

Cindy Gentry interview

JE—Jon England

CG—Cindy Gentry

JE: This is Jon England, I'm here with, go ahead and please say your name?

CG: Cindy Gentry.

JE: And today's date is July 17...19th. July 19th 2016, and we're here in downtown Phoenix discussing the Dinner 2040 Project. So Cindy, if you could tell me a little bit about your early years. Where you were born, and when if you're comfortable with that.

CG: Oh I was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1951, and grew up in and around the city, in the northern suburbs, Skokie, and when I was a sophomore in High School my parents moved to Glen Cove. And I went down state to school in Champagne Urbana.

JE: Oh ok. Great. Tell me a little bit about your schooling and education.

CG: I came of age...I was twelve when the Civil Rights movement happened, and we lived in kind of a ghetto. About forty percent of the people that came from Germany and Eastern Europe that survived the camps came to Skokie, yet it was still mostly Jewish enclave. And so when the first African American families moved in everybody was up in arms, and so I remember the shift in the community and my parents going to welcome a couple of these families, but unfortunately some of their neighbors had thrown rocks through their windows and done some other unwelcoming things. So there was that kind of pretty normal middle class life and then the chance to really start looking at injustice and inequity in that way.

JE: So, you had sort of a civil—so your education, a lot of it took place outside of the school atmosphere.

CG: Well some of the more memorable—I had to go to school. I had younger brothers and we all had to do all the things you're supposed to. My parents were active in the PTA and volunteered in the community and did homework, and I was the only, although oldest, girl and my brothers were smarter than me and skipped grades and stuff and were good in math. I was not. I was good in reading and the soft sciences

JE: Right. OK. What about your college education? Maybe you could talk a little bit about that. What your college years were like.

CG: [Laughs] Again, I went down state to the University of Illinois right about the time the Vietnam War was heating up [laughs].

JE: Oh wow.

CG: In this case, my education was a lot more out of the class room [laughs] then in it, and I spent...It was in an engineering school. There was a lot of scientific stuff going on, there was a lot of war machine stuff going on, and the chance to understand that, the next generation of people didn't want to carry that on and let our voices be heard. So I spent seventeen years getting my bachelors degree in sociology [laughs]. I stopped and finally finished up here at ASU.

JE: So you were involved in a lot of—politically in the community.

CG: I was.

JE: Wow, that's exciting. Where do you think food plays into that? Maybe you could talk about one or some of your most fond food memories.

CG: I came from a loud, noisy, Jewish family and food was the center of everything, and that's how the dinners, the exchanges of ideas, the hearing of politics, the friendly and unfriendly arguments, the really bad jokes, everything kind of centered around normal dinner and then celebration dinners, and food was a big part of how we knew who we were.

JE: So did you have a lot of family, beyond your immediate family? Cousins, aunts and uncles then?

CG: Yeah, nobody was really scattered in those days. In these days, everybody's an air plane ride or two away. But my Dad's friends that he hung out with were from the neighborhood where he grew up, and he had a pretty good extended family. And my Mom had, she's a little more independent, but she was still kind of not very far away from her parents and so we grew up with cousins and aunts and uncles. It's different today I think.

JE: Yeah, so during these formative years, and while you were getting your education, were you involved in any sustainable organization? Or anything to do with the environment?

CG: I don't think so. I think it had more to do with social justice. I think we were shown and taught and asked to volunteer to help people who had less access to what they needed than we did. I lived in the city, and then I lived in the suburb where my Dad gardened, but it wasn't really about the environment, or knowing where your food came from at least in our household. I became a vegetarian when I was about fifteen and shocked the heck out of everybody and at that time joined Food First, which was just coming into being. I don't know if you've ever heard of Francis Moore Lappé, now her daughter, Ana has taken over, but at that time they were starting to talk about eating lower on the food chain so that people could, more people could get what they needed and learn that you could get just, no, my parents didn't believe this, but you could get just as much protein from eating rice and beans and cheese as you could from meat. My father was first generation American so the thing that you wanted to make sure as a good provider was that you had meat on the table and potatoes and all that, and vegetables. But then not too long after that it became clear that we were consuming a lot of resources by having that model.

JE: So maybe talk a little bit more about why you made the switch to vegetarianism. What prompted that?

