

**Don Bustos**  
**Narrator**

**Ron Kroese**  
**Interviewer**

**February 21, 2017**

**Don Bustos—DB**  
**Ron Kroese—RK**

**RK:** This is Ron Kroese, today is February 21, and videographer [Jackie Monroe] and I are here on the farm with Don Bustos, located north of the Santa Cruz River, not far from the town of Espanola, New Mexico. Don's farm has been in the Bustos family since the 1600s. Don, I'm really glad to be here to talk with you. As I mentioned before the interview, I like to start these interviews with the idea of really getting to know the people who helped form a lot of the policies that farmers around the country are benefitting from today. But I'd like to start with a look back at your own background, all the way back to when you were a little kid and how you got interested in farming, why you got interested. It's pretty obvious that the family going back to the 1600s is why you were interested in farming, but I'd like you just to describe it and up through your youth and then we'll go on from there.

**DB:** Sure. Thank you for interviewing me, and, as you say, the farm is a ... we live in Santa Cruz, and the name of the farm is Santa Cruz Farm. Well, I named it after the church, the Santa Cruz Church, and I named it after the Santa Cruz de la Cañada Land Grant, which was established over 300 years ago. I like to tell people we still farm the same land our ancestors farmed 400 years ago, and we still use the same rituals and we still use the same traditions. We incorporate a little new technology that allows us to be economically viable, and that technology comes in the form of using solar energy for year-round production itself. So I'm really proud of that. I really am proud, also, that we are sitting on the land that belonged to my mom and belonged to my grandma. My mom's name was Trinidad, my grandma's name was Genara, and my great-great-grandma, Altagracia, lived just across the acequia from where I live right now. This land has always been on the women's side of our family, and it's because women always outlive the men, and through the history of New Mexico, there was always men would die from different natural causes or the difficulties and stuff, and so the women outlived the men itself. My great-great-grandma, Altagracia, had three different husbands, and she outlived all of them. So you can see how women were, really, the ones that always have protected the land and really made it available for the future for our kids themselves. So, I grew up with that kind of a feeling of the land is to protect, to nurture the next generation, because here's where we're going to be for future generations. I, myself, one of the fondest memories I have, I grew up here, then my grandpa on my dad's side, Abron Bustos, my dad was Frank Bustos Francisco, and Abron Bustos, just on the other side of the foothills, I grew up there also. And Grandpa Abron had an old mule, and I remember he would be plowing down the field with the old mule, and he'd hit a little stump and he'd wiggle that plow out and put it down and sweat would be coming off of his forehead, and the first thing he would say, he would be taking off the hat and wiping it across the brow, and he'd be saying, "Ojala!" if the creator wills it, it will be. And then, "haah!" and the

mule would go forward and it would keep plowing. So this sense of belonging, the spiritual kind of connectedness, has always been in our family, and I think that is what really binds me to a land is I never feel more comfortable, or I never feel more secure—I've never felt more secure until I'm right here on the land, because it speaks to me. Not just this land, but the whole area just speaks, and there's a certain kind of a connection. So, I call it just living in the moment and really appreciate what we have and learning how to live within those areas itself. So that's kind of like the memories I grew up with right here. I grew up right here across the field that you can see here. You can't see it, but we grew chili, we grew sweet corn, pumpkins, we grew a lot of native crops like lamb's quarters, purslane—all those were incorporated into a diet. My dad had a cellar, and the cellar's still there. My mom would pack food. We'd dry squash. The women would do like all the packing, the preserving, and the men would do the fields, the wood gathering and the hunting itself. So, I grew up in that real traditional kind of a family that everybody contributed to the larger picture itself. The family and then the community itself was engaged in that kind of an area. And that's where the acequias ... the acequias are the first form of democracy in the United States, but it's also a form of water distribution in New Mexico and across the Southwest. And part of it is bringing people together to do the common good for the community, and that was to maintain the acequias for the distribution of water in different forms. So that's all being part of a family, being part of the community and being part of the larger whole and not just for yourself, but you're serving everything around you and making sure everything's safe. So those are the types of areas that I grew up in.

**RK:** Nonetheless, from what I've read, when you were a young man you left the farm for a while, didn't you, and were a carpenter?

