

Margaret Krome
Policy Director
Michael Fields Agriculture Institute
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

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Margaret Krome—MK
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: This is Ron Kroese. Today I am in Madison, Wisconsin. It's February 16, 2016, and I have the pleasure of interviewing Margaret Krome today. Margaret is policy director for the Michael Fields Agriculture Institute. Margaret and I have known each other for a long time, but part of what I don't know much about is your life before you became involved in a number of the sustainable agriculture activities that we've been involved in over the years. And for the sake of these interviews, I really like to learn about the people and how they got involved in sustainable agriculture. What sparked it in you, going all the way back to when you were a little girl or whatever? So take us through that, please.

MK: Totally—I love that question. And it actually does date back to my being a little girl to an extent. My grandfather Krome was an engineer, was the chief engineer on the railway down to Key West, and he also was a horticulturalist, a self-made horticulturalist, and he homesteaded in Homestead, Florida. So my family still does raise avocados, and for decades and decades he developed the South Florida avocado industry, very central in that industry, you know, back in the early ...

RK: That was really the fruit basket for the United States before California really came on.

MK: It's true. And so avocados, mangos and Persian limes were our family's thing. But I can just tell you how much fun it was, because, of course, everybody grew every imaginable kind of citrus, yummy citrus. So going down to Florida from Virginia, where I was raised, our family would go down at Christmas, and I would be in heaven, we would just walk out through the groves and pick whatever ... tangelo—and most people in the country didn't know what a tangelo was, but our family had all sorts of varieties of tangelos and had worked to develop these different fruits, so that's a piece of it, I think. But then I was an English major in college. I went to University of Virginia, which is not a land grant institution, and it didn't have a botany program. Had it had one, I'd have just jumped in with both feet. But they had biology, and it was all pre-med, so I took every itinerant botany professor's course that came through. I studied at the biological station, and it spoke to me deeply, and I loved it. But I thought—well, I'm this far along, I'm not going to change my major. And so what do you do when you are graduating, following your boyfriend to Washington, DC, and an English major? Everyone says—you're going to work in law. And I'm thinking—I'm not going to be a lawyer, no way. But it did happen that I got a job working in, 1979, with the National Legal Aid and Defender Association in Washington, right on K Street. And I worked for them for four years, and my condition for

doing the kind of funky, administrative ... much more significant than a secretary, but not a significant policy job—but my condition was that I be trained as a lobbyist. So I was, and so I ended up working at that fascinating time, which was the end of the Carter years and the beginning of the Reagan years, and the first overwhelming change in ideology, and watching what happened, and so I was working on such interesting topics, all sorts of things having to do with regulatory reform and prayer in schools and all these unlikely issues. My fundamental issue had to do with access to justice, and I won't belabor that whole set of issues, but it was an interesting time. I learned during that time that I found Washington and the political world repugnant. I found it phony. I found that even the best, most progressive people that I knew seemed to feel this terrible need to demonstrate their ... who they know, that they knew the talk, that they could communicate in all the subtle ways of the current lingo, and I just found ... I thought, you know, I'm young! Why would I harness myself to what feels so false. I thought I was a pretty good lobbyist; I think I was. I did really good work on the things that I worked on, and I loved it, so far as the strategy was concerned, and I learned a lot about democracy, which was extremely valuable to me. I have learned—in fact just earlier in the week I was giving a talk at the university, and as I was teaching that class, I was saying—I'll never forget talking with Senator Metzenbaum of Ohio, his staffer, who said to me—you know, I think the senator is likely to go with us on whatever the thing was, but if we had maybe three or four more people from Ohio who called ... I'm thinking—do you know how many bloody millions of people live in Ohio? A few people? Personal contacts makes a difference? That left a deep impression on me, and I came away moved and quite clear that I did not wish to be part of what seemed to me to be very derivative living. I think the word people these days uses is authentic, which seems equally overworked. But the truth is I just felt like my strength is that I don't feel that I need to pretend who I am. I am good enough as I am, and I'm not going to ... that good enough isn't going to suit a lot of people who really want to have the polish that comes with pretension, and I just won't be happy doing that. So I very intentionally and deliberately went about participating in one of those things that was called in those days—What Color is My Parachute? And it was like—what do I want to be when I grow up, effectively. It was really extremely well done and stimulating and clarifying. And what I learned was that my passion for botany, my passion for natural systems, my passion for how people use natural resources, was very central to what I cared most deeply about. And that I probably wanted to work, I thought, in natural resources management in the Third World. Didn't hurt that my boyfriend at the time was—different boyfriend than took me to Washington—but the boyfriend that I then had was a Ph.D. and fellow who worked a lot on tropical forestry issues. And so I really found my fascination in Third World resource management. And, of course, if you live in Washington, people say—oh, there's a program for you. So everyone said—oh, the Peace Corps. You shouldn't even think about graduate school until you've been in the Peace Corps. And, frankly, I thought that made sense, because why would I put my hard-saved dollars for graduate school into a less than precisely defined program if the Peace Corps could help me clarify it. And that is exactly what happened. I went and did agro-forestry in Cameroon, which is West Africa, central part, latitudinally, and it was transformative.

(7:46)

RK: That's where Denny Caneff went, too, to Cameroon.

MK: Isn't that crazy? We never met each other in Cameroon. It wasn't until we were back here. I heard of this guy, Denny, but not tons, because I was in a very different part of the country than he had been.

RK: So you went to Cameroon.

MK: So I went to Cameroon, and it was an exciting and really difficult and very enlightening time. I learned, among other things, things that were important personally, like how deeply rooted I think in the human wiring it is to create "others," to find other-ism as a kind of social glue. I can't tell you how many communities I worked in where people would say—oh, you don't want to work with that other community because they lie or they steal. Or don't work with that group because—whatever. Any excuse would do. And I discovered it wasn't race; it was this need for other-ing. That was to me a very profound discovery, and it has influenced a lot of the way I think about how to do policy, because it's important to understand people's need for affinity, and how to use that to draw people in rather than push them out. So there was that. But it was extremely difficult work. I don't know how many times—I actually do know how many times—I had amoebic dysentery six different times, plus repetition. I was skinny as a rail and malarial drugs made me white as a sheet, plus sunburn. I was the most homely looking thing, but it was also deeply, profoundly wonderful. I loved it, and I believed in the important relationship between how people use their resources without exhausting them, but do use them. What does that sound like? It sounds like the sustainable use. When I went back years later and I looked at my graduate school applications, I had used the term, not capital S, but small s, and I realized that when I had applied for graduate schools the thing that had brought me into this field was my understanding of the need to understand that it isn't good enough to have people use resources; you have to not use them to exhaustion, you have to use them sustainably. But it's also not good enough to imagine that we won't use resources. We have to understand how humans interact with resources in a sustainable way. That was deeply in my understanding when I came back to graduate school. I came to Wisconsin, because I applied from my little tiny village with no phone, no electricity and all that. I applied to eight schools, deeply doubting I would get in. From way out there, I'm sort of throwing them out in the wind, and then I got into all my graduate schools. How did I consider them? Well, I got an Amtrak pass and I toured the country, looking at all these schools. A couple of them I thought were too snobby, but I did look at a lot of schools, and I got to Wisconsin in early December of 1985. It had been snowing for a month, and people here were really grouchy about it. I loved it—we went polka dancing; I went to all these fun workshops and brown bag seminars, and thought—this is intellectual ferment, this has deep agricultural culture, and they did polka dancing, and it knocked my socks off. And I never looked at another school. I did talk with one or two, but I knew immediately this was home, and it became home very quickly.

(11:35)

RK: What did you end up studying, then?

