



Spotlight on Equity: Esperanza Community Farm

Dr. Jeannine Rios, Senior Manager, No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices

Hello, everyone. My name is Dr. Jeannine Rios. We're coming to you from The Center for Best Practices at Share Our Strength. We're here to bring you stories from organizations across the country who are implementing practices at their work, in their communities that are grounded in equity. As you're going to hear today from our guest at Esperanza Community Farms that partners with schools and communities dedicated to creating a healthy localized food system based on food sovereignty, work with dignity and stewardship of the environment, and how their work has been able to impact providing fresh fruits and vegetables to their community and local schools. Our guest, Mireya Gómez-Contreras, is a co-leader at Esperanza Community Farms in Parajo Valley, Watsonville, California. And she will share more about how they do this and their journey to create a more equitable program and workspace.

So Mireya, I'd like to welcome you. Thank you so much for your time. Thank you for being here today. And as we open, I'm wondering if you could share a little bit more about your background, your career path, and why you're committed to addressing equity and how that looks at Esperanza Community Farms.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras, Co-leader Esperanza Community Farms

Thank you for the invitation and for inviting us to talk more about Esperanza Community Farms. I've been with the organization since 2017. It's been, in terms of a journey, it's been a really beautiful one, very insightful one for me personally.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras

And it's been transformative I think for us as a team. And it's almost difficult to know where to start, but I trust that just any entry point into the work will get us full circle. In 2017, when the organization was founded, I joined as a CSA member. And at that time, there were about 17 member families and it was very small project, fiscally sponsored by our local food bank at the time, who has always allowed us to work very independently, which we were very, very grateful for. And I can come back to that because that's actually been an important part of our growth over the last few years.

I joined because when I became a godmother of a little girl, of a neighbor, she was three years old and I was looking for something special to do with her, a place to build memories. And we could've gone to the park, but I learned about a network of community gardens, and so that was my first entry, that was entry point into what then became the farm. The network of community gardens has the same founder as Esperanza Community Farms. And I think the thread for me in terms of my participation in Esperanza Community Farms and the projects that I've been a part of in the past has definitely been my love for bringing people together around things that we have in common, having conversations about how to grow that more, how to grow spaces where anyone can step in and feel a part of it and really make it their own.

And there are many spaces that do that. I think in particular the arts are another place where that happens. But at Esperanza Community Farms, we are a team of about six people. Most of us are part-time. We mirror the demographics here in the Parajo Valley, immigrant, Latinx, Indigenous from [inaudible 00:03:52], multi generational families. I think for the most part, the immigrant experience is what really binds the teams. And I think that's what we lean on the most in terms of beginning to do the equity work. And we've always known that is a component of our work that if it were missing, we would be just another charitable nonprofit, and I'm proud to say that we are not.

And we are not because we're not in it for the establishment of the nonprofit, we're not in it for counting growth and money over time for the organization. We really, not that that's not important, of course it is, but in terms of the impact, we really want to grow not the physical farm, but everything that the farm as a space allows us to do to come together, multiple languages, multiple generations, sharing food, acknowledging that everything we have and everything we breathe comes from the Earth, and are beginning to reestablish that connection that has been lost for so many of us. We know Indigenous cultures from all over the world have been telling us this for generations and generations and generations. And I think it really is right under our nose to be able to do it. It isn't easy. But I think for us, one thing that has really helped is knowing that we will start small.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

As we learn more and as we kind of fine tune our systems, our operating systems and things, then we can grow. We can grow. And we don't want to grow beyond what will keep us meaningful and relative to this community. So we know for example that the farm probably won't grow beyond five acres, or at least not too much beyond five acres because our members, we want to know by name. Our members, we want to remember who their neighbor is and that they grew up in a town close to ours in Mexico. We don't want our members to become numbers. And in terms of the school and the farm to cafeteria component, that has its own special story.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

Thank you so much for sharing that, Mireya. While you were talking, you brought up so many important points about ... I have so many questions, but I'll start with, I see other organizations wanting to embrace equity at this time in history. And what I see is that they want to do it all at once. They want to be there. They want to, let me put this on my website, not that they don't mean it because they're authentic. We're ourselves on this journey, we believe in equitable practices, but it sounds, what I'm hearing from you, it's a slow, slow process. And it's not something that you can just be there, or you can't just maybe necessarily change the structure of what's already created in an organization and get there.

