One of the greatest challenges that I've faced, and we all face, is that there's huge dollars invested in the system as it is. It's a system that's patently unjust and unhealthy but there's huge dollars invested in it.

Abra Brynne, Director, Engagement and Policy
British Columbia Food Systems Network[1]

Mike Evans (ME): Many people would consider you a food activist. Would you accept that label and if so, how does that inform your practice? What is your goal, what are you trying to achieve?

Abra Brynne (AB): I do tend to think of myself as a food activist, a food systems activist, but I also use the term advocate because it depends very much on the audience. For some people "activist" connotes too much assertiveness and abrasiveness as opposed to "advocate "which is perhaps a little more reasoned, careful, and collaborative. I do both, depending on the audience and the relationship—at my core I'm a food activist.

I want to transform food systems so that the sources of our food are honoured and cherished and that includes the land, it includes water, it includes people, and it includes Indigenous systems, rights, and experiences. Those are the sources of our food. I also want to improve the understanding of food systems and to lower barriers to healthy, sustainable food systems. Twenty years ago hardly anybody was talking much about food systems and there's a lot more people talking about them now. I think the more we can build

[1] Interviewed by Mike Evans, October 2016 in Vancouver, BC. Please note, this interview has been edited for length and continuity, and should not be taken as a verbatim transcription.

understanding, concern, and engagement within food systems which affect us all, the more effective we can be at transforming them.

Related to this, absolutely, is food sovereignty, because when we have control over our food systems we are active actors in them. Then, I think that we have the opportunity to imbue them with the values and priorities that we hold in our communities and families.

ME: How do you define what is the sovereign entity that we're seeking to protect through secure food systems?

AB: I don't think about a sovereign entity so much as peoples' role and power in food systems so that they're not just at the mercy of some corporate entity making decisions about the quality and source of our food; where they have the ability to have some say in where food comes from, how it comes to them, how it's priced, where it gets distributed, who has access and what impact ultimately it has on the communities and ecosystems, both in which it's produced but also where it is at the end of its life cycle.

I think it's dynamic, not static. Ultimately the individual and the household is where it starts, but food systems are so diverse and complex and broad that we couldn't possibly obtain food sovereignty in one household, it takes a community. It's like it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community to shape, or form and aspire to food sovereignty. Food systems have become so globalized that it takes many layers and a multiplicity of communities in order to really have an impact on that larger food system. I think it needs to start in the home and on our streets and in our neighbourhoods, and then out to the broader community.

ME: So as we work up to the global scale are there some principles to which you think we should be cohering?

AB: The core of my work is about relationships. Relationships with people and relationships with places—both need to be honoured and respected and that's not a common factor in communities and food systems these days. I just think you lose so much when our food

system seems to become an amorphous collective mass, so I think that relationships across the communities are really helpful. For example, I was involved fifteen years ago in a cultural exchange with farmers in five countries in South Asia and it was wonderful to be able to spend time in their communities and learn about their food systems and how they work to meet the food needs of their communities. They didn't need anything from me. I remember very vividly one of the farmers saying "keep your darn toothbrushes and toothpaste, we don't need them here in India." It was startling for me to think that something like a toothbrush could get someone so angry, but it was an imposition of how we do our dental hygiene that they simply didn't need and it really was a foundational lesson for me. I know how to operate in my food shed in my community, I don't know how to do it in Italy or India or New York. But solidarity and support and understanding are really important, and sometimes we can do it organization to organization, but a lot of it is about the humans involved.

ME: I remember living in a small village in the South Pacific as a PhD student—there was an item on the radio about a World Health Organization representative who had come in and was talking about the evils of oils and fats, specifically coconut oil. This old man just lost his mind. He was a very soft-spoken man but he just lost his mind. It turns out he was right, the problem in the South Pacific is the carbohydrates from the flour. It's interesting the way that within those contexts those very simple food traditions can really spark resistance. That was the lesson for me, something as simple as the socio-economic consequences of dietary information coming out of the World Health Organization. He knew instantly what that was about—regardless of what the nutritional information was, the political information had a very specific consequence and he knew exactly what it was.

