

Growing and Buying Good Food Keynote Transcript

Michelle Napier-Dunnings: Our next group is a panelist that we'd like you to listen to the story of two women. One is from Southeast Michigan, the other is from Southwest Michigan. One works in an enormous school system, the other works on her blueberry farm. And how these two women met each other, why they do what they do, and how together they are nurturing and feeding thousands of schoolchildren every day with nutrient rich food. Christine Quane will be their moderator and she will encourage them to introduce themselves in more detail. Please, however, at this moment. Welcome Betti Wiggins and Barbara Norman to the stage.

[Applause]

Christine Quane: Good morning everybody. I love these women. I'm Christine Quane. I work for the Eastern Market in Detroit. Many of you know Eastern Market, know the work that we do. Some of you do not. The Eastern Market is the oldest public market in the country. And I have the greatest job on the planet. I get to work with these two women. And it is my honor to introduce them. This is Betti Wiggins. She is the executive director for the Detroit Public Schools, Office of School Nutrition. And Barbara Norman is a fourth-generation blueberry grower in Covert, Michigan. If anybody knows anything about Covert, and farming, Google it, it's an incredible, incredible story. That's just an aside, just an aside. So I'm going to lead off discussion. One thing in my questions that we weren't going to cover, but I think it's a great story if you could just tell us how did you guys meet. I don't even think I know that story.

Barbara Norman: I do.

Quane: You go Barbara.

Norman: It started, believe it or not in San Diego, California. I was at a National School Board and Educators Conference, and I met a board member from Detroit Public School. And walking down the street talking, she kept bragging about their food systems, and that I had to meet her food service director, the executive director, none other than Miss Betti Wiggins. Upon getting back to this part of the state, I met Betti at one of my field days. She came down and we picked blueberries together and talked, and the love was on [laughter]. Betti Wiggins: Well, what made it so interesting to me and to be in Covert, it was very reminiscent of how I grew up. I tell people most of the time because I'm African American, I'll tell people I was raised on a farm, and they'll say what part of the south are you from, and I'll say Southern Michigan. I was raised down in that little corner, just south of Ann Arbor, if anybody ever heard of Whittaker, and Milan, Maybee. And that's the area I came out of. So, I was raised on a farm, so I was very interested in seeing what Barbara was doing. And I knew the importance of fresh



produce. And I also, I have a very soft spot in my heart for farmers because I came out of greenhouse country and out of what you guys call specialty crops, but vegetable farmers, tomatoes, potatoes, corn. So, you know if you go down that part, you know, there's some huge greenhouses, and huge farms like Rulee's Farm [assumed spelling] and Dundee Potatoes. So I knew those people growing up. And I used to watch for what happened at the end of the year, when they wouldn't sell all their crop, you know. Pigs and cows had a good meal because you know it would be destroyed. So I was determined that I was going to try to buy as much crop and then just seeing what happened to African American farmers after, if anybody's aware of the Pigford case where they you know they said African American farmers weren't treated fairly, which they weren't. And not given a market. And when I met Barbara I said, hey, here's a time that you know we can put a stake in the ground and see what we can do about getting fresh produce and getting her produce and particular produce of the people in Southeast Michigan. I know some of you guys are probably from different parts, but I think Southeast Michigan has the most variety. Some of the best food. I was up in Travers City and I couldn't help myself, I bought a bushel of Honeycrisp Apples on my way back home. So, you know my dedication was to number one, recognizing that I think farmers are the most courageous small business people there are. Anybody depends on the sun.

[Applause]

So, you know they personify to me what we try to do in this country, you know you've got to depend upon the weather, the sun, so many other things. You really are dedicated.

Quane: It is true. Barbara, tell us about the work that's being done on your farm and the way that you're engaging and connecting with schools in the area and around the state.

Norman: Well with the Good Food Charter me and a couple of friends we were in on the beginning in setting the goals for the charter and number six is my main goal. And that is for the state of Michigan, then the nation, and then the world to engage and incorporate food and agriculture as one in the school systems to all children. And so with that, that's my goal. That's what we do. And meeting Betti and doing Detroit Public Schools, not only getting your product, your help growing good healthy foods, growing nutritious fruits, vegetables and produce you need to educate adults and children. And I say from the birth to the grave. And that's my goal is making children aware of where their food comes from. Everybody should know their farmer. They should know who grows their food. And everyone has to eat, and if you start if you bring up the child right and start incorporating it in the school we won't have hunger. We won't have what you are call food deserts. And so that's what I do and in Covert we have community gardens. We do what we what we call 100-garden dash, whereas we have 100 gardens every year and each year we try to incorporate more families that has not growing a garden. Our kids plant at the senior building in their little window sill stuff and just advocating in the community



for a healthy food system and stop the junk foods. You know, I live in a community where the two convenience store gas stations, even though I'm in a rural area with no red lights in the railroad tracks, no tall buildings, the two stores and we're very rural. I have 53 acres of land, but there the kids can't buy fresh fruits or vegetables in the two gas stations and that's sad, or in the two convenience stores. So my goal is to kind of make it all come together in a loving equitable way where everybody wants to eat healthy.