CG: I got a hold of some reading material, and it was probably not Food First, but it could have been Mother Earth News, it could have been anything. It could have been a recipe book. *Diet for a Small Planet* was big then, and it was sort of like "Wow!" And I really didn't care for big heavy meat meals or anything, I mean I liked it, but it was just easy. Nobody else followed suit, and I was the cook in the house and so I still cooked what everyone else liked to eat, but I didn't eat the meat part.

JE: OK. Was that more of a dietary choice, or was it a social justice choice?

CG: Yeah, it had to do with understanding that there are way too many people starving and we were consuming, in our country, way more than our share of the natural resources

available and part of that had to do with what it took to produce meat. And it seemed like maybe we could do more with less.

JE: OK. Is that sort of what started you on the path on becoming more interested in food sustainability? Or sustainable food systems?

CG: No, I think just noticing from being a little kid that some people lived pretty rough. And just understanding that it was important to try to figure out how to change that.

JE: Great, so you were very cognizant at a young age of social welfare.

CG: Mmm hmmm.

JE: That's great. So what was the catalyst that got you interested in sustainable food systems?

CG: I already had moved out here and was trying to find a job in sustainable food systems, and the only job I could find was with the Food Bank Association. It turned out to be a wonderful thing to have happen, but there wasn't an ASU School of Sustainability, there wasn't a chapter of Food First here, there wasn't Local First, there wasn't anything that I could find and I looked pretty hard. There weren't even farmer's markets in nineteen seventy-seven, seventy-eight. Eighty-four, I graduated ASU in eighty-six, and so I guess there weren't even farmers markets here. And so the idea well what could I do to begin to help people who needed to access food do that better. So I was lucky I got a good job with the Association of Arizona Food Banks, but I came in there, the director is still a dear friend and was my mentor, as were some of the other people there. But I came in there with the idea of we're doing heroic efforts to get people through the next three to five days, but where's the space for what got them in that fix in the beginning? Some of the food banks were more open to addressing that than others. There's a great model in Tucson, Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, that in addition to their emergency network, they call it a line from Feeding America, which is a national food relief organization, it's called "feed the line and shorten the line." And so they're working very strongly on shortening the line. And then somewhere in there my job turned to get out into with the state wide gleaning project to go out into the fields and help recover what would have been dissed (?) under or just thrown away or go to the coolers down in Casa Grande, Eloi, and Nogales, Yuma, all that, and help that project rescue food and get it on the tables of hungry people. And one morning, just about first light, I was standing out in the west valley talking to a guy, and I said "Thank you for your donation," and he plants extra to feed the food banks. And he said "Don't thank me, I'm not making enough to make the tax credit." And I'm just thinking, alright, there's all this food out here, there's all these people hungry, and that guy's not even making a living farming. He is now, but the idea is that it is less about lack of food than it is about distribution and access. And a light just switched on. If the producers aren't making a living, and there's all this food and we can't get it to where it needs to get to, we need to do some shifts. So I spent a couple more years doing that program and then started my own organization called Community Food Connections and the idea was to, and still is, to increase food access for vulnerable children and adults at the same time as building economic and community development for everybody including keeping farmers on the land.

JE: Oh wow. That's great. So you mentioned that when you came here there were no farmers' markets. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that. Were you involved in farmers' markets before you came here to Arizona?

JM: No, but I had seen them around the country. I had the good privilege of travelling to California, to the Northwest, to the East Coast, and I had seen them, and, let's see, 1991 I think the first market started here. Dee Logan started the first market with her husband, and I think it was at Heritage Square, and shortly thereafter, Roadrunner at 36 street and Cactus, and then Mesa. So she's been doing it for a long time. But before that I didn't find any, I didn't know about it. I liked markets. My grandfather didn't finish seventh grade. He came to this country, maybe he had to stop it when he was twelve and had to support his family and I was, at some point, rebellious and thinking of dropping out of high school, and he took me in his Cadillac down to the Maxwell Street market, which is on the west side of Chicago, and it's this wholesale market, half the mob has family there, it was quite a colorful place, and he said "If you don't finish high school you're going to end up down here." And the irony was that, how many years later? Thirty-five, twenty-five years later I did end up starting a market here [laughs] and getting involved in supporting the whole market system in our state with some federal programs. He was gone by then, he died when I was eighteen, [laughs] but it has not stopped me from chuckling from time to time.