Thinking about that, I have two questions for you. The first is, it sounds like somewhere in your journey, there's already value for diversity. And I'm wondering, it sounds like your organization has been very intentional about continuing to have diverse members and groups with different experiences that represent your community, but to make sure everyone's included. Where do those ideas come from? Are they hard to convince other members of? And how do you continue to value that in our culture?

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

Yeah. Well, you're right about kind of equity and diversity and belonging being the sexy thing now still. It's lasting a little longer than I expected and I'm glad because it means hopefully having a bigger impact on many of us. One really important thing around kind of building equity, practicing equity, being equitable in our programs and our organizations is that leadership has to have that commitment. And in terms of Esperanza, as co-leader along with our lead farmer, who's our other co-leader, Guillermo comes from a near traditional agriculture sector, which is very competitive, very profit driven. And so I come from a background in social activism, and as a very proud Brown Beret member, which I became in high school, we had an autonomous chapter here of the Brown Berets, my consciousness around power, power dynamics and what we now call equity and kind of the bigger umbrella, social justice work, all for me was ... I was able to give it language as a Brown Beret member.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

But I remember when I was very little and I was working mostly in the grape fields with my parents in San Joaquin Valley, things like seeing all the farm workers around me since I was a little girl, seeing all the farm workers around me, hear the farm owner approaching in his truck and they would turn down radios, and they would get quiet, and they would stop laughing and they would stop joking around. For me as a little girl, to see that, it was so striking. And I remember knowing that there was something big there, but I didn't know, I didn't have the language. And it wasn't until later that I was like, "Oh, gosh, undocumented farm workers, land owner in power, worker rights, conditions," and of course, I started to just look all around me. And it wasn't hard to see the inequities or the injustices. And then as I continued in my professional kind of journey, I naturally wanted to create and wanted to be a part of programs and projects and organizations that were directly addressing inequities.

And I haven't seen that done well a lot. And so I guess that's why I started with it, really does depend a lot, the success of an organization in terms of integrating and practicing equity and institutionalizing it through ... And you can do that in different ways. Leadership has just got to be super committed because it isn't easy and we have felt the pushes. We have felt the pushback hard. And luckily, not as often in these times, given what you said, the context is helpful, unfortunately, with how it all even began with the Black Lives Matter movement and people who have been murdered under different police activities. But bringing it back home, the other only thing I'll add is that hiring the people that are representative of the local demographic is absolutely key because that in itself will give you lots of ways to build trust and to build long lasting relationships that go beyond the project, that go beyond leadership, that go beyond the organization, and that allow you to grow in ways that are relevant and timely.

So yeah, it isn't a statement on our website alone. It isn't hiring a Latino, Latina alone if it is that you're working with Latinos and Latinas. There is a lot of invisible. There's a lot of nuance to this work. And for that reason, I do believe that it's also really important to build the skills. And there are lots of people now that train and teach kind of practical tools for this. A lot of it is heart driven, but a lot of it is technical.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

Definitely, definitely. And that's why we're so glad that you are here to share your story, to share how you do it, and the important aspects of this work because so many ... What we found is you're right, that equity and diversity, inclusion, belonging, is popular, is as you put it, and I think that's so well put, sexy, that now that people are becoming more aware, they're not sure where to start. Right? Or they're not sure what it looks like. Or is this it, or is this not it? It comes with, like you mentioned, that commitment at the start. Once you have that commitment, you will do, is what I'm hearing, what it takes.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

And there's a lot, it can look a lot of different ways. But it sounds like starting from there has really been one of the drivers of success for Esperanza, which I'm super, super excited about.

