

# Questions for Oran Hesterman about the Good Food Revolution

**Bill Zirinsky:** Oran, you have said that Fair Food Network is working at the intersection of food systems sustainability and food equity. Please explain what you mean by that.

Oran Hesterman: Fair Food Network is a national nonprofit dedicated to building a more just and sustainable food system. We work at the intersection of food systems, sustainability and equity to guarantee access to healthy, fresh and sustainably grown food, especially in underserved communities. We implement model programs and bring the right people together to generate ideas, share resources and promote policy changes that will repair our food system.

We are faced with a broken food system that undermines the wellbeing of people, the environment and the economy. Our current food system leaves many communities without equitable access to healthy food. Neighborhoods dominated by fast food chains and convenience stores are prevalent in underserved communities nationwide. Diet-related illnesses such as diabetes and childhood obesity are reaching a crisis point, and disproportionately afflict low-income communities and communities of color.

Current production, processing, and distribution systems have serious, negative impacts on workers and the environment. The people who pick, process, deliver and serve our food are underpaid, live in poor conditions and often work in hazardous environments. Many current farming methods are contaminating our air, soil, and water.

Our food system needs a re-design and Fair Food Network is dedicated to working with others to bring about a food system that is more sustainable and equitable.

**Bill Zirinsky:** You had previously been the Executive Director of the Fair Food Foundation. How was that structured differently from FFN, and what happened to it?

Oran Hesterman: Fair Food Foundation was a private foundation fully funded by a family who wished to dedicate their wealth to a philanthropic organization with a mission to provide access to healthy, fresh food to historically excluded populations. They asked me to take the leadership of this new foundation because they understood my dedication to this same vision. For a year and a half I created the structure, systems, and hired a stellar staff to move this vision forward on a regional and national level. Unfortunately, this family lost their ability to continue funding the Fair Food Foundation when Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme was uncovered. Virtually overnight, just as we had really hit the ground running, we needed to close our doors.

But the good news is that, shortly thereafter in 2009, I incorporated Fair Food Network as a nonprofit organization, and it is moving energetically forward with a similar vision and mission but with a nonprofit, public charity, organizational structure.

**BZ:** You have had a long career in philanthropy, working as the Food and Society Programs Director at the Kellogg Foundation. Please tell us about your work with the Kellogg Foundation, and how that relates to the important work you're now doing with the Fair Food Network.