**DB:** Yeah, yeah, when I was growing up I went to military school. I went to military school down in Roswell, at New Mexico Military Institute, and I was just about to join the military and the draft ended. So I go, yeah, my dad served in Korea and my uncle served in World War II, and so we've always, our families always have served during times of crisis and need, but in that time when there was no need, there was no need for me to serve. So I left the military institute and I left the training. I left the area and came back to the farm, and I joined the carpenters' union. I was in the local carpenters' union for several years. I went through apprentice program and became a journeyman carpenter, and then I think it was in the late '70s, in the early 1980s, when the recession hit and there wasn't a lot of work around the country and slow in building and constructions, I started to come to the farm more and more and help my mom and dad. They were getting a little bit older, there was trees coming on—you know how farms sometimes get in a little bit of disarray, and so I helped them clean it up, and I planted the alfalfa fields, and that's what really got me energized back, and I started to migrate—even if I didn't know it, instinctually—but I started to migrate more and more to the farm itself. So I had the fields all full of alfalfa, I'd be here, I'd be cleaning, and then one summer I planted a row of cucumbers, and the cucumbers did so, so well that I had cucumbers, I'd give them to everybody. And my mom goes—well, there's a farmers' market in Santa Fe, you should go to the farmers market. I thought—oh, I'll go give it a try; I didn't have anything else to do. So I loaded up my truck and I had a little bit of red chili, and I took my cucumbers to the farmers' market. I didn't even make enough money for the entrance fee. But what there was, there was so many beautiful women there that I go—I'm going to go back again. So it wasn't the money—it never is about the money—it's always about having a good time. So that's what really drew me into farming

again was—oh, yeah, there's a little bit of money to be made, but there's more of a social aspect to be had. More of a community kind of an environment. And I think that's always something that we've always been drawn to a little bit, is that social engagement, that community kind of thing, yeah.

**RK:** And then when you gradually went from cucumbers you just started getting a clearer vision of what to grow, and now you have something like, what, 70 crops you grow. And talk a little bit about what the farm has become today.

**DB:** So out of that experience I started watching and I started looking at different kinds of crops. I started growing sweet corn and pumpkins, and I would go to the farmers market. I mean, in those days the farmers market was just barely taking off, and just the cool thing about that is that this whole thing about organic was coming up, so there was this whole movement, or this kind of rumbling about being organic and how it's better for food and it's healthier, and I caught that wave. And that wave really demanded a diversity of products to be delivered, had to be the appropriate growing conditions. So we were able to start to meet that demand a little bit more through this farm, and then we went to season extension and that ... we'll talk about the USDA programs, but all those programs, through on-farm activities and needs, we were able to translate those needs through organizations like the Rural Coalition, like the NSAC, like Sustainable Ag Coalition before them, and NIFI [National Immigrant Farming Initiative], and all these national organizations—they helped us translate the needs of small farmers into language that could be adapted by USDA and then create the programs that impact us directly. So those kinds of things that really started to happen, you know, the farming area, the pieces of the policy studies that come together, the articulation for the needs. And then the rise from all of the people that wanted to eat healthy. I mean that was really the motivation is that people wanted to start eating healthy and became aware of the importance of organic, natural, pesticide-free, chemical-free, and then later it was organic. But all these things come out of what I call this on-farm innovation and discovery, and then starts the research and demonstration from there.

**RK:** Yeah, and it's really a matter of both the ... incorporating both the traditions and the wisdom of how to use the water with, increasingly, the scientific method. Sometimes your methods were ahead of the science, and sometimes the science learning more recently helps you out, right?

**DB:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have a good example of that, also, is that I wrote a small grant. So one of the programs I really like to cheer on or champion is the SARE program, and Western SARE, because we live in the western United States—the biggest region in the U.S., by the way. [Chuckles] I learned...

**RK:** The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education...

**DB:** Program, yeah, yeah, yeah. So that's a federal program and they have funding. So I got a small SARE grant, Western SARE grant, and it was to put up solar panels, because what was happening, about 20 years ago I started to sell to the Santa Fe Public Schools, and what was holding me back is that there wasn't enough production in the middle of the winter—January and February. I used to build these little cold frames out of PVC pipe and I'd put up plastic, and I'd

be able to extend the season into December, and then it would get really cold and it wouldn't grow anymore, and then I wouldn't start up again until March, when the daylight was long enough and night time temperatures allowed for it. And anyway, came along the SARE program, and I learned about SARE. I attended a small workshop in Albuquerque on grant writing. This is part ... oh, I'll go to that, sounds interesting. And I went over there and I learned about the SARE program. I got a couple of grants from SARE, and then I wrote the one for the solar energy, and they gave me solar panels. I told them—I got a brand-new method, man. I'm going to grow food in the middle of the winter, using nothing but solar energy. And I drew this little piece of plan out on a plywood, and then we drew it out on paper, and then I did all the plans. A plumber friend of mine came in and helped me do the plumbing schematics, and I wrote it and I sent it in. It got funded. Yeah, it got funded—it's amazing! We put up solar panels. I put the radiant tubes underneath the beds of the cold frames that we have now. So, the idea was to have hot water heated during the day, store it, and then circulate that hot water at night underneath the soil. That brings up the soil temperature, and then at night we covered it with a polyester woven cloth, and then the plastic on top, so the plastic layer would freeze first. The polyester woven cloth would freeze, that would create two layers of air, and then the hot air being released from the soil at night from the solar exchange system, that hot air would be trapped underneath that layer of ice. So it is like an igloo, I tell people. We are able to grow lettuce. It would be below zero and we are harvesting lettuce at 10 o'clock the next morning. Solar energy. So I went from \$750 for a little tiny propagation greenhouse I have—it's 15 feet by 50 feet—\$750 a month for natural gas—to seven cents a day for my electrical and natural gas needs.