MK: What drew me here was also a terrific graduate school program called—it's now called the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies; it was then called the Institute for Environmental Studies, and they had a program called the Land Resources Program, where one could create

interdisciplinary programming to suit oneself. I came with a very specific interest in understanding how to work with farmers—not in policy—I was imagining doing work with farmers. If I were to have imagined my career in those days, it would have been as an educator, as an extension agent, as a person working to help farmers use their resources. It's much the same way I had been in Africa, I think. I had really felt that I loved that Third World work, but I wanted to translate it into US terms, for a bunch of different reasons. And so I think what happened was ... I had an internship. I sought an internship and unfortunately and fortunately, the man who hired me—it was at the Wisconsin Rural Development Center—and the man who hired me hired me for my “Washington experience.” I was kind of sweeping it under the rug. That was not the thing I was imagining was my future. I had felt that I had kind of closed that chapter, and that was the chapter he wanted as the basis for my internship. And that internship moved swiftly into a job, and not long after that I knew you and many other folks and I was very actively involved in the policy part of the sustainable agriculture movement. And I think it's funny that he perceived what I didn't, and I now see that I actually love the strategy. I love thinking about the whole system, and one of the things about policy is it lets you think about whole systems and the particulars about how you can influence it. And that's a big part of it. And I guess I have to say one other thing. This won't surprise you, but another part of what influences the way I have always done policy is the same thing that influences my being a Quaker. It's not that being a Quaker has made me pursue this, but I have always felt that I wanted to make a contribution without having to be a star, and I value being in a movement and being part of a fabric. I think it's a useful exercise to not feel that it's necessary to stand out, other than by helping in a way that is profound, I hope. But I don't particularly feel that I want to set myself up for needing the rewards of the recognition, which allows you to do a lot of subtler things in a movement. To me that's important, and it's something that I think I have done. You said you were going to ask me what I'm proud of. Some of the things I'm proudest of are things, probably—I don't know, I've never asked anybody, but I would be surprised if very many people fully understood that they are living some of the consequences of the work that I have worked on, that I helped create an architecture and the scaffolding, because I considered them important and not something that I needed my signature on; I thought they were important to our movement. And that's something that ... as a way to live your life; it's deeply fulfilling.

(15:21)

RK: That's right, and it reminds me, I think, about Ferd Hoefner, who's been involved in this from the very beginning. You know him very well and we all do as the policy director now for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. But that basic kind of humility and about always ground-truthing with farmers has been just a really big part of the way he operates and that permeates, I think, the attitude that you two had. I also think there is sort of a fine line that one has to learn between sort of the Biblical admonition to keep your good work silent, but at the same not to hide your light under a bushel. Finding that balance is also part of the picture.

MK: It's true, and I'm not interested in false humility. I don't mind saying the things I'm proud of, but it is true that ... I think it's counter-productive for a movement ... one of the things I learned back when I was in Washington the first time—there's just nothing that is going to antagonize people more than self-promotion. And there is no greater invitation to divisiveness than the feeling that I own this, you don't. So I have loved working in a movement where there's

always an open door for more participants. That's really healthy, and I think our movement has benefitted from inclusion.

RK: I do, too—definitely.

MK: Stardom is not our danger. It has been a danger in times, I have to confess. I have felt that there was a few times when we had a few ... when we were at risk of that. And I think our movement has fully grasped that it's really a bee hive. I like the bee hive or ant colony. Maybe I'm happier being an ant, a little closer to the soil, you know—either way.

RK: We'll talk about that, too, around this whole inclusion idea continues to be a struggle, and, I think, particularly around racial issues and ethnic participation.

MK: You are right.

RK: Much of NSAC, for the reason so much of its Midwestern roots come out of largely Caucasian people—it's an ongoing issue to, increasingly in our diversified culture as a whole, to bring that deeper into the movement. I know you've been a part of that, too, and I want to touch on that a little bit later in this discussion.

MK: That's great. I'd love to do that.

RK: I would like to think, now, about 1985. You landed in a time of great discord. We were still under President Reagan. There wasn't a lot of support in the Department of Agriculture for sustainable agriculture, and we were coming off the years, the big years of the '70s, and into farm crisis, where farmers were losing their land, farms were going bankrupt. There was a lot of problems around 1985. When I worked with Land Steward Project the insurance companies were taking over farms—that became a big issue for us—and then not taking care of them. So that's the year that you came in on, right?

MK: Yes, I started here in January of 1986 as a graduate student. It was interesting. It's kind of funny—I tell the story about my husband, because I met him at a TGIF for the Nelson Institute graduate students. He was one as well in that time. I met these folks, and I had looked in the newspaper and had seen this little squib from this group I had never heard of called the—of course, how would I know? I was new to Wisconsin. But there was this group that said—the Wisconsin Rural Development Center is holding a “pick and glean event.” Because I had mentioned that Wisconsin had had early snow, starting in November—prior to that, rain. Farmers couldn't get into their fields. So how do you harvest your corn crop when you go from muddy fields that you can't get into with your tractor to snowy fields that you can't get into? Well, there were a lot of farmers in this state who couldn't get access to their fields, and so Wisconsin Rural Development Center, though understanding the larger structural issues, nonetheless said—in the here and now, let's help individual farmers. And so they organized these hand picking crews. We went out into the fields and would help farmers pick their corn crop. What a neat exposure to the culture of Wisconsin's farm communities! So anyway I read this, and I was proposing this at a TGIF, and my husband said in his stentorian, now professorial way—you know, well it really doesn't address the underlying farm crisis problems. And I said—oh, give me a break. I always

said that was how I set my ... my expectations of him were very low, because I met him with this very studied approach, and, in fact, I later discovered that he has a much broader understanding, and he's not quite such a killjoy. He's a wonderful man. But we went out and we did that and we learned what the underlying concerns were. And I, of course, was taking a lot of courses and soils and some of the basics of horticulture and agronomy, but also farmland preservation and also issues having to do with farm policy. So all sorts of different projects and programs. That summer I took a wonderful course in the sociology of Wisconsin agriculture with a terrific, now just retired, rural sociologist named Jess Gilbert. We toured the state. Some of the people that I met then have gone on to become, for one thing, close friends of our mutual friend Denny Caneff. The Klessigs, they were people he knows because I met them on that tour. Isn't that interesting?

RK: Yes.

MK: And I just learned so much. Really it was a brilliant course. It taught me so much. And I began my internship. I had my one semester in my undergraduate and graduate years total—I had one semester that I didn't ever have to work, and that was that January through May semester, and then I had to. And I loved that one semester of just studying, but then I jumped into working as well to help pay my way. I developed a project internship where I was a project assistant for this same professor, Jess Gilbert, and that allowed me to have in-state tuition and healthcare, and it meant that he benefitted from my having my grants go to him, to his department, to the college of ag, and we began working on a whole bunch of different issues, some of them very closely associated with the struggles in the farm community, some having to do with the structure of the college of agriculture itself, and the frustrations so many farmers felt with ... the college of ag was so unresponsive to their needs. Having to do with conservation—we had, just before I came, before I got actively involved, I should say, the Wisconsin Rural Development Center worked with a very talented state lobbyist for the Department of Ag, named Jim Arts, worked to get oil overcharge monies. Remember the windfall profit tax? Ding, ding, ding—way back—you remember that?

(23:20)

RK: Um-hum.

