



**why.**

WhyHunger

# **Social Justice for Lunch:** Delta Fresh Foods Initiative at the National Farm to Cafeteria Conference

By:

**Deborah Moore  
Judy Belue  
Brooke Smith**

2015



**While the work of the Delta Fresh Foods Initiative (DFFI) is deeply rooted in the history, land, foodscapes and people of the Mississippi Delta, their message of collective power for change, and emphasis on the long-term development of truly local leadership for food justice resonates far and wide across the country.** The group recently shared their experience developing a successful Farm to School project in the Mississippi Delta at the annual National Farm to Cafeteria conference hosted by the National Farm to School Network (NFSN) in Austin, TX. In addition to generating a buzz of excitement and networking with many conference attendees who were also engaging in food justice, Delta Fresh was asked to contribute social justice metrics to a new nation-wide research tool published by the NFSN, "Evaluation for Transformation: A Cross-Sectoral Evaluation Framework for Farm to School." Following is the presentation by Delta Fresh Foods Initiative Director, **Judy Belue**, Delta Fresh Foods Initiative Board Chair, **Deborah Moore**, and WhyHunger's Grassroots Action Network's, **Brooke Smith**.

## Who Is Delta Fresh?

**Deborah Moore, PhD**

Board Chair, Delta Fresh Foods Initiative

The Delta Fresh Foods Initiative is fondly known as "Delta Fresh"...a network of organizations working together to create food equity in the Mississippi Delta.

I think it is important that you understand life in the Delta as well as Delta Fresh's history in order to understand how Delta Fresh evolved into this diverse network committed to building sustainable, equitable food systems in the Mississippi Delta.

The Mississippi Delta consists of 18 counties in the flatlands of Mississippi. While the Delta is known for its rich fertile land, music, friendly natives, and good food, unfortunately it is plagued with pervasive poverty. I am a Delta girl. I was born and reared in the Delta and actually grew up in poverty. Many individuals live in substandard conditions in the Delta. We face high teenage pregnancy rates, high illiteracy rates, high unemployment rates, and poor health conditions. Portions of the Delta are considered a food desert where people live miles from fresh fruits and vegetables and access to a grocery store and transportation is a challenge. We have been told many times if the Delta could be cut out of the state of Mississippi, then Mississippi would look more like the rest of the nation.

And just as the land is fertile, the Mississippi Delta is also fertile for research. We are a breeding ground for research. People don't understand us, so outsiders are constantly trying to fix us. Needless to say, we have been researched to death and many organizations have received millions of dollars in grant funds to "fix us." This puts people in the Delta in a passive position and does not allow us to build our own capacity. While we have seen some positive results, what we normally see is once the funding dries up, the programs are gone and we are right back where we started.

That didn't happen with Delta Fresh. Delta Fresh has lasted when many other attempts have not—Delta Fresh just celebrated its fourth birthday. Our evolution is unique in that we had a partner and funder [WhyHunger] that didn't throw funds at us and tell us what to do, but rather provided technical assistance and allowed us to create a model that worked for us.

Delta Fresh's work began in the fall of 2009 with six months of organizing leading to a two-day community gathering in February 2010. We began by organizing to engage people from all sectors (youth, farmers, funders, community development professionals, health professionals, teachers, agricultural educators, etc.) who were interested in networking and planning healthy, local food systems in the Mississippi Delta.

The gathering of over 100 people at Delta State University included a reflection and review of the personal, local and global events around food; collective creation of a timeline of our food history dating from the 1800's to current day; visioning for healthy futures; and a community action plan for ensuring a healthy Delta.

