. Sewage sludge, irradiation and pesticides—I can't remember what were the big three—GMO. No GMO, no sewage sludge, and no irradiation. We knew there was a lot of no pesticides—there had to be obviously organic materials. There was a lot of work to implement the OFPA, Organic Foods Production Act. So Kathleen came on, Kathleen became part of this, and we went ahead and waged ... this is again, in this conservative Congress, we—well, this wasn't a congressional thing, but there were some congressional

oversight on this—but we won those three—that was critical! And also the right—and part of that was also there was more detail in the policy, without getting too analytical here, but there had to do with independent certifiers and everything. And all those independent certifiers were joining the Campaign, and we went, you know ... so anyhow ...

(54:46)

**RK:** So that was all happening as the Organic Act passed in 1990, but it wasn't till 2001-2002 that the final rules finally came about, so your organizing was trying to keep those bad things off the rules ...

**AL:** Right, but we won, we won steps along the way. And the first—no one thought we could do it—is to keep GMOs out of the organic, and irradiation. There was so much anti-science out there about—oh, GMOs and irradiation, and sewage sludge. I remember some of these fantastic farmers. Liz Henderson and some of the dairy farmers who didn't want their GMO alfalfa; they were doing organic dairying, all over in the Midwest. I just remember so many of these farmers stepping up and saying this. Some of them not even organic, but saying—we have to have integrity; people have to believe—and this. It was just amazing. That was just one. I didn't have to say. The whole thing is so amazing is seeing, especially these farmers, step up out of the field and into an arena that was so foreign to them. But once they got plugged into understanding their power, it's like being very good at it and, really, the goodwill of these people, doing social change work in all these different issue arenas in the sustainable ag movement. These are like the kindest, most creative people. I just love them. There's something very special about people who feel connected to growing food. The soil, the air, the clean water—I know, I grow food. My favorite thing in the world is to grow food to feed people. It's like there's this nourishment, this thing. So anyhow ... I digress. [Chuckles]

**RK:** That's all right. I think, then, you left around 2002 or so, and then were you doing the Northeast Sustainable Ag Working Group, the Northeast SAWG, while you were doing the Campaign, or did you ...?

**AL:** No, we ...

**RK:** You left for awhile and then came back to do that?

**AL:** No, I was not doing NESAWG. I was doing the Campaign; the whole time I was with the Campaign, and we had Leona, who was my assistant coordinator, whatever we called her, director, whatever. She worked part-time for NESAWG, and we were housing NESAWG's database, the list that they were building. We were doing that with the other SAWGs, too, and building this list. But I was just doing the Campaign. After I left, I went and did other—I did a local land use Campaign—I went and did other Campaigns.

**RK:** When did you come into the Northeast SAWG?

**AL:** OK, after Obama won in 2008, there was the merger. During 2008 there was a merger, so immediately after that Campaign I came and did a little bit of consulting with NSAC. This is probably something we haven't talked about.

**RK:** No.

**AL:** There was fall-out..., so I came to sort of help tease out some of what was going on with that merger, under the guise of training, and I did some of that, but it was time for everybody else to do it, so at that time Kathy Ruhf of NESAWG, she had started NESAWG and was running it—she and I were very good friends, because she and I had worked, had done a lot to help NESAWG during the Campaign—she hired me on as a consultant to do policy work for NESAWG. That was in 2009, and since then I've been working with NESAWG. I've had some other consulting projects here and there. I did some consulting with the New England Farmers Union, and there were other collaborative efforts that we got funding for. So the fall-out—I shouldn't call it a fall-out.

**RK:** Well, the consequences of the merger.

**AL:** There were consequences. One of the things I had done in the Campaign was put together a diversity committee, a committee to address racial equity in our work and the work that we were doing for the food system. Not so much racial equity in the food system, but how do we build more racial equity into our work, be it in the food system or in how we are working together. There were people scratching their heads, but I knew we had to do this, and so in that effort in bringing, we reached out to new folks that felt their connection to the Campaign was through this work on diversity, and when the Campaign and SAC merged, that got lost, and there were people saying—what about this, and what about that, and what about our issues, what about our connection? This was a time when SAC really—maybe too much—but really had to be more formalized, and many of these groups couldn't afford the membership. They felt they weren't represented in SAC. There weren't people who were carrying that torch that were now in the formal SAC, NSAC.