MK: Well, those dollars were used in Wisconsin to help create a sustainable agriculture demonstration program. So I became—I was on the sustainable ag ... that program's advisory council, and in that capacity we were giving away grants to farmers for all sorts of things like starting up farmer self-education networks. It was a perfect opportunity, though not our design, to learn what farmers were feeling about their livelihoods—oh, the heartbreak, the tragedy we saw! And the fury they felt at the betrayal, as they saw it, of the land grant commitment to being responsive to citizens' needs. They felt that that had been abandoned, and they felt that the idea that was sprouting up all over the country, I thought—I found it fascinating that not only in Wisconsin, but all over the country, following the tragic loss of farms, following the terrible problems, environmental problems that were then being documented with the whole “get big or get out” mantra, that suddenly we were hearing people say, in the lateritic soils of Georgia and California and Wisconsin, in Northeast, everyone, people were saying—what we care about is

being able to farm in an environmentally sound way, not these highly erodible lands, and in a profitable way, in a way that also helps our communities. So those three, which continue to this day to be the centerpieces of the thinking behind what makes sustainable agriculture, they were early manifested, very spontaneously, not by academic design and understanding, but by people themselves all over the country. We saw that here. We saw farmers in Wisconsin saying—we care about our land. We want to do conservation work. We want to do creative new crops. And that's about the time that grazing, managed grazing, started to come in, in the late '80s. So that program that I mentioned, the sustainable ag demo program, helped allow farmers that exploration of new ideas and the concept of on-farm research began to go forward. We worked with a gentleman you remember—a friend of mine and a colleague, Steve Stevenson, who was working for the Wisconsin Rural Development Center. He was doing a lot of work on land grant institutional structures—what gets in the way of this kind of responsiveness. I was a graduate student as well as working, and as a graduate student I saw lots of opportunity that, you know, being a lobbyist, frankly, had helped me see. So I helped organize ... there was an organization which lives to this day, pre-dated me, but it also ... I was very active in it and helped to usher it to new stages, and it's now got its own leadership, pretty much just undergraduates, now. But it's called the F. H. King Student Group for Sustainable Agriculture. F. H. King was a soil scientist here at U. W. Madison, after whom the soil sciences building, King Hall, is named. He wrote a book called, *The Farmers of Forty Centuries*. China. Looking at the old idea of how do you sustain production in a way that is environmentally sound, socially responsive, and profitable over time? So that sustainable ag group, we arranged to have a little place where we could have a library of materials in the Steenbock Library here, and we began arranging for courses. We had courses that we created, and we got people to help run them and name them for us. I helped pull together the first in 1987, February of 1987, I pulled together—it was one of my first big projects, pulling together the first conference on sustainable agriculture here. I worked, while at the WRDC, one of the first things I did was work on what we called—the Source Book. We called it the Source Book, and it was interesting, we documented—I just called around all over the country. Who in their land grant institutions was doing work on sustainable agriculture? So it was a great way for me to get to see who was doing what, what motivated them, and how different the models could be. We published it; we worked with Garth Youngberg, whom you may remember—a very wonderful man, then at the Department of Agriculture. Such a transformative person, working very humbly and profoundly to change the system within the USDA. We had him come to our conference in February. I guess it was early March of 1987. And it brought such new ideas to the fore, and we got press. We started to have a real discussion in the state. Not long after that some of those discussions were very heated, and I began to think ... some of the farmers were saying—we need our land grants to do what we want them to do on sustainable Ag. Some of them, I will honestly say, carried the kind of parental punitive ideas like—we need to punish the college of ag. And so I had a different idea, having talked with folks within the college of agriculture, knowing that, frankly, there were no discretionary dollars. They really had no money that they could set aside to do it. So I said so how about if, instead, we get money and create an accountability system so that their feet are held to the fire. Of course, some of the farmers were very uncomfortable. That seemed like rewarding bad behavior. So there was an internecine kind of fight about it. I ultimately succeeded in persuading—folks by this time ... Denny was at WRDC—and able to persuade Denny and others that this was not feathering the nest of anybody, but, in fact, it was creating the means by which the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences could do what it ought to do, but then be held accountable. So we created a

citizens' advisory council, constituted in certain kinds of ways. I wrote the legislation. I worked it, worked through ... so I became actively doing the lobbying that all those years ago I'd said I wasn't going to be doing. And I found it important. And right about that time, 1988, was when NSAC got started. So we found we had different models. You remember Ken Taylor, wonderful late friend, who had a very different model for transformation in Minnesota. And he used to laugh about the different strategies and how they ... I had been a lobbyist, so the things that I understood how to do had to do with changing things in the legislature, and he had a different model. So anyway, ultimately, we created the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems. We just last week had a wonderful dinner that was their winter meeting and anniversary, sort of a gathering dinner, and it's so exciting to see how vital, how extremely effective CIAS continues to be. And I'm very proud of having worked so hard to bring together all the different kinds of players. To create the coalition that made that happen. It had to be way more than the discontented farmers in the sustainable ag community. I brought in League of Women Voters, I brought in the churches, I brought in the mainstream ag groups—I brought in the Farm Bureau. I brought in what was then called the Federation of Cooperatives, and the Farmers Union and some of the other farm groups, and, of course, some of the farm groups wouldn't have touched it for anything. But once it started growing and the coalition was succeeding, it worked, because people thought, well, it's got enough of a center of gravity that maybe there's something good in it. I pulled into the framework, bringing an extension component, which brought in a few other players. My intention was to have that extension piece built in so that we could do integrated pest management through some regional work—folks who still are on the ground; we still have those positions, doing work on what's called the Nutrient Pest Management Program, which we created as part of that original design. But there were—this is getting to some of the frustrating moments—we had some faculty folks who said—to hell! We're not going to have the citizens' advisory council over this umbrella tell us what to do. And they bolted as hard as they could, despite our having had a memo of understanding with extension dean and the college of ag dean and the secretary of ag. And it was destructive, because that bolting took away some of the relevance of this initiative to mainstream Ag. So the idea that I had was to structure in relevance to small farmers and medium-size farmers and large farmers and diversified farmers and specialty crop growers and cash grain farmers and have people understand that we could be a bigger tent. The tent stakes for that tent got yanked out early. I had to reengineer it later on in the mid-'90s. I got some funding from another court case settlement that we used to create what we called the Pesticide Use and Risk Reduction Program, which was designed to help, again, bring the issues of pesticide back where some of the IPM (Integrated Pest Management) issues could go forward, and that has helped. But it is still tough, and that's one of our toughest issues. Ideologically, people ... some of the folks who want to support Center for Integrated Ag Systems don't want to see mainstream ag farmers spoken to by it. They say—they've got their own resources; they shouldn't be working with us. And some of the mainstream farmers say—they're finger pointers, all of them, of the sustainable ag community. So it ideologically tends toward the center will not hold. That's tough.

(34:47)

RK: That sure is. When did your lobbying activities turn more toward federal policies? I know they were working hand-in-hand, but I think about that 1988 meeting you referred to, what was

then called ... what became called the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Coalition Working Group ...

MK: Yeah, we were the Sustainable Ag Working Group, and then when there were others, we became the Midwest one, you're right.

RK: You're right, because I read that memo that, in fact, you and Denny wrote the notes for, and their decision that was discussed probably for several hours, the way those meetings went. To use the word "working group" rather than "coalition," because "coalition" implied more unity than people really felt, and "working group" would allow different groups to come in and support part of the agenda but maybe not the whole thing ...

MK: That's right.

RK: ... and it was all part of that effort for the big tent that you've been describing.

MK: And then there was that clever, clever piece of architecture, which has worked to this very day, and so importantly, and that was that within that working group where all comers were welcome at the table, there would be a core that could sign on to a letter as a coalition, and that's how SAC became a sub-set of SAWG. It was really smart. I think you were part of the architecting, you and Chuck and Ferd. I really, frankly, wasn't. I admired it, but I thought—wow, that was clever. [Chuckles]

RK: Working with the Center for Rural Affairs is how we got involved with Ferd. It was working with Land Stewardship Project and with the Center for Rural Affairs, with money, I believe, from the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, and that got things rolling with that more intense group that the tent then grew from.

MK: Absolutely right. And I guess I want to say I believe this summer we spoke of the important roles some of our funders had, and I think it's really worth saying the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, Joyce Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation—some of these were critical to our having support in those early days, and allowing that good idea to flower and develop enough of a track record that it could really gain the traction it needed.

RK: Right, I think you're right. I think of you ... but looking back on the past, all the great work you've done on appropriations and implementation of the policies that were passed. You know, I think it's 1990 the Sustainable Ag Research and Extension Act was passed, that was a big one. The need for research in sustainable ag, and that hardly any of the dollars, still not nearly enough, go toward sustainable ag. But I'd like you to talk about how did you get into that work, and were you linked with Michael Fields Institute by then? Or how did that all get going?

MK: Yeah, I can actually tell you, but a lot of it is a tip of the hat to you, Ron. And that is that one of those things you will remember from one of those early meetings was there were a fair number of people who resisted the idea of our creating, especially executive directors tend to feel some of this—why do we want to create another entity that's just going to take limited dollars from our coffers? We don't need to create competitors for funding. And so from those meetings

came the idea that there could be important functions that could serve the whole that individual groups could take on for the whole. And you manifested that first, with what we now call—I always have called it the Marta Cleveland model, where you hired Marta Cleveland with the Land Stewardship Project to do media work, I think, was it not?