After the gathering, individuals and organizations began working together. As a group, we went through the normal group process of "forming," "norming" and "storming" before we were finally "performing!" Recently, as part of our continued journey to local empowerment, Delta Fresh applied for and obtained its official 501(c)3 status positioning us to be able to be our own fiduciary agent and to be eligible to apply for foundation, state and government funds to support our work. Through these experiences and partnerships, the Delta Fresh Foods Initiative has grown and matured as a network, gaining regional and national attention for our grassroots efforts. WhyHunger has provided ongoing mentoring, capacity building, facilitation and support to the network since its formation in 2009. We

have held true to our mission in that we are committed to building sustainable, equitable community-driven food systems to strengthen the local food economy and to promote healthy lifestyles in the Mississippi Delta. And it is this mission that leads us to our work with Farm to School.

## **What Are We Doing?**

### **Judy Belue**

Director, Delta Fresh Foods Initiative

I would like to talk now about the way Delta Fresh goes about using Farm to School as a strategy for building community capacity and social justice in the Delta. We take what could be called the "road less traveled" and, as you might imagine, that means it is typically slower, bumpier, and harder to navigate!

A large percentage of current local food suppliers in the Mississippi Delta are retired, part-time minority growers. While these local food champions are wholeheartedly committed to safe growing and handling practices, most cannot afford the costly and time consuming annual USDA certification for good agricultural practices (GAP) and good handling practices (GHP) originally designed for large agricultural operations but currently required for all who want to supply major portions of the Farm to School market. Delta Fresh is actively working with the powers that be in Mississippi to establish an alternative food safety certification for small to medium sized growers that will ensure safe and healthy local procurement for the good of food service operations, growers and Mississippi's students. Our support for grassroots local food producers in the Delta Fresh network is aimed at paving the way for their success while getting more significant amounts of locally grown produce on the plates of school children in the state! ▶

Delta Fresh is committed to expanding Farm to School for many important reasons in addition to getting more healthy, locally grown food into school meals. We work hard to ensure equity—inclusion that will produce economic benefits to local communities, and sustainable growth in local food production. And, although it takes more time and patience to make a deliberate effort to make space at the table for stakeholders with little or no power and voice, it surely opens up possibilities for real change and, at least for me personally, ensures job satisfaction that is off the charts! If that strikes a chord in your heart, this is definitely an approach you should consider.

Taking the road less traveled in developing robust, equitable Farm to School programs is not, as you might fear, a mushy, poorly-constructed approach. For Delta Fresh, it is simply a deliberate commitment to change an operating paradigm that has not typically resulted in sustainable, equitable progress...and, for me personally, it is acceptance of the reality that I have to wake up every day and recommit myself to rejecting the urge to take smoother, easier, more efficient and familiar paths.

I was born within a stone's throw of "the most Southern place on earth"—the rich, beautiful and totally fascinating cultural experience that

is Mississippi. We have a lot going for us—some of the richest soil on the face of the earth, a long tradition of agriculture (even though it is obviously flawed by grievous past wrongs), a culture that cherishes good food, and a fierce independence that could actually serve us well if utilized for real and permanent good. Perhaps above all, Mississippi is **SLOW TO CHANGE**.

Millions upon MILLIONS of dollars in grants have flowed into our state from too many well-meaning funders to count. Mississippi should by now have experienced substantial change. Don't get me wrong, there has been some progress, but certainly not proportionate to the money thrown at pervasive poverty, deeply rooted privilege and voracious structural racism as virulent as our famous kudzu vine.

To get an insight into what I'm referring to when I say that Delta Fresh is taking a different path, let me ask you to please think for a minute about your own communities, your own projects. Are there ANY folks in your community who are not included at the table your projects encompass (hint—these are often those in the demographics you use in grant proposals)? Or, more importantly, if they are included directly, are these folks empowered, valued, and listened to in the process of the project? If not, ask yourself...**WHY NOT?** ▶



Perhaps you have not given it real serious thought, or perhaps you are weary of unsuccessful attempts to be inclusive and to collaborate. Maybe you are so strapped with grant requirements, guidelines, workplans, and reports that it seems impossible to take an approach that might not produce "timely" results, an approach that might necessitate difficult conversations and conflict resolution, or perhaps slow you down in a lot of other ways. I certainly understand those issues and I worked in that mode for nearly two decades as a fundraiser.