**RK:** Wow.

**DB:** So you talk about the savings, huh? So, I did that at SARE, and then you call the science center. Like you're saying, I'm trying to tie it back in, how it works. So I called the Science Center, which are good friends of mine, those guys there. They were looking at it, and they go—yeah, Don, it looks like it works ... but we never did the research. But I'm not a researcher, I'm just a farmer. So they were able to get a larger grant, and they were able to do the research. And Del Jimenez put up I don't know how many cold frames, he'll say ... and he did—he's put up, I'd say, several hundred cold frames across New Mexico. And Steve and Charles, all those guys, they got grants and they were able to do the research, and they now knew in the exact day what to plant. What, how deep, what the temperatures ... it is so sweet to see them really follow up. And then the whole community, all of northern New Mexico, really thriving to meet the demands of production in Santa Fe, and the local schools. That came out from right here, just saying, man, I need enough ... the damn gas bill was too high and I couldn't pay it, so I had to figure another way so I could grow food to pay the bills.

**RK:** That's wonderful.

**DB:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, so I go in for that simple stuff.

**RK:** I imagine that's been written up by somebody, because that's certainly a success story.

**DB:** Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, for SARE. So from there I tell the joke that I wrote grants to SARE, and I think I got funded two or three times, and I go—they finally got tired of getting my grants

and funding me that they asked me to sit on their committee. So I sat on the SARE committee for, I think, four years or seven years, and then I became the chair, and I chaired the Western SARE for three years.

**RK:** Did you really?

**DB:** So I came all the way from writing grants, a farmer, all the way to chairing the Western SARE committee.

**RK:** We'll probably talk some more about this, but I think a lot of folks consider that SARE program one of the most significant things of what became NSAC, the working groups and the Campaign for Sustainable Ag—all that work that ultimately led to the SARE program, and gradually in the hard work of Ferd and others to keep enough money in it—that's always the struggle. It's still a relative pittance of the USDA's research monies, but it's done so much good.

**DB:** Yeah, I champion SARE, and I think that they should actually get the amount of money that they need to do an effective—they're doing an effective job, but there would be a threshold if they get more funding, and then it kicks them up to the next level where they can open up more research centers. So I think that they should continue to get funded, even at higher levels. They are one of the only USDA programs—and I don't mean to be disrespectful to any of the other programs—but I think that they are one of the only ones ... well, they are one of the ones—there are several of them—but that really hit the ground, and they're having effective ... all of them do, but this one has an immediate effect on the farms themselves, because part of it is applied research and demonstrations, where farmers can actually see it as it's going on. It's not just research and put on the shelf for another researcher to read and then build on it. This is work that's really done right on the field. And then the councils incorporate people from their regions, too, so they're getting feedback what each region needs. I can go on to say ... so the cool thing about SARE is the regions, and each region gets a certain amount of funding, you know, equal amount of funding, and then the region and the council decides how that funding is used, and not somebody in Washington, DC, or somebody that doesn't know anything about the region, because the Southwest and the West region is different than the Northeast or the Southeast region. So those are pretty innovative ideas.

**RK:** Yeah, so that was happening in the '80s, probably when the work started on SARE, I think, and maybe about the '90 Farm Bill. I've got it written down somewhere, exactly what the chronology was, but you were probably one of the earlier people involved in SARE. Were you part of any kind of a contingent that actually helped get SARE itself funded, or not?

**DB:** No, I wasn't part of that. I was a little bit, but not directly. Because at that same time Ferd and the Sustainable Ag Campaign, the national campaign, were holding these national leadership development trainings, and I got invited in several areas, but one was to Washington, DC, and they showed us how to lobby. And in that packet it had the SARE program, and it had the farm program, energy programs and stuff, so we would go to our senators and our congressmen with the packet and lobby for the programs. So that was one of the great things that I really got from the campaign itself.

**RK:** One of the things that really happened that's so good were those farmer fly-ins, where the farmers themselves would get trained, and they were a voice that really couldn't be ignored, even by people, legislators who might not agree with them on a lot of things.

**DB:** Well, no—you go in there and, like me, I knew my Senator Domenici, since I was a kid. Senator Domenici! What are you doing here, Don? Who let you in? You know, joking around, asking about my dad. And then Senator Udall, all of these guys that have been there now, Representative Lujan, and Senator Heinrich, and Representative—she's going to shoot me 'cause I can't remember her name.