RK: Yes it was.

MK: And she did a great job. And that was the model that Denny Caneff, my boss in those days—he had become my boss—then used when he got a phone call from the C. S. Mott Foundation program officer, Ed Miller. They had a new program on ... you know it better than I do. It was agricultural chemicals?

RK: I think that's right, yeah.

MK: I think they had an agricultural chemicals program, beneath which the field of sustainable agriculture could be a legitimate funding priority. And so he, because of his benighted good thinking, was just doing due diligence and calling around to groups in the community and exploring what the possibilities might be, what might it look like, and it just so happened he had just called Denny and said—what would you do? Well, we had talked, or then shortly thereafter talked—I'm not sure which came first—with Ferd. What would be a function ... I think Denny really wanted us to use the Marta Cleveland model. I think he was one of those folks who very much felt that we should not impoverish our members by the success of our collective, whatever that body was going to look like. He was a strong believer in following that model, and I believe he talked to Ferd about the merit of our doing work on appropriations. He said—Ferd, how could we be helpful? And I very clearly remember Denny telling me that Ferd had said—appropriations is what we need help on. Write a grant to be leading on appropriations. And Denny said—Margaret, are you interested in doing this? And by that point I had become the sustainable ag policy director, through a variety of ... funny thing—I had come in as an intern two years earlier, and I became the senior staffer, which really told me more than I actually hoped to know about how quickly the landscape can change in the nonprofit world. But anyhow, so I said, yeah, I would be glad to do that. Grassroots lobbying doesn't carry the things that I found distasteful about direct lobbying. Yes, you're sometimes talking with people who really do feel this need to posture, but it's really a different animal. And I feel much happier about it. So I really just loved that work, and learning it out, learning the details of the appropriations work, understanding what was important about it—we had a really rather limited network, grassroots network. But just about that time, early '90s, maybe late '80s, you will remember that we had this group around the country of groups like ours, wanting to be SAWGs, and there was some national money to support the creation of the National Dialog for Sustainable Agriculture, and Amy Little was hired to help coordinate that work, and I'll tell you, you don't talk to Amy Little about grassroots work without her putting her shoulder to it.

(42:09)

RK: Absolutely.

MK: She understood power, still does. And she understood the potency of our developing a grassroots base. So building regional coordinators who were working with the grassroots groups, and she had no compunction about really helping to push them to flex their muscle, and so I actually had an asset that, had it not been for Amy, I wouldn't have had. And her incredible instinct and drive, and that was hugely important. And really I think appropriations for quite a while was the most common exerciser of that muscle, and it grew quite a bit.

RK: Did SAWG and the campaign use the farmer fly-ins as a way of further legitimizing your work?

MK: Absolutely. We did do that. So we started in doing a fly-in. We did a lot of organizing, of course, in the spring, because the spring is when ... like right now, that's why I had to stop and go work on trying to get a farmer for the fly-in in mid-March, because you have to target when ... in appropriations, you have to target when the key decisions are made, individual appropriations sub-committee members' letters are due to the chairs by date certain. By that date you have to have supporters, have long since have got to let those members know these are the priorities we really are hoping you're going to champion. This gets into these secret, secret letters that they send to the chair, and that influences dramatically what the chair is going to put into the bill that will come and be visible in the public sometime in maybe late May, more typically mid-June or so. And so we worked very hard on that and began doing fly-ins, but we also would do ... not so long—it took a few years to understand that our appropriations campaign, we realized, was hampered by whether the president did or did not include funding for our priorities in his budgets. And so we began in the summer creating fly-ins to go and influence the USDA preparatory to their budget development for the following fiscal year's campaign, and we would meet with the Office of Management and Budget, and that was important. The other thing I'll just say about this work—it illustrated several things to me over the years as the campaign emerged. And leaping ahead ten years just to the early 2000s, when our movement took a big, big hit. We were really hurt by the popping of the dot-com bubble. When the economy hurt, it really went down for quite a period there. We had a significant recession during that period, nothing like the great recession that we just experienced, but when we did, a lot of groups lost their funding. And when they lost their funding, we found that the movement was quite ragged, and there were places in this country where we had appropriators, we desperately needed them, and we didn't have groups in those states. So you will remember that I came to you when you were with the Mott Foundation, and I had Jim Lukens—I can remember standing out on the front porch with Jim Lukens on the phone and you on the phone, making the case to you why we needed to get some funding, particular funding, to develop organizing capacity in a few key southern states. Mississippi was one of them. Texas was one of them. And you, thankfully, supported—we had a few other states that were also very important—Arkansas—we had some others. But these were states where we didn't have enough traction, and we needed more people who were affiliated with our movement. This continues to be a problem today, but your support of that work meant that we were able to find the key people, of whom there were precious few, but we found some who could go and talk with Thad Cochran, who could go and talk with Henry Bonilla in the House, when he was approps ag sub-committee chair. Those things were really very important.

RK: That's good to know.

MK: I want to tell you one more approps ag story, if you don't mind.

RK: Oh, please.

MK: This was a lovely truth-telling for me. I mean it was one of those great stories in my mind about you never write somebody off. And it was pretty early in my ag approps work. I'm wanting to say early '90s. I couldn't tell you just precisely what year, but pretty early '90s. There was a new ag approps sub-committee in the House, new member, a guy from Upstate New York named Jim Walsh. And I did as I always do—I looked him up and called people and said tell me about this guy, Jim Walsh. Of course, there was no internet at that point, so how do you ... You call, you figure it out by calling people up and going to the library and looking up old newspaper stories and things like that. This old fashioned way that we had to do in those days. But what I heard from people whom I called was—Jim Walsh has never voted for an environmental bill in his life. No way he's going to support sustainable agriculture. You might as well give it up. I mean, I heard very strong statements from people who deeply resented how conservative he was. People in his district, people in the environmental movement in New York State who just said—cash it in. And of course you can't do that. You're given a very limited hand in agricultural appropriations. You're usually given a few good people, and they can't hold sway unless you get a whole bunch of the dubious people and persuade them. And so how do you persuade those people is always the art form, and that's kind of fun. It's a bit of a puzzle, you know. So I only learned how much fun it could be through this story. It was my first introduction to really a transformative strategy, which was I was meticulous on who I looked for in farmers from New York State. It was during the era that Birkenstocks were still ... like people's vision of sustainable ag was Birkenstocks, long hair, shaggy, you know, funky. So I made sure they were all tie wearing, straight ahead, and I looked for every SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education) grantee, any farmer that anybody had worked with, I found who were the extension agents that had worked with them, who had gotten a grant—did they have any farmers. And I was particular about the profile. I really wanted these dairy farmers who, frankly, looked and smelled and talked and sounded just like what Jim Walsh was going to feel like the majority of farmers in his district were made up of. And he became, over the time that he was on ag approps, he single-handedly, one year, saved SARE from being cut. The same with ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas). He was critical, and it was because we didn't give up on him, and we started with these mainstream folks. And then we had folks like Elizabeth Henderson and others who were far more conformed to his stereotypes. But I learned you have to puncture the stereotype, and then you can have the chorus chime in, but you have to puncture the stereotype first. We did that many times. Joe Skeen in New Mexico—he was approps ag sub-committee chair, and I remember working with farmers there, and they pointed me to a farmer who was ... I can remember his saying to me when I talked to him on the phone about coming to a fly-in, saying—you know, I spot spray. Like, I'm not pure. And I'm saying—I love that you spot spray. You're doing what's responsible and appropriate, and you are choosing not to broadcast, and the reason you're ... and I loved hearing that, and I said—we are not purists, what you're doing is ... and he came in and made a stirring defense of why SARE was so important and why ATTRA was so important. Skeen was a skeptic about ATTRA; he thought it was a duplication of extension's function. So we needed those mainstream guys. That's the critical point. The mainstream farmers are important to us, and have always been important

spokespeople. That's who I'm looking for in Kansas right this minute. That was an early lesson, and it's something that our movement needs to understand.