(1:01:15)

**RK:** The diversity torch?

**AL:** Um-hum, yeah. I remember having discussions with Aimee Witteman who was doing that, and then about what needed to be set up and how we could readdress this. And some of that fell through in the transition from Aimee into the new director, but there was no longer this sort of—we all have a place at this table, which the Campaign had. That's the way I organized. Everybody has something to offer here; there's not one ... you know. And there was no longer a place for them at the table, and I understand why. Part of NSAC's power is its structural clarity, because we were no longer a Campaign. NSAC was now a formal organization.

**RK:** And why couldn't they ... you said they couldn't afford it. How much did NSAC charge, or what was ...?

**AL:** I don't think it was so much it was the fees; it was what it meant. That you had to go through some ... I think you need to, like ... I understand you're feeling you want to understand this; I think you need to ask some of those folks. But what they brought to me was that there was a disenfranchisement. There was like—we're not wanted at the table, and there's not really a formal place for us. In order to go to that formal place, we can't be who we are. It's just like the Campaign couldn't become a formal member of another coalition, because we didn't really have that formality, that kind of process, to become that. When you set up, for better or worse, a bureaucratic infrastructure—I don't mean bureaucratic in a bad way—a formal infrastructure, there's rules and triggers, and they looked at that and said—bleh, you know. Maybe this is a point of departure. And there's still fallout from that.

**RK:** Yeah. I think that NSAC, from what I understand now, now has a diversity ...

**AL:** Oh, it's fantastic. Oh, yeah.

**RK:** ... section, whatever they call it, is a priority.

**AL:** Yes.

**RK:** And that's coming out as results of some of those things.

**AL:** Yes, I have to say that the NSAC Diversity Committee has just come so far. I'm so excited about the advances that it's making within the coalition and what that's going to mean for what happens in the advocacy work. Some of the folks that were in the Campaign that didn't give up when the Campaign became the National SAC—they didn't give up. Margaret—there she was, like battling her way through.

**RK:** Margaret Krome?

**AL:** Yeah. And some other folks—I'd like to say their names now, but I have to go back in ... [Chuckles] So they have carried that torch. So thanks to some very strong leaders not giving up on this and continuing that torch from the Campaign into NSAC. So while there may be a perception that there was a huge fallout, in reality there were some groups and some individuals that felt alienated during the merger. There are also several who stayed on and have brought us to this point where now we have a whole assessment about race and equity in terms of the work that NSAC is doing, and it's so fantastic.

**RK:** Well, that's great. I'm glad to get that perspective, and that we explained that in more detail. So that's good. I wanted to move a little bit now towards maybe the future. You know, like what are you doing now, what are the priorities for Northeast SAWG, and then taking that, extending that to how's that ... you're a member with NSAC, right? As is Northeast SAWG?

**AL:** Yes, yup.

**RK:** And so what do you see as priorities—what are some issues, kind of maybe in the short-term, things like crop insurance, for example. But in the longer picture, what do you see?

**AL:** Let me first start by saying the programs that NSAC—the Campaign and SAC and NSAC—have worked on over the last few decades, the sustainable ag programs, some of them small, some of them kind of medium [Chuckles], but still pretty small, these fantastic programs that have helped the proliferation of farmers markets, that have helped people get more local food, that have helped farmers diversify their crops, that have helped protect waters—these programs, they have an enormous impact on the Northeast, where the kind of agriculture we have is much smaller scale. We depend on smaller scale agriculture for our ag economy, and there’s no farmer in the Northeast can really make it with one or two crops. You must diversify, both in terms of what you grow and your markets and things like that. So that enabling, helping along that diversification, and that, sort of, market options and linking the health and food desires in communities to what that means for agriculture, has a huge impact on the Northeast. For various reasons—smaller food routes and the kind of agriculture we have. So that means a lot about moving forward and what we do with NESAWG. And NESAWG, it’s a lot about food systems, it’s a systems approach. Taking that systems approach—the systems that go from soil to plate to waste, all along that way as NESAWG is very good at looking at that as a regional, as a people—how are going to meet our food needs, how are we going to have clean water, and how are we going to address the social issues—all of that lends itself to policy handles. And so we’re going to continue to work on those important policies as we go. We’re in a crisis situation. There are not enough farmers. We are losing so much farmland. There’s not enough saving the farmland, to get farmers on there and then have farm viability. It’s a huge problem, particularly in the Northeast. We’re just losing all that. NESAWG did a great study about what the build-out in the next 50 years would be on the food system, and where is the best farmland, what are the nutritional and calorie needs for our people? How could we meet our food needs? We could do it, but it’s almost too late in terms of losing farmland to development, and we need local, state, regional and national policies to protect that farmland and help make farming viable. So you had asked me what are critical issues here—is how can a farmer do what he or she needs to do, including paying the staff a living wage? So often that would mean a farmer is not making a living wage. It’s like how do we do that? In the Northeast we’ve been really doing so much to bring the farm worker and the food chain workers to talk with the producers. Everybody is on the same page in wanting it, but they can’t figure out ... no, it’s not that they can’t figure out, it’s that there’s not the political will to make it work. So on the one hand we have farm policy that upholds a very bad structure of agriculture. The structure of agriculture is such that we keep losing farmers. We lose farmland, and there’s a concentration of very bad agriculture which doesn’t address climate change and doesn’t help with people who need drinking water, the continuation of soil that we could grow in, or a whit of concern about social justice. That structure of agriculture is upheld by our policy, and so we need to turn it on its head, because, really, to have a food system that’s going to feed people and be able to carry it into the future, we have to turn that on its head and make it sustainable like a food system for the future the priority instead of upholding this structure of agriculture which is really—it’s only leading us to doom. It’s just like we knew climate change is an issue—20 years ago people were talking about it. Ten years ago—oh, we must do this—and now we’re like at this crisis thing. It’s the same way with the food system.

