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Laura Kalina, Registered Dietician and Founder
Kamloops Food Policy Council¹

Lindsay Harris (LH): The label food activist is something that a lot of people would apply to your work. Is that a label that works for you? And what would you say is your ultimate goal for your work?

Laura Kalina (LK): Well, definitely food activist works. My ultimate goal – well, I started this job in 1987, so it's thirty years this year, 2017. When I first came, I was invited to a women's tea to talk about the Canada Food Guide and then I had a couple of low-income women come to me and they said, "We cannot feed our family by the third week of the month." And this is back thirty years ago. I thought, "Wow," because we had some struggles growing up – I'm from Montreal initially – but we always had food and so I met with the women and I couldn't believe this. They brought me to their house, they opened up their cupboards, and said, "Sometimes we have nothing in the house but salt and pepper and I boil water and I add salt and pepper." And I just couldn't believe that this was happening in my community, so I basically put aside the food guide and started working in food security. I think the food activist label could work.

¹ Interviewed by Lindsay Harris, November 2016 in Kamloops, BC. Please note, this interview has been edited for length and continuity, and should not be taken as a verbatim transcription.

I did everything I could to learn about food security. We didn't call it that, but I was reading Ron Labonte's work about health promotion and I met with the women and I said, "Well, what do you need?" And I didn't even know about the word community development either at the time. When I met with them, they said, "Well, we really like to get together and cook because we can extend our food dollars." I worked with them for a few years and at that time I thought, "Well, what else could we do working together?" And then I researched—Montreal had community kitchens, run by Diane Norman. So we brought Diane Norman down to do workshops on community kitchens. Nobody had heard about community kitchens here so we brought her down.

I think as an activist you have figure out how to get the job done with little money. This job did not have any budget for community work, so I would hear if there was money with the Union of BC Municipalities, or a little health promotion money, and various moneys. There was a grant through the Health Promotion Institute and we got \$77,000 to work with low-income women to improve their nutrition and their food access. Then I thought I might as well do my Masters because I'm just getting all involved with this stuff. I started my Masters at St. Francis Xavier University which was really into community development, and that's when I really started learning about community development. So that name was always around but I didn't know it, and that was kind of, "Well, how do I see myself?" I see myself as a community developer.

Food activist turned community developer. Once I learned about community development during my Masters, I thought that's what I needed to do. I needed to find people to work with, legitimize it, and support the process. I think my Masters really helped because then I developed the food security continuum of food action and then policy work. And I thought, "Well, I'm just going to work in Kamloops." And then from the low-income women, we started community gardens. It really became apparent that we needed to develop a food policy council because it's one thing to do action but if we don't have policy then we're not really getting long term success.

That was my ultimate goal when I first started, to always provide action and support people where they're at, but at the same time work at a policy level for ten years from now. I knew that we should develop a food policy council because I'd been reading about it—Wayne

Roberts and I have always been close colleagues and he was working with the Toronto Food Policy Council, and I was hearing about what was happening. So, we were probably the first grassroots food policy council. I think the Toronto Food Policy Council was formed right around the same time, but it was an arm of the government whereas we thought “We don’t want to be an arm of the government, we just want to work directly with the community,” and then my job was more about health promotion. And that’s basically how the food activism started – way back, like 25 years ago.

LH: And how have your goals shifted as food security and food issues have become more commonly discussed?