But...if you became convinced that the long term benefits of a deliberately more inclusive, infinitely more patient, radically transformational approach could actually result in greater, more lasting, much more sustainable progress...would your work look the same as it does right now?

My own experiences over the past four years with Delta Fresh on this "road less traveled" have forced me to concentrate as much (if not more) on the *process* than the project—to delay my craving for more instant gratification sometimes achieved by doing it myself. I have become less enslaved to writing glowing reports and making sure we look good on paper, and have enjoyed the privilege of open and honest communication with our funders when things do not go as planned on the ground or when an unexpected new and different path opens (which is, by the way, typical when we are engaged with communities that are day-to-day living out the very challenges we are trying to impact.) I am learning to slow down and listen to different points of view, to deliberately identify and include people who have been served, studied, canvassed, tested, and marginalized rather than privileged, included, listened to and learned from. I realize now that even while I gave credence to the belief that change comes from within, I did not immediately recognize that if we kept doing things in the same way, we would

continue to get the same results (or the same lack thereof).

I am here today to encourage you to consider whether a shift in the way you go about your work is needed. So what does it look like, what does it take, to go deeper, rather than broader with your goals, to open the circle to those traditionally left out of the discussions, to cooperate rather than competing with those of like minds and shared agenda?

Building on what Deborah has told you about how the Delta Fresh Foods Initiative was formed and some of the milestones over the past four years, let me describe how Farm to School became a key strategy for our work in the Mississippi Delta.

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Within the first fragile year of our existence, we spent many hours trying to hear each other out about *how* to go about our work. After several lengthy and pretty stormy sessions, when many of us were beginning to think we simply could not move forward, we got some very timely relief from our friend, our mentor, and fortunately our funder, Brooke Smith of WhyHunger. She captured and made sense of all the discussions around the table, and synthesized things into a cohesive set of objectives and goals. Having this clear framework brought us back together—identifying common ground we all could agree on and embrace. ►

It was pretty simple—we would build local food systems by **(1)** increasing supply; **(2)** fostering demand; **(3)** continuing to build the network and **(4)** working in a way that would bring about sustainable, structural change. This framework continues to serve us well today as we can easily evaluate ideas and opportunities through this lens.

In our second year, we collaborated with Ken Meter of Crossroads Resource Center to gather and interpret research that helped us understand and articulate the benefits and opportunities of a strong local food system in the Mississippi Delta. Research is a powerful tool, and early on in the information gathering process we all felt more empowered, determined and equal as we discovered together the potential impact our efforts could have. Though Farm to School had already gained momentum elsewhere in the country, we came to understand how well it could fit into the rural, sparsely populated, poverty-stricken counties in the Mississippi Delta. Armed with this legitimizing and persuasive [report](#), “Local Food Systems: Building Health and Wealth in the Mississippi Delta,” we really began to move forward.

With limited staff and a large chunk of geography to impact, we chose school, community and church gardens as a focus for projects to build the supply and demand in communities. We also started working intensely with a group of growers in our network to address production planning, infrastructure, and marketing issues. Though there were small food producers on farms dotting the landscape, most small farmers in Mississippi had come to rely almost solely on commodity crops and traditional agricultural methods with almost no significant fruit and vegetable production. And those who did raise fruits and vegetables either gave them away or sold small quantities at roadside stands. It became clear pretty quickly that the Farm to School market could be ►



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a good entry point for small growers to access larger markets.

So we set about finding ways to connect local growers with local food service directors in small school districts in a few Delta counties. It was a humble but powerful beginning with a lot of push from board members, the wisdom of a couple of real "champion" food service directors who immediately grasped the potential benefits of buying local food for the thousands of kids they were feeding, and a handful of local growers who were willing to visit schools and build relationships with these food service directors.