**RK:** Oh, we'll come back.

**DB:** Yeah, it'll come back to me in the middle of the night, and I'll wake up—oh, I messed that one up. [Chuckles]

**RK:** That's fine. Also...

**DB:** So it's neat to have those connections, and I think part of it was to get that confidence. To get over there, and they'd show us a packet—here's what you want to talk about, here's how much money, and then, if they could, I think they would send an aide with us or a group of us, and they would be able to explain in detail, and they would give them the card, and then there would be a more direct connection. So that went on, like I was saying, with the National Campaign, with the Rural Coalition, and then after that, after learning all of that, part of the cool thing is myself, Rigoberto, which is executive director, Maty, Lauro Chuko, I can't remember the other guys—we formed the National Immigrant Farmers Initiative. And that's a national non-profit organization that works on immigrant and refugee issues relating to sustainable agriculture, and we've been existence, I think, now about eight or nine years, and we've had programs all over the United States. It's because the way the Oxfam report mentioned several years ago—I don't know if you read that Oxfam report—but I remember it because it had my picture in the book, and I was quoted in it—that was cool stuff. But anyway, it was quoted as organic growers and small growers are like two percent of the population, and all the funding is going to these other people, and over 15 percent, but we are getting less than two percent of the funding. And then it talked a little bit about how all the farmers are getting older. And then it talked about the next population of farmers are going to be immigrants, you know. If we really want to look at life seriously there's going to be a lot of internal growth, but if we really want to feed ourselves in the way that we think is the right way, in a sustainable and healthy and economic way, then we need about I don't know how many million new farmers to come in. So we need to engage this new migration of agriculturalists and engage them in a positive way so that they can become part of the system and not excluded and being taken advantage of, and then later on you get chaos. Bring in your [Unclear] and there's not as much ... there's always chaos and differences, that's what makes it interesting, but not so different where we cannot figure our commonalities together.

**RK:** I can't resist—with the recent election of President Trump, and some of the things that have been going on early in his administration around immigrants, it must be hard for you to hear some of those things, I would think.

**DB:** Yeah, it does, it sends chills, and over the days and weeks, you have to learn—like I say, you live in the moment and you learn how to work, because wherever there's challenges there's opportunities, too. So we have to always look about ways that we're going to work on things, but it is concerning. It is concerning that there is a whole kind of an attitude, not only from our leader at this time, our president, but there seems to be a whole demographic that has been more emboldened, if I may say so, to express feelings that maybe aren't ... I don't know. I really don't understand why people feel so emboldened to be so ... I'm not sure what I'm looking for.

**RK:** Untrusting, or...

**DB:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah exactly.

**RK:** To put maybe a different slant on it, you've had a lot of work and been a part of the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program, too, right, with NSAC? I'd imagine that came along late enough, more recently, I should say, that you may have been probably a part of even the lobbying and effort to get those programs and to get them funded in a solid way.

**DB:** Yeah, that was really, yeah, I was part of that, that one, and then they increased ... the other one, too, were the programs through NRCS. You know, that's a whole program that was just started recently, and that was season extension, because of what happens on the farm and people get the season extension. That whole program, I remember lobbying that completely with the folks from ... it's the Rural Affairs ... what is it?

**RK:** Center for Rural Affairs?

**DB:** Center for Rural Affairs—I remember I was attending them, and we'd be lobbying, take me out there, and we'd be lobbying on those specific issues.

**RK:** Chuck Hassebrook was one of the people I've interviewed earlier.

**DB:** And then the whole thing is just including limited resource and underserved people. Four words is all we wanted to add, and it takes 12 years to add four words to a bill that allows for a certain demographic to be a specific group. That's what I learned out of part of that is you have to have patience. That first four years you're learning. Second four years' things moving. You know, things don't happen till 12 years, it seems like. Twelve, 20 years down the line you're able to start to move policy a little bit more. Although Ferd had great success with SARE, but it's because he had a lot of experience, and the things were just right when the SARE program came in, so he moved that along really quick, and we've all benefitted from the work that's happened there.

**RK:** Yes, yes. I think in 12 years, too, I know that the Organic Food Production Act was actually passed in 1990, but it took until 2002 before all of the work on the ... you know, what is actually organic and what isn't, defining it, and what materials could be used and everything. I think it was 2002 that it finally was really there.

**DB:** And that was because all the people called into Washington. Remember all the phone calls; they packed all the lines to all the senators and congressmen didn't know what to do. Because everybody stood up and said—we want this organic certification. I remember those days people ... so I have stories, and I don't know if you look at online, or if anything is ... I've been affiliated with this group called the Agrarian Elders.