AB: I'm delighted to hear that sort of thing, because one of the things that makes me crazy is that I've lived rurally most of my life but I work with people that live in cities. I work a lot with people that live in BC, in the Vancouver and Victoria areas. There are a lot of people in cities, so they generate a lot of ideas, and there are a lot of bodies to do all these exciting new projects and put things up on social media and then they want to export it all to our small communities. It's the imposition of the silver bullet solution from someplace else, but there's no silver bullet solution—particularly to something as nuanced as food systems in communities. You rarely can just take something and plop it down in another community, it

needs to be adapted; you need to let the community look at it, examine it, and see what parts of it make sense in their communities and maybe nothing of it will. But imposing ideas and solutions from elsewhere is not a very respectful way to go about things.

ME: So, you've talked about goals, what about the end of your work, what do you hope to achieve?

AB: Ha, world peace! Food is so foundational. That's the exciting thing about being part of the food movement, for lack of a better word, because it is the common thing, food and water and air, to all humanity. Where people are well fed and not at risk of being harmed, it tends to bring out peace and collaboration and so ultimately I would love to see a world where we're all well-nourished, and we're not destroying communities and ecosystems in doing it. It's a very big goal—not sure I'll achieve it in my lifetime, so I'll be at it for a while yet.

ME: What kind of strategies have you employed to work towards these goals and that ultimate result?

AB: First and foremost, I've tried hard to educate myself. One of the things that drives me crazy about food systems work is that it's such a complex thing—you move this piece and there are domino effects across food systems and communities. I take educating myself about it very seriously, although I've never done it formally. I don't have any formal training for what I do. I grew up on a farm, and I've just been engaged for a long time. The other piece that I do, as I said earlier, is about building relationships; because I tend to be somewhat of a problem solver, I do intervene where my skill-set and my relationships allow. As an example, I started working with my local organic farming organization about twenty years ago because I thought, if I'm going to be supporting them I need to understand them better. I started showing up at their meetings and by the very first meeting it was patently obvious they really needed someone who could help them do something as simple as take effective minutes. And then I started writing letters on behalf of them to the Ministry of Environment—to object to the spraying of pesticides. And then I started monitoring regulations because the more I got into it, the more I could see that there were decisions being made elsewhere that ultimately could deeply impact their ability to farm. My ability to read legalese has been a useful tool for quite a few years now.

ME: So, in terms of your community organizing, is that fair? Would you say that you organize community?

AB: I build relationships, I don't think I deliberately try to organize communities.

ME: Well, we're back to that individual vs. collective dynamic, right? We all have individual relationships that matter to us, but then there's a point at which we understand that we're engaged in a web of relationships that cohere around particular issues, sometimes around particular locales. In terms of making sense of how communities come together around that greater goal, there's a lot of organization that happens, even if it happens one relationship at a time.

AB: For me it's not so much about organizing as networking, linking. I do a lot of that, but for building relationships, and for the efficacy of my work particularly over years, the quality of relationships are really important. I love the fact that at this point in my life I have deep relationships with people around the world, primarily across Canada but also around the world because of how long I've been doing this. I can just call someone up or email them out of the blue, we won't have connected for years but the quality of the relationship is such that we can leap right back into collaborating or exchanging information and it feels appropriate, it doesn't feel like an unfair use of someone else's expertise and time because the relationship is mutual. And the same thing happens with me, people will contact me for my particular skill-set. It's good to be able to do that, and because of the depth of all of our respective experience we can be more effective.

ME: Can you give an example of an event or a particular issue or crisis point, where things came together in a way that made sense?

AB: I don't know if I can give a specific example, but in terms of areas of work, I've been working on place-based food systems, a lot of people call them local food systems. One of the reasons I got into this is because I learned early on, when it was just first starting to happen in Canada, about genetic engineering of agriculture, of crops, and then animals, and I was terrified by it. I was outraged, I did not want my then fairly young children to be eating any product of that system. We wrote postcards to Ottawa, and I put on a tour

around the Kootenays and educated people in their communities about it. I learned many political lessons the hard way. I started a petition and sent it into Ottawa and of course it didn't go anywhere because I didn't know it needed to be presented by my MP.