(1:12:16)

**RK:** Well, what you're saying is consistent with what I've been hearing from several people, including Ferd Hoefner, that while we've been making progress, you can look through this list of accomplishments, and they are real and they are significant, but the structure of agriculture, the thing that's still operating out there that's diminishing the number of these medium-sized farmers is the growth in farmers at one level, but they tend to be the smaller ones, and an increasing concentration of the wealth in agriculture, has not been adequately dealt with at all, really.

**AL:** Unh-unh. It's the same story. One percent ... wealth in agriculture is increasingly being concentrated in that upper echelon, and the rest of agriculture is being lost. I mean, there's gains—we have more young farmers. The gains are small compared to this huge thing. But I just quote Ralph Nader here. I went to a conference with Vandana Shiva and Ralph Nader recently, and he is, as a political scientist—it really is only going to take one percent of the people demanding that change, and once we reach that one percent of demand, we can make the changes. And he is able to show, issue after issue, how that happened. So there's hope that we can do it, but we have to reach that critical mass to work on it. So while I think it is ... we're looking down the cliff, we know some of these solutions. We know a lot of what needs to be happening. It's just like Bernie Sanders saying—we know we can't continue with the way things have been going, but there is another way. We need to spread the wealth out. We need to decide what is our design for agriculture. We have those answers all over the country. The SAWGs started doing it, and now many of them like NESAWG are still doing it, and many groups like Land Stewardship Project—they were like we know a lot of what needs to happen, and we just need to create the political will to make that change. It's not that much of a radical change, really.

**RK:** So kind of winding this up here, are you going to stay on the organizing path? Are you going to keep on keeping on?

**AL:** Yes, I am.

**RK:** To bring about that one percent change?

**AL:** I am, I am—I've got the fire in my belly. I'm a tree hugging dirt worshiper. [Chuckles] But I've got that fire in my belly. While my favorite thing to do is to be out on the farm, farming, I'm going to keep on raising hell and working for change.

**RK:** Excellent. Thank you. I've already said thank you to you, but is there anything else you want to say about organizing and your work with the younger people and that sort of thing?

**AL:** I want to say that none of the changes that we've worked on, especially in agriculture and food systems, but also across the board, that they came about by design. It was the personal communicating, the relationship building, the listening, finding common ground, the kind of things that take communication skills. You don't find that on the internet. The internet was not, even though this explosion, like the local food movement, took off during this work, and the internet was just one tool. And it wouldn't have pushed us over the cliff into it being a movement had not we that foundation of relationship building and bridge building, going out beyond the margins, taking stands, organizations trusting each other. You could be the expert on that and

you can be the expert on this, but we're going to work together to try and win it. On resource sharing, all about connectedness rather than separateness, and not taking for granted those personal relationships which you can't have via the internet. So what I would want to say is the important thing in that organizing is listening, sharing, building relationships and going beyond the edges of what seems the most probable to what might be possible.

**RK:** Good. Thank you.

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