Something that we've talked about on another time that you and I met that I would like to delve a little bit into is: How did it come about that your farm got integrated and works with young people at the high school? And now I know that the high school kids have more access to fruits and vegetables and just tell us a little bit about that. I find that to be just such an exciting part of this work.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

It is an exciting part of our work. We didn't expect that this would be an area where we would grow. It really came about quite naturally. We're situated a quarter of a mile away from Watsonville High School, and so students, parents, educators who are working at the school or visit can see the farm from their high school. And we can see the high school, we can hear the bells ringing every time they change periods. So in our first year, teachers started to come by the farm and ask what the farm was about. We have a really pretty sign. I think that might have been what attracted people. But they said, "We really are looking for ways to get students out of the classroom and to have kind of experiential learning. And wow, a quarter of a mile away, we can walk here. Our periods are two hours long. Takes us 10, 15 minutes to get here. Let's have an outdoor classroom. Can we work with you?"

And of course at that time, our CSA project, the farm to door delivery of organic local fresh produce every two weeks to local families was really all we had and all we thought we would continue to do, although we knew eventually we'd work and we'd get into policy work. So we said, "No," we said, "We are not the organization that would be the best fit." There's Food What, which is a great organization that does food justice work here that works specifically with youth and has a farm also. But they were very persistent, Jeannine. They kept coming. And there were a couple of teachers who I sat with at our green table right next to our shed on the farm, and the chirping of the birds, and next to the wetlands where we are situated, we just had a long conversation about what that would look like.

And still, we were hesitant because we're not educators. We don't have the time. There's lots of work to do on a farm and it's very time-consuming. And a few months after that, one of those teachers came by with a half a dozen students after school and walked onto the farm. And as we were greeting the teacher, of course we were very welcoming and excited they were there, unannounced, and the students walked into the field. They started to point to vegetables. And I started to see their physical body just change. Their voices got louder and there was the kind of laugh that comes from your belly.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

And there were stories that were ... One of the students called their grandmother at the end of that visit and said, "Quiere que le lleva algo de la granja?" like, "Do you want me to take you some ... What do you want?" Because we said to students, "Take whatever you want. There's so much here."

And Jeannie, after that experience, we just couldn't not entertain a full more complete conversation, and we did. And actually, it was a few months after that, to me, this was the critical moment. It was a few months after that, that students ... I invited students back and prepared to facilitate a very specific dialogue, but the students really made it happen. We separated the students into three groups and each of them got one question. And they got a piece of butcher paper and outside in the open, using our shed as a place where they were taping their butcher paper, they started to answer questions like: Well, what vegetables do you want in your salad? And how would we do this? How often? What days? How long do you have for ... We were really getting into the logistics of it. How is it going to really look? And what role are the students going to have?

So we took, literally, we took their notes and we wrote up a small proposal and asked a local donor for \$24,000 to fund something. And we did ask the school for permission. We were relying on teachers to help us open those doors. Luckily, going back to the team, because the team is of this community, because the team speaks the language, because the team has kids in the school district, it was not hard to then submit the proposal, get these yes from the donor, go knock on the principal's door and say,

"Hey, here's a project. When can we start?" Not let's make a meeting to ... That's how it started. And in the end, we not only started the project, but we were invited to start a whole month earlier. We were able to engage almost double the number of students over the course of the pilot project last year. And we even added a whole nother component thanks to some important funding.

But we integrated local small farmers from where we brought in additional produce that our own farm couldn't produce. We couldn't produce all of it. And so we began to see the food chain, we began to see a food system, where the growers, the consumers, the institutions, were all doing their part in the food system and the food chain, but then we were doing it differently. We were doing it based on dignity and abundance and joy and integrity, not for profit, not for some, for all things, taking care of the Earth. So that's how the farm to cafeteria project came about.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

I love that. I love this story because as you tell it, it came about organically and it seems like it happened quickly, but it was because you had prepared the soil. You had prepared the foundation, the relationships, you had built trust with community, with people in your organization. And you were, it sounds like you were very authentic and that became known. And people became interested, the kids became interested. The teachers saw the opportunity and I think a lot of us, a lot of nonprofits, we have a mission and a goal, and sometimes we forget to go to the community, to find out what is actually needed or how it needs to be done, and involve members, all members at the ground level, not after the table has been set. Right? But as we're figuring out what needs to go on this table, who needs to be here, what kind of menu, before that happens and you invite people, to have people help you do that.