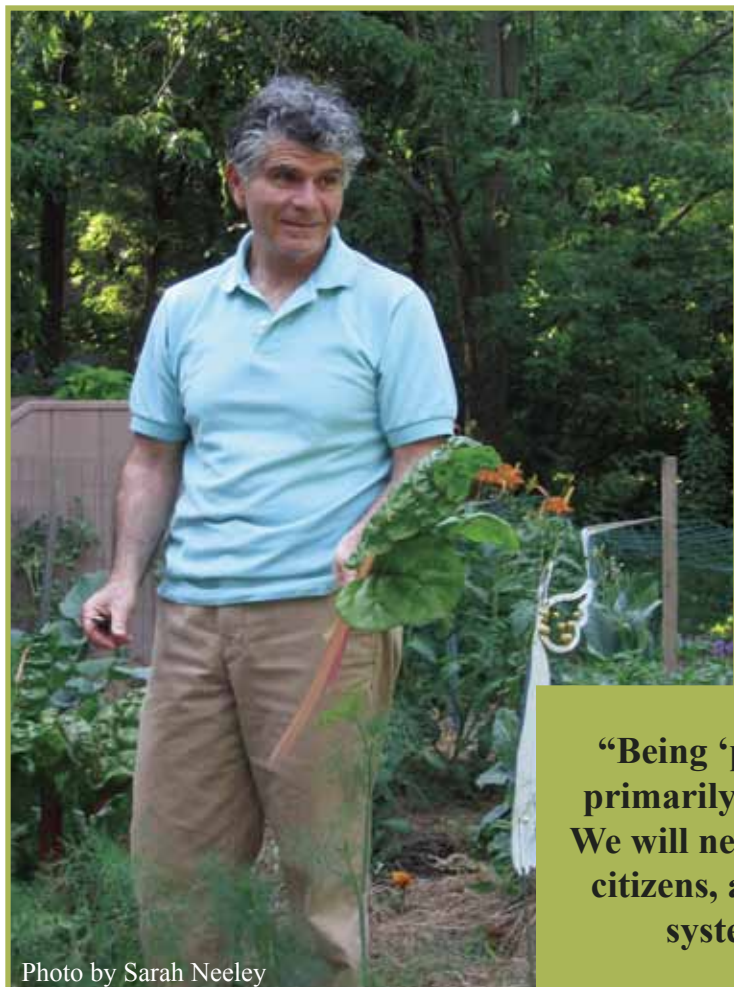
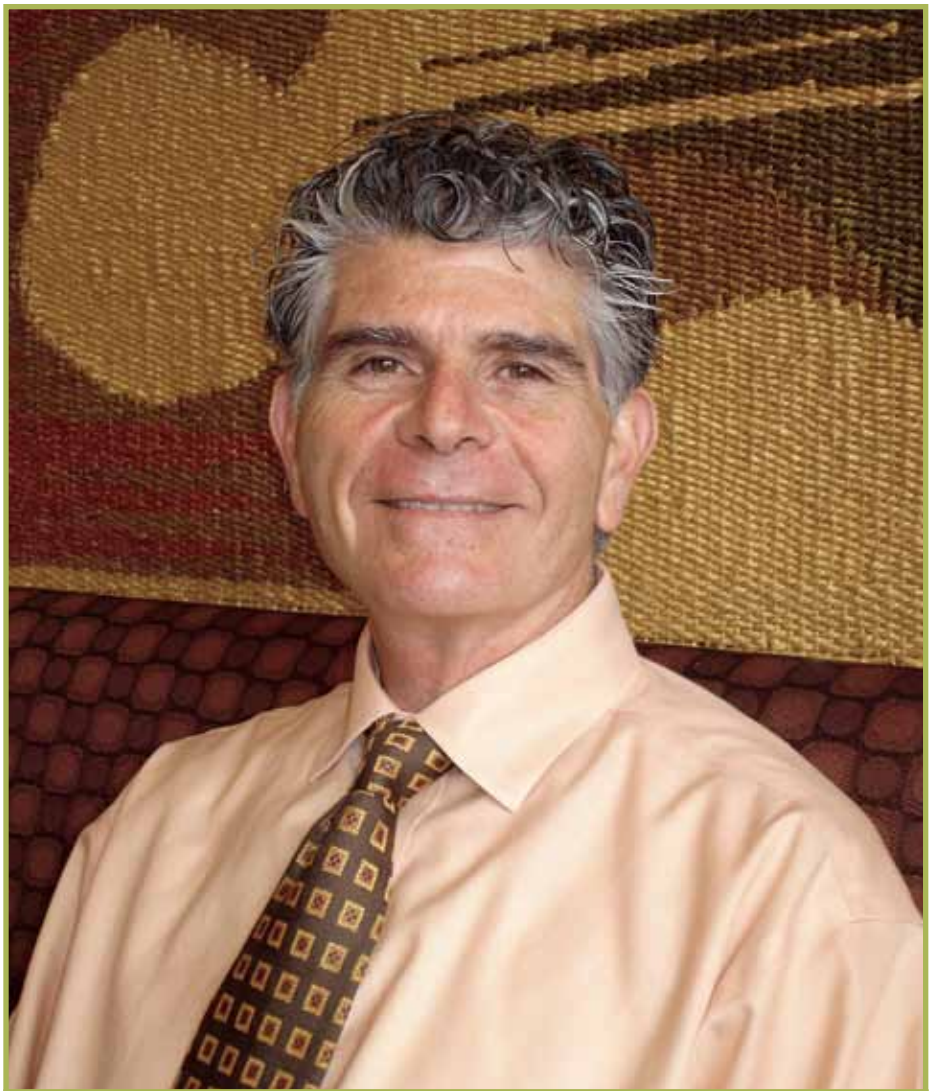


Photo by Sarah Neeley

**you're now doing with the Fair Food Network.**

Hesterman: I led the sustainable agricultural grant-making program at Kellogg Foundation for 17 years. In 1991, I helped Kellogg Foundation initiate the Integrated Farming Systems program that funded projects focused on

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**Oran Hesterman is the director of the Fair Food Network, based in Ann Arbor. He led the sustainable agricultural grant-making program at the Kellogg Foundation for 17 years, and is one of the nation's leaders in the sustainable food revolution which has spread like a prairie fire across the country in recent years.**

**“I'm writing a book about the need for the good food revolution and the heroes who are already developing this vision into a reality. It is time to create a food system that fosters healthy families, healthy communities, and a healthy environment. *The Good Food Revolution* lays out a vivid, concrete vision of how we can shape the food culture in our homes, communities, and in the public sphere.”**

local and sustainable farming practices and production systems. It became clear that to repair the broken food system we needed to change not just individual farms and individual consumers but to support change at the local and national levels through informing public policy to create systemic change. Over the years at Kellogg Foundation, I had the opportunity to help the Foundation invest over \$200 million in projects and organizations nation-wide that have all been working to create a more sustainable food system in the U.S. These projects, organizations, and leaders have become the base of the Good Food Movement that we see taking root in so many communities and institutions.