JE: Yeah, that's a great story. Maybe you could talk a little about starting the community food connections? How did that come about?

JM: Well it had to do with talking to that grower and just saying, OK the food bank network is heroic, the gleaning project is doing some amazing things, but I really, by that time the Community Food Security Coalition had come about in 1996 and I was part of that—and I was just getting an itch to go focus on some other aspects of food access. And in 2002 I retired from the Food Bank Association and started that organization. And we focused on a food policy council, I had contracts from—Farm to School, I had contracts from different friends from here and New Mexico and nationally that kept me afloat until we got the proper paperwork in place, the 501C3, and then [thinks] brought in with friends programs like the Farmers Market Nutrition Program, and SNAP at the Markets, food stamps is what it was called, and got some equipment going for them so that different markets around the state could begin to process food stamps, and a federal program called the Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which is for low income Moms and kids on Wic and for seniors, we got the first part of that going, a bunch of us. Then got the idea that I should start a public market as kind of a central place for not only the market— building it up to be a seven day-week market, have it have storage and be like a food hub where food could be aggregated, food could be distributed, it would be a place for local food. And we were on our way to that and I ran into—when you're a nonprofit, who'd really in charge is the board of directors, and we had a differing of opinion in 2012 and went our different ways. But the downtown Phoenix public market is part of, is where that started and it was meant to expand into a community kitchen and to have pickup spaces for schools. And chefs do come there now, still, but it was meant to be a lot more organized around being a hub for local food.

- JE: OK. Wow, so you mentioned a little bit of opposition, what kind of opposition? Or maybe you could just talk about the kinds of opposition that you've encountered in setting up these organizations.
- CG: Well, my brother is an anthropologist and he decided to go off on his own somewhere back in the early 2000s, and he set up an LLC, and I said, "Why? Why didn't you make it a non-profit, because then you can write for grants and do all that?" And he said, "Because I want to do what I want to do and I don't want to have to worry about a board trying to direct me or govern me." And I said, "Oh that will never happen I've worked with non-profits, for most of my adult career." And so another buddy of mine said "Just pick who you want, who you trust with your life to be on your board." And I said, "Okay that makes sense." But those people got tired after a few years, or they moved away, or something and then other people came in and then they had a different idea of community service—they got burned out, some of them thought there was a little power thing, like they thought I was trying to do things for my own behalf, where I wasn't, I was just trying to share my experience. And so that can happen. Money troubles can happen. And at the end of the day they said Well it's going to be this way or no way, and I didn't pop them in the nose as I should have done, probably or fire them, or whatever. There were only a few left by that time. So that organization, and I was not strong enough to move on forward.
- JE: In making healthy food more accessible to lower income families like incorporating SNAPs into farmers' markets and that sort of thing, did you encounter any opposition with that?
- CG: No. At the same time that you're bringing access to people you're bringing income to growers. You know at first I'd hear these little comments from the farmers. They'd be "Oh they drive a better car than I do," and all this kind of thing. And I'd be "Alright, maybe they had that car today, maybe it's not even theirs, maybe they borrowed it, and next time you see them they might not have it." And then they started thinking about their sister-in-law who was on WIC or their other family circumstances that might have led somebody to be compromised in a little way and pretty soon it was like the most annoying thing was well people forget there's a certain, for part of the farmers' market, nutrition program, there's a window from March to the end of October and a lot of people just swamp at the end of October and our produce season is kind of lean at that time period in the valley. And so they would gripe about that. But at the end of the day it became, for me, like a little social experiment. Markets can help bring people together who normally wouldn't be in the same place.
- JE: Excellent. So, that leads into another question, which is, how do you build bridges between other activists and organizations with the goal of making food more accessible?
- CG: [thinks] I think that's the crux of the matter. How do you make it normal for people to come and use their food benefits at markets and have access? Do you bring the food to the neighborhoods? Do you make transportation arrangements? But you have to find people in the neighborhood that other people look up to that are willing to kind of lead the charge. And it's like well if grandma Nelson says this then we're going to do it. Because it isn't normal. Right now people—we're using bribery, incentive items, if you