So it sounds like because you naturally did that, it kind of is happening, and this outgrowth is because of that, is because you built trust and because you're transparent and authentic. And you mentioned your values of integrity and dignity and joy. And I think there was one other one, abundance. And because that is what you're going for, it's not surprising that is the outgrowth.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

There is a lot of pre-work that has to happen.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

Yes, definitely. There's a lot of us out there want to see the end product, but sometimes we're working so fast or doing so much that there's not built in that time for relationship building and that is a slow process, is what we tend to forget. But what you're demonstrating is that is crucial, and sometimes we have to slow down.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

Yeah. It isn't normal, not normal, it isn't our go to way of doing business. It feels kind of old school to practice relationship, nurturing relationships. But I think that we underestimate I think the power because just like you said, when there is constant consistent nurturing of relationships I think authentically, whenever the opportunities come, and they will come, you're ready to move. It is easier, it is smoother to move and to take the kind of action that we did, which was outside the box. And we are about doing everyday things differently. So yeah, we're looking forward to going into our second year.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

That's wonderful. I love it. And I love these examples because I feel like just like the avocado became sexy and avocado toast became the it snack, this kind of authentic, going back to cooking, going back to gardening, going back to building relationships in order to have trust, I think and I look forward to that becoming the norm. And with that, I have another question or curiosity. And I'm wondering because when I talk to you, our audience can't see how excited your face is and how much I see just brightness and your heart shining through. But I would like to know: What is the most rewarding aspect of this work for you? I see so much joy in your face when you talk about the farm. I love it. And I hope the audience can hear that in your voice.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

It is. And I'm a creative writer, and I'm trying to own myself as a poet too, my identity as a poet. And I really do have a hard time even describing that. Different volunteers describe the experience on the farm in lots of different ways. But ultimately, I will classify it as contentment and joy. It's a place where you can take that deep breath inside and you know you're safe and you know you're cared for, and like anything is possible, you can dream anything and it really could come true.

Two things have been really the most rewarding for me. One is working alongside Guillermo. He and I complement each other's skills very well. I have learned so much from him. I'm an idealist. He's a realist. And we push on each other. That's been one of the things that I think has also helped us is we push on each other quite hard sometimes. And underneath it, there is such a commitment to the project and a deep respect for each other, for each other's different life stories and different life experiences. And we did, we front loaded a lot of the work in terms of knowing that trust needed to be there if this project was going to get off the ground and become what we want it to, which it hasn't yet, but that's been one. That really has been an honor working alongside Guillermo Lazaro.

The other is experiencing and harvesting and planting and cutting flowers with kind of a multi generational team. We have about 20 volunteers. Most of them are retired women who identify as white, former educators. We have youth, especially during the summer, who will come. We have little ones that come not only for our kind of annual you picks, but we have fairly recent immigrant families that are coming to help harvest in the morning as well, and plant. And they come and just sit at the farms sometimes. So that kind of exchange of different groups of people in terms of different ages has been really special, probably in part on a personal level because my parents passed away when I was in high school, partly because when my parents moved here as immigrants, I no longer had access to my grandparents.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

And now as a mother of a four and eight year old, I know the many, many things that get passed on from parents and grandparents that if you lose it in that generation, you lose it, unfortunately.

