

Lorette Picciano
Executive Director, Rural Coalition
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

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Lorette Picciano—LP
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: Today is February 11, 2016. I am in Washington, DC at the Mott House at 122 Maryland Avenue, and today I get to interview Lorette Picciano, who has been the longtime executive director of the Rural Coalition. She's got a lot to tell us about the work of the Rural Coalition over the last, I think, almost four decades—three-and-a-half decades—of work, and so we're very eager to hear your story. I'd like to start out, as I do with all the interviews, with some history about you before we get into a lot of the good work and the challenge that the coalition has dealt with, and will be dealing with in the future. So, let's hear about you, all the way from your childhood, if you will.

LP: All the way from childhood. [Chuckles] Actually, like several members of our board who are recognized activists in sustainable ag and equity, I was born in New York City, in Queens. John Zippert, our chairperson, was born in Manhattan, and Sammy Horn, who is from Jamaica, was born in Jamaica, New York. But there was a lot of rural traditions. My grandmother, who came from Italy in 1908, had immigrated to Upstate New York, and my father always visited there. His mother married and moved to New York City, and he moved us back, and so he moved back with five kids—well, with two of us—in the late 1950s, and so I grew up in Endicott, New York, which was an immigrant town. It was a town where there was a shoe factory where many, many immigrants ... so I grew up in an immigrant culture. My dad had, during World War II, joined ... he signed up for the draft in 1943, but he was still only seventeen, to fight in World War II, so he was sent to Cornell University for an officer training program for a couple of months, until he was old enough to go fight in the Battle of the Bulge. He wanted me to go to Cornell University, because when he went back and applied as a young Italian Catholic, he wasn't able to get into Cornell, and so I went to Cornell and I got accepted at the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. I had actually had started out in Human Ecology, and I moved over to Agriculture. But our family had come from an agricultural culture in Italy and also Ireland, and that was part of culture, the making of cheese, and my grandmother first lived in a little village on the Delaware River in Sullivan County called Callicoon, so planting the soil, planting the tomato plants, was very much part of what we did. In the College of Agriculture at that time, hunger was the huge issue of the world, so I got into agriculture, economics, and rural sociology, with professors like Walt Coward, who later worked at the Ford Foundation. We began researching and looking at the international side of issues. There were lots of international students at the time, and then I was also active in the Catholic

community, and it was kind of hunger and social justice were the hallmarks of that era. So that's really how I came to this, and I did one semester in grad school at Cornell, and then I was accepted into the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, which was bringing together scholars from the United States, but also all of the Asian countries. During that time I went to the Philippines. This was the late 1970s, and at that point the Philippines was ... working in the rural Philippines in the late 1970s under the Marcos regime—I was 23, or something like that—there was a lot to process and learn about the land struggles. It was land and the peasants and I remember one of the extension agents saying—this new rice, the thing that's wrong with it is that we can't ask our wives to plant rice three times a year. It's like upsetting the culture. You're looking at an outcome, and it kind of got me asking questions and also looking at where the military was involved in pushing certain things; what's the role of the government. And the end of the time I was in Honolulu I was also looking at the degree of respect that the institution was showing to all my colleagues from other countries, who were supposed to go back and lead agricultural development, because at that time there were so many people on the land. So it was kind of a time to understand the struggle. I think Walter Mondale came back and did a speech and praised Ferdinand Marcos' human rights practices, and we organized demonstrations at that time. It was a time when we realized there was a disconnect between how people could talk to the government. So I married, and we settled in Washington, DC, and the first place I was accepted for working—I was interested in hunger—was at Bread for the World, and I worked at Bread for the World for a couple of years. It was my assignment to go and work on the international hunger issues. We were working on the famines in Ethiopia and Somalia and Mozambique. I remember meeting the finance minister from Mozambique, and we asked what do you need, and he says—I need you to send us your old jeans, because there's nothing to buy in the marketplace, and we need to pay the farmers. So it was understanding that agriculture was a whole lot more complex, how the economic pieces worked. I started working with Bill Gray in the Congressional Black Caucus. We were trying to get emergency aid. We were having a debate with some of the top leaders of the Appropriations Committee that you couldn't spend more than \$25 million dollars in logistics in Mozambique to distribute food. And then raising the questions that I had started raising at Cornell—what exactly does food-aid do?—and the whole preference about local agriculture. So I really came with a very international view. The first thing I worked on when I got to Washington was the establishment of the emergency grain reserve, which was something Nick Mottern and Jamie Edgerton who were at Bread for the World at that time, and we got that passed at that point. President Reagan had put an embargo on wheat to the Soviet Union, so there were four million tons of wheat off the market, and we began to learn the complexities of markets. So, before, putting wheat into a reserve wouldn't have been acceptable, but now, because the government held this wheat, we were able to translate it into a reserve. Secretary Bergland signed the bill and came to the Methodist Building and met with us all, and we were celebrating that. So that's kind of how I came to Bread for the World. We can talk more about some of the other things that we did. Then I started working, I had children, and I was still working, but sometimes more consulting, so I was invited to come work with Interfaith Action for Economic Justice, and that's where ... also during that time we worked a lot with Ferd (Hoefner) and others who were connected, so we were very much connected in those times. At that time it was basically to be doing some leadership of the massive debate that was going on over what model of commodity policy we should have, so that was like the early ... and there was a big disagreement within the church organizations, because Interfaith Action brought together the denominations. So I worked, and I wrote the *Family Farm Networker*, when we