**RK:** No, I didn't know about that.

**DB:** Yeah, yeah, and it's Michael Ableman, Eliot Coleman, Jim—oh, all these great farmers—Tim, Tim Nash, Live Power (Community Farm). You know, they're all about my age, and I like to joke, so I sit on, I support the young—this is another group I give advice and counsel sometimes when they invite me—is the National Young Farmers Coalition. So when I go there, I'm the oldest guy there. And then I go to the Agrarian Elders gathering, and I'm the youngest guy there, and I'm—all right, man—I feel good now! [Chuckles] So we sit around and we talk, and we've had a couple of retreats and stuff, and we're trying to figure out—like you were asking earlier, I might be leading too quick, is what's the next step, and if I had to do it again what would we look at. We'd do, I think, more about acquiring agricultural land for young people that need it, because the way the system is set up now, it's all about ... I'm not sure how to put it, but it's about private ownership, where it should be more about people that are using it doing good things to the land should have access to the land. So how we start to talk and change that concept—and I know there's conservation easements and all of this, but that and maybe more tweaking where people can actually get land for generations and improve it, and hold on to it. The part of why we've had this land here for 400 years is because I know I don't own it. I'm going to pass away here, if I'm lucky ... I'm 60; my goal is to live to 2050, so that will put me like about 93 years old. And that whole thing is now Nettie, my niece, we're setting it up so that whoever is ready to take care of the farm will take care of the farm, and my son, when I pass away, and then from there on it will take care of them and their families for the next generations. We're not going to hold onto it forever, so we never—my mom and my dad and everybody—we never think of selling our land. I mean, you sell your land you're never going to get it back; you'll never be able to walk on it again; you'll never be able to grow a bean—anything. So that's why it's important to be able to have those federal programs in place that allow us to be successful, to use our land and water for future generations. That's kind of why I got involved in the policy piece.

**RK:** Good, and I want to talk a little bit about how you've taught and nurtured other beginning farmers, too. Before we go there—and I'll try to remember to go back to it—you've kind of referenced it, but another area that I know you've been a part of is sort of what's called the civil rights struggle within agriculture, that for many years the benefits weren't fairly distributed to the limited resource, or even probably more largely to people of color. I know that was particularly true in the South, and a lot of good folks from there have been working on that issue, and there was ultimately some lawsuits. The Pigford suit, for example, and another one in this part of the world. Talk a little bit about that, your involvement in that.

**DB:** So it's OK to say it, but USDA has always been, has always underserved the people of color and limited resource. And it's been a blatant racism, and the black farmers had to put a lawsuit after years of being disqualified for loans or grants just because of the color and of their

economic background. And they filed a lawsuit, *Pigford v. USDA*, and they went through years and years of litigation and then lawsuit settlements. And I know Ben Burkett and several of the other folks that were initiating that lawsuit, and USDA has always... they're a lot better now than they used to be, because I remember, even, in the '50s and '60s we'd apply, and even as recently in the 1980s I have a story that we were part of the *Garcia v. USDA* lawsuit because of what happened here. But there was blatant discrimination and the USDA was sued. They lost the lawsuits, and there's monetary funding given out to the different minorities, if they qualify, if they can prove they qualify, then there's a settlement given out to help them continue farming. A lot of the black farmers and a lot of Hispanic farmers lost their land because they would go for a loan. They would say—oh, there's no money—but the money would be going to the white farmers and stuff like that. So the black farmer would go in and see it, and the white farmer would come in with the money on time and all the loans, and their crops would do well, and the black farmers or Hispanic farmers wouldn't get the loan, it was denied, and their crops would die. The land would shrivel up, and before long their land was up for sale, and the white farmer would get the land for pennies on the dollar. So that went on for years and decades, and then the lawsuits came through, and thanks to all the work, like the Southern Poverty Law Center did and other groups worked on.

**RK:** Federation of Southern Co-ops.

**DB:** The Federation of Southern Co-ops. Yeah, and oh man, all of those people—Shirley (Sherrod) and Cynthia (Hayes), Ben—they really led the group for all of us to really say—no, that's enough. We're going to stand up and fight USDA. So they really led the charge for not only themselves, but for Hispanics and later on women, because women have been discriminated by USDA for decades. Oh, they're just women—they don't need the money. Where's your husband? I remember that story being told over and over. And then the Native Americans have been discriminated, so their lawsuits ... but what happens is you get the lawsuit, the U.S. government delays it, it goes through courts, and then the people that originally ... like Mr. Garcia passed away before he ever got to see anything and lost his land.

**RK:** Wow, I saw that ... one thing I read was they finally did get ... what year? By 2010, 1.2 billion was finally appropriated, but it wasn't until the Obama administration that some of that money started getting spread around, and now there's been something like—this might be a couple years old—13,000 farmers who have gotten some money, and something like a billion dollars has either been already been given away or will be. So it's an ongoing process of trying to bring some economic justice to that situation.

**DB:** Yeah, it's an ongoing process, but I think that, you know, if that money isn't spent it reverts back, so the longer they can delay it and push it back, then that money goes back to the government. I guess I'm still like you have to be ... I think it was Reagan—trust but verify. Oh, we trusted, but let us verify, let us check anyway—we trust you. We trust USDA and everything—I'm sure everybody does—but let's just verify all the programs are being equally distributed, everybody's given the same weight, and all the process works correctly, because a lot of people have been affected and are still affected by those activities that occurred as recently as the 1980s.