use your EBT they call it, or farmers market nutrition program coupons you'll get a gift at certain markets, which this office now provides. A non-profit here called Pinnacle Prevention just got a federal grant called food insecurity nutrition incentive program and it will match up to ten dollars a purchase, somebody using their SNAP cards at specific markets and CFAs. It's just starting. There's funding for some of it in Tucson right now through a different source and the International Rescue Committee has a market that I work with that already has matching dollars through the same federal grant. So we're trying to...in other parts of the country it's been wildly successful. And I saw it this morning, I was at the market, you use ten dollars of SNAP, or FMNP you get ten dollars of food free. So you stretch your food dollars enormously. So, not to skirt the question, it's really tricky, and it's really slow, and you have to go where people are and they have to come to trust you. I do two markets, I work with two groups that do markets at WIC offices in low income neighborhoods, and it takes a minimum of a year for people to catch on. And just think you're not trying to give them bad produce, you're not trying to—there's still this “the prices are too high” at farmers' markets, “it's only for white middle class people,” whatever. So there's a lot of perceptions to overcome. You know the verdict is still kind of out for me if whether I'd like to try a mobile market, like Fresh Express, but just do local food on it, and see if people would respond to it. I'm not sure if they will.

JE: Well that's interesting, yeah. Some good ideas. What about, have you tried to incorporate different, or rather are there other agencies that are more localized here sort of organizations or groups that you've tried to incorporate into making food more accessible.

CG: I personally work with three right now at the various markets and they work with and they work with and it expands out and expands out. And I think that having them involved helps. You need to have people that look like you if you're in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood, you need to be able to speak to the people, and people need to feel comfortable.

JE: Right, great. So this is a very broad question, you can answer it however you want, but how do you think this is important for the future of food?

CG: I think that everybody deserves to have access to healthy food, and most people want to eat healthy and provide healthy food for their children. I've heard older ladies look at the market table and “Oh where's the meat and potatoes, I'll come back when—” and it's supposed to be a giggle, they've come out and they've had their blood pressure you know. But I think it has to become normal and available so that people can change their habits. Everybody didn't always drink Pepsi Cola. Everybody didn't always go to Starbucks for goodness sake. And its sort of—some kind of—you can't avoid it, it's everywhere. It's in the convenient stores. It's in the liquor stores, whatever, that's where some people buy their food in some areas, and by food we're talking loosely here, but Slim Jims and whatever, but there's got to be a shift where people taste, they remember, they know how to basically cook. I was printing out recipes when you came, what do you do with this stuff? “Oh I can do that. It's easy.” And I think that if we want people making healthy food choices there's a crazy amount, 68% of our population here in Arizona is overweight, and some minor, smaller, but not much smaller portion of that,

wanders into the range of obesity. In 2006, and I realize that's ten years ago, but it's a study done by the department of health services, half of the deaths in our state had to do with nutrition related disease. They could have been mitigated by access to better food. So if you're thinking about public health, and if you're thinking about lower insurance costs for everybody, and you're thinking about a cleaner environment that's less taxing on whatever contributes to climate change, we should be making it more possible for people to have healthier food choices. Not just fruits and vegetables, but fruits and vegetables, clean antibiotic free meat, because it's been proven that if you eat meat that the animals that have been treated with antibiotics to make them grow faster and keep them healthy in a herd, that you're body becomes resistant to the antibiotics.

JE: Oh wow.

CG: Hormone free because there are studies showing that little children, women, girls that have hormones in their milk are starting their menstrual cycles earlier. Pesticide free, because who knows what the heck is going on with the things that kill—pesticides. So all of those things are all connected and here, you know I've only been here, I'll be here two years next weekish, August 4th, people have weird ideas. They think that if you're low income you shouldn't be buying organic food. They think it's enough to eat vegetables rather than buy local. And I'm like "This is crazy, you could do two things at one time." You could buy local food, you could spend the same amount of money and keep the money here in the community, and you know where your food comes from, you're making a choice about tastes better, it's picked the day before, and so you want to have more of it. It should be in our school meals all the time. And our school gardens, it's now possible for people to—kids to eat what they grow in their meals. So that you're surrounded by healthy choices and it's not just like, food is not just like this thing that comes—it's over processed, it comes out of a bag, you never feel quite full, but you feel well-salted [laughs] and all that. And so it—I like ice cream and chips as much as the next guy, but I have a choice to get those I don't eat too much processed food except pasta because I don't know how to—I haven't sat down to make it by myself. And I buy bread from the store, but the rest of it—rice, I guess we buy rice and bulk beans, but people should have the choice of it, and it should be close to them and they shouldn't have to worry that if they try something new for their kid and the kid throws it away they've just put money down the drain that they can't replace. That kind of thing. That's how I think local connects to making your economy better, making your community more connected, making the environment cleaner and addressing health-related disease. Nutritional-related disease.