LK: You know, they haven’t shifted much. It was always about providing support where people were at. My whole idea with community development is that I wanted quick wins. That’s where I found Wayne Roberts quite a mentor to me at that time, having read his work, it was “have quick wins.” And unused capacity was a big thing – if there’s land that’s not being used, maybe you could be growing something on that. I’ve always been an entrepreneur. I can see something and I can make it happen. I just know it’s going to happen. I just have that vision – I can get moneys together, I can bring people together. I’m a pretty good networker, good at bringing people together. So the goal hasn’t changed at all, just the project. The first one was community kitchens, so we got funding for that, then we hired a community kitchen coordinator. The whole idea was to start a project and then to pass it off to an agency that had more infrastructure, because the Food Policy Council’s an initiator, we don’t want to run projects. So we basically handed it over to Interior Community Services at the time. Then, “Okay, so that’s doing well, let’s start community gardens now.” There was one community garden, but not enough. We managed to get more community gardens, getting bigger than what we could handle. We always got little pockets of money, \$4,000-5,000 – never a lot of money. But you always have to have some seed money because you have to hire a volunteer coordinator. My time was always basically covered as part of my job though I did volunteer probably about a day a week anyhow, because I only worked .5 at this job. So, I volunteered my own time, which is a passion, it still will always be a passion for me. So, we started community gardens, passed it off. Then we passed off Gardengate Training Centre, Kamloops FoodShare, which now is getting money – any program we’ve done is all as a result of the ignition from the Kamloops Food

Policy Council. And the program we're working on now is gleaning—it's our third or fourth year. We would like to pass that off to another organization because we don't really have a paid staff.

That's our big issue now, the Food Policy Council probably has budgeted about \$80,000, but we're struggling, because we have kind of a part-time administrator, but we don't have the financials in place. I was just with the accountant yesterday, and we're a charitable organization now, which was always a goal, but we've missed the deadline for doing our submission. I'm still trying to pass this off to the community. But I find you still have to keep a watchful eye. We've just grown too big. The victim of our own success, as one of our board members would say.

But they're still the same goals, the same community development. I probably have spent the last ten years more in mentorship than in leadership. There's probably about four young gals that are in their thirties now, that I've just mentored along the way. One now is doing her Masters, she's coming back. Another now has a job with the city in food policy. I knew I'd need to provide their mentorship and then we'll see it grow, so it's just been really exciting. I almost feel like it's a baby that we've given birth to, and we look back at all our successes. I'm probably the most proud of this, the City of Kamloops Food and Urban Agriculture Plan.² I see in other communities, it's like, "Oh, you're trying to get in to talk to the social planner?" but here they come to us, like, "Can you review this?" We really don't have any problem working with the city; the working relationship is absolutely amazing. Or our PlanH video.³ That's the perfect testament, knowing that we need to document what we've done. That's why I'm glad we're doing this interview, because the history is so rich and because we've never had the infrastructure to document it. We've tried to get it written down—that's why I'm glad we got funding for the PlanH video because we really need to showcase all of what we've done and the successes and how it's really been done on such a little budget. I think that's the power of the grassroots.

² <http://www.kamloops.ca/socialdevelopment/pdfs/15-09-FUAP-Final.pdf>

³ <http://planh.ca/resources/videos/innovative-food-security-programs-kamloops>

Building Food Security in Canada, the book I wrote, was basically the first time that people talked about food security in Canada. It's what I did for my masters. I always loved the idea that we were going to publish documents and share. We've published so many documents over the years, best practice is always documents—that way, other people can duplicate. This book was used by universities like UBC, food systems courses, in Ontario, etc.—all over. This was my take on how to go from hunger to sustainability, a community guide. Basically, I talked about what it is, what is food policy, and then soon after that we saw food security definitely more in the mainstream. I had already been doing the community development step approach for a few years so even though it was well known, I wanted to put it in terms of the food aspect and then food action projects that worked. That's when we came up with the idea for gleaning. I always wanted to do gleaning, but we just got a gleaning program a few years ago. So, everything—it just takes time. I've always felt it's five to ten years for successful community development, and gleaning is only at three years so we probably can't give it up for another two years. I find you can't give something up for five years, until you really have it sustainable.

So all of the things that I wanted to do back then, we've done, and that was the food security continuum. First it was charitable,—it started with the food bank but we realized that's not where we need to spend our energy—support the food bank but then move to action. And then we needed to redesign the food system and we're still working on that—the redesign is going to be an ongoing thing forever and ever. But we knew we needed to have a food policy at the municipal level. It's all really outdated now, but that was what we thought a food policy organization should be.