Quane: Betti tell us about the journey that you've had to Detroit Public Schools. The changes you've made and the things we've done.

Wiggins: First I have to give kudos to Mike Ham [assumed spelling]. I started reading some of his papers and some of, you know you got to, you know you got to understand as they say there is some science, there's some factual empirical stuff that you need to know before you start doing this. And so I finally realized that what I was engaged in was not just with food, but changing the food system. That's the kind of work I'm doing now. And then I recognized that couldn't do it by myself and how wholly ignorant I was of some things so I reached out for different partners. Great partner I had was the Eastern Market with Christine Quane. Fair Food Network and the work that they do. I got involved in Detroit Food Policy Council. I started coming to events such as this and I just totally embraced the Michigan Good Food Charter. I've been around this country a lot of places, but I have never seen a document such as the Good Food Charter that has specific goals with timelines. Right now I'm engaged in number one. And that's because of that dirty, dusty, country road and the folk that I knew who raised the crops and the animals. And I'm also engaged in number five. And because of number one I got engaged in something called the Local Food Association, which is centered in Kentucky, but what the Local Food Association is about is to try to bring, for small growers, bring them into sort of like the Manufacturer's Association, where they can have a voice. And then I'm engaged in terms of trying to get my colleagues in the state, food service directors. All over this country, we are into a \$400 billion business and we can make an impact in our local economy. And a lot food service folk are just afraid of it, because it's change. And you know everybody keeps focusing on the nutrition standards. The nutrition standards are the nutrition standards, are the nutrition standards. But how you implement those standards. It takes, that's what they pay us to do. So my journey started becoming educated, reaching out, understanding what was available through the Healthy and Hunger-Free Act of 2010, you know that needs to be re-authorized. I don't care what politicians or what side wins. We need to be behind that. Because that's the first thing, that's the first really stick in the ground for children where we're going to have a standard. We've got to change the food system and what we feed children. So I got engaged in that and then just sitting down and making a commitment. The kids in Detroit Public, and not only do I serve Detroit Public, I serve 35 charter schools, two small school districts and something called the EAA. I just said, in the city of Detroit since I'm going to be responsible for feeding all these kids we're going to have healthy food. And so we do



educational things with the Eastern Market, I do things with the Detroit Lions of getting kids involved as Barbara said. And then we decided to have a school garden program. We have 76 school gardens. We have a 4-1/2 acre farm that's going to expand to 11 acres next year. We have a greenhouse. You know and I didn't do all of this by myself. It's a journey of collaboration and we created something called the Detroit Public, the Detroit, not public schools. The Detroit School Garden Collaborative. And anybody can join. And because we have you know scale. We help people. We use USDA money, so we don't charge. We help people as long as they're going to pursue the standards, the nutrition standards and trying to increase local food. Right now, I've been saying 30%, you know, 'I've got to get to 30.' Well I have 22.5% of all my product, my fresh fruits and vegetables come from Michigan, local.

[Applause]

So I kept saying "30," they said, "no Betti it's only 20." I said, "no it's 30," it should be 30. It should be 30. Twenty is not even heavy lifting so it should be 30. So you know if I could lobby for that I'll lobby for that. So that's how my journey started and that's how it continues. To eventually have, and my estimation when I put out my RFP. Because I have, you know I do 85,000 meals a day. There's only one organization in this state that serves more meals than I do and that's corrections, that's sad. But you know if you look at all the little school districts and everything, if we could just come together and make a commitment to Michigan agriculture, whether you're a self-op or a management company. And farmers, the farmers, you're small growers, you're taxpayers, you're on school boards, you've got people in the legislature. We should just make this commitment to the Michigan farmer. We didn't, you know one of my ideas that I had was that if the state of Michigan would give us 1 cent for every time we serve a reimbursable meal with local food in it, that 1 cent would circulate in the economy. There's 565,000 reimbursable lunches being served. Not a big impact, but money, is money, is money. So you know like the small apple grower told me the time I bought 300 cases of apples from him, that he would not have had, that it would have laid on the grown and he wouldn't have a customer for it, he said that allowed him to buy a new cooler. So now he has a way, you know a better way to manage his harvest. That's what I'm engaged in. Number five is going to take care of itself because we have the Michigan Department of Education and they're going to make sure we do number five. So, which is the new nutrition standards and making sure food. And so that to me is one, is the one that we as food service directors and institutional buyers hospitals, nursing homes, daycare centers, anything should be focusing on, which would improve our economy. So I'm a rooter for the farmers and I hope that what we're doing is having some meaningful impact.