were doing the whole debate around the '85 farm bill by then. And then we moved right into the Ag Credit Act, and in 1987 there were farm foreclosures and many transitions, and so it was working with people like Theresa Keaveny, who was consulting with the National Family Farm Coalition as it was forming, and Cheryl Cook and Howard Lyman with Farmers Union, and we spent a year outside the House Agriculture Committee, just working on borrowers' rights, and really getting engaged in credit. At that point I really started working with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. Some of the groups from the church's committee on voter registration, which was part of Interfaith Action, so we had groups working in environmental justice movement. As Interfaith Action was reorganizing, I worked with these groups in trying to integrate them into the dialog of the religious community, and we had a new leader come and he wasn't really happy about that, and so at that point the Rural Coalition said, Lorette, come work with us, because they were about to close down. They had no funding and they had debts, since everything ... so it looked like the great opportunity, and John Zippert said—you come with us. So I went to the Rural Coalition in 1991. We can talk more about that history, but that's basically how I ended up where I am right now.

10:24

RK: I'd definitely like to go into the Rural Coalition and what its challenges have been, even within the context of this period. Especially, 1990 is often cited as a watershed year because of the Organic Act passed and some of the other conservation programs passed. So in the context of sustainable agriculture and the Rural Coalition and the issues around that. And then I'd like you to also touch on what are some of the high points policy-wise and programmatically that you accomplished with the Rural Coalition.

LP: OK, I want to go back a little bit to the decade of the '80s as we do that, because I think that was an important ... the Rural Coalition was founded in 1978, and there were a few organizations that were founded before that, and in terms of voices and national policy and everything, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives had been very active. The American Indian OIC, and the American Indian Movement, both of those are founding members of the Rural Coalition, as was the Rural Advancement Fund—which is based in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and still continues, and will be celebrating 80 years in 2017—and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Then there were also the debates over commodity policy and price and family farmers. So we were in this decade where what I really want to be noted is all of the groups of the Rural Coalition. I was working with the churches, but I was working more and more with the groups of the Rural Coalition in that work, so we got to know each other. We were already working together since the early 1980s, and there were already issues around discrimination, and we were starting to look at the various reports. There was a report in 1964, the Civil Rights Commission Report, in 1980, and you could see that was a tension of issues. And then for family farmers, it was the tension of the price issue, and that's been a big piece of where sustainable agriculture is also during all this time. Whether we did targeting in conservation programs, whether we did price, how the two things fit together. So we were engaged in a very severe struggle, and I think that was around the food from family farms and basically reestablishing the parity pricing. So that was central to the '85 farm bill debate. So it was learning all of those issues and engaging, as opposed to a targeting of benefits approach. So the movement really had some role in kind of how farm policy got even more complex and then also expensive, because you were looking at