JE: Great, thank you. Yeah it seems very important then. It has all these connections. So you've talked a lot about working other people and other organizations, and you've even spoke about a board of directors—now when you're working with all those people, how do you decide, or rather, how do you create a list of priorities, or which food problems do you decide to address first?

CG: Well I think you have to talk about it. I just had somebody said "Review this policy for the Maricopa County Food System Coalition." And they were going to be advocates for local food policies, and I said "Well how do you know which ones?" You know they asked me to comment, I said "Sounds good, how do you know which ones? You're going

to have a slew of them.” And so you have to sit down and figure out broad categories and then, low hanging fruit, what can be done here and what can be done here? So there’s some strategic planning involved in it. I was working with a group in South Phoenix that there all over the place. Their vision, their charisma is just fabulous, but it’s like I can’t keep up with what they’re trying to do, and I told them to call me when they’re ready to do a couple of things. I’m working with another group of farmers right now, and we’re going to focus on a couple of things that we agreed to are the most—everybody talks and everybody says, This is where I’m coming from, this is what’s important to me, oh this is where I’m coming from it’s a little bit different, let’s figure it out. So it’s just a process.

JE: Great. So we’ve talked about this a little bit, but what do you think are the biggest challenges to creating a sustainable food system?

CG: Land ownership, water access. Most of the growers I know don’t own the land they farm on. Water is a big issue. There’s some tension between [thinks] use of water for municipal, you know housing developments, and farming. And zoning for ag land is putting some kind of land into agricultural production for a long time. Preservation, so land and water are big. Zoning is big. Where’s the next generation of growers going to come from? It’s hard. Farming’s hard. It hurts. It hurts your body, it hurts your mind, it hurts your pocketbook. And yet some people can’t be anything but growers and ranchers. And so the next generation of growers. And then getting it to be in demand. At people wanting it, knowing it. Its like you go to Burlington, Vermont and you can’t escape it. You walk down the street and everybody’s got a blackboard in the window—what’s on the menu, and what farm it came from. I was just in Madison, Wisconsin, it’s the same, at least where I was. They really highlighted it. Here it’s not so much. And then the fourth or fifth piece is policy. It is policy that—state and national, policy that encourages local food distribution, access, consumption and production.

JE: Right, ok. So with that in mind, I guess, what does food sustainability mean to you?

CG: Well those pieces would need to be in place. You’d need to have production capacity. You’d need to have distribution capacity, and then you’d need to have demand, access, consumption preferability (?). So it’s just a piece. It has to be available, and then it has to be accessible, and then people have to want it, and it just keeps going around like that. The more people want it, the more people are going to try and make sure that it happens.

JE: Great. What is Dinner 2040?

CG: It seems to be a cultural event that shows us where we are and where could be and involves, because of the people planning it, local historical context as well as some kinds of real, tangible, art forms. I know that the plates and the serving and all the utensils and stuff Joan Baron has been integral in putting together. So you’re going to get an experience of where we could be and where we hope to be as a community [thinks] 24 years from now, or whenever it is. And I am not sure then what we have to do to ensure that we get there. But I hope we figure that part out.

JE: Great. So why do you think the Dinner 2040 program is important to the community?

CG: Because it brings the focus home on where we might not be if we don’t pay attention, for one thing. Excuse me, I know that there are some tribal folks that have been invited

to be involved in it and I hope that it shows the kind of broad spectrum of people involved in the food system. And people are just going to have to step up and say if they care enough to say what could happen in 2040 if we don't pay attention. Where's our food going to come from? What's it going to look like? What's going to happen to our farmers, average age 61, here in our state if we don't do something now to protect them? So I think for that reason, if they lift that up, I think that part is important.

JE: OK great, and what do you consider your role to be in the Dinner 2040 program?