(57:32)

RK: So we've been discussing your work and your ongoing work in appropriations. I'm so glad we're talking about that, because a lot of people who aren't really privy to the inside of these processes sort of celebrate the victory when a law is passed or the law is authorized, but we've come to learn the hard way over the years it's really appropriations—getting the money to carry these things out is an ongoing struggle. And then you've been involved in this, too—once the money is there, getting it used wisely.

MK: Yeah.

RK: And I know you're been a part of the effort with some other states, through the Michael Fields Agriculture Institute, on getting farmers on the technical committees, that get the conservation dollars.

MK: Oh, yes, right.

RK: So, tell me something more around your work around, since you've been linked into Michael Fields, and when, about, did that start?

MK: It started in the early part of 1995. I remember so clearly going to my first board meeting—I think you were attending it—perhaps chairing it; I can't decide.

RK: I was on the board at that time.

MK: You remember that Michael Fields Ag Institute did not have a policy program at that time. I created it, and they were reasonably open to my coming and just said—as long as you bring your money it's fine; we know you, we like you. I remember I asked the board specifically—how do you feel about this? And they said—well, we like you. Policy, yeah, fine. As long as you pay for it, that's OK. But then over time, I had an offer a few years later for a position, and I had to really consider do I stay, do I go. What would happen to the policy program if I left? So I put it to the board, and they ... I decided to stay, regardless, but they did say—no, we really believe in the importance of policy now. So we're glad that you're doing it; we think it's critical. So that's been refreshing. Over the years, it's been a very important program and a successful one. Not so long after I started, the next year, actually, in '95, after starting at Michael Fields, there was a court settlement here in the state against a chemical company that had overcharged customers, and then the way the federal court sent it down was to all the states. It just said—look, it is to be used to benefit farmers. It was really ... the farm community, it was really this broad mush. And so, given my concern that the state program, the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, had not successfully kept the piece of it that I felt could be of value to conservatives, I specifically worked to create a coalition with all the mainstream ag groups to go after that money to address the pesticide use reduction—and then it was added—and risk. So pesticide use and risk reduction, that was specifically because there were some folks said—we're

not going to reduce our pesticides, but we will reduce the toxicity. So in any event it was a very good thing to do. I think it has paid dividends for the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems to have that piece of its agenda brought into it, and that helped the organization. That happened in the mid-1990s. Right around that time, one of the other things that I did ... so I'll talk a little bit about other state policy things, but I will say that for a pretty long time, not long after that, I did not do any work for about a decade in state policy. And the reason was I thought, as I do believe, you need to trust that there will be others. You don't have to do everything. You don't need to feel protective of everything you've done and need to stay there. I've never been on the citizens' advisory council for the Center for Integrated Ag Systems. I've been happy to trust that there are other smart, good people who do what needs to be done. And I felt that was the soundest approach, but then I actually, about a decade ago, I said—you know, there actually isn't another group doing this work on state policy. And I did have a funding opportunity that arose that allowed me then to start doing state policy work, and that proved really important, I think. So I will come to that era a little bit later, because this last decade we've been very active. Once I started that back up. I will tell you just real briefly, maybe, since we're on it. One of the things I did was in extension of my internship program, which I will come back to in a bit, but the internship program, I hired a really talented graduate student who was just about to graduate, or maybe she had at that point graduated—her name is Jeannie Merrill. She is in California, and she's working with the Cal-CAN, California Climate Action Network. She's their policy director. She had come from a background of pesticide activism and also some GMO Greenpeace work. She asked if I would consider her for an internship, and I said well, yes, I would. But more importantly, I would be interested, I have applied for funding, and if I get, you're the candidate I most would like to be my assistant policy director. I said—here's the deal—if you'll make a commitment of at least two years, but I would prefer at least three, and be prepared to stick around, I'm prepared to say you'd be at associate policy director and give you more responsibilities. And if you're not, then frankly, I will keep you with the specific project goals that we had with this grant, because it's tough in the policy world when people come and they go all of the time. You lose social capital every time you do that. And I said—if you're willing to make an investment and commit to being here, I'm prepared to help build your own capacity. So she did, she stayed three years, really effective, and one of the things that I was really pleased that she did was she got through the legislature. We did, I will say, but she really was, it was her baby that she really led working with another person on the Buy Local/Buy Wisconsin campaign. It was the new program that we got created and over the last several years we have been the principals leading to make sure it's gotten funded. So it's the program that helps support usually somewhere between eight and ten grants around the state every year, a couple of hundred thousand dollars—not big money, but it's enough to help galvanize new food systems-related work around the state. That's been a good one.

RK: That's been relatively recently, though, right?

MK: Yes, that's in the last decade, this most recent decade. I'm just going to finish up with the state policy stuff, just so we can go on to the other things. But the other things that we've done—we worked a lot on grazing in the state and have gotten funding to support and positions created to support grazing researchers, other grazing-related work. And we are continuing that work right now. There came a time when I didn't think we needed to continue to do it, and now I have

revisited that and conclude that we do, so we're working right now on trying to develop some further initiatives, and I won't go into those so much right now.

RK: But it's very important, I should note, in Wisconsin, obviously, because it's a dairy state. There's trends in the other direction with big CAFOs, (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) while at the same time this is to counter that, so that improving grazing techniques can keep ...

MK: Super-important.

RK: Really, to keep the farmers on the land and have the land treated better and the water, ultimately, treated better as a result of skilled grazing.

MK: It's so important, and one of the things, the first thing I think I had Jeannie do, I said—OK, if you're willing to make the commitment, here's an array of two or three projects, any of which would be really wonderful for you to take on, and I was pleased she bit on this one among them. And that was to do a constraints study—what gets in the way of wider-spread adoption of managed grazing? And one of the things that we learned is that a lot of farmers would say, essentially, what's the need? Or they would say it's not profitable. There were a lot of misconceptions, and it was clear that there was misinformation—that was the bottom line. So we began developing a strategy to address that set of concerns. I feel like we have made a significant difference on that, but one of the great truths in the state of Wisconsin is in the counties where there is good technical assistance for grazing, where there has been grazing technical support, we have more grazing plans and more graziers. So grazing technical assistance is critical, and that's what we're working on right now. Another program that, after Jeannie left, Bridget Holcomb—now do you know Bridget from her days with Illinois Stewardship Alliance and then with us?

(1:01:18)

RK: Right.

MK: Wonderfully talented. She's now the executive director of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network—WFAN. She, again, I helped think through strategy, same sort of thing. I was behind the scenes, the curtain was closed, but we had constant conversations, and she led—and did a brilliant job—on creating the Farm to School legislation in the state, creating an advisory committee, a grant program, and having staff at the department of ag on Farm to School, and that's again something that we're working on, continuing. So those are some examples of continuing state policy work that we do. We, throughout it all—as you know, because, in part, you've helped fund a good bit of it through the McKnight Foundation—we've worked on a number of different conservation pieces. I just was giving a talk at the university yesterday, and I always say there are three basic pieces of federal policy that you have to contemplate, three processes. One is the authorization, one is the implementation, and one is the appropriations. Implementation often gets short shrift. People forget that there is that taking the idea writ large and looking at the details and working on rule making and all that stuff. We have been really active on CSP. Jeannie, when she was here, was very active, and she very actively

helped create and worked to co-author a report on CSP and its efficacy, prior to the 2008 Farm Bill.

RK: Do you want to say what the CSP stands for?

MK: So sorry—the Conservation Stewardship Program, one of the signature achievements of the national sustainable agriculture policy apparatus. We have always had concerns that it wasn't getting promoted well enough or it wasn't implemented well enough, paperwork was too clumsy—these different issues. And we are just right now, my wonderful colleague George Reistad is just finishing up a piece of analysis of that program and we are using that to help promote CSP sign-up this year.

RK: And that's a program that is special in that it rewards farmers who are doing the right thing on the land, you might say, and sort of the more you do the better your stewardship, the payments can rise as a result of that.