how much supply management, and you were looking at the international grain reserves. When I was with the churches I worked with Mark Ritchie, and we worked on trying to put together—he was at the Institute for Ag and Trade Policy at the time. We worked on putting together a dialog with the European Council of Churches and the Council of Churches—we had African members—where we had the first international dialogs and we were looking at the trade agreements, and at that point it was the general agreement on tariffs and trade, and what that meant. So we brought the churches together, and at that point we got a letter from the U.S. trade representative, who was Clayton Yeutter, who said—you held this meeting on U.S. soil, and why did you not inform us that you are holding a meeting on trade on U.S. soil? It was also like the feedback, it was like why would we get a letter like that? And we have our suspicions of why we did, but what we were talking about is that our trade policy that we as people in the United States had to be looking ... and I had had this other experience, so we could see the questions of what impact did we have, and it was really we were talking for the whole world, but we were now talking about a new U.S. ag policy, that localization, local food, is important, and what are the implications. And then I think it's also the balance of the grains and so-forth. And then we were looking at the whole question of reserves. In 1983 I was working for Bread for the World, and I remember the date very, very well, because I was nine months' pregnant, and I was dressed in maternity slacks, working in the basement of a warehouse for Bread for the World, and I was summoned to the Hill for a meeting about domestic draw-down of this international grain reserve, because I was the staff person on it, and I was in a room full of suits. There are some people that are still players there, and it was the Democrats, and what they wanted was our sign-off for a domestic draw-down of this wheat reserve to the processors. And it was all about where the money was, so those things were really important dialogs that was going on. Bob Greenstein told me at that point I had to come and speak to the ... we were also working on nutrition issues and on school lunch, and there was milk in school lunch, and we used to get together over in the Longworth cafeteria, and we had hundreds of meetings. The School Foods Service Association was in town and I was supposed to come and talk about child nutrition and food stamps to them. I remember also, it was exactly the same time, and he says—you can't have the baby until ... [Chuckles] you know, and my son's now 32, is going to be 33 in a couple of days, and I told him—you can't be born until then. What we also saw over time is the money coming in even to the School Food Association, and into the politics of food distribution, which were the same issues that were being discussed on the Indian reservations and among our members. So I was working also with the tribal organizations. During that time we worked with Greg Smitman, who was the first executive director of Intertribal Agriculture Council. So Family Farm Coalition was formed during that decade. Intertribal Ag Council was formed. So, gradually, on the international issues, the domestic issues, the credit issues, the food issues, I was working on all of those issues and weaving together the people. And, you know, Rural Coalition was meeting during that time, and they did a lot of work on a lot of the rural issues. The late 1970s, early 1980s, they were proposing that there be a rural development mission area. So when you're looking at it there are a lot of things that are in the law now that all of the groups working on these issues have had a role in shaping. In rural development ... and the undersecretary actually came later, because you had the rural utilities and you had the various functions. USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) has been reorganized a couple of times. You had Farmers Home Administration that had the housing loans as well as the farm loans. And so it's lots of complexities, and it was all kind of moving together. It's very complicated, and then the complications of commodity policy. I remember Grant Buntrock, who was with National Farmers Organization, and came to work

also with David Senter and the American Ag Movement, and then the founders of Family Farm Coalition, and then with the Farmers Union. So the work with commodities kind of merged into the work on credit. Before I was at Rural Coalition, in the 1987 Ag Credit Act ... well, in 1986 there was one little program under the Reagan administration that funded a couple of groups, like the Federation of American Indian OIC to do outreach work to people who weren't included in programs. What we did is got some language that ... it was report language that said they should continue this program. And then we were starting to work on definitions, and in 1987 we started, in Interfaith Action, in the work I started, because I was working with the Federation then by that time—Land Loss Prevention Project and the Intertribal Agriculture Council, and Calvin King at Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporation, and we basically said we need to ... there were 78,000 foreclosures at that point by Farmers Home Administration. We were working with Lou Anne Kling in Farmers Legal Action, Jim Massey and the whole group, Lynn Hayes, who is still around. The issues were that the farm economy was collapsing and there were bad loans and so forth, but if you foreclosed on all of those it was going to be a massive change in wealth. But at the same time we were looking at what was happening with the black farmers. And then we were also working with the Council of Churches, people like Max Bland and Mona Lee Brock, who were in Oklahoma with the Council of Churches. Mona Lee was pulling guns out of people's hands, because you had this spike in suicides. What we also were working on is the solidarity between the African American, American Indian, Latino and the other communities, and the white community of family farmers, who were suffering these losses. It also related to what the prices were, of course, and how you could make money. So those issues continued, but during that time the one thing that happened in 1987 is we had to go and say we wanted to be looking at some priority for people-of-color farmers. What we figured out is you can't say, well, black farmers should get more loans or Hispanic farmers should get more loans or whatever. So we tried to look at what was a definition that would be a legal definition of discrimination, and that's where the term "socially disadvantaged" came from, and it came out of the Small Business Act, Section 8a, which basically said "socially disadvantaged" is somebody who is recognized because they're a member of a certain group, rather than they are for their individual qualities. So that became a precedent. Whether it was the best term to use, it is what we had. We didn't have any lawyers, and at that point Keith Strup was working with the American Ag Movement—he was a lawyer; we talked to him. And that's the definition that went in, and it was based on race and ethnicity at that point. I was staffing that work, while I was at Interfaith Action, with this working committee of these groups, so that's basically how they knew me, and what I realized from my family history and struggle, it's a struggle about land and so forth. So we did that, and then we prevailed, and we worked on the borrower's rights, and many other provisions in ag credit that are also important. And then in 1990 we worked on the farm bill with that whole team, and it's the first time that we had the whole team working together, and again, from my position in Interfaith Action, I was staffing that. It was before I went to the Rural Coalition. We wrote the Minority Farmers' Rights Act, and that was with Land Loss and the other groups, and definitely the Federation. Out of that was what we call the 2501 Program. In Section 2501 of the 1990 farm bill, we got statutory authority for this program, for outreach and assistance to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. It began with authority for up to \$10 million dollars, which we've struggled with ever since then. That was the most important program, and we got some other language and started working a little bit on transparency and accountability and other issues. That we got passed; it was actually Senator Wyche Fowler offered it as a floor amendment, passing by unanimous consent. Jesse Helms wanted to oppose it, and he says—well,