**Can you tell us about the current programs of the Fair Food Network?**

Hesterman: *Double Up Food Bucks* is Fair Food Network's Double Value Bonus Token Project that provides incentives for families who receive food assistance benefits (SNAP, or Food Stamps) to buy healthier food by increasing their purchasing power for fresh fruits and vegetables. When Food Stamp customers shop at a farmer's market, the amount they spend is matched with Double Up Food Bucks bonus tokens to purchase any Michigan-grown fruit or vegetable. This concept, already piloted in Detroit and several other cities in the U.S., demonstrates that a small incentive can shift buying and eating habits and result in healthier outcomes for low-income families. Without such an incentive, tens of billions of public dollars allotted through food stamps are being spent on nutritionally inadequate foods.

Double Up Food Bucks will also provide a badly needed boost to the local food economy by increasing demand for locally grown produce. All local growers can benefit — from traditional farmers, to urban gardeners, to locally owned small groceries, farmers' markets and farm stands.

*The Good Food Social Enterprise Laboratory* is an education and training program for entrepreneurs in the nonprofit sector who want to become more adept at creating revenue-generating enterprises for their

organizations. We piloted this project last Winter with about 10 leaders and plan to expand the program this fall.

*Informing Public Policy* is an important part of our programmatic structure at Fair Food Network. If we are going to build a truly sustainable food system for the future, we need to not only demonstrate good practices on the ground, we also need to have the community-based work inform future public policy. To that end, Fair Food Network has a presence in DC, working with policy makers at the US Department of Agriculture and on Capitol Hill. We are interested in helping to inform the future Farm Bill around food assistance and nutrition policy so that it can better serve the nutritional needs of low-income families, while supporting local food economies and local farmers.

*Assisting foundations and funder collaboratives* to make good investments in the area of sustainable food and agriculture is another focus of Fair Food Network. With our long experience of funding projects in this field, we are able to advise other funders about what projects make the most sense to invest in, given their strategic goals.

**You have emphasized that people with low income have the least access to healthy, organically grown foods. Please elaborate on that, and specifically tell us about the situation in southeastern Michigan, and in Detroit.**

Hesterman: There is a \$1 billion food economy in Detroit. About \$450 million – 45% is composed of food purchased with federal food assistance (food stamps). 60% of all redemptions are at liquor stores, convenience and corner stores, few of which carry any fresh fruits or vegetables. Detroit is the 11<sup>th</sup> largest city in the US, and there is not a single major super market left in the entire city.

While Detroit is a stark example of what USDA has termed a “food desert”, this is the situation in virtually all underserved or historically-excluded communities across the country.

**Organizations similar to the Fair Food Network are sprouting forth around the country. Over the course of your years at Kellogg, you helped to build this network of food equity and sustainability organizations around the country. Please tell us more.**

Hesterman: As a decision-maker in the largest funding program in sustainable agriculture and food systems, I have funded (as I noted earlier) over \$200 million of grants to well over one hundred organizations. I have also had the opportunity to review many hundreds of proposals from those individuals and their organizations who have shared with me their thinking and their most creative ideas about how we can improve the food system in our communities and beyond. Many of these organizations have become the leaders of the Good Food Movement, and this network is responsible for much of the work happening on this issue in communities around the country. I am drawing upon all this experience in my new position as President and CEO of Fair Food Network.

**For a few moments, take us back two and three decades. Take us back to when talking about our food system wasn't a very popular thing to be talking about.**

Hesterman: When I was a new professor in the Crop and Soil Science Department at Michigan State University in the mid-1980's, trying to have a serious conversation about organic farming or sustainable agriculture was not possible. There was no



Photo courtesy of Fair Food Network

## At Eastern Market in Detroit

The Fair Food Network's *Double Up Food Bucks* project provides incentives for families who receive food assistance benefits (SNAP, or Food Stamps) to buy healthier food by increasing their purchasing power for fresh fruits and vegetables.