MK: Right. It's not just trying to pay to fix problems, which is much more the EQIP tradition, and which lends itself to saying the bigger you are the bigger the problem. You're more likely to get awarded the contract. Yeah, it's a very different philosophy, and, frankly, getting NRCS, nationally in particular, to implement that philosophy has been very difficult. And we've witnessed that in the state. We have a lot of district conservationists who struggle because they think that it isn't making a big enough difference with farmers. They think it's too much paperwork for the amount of change.

RK: There's also the struggle, too, of people thinking, good people, that, well, those people who are already being funded are already on a stewardship track; the money ought to go to getting people on that track.

MK: There is that perspective.

RK: There's that one, too.

MK: So that's a program we've been very actively involved with, so that gives you a little sense ... you talked about our interest in having people use federal programs, and that is something I've been very involved with from way back in the mid-'90s. It really resulted from the fact that I felt that the appropriations campaign is an exhausting campaign. As you know—you've witnessed it. Especially in those days, because now we have all these NSAC staff taking on the grassroots piece and the policy direct, the Washington stuff. And I was the one person doing it with Ferd, and sometimes with his colleague Ann Wright. But it was extremely tiring. We would work, work, work and get these gains, and it suddenly hit me in the mid-'90s—well, I don't think farmers out there, are the potential stakeholders who could use the program, even know that some of these programs exist. And don't we want farmers and others who are the target stakeholders of sustainable agriculture to know what federal programs and resources are available to help build the sustainable agriculture movement? So C. S. Mott Foundation was one of the foundations that supported my going and developing the first edition of what has since become ... after every farm bill we put together something which is the guide to federal

programs. It's called different things. The first year it was a perfect example of government, too many agencies wanting their finger in the pie, so it was called something very much like, "A Guide to Programs in USDA and Other Federal Agencies that Support Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry," or some dreadful title kind of like that. But the truth is this has always been a guide that people can use to kind of learn what's out there. And now that we have the internet, I say to people use it as a menu, figure out what's of value, then go on line and get into the bloody details.

RK: I saw the USDA stamp on there, so ...

MK: Yes, SARE supports this.

RK: ... what SARE produced ...

MK: Well, no, we produced it. We did the work.

RK: You did the work, but it's actually got the imprimatur of the ...

MK: It does. We have three, really four collaborators. USDA has helped fund it, and they substantially funded it. Also, we got some support from Farm Aid. We also work closely with NSAC, because NSAC does something that's a little bit ... they call it The Grassroots Guide to Farm Bills, and it's a little bit wonkier. But they know these programs so well, so they took on a few of the programs, and I would later edit and tighten it, but it was still really super helpful. They took a bit chunk of the work. And then we worked with NCAT, National Center for Appropriate Technology, their ATTRA program, which helps distribute it. So if people want a copy, they can call up ATTRA and order a copy, and it's also online, that they can download

RK: So that's like the umpteenth edition of it.

MK: It is. I think this is the sixth edition, I'd have to go back and check, but we have done it, and it's just always people just die for them. Just last week somebody said—can I get a whole bunch more? So that's good, and I use it when I do grant writing workshops, and I've done a ton of grant writing workshops. I don't know how many hundred, but several hundred over the years, and that's very satisfying to me. I find it very gratifying that so many people have told me—if I hadn't seen your guide or if I hadn't done your workshop, I wouldn't have tried to apply to this, that, or another thing. We've learned another very important thing, though, and that is—I learned this about not quite a decade ago—that the workshop, even if it's a great workshop, frankly, isn't sufficient to help those immigrant farmers or sometimes socially disadvantaged farmers, or farmers who just feel like—oh, my English isn't good enough, even if they were born in America, and they feel intimidated by the process. Sometimes people need more handholding. And we have hired, and we have as a consultant, a grants advisor, whom we get Farm Aid money and SARE supports and another Wisconsin Farmers Union, and we have other funding sources that help us pay for this wonderful grant advisor's time. And she will talk with potential grantees, and sometimes they didn't even understand that there would be resources that would be better suited to their needs, and she can guide them there. She has a list serve—people learn what resources are available all the time. You wouldn't believe how many USDA program officers,

program staff, want to be on it. And they say that's their best source of what new grants and other resources are available. That's super. And then she helps people do their thinking points, all that, and review their proposals. It's very gratifying; the stories from this are super-touching. It is my favorite grant report every year, because the stories would just warm the cockles of your heart.

(1:10:04)

RK: Just so I know, where does that grant go to—does it go to Michael Fields, or is that right through NSAC, or what?

MK: No, it goes to Michael Fields. It's our initiative, but we hire a grants advisor. And it's only for the Midwest, although she gets calls from all over the country, and I keep trying to get USDA to take on this job. They should be doing that work. But until they do, we at least can cover a good part of the country.

RK: What made me think, as you were talking, too, we think about how much there is left to do, but the progress that has been made—I'm thinking about my interview with Roger Blobaum, who devoted his life to promoting the organic side of things. In 1981, when Reagan got elected, Bergland, as the secretary of agriculture, earlier had put out a report and recommendation on organic farming, and it was published, as I understand it, in October 1980. The election happened in November. Reagan was elected and put in John Block as secretary of agriculture, and he ordered that that report, which didn't really go overboard—it just recognized the contribution a more organic approach to organic farming could make—he ordered it destroyed. So it ended up Roger and some others ended up getting the copies of it while they still could, before they could be burned, to distribute them. And now we've got the sixth edition of a guide that's actually coming, a guide that's coming out of USDA.

MK: Yes, and then you look at their website and look at the SARE website and look at the incredible data that they've developed, the research they've provided and the super help they provide, and just on the topic of cover crops alone, you realize USDA has come a long way. With a lot of advocacy from a lot of people. [Chuckles]

RK: It didn't just happen, but it definitely did start to happen with all of the effort of people like ...

MK: You!

RK: ... people like you.

MK: And you. Yes, it's true.

RK: I know you wanted to touch on, too—you sort of did, but your work's been, along the way, to bring more young people, younger leaders into the movement.

MK: Yeah, I do really believe that, so many of my grants have included this thing that I call building the movement. And building the movement is generally made up of three things. One is I felt that as a movement that was dependent upon grassroots power, we needed to have a better grassroots base, and that the Sustainable Ag Coalition and the National Campaign, now the merged group, the National Sustainable Ag Coalition needed to have a better grassroots muscle to flex, and so I spent a lot of time working on building that in all sorts of ways. I'd go to conferences, and I would get people to contribute their conference lists. I'd implore groups to help do what I always did. Every workshop I went to—I still do—every workshop I go to I get people to sign up and I send those names along to NSAC. Wisconsin, for years, was overwhelmingly the largest state with grassroots members, because I'm always signing it up. Not all groups are comfortable doing that, and I wish more were, because I feel like that builds our collective capacity. Doesn't diminish our own—we can use our mailing list just as well, but it means that the collectivity benefits. But, anyway, not all groups see it that way. So I spent a lot of time on that, and on a lot of grassroots strategy, helping to develop grassroots plans for NSAC, for example, and developing long-term thinking and so forth. The NSAC grassroots team is so good now they don't need that kind of thinking. They've got their own great ideas and they are really super, but there were times when I think that was really helpful. The youth, or the young leaders, is something I take really seriously. I felt there was a period back in the maybe late '90s when I would go to meetings—early 2000s—and I knew every person in the room, and it gave me the heebie-jeebies. I'm thinking—whoo, we have become really insular. We don't mean to be, but we have not been cultivating. So I, thereupon, really did begin very deliberately creating an internship program. I'm a bit ambivalent about it only because it takes so much work. The theory of my program was not how to have people help me with my work. I did have people help me with my work, but the theory of it was how do we build the capacity to get new leaders committed to sustainable agriculture policy? I started with one internship, and literally with that very first internship another one said—I don't need a stipend if I can just do it. And so I learned it was no more trouble to do two than one, so I always made it a twosome. I would always hire two interns, and I would make it a national solicitation. Oh, the intern applications I got; I got just so many incredible applicants. And what I learned, I learned some really important things. I learned that I had to tell people that my top criteria—not all the normal stuff like are you easy to work with, are you a good hard worker, all that kind of stuff. Are you clear that you want a career in sustainable agriculture policy? Because I'd get a lot of really great applicants, and I wasn't clear that they were clear that they were going to land in policy. And, frankly, I don't have the capacity to invest my time in helping people figure that out. Other people do, I don't. I felt like I had state policy experience that they could learn from and participate in. The appropriations campaign was a really great window into which to understand mechanics, how you translate philosophy and vision into the mechanics of an operational campaign. So I would always arrange for them to go to DC and work with then SAC and then NSAC for two weeks, typically sort of in the March-ish range. They would often help participate in a fly-in and help planning it, making it happen. And then when they came back I would always consider that was the tipping point. After that it was the second half. It was a five-month internship from sometime in January to the same date in June. And then I would say—OK, now again, let's revisit again what your goals are. Have they changed? What are you thinking? What's your long term intention? And I invested, then, in helping them think through what they needed to learn in the remaining time, and did they want to—for example, Bridget knew she wanted, always knew she wanted to end up in Minnesota, so I called up Loni Kemp and other folks in Minnesota, and