CG: At this point I've said I'm going to be a volunteer. I have been a gadfly. I have been an idea expander. I have been a person pointer, "Include this person, how about that person? how about that person?" Somehow they have managed to pull it together, but I got impatient with the planning process and I stepped back and both the Joans know that and my—I've put on many a conference in my life and I need a little more structure [laughs]. So they've got it, it looks beautiful, and at this point I said do with me what you will on the day of [laughs]. And I'll wash dishes or whatever you've got in there. Set up tables. But that's how it was, I love talking with—it's been Joan and Joan and Maya and me for the most part. I haven't met most of the students, and so we've just been going "Well what? What about what?" We've just done a lot of back and forth and visioning, which is really cool. And so I was there, and then I just kind of said "You guys I need this, I need—here's a list of things I need [laughs] in order for me to understand how we're actually going to pull this off." And they've done it, from what I can tell, from reading the emails it looks like they've—I made a grid, because that's how my brain works, and I was like "Where's the timeline? How are you going to account for this? How do you do that?" And it looks like they've made, in a parallel universe, a way to make the event happen. So it's good.

JE: So how did you find out about, or were introduced to it?

CG: Oh, I think Joan Baron invited me. [thinks] I knew her from the market downtown, and I knew Maya. Maya is like one of my best friends, Maya Dailey. And I didn't know Joan, but it turns out I know her daughter, and she had a food truck before she went to work with her stepdad, and she made the best food ever. And I didn't know they were connected. And I have just been around in the world of local food for a day or two, so.

JE: What were your first thoughts about the idea of sort of creating a vision for what the Arizona food system would look like in twenty-five years or so?

CG: Well I think it's good to start with where we're at now and get a baseline and then try to figure out what needs to happen. And I think there was an event at ASU for a couple of days, goodness, several years ago already now, where as part, when they first got this grant they brought in Vandona Shiva from India to come. And then they had people from all over the country who were also participating in this project in their own communities. And so we sat for two days, this was in what used to be the sociology building over there at ASU, and kind of went through the fast track of what will it look like, what is important to you, even down to what the menu would be. And everybody had—how'd they do that? They split you up and all that, and so I thought it was worth while because there were some pretty out of the box thinkers at the table, and that was kind of fun. And then all of the sudden "Ok well now we're going to plan a dinner here."

[Laughs] I'm like, "OK" and we've moved the date twice because it wasn't quite gelled yet.

JE: OK. So the Dinner 2040 is sort of centered around the humanities, right? And usually when people think about food sustainability it's very scientific, or engineering, and all that. Could you talk a little bit about what the humanities have to offer as far as food sustainability goes?

CG: The little I know about it is that [thinks] our relationships to each other and to the world and to material things and immaterial things, our religion, are a lot of times based in history and religion and world view. And so the more clear we can become about what world views are in play, as we understand who has access to food and how it's produced the stories, the traditions, the more familiar we can become with options. It's like being a world traveler. If you just stay in your neighborhood and you just do what you do, it's one thing. You can honor and revere that. But the minute you step out and you visit Scandinavia, or Ireland, or West Africa, and all of the sudden people are thinking about things and doing them differently, then you begin to say "Gosh, I wonder how that can apply here?" So I think it's about expanding your cultural base, and I think it's about recognizing where you've come to on the continuum from whatever religious forces and revolutionary forces and everything got us to this day. I personally think we're coming out of this that in the last four to six hundred years in the United States [thinks] the prevailing point of view that people seem to adhere to is that the more stuff you have, the better person you are. And those without are pretty shameful examples of human beings. And I think that that has its roots in certain kinds of religions, organized religions, and I think that the idea of man, humans being dominant over nature and all that kind of stuff, have led to us the huge amounts of disparity that we see. And so I think that being able to get some context for that, and understand it doesn't always have to be like that going into the future is maybe where the humanities come in.

JE: Yeah, when you talk about sort of the cultural expectations that are associate with food, it made me think about what you said about your father. How being a good provider meant that you were able to put meat on the table. So that's very interesting. Is there anything left that you'd like to add about Dinner 2040 or food sustainability in general.

CG: No, I think that in this fast-paced world that we live in though, Jon, I just think sharing a meal with friends and remembering to share it with others less fortunate is a huge gift.

JE: Great, thank you.