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recognition of any problem with our food system. Only in the last 10-15 years has there been a new awareness that the food system is as broken as any of the other systems, such as our health care system or our education system. Now it is more acceptable to talk about the broken food systems. But when I started a new organization at

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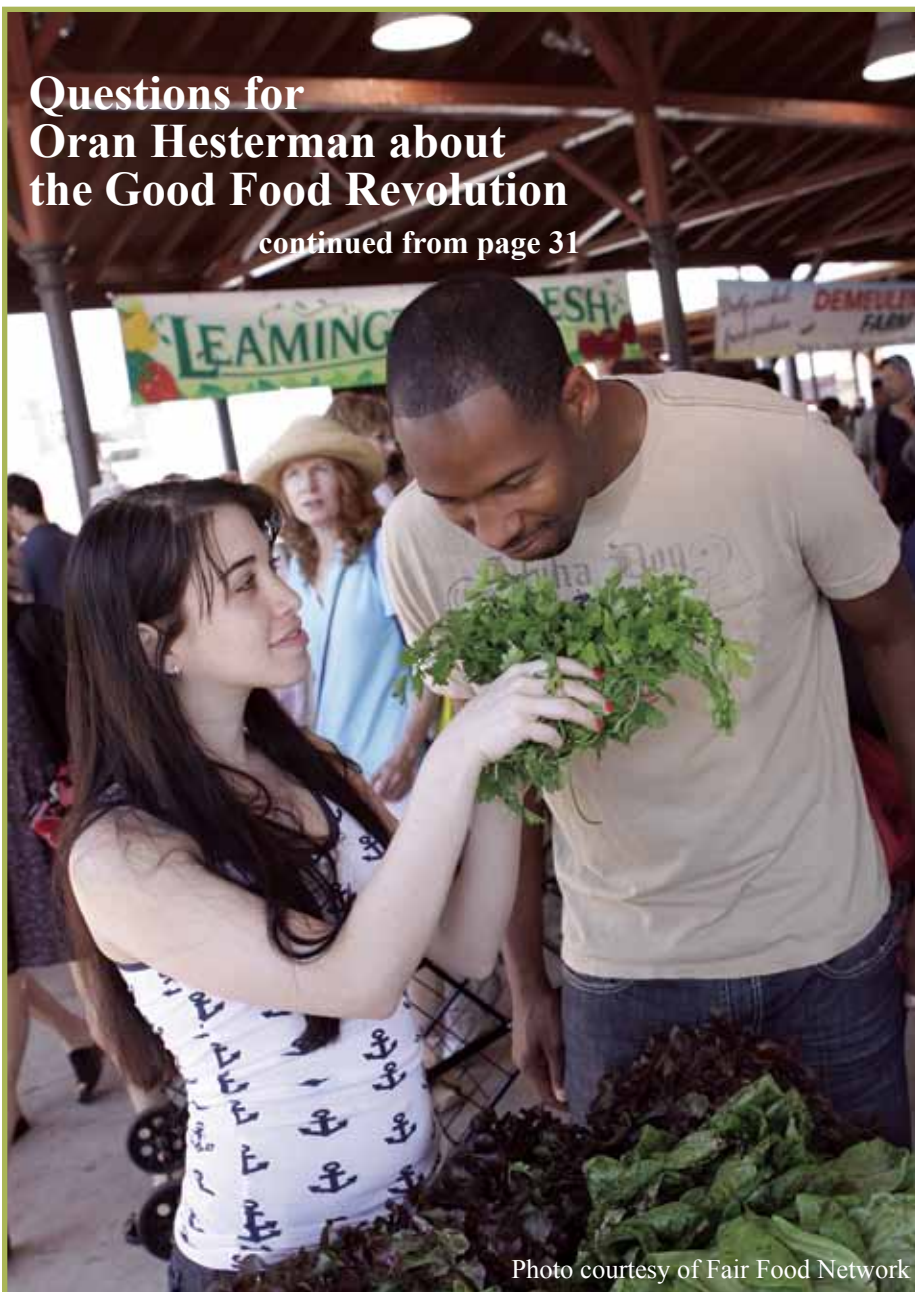


Photo courtesy of Fair Food Network

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MSU, the Michigan Agricultural Stewardship Association, there was a great deal of defensiveness and opposition on the part of most of the faculty who did not see the need to address the issues I felt were critical.