said—would you like to have, free of charge, because she will be paid by our internship, but she would be doing work for you. I know it would be supportive of our big mission anyway. And she would have exposure that would give her some credibility in the world that she's wanting to move into. I did those kinds of arrangements for the interns. It was, honestly, a terrific internship, and we really got a lot of great leaders out of it. Steph Larson, here in this state—our wonderful Farmers Union Government Relations Director. And, of course, I don't know if you knew Katie Peterman—Katie Weed used to be her name—and she was with Organic Valley, their policy person, and then, of course, Bridget, and many others. We had a lot—I won't even say them all, because I'll forget someone and that will offend people. But the point is many, many people are really ended up in positions where they are making a difference. That is deeply gratifying. But the other thing I learned is that most of my applicants fell into a very specific demographic stratum, and that was white, upper middle class, women, typically somewhere in their twenties, early thirties, most with a graduate degree—not all. Many of whom had traveled, say to South America and done work in sustainable ag and so forth. And, you know, it was clear to me that our movement, as you said so well earlier, because so much of the policy part of our movement derived, and the most potent part of our policy work, came from those early days from SAWGs and the SAC. That was Midwest, it was Upper Midwest, it was very white, and we hadn't gotten away from that very well. And also I will say I felt that we as a movement, we are failing to address stakeholders who are genuine stakeholders, but they are unknowing stakeholders. They don't know that the work we do affects them, and yet it affects them. Our mission isn't about tokenism. The reason that motivates us to do this kind of work on diversity shouldn't be about it makes us look better. It's nothing like that. It's that we have stakeholders in a democracy, people who are affected significantly, in many cases, by the work that we do, and they have no idea that we are doing it, and they have no voice in it, and they could be powerful in their work if we helped cultivate those people in our work. I learned from really working hard to find applicants of color, and making exceptions in my commitment—are you sure you want a career in sustainable ag policy? Sometimes I made an exception if it was a person of color, because I really wanted more interns of color. I learned from them that what we needed was to start much younger. And we have. I started much younger with George (Reistad). He did not have a background in sustainable ag. He's a super-smart guy, and a very quick learner, and committed to learning, and willing to invest the time. And I was willing to invest the time in training him, and he's just like a sponge. He's always learning and always growing, and he's become a very important person in NSAC's work on diversity. That we'll come to in a sec, but the point is we are working now on trying to develop a program on developing new leaders of color, starting much younger. Just this morning I was on a conference call as we were trying to go after a federal grant that can assist us with some of this. This is a really important area that our movement needs to work toward.

(1:21:10)

RK: Thank you. I know we wanted to ... or I wanted to, especially, talk about something that you were involved in around the structure of NSAC as it developed. We've talked earlier about the National Campaign, which comprised, among other things, the sustainable ag working groups around the country providing the field base, while SAC, the Sustainable Ag Coalition—I'm thinking of people like Ferd Hoefner—was working in Washington on policy. And yet they

were very interlinked and dependent upon one another, and the decision came to try to merge them, and you were involved in that, and I'd like to have your perspectives on it.

MK: Well, I'm thrilled to be asked, because really I did feel very strongly for years. If you imagine trying to coordinate an appropriations campaign for the sustainable ag movement when you have two bosses, each with very different priority setting processes. The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture did a wonderful job early-on of having much more diverse stakeholders and members, and its priority setting process was wildly more inclusive, so they can end up with a way longer list of priorities. Then the Sustainable Ag Coalition, which is now much more closely associated with what we think of as NSAC, had a much tighter set of priorities, and they were the Washington place where that touched down. So that's why I worked so closely with Ferd on this, and yet I had to merge these things. This was very clumsy and it seemed completely awkward to me. It also seemed awkward to me, quite honestly, that technically speaking it had come to be the case that SAC, the most powerful entity in the nation on sustainable ag policy, was a sub-set of a rather small Midwestern working group, Sustainable Ag Working Group. What a weird ... it was just an accident of history that it ended up that way, but it was a clumsy system. And it came, I witnessed, because I always had to work it, at least as strongly as anybody else could have seen how clumsy it really was. So I had felt for quite a while we needed to explore this question of merging, but we, frankly, didn't know when the farm bill, what became the 2008 Farm Bill ... you know, from 2002 to 2008, that was a six-year span. We were kind of thinking it might be done a little sooner. We had hoped it might be done sooner, but it wasn't. Meantime, we had kind of put on hold this question of a merger until we could get the farm bill done. So finally, as the farm bill finally started getting ready to go to bed, we said—OK, we can't put this off anymore. And we began that process in late 2008, or even earlier—but in 2008, and started having meetings, talking about it. One of the things that was really quite tender and very disturbing to me is that the much more diverse membership of the National Campaign for Sustainable Ag, some people, and I, thankfully, am happy to not go into those whos and whys. I couldn't attribute purpose and intention, but there came a time when it looked as though the merger was going to happen, as it ultimately did, which is to say that SAC was going to become the body that carried it forward, and that the national Campaign members, we would seek actively to have them become members of this new entity. There's always got to be one of the two that ends up kind of carrying it, and it ended up seeming to many that SAC would be the one that carried it, and it would do it as it always had done, or it proposed to do it as it always had done under the fiscal agency of the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska. And there were those who didn't want to see the merger go forward without the campaign being the preeminent one, and some people used scare tactics, some of them, I thought, rather racially charged. That this is going to ... they're not going to care about diversity. They aren't going to be engaged, and that the Center for Rural Affairs hasn't been interested in diversity. They're going to try to control the agenda. So during that period of deliberation about are we going to merge or not, there were those who, for a variety of reasons, some of them nobler than others, wanted to oppose the merger under the terms that the boards of the two groups had agreed upon, and that the advisory group set up to create the new entity had proposed. I felt dismayed when I learned that there were people who were casting aspersions on the intentions of the Center for Rural Affairs, which had always been meticulous about not trying to bias any of the decisions that NSAC made, other than as a member of NSAC. Or SAC had made, other than as a member. They'd never used their fiscal agency other than as a way to help it, and I didn't appreciate that