if Jesse wants to vote against it, then so be it. So we spent all that time, we spent a lot of time in Congress in '87 and a lot in 1990. And then at time we were also looking at the conservation issues. We were already raising the question of the Conservation Reserve Program, with a little bit of a warning of what does that mean? But it's also important when we're looking at the other reserve policies, but also how do people get into the program. And one of the things the tribal members were already saying at that time is—we never tore up our land that way, so it's not in bad enough condition to get into the conservation programs. So we were beginning to look at how those pieces ... and there were so many issues during all that time. And then finally Interfaith Action reorganized and became Interfaith Impact, and I think the new guy didn't really want all these groups, but Rural Coalition wanted me to come there, and so they said—Lorette, you have to come over. So I began working in late '91. I think I started on April 1, 1992 as the executive director. [Chuckles]

25:27

RK: Thank you for taking us back there. That was very important information. I have to say, personally, starting in '82 is when I was really caught up in those issues for the Land Stewardship Project, which I was directing, it was the insurance companies taking over the land in the mid-'80s, and when the prices went down and everybody was stretched in credit and not able to pay back. The banks and the insurance companies, and the insurance companies were taking them over and many of them were not taking care of the land once they got it, on top of taking it away ...

LP: Yes.

RK: ... so that became a dominant issue for our program and led me to hire some of the organizers, like the late Steve O'Neil, and Mark Schultz, people like that, that then became, over the years, and the struggles that you'll continue to talk about.

LP: And, see, the thing is we began working with Land Stewardship Project over those years, and we always have. And Land Stewardship Project is one of the Euro-American-based groups, the Midwestern-based groups, family farm-based groups that has been a member of Rural Coalition throughout the many years. We still work closely with Mark. Also, Rhonda Perry in Missouri Rural Crisis and Family Farm Defenders have always been a part, and co-conspirators in the struggle, also, of minority farmers.

RK: Now you've brought us up to 1992, and your beginning with Rural Coalition—why don't you take it from there.

LP: OK. With Rural Coalition, when I came on board, the Rural Coalition, their founding director since 1978, Larry Parachini, had left, and they were without staff—they had like an interim leader—they hadn't had any staff for 18 months. There's a history of the groups working together. It started out as a kind of Washington-based movement, and then in 1980 it went national. It was groups like the American Indian Movement, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporation, and there was some work sometimes with the 1890s, and sometimes, you know, not the 1890 colleges and universities and