I've been doing this for a very long time and when something comes up around genetic engineering, all of the people who were involved back in the very beginning, I still know where they all are across Canada. If some particular issue comes up in that field, I can contact them if I don't understand the latest variation in genetic engineering that is now being implemented.

ME: One thing that constantly amazes me is that we do not have GMO labelling, because I can't think of any political ideology that you could mobilize consistently and come to the conclusion that we shouldn't label GMO products, regardless of what you think about GMOs. If we think about activism around GMO, it's been remarkably unsuccessful given any kind of reasonable analysis about the labeling, and some very legitimate concerns about the consequences.

AB: Well, I don't agree with your premise that it hasn't been successful, because we have actually made a dent in holding off some approvals in Canada. Actually, it was a decision made by our early activists over many meetings and many conversations to not pursue a labelling initiative, because we didn't want it happening at all—labelling something concedes its right to exist. We didn't want GMOs in the marketplace, and therefore we didn't pursue labelling.

I'm getting more and more involved in sustainable fisheries issues, and I find it fascinating because the parallels and the differences between agriculture and fishing. Where there's overlap and where they're very different in terms of market access, processing, vertical integration, policy; it's really fun to see where, by doing some cross-fertilization we could perhaps leverage some change in each of those respective sectors. For example, the quota systems are quite different but in some ways similar. Meat has been something I've been quite involved in for a long time. I work with various people in various parts of Canada on trying to mitigate the damage done by a system that wants to push meat systems more and more to a larger scale, and to food safety oversight that is prohibitive and not even really

necessary or useful for smaller scale systems. I've been writing on it lately and I'll be doing a presentation later this month on the legal parameters around meat systems. The structures of the North American meat system were set in place 150 years ago.

It's set up so that, especially with beef, you make most of your income not from meat, you make it from the by-products. I have a friend who used to sell one of the lucrative by-products that a small-scale abattoir could never hope to get involved in. She was able to send me all kinds of information on fetal bovine serum, which is extracted from in-utero fetuses of pregnant cows sent to slaughter, and then sold as a growing medium to labs for something like $250 a litre. It's such an intriguing part of the meat sector and it's part of the reason that small scale meat systems don't work because it's absolutely outside their ability to access. My friend worked in that sector until she couldn't stomach it anymore. She was able to give me all kinds of great information around the annual production, where it's predominantly made, where the cost is, and what the considerations are around that particular growing medium so that it works well in those research labs. The technical requirements are definitely prohibitive for a small-scale abattoir.

ME: So, does this help you imagine a context where smaller scale abattoirs or smaller scale producers can participate in that by-product market, or to understand why it is that larger scale abattoirs are able to outcompete the smaller scale ones?

AB: It validates my premise that a small-scale abattoir is blocked as it doesn't have access to some of the income streams that make a larger scale meat sector a viable entity.

ME: I've been concerned about the way that food safe regulations have been used to squeeze out small-scale abattoirs, which looks like a pretty straightforward use of legislation to validate over-capitalizing industry in a particular way, and creating a supply chain which is shockingly concentrated, without any real concern for its long-term sustainability. But you want to go further than that in your analysis?

AB: Well it's more complicated than that. The meat sector is very complex. In Canada one of the things that we really deal with is the fact that we're a northern country. A lot of our food

supply, whether it's animal, vegetable, or fruit, comes at certain times of the year, and you have to figure out how you make infrastructure that you have to pay for year-round work when you've got a glut of product for maybe four, six months of the year. There's a real challenge, particularly for a single-species abattoir, to figuring out how to annualize their costs and keep staff around who are adequately trained. Smaller scale abattoirs actually need skilled personnel, they don't need someone just standing at one site doing one cut all day long, so there's real challenges with that.