**RK:** Yes, yes. I wanted to pick up on that...

**DB:** So the Rural Coalition really did a lot—I don't mean to interrupt you—but the Rural Coalition really did a lot of good work, a lot of it with NSAC is to get this thing, a receipt, so when you go into your office now at NRCS or FSA. Not all the offices do, and there's not enough enforcement anytime, but they are supposed to give you a receipt of services. At least you have proof that you went to that office and offered services, because paperwork can get lost, people can forget, so at least there's a way to ... and that was passed through the Rural Coalition effort. That little piece of work, just a receipt of services, makes the difference. Now if everybody can adhere to it, that would be a different story, but at least it's in place. Just little pieces—that's why I've learned a lot from everybody. You know, somebody mentioned to me that USDA is like this great big battleship. When it's out there in the ocean you can't just turn around, it takes like I don't know how many days or hours it takes to turn it around. That's like USDA—you can do little things to tweak here and there, but to turn USDA around, I don't know. Then I think about it, too, and I work with a lot of activists, and I don't think that anybody I know would like to see the collapse of USDA, because I think it would collapse not only within USDA but around the whole ... you know USDA is not only food, it's forestry, health, nutrition—everything. So it would be disastrous to see it, but I could see where some programs could be continued to be shaped to support more economic growth and production of healthy foods and nutrition.

**RK:** I wanted to hear, too, now, as I referenced a little bit ago, some of the things you've done coming out of not only the work that's federally supported on beginning farmers, but how you are serving as a mentor for farmers around here, and, really, even more broadly than that.

**DB:** I've been really fortunate over the years is that I guess I grew up here on the farm with Grandpa and Dad, and my dad always would say that there's enough for everybody. In Spanish would say "Hay para todos, mientras que no rebaten," There's enough for everybody as long as you don't get greedy and start to grab. So that's always been my philosophy. There's enough for all of us to be able to be successful as long as we can all be successful together. So I've taken that kind of thinking into policy and into activity. When we started to develop the farmers market in Santa Fe, I was one of the founding members, and I had the vision that we needed ... well, I had produce to sell—another necessity, huh? This is like I can tell you how things get involved, it's because I need them. I hate to be like that way, but we needed a market in the winter. The farmers market was doing good in the summer, and then I learned how to grow in the winter. I was meeting some of the school demand, and then I needed a little more income and I had the stuff, so I went to get the farmers market. Anyway, the farmers market started out of a need of year-round production. So we started from there ... now I lost track.

**RK:** I wanted to talk then about how did you ... I mean, one of the things that you've even gotten the James Beard award, I have to mention that. That was a few years back now, right?

**DB:** Yeah, it's 2015.

**RK:** Yeah. But one of the things they cited were those who influence and how we eat and affect those who grow the food we eat. So there I think about the training that you provide or the mentorship that you provide.

**DB:** So, coming from my dad—thanks, I lost my thread—so coming from my dad of that sharing, I've always said that more is better. So I have a small farm, but if 10 of us can grow food and then we can sell it to a larger institution, that makes my market easier, so the idea is to grow more growers like ourselves so that we can have more access to markets. I don't see us being limited by the market, I see us limited by our growth potential itself. So out of sharing policy development, out of sharing growing methods, came the idea that if I can mentor more people ... and it came out of just making friends more than intentional. The more like, hey—and I'll mention Joseluis, because Joseluis, he's a good, young kid in the [south] valley I've been mentoring, been working with me for about seven years now, and he's really blossomed. He's a leader now in the community and he leads La Plazita youth group, and they have people that are at risk coming to the farm. They work a couple of days a week. He's working with the Native American youth programs, so he's really a leader in training other people. But I would invite him to go in, so sometimes instead of going myself, I invite a friend, and that kind of learning by osmosis occurs. So you teach somebody, you hang out—hey, man—why don't you go over there tomorrow and I'll be here. So you start to teach people, they start to get confidence, and that's where that kind of learning came in from the policy. So when I started with NSAC and all these other programs, I started taking people with me, and they would start to learn, and now they are leaders within their communities themselves. Not so much intentional, but the results of sharing knowledge and sharing connections is not being afraid to share what we have, instead of holding it, saying this is my connection, I'm going to keep this, and here's where my power is. Now we share it with everybody, and all of us advance together. So out of that I started with AFSC, and I started a farmer training program.

**RK:** American Friends Service Committee.

**DB:** American Friends Service Committee, New Mexico program, and I was the director for almost 14 years. I left the program now in August, last year. But I started a training program to model the farm that we have here where there's year-round production, diversity of products, growing in the healthy way and making enough money to pay the bills. The idea is that you've got to make enough money to pay the bills, otherwise, why are you going to do it? So we started the philosophy in the training, when our people come to the training program, we help them figure—how much do you need? You've got to send your kids to college, you want to take a vacation, you want to save for retirement. OK, now we'll develop the farm to meet those needs. Instead of the farm being the driver, your lifestyle is the driver. So we develop the farm to meet those needs. And then the training program is learning by doing it, so the trainees get to hang out with Don for a full year, three days a week—woohoo! So we make friends. We make stories, we make friends, and if I need help or they need help, we're there for each other for decades. And they start the training program, I start by doing the how much do you need, we do the farm plan, we do a business plan, and then we build a greenhouse or a cold frame on each individual's place, or we help them find land, because I just help them get started, so if they don't have land, we help them find land that's available. We help them find the funding, put up a cold frame. So we practice putting up cold frames, we practice putting up drip systems, we practice farm

planning, planned sequencing through the whole year. It's not just talk about it. If we talk about it—let's do it! And then tomorrow let's do it again. And then let's do it again until we practice it over and over, and then that's one full year of training, three days a week, at least six hours a day, 50 weeks a year, because, you know, for Christmas and stuff we need to close it.