Quane: Barbara, we know that the Good Food Charter puts six goals for 2020. One of those is for institutions to buy 20% at that time. What do you think it's going to take to get us there?



Norman: This audience. It's going to take each and every one of us to just embrace healthy foods. We're a generation that hasn't given anything back. Every generation before us whether it was war, whether it was land, whether it was whatever, if you look at the data, we have the less healthiest young people, the less educated young people. We have to step up, work together, and get this right. Because everybody has to eat. There's more childhood obesity, there's more childhood diabetics and we're study buying food. So we have to take the initiative to make sure that what we put in our bodies as an example and what you children eat, or your grandchildren, or your neighbors, or your senior citizens is good, healthy, fresh food. And this is the state that can lead the nation in it. I was listening to Betti and we have so much in common, because I was in the audience when Mike Ham first came to MSU, I heard his very first speech. And we've kind of talked since then. And also I was food service director at South Hebron High School for years and when none of this was going on. And I used to get cabbage from a local grower who drove the buses with me just thinking about it. So now this has come full circle and with somebody like Detroit Public Schools leading the way. And we have ag classes on my farm. They come down and they pick berries and several other schools has joined in since then. Me and other framers we go to Detroit and help plant gardens. We bring blueberries. We give blueberry plants. Not just growing your produce or your fruit and selling it. That's part of it. Yes, but the other part is educating people. Giving something back and helping people to understand what a food systems mean. What healthy food means. So.

Quane: Betti do you want to add anything to that?

Wiggins: No, I think what I would add too is it is a community engagement part, you know. It is a reality that we're all in this together. I was out at a conference I think it was in Denver, and I was talking about serving asparagus, I buy asparagus from up here. And the great thing about being in Michigan when I talk about my work I can just hold up my hand and say get my peaches from here, I get my blueberries from here, I get my potatoes from down here. I get my, I had potatoes from Kalkaska and I was on my way to Grand Rapids and we jokingly said we ought to find that farm. I was on my way to Traverse City and we said we ought to find that farm Elmapple Farm up in Kalkaska. And then I got my apples from Klink Orchard in Grand River and I'm getting to know, in Grand Rapids. So I'm getting to know the farmer's names. I'm getting to, they're people. So I can tell my kids, you know the you know the people at Elmapple Farm, grew our potatoes. You know we just did that for food day. So, I think also the farmers need to give back in terms of visiting my kids and saying, yeah I'm the farmer that raised your potatoes. That's called community engagements. That's how we communicate. That's how we break things down. As I said I was in Denver and somebody from the Asparagus Association stood up and said, "I really want to thank Detroit Public Schools for buying our asparagus." You know how wonderful that was to hear someone from upstate Michigan talk about thanking Detroit is instead of complaining about us [laughter]?



[Applause]