I'm talking I guess in general terms, but it can be and I think in terms of what I see in my community, it is a powerful shift in terms of culturally what we don't learn, what we don't retain in terms of memory and stories. It's like uprooting a young plant and trying to plant it elsewhere. It may or may not kind of make it to thrive in the way that it would have originally if it had stayed rooted or connected. Right? And the roots grow long. So those two things have really been the most gratifying things for me.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

That is such an important point and like you said, it's so important to our culture to be connected to not only other people, but other generations. And I feel like when we grew up, maybe, I'm not sure if we're in the same generation, but when I grew up, we lived next door to my aunt and uncle, my grandparents, and we just lived next door to each other, so we ran in and to of different houses when we were playing. You learn, no one has to tell you, respect your elders, or respect your grandparents, or you know there's wisdom there. You know that exists and there's something about learning that authentically. And now in our culture, a lot of times we're separated. I'm living in Texas. My family that I grew up with lives I California. And so there isn't that same connection like you were saying to have those lessons passed on, even if my daughter has learned stuff from other elders, it hasn't been in her culture necessarily or in her family of origin. And that does change it a little bit.

But you're inspiring me to just feel that connection that is at Esperanza Community Farms. And I'm sure other people are listening and wanting to go visit and wanting to see your website at Esperanza Community Farms. And I just want to make sure everyone knows there's so much information there. There's some videos. You can see the farm. You can see Mireya. You can see the people that you're mentioning here, Guillermo, who's also there. And it's just such a great experience that you shared with us and that there is there to learn more about. And as we wrap up, is there something, one piece of advice that you have, maybe for other organizations who are just beginning their equity journey, learning, maybe seeking to build stronger relationships in their community or with their community? What kind of advice could you give them?

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

Yeah. It's so interesting. This work is like a puzzle, and every piece is important. So in terms of advice, it is a difficult thing. But I guess from our experience here at the farm, I think I mentioned it already, a commitment to equity at the top, meaning we work in hierarchical systems and so leadership really prepared to be moved and shaken, but stay committed to equity and know that equity can look a lot of different ways and that it will make ... There will be moments of discomfort, which is why part of my advice is to have a team that can help, to help work through those uncomfortable moments and to help make decisions. We do constantly talk about flattening the hierarchy, and to a certain extent, I think we do it.

And then of course, we live in hierarchical system, and so it is hard from a different direction. But if we're going to do this long-term and we're going to do our work to really transform and to have the impact, not of numbers necessarily, but to see relationships with the Earth improve and to see more spaces where parent, grandparents, can come together with littles and to be able to get local food stay local. This is a long-term journey. And so institutionalize it in ways that you move every day, and in terms of the kind of culture that you establish with the team, build the technical skills and take care of yourself so that your heart is ready for those both good and difficult moments.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

That is awesome. What a great point to end on. And I just want to thank you again, Mireya, for your time, for all that you do at Esperanza Community Farms. And I want to invite all our listeners to go to their website at [Esperanza Community Farms](#) and check out not only their mission and what they're doing, but some of their videos. You can see their farm. And look at their mission of promoting consumption of fresh and local organic produce and economic justice in the Parajo Valley. And they do that by supplying sustainable farm produce for families, partners, and especially traditionally excluded people. They have such a great vision and mission, and so thank you so much for taking time out of your busy day to spend some time with us and to share about your equity journey and what you have learned and what is important to your process. We really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

Thank you, Jeannine. It's been fun. Thank you for uncovering some memories.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

My pleasure. And I do look forward to coming out and visiting.

Mireya Gómez-Contreras:

I'm holding you to it.

Dr. Jeannine Rios:

Thank you again to all of our listeners and thank you to our guest, Mireya Gómez-Contreras, co-leader at Esperanza Community Farms in Watsonville, California, who shared about their journey to create a more equitable program and workspace. My name is Jeannine Rios, coming to you from Share our Strength and the No Kid Hungry Campaign. These stories would not be possible without the support from our funders and the amazing recording and editing expertise of Chelsea McCormick, program manager extraordinaire, who has been dedicated to making sure these stories sound great and smooth. Again, thank you for listening. For more information about the Center for Best Practices, please visit us at bestpractices.nokidhungry.org, where you can find more resources and you can sign up for a bimonthly newsletter. Also, for more stories about equity and child nutrition, visit us at bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/equity.