I will never forget the day we served small, whole sweet potatoes to junior and high school students at Coahoma County High School in Clarksdale, MS. There was a huge room full of young people, born and raised in Mississippi—"the sweet potato capital"—who were not sure exactly what that beautiful orange thing was in the serving line, and who really did not know how to eat it. We saw mostly puzzled faces and heard questions like, "What do we do with this," and "Where are the candied yams?" A few savvy kids, who we later learned had grandparents who were avid gardeners, picked up those potatoes and began to eat them. The local farmer, who had been standing next to me, went over and sat down with one of those kids who was eating his potatoes. And, for me, that moment crystallized our passion to win Mississippi children back to real food. It was an equally powerful moment for that farmer, who said later, "I have never fed this many children before in my life!"

It was a perfect outcome from our first Farm to School success! This day, and a few other early successes, garnered some fantastic publicity, and the Delta Fresh board voted to make Farm to School a top strategy. Increasingly, local growers began to believe they could sell enough food locally to warrant increased production... this sounds so simple for an agricultural state, but in an area frozen in poverty, lost hope, little access to fresh local food and mired in a well-oiled state system to supply processed, canned food...it was not simple.

As we moved forward in our network evolution, Delta Fresh gathered stakeholders once again to develop a longer term strategic plan—still relying on our framework to guide us, but enriched with input from a variety of Delta stakeholders with varying degrees of participation with Delta Fresh and some of our projects.

As a young network with limited staff and resources, we obviously needed partners in the Delta and statewide to make a bigger impact. We did not want to duplicate efforts, or compete with our partners, so we worked hard at identifying ways to fill in gaps, to leverage resources, to shoulder the work together. We joined hands with the Mississippi Food Policy Council and helped get the first Farm to School Week established in Mississippi. We partnered with others to create comprehensive guides for local school procurement. On the grower side, we worked to increase production, and sought funding for the expansion of school and community gardens.



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A handful of committed food service directors, and a small but growing network of local growers were empowered to share their success with their peers and trainings and conferences—momentum is growing! In less than two years we have built more than 20 school gardens, we have developed a school garden curriculum compiled for 5th grade math and ELA (aligned with the new Common Core statewide standards). We played an important role in planning and co-chairing the first and second annual statewide Farm to School Conferences in Mississippi, and are well into planning for our third.

Pulling folks together by building trusted relationships, sharing recognition, and the unselfish distribution of resources has served us well. No matter who gets the credit or the funding, Farm to School was ignited in the Mississippi Delta and the landscape is beginning to change much more rapidly.

So...each organization's and each community's story will be different, but we hope you have been inspired to pay as much attention to the process—the *way* you go about your Farm to School projects and other work—as to the "product" you want to produce.

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**We will leave you with four key words that capture the essence of the Delta Fresh process...commit yourself to work that is:**

- **Respectful** (of all)
- **Resilient** (adaptable to inevitable change)
- **Righteous** (motives as pure as possible)
- **Relationship-Based** (with trusted partners)

## **How Is This Connected to Food Justice?**

**Brooke Smith**, co-leader of the Grassroots Action Network at WhyHunger

It's an honor to be here with Delta Fresh! I'm going to share our perspective on how the Delta Fresh Foods Initiative and their Farm to School strategy fits into the national narrative of a movement for food justice. I work for a global non-profit called WhyHunger, and we talk about food justice as the idea that everyone, at all points of the food system, has the right to good, healthy, fair, equitable food. And the reason that there is need for a concept like food justice (and that there's long been vibrant international movement building around it) is because that assumption of basic rights is not our current reality- there is, in fact, incredible oppression in the food system. If oppression is understood as power + prejudice, then food justice is a rights-based lens used to identify those prejudices, and to address and transform the way that power is wielded in a system that's supposed to be equitable—to ensure healthy quality of life for everyone.

How does this lens of food justice look in terms of Delta Fresh's work in Mississippi?