the tribal colleges. What we knew from all the reports that had come out, and then especially from field and lived experience of members, is that things were not progressing—we didn't see the farm suicides with the black farmers, because I think they pretty much expected that they were going to have all of these problems, and that they were going to experience racism, they were going to have applications thrown away and whatever. I think always we were also looking for what are the models that would work. So what we knew is that support for the groups that were working on the ground was critically important. So that's where you had people like Shirley Sherrod, who was working in Georgia—and there is much more history around Shirley Sherrod and what happened to her in all the years after, but she was a staff member running the Georgia office in Albany, Georgia, and her husband, prominent and well-known civil rights leader Charles Sherrod. She had the lived experience in the South in a very extremely violent time. Her father was murdered, and she was trying to ... she sat down with the USDA loan officers, and they would have a meeting, and she had a whole process of walking through what did the farmer need to do, what did the USDA need to do, and had successful packages of loans. You still had trouble, because it was the issue of somebody wants your land. You had at that point county committees, both on the loan committees with what was then Farmers Home Administration, and then the ASCS (Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service), the ag conservation and stabilization service that had the farm programs. If you look back over the numbers—and that's why I always appreciated Grant Buntrock is that when he later got over to USDA under the Clinton administration, he had all the numbers. They had identified everybody's race, but there was a lot of information about how many farmers by race, gender, and ethnicity were on county committees, because it was always a problem to be able to have numbers that could be the basis of an argument for why you needed a policy to change something. So we knew that land loss was happening, but all of the numbers didn't match up, and Lou Anne Kling also helped during the time when she was at USDA to actually get data and numbers so that we could not only document the lived experience, the issues that were going on, but also what the numbers told us, and down to the county level. It was always one of our themes that we had to go down to the county level. So we were talking, we had John Zippert who worked down in ... he ran the training center of the Federation down in Greene and Sumter county, Alabama. What they did is they had the farmers run for election in the county committees. When we later went back in the '90s and looked at numbers, they had the highest turnout rates. Typically in county committee elections, maybe five percent of the people vote. If they had 73 percent of the black farmers, then 43 percent of the white farmers would vote. And so we were also always talking about democratization and democratic participation and all of those issues in the communities. But we also realized cards were stacked against people. So in 1990 we got a little in the farm bill. We had a whole longer piece of what we wanted to do, and we started doing field organizing, but at the same time we were doing much more documentation on discrimination. Rural Coalition previously had worked on a wide range of rural issues, and I think during that time our leader said we have to focus on this particular need, and we knew we needed the outreach. We knew we needed to do land continuity, we knew we needed to do wills and other issues. We were looking more and more at the tribal issues. In the 1990 farm bill we had also worked with Greg Smitman, and it was a small bit of language, but it was really to allow the tribes to run their own agriculture programs. So we were looking at authorities through all of that time, and we really specialized. In 1993 we were founding members of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture. We used to run the Minority Farm Issues Committee. During that time, too, we were arguing to funders who were saying, well, sustainable ag was

becoming all the rage, but they were saying—how does equity relate to sustainability? And that was a tough argument, and funding has always been hard, hard, hard, for all of our groups to find. It was just like not an interest within the agricultural sector.

33:30

LP: But at the same time you had poverty in all of the places. But what we never had was the research to really be able to document the economic arguments. Foundations wanted to see in dollars and cents what if you invest ... and we were all talking different languages during that time. So we continued and kept on working, and then the 1996 ... the 1995 farm bill became 1996, and that was Freedom-to-Farm and decoupling and it was all these debates over agriculture policy and all of the community ... and at that point the church community was still much more active before the churches all split up, and I think that was a big factor we have to look at. There were the North and South churches, and the money that went into hunger got cut back. It was still the overhang of what had happened with block granting under the Reagan administration and poverty and so forth. So in 1996 it did not look like a good year to try and get a lot of things. We were still implementing the farm crisis. We worked afterwards on the foreclosures. We mailed out 78,000 letters and tried to get borrowers' rights protected. FLAG (Farmers Legal Action Group) had an important part at that point. But then in the '90s, we were dealing with farm economy, but we were dealing more and more with civil rights, and '96 was not a good Congress to be moving forward, so we started organizing more and coming up with an agenda. At the same time we were starting to, with the 2501 Program, get programs on the ground, and realizing the Rural Coalition is a multi-cultural organization—we have one table. Everybody's around the same table. It's the most diverse of the rural organizations. It always has been. We believe in democratic elections and democratic participation of our members. So we were moving along in terms of how we made decisions, but what we realized is resources had to get back to the grassroots level, because the kind of work that Shirley and John and the Intertribal Ag Council were doing had to be put into place. We convinced the Farm Service Agency under Grant Buntrock and Lou Anne Kling to do a training on county committee elections and other things, and we brought a multi-cultural group into USDA. At that point we were also talking about discrimination. There was more activism around the black farm lawsuits, so we worked really, really hard on those issues, but we were finding other issues, like how did conservation relate to that, and we got some funds, and we did a whole program on county committee elections. People went back all over the country. We started working with the Hmong farmers, the National Hmong Farmers Association. We were working with the Latino farmers. As we started talking more, we were also looking at numbers and making a better case and a stronger case on discrimination. It was during that time that Grant Buntrock admitted that USDA had discriminated, and that became the basis for the Pigford (Pigford v. Glickman) lawsuits and the whole era that we were going on. So we were doing more and more at the local level to get people more engaged and to be asking for what was rightfully theirs. But then we went into a couple of decades of work on the lawsuits. It was like in '98 and '99, what we had to do is work on a law to waive the statute of limitations, because what we found is, during this time, that USDA had shut down its civil rights operation and in 1983 there had been no office, so if you sent a complaint it would get filed in a circular file. And what happened is if you made a complaint, your file would get sent to Washington and wouldn't be serviced anymore. And we were only unraveling what was actually happening inside, and it still wasn't functioning in 1996,