**RK:** Is that what happens with the Friends, and does that still continue, do you continue to do that?

**DB:** That's still going on now, and so that's still going on in some form or the other, that's still training program of passing it on. So I learned from Heifer (Project International) is passing on the gift. So you learn something and you get something and you help the next family get it. You pass it on. That makes everybody feel good, because you're able to teach your neighbor or your cousin what to do and then help them get started and then they help the next person, so it's not a handout, it's helping somebody else. It just changes the dynamic completely, and then you become the expert, instead of having Don or George or somebody, you're the expert. So it really is empowering community, building leadership, and right within the community itself. So the training program, I've done it for over 12 years. It started with American Friends Service Committee. The first USDA grant was a community food security grant I wrote. I wrote it twice, and I got once, I got rejected. Albino Garcia, the director for La Plazita Institute, he's a ... I don't know that you'll ever get to meet Albino, but he's a great guy. He's all a gang prevention; he came from Los Angeles, lives in Albuquerque. I met him because he was a local organization, and I was looking for organizations. He goes—Don, we don't do farms, man, we do gang prevention. Anyway, I talked him into putting a little farm, and I tell a story—I get off the track—but I'll tell a story. One day he came in with almost tears in his eyes; we were at a meeting. I had the farm going and he came into a meeting. I go—Albino, what's happening here—you're breaking down. He goes—Don, I just came from getting a kid out of jail, 13 years old. He got caught stealing food out of 7-11. Albino went to the judge and told the judge—hey, I know this kid; let him out. 'Cause that's what Albino does now. The kid didn't have any money. His little brother and his grandma didn't have any food in the house, so he went to steal food from 7-11 and got caught and got thrown in jail. So that's where Albino goes—no, we got to learn how to grow food, man. And he started the slogan: Let's sling tomatoes instead of guns. Oh, I have a t-shirt now—you probably know, I point to her, the one that—Turn guns into plows? Oh, yeah, so they did a whole program around that now in La Plazita in Albuquerque this last year, between AFSC and La Plazita. So now Joseluis runs the training program for at-risk youth and the farm, and he was telling me just last year they made money. They actually were able to pay the farm worker, buy their seeds. Not money as a non-profit, but enough money to cover their costs for the operation of the specific farm program—not all the program, but just this farm program itself.

**RK:** Wonderful.

**DB:** So we take that whole training program like that, and we train people how to become leaders, how to get active. So in New Mexico the cadre part of it is when they go through our training program they know not only about farming, but they learn about community. So one of the things we do is we do legislative training. We bring them up to the legislature, we give them a packet, we already introduced them to their representatives and their senators. When the

session is going on now, we'll go and we'll visit with them. We'll tell them a representative ... we're really working with Representative Gallegos down in the south, because they're building the farmers market in Anthony, New Mexico. They're building a facility like the Santa Fe one, and Senator Cervantes and Representative Gallego have both put state funding and some federal money from grants, are already going to build a facility. So these guys from Anthony here, constituents, we'll drive up as a group, and we'll meet with the senator and the representatives. And then last week we got to—well, I didn't get to, because I'm already an old guy, but they got to sit on the Senate floor. So their senator got to introduce them and acknowledge them—hey, these are my constituents and they're building a farmers market. I just wanted you guys to meet them and treat them friendly. That's what it's about, it's about breaking that ice and making them feel like they're wanted, their ideas are ... not ... they know we're just ... accompany them on that journey to be more empowered. That comes from sharing. We're not going to do it ourselves, man, we've got to do it all together.

**RK:** I don't want to go too much longer for you, but I surely appreciate learning about all you have done and these very interesting stories. I'd like to end, then, with picking up on what you think ... you've touched on a lot of things that obviously have to go forward, but what do you think is the biggest challenge and has to be met, and people ought to be working on towards the future for a better food system and a better care of the land, those kind of things?

**DB:** I grew up here as always, I've said that, and the most important thing here is water. Land and water and culture, but without water we can't do anything. So we really have to learn how to manage our water in a really effective manner, because we can see in the rural communities in New Mexico and the Southwest there's a big urban development, and that's taking water from the rural communities. I don't know why there's this disconnect about, you know, water needs to go to cities and not grow food. Not a complete disconnect, but people aren't ... they're there, but they're not quite there, so there's still this kind of a whole kind of a discussion about what's a carrying capacity of the environment in the region that we're in. Once we can define the carrying capacity, everybody agrees to it, then maybe we can come up with a solution that allows us to continue within a sustainable capacity for future generations. Or else we'll start to go down that pathway as a collapse. You know, that whole book, *Collapse*. I can't ... he's a doctor...