**You’ve called our food system “a runaway train”. Is it irretrievably broken, compromised, out of control?**

Hesterman: If you're like many Americans, you have spent much of your life treading the well-worn path between the kitchen and the supermarket without giving much thought to where the food you eat comes from. But if you look around, you will see a growing number of signs that our food system is reaching a crisis point. The system that was meant to bring us abundant food at low cost while maintaining rural economies is endangering what's most precious to us: our environment, our health, our soil and water, and our future. There is chemical runoff from agriculture in our waterways; soaring rates of diet-related illness in our inner-city communities; loss of prime farmland to urban and suburban sprawl; corporate concentration that delivers 80% of our meat from only four suppliers and 42% of all groceries from just three retailers. These are not problems that can be solved one by one. If we try to create a healthy food system by solving individual problems, we will likely create more unintended consequences. Instead, we need to view these as symptoms of a larger system that is broken and out of control, like a runaway train. There are many reasons for the current state of the food system, primary among them, decades of bad public policy. The good news is that many people, those I think of as the heroes of the new Good Food Revolution, have been working for a couple of decades to help us see how to bring this runaway train under control, and there are glimpses of this starting to happen.

**There is SO much interest in food, right now. Locally grown food. Organic food. Sustainable farming practices. Growing, buying, eating local. Why is the food system riding this wave of interest? Has the wave peaked?**

Hesterman: My sense is that it is still building. Signals are everywhere such as the change of leadership at USDA and the explosion of farmers markets and CSAs. My belief is that this movement has a lot more growing to do to bring about the change needed to repair this broken system. Most of the wave we have seen building is still based on individual families and their relation to their refrigerator. As more of us make the transition from conscious consumer to engaged citizen, we will see policy change start to take place, which will be the real sign of systems change in the food system.

**On a more personal level, what has aroused people’s interest so much? Is it diet-related illness, is it food safety, is it public policy, is it economics --- why are people caring so much now, about the food they eat?**

Hesterman: My direct experience says that people initially wake up because of some personal experience that is often health related either in their own personal life or the life of a loved one. For example, there is new research connecting the use of certain pesticides and increased incidence of ADHD in children. As parents of young children read this information, they are aware of the health impact on those we love of the food we eat, and they will be more mindful of the kinds of produce they choose for their children.

**Will you talk about staying “plate-centric”...and say more about our morphing from conscious consumers to engaged citizens?**

Hesterman: This building of conscious awareness among consumers is really important AND it is only one aspect of the wave we are experiencing. The transition from conscious consumer to engaged citizen is what will take this wave and cause it to create the kind of significant change that is needed for the system to get back on track. It is important for each of us to take personal responsibility for the food system we create in our homes and our families. Being “plate-centric” means that we relate to the food system primarily by what goes into and comes out of our refrigerators. We will need to move beyond the refrigerator, to engage as active citizens, and all of us take responsibility for our collective food system, in order for the system re-design to happen.

**You have said that childhood obesity “isn’t a problem we can solve”. Please elaborate.**

Hesterman: Childhood obesity is a symptom of the system similar to environmental pollution or the poor treatment of farm workers. Rather than solve problems one by one, it is far better to redesign the system.

**You are hoping that some of the Fair Food Network’s on-the-ground projects will help inform public policy. How?**

Hesterman: Ultimately the best public policy is policy that is informed by direct experience in the communities. We will have a very sophisticated evaluation procedure for our Double Up Food Bucks that will analyze the effect of the program on the health of the consumers, the economic viability of the farmers’ markets and the profits to the small farmers. In this way, we can have hard data to illustrate the effectiveness of this program and the need to expand it and other similar programs to underserved populations. As policy makers learn about this project, and others like it, they can understand how public policy could be shifted to support programs like this.

**Why do you call the Fair Food Network a ‘network’?**

Hesterman: It truly is a network and a collaboration between farmers, producers, distributors, inner city food activists, consumers, farmers markets, and CSAs, the USDA, food coalitions, anti-poverty groups, academics, and all people who are interested in ensuring a healthy diet for Americans. I see FFN as an organization that brings people and ideas and resources together to benefit our community.


**You are writing a book. Why are you writing it, and what is it focused on? What will you cover in the book?**

Hesterman: I’m writing a book about the need for the good food revolution and the heroes who are already developing this vision into a reality. It is time to create a food system that fosters healthy families, healthy communities, and a healthy environment. *The Good Food Revolution* lays out a vivid, concrete vision of how we can shape the food culture in our homes, communities, and in the public sphere. My hope is that by writing about my experience with the Good Food Movement for close to 40 years, and by highlighting success being achieved in many small projects, I can help inspire others to action and help them connect with organizations and leaders across the country who are dedicating themselves to building a better food system for our children and grandchildren.

**If people want to know more, and engage on this subject, how do they contact you and the Fair Food Network?**

Hesterman: Please sign onto our website at [www.fairfoodnetwork.org](http://www.fairfoodnetwork.org) and you will receive periodic updates about our work. You can also reach me directly at [ohesterman@fairfoodnetwork.org](mailto:ohesterman@fairfoodnetwork.org)

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