and so Congress, we had to get them to pass a law, because you can't sue the government under ... it's all so complicated, and we had to learn it all. We researched it, and there's a two-year statute of limitation on credit issues, but there's a waiver of sovereign immunity, which means you can't sue the king, so this would allow you to sue the government for damages. So it's the basis of the lawsuits, and we convinced Congress to waive it all the way back to 1981, which was two years before the office was closed, but you had to have done a complaint. We went into the era of the Pigford I lawsuit in 1999 that settlement process began. But it wasn't until ... we had to do more work in the farm bills later on, in 2002 and then in the 2008 farm bill to allow the settlements of the Keepseagle case, and then to really push the government on the Hispanic and women's lawsuits.

RK: Those were all discrimination cases.

LP: They're discrimination cases, yes. So these are that because of race and ethnicity that the government had discriminated and treated those farmers, they were treated differently. They had to show they were treated differently than a similarly situated white farmer. Then we began the era of having to work on those cases. And since that all of our members have spent thousands and thousands of hours of uncompensated time, working on those lawsuits. John Zippert himself, who had been our chairperson, wrote a thousand packages on Pigford I, and 95 percent were approved. There's one other thing about the Rural Coalition—when I was hired in 1992 we brought our assembly ... our chairperson at that point moved from Hubert Sapp to Carlos Marentes, and he was the head of Border Agricultural Workers in El Paso, so we also started to work on the trade issues. We also spent time in the early part of the '90s opposing NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). We took a congressional delegation, including Colin Peterson, and John Conyers and several others—Bill Zeliff, Gary Condit, down to Mexico. They came on Air Force Two, and we showed them what it would do in rural communities in Mexico, and we were working, because we had member groups in Mexico, too. And so we also worked against NAFTA and CAFTA (Central America Free Trade Agreement) during all that time, and were working on the farm worker issues as well.

40:56

RK: NAFTA is the North American Free Trade Agreement.

LP: Yes, sorry about that, right. And CAFTA is the Central America Free Trade Agreement that later came out. We were also in Seattle in 1999 on the WTO, the World Trade Organization, going back to this early work. So we've been part of all those struggles and how to us it's the democratic nature of negotiating all these rules at the international level that have impacts on all of the communities, without the communities being at the table. So we have worked together as this group. We worked within the sustainable ag memberships during all that time. We worked in other collaborations.

RK: I wanted to ask you... you touched on this a little bit—the interplay with the sustainable ag working groups and then what became the Campaign, and then ultimately the merger to what became NSAC (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition). Over the years I know there's been issues around the fact that the priorities of some of the sustainable agriculture groups haven't

always embraced the concerns around diversity, and I wanted you to talk about that. I mean, I understand, personally, some of the reasons why, I think, but I'd like to get that on the record as much as we can.

LP: This is really a conversation for all of our members, the Rural Coalition—I'm the executive director; I work for the Rural Coalition. I'm here because the Rural Coalition asked me to be, but I respect our leaders, and we work with them, and they are a very dynamic and a very diverse group, and they have their opinions, and so in some ways that's a conversation that we have collectively with everybody. I think we have probably cultural differences and cultural understandings just even in our processes, so we tend to work in a collective way rather than by doing a lot of voting. We have shied away from the word priorities, because when you're talking about inclusion and equity, what are your numbers, and so the most votes ... so one issue that was always an issue in the campaign was—well, which priorities? So what about extension agents on Indian reservations. It's not a federally recognized tribal extension program. We have 547 tribes in the United States, and at that point there were 28 extension agents on tribal lands. We wanted more money for that program, but we were told that there's not enough votes for that. Well, you're talking about millions of acres of tribal land. It's like on what basis?

RK: Not enough votes where?

