

Leading Food Dignity: Why us?



Monica Hargraves ^{a*}
Cornell University

Christine M. Porter ^b
University of Wyoming

Gayle M. Woodsum ^c
Action Resources International and Feeding Laramie Valley

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Introduction

Together, Christine Porter, Gayle Woodsum, and Monica Hargraves led the action and research project called *Food Dignity* to its close, seven years after it began in 2011. Though playing this role could not be a surprise for Christine, who was principal investigator, the three of us doing it together was not part of the original leadership plan. In this three-voiced essay, we aim to answer the question, “Why us?”

^{a*} *Corresponding author:* Monica Hargraves, Associate Director for Evaluation Partnerships, Cornell Office for Research on Evaluation, Cornell University; 35 Thornwood Drive, Suite 200, Room 150-C; Ithaca NY 14850 USA; mjh51@cornell.edu

^b Christine M. Porter, Associate Professor and Wyoming Excellence Chair of Community and Public Health; Food Dignity Principal Investigator; Division of Kinesiology & Health, University of Wyoming; christine.porter@uwyo.edu

^c Gayle M. Woodsum, President/CEO, Action Resources International; community-university liaison, Food Dignity; founder, Feeding Laramie Valley; gayle@actionresources.ngo

Monica

For me, the answer to that question is rooted in how the project opened my eyes, challenged my professional identity, and is still rewriting my sense of self. No other work project has ever made me as distressed, inspired, infuriated, and ultimately (reluctantly, sometimes) grateful as the Food Dignity project has. For all the moments that almost drove me away, the promise of the project and the integrity and determination of the people involved—most often the community leaders—

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were things I could not walk away from.

I came to the project a little late, invited in because I was a former economist and a current evaluator. (The person who had been slated to evaluate the economic impact of the minigrant programs—a key part of the grant support to partnering community organizations—had had to withdraw.) An initial meeting with Christine and a few others involved with the grant introduced the project's questions about how communities create equitable and sustainable food systems. I was drawn to the idea of learning from community organizers on the front lines of social justice work and I thought that the approach to evaluation that I had been trained in might be particularly useful for the minigrant programs that community organizations were going to design. So I signed on.

I had missed the first national project meeting, but learned it had been very contentious, with clashes—both overt and hidden—between academics and community leaders that had rattled the project's launch. That was the first hint that I might be in way over my head, as I'm uncomfortable with conflict and unfamiliar with the age-old inequities that were being named and battled within this research collaboration. When it came time for me to facilitate a session about the minigrants at the next national meeting six months later, I was nervous. Evaluation is not most people's favorite topic at the best of times, and my distance from the realities of the on-the-ground work of these diverse community organizations could well have raised opposition. Somehow I got through my self-introduction and discussion session, and despite revealing some of my naiveté and ignorance over the course of the day, I was treated graciously by this group I was so nervous about. I learned a lot over the subsequent years from the meetings, site visits, anti-racism workshops, project presentations, and especially one-on-one conversations with community organizers willing to teach me things I needed to learn about the reality and consequences of systemic oppression. I gained a

deep appreciation for the challenges and goals of community-based food justice and social justice work, the tenacity and insight of community leaders committed to this work, and a sensitivity to what I could never fully know because of my privileged position in this world thanks to skin color, socio-economic status, formal education, and numerous other sources of privilege.

Several experiences over the course of the project, both negative and positive, anchored my respect for the work of community leaders and expanded my commitment to the project. One arose from having given an extensive in-person interview to academic colleagues. They conducted an appropriate, respectful, sensitive interview exploring my history leading up the Food Dignity work and my experiences in the project so far. Mine was the first of several interviews they were planning to do. I was engaged by their thoughtful questions and attentive listening and felt comfortable talking to them, so I was shocked by an intense after-effect of painful vulnerability and distress. It took me some time to recognize that part of it was because it was so lopsided: the interview had all the attributes of a personal, intimate conversation, but ended up feeling extractive because I was the only one sharing interior truths about myself and my journey. I felt exposed and raw, and suddenly glimpsed what community members meant when referencing a pattern of researchers coming to town, extracting ideas, insights, and inspirations from a community, and then leaving to analyze it all and package it up for external purposes. I had never felt like a research subject before and suddenly I did. My discomfort was all the more unexpected because I was in an incredibly safe position, being interviewed not just by colleagues but by friends who I trusted fully.¹ Amazingly (to me), my feelings of violation and appropriation were then redoubled when, in a later national project meeting, a facilitator referenced the distress I had experienced and had shared in private conversation, and used it to make a point