Abra Brynne, Cathleen Kneen and I started the BC Food Systems Network twenty-something years ago, and Cathleen, she was a real advocate. I had three or four mentors over the years, and she was a mentor of mine, probably about ten years older than myself and just way more experienced. She drew this graphic for me, that was her depiction of food policy organization—it has food action projects, it has research, education, networking, and food policy. So you're doing all of these things and you're moving government and public policy forward. But people won't come to your group if you just talk policy, so I always felt, let's have some fun things, quick wins, that people feel, "Geez, this is a really good group. We actually see something done." Get it done, move on to the next thing.

Research, I always felt we needed to have research, but we've never hammered that one down. I've worked with Susan Crawford at Simon Fraser University, she was a researcher of mine when I did my Masters and I got that grant. We had to have thorough research for the grant. But that was probably the only time I really had a thorough researcher work with me. We've had some people from the geography department at Thompson Rivers University help with some others but we've just never been able to have something ongoing. Because we're really good at the other areas, but we're lacking research.

LH: You've been talking about this a little already, but could you go into some of the strategies that you've been working on over the last 30 years and then which of those strategies you found to be the most effective?

LK: Well, community development is definitely a strategy, so that's what I think is the best. The other thing is always being positive and never giving up—you have to know you're going to get to a good place. And interpersonal skills, networking, advocacy and identifying who could move your cause forward. Right away, early on, we identified the City of Kamloops and who in the city's social planning department could help move us forward. At that time, it was Ron McColl who just was a champion. We have to find other champions in the organizations that we need to move forward. That's a community development principle. Find a champion and then work closely with them for a win-win situation. When we identified Ron McColl, he was so supportive and that's when we did our very first social plan and that was really exciting. We did this document in 2006—the Food Action Plan⁴—and I did it with the City of Kamloops, with Ron McColl and myself. Everything has to be done very professionally. I learned early on that the people we hire to write, the consultants we hire, are planners. I don't try to do it myself or hire another dietician. In this case, it was an urban planning company that the city uses. We've always got a little bit of money, so do something professional. And always work with stakeholders. When we did the Food Action Plan, we'd have meetings of everyone from the community. The approach is very collaborative, very participatory. We'd get an outside facilitator to help pull us together, "Everyone, what's your feedback?" It's always been a very long, extensive process for

⁴ <http://kamloopsfoodpolicycouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Food-Action-Plan-sept-20061.pdf>

anything we've done. Nothing has been: "Good idea, just put it there." So, get a champion, a partner, and hire good consultants to write your documents.

Then once you have this done, media. I'm very savvy with the media, so anything we've done, any launch of a new program, the mayor is there, signing it off. Press releases, our media coverage has been amazing. When we haven't had something go our way, I knew how to get that back on track too with letters to the editor and support. If a door closed, it was that a door closed—I could figure that out. I remember when I first talked about gleaning, it was so funny because the planner at the time said, "Why would we put fruit trees in the park? We wouldn't eat the fruit. We just can't have people eating the fruit." I remember thinking, "Oh, my," and then ten years later they're the biggest supporter of gleaning. They've put a community garden in the park. Initially, there was no way we could get a community garden in the park, that was for the park! You could never put a garden in there because of the liability and everything. And now we have two or three, but I knew we would.

Once again, a perfect example, I have so many examples to share, but this is just one: public produce. This was an idea we had, it's just growing food in public spots, which is not a new idea, but it hadn't really come to BC yet, the name public produce. However, Montreal was very into it. So we thought, "Who's the expert of public produce?" and it was Darren Nordahl from the States. In his latest book he has a whole chapter on Kamloops. So we brought him out, once again through the City of Kamloops we got a \$5,000 social planning grant and partnered with master gardeners. I'm not a farmer. I have a community garden but I can barely grow anything, but I know who can grow so I'm more the front person, right? They all laugh at me at the Food Policy Council. But anyhow, we knew we needed to do that. We brought Darren in. We had such good media coverage. The room was packed with planners, it was amazing. That's where one of my mentees, who's now with the city, she was a student that came in. And I'm really good at people that just walk in the office: "I'm a third year nutrition student. I want to get an internship." I'll say, "Oh, come! Work." She was between jobs: "I just need some experience. I love food." I said, "Oh, good!" So basically she volunteered to get this thing off the ground and then we got a little bit of money and we could pay her. We've always been able to cultivate volunteers and get some money to pay them. And now she's working for the city. Look at all the experience she has,

and now she's writing all the communications for the city and has a special place in her heart for food policy.