LP: Like within the Campaign in later years. It think as we went on that's not quite as much an appropriations priority. So that's just like one illustration of the issue. Because you have like systems and whatever, and I think within the Rural Coalition it's more a consensus thing, that this is an important issue and maybe we have to give it more weight, you know, because there's less. But we worked, especially in the years when Amy (Little) was leading the campaign, we worked well, we worked on various issues. We felt that there was support. I think there was always questions about the other issues. They had a ... probably the most painful one—and I kind of hesitate to say this—was the red dots. Like you put green dots on things that you agreed with the most and yellow if you would help out, and you had like one or two red dots if there was something you didn't want to do. And the red dots were on two specific issues—anything to do with farm workers they didn't want the Campaign to do, and it wasn't everybody; it was like somebody. And the other one was on trying to deal with the issue of participation on USDA county committees. So some of the structural issues, and I think probably—I don't know if we ever spent the time sitting down and talking out these issues. I think what we've learned over time is we have to be about what power we need to change things. And that means if we're going to work together we have to work out our internal disagreements on issues. We have to figure out where we can work together. Our groups have to figure out where do we invest our time, within which movements. You have to look at where do resources flow, how do foundations fund things, and then also what is our definition? Is equity accepted as a piece of sustainability, which we strongly believe it is. We're looking more now at the concepts of food sovereignty. New fads come up. Like one is agro-ecology, and our members believe you want to see how to have a sustainable method of agriculture. That doesn't necessarily mean we want to start a USDA agro-ecology project, we want to look at how does this integrate with everything people do. When you go back to, like, in Oklahoma, with the black and the tribal communities, what does that mean? What does it mean in Mississippi? What does it mean for commodity farmers? So we'd like to go back and do the research to actually know what we're talking about and then understand the

implications of any one policy decision on everybody. So I think that what we recognize is NSAC is a strong organization. It has a lot of power on Capitol Hill and so forth, but we're not a weak organization. I think we've worked on different things, and the question is do we support each other's priorities, and how do we do that. I think the conversation's still going on. Like right now we did work together. We did meetings in late December, and we went together to the Office of Management and Budget and the White House and said—you need to put more money into the 2501 Program, which got cut back. And that worked; we got a budget request of \$10 million more dollars. So there's kind of win-win. We're really trying to work on how ... but when the Campaign reorganized it was sort of they dropped the Minority Farm Issues Committee and we were somehow no longer really in it. Instead I think they were kind of recruiting different ones of our members to be in it. It's managed in a different way. Everybody, we believe in democratic participation, so we formed this "GOAT" process, the Getting Our Act Together, and it's kind of like a weekly phone call, and it's just to find ways to work together, where everybody can keep and maintain their own identity, because what we understand is NSAC comes out of who its members are, and what their familiarity is on issues, and we have a different level of familiarity, oftentimes, in different places, and sometimes at the field level. So it takes courage to have those conversations. And then also to understand how do we build the political power, and in general, as I've said, we've worked with some of the groups that we've always worked on together, where we have a common understanding of a common struggle. Land Stewardship Project has understood those issues. Missouri Rural Crisis Center, so they've stood beside. And Family Farm Defenders—on trade issues, on other issues—we have a lot of overlaps, probably more with the Family Farm Coalition, who is also an important organization. So, again, that conversation continues. There's probably lots more to say, but as our chairperson will say—we have real enemies. [Chuckles]

49:30

RK: Good point.

LP: And it is, it's about power. And then we've also been spending many, many ... there's a whole other chapter on all of the different lawsuits, and we're still working on a very unjust outcome of the Hispanic and women's claims settlement process that just closed a year ago, and very unsatisfactorily, with 10,361 claims being rejected because of fraud concerns, maybe related to the fact that there were clusters of claims in some places. We said—well, there was clusters of discrimination. So, like, one claim will be funded in one place, but if there were ten in another, those were denied.

RK: Wow.

LP: There's another level of attention that we have to pay, and at the same time what we've also done is worked with our member groups, such that things like in the conservation programs, we suggested high tunnels and wrote inter-regulation comments that NRCS (National Resource Conservation Service) should fund these seasonal greenhouses, because that's what we knew farmers liked. We got a higher level of cost-share, so the government would pay more for socially disadvantaged farmers. In 2008 we got 30 sections in the farm bill that we worked on in transparency and accountability, like making sure we know how many farmers are in each one of

the programs. Our receipt for service, which was finally made mandatory in 2012. If you go into a USDA office they have to say what you asked for and what you got. Because discrimination, a lot of the discrimination, was people being turned away from the offices, and being told that—you don't belong here or you're not a real farmer. Also teaching farmers like why you need to register your land. Somebody who doesn't want to go back, or with the immigrant farmers, who doesn't want to go into USDA. Well, now if there are programs like that—and we also pushed for micro-loans, and those were approved. So those things have been changing, and one former Clinton administration, high-ranking USDA official said—we don't know how you got all of those; you don't give as many political contributions and everything, and you're really punching above your weight. It's like the shared work that we have to do, and we also push that there be discussions on commodity policy within the campaign, and that was finally done, not with a lot of agreement. We're looking at how all these pieces fit together, but the structural issues are what we participate in, and I think in the places where we've been able, locally, to get people working together, we're making more progress, so we believe we need all of us, but that includes us. What we've tried to educate people is that our members have been here for a long time. We have Rural Advancement Fund, but we also have—you know, the Federation has been around almost 50 years, and they've been steeped in the civil rights struggles, and there were land struggles. RAF was founded by Eleanor Roosevelt and A. Philip Randolph, and it grew out of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. It's about the land; it's about the tribal struggles. We're still in that right now, now figuring out where we go and working on an equity package for the next farm bill and how can we work together from positions of strength where we respect the strengths and the knowledge that all of us have.