That you know the community engagement, the outreach. I'm really you know if there's anything I would like to do is I really would like to see our school food people in the state of Michigan we could some of you, you know you guys got small school districts. It's very hard for me because the supply chain is my problem I have, you know I have 131 schools, but in these little local school districts you get to know the food service director. In some of your schools, you know 3, 4 bushels can help. But when I buy apples I had to buy when I bought baker potatoes from Kalkaska that was 385 crates. I had to buy apples were something like 300. I but in half truck loads, truck loads, I get 80,000 pounds of blueberries from Covert. When I bought my peaches it was 50,000 that I had, you see I don't buy in the dozens, I buy in the thousands. So when I think about growers out there in Michigan growing that stuff you ought to say, you know, "Let's go down here and talk to these people in Detroit and we'll form some sort of a consortium or whatever." I challenge the school food consortium in Michigan that we got to stop breakdown and talk about how could we possibly could have a bid with our local farmers, together. I know it may not be possible for the aggregate, and I'm not asking you to suppress, or you know not using your commercial contracts you have, but we're a fixed market, I can tell you how many kids I'm going to buy, you don't have to go out there. You know I can go to a Farmers' Market or something. Well maybe I'm going to sell 6 bushels, 12 bushels or whatever. There's a peach brokerage out in Benton Harbor that know they're going to get 50,000 peaches ordered from Detroit Public or those farmers. So the other thing is, that's what I have to say is supply chain. I have finally found out that my local food hub is my local distributor who was able to process 40,000 pounds of sweet corn for me in 2.5 days and had it to my kids' trays never frozen. You should have saw those kids when we grew that sweet corn and they never. Because they all through the sweet corn came in kernels. They didn't know it could come on a cob. So those are the kind of things that I would say if we're going to change the food system, the farmers are going to have to engage with the customers and the consumers. I'm not the consumer. I've got 85 little children out there and their families behind them. And that's the reason I support things like our Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program that's sponsored by the USDA where I'm allowed to introduce foods, new foods and vegetable to the kids. So our priority has been local foods. I'm working on an apple house to give me somewhere here in Michigan, where we're putting a Michigan apple on our menu every month. So I mean those are the kind of things, but it is through communication and people reaching out that the apply guy, and I can't remember the name of the broker, he actually came down and sat and talked with me and showed me what they could do. I'm trying to get the Asparagus Association to sit down and talk with me, because we'll take seconds, I don't want all those pretty ones with the rubber bands. If I could get the ones that tips its stems and we pack them in 20-pound cases, all the sudden green beans I don't have to do, I got a Michigan product on my menu. So it's that kind of stuff. It is communication, and it is an awareness that we can change, we can meet all the goals in the Good Food Charter, particularly one if we all you



know work together.

Quane: You both, maybe Barbara can start, what are the biggest challenges that you face in the work that you're doing now. I mean there's always challenges on the farm for sure.

Norman: I have to think about that. There are some challenges, but personally I always see the glass as half full. I never really see it half empty. So with a little prayer. Challenges. I would think that you really have no control. Maybe the weather, but I work around that. Because I always have produce. Every year. I don't care what other farmers say, and this might sound funny to some. But I always have good blueberries. So when we change from maybe handpicking to more the machine pick, I was able to make that adjustment. I just really, I really don't have a lot of challenges. I really don't. So I just can't make up a lot of words you know Betti was a blessing to me. I've done other markets I also did the Healthy Snacks Program that USDA sponsor where children were to get healthy snacks all during the day at the schools and I started right there at Covert Public School. And put a few in South Haven and those where were the, in the hallways, or on the desks, or wherever the children went during the day, the government, or the nutrition program, or the food policy recognize that children should be able to eat an apple, or they won't let us do grapes because kids throw them. But whatever, cherry tomatoes. Whatever it is that a kid's taste buds you know during the run of the day, they were able to get them not just in the lunch program. So I didn't that. And so there's always been something that was so beneficial to making all of this work and giving stuff to the seniors or at church. Just making everybody aware of the difference in something produced somewhere else frozen and rode across the nation in a truck. Picked green, rode across the nation in a truck and maybe a week or two after it's on the shelf it gets ripe. All of it works together so, and that, I've always tried to promote that. So to me, like I said I really don't have a lot of challenges.

Quane: What about you Betti, where do you think our challenges are in Detroit?

Wiggins: Our challenges, in Detroit, you know I'm going to tell you I see a lot of changes happening. One of the challenges that I feel like from an institutional perspective is that, or even from a community perspective, sometimes people view Detroit Public Schools as an 800-pound gorilla in the room, and so they stay away and they you know they don't want to work with us or they think because, well don't think because I. And very you know very aggressively what I say is because I've got a whole bunch of regulations behind me, and while some people take this on as an avocation, this is part of my profession, feeding kids healthy, trying to change the food system. So that's the reason it becomes more important to me is I have to go out and get champions for what I do. We did a partnership with Fair Food, I hope Oran don't mind, we did a partnership with Fair Food Network where I need to get to the parents. So we were distributing his information in our cafeteria lines. So the kids got the cards, we put the posters in our schools. And so this wasn't a collaboration, it took us 15 years to get together, it



took a telephone call. The same thing with Eastern Market where as you know Eastern Market helps me coordinate farmers to get the product out. I work like in the community with the Detroit Food Policy Council where we got kids to events. So the challenges is that you know people have to take you serious. When we look outwardly into the state and it's just not about Detroit, if we're going to really change the food system. If there's any of my colleagues here who are food service directors, I would say you know why can't we in the state of Michigan with all the products that we have, even with our seasonality, because it doesn't all have to be fresh. Have one day where we all serve the same menu with the emphasis of having it be local. It's a whole thing approach not working in silo.