¹ I remain good friends with these colleagues, in part because they listened carefully when I shared with them what this experience had been like for me. They wanted to understand why, since they were consciously doing the work with all the

sensitivity and delicacy that the protocol for that kind of narrative inquiry calls for. My reactions were eye-opening for all of us.

about... well, I can't even remember the point. I was stripped bare again, and felt compelled in that group setting to stand up and protest the new violation of having someone else using and putting words to my experience. It was a powerful awakening. If this small episode for me revealed a piece of the reality of what communities face or risk in working with researchers, what else was also true?

Other galvanizing moments came in internal academic team meetings, where individuals expressed frustration with how hard it was to work with community members—time intensive, complicated, full of communication delays, and ultimately not “productive” at all in terms of the usual academic markers of publications or new grants. One academic colleague even observed that we already knew all this stuff, books had been written about the issues being discussed in national project team meetings, and there was nothing to learn. The basic premise of the Food Dignity project—that community members and leaders have unique and valuable expertise and that the goal was to learn from and with them—made sense and had captivated me. Clearly some academics felt very differently or found the realities too burdensome. This challenged my sense of belonging; these were my colleagues, academia was my workplace, and its language and culture were familiar. I came away from these meetings angry and frustrated, and increasingly unsure of where I belonged.

One of the deeply rewarding parts of my work in the project—one that gave a positive anchor for my commitment to it—came from the expansion of my role beyond its focus on minigrants to include working deeply with each community organization to develop what we came to call Collaborative Pathway Models. This methodological innovation (described elsewhere in this issue, Hargraves & Denning, 2018) is values-driven work that requires a foundation of trust and close listening. Our conversations in the process of developing those models were intense, detailed, and full of things that mattered. That work gave me an extraordinary opportunity to learn, form relationships, and feel connected across the entire project and with all the community partners. The desire to try to do justice to their work is a strong motivation for me.

My growing understanding and sensitivity to

the nature of community-based work made the more recent writing of journal articles much more difficult, raising new rounds of professional self-questioning. Everything I had learned in my collaboration with community partners included an alive wholeness and complexity that made academic, dispassionate language and styles of analysis feel painfully inappropriate and reductionist. I struggled to write papers that felt accurate and true, did justice to their subjects, and also met styles of exposition and analysis that academic papers require. Peer reviewers have responded to my first drafts of manuscripts for this journal as, variously, too academic or too informal and lacking in analysis. Getting to that Goldilocks “just right” balance has forced me to question my work and myself more deeply—ultimately leading to better papers I believe, but it is challenging nonetheless. At the same time, given all the ways that community-led work is underfunded, under-recognized, and discounted, the stakes felt very high; we have an opportunity from the Food Dignity project to bring important community-led and collaborative breakthroughs to light, and that is both a responsibility and a privilege.

There were many moments in the course of the project where I found myself immobilized by frustration or seeming impasses, and each time I re-engaged by returning, eventually, to an understanding that these struggles and messes are the *real* work of projects like Food Dignity, and are a measure of its accomplishment. There is no way to undo the kinds of systemic problems the world faces without encountering and persisting despite these kinds of individual and shared challenges, setbacks, and restructurings. I have found the community leaders in Food Dignity to be gritty and determined in their battles against the forces that oppress and challenge them. This has inspired me to keep trying.

That inspiration, together with all that I have learned, are why I am still engaged, still wrestling, still pained by my shortcomings, but persevering in the work of the Food Dignity project.

Christine

I did not set out to be this project's principal investigator (PI) and project director. When I saw the

call for proposals, I hadn't yet finished my doctorate. I first tried talking more senior people at Cornell University into being the PI, as I was still living in Cornell's home of Ithaca, New York. I also asked another applying team elsewhere if I could join them. Neither attempt worked. However, once I decided to apply myself, based on the faculty position I had accepted at University of Wyoming, in Laramie, I was clearly going to be a project leader if it were funded. When it was funded, I started out as *the* project leader.