Here's another example: *Best Practices in Urban Agriculture*⁹ With all that experience, once again we hired a consultant that the city uses and developed a best practice guide. This guide has gone all over North America. It's probably one of the more popular hits that we have on our website. That's just an example of something: put on a workshop, call people together, and then the person who wrote this document was a volunteer who is a planner. We really managed to get people to contribute with their passion. It's not like we're paying \$20,000 for a document. If we were to hire him to do that, it probably would cost over \$10,000, but he did it complimentary. So we leverage expertise with the project.

We don't take on too much at one time – this is what we did for five years. So now it's done, and the city has a public produce site and it's in the urban plan. Now gleaning is our latest thing, and then we want to get onto yard share. We try to do something well over five years and then move onto something else. Don't let the obstacles get in your way because there's tons of obstacles. If we were to have that negative mindset, a can't do mindset, then we just wouldn't be doing it. I also would go to city council twice a year just for the good news stories, not asking for anything. Just to say, "Oh, here are the great things you're doing! Look at the public produce!" and bring them all a basket of public produce. It's just all about how you keep everybody in the mindset that it's all everybody's idea, we're all working together.

LH: So much of your focus sounds really hyper-local. It sounds like it's coming out of a really deep care for Kamloops as a community, and the people that live here and relationships that you've built here, but yet, at the same time, your work has had national influence, definitely, maybe even international.

LK: Well, whenever I get asked I speak at a lot of international conventions. Whenever there's a convention I will put in a proposal or an abstract, and now I get asked to speak at various conferences. Across Canada I've done lots, I just spoke at Dieticians of Canada last year on food security and the dietician's role. I'm always looking at what is out there

nationally and presenting on the national stage. I get asked to do a lot of presentations. That is always a big part of it too because, once again, I'm using this as my community and I can't spread myself too thin, but I can share. I really am about sharing with other areas. For example, now I'm working in Salmon Arm to develop the same thing we've done in Kamloops. So I've always shared, as time permits, definitely. That's why I do the resources because initially I had so many people calling me. My masters is in education anyhow, so I'm all about education. I just share everything.

Our website now is totally being redone to post more of our resources and we have a whole communications group. I find that I'm not burned out because I still love what I do, but I don't have the skill set anymore. I still have the passion but I'm fifty-six and I've been doing this since my early twenties. I want people to take charge, and I would rather just come when they need me to go to city council, or I have such good connections. So if I need to call somebody up it's, "Who do I need to go call? Okay, just send me off there." I told the Food Policy Council that I'm hoping that we'll have that leadership there and they can just call me in when they need me.

LH: What have been some of the challenges or obstacles that you've faced?

LK: The whole education around food security, and people's thinking about food banks, just the whole culture shift. We're not food secure so it's a whole education around first, food poverty, people think "Oh, you're using the food bank because you're lazy," and there was major education about that whole area. And we all could be food insecure in three days if there is an earthquake in Hope, so that's always been a challenge. Even now, people don't go to the farmers' market, they think the food is too expensive, but they'll shop at Walmart. The biggest challenge is changing people's ideas about the local food system and understanding that it is vulnerable.