55:35

RK: Well, that's really what I wanted you to get to as we draw this to a close is sort of the next steps. And so one of them is this real focus on equity for the next farm bill?

LP: Yeah, and how can we ... you understand between 2008 and 2012 the census of agriculture begins December 31, 2007, and then it begins again December 31, 2012, so it was pretty much that period of the best farm bill that we've had in recent years, and it was not good in all ways, but we got more things. We had a net increase of 28,000 farmers of all operators within the constituency, so we're seeing, after many, many years, a reversal. It's more the Hispanic and the Asian farmers, but it's also increases in the African American and the American Indian. Some of it is we're working with NASS (National Agriculture Statistics Service) and other USDA agencies to get them more connected with USDA, but we need to continue that. They're important in land ownership. Look at where the black farmers are—they're in the poorest communities in the United States. The Hispanic farmers—the state of New Mexico. We're looking at the grazing land. We're looking at these other issues. So if we're really concerned about sustainability—and then look at the amount of tribal land that there is in the United States. If you're concerned about the climate, those are the communities we have to work on. If you're concerned about poverty, those are the communities where we have to work. We have one of our members ... we're looking for what are the models that work ... our member up in Massachusetts has 275 refugee farmers growing on 70 acres of land, selling at 42 farmers markets in the Boston area. They're African refugees from the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi. They're the Hmong farmers 30 years ago. What are the models that work and empower people?

How do we invest in those? How do we make that commitment to equity such that the groups can have self-determination, self-definition, self-reliance in their communities, and our efforts strengthening and weakening that. We want diversity to be something more than we've got a couple of people on a committee who look different than us to something that we're really going back to—who represents the communities and how do we reach the farmers in those communities to be the actors in their own lives and to really have the access to resources. We have a lot of people that come to us when it's time to apply for a grant, and they need—I need the name of a minority farmer in this state or that state, and that's not helping. It's not a way in. What we need is the solidarity of going to the communities, being in the communities, learning and sharing the exchanges and conversations and then crafting agriculture policies that take into consideration all we know about trade agreements, all we know about inequity. We are working much more closely with USDA than we have, and yet, even still, there's always more to be done.

RK: Thank you very much, Lorette. This is very good. If you have anything further ... I think this is just what I was hoping we'd get from this interview. If there's anything else you'd want to say now, or we could wrap it up.

LP: It's probably time to wrap it up. We didn't talk all about the Civil Rights Action Team Report and how the Small Farms Commission grew out of that report. What I really want to emphasize is—a lot of the things that are part of the history of the sustainable ag movement we have been active players on and helped shape the policies. Our members have always carried their weight in doing this, and I think some of the practices and things that we know work best in our communities work best for all communities, so with the high tunnels at USDA, there's now over 11,000 of them. There's now over 14,000 micro-loans. NSAC worked very closely on that. We have been working on that ever since back in '97, and USDA started it before. We now have outreach happening again with Farm Service Agencies. We just want people to know that things like the 2501 Program started long ago, and its long history, and became some of the models for some of the things that later became Beginning Farmers and Ranchers and those type of things. So we just want to know that we've always been there, and the more we can make real relationships where people bring whatever their knowledge is and respect the knowledge of others and respect the organizations. There should be a strong NSAC. There also needs to be a strong Rural Coalition, and all of our members need to be strong, so that they can play and put their political weight to work in the South and in the West and in all the places where we need ... it's about building enough power to make this change.

RK: Right—that's right. Well, thank you. You know, there's one other thing, Lorette, if I could ask you. I know about Farm Aid, of course, but who have been some of the funders that maybe should be in the record that have been supportive of the Rural Coalition or the groups that are key players in the Rural Coalition?

LP: Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation would be our top, always-been-there, and so forth. And the Presbyterian Hunger Program. Farm Aid, some, and Kellogg Foundation has stood with us, especially in the last couple farm bill debates, and particularly like in 2008 and in 2012, that really helped to sustain us. Those are our foundation funders—and that's all! [Laughs]

RK: Thank you, Lorette.

LP: All right.

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