Gayle became involved in the project as the founder of one of the five community-based organizations that partnered in the project, Feeding Laramie Valley. Almost as soon as I moved to Laramie in July 2010, she began offering me leadership coaching and support—from the most experienced community organizer on our team to the least experienced academic.

Monica joined us after I (very) actively recruited her a few months after the project started in spring 2011. We had lost our project's economist to a "sister" project that was funded at the same time as Food Dignity. When Monica described herself as a "recovering economist," I knew she'd be perfect.

In October 2013, Gayle and I were on a city train bound for Brooklyn to visit East New York Farms! It was my first project travel since finishing treatment for stage-3 cancer that August. Everyone in the project supported me through that, personally. In addition, first Gayle and then Monica stepped up to help carry the weight of the project itself. Sitting on that train to Brooklyn, I did not feel sure I was going to make it, in several senses. Gayle, having gone down that cancer tunnel before me in 2012, knew that feeling. I asked her if she and Monica could lead the project to its end, if I could not. Among other things, Gayle said yes. That is why, and when, I knew: however much more power I would have and more credit I would get, it was the three of us, together, who would shepherd the project we called Food Dignity.

Gayle

There's nothing like asking three people to independently answer one question in their own words and from their own perspective to bring about an

absolute rainbow of response. If those answers are then melded into one cohesive item, the process might be referred to as a collaboration. As Monica, Christine, and I finalized the content for the Food Dignity project's contribution to this journal, adding the essential bits that would serve as something of a tour guide to what readers will find here, it occurred to us that it might be helpful to share why, out of three dozen active participants in the many years the Food Dignity project operated, it's we three who remain as the team shepherding the final report-out. As we discussed who might draft the answer to that question and what form it should take, another need presented itself: the need to have a place to address some of the personal aspects of taking part in leadership roles for this project. This *Why Us?* essay gives a nod to both those needs, letting go for the moment of any attempt to merge our very different voices and experiences.

In my mind, still working on behalf of the Food Dignity action research project long after the subawards and expectations of doing so had run out, has a taste in it of "the last women standing." In other words, someone had to do it and we three were the ones who kept showing up. Formal commitment and responsibility also had something to do with it; Christine was the PI and project director, Monica had added projectwide collaborative pathway modeling (in addition to minigrant program evaluation) to her job description, and I've been serving as the project's community liaison since late 2013.

Like Monica and Christine, however, the fact that my name is one of three attributed to having a leadership role in the Food Dignity project is not just a formal designation. Within months of becoming a participant in this project, I could feel the experience identifying with and attaching itself to the 35-year journey I've been on as a social-justice activist. Which is to say, it's never been simply a job or an assignment to me.

I've been enriched in more ways than I could have imagined possible as a result of having the Food Dignity action research project and all of its players being spotlighted for me every day since the spring of 2011. I've seen food growing in challenging and beautiful places: on a hillside

overlooking two unincorporated cities in California, with a view of San Francisco Bay; in the long shadows of the Wind River mountain range, the home of the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone people in north-central Wyoming; in the burning, high-elevation sun and punishing winds of the Laramie Valley in southeast Wyoming; beneath the rusting, rattling elevated train tracks that traverse the neighborhoods of East New York; and across the backyards and rolling fields of Ithaca's breathtaking dance between urban and rural identities.

I've always been a countrywoman with wanderlust, and my love of the land serves as the backdrop to every memory I hold. My Food

Dignity project memories are draped with the lovely ruggedness of the communities and their people who offered up, with great generosity, the wisdom and struggles that live there. For a while, I got to witness what and how these communities successfully fight for their right to access to healthy food. One does not take that kind of privilege lightly. That's why I've stayed on to be part of passing along the stories they tell, the truths they embrace, the vision they are bringing to life. That's why I'm honored to have been given this opportunity to work and be counted alongside the loving, fighting spirits of Monica Hargraves and Christine Porter. 