The statistics that Deborah mentioned are not just numbers, they are the evidence of deeply rooted and systemically reinforced historical and modern day oppression. Through the lens of food justice, oppression in the Delta's food system shows up in a complex variety of ways. ▶



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One example can be seen in how persistent poverty has led to 70% of students in Mississippi schools qualifying for free or reduced lunch, that number rises to almost 100% when you narrow the geographic scope down to the Delta. For years the "system" that has power over resources has decreed that those same students be fed low-nutrient, high-calorie surplus commodity foods with little to none of the more nutritious and locally grown fresh foods...which is one of the factors leading to another statistical reality that almost 40% of Mississippi children ages 10-17 are overweight or obese. So, the current equation looks like this: if you're poor, then you are undeserving of healthy food, and therefore subject to life-threatening health outcomes. Could there be a clearer example of injustice in the food system?

And I could go on...inequity is not just seen in the "problem", it's also prevalent in the "solution" side of the equation. Judy mentioned the questions of equity and agency in terms of the development of "solutions" in communities and schools suffering from this lack of access to

healthy food. These are questions such as: Who is at the planning table when the project ideas are hatched? Who has the ultimate decision-making power over resources and how they get allocated? Who defines the metrics for gauging the resulting success of the projects?

All too often these questions reveal the continued exclusion of the voices of those most affected by the issues (and therefore, those with the most at stake in the success of these projects), which only reinforces the status quo of existing power relationships (if you control the resources, then you have power over those who don't)...all the while under the guise of "helping" and "solutions." These are the symptoms of oppression in the food system, and these are the issues and the questions that Delta Fresh has made it their mission to address.

So how does Farm to School fit into this conversation? Because, at its core, Farm to School is a social justice issue—it's about the right of every child to grow up healthy. And it's this lens on Delta Fresh's Farm to School strategy that plugs their work firmly into the national movement for food justice. What makes Delta Fresh so effective is what Judy was describing about their process—in recognition that they need to change the playing field in order for the right players to come to the table, they are building relationships between those previously disconnected players (like small local farmers and food service directors) in order to uplift new voices and create new alliances that are better able to represent the priorities ►

of the community, and steward the resources required to meet those priorities because they ARE the community.

So when you see Farm to School as a way to create agency in your community, then you can use it to redistribute the access to social, political, economic capital and, ultimately, to transform the current system. From that perspective, the most critical and transformative outcomes of these Farm to School projects are not necessarily the usual metrics of pounds of greens cooked, or loads of melons sold (although those numbers are impressive and important!), but rather increased levels of social and economic equity for all. For the students that Judy met in the cafeteria who now can choose food that is nourishing their bodies and their minds; for the food service directors who come to the Delta Fresh trainings to meet with local farmers and gain the tools for cooking healthy and culturally appropriate meals; for the small local farmer who now has the market-backed option to plant vegetables and not just raise commodity soybeans to be shipped out of state—this new school-based market option gives them real choice over their quality of life, and creates the opportunity to generate and control resources for their own community. All of these outcomes shift the balance of power directly into the hands of those most affected by the astronomically high rates of food insecurity and the resulting health crisis in the Delta. And *that shift* builds the foundation for true sustainable change.

**"When you see Farm to School as a way to create agency in your community, then you can use it to redistribute the access to social, political, economic capital and, ultimately, to transform the current system."**

So if it's that extra attention to values—a process built on transparency, dignity, trust and respect—that makes Delta Fresh's Farm to School strategy so promising in the Delta, it raises a few questions for me that I'd like to share and hopefully think through together with the larger movement as Farm to School continues to spread across the country...

- How do our Farm to School approaches and strategies change if you frame them in terms of a community-wide issue—one that affects not just children in schools but the entire ecosystem of the community?
- Who needs to be at the table from the very beginning of the conversation?
- What if Farm to School funders, researchers and practitioners chose relationship-based indicators of success in addition to commonly agreed upon metrics of volume sold and mouths fed?
- What if we measured the quality, depth and longevity of the relationships within a community as a valued currency and a viable return on investment?
- What if all Farm to School initiatives were framed in terms of human rights? How would that change the planning, implementation and evaluation process, how would it effect community engagement, what would the messaging be, would it shift the sources of funding, and how would funder expectations, timelines and metrics change?