there were some divisive ideas that I thought some people maybe used to oppose that merger, and they've had a lot of consequence, because there were groups that I think we could have had join NSAC, groups that had been members of the National Campaign for Sustainable Ag, that didn't join, and I think it was, in part, because of the rumor mill that circulated at that time. That's a legacy that has harmed us, and at literally the first meeting of the past and legally constituted National Sustainable Ag Coalition in Alexandria, Virginia, in January of 2009—I remember it well—it was a darn close to 100 percent white audience. It wasn't everybody, but we were so white, and it was so strikingly different from the way the National Campaign had functioned, it was disturbing to most of us there. I began immediately thinking we needed to really work to bring about change. We created a diversity committee, also called the social justice working group, within NSAC. I was a co-chair of it for lots of years with Lydia Villanueva from Texas. We were charged with doing two things. One was to think about how to change our own membership to help make NSAC's members more diverse, and, second, how to make sure that the work that we did would reflect the priorities of that more diverse constituency. So, in other words, even if we weren't yet diverse, to make sure that we were listening as well as we could. So before the last farm bill, Lydia and I went and did a lot of phone calling to many groups to try to hear what some of those priorities would be, and once again we heard from some groups. Some people were discouraged from talking with us, actually. So there continues to be a tender issue here, and turf. I think I might as well just say it—there's some turf. There are other groups that are reluctant to see NSAC diversify, because maybe it makes their group less relevant—I don't know why. But it is a disturbing idea to me, and continues to be, and I'm very grateful that we're starting to really systematize how do we help groups. I am now of the firm belief that we will not as a coalition diversify until our member groups individually engage more in issues where we have stakeholders of color, where we then can cultivate board members of color, where we then cultivate and hire staff members of color when they are not yet even trained in our work, but in whom we trust and who we know can gain that capacity, like George Reistad. That, to me, is a model that we need to follow, and we need to actively, intentionally, be about it. I'm thinking it's becoming a stronger and stronger message in all of our meetings. George is a brilliant diplomat, because he doesn't blame people, but he calls it. He looked at the priority-setting process we had this last time, which was messy in the extreme on all sorts of criteria, and said—for a group that says that we want to listen to social justice issues, that didn't come up in this priority setting.

(1:30:39)

RK: Was that for a recent annual meeting?

MK: That's right—the annual meeting just about two weeks ago or three weeks ago in California. At our policy council meeting, you know it, frankly—we talked about everything under the sun, and it didn't come up partly because it was such a messy process, but partly because we didn't have a sufficient hold on our own way of integrating the social justice agenda into our priority-setting process that it had a constituency right there saying—hey! So he brought it up, talked about it, and it became a very hot topic and a constructive topic. So that's important—we're gaining on it, but it's tough—we need to keep working now.

RK: Well, you're coming to what I wanted to cover as we wrap things up, and that is looking forward. We've hit on, obviously, a very crucial topic around diversity as needing to be strengthened as this movement tries to move forward to real progress in making our food system and agriculture more sustainable. Do you have any other ideas about what you see as the challenge, maybe thinking in terms of more immediately, the next farm bill, and then looking out beyond?

MK: I do, and I see one of our biggest challenges as a movement, deciding, trying to find a balance between incrementalism and large systems change. I'm a believer in both. We are at a time where we are about to face the likely 70 percent of our farmlands being transferred in this next 20 years. That doesn't allow for incremental change. That's got to require systemic change. We have a lot of farmers who feel alienated for all sorts of cultural reasons, not just the sustainable ag community, but they are thrilled to be given an enemy to hate. Are we so foolish that we are going to allow ourselves to be set up that way? Do we really want to isolate ourselves as a movement—not that any one person says that we should. Nobody ever says that, but it is a byproduct of some of the decisions that we make. And how we orient and how we frame what we do, how carefully we communicate to mainstream farmers that we know that our policies can be useful to them. One of the great advantages of this whole farm revenue protection, risk management work is that it's directly relevant to the potato growers and the large-scale specialty crop growers that I just went and did a workshop with a week-and-a-half ago. I was so pleased to be able to go, because they got it. They did not feel or communicate in any way that they felt alienated. That's who we need to be understanding as part of our constituency, and we need to be reaching out to them, not only because it can help build our power, but also because if we want to change the face of agriculture, it isn't going to help for us to only build capacity for what is a relatively small segment of agriculture. We also have to be influencing the structures that affect how the majority of farmers in this country farm, and developing the mechanisms for culture. One of the things that I think has been a perfect example of how policies can change culture is the little tiny program years ago that, coming out of the 2002 Farm Bill, almost didn't get funded, and was one of, I would say, one of the little tiny triumphs of the appropriations campaign. We said no, let's not give up on it; let's do one last big kill ourselves, and we got the farmers market promotion program funded that year. They had 20 times the number of applicants for that one little \$1 million dollar pool of funding. They had \$20 million dollars' worth of applicants, and then the next year was \$3 million, and then it built. In the next farm bill it went higher and higher. And now it's ... I've forgotten what it is; it's a huge amount more now. The point is over the years what that program allowed was a flowering of the direct marketing mechanisms of CSAs and farmers markets. Many of them would have happened on their own, but nothing like the potent, sophisticated, effective network that has been built and sustains a lot of dialog and a lot of engagement and activism. Think of all of the Mark Bittmans in the world and all of the food commentators and the local foodie movement—none of that would have happened if there hadn't been an infrastructure. That's how the policies that we help create can alter the world. Now let's do the same thing towards mainstream ag. Let's intentionally create programs that help them think of us as we.

(1:36:03)

RK: That's a very good idea. I think, also, just be remiss if we didn't mention, in addition to this transition of farmland, that 70 percent you're talking about, also doing this in a time of climate change.

MK: Absolutely right.

RK: And how can, maybe—will climate change be a way of bringing people together across this somewhat of a divide that exists today? That will be crucial, it seems to me.

MK: Well, you know what? Ok, you're going to be surprised that I am such a pessimist on this, but it won't unless we structure it and frame it that way, because people naturally react to danger by finding an enemy and dividing. We don't naturally come together unless we understand that your gain isn't my loss. So when we set up our policies we have to make sure it's not a zero sum game. We have to say—we want to have mainstream agriculture able to continue to exist. Let's help you gain the technologies that allow you to use less water, that allow you to develop cover crops and not lose your crop insurance. That allow you ... in other words, so we're not a threat; instead we're an ally. And we can be an ally on terms that help build sustainability and resilience, but let's be careful that we don't gratuitously—which is to say sometimes we need to be absolutely oppositional because we just have no choice, but let's not gratuitously set ourselves up to be other. That's all.

RK: That's very good. I believe we have covered most everything that I wanted to cover.

MK: Could we not? Could we have left anything out?

RK: But is there anything else? If not we'll just settle with this. I'm very grateful that you were willing to spend this time with me and get this recorded.

MK: Well, Ron, I am grateful, too, and I want to just say what I said when you retired, which I'm not sure has been recorded here, but I want to make sure it is recorded, and that is—your role, early-on, as one of the foundational thinkers about SAC and the sub-set of MSAWG, and your willingness to work, to help write the grants that helped make it possible, you and Chuck in particular worked. And your commitment to hiring Ferd, whom you knew to be good, and whose integrity you early trusted, and whose competence you defended, and his role was so essential. We could have had various ways of constructing that role, but you said—Ferd is critical and he has proven to be so. And you know you had so many roles in this movement. You know you've had roles as an NGO member. You've had a role, several roles as funders. Those roles have been absolutely instrumental in setting the pace for helping the funding world understand that how they fund is also important. It's not only who they fund and what they fund, but how they go about funding, and the openness that you always demonstrated to listening to your grantees saying—to you, for example—we really need organizing capacity in the South, and your trusting us and empowering us to do what the movement needed. And you've did it over and over. And what I said, one of the comments I sent at the time, I remember from a year or so ago, was I so clearly remember ... I think we were in Minnesota, couldn't be sure. Yeah, I think we were in southern Minnesota, and we were meeting about ... and Ken Taylor was there, so this was in the early '90s, talking about biotechnology. And I so clearly remember your saying—sometimes in

this policy world we get so carried away with our sense of strategy that we forget to ask the moral question—but is it OK? But is it right? We get so caught up in our tactics that we forget to ground ourselves in the fundamental values of humanity and the core principles of our movement. And, you know, I feel like there's so many ways that lesson has been useful to me, and I betcha a lot of other people. I'm sure it manifested many other ways, but that's one that I happened to be a witness to, so thank you for that, as well.

RK: Thank you. Well, glad I'm off camera with my red face, and I probably won't edit this last part out of our conversation.

MK: Good, please don't, yes, absolutely not. Lovely, thank you. Let's go have lunch.

RK: OK.

Transcribed by
Carol C. Bender
WordCrafter
carolbender@msn.com
651-644-0474