[Applause]

I mean, I'm very serious about what it is is people working in silos. I tell people all the time, I don't care how you teach your ABCs, I don't care whether you're charter, catholic, home school, no school, without school. I don't care a good nutritious meal is what all our kids deserve. And we could deliver that to our trays. We could even you know deliver to our lunch bags and the way we deliver it to our lunch bags is the parents have to be informed. That's the reason I was really interested in working with Fair Food Network because of the Double Up Bucks. Don't think that poverty or good food is not available only in Detroit. But when you get a program like Double Up Bucks, one in six persons in the state of Michigan are on food stamps. One in six don't all live in Detroit. So you go to all these areas. And I go camping, or I go out visiting friends and stuff and I go into the middle. I didn't know so much poverty existed in the center of our state. So programs like Double Up Bucks allows people to increase the you know the fresh fruits and vegetables. So those are the challenges we have is educating, working together. Because we got good policies in place. The Michigan Department of Education they just came out with some smart snack rules. They're real serious about you will serve our kids healthy. I mean they have rules. I mean and they're, and then they have other things, I just came back from this weekend from a School Nutrition Association meeting in Traverse City and the things that the State Department Michigan Department of Education's Nutrition Division does providing us with education and materials and it is just a [inaudible]. The challenge is I think stop working in silos, stop thinking that your work is the most important work and there's no way, or no place to collaborate. If we're all interested in doing one thing, increasing access of healthy food, and foods, not only to kids to but our families. That, if we increase that then the return to our farmers, the Michigan economy, and you know the wheel goes around, you know that whole song. But that is the outcome that I would like to see. Because we're not going to build cars anymore, manufacturing is not coming back. And I'm tired of exporting congressional districts and PhDs. Because that's just about all we're doing right now.

Quane: Barbara, we had a little bit time left. I just wanted to ask you guys one more thing, what



is your vision going forward? What do you see for good food in the state of Michigan going forward, what's your vision?

Norman: Okay part of it let me say this instead of the word challenge, after I finish talking, it's change. I don't look at it as a challenge. As things change and rules and rules and regulations get different or promoting more healthy foods then we as farmers have to just change. We have to educate ourselves. We have to change the way our grandparents farmed. We have to change the way we prepare to grow our foods and produce. And so that's my vision is keeping up with the Good Food Charter, keeping up with the food policies. And doing whatever it is that I can do as one, or whatever I can do to encourage and help, and be a resource for other people. I have to, my vision is to move with the change. Be a game changer. If I can encourage anybody to do anything, or help any school system start serving local, or healthy, or regional foods, then that's what the vision is. Just move with the flow.

Quane: What about you Betti?

Wiggins: My vision is that I would like to see the state of Michigan come up with some sort of reimbursement to school meals if they serve local. For every local, every meal they serve, they give us some sort of reimbursement for it, .10 cents a meal, .05 cents a meal, I mean we can do it so while they're making some of these tax cuts and stuff let some of that dribble down not just to business people, but to our farmers. You know to our farmers if you know [applause]. And I think that should be something because when I go out on the west side of the state and I recognize that some of our legislators are farmers, why aren't you even thinking of your own best interest you know of doing that. And I think that's something that we can accomplish in Michigan. I really think we should get together as people like myself. I'll buy the stuff if they give me enough money. And if we buy it in Michigan, it stays in Michigan and it only helps our industry grow. So that's the one thing I want. That's the thing I think that we could do. The policies are all there the spirit, you know the spirit is willing but the pocketbooks aren't you know. So those are the kinds of things that we need to be working on together with healthcare, and particularly in school meals as a reimbursable program. Healthcare, you can do it with affordable and I just came back from the Michigan Help Endowment Fund, \$1.56 billion over a period of, because of the Affordable Healthcare Act. Why aren't you farmers or us getting together and saying, 'look we want to do some of this money for a sustainable project around local food that you know use some of this money to do those kind of things.' So that's my vision is to get us together and to say, 'local food costs money, we're willing to do it, but our government has to help us.' I'm not saying take care of us, because you're going to work and I'm going to work to earn that money.

Quane: Well thank you guys. You guys have been great. I think everybody here is a little bit more inspired, a little bit more aware of what we're doing in Detroit and what's happening over



in Southwest Michigan and on the blueberry farm. If you have never been and had a Barbara blueberry, you got to come out. It is really an honor to work with both of them and down a big of a round of applause for them?

[Applause]