The other thing that most people don't understand is that probably 99 per cent of people's meat is sourced from the large grocery chains, or retailer chains, and they all source from federal plants because they don't want to have to consider provincial boundaries. There's a political boundary with regards to the regulation of those abattoirs but for the grocers it's a convenience thing. They don't want to have to consider that political boundary and so they justify only sourcing from federal plants. So, there's a whole host of reasons on top of the regulatory issues that make the smaller scale abattoirs more of a challenge, and so for me, helping people understand the range of challenges means that we can collectively come up with better solutions but also help lower people's resistance to paying the true cost of meat. When you take into consideration humane animal handling, and the economic and environmental health of our communities, the domino effect from not having animals on our landscapes is quite significant.

ME: The ultimate goal is a more flexible, responsive consumer?

AB: Yes, and viable meat systems across our landscapes.

ME: Which is what comes of a more flexible, responsive consumer?

AB: Yes.

ME: How do you go from talking and learning and interacting with people in the know (who are actively engaged in thinking about these issues) to creating that more responsive consumer?

AB: I think we just need to keep telling stories. I guess I'm enough of a Pollyanna to hope and believe that if consumers, if citizens, if people, adequately understand some of the worst aspects of our global food systems they will actually choose to place other priorities above just the economic one which tends to drive a lot of consumers.

ME: How do consumers make those choices? People make market-based choices, so willingness to pay more for organic beef or to a small-scale farmer is a market choice where you value other sorts of things besides simply the meat. Some of us can make that choice; others have much more difficulty. It's a much higher opportunity cost for poor people to make that choice, but how else beyond that consumer choice can people get active at that level?

AB: I think the more people understand, the more they can react appropriately when an opportunity or an issue arises. For instance, when there's a meat recall, they tend to almost exclusively happen at large federal plants. There's always an outcry, and people call for greater inspection and more demands on the abattoirs. It dominos right down to the small abattoirs that have nothing to do with those large-scale plants. I would love to find ways so that the "me" goes down; it's a genuine issue, but people tend to immediately think "I don't want to be vomiting, I don't want my kid in emergency and so therefore we need more inspectors." That's a facile inadequate response to the complexity and needs of meat systems. I just hope that if people are better informed, they won't just jump for the easy answer.

ME: Wouldn't we expect our food systems professionals within federal, provincial bureaucracies to bring that sort of sophistication to the issue?

AB: There are some really amazing and wonderful civil servants, and there are some that really don't care because they have a very secure job and a pension. When they're dealing with an individual [abattoir] operator, they have their own biases about what actually produces safe food. The culture within the organization that's providing the oversight can really have an impact on how well that relationship works and whether or not we're producing good, and safe food.

I've been having conversations over many years with different folks within health authorities to look at that dynamic and tension between public health and population health, and how we can support healthy communities with good, local, healthy food, that isn't compromising the safe food oversight. And how can we get the safe food oversight to not just through a command and control approach that just tends to shut down and unduly burden small businesses, and instead look towards a collaborative, problem-solving culture. That certainly exists with some of those professionals, but they don't see it as part of their job to help a business persist. Large scale producers can survive millions of pounds of recalled meat'—a small-scale abattoir can't necessarily survive one recall if it hits the media and it significantly damages their relationship with markets that they might have spent years developing. For me, there's a precautionary principle involved there around how you support, particularly the meat sector where the profit margin is so razor thin—how you protect and help them survive, produce safe meat, meet the public good, both in the immediate safe meat question but also in the longer term of having livestock on the land, having manure for soil fertility, just having all that our food systems can and should do in communities.

ME: What are the greatest challenges that you've faced? What are the greatest impediments to success?

AB: I'm basically doing this out of my own personal passion and have, for a very long time, and so the challenge is continuity. My dream would be to be on retainer with somebody to just do what it is that I do and that's not going to happen. So it's been a lifetime of project to project, different funding opportunities, some great, some not so great, and that's really a challenge. I have a core goal, a core drive in terms of what I want to do in my work but often it has to be compromised to suit the flavour of the day of the latest funding initiative or bright shiny thing that's caught somebody's eye in government or a foundation.