I don't have answers to all these questions. And I know we're not the only ones asking them or working in this way. But I'm hoping that together we can continue working on answering them, and through that process we will build our way to a food system that supports dignity and healthy food as everyone's right! ■■■



## Deborah Moore

Deborah Moore is the Associate Vice President of Community Relations at Delta Health Alliance, providing administrative oversight and technical assistance to the community and organizations. A retiree from the state of Mississippi, Deborah served 27 years in community and economic development and spent 12 years at Delta State University's Center for Community and Economic Development in Cleveland, including five as the Director. Moore is a member of several non-profit boards including the Mississippi Center for Nonprofits, Cleveland Youth Council and Friends of the Environment and Delta Fresh Foods Initiative, where she serves as chair of the board. She is an advisor for the Breast Education-Early detection Project and the School-based Asthma Management Project at Delta State University and the Excel By 5 program.

A native of Cleveland, MS, Deborah is an M.B.A graduate of Delta State University. She has a certification as an Economic Development Finance Professional from the National Development Council (NDC) and received her PhD from the University of Southern Mississippi in Human Capital Development. She is married to Dr. Billy Moore and they are the proud parents of two daughters, Andrea and Alicia.



## Judy Belue

Judy Belue is the Director of the Delta Fresh Foods Initiative (DFFI), a coalition of stakeholders committed to establishing and strengthening community food systems in the Mississippi Delta. Judy provides administrative support, financial management and project coordination for the organization. She leads DFFI's Delta Farm to School network, working directly with local food producers to increase production capacity, food safety and connections with appropriate markets. Prior to joining DFFI, Judy served as Consultant and Project Director for Quitman County Good Food Revolution (QCGFR), developing a more sustainable local community food system, as Regional Health Director for the Get A Life initiative of the Community Foundation of NW Mississippi funded to prevent childhood obesity in eight counties of the Mississippi Delta, and as Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Club of SCV Foundation.

Judy sits on the board of the Mississippi Food Policy Council, serves as chair of the Council's Farm to Institution Committee and Co-Chair of the annual Mississippi Farm to Cafeteria Conference. Judy has studied at the University of Memphis, University of Tulsa, UCLA, and California State University at Northridge with an emphasis on volunteer and non-profit management.



## Brooke Smith

Brooke Smith is the co-leader of WhyHunger's Grassroots Action Network (GAN), working in partnership with community-based leaders, organizations and networks across the USA to build and enhance capacity, support leadership, and strengthen collective impact for the food justice movement. Understanding food justice as the demand for dignity, respect, rights and equity at all points of the food system, GAN works at the intersection of local, regional and national organizing to prioritize and resource community-based expertise and strategies for building the food justice movement. This work is deeply rooted in an anti-oppression analysis and takes the form of authentic long-term relationship building supported by peer mentoring, training and technical support, allyship, storytelling and collaborative project development.

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WhyHunger is a leader in building the movement to end hunger and poverty by connecting people to nutritious, affordable food and by supporting grassroots solutions that inspire self-reliance and community empowerment. WhyHunger brings its unique assets and history to building a broad-based social movement to end hunger. Our set of core values rests on the understanding that solutions and innovation are often found in the grassroots. WhyHunger's programs work to support these community-based organizations as they grow and develop, and bring new ideas and practices to creating a just food system that provides universal access to nutritious and affordable food. **Learn more at [whyhunger.org](http://whyhunger.org)**

## Food Justice Voices

Our support for grassroots local food producers in the Delta Fresh network is aimed at paving the way for their success while getting more significant amounts of locally grown produce on the plates of school children in the state!

—**Judy Belue**

Director, Delta Fresh Foods Initiative

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