The biggest challenge initially was working with local government and them not seeing the need for more community gardens, questioning why we would need that. When you're not educated about food security, you just have too many other priorities, it just gets pushed aside. Social issues with councils, it was all roads and fire department, it wasn't really about

the infrastructure and the social plan. We didn't have a social plan so I was very involved with the development of the first one which I think was in 2006—any meeting there was about social planning, or affordable housing, or the social determinants of health, food is one of them, I went to all of them. And that was a challenge because it took a while for that education. Now, you can't even open up anything without talking about food insecurity, rising food prices—now, everyone's talking about it but back in those days you couldn't get people to really pay it any attention. Then of course the challenge is that everything is done on volunteers, so financial challenges. Nothing really new that any other organization wouldn't experience. We're still being challenged now with financial reporting, we don't have the appropriate skill set in that department. We've done well, farmers are really good at action but administration wise that's a real challenge. We've done everything out of this address, this is the address for all of our documents right here, we don't even have a building, we don't even have a desk, we don't even have a computer.

LH: OK, so if we shift to doing some forward thinking, where do you see the greatest opportunities for change or work coming up?

LK: Now we have a community food centre opening at the Mount Paul church, so that's really exciting. I just see more partners coming, there's more people wanting to look at funding us, the city wants to work closely with us. I feel like it's just the time, we've arrived with where we need to be, and it's just once again, getting the resources to accomplish. In the Food and Urban Agriculture Plan, there's lots of fabulous suggestions and projects to get this going, to get that going, and we're named in some of them, and we're lucky if we even get one or two of them done. I just feel like with more infrastructure and more funding and support, we need a proper executive director. Whether that's two part-time people, we don't know what that looks like, but we need to have someone ongoing that can build the infrastructure and just keep moving forward. We'll be getting an office now at the community food centre, so that will be great once we have an office with a filing system cause right now you can see I've got everything everywhere. We've got so many resources and manuals, all of these resources have gone everywhere, and since then people have done their own.

I always kept in touch with what was happening in Toronto. I always looked at other successes. Debbie Field was a mentor of mine too, so Toronto FoodShare, whatever Toronto FoodShare did I wanted. I've gone for tours there and been involved when they had the very first food security conference at Ryerson University which was the first food security hub. It was so cool to meet with everyone from the UK, all over, who was doing food security. I went on a tour of FoodShare, anything they have, if it was out there I would just take it and modify it, so I didn't feel I ever had to create my own program—although sometimes it wasn't out there and you had to create it—but usually there was someone who did something and I would just cut and paste it to my community.

LH: And did you find that was effective?

LK: Yes, totally.

LH: Even with the differences? I mean, Toronto's obviously a completely different environment.

LK: Yeah, we figured out how to do it, once again, as a group: here's what it is, we'd always do the PowerPoint first, here's what they did, and what we could do. We always did the SWOT: what's our strengths, what's our opportunities? We'd all do it, we'd figure out how to make it go, we'd apply for money and then we'd hire a coordinator. Everything was the same system, and then we'd get that going. But we never evaluated it that well, that was probably one of our problems, but we knew it all was working because it was working! You move ahead, right. Looking back, at one point we did a food security report card, that was something we did, "Where are we at now?" and then we used that as a tool. Now it's a capacity building tool, from Health Canada, that's what we're all using, and that's what we've been putting into our evaluations.

LH: Can you talk about some of the forms of cooperation and collaboration that you've used so far? You've definitely talked a lot about the importance of that and the importance of building networks, but given shifts in things like social media that are so prominent now do you see that type of work in terms of collaboration changing in the future?

LK: Oh, absolutely. And that's where I've passed it on to the other board members in communications because we have a Facebook page and all of our social media, we're trying to put our interviews up there and on our website. That's where it needs to go, absolutely, and that makes it easier for us too because you can find things, like we're using google drive now. I think in terms of collaboration and trying to keep up with the technology, and then sharing resources with others and just working together, what I'm finding now is I'm just getting tired of trying to keep up with everything because in the old days you knew exactly who was doing everything.