Earlier in my career I've definitely had issues with professionalization, for lack of a better word. I have a lifetime of working on this, I grew up on a farm, but I don't have any credentials to attach to my name. At this point in my career it rarely is a barrier, most people value the quality of what I do in my work, but every so often it comes up and because I don't have a specific academic degree that's somehow related to what it is that I do I may be

barred from things. I'm sure that's also contributed to the tenuous nature of my career, that it's been project to project, because I don't really qualify for a nice cushy job in academia or government. Though usually they're the ones contacting me and asking the questions.

One of the greatest challenges that I've faced, and we all face, is that there's huge dollars invested in the system as it is. It's a system that's patently unjust and unhealthy but there's huge dollars invested in it. It's frightening when you hear the news of all of the large grocery chains in Canada, they're all dropping their prices, and I find that deeply disturbing. It was started by ne company, but then everybody followed suit and then there's huge ads about dropping all the prices on their foods. They're passing that on right down the supply chain, right back to the primary producer and if it's not the primary producer then it's a little bit up the supply chain and somebody's compromising welfare standards for their workers, or environmental standards. We cannot think that our food has to be so cheap, it's a huge problem. When we keep cutting costs the repercussions are very real. When you come back to meat, people are appalled, they don't like it when they are faced with the reality of how most meat is produced. You think about pigs, you think about sow crates, it's so unethical, inhumane and horrific and yet people happily go off and have that slice of bacon and don't think twice about the animal that it comes from. If only we could help people understand that their individual choices, every time they go and they buy that pound of bacon for whatever price they pay for it nowadays, they're perpetuating a system that on every level should be offensive to them.

ME: If we pay more at the supermarkets chains, why would we have confidence that it was going to get to the producer at some point?

AB: I wouldn't go to those stores.

ME: Aha! Okay.

AB: For years and years, I haven't gone into large grocery chains, I don't shop there, and I will actively seek out independent retailers, independent anything, because that's where I try, through my purchasing habits, to undermine that system. And there are independent

grocers. I think it means we have to be less focused on convenience. We make a lot of choices about how we spend our money and how we spend our time. And I think that we could revisit where there's some wiggle room. It's about trying to build the world we want through good food.

ME: What keeps you inspired?

AB: I've been driven all my life by justice. There's so much about food systems and about our world that's unjust and so much of that justice is directly related to how our food systems work, and it's that drive, that passion for justice. My farmer friends all encourage me to keep doing what I'm doing because they don't want to be doing the kind of research and regulatory reading and interventions that I do and they're grateful for that. But I also realized that if I was anywhere else, farmers and fishers are going bankrupt, people are starving to death in various parts of the world, people are suffering enormously from the impacts of climate change which is related to our food systems, people are hungry, they're deprived of their land if they're Indigenous. If I was in any of those situations I wouldn't have the privilege I have now of thinking "Oh, should I stop working on food systems?" When I realized that a number of years ago I thought my skill-set, which I developed over a number of years, my knowledge base, my relationships, they're too deep to just throw to the side and start on something else. I think I have something to contribute because of how long I've been doing this and so I'm going to keep trying.

ME: What do you think are the greatest opportunities for change? I don't mean in the next 200 years, I mean in the next ten years.

AB: I do see there's a lot more interest in food now than there used to be, and not just in the latest whatever some chef has come up with. Some of it's still about fads, but people are thinking more about the provenience of their food and the quality of their food and all of the ecosystems attached to it and to their choices. It's still a small percentage of the population but I think we might be getting towards a tipping point and I find that exciting. I think that also there is a more engaged citizen, again still perhaps not the critical mass tipping point, but I think we're building our capacity around how to effectively engage with our

governments at all levels to shift public policy in the directions that we as citizens are wanting, so it feels like citizen power is on an upsurge. Another thing that I find inspiring and that does in fact help push me along is the uprising in Indigenous communities, calling us on our colonial crap, past and present, and that to me is awfully inspiring.