**RK:** Jared Diamond.

**DB:** Diamond, yeah, yeah, I read that whole ... there's several ... all sorts of people talk about if we don't ... or write and research, and understand if we don't take care of what's here, then our society and all future societies are bound to collapse or have chaos that sometimes isn't the best results of, because we're just mismanaging or we just don't understand what's occurring. So that, around water, that whole management of our natural resources is like ... so there's that, and then there's this whole thing about supporting and engaging more production in healthy farms in the United States and across the globe. So if I understand it, the majority of the world ... not the majority, or maybe so, have small farms and to sustain themselves. In the U.S. and other developing countries, mega-farms, commodity farms are developing the food, and they're supplying the food through technologies that some of us all don't all agree and have proven since the 1960s and the Green Revolution, not to really work. That was the silver bullet, and now we're finding out that isn't the silver bullet, because it displaced cultures, broke economies, and

the commodity crops aren't that healthy anyway. So we found things that are going on. So how do we set up more ability for adults and young farmers that want to access land and water and allow them to grow food in sustainable manners to feed the populations of our country?

**RK:** It seems, and I have to bring this up—neither of us have quite brought up climate change. And in that challenge is how do we do that while still meeting the challenges the environment will likely bring through climate change, too. And it seems like, and I think you would agree, that many of the people I interview feel like looking towards as natural systems as possible is at least one good strategy to try to deal with the inevitabilities of climate change.

**DB:** I think that definitely is what they call the elephant in the room. Because that's what is going to affect all of us, climate change. We see it right here now. Well, you can see on a beautiful day like today it's almost close to 70, I bet, and it shouldn't be this warm. So we have a good snow pack now, but the last five or eight years we've had a heat rise in our climate, so all of the snow will be melted by July and August, the run-off will be gone. We'll go into the hot part of the months without very little rain and no snow pack. Those are all indicators of climate change. A lot of the big cottonwood trees that you see along the river, a lot of the pests that are occurring into the forest, the tree beetles and all these—these are all caused by climate change activities. So to me it's like we really have to really start to think about how we are going to address it in the future. And I think—and I don't like to boast, or I don't like to really think about it—but I think a lot of it is still being developed on the farm. People that are growing the food every day are harvesting the forests or fishing or ranching, because the ocean and the fish are just as important to talk about as the land. A lot of times we in agriculture get caught up on farming or agriculture; we're growing something, or is the forest, but there is the whole ocean, fishing, that is occurring, and a lot of people are integrating these kinds of sustainable systems into the harvest of marine animals and fish. But I don't know, man. So I say, I always like to, I'm always looking for opportunities, so our cold frames, we're getting ready for that climate change. We're going to grow lettuce in January. Our greens, our produce are going to grow in the winter and in the summer we'll just grow cover crops and...

**RK:** So adapting to it the best you can?

**DB:** Adapting, as long as we can keep our water. So that's why it's so important to preserve our water, because without water through these climate changes ... you know, studied over the globe, that's what affected agriculture more than anything over centuries, over thousands of years, it's been the water. So we really, that's why I go back, we really got to manage our natural resources in an effective way. And not to go off on a tangent or anything, but I grew up here, and my dad's saying was that as long as you can grow beans, squash, your chili and your corn, the whole world can go to pot and you'll be OK. And I still live from that philosophy, is that as long as we can take care of our land and our water and grow our food, we and our community will be OK. So that we're not a global dependent on people growing our food. I visited China and I've learned from Chinese farmers, Korean farmers—I've been all over the world, all over Europe. I've only been two continents, Africa and Antarctica, I haven't been to. I've been all the rest, and I think that that whole idea of this farming community is more important.

**RK:** Well, I think we've covered almost every topic. I can always listen to more of your stories, but if you've got anything else you want to add. Otherwise, I'm very satisfied that we've caught a lot of what you've brought and the reason you've gotten the awards and accolades that you have.

**DB:** Thank you. I hope it's what you were looking for. I ramble a lot, so you might have to...

**RK:** The rambles is where a lot of the wisdoms come through, as far as I see. So I appreciate it. Thank you very much.

**DB:** Make sure that everybody knows that me, and I really appreciate it, and I think all of the farmers really appreciate all the work that NSAC, the Rural Coalition, NIFI—all these organizations that have really supported grassroots, underserved, limited resource, and people of color throughout the whole USDA farm process. We couldn't do it without everybody helping us.

**RK:** Right, very true. Thank you.

Transcribed by  
Carol C. Bender  
WordCrafter  
[carolbender@msn.com](mailto:carolbender@msn.com)  
651-644-0474