We always have to be collaborating. That's where I think we've done well because we're totally the most collaborative group. Anyone could come to the meetings, and if they don't come for a few months, it's just free-flowing. There's not a closed shop. I know this with some of the other food policy councils, for example, I've been working with the Salmon Arm one, they don't have the big potluck. The board meets once a month, it's just four people. We have a board now, but we didn't have a board until two years ago. That's one thing we had to change because our monthly potluck was the board meeting – people were on the board but it was just names on a sheet to go the society. But, when we became a registered society we knew we had to have a separate board, so that's been a growing development. We did a strategic plan for ourselves, and we had to get much more organized to meet the qualifications for a registered society, so now the board meets once a month and the bigger group meets as well. We definitely have more work to do there, that's a work in progress. Right now we need to be doing a strategic planning session in the new year, someone needs to be taking that on. Normally I'd be leading all that but I need to step back from that. There's always a request, I just got a request for the twelve-month farmers' market, they're having a meeting Monday morning, and people always invite me because I've been the face of the food policy council. So I email it out, "Can anyone go to this, can anyone go to that?" just trying to break up the work load, it's a big workload now, because everyone wants you to be part of their committee.

LH: Yeah, it's a huge organization and it seems to me the food policy council is the biggest grassroots organization in the city?

LK: I think for the sustainability of it, for the length of it, I would agree with you, because I've been around, I think things have come and gone and other than something like an agency that started where they have a big budget, I'd think it is one of the largest grassroots organizations. That's a challenge too, I don't want it to change either. That's why we were so afraid of hiring an executive director. No one even wanted to call it that. We spent two meetings saying: "Nobody's directing us, we don't want a director," so then we called them an animator, the food security animator. Then we went to the United Way who is helping us, and they said "We don't know what an animator is," so forget that idea, nobody knows what that is. Then we had the idea for a manager, so we've kind of settled on community food action manager. I think the board is afraid to hire one person, I don't blame them, they want to have someone managing food action, but maybe it would be three people managing, a leadership team. We're going to be really creative with our model because it's not a top-down, top-heavy organization, so the executive director model doesn't really work for us. We want to all work collegially and collaboratively and not have one person running things. But then the problem is that we have these small contracts, and then nobody really had the financial contract, "Geez, who's doing the financial?" We laughed too, honestly we have the meetings and it's such a fun group. I don't know how we're doing what we do but somehow we always seem to get it done, and I think that's the benefit of it. I know if I step away it's still good and that's successful community development. Actually, the reason I haven't retired yet is that I can't retire until I really feel like this baby is a teenage or young adult. I thought I better stay until the spring and just see, because when I do go, I'm probably going to have to go away, I probably don't want to be in phone contact, I have to step away, otherwise I'll just keep working. I don't mind volunteering, I volunteered for so long, but I want to start going and doing other fun stuff. So, I'll be spreading my wings and go do something different.

I honestly don't think we've figured this out yet, so we have to figure it out, because you do ultimately have to have someone in charge. Whether that's a more administrative one, we have to figure out a better model. Apparently there is a model out there for food action groups, someone was sharing this concentric circle model so we're going to try to figure it out. In some ways, even though it's organized confusion we're obviously functional, look how well we've done. That's why we say we can't be too hard on ourselves, because somehow, we do manage to get the money and we do manage to do it right in the end.

An example is the United Way *Seeing is Believing Tour*, they're our funder, and they asked us to be on the tour. They have all the major heads of the banks and everyone on this bus, and they went to the Boys and Girls' Club, and when they came to our place we had it so organized and we had a beautiful event. It was in the Mount Paul church, we had tablecloths and we had all the local squash and we made appetizers with leeks and they came in through this area and the head of the United Way said, "We've never had a reception like this." They couldn't even believe it. The Community Kitchen coordinator came to it, she did all the cooking. Then we showed the PlanH video and had an overview and thanked them. It was beautiful, and you could see they had been raving about the tour and how we had helped the organization, so when we do need to do things we do it right. We just pull these things together and then we all feel proud of ourselves and I think it's because we really feel connected. Everyone feels connected and because there's no one really getting paid a lot, it's not: "Well, they're the executive director. Why should I do it, they're getting paid to do it?" With this job, it was part of my job but I did volunteer too, so nobody thought, "Well, she should be doing it," because everybody knew they each had to contribute. Keeping that going is going to be really important, so we have to make sure we figure that out how to do that.
