

Farmer: Debbie Leung

Interviewer: L Kravit-Smith

Date: 2/12/2021

Place: Olympia, WA

BIPOC Farmers in History and Today in the South Sound: A Slow Food Project, Winter 2021

My interview with Debbie Leung left me feeling inspired about her work in the past and future with farming. Debbie stopped farming in Olympia when I was 5 years old working in my mom's garden for the first time. And now we are sharing connections with her current work with the Community Farm Land Trust. Despite sharing different life stories, I learned that me and Debbie share many similarities in our interests and connections to culture.

Debbie began farming in 1985 and ended in 2005. She lives in Olympia and her farm was by East Olympia Elementary School. She owned 2-1/2 acres but farmed about 1 acre of it. For a couple years she also grew winter squash near Gull Harbor on about 1/4 acre on a friend's land. Debbie has always felt it was important for her to be part of the land and she always really enjoyed gardening and raising vegetables. She got a job at the Olympia Food Coop back when it was small and there was just the west side store and there were only four staff. She ended up being the produce manager. She enjoyed doing that and started learning the business of marketing produce in particular. During this time, organics were only really starting to become a thing in Olympia. With her work at the Co-op, she thought it was just intuitive that farming would be the thing for her after she left her position there. And with her desire for social outlets, selling at the local farmers market also seemed to be a great option as well. And so, Ninth Heaven Herbs & Vegetables began. Debbie shared with me her reasoning for choosing the name of her farm. Ninth Heaven is part of the Chinese culture, it means that there are nine levels of attainment. She says "it's kind of like the Chinese version of Nirvana. But white people would always go why nine not seven? I have only heard of seven heavens. It was hard to explain that to people a lot."

Initially when she went into farming what she wanted to grow Asian vegetables, in part because that was the food she liked! But also, because that would be something that none of the other farmers would be selling at the farmers market. It was interesting to hear about the lack of knowledge around certain foods when she was selling at the market. She described that back then a lot of the people that came to the farmers market were not aware of what cilantro was. So, her selling Chinese broccoli and lettuce was different. She grew giant butter lettuce which people loved. And then she got people hooked on baby bok choy, and cilantro, garlic chives and arugula. Ninth Heaven Herbs & Vegetables got a loyal following of people. My mom still fondly remembers visiting Debbie's stand and buying her bok choy.

When asking Debbie about her experience with race and racism being an Asian farmer in a white dominant community, she said she did not really feel too impacted. She says "I think

maybe because I had been working at the food Coop as the produce manager, a lot of people already knew me, and I knew them. But I think more of what I felt uncomfortable with was the fact that I was a newcomer to farming. And I had to prove to myself that I could stick with it and do the work. I remember this one person who kind of made some comment about me being a “city girl”, and it's like, oh, okay, I'm not gonna argue with you!” I can imagine how difficult it must have been. Farming comes with such stark learning curves and I admire Debbie’s ability to push back against those feelings of uncomfortability.

Debbie's Chinese culture is very important to her, she grew up with her mom being a really great cook. Her mom did not really teach her how to cook because the kitchen was her domain. But Debbie inherited a real love for food from her and wanted to recreate those flavors and a lot of those traditions. She explained to me the difficulty of not being able to find certain products for traditional cooking. She notes, “as much being a farmer and eating fresh food and food grown has been super important to me, on the other hand, I also feel the contradiction, and the necessity of going to an Asian grocery and getting these pastes and things that came from really far away. But I have to have it because it's part of my traditional food.” I deeply resonated with this. Debbie and I discussed the ways that both of our cultural food is not represented in the Olympia area. I can rarely find Guatemalan ingredients that are fresh and available in this climate, it is hard to be disconnected from cultural food. Food can bring home to you.

Debbie is no longer farming but she does currently have a vegetable and fruit garden. She is still doing some incredible work that connects her to the land. She has begun working with the Community Farm Land Trust; an organization that I am taking part in as well. She spends time volunteering on two committees. One of the committees she serves on is the farm preservation committee which looks for farmland to preserve, as well as advising the executive director on potential purchasing. And then the other committee is focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Debbie explained that she felt that she could not make a living from farming. Which is sadly a common statement. Debbie believes that farmers deserve more of a living, and that brings up a much bigger issue about agriculture and how it is supported and its place here in the United States. Debbie now teaches Tai Chi and Qi Gong in downtown Olympia. And with her farming background, she has made it a goal to create programs that surround stretches and routines that folks can do to lessen the impact of farming labor on their bodies. She has done a lot of work with the Organic Farm at The Evergreen State College. She mainly focuses on arthritis in the hands, which is a common issue for farmers. As well as how to prevent issues with the lower back and knees. Debbie’s work helping farmers avoid damaging their body while farming interested me. My mom told me once that she wanted to become a farmer yet that never happened because she threw her back out when she was in her early 20’s. She was still able to have a large garden throughout her life. I have seen the ways that farming can break down one's body, to a point where the body cannot sustain farming labor. What Debbie is doing is vital for the health of those working with the land.

I enjoyed immensely talking with Debbie Leung. She brought up many important points around what it means to make a living as a farmer, connection to culture through food and work

you can do related to farming that is not becoming a farm owner. It is inspiring to see her morph her passion for the land into different outlets throughout her life. It was a privilege to interview her.