CDFIs Making History Interview

Daniel Wallace
Program Developer, Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems, CEI, Natural Resources and Sustainable Communities

Dave Glaser, Chief Executive Officer of Montana CDC, conducted this interview on September 11, 2014.

Dave: You're part of the Emerging Leaders group with the Citi and OFN Initiative and OFN. As part of the 30th anniversary of the organization, some of the [OFN] Board Members are interviewing folks like you to get a sense of the industry from a new perspective.

Daniel: Okay.

Dave: You said you started three years ago. How did you discover, or first come to CDFI world?

Daniel: About five years ago now, I was building houses for Habitat for Humanity and decided that I was ready for a career shift and went back to school right here in Maine to get a Master's, a Community Planning and Development Master's. What I wanted to do with that Master's program is focus on food planning. I've run food businesses in the past. I grew up with my family raising its own food. I've just always been very close to food, so I thought this sort of nascent food planning sector would be a great place to try to get involved.

Then what happened, while I was at my Master's and doing some contracting work, is that I discovered CEI. I had not been aware of the industry prior to that. I got to know a couple of folks who work at CEI through a couple of different venues and really was quite intrigued by it, particularly because at CEI we have some focus on food and agriculture businesses. As luck would have it, there was a job opening towards the end of my Master's program, and I jumped on it and was able to get it.

Dave: Was there anything in particular, like when you were being recruited or thinking about joining CEI that stuck out to you as, "Whoa, there's something going on there and I want to be a part of that."? What attracted you to them? Outside of your experience being analogous to what you were going to do at the organization.
Daniel: Well, certainly at the outset, there's a combination of two things, and one of them is very banal, the sort of, "I need a job and this is a really interesting job." It's certainly developed far beyond since then, and it's really the second part that is a better answer to the question. For lack of better phrasing, there's a mission fit between what the CDFI industry does and what I would like to spend my life doing. Work has always been front and center for me, and it's always been really important that I'm deeply engaged and really passionate about that work. My work, through the course of really various careers to date, has either been in a nonprofit capacity, or a business management capacity, or with something like Habitat for Humanity, something very volunteer oriented with the intention of trying to provide something to the greater community.

As I got to know CEI—and slowly getting to know the industry—it's really kind of eye-opening the way this thing that's been out here for my life and I wasn't aware of it, but it's sitting there, and I really feel like I found a place where all of my various interests are met with the mission of being of service to certain communities with job creation. It's a place that is very easy to come to work to every day, not saying the work is easy, but it's very easy to show up and be engaged, and get excited, and keep going despite the challenges that arise.

It's just the place that is really comfortable, and that I can be deeply passionate about, and that, I believe, is truly having a positive impact on the world.

Dave: It's comfortable except it's awkward to work with Keith, I'm sure.

Daniel: [LAUGHS] Keith is great. Keith is my boss.

Daniel: I better be careful what I say.

Dave: You should walk in there and kick his chair and say, "Listen, Bisson, I need more out of you."

Daniel: [LAUGHS]

Dave: Keith and I have known each other a very long time since I first started work in the industry 'cause we were part of something called the Triple Bottom Line Collaborative. He and I were both relatively new to each of our organizations at that time, sort of grown up together in CDFI. It's been fun then to serve on the board together because we're really on a similar trajectory, our organizations are somewhat similar,
we've modeled much of what we do after what you do, and therefore, we have so much to share with one another about the struggles of the organizations, and where we're going, everything. It's great. That's one of my overwhelming positives about the world we work in, is the incredible colleagues in CDFIs across the country that I feel like I can pick up the phone and call at anytime.

Daniel: That's one thing that the Emerging Leaders has been particularly successful at the Citi program is in developing that network for the newer people in CDFIs quickly. There are 20 folks that are in that program, even across the cohorts, but in particular, the 20 folks in that Emerging Leaders group, I now feel like I can do just that. I can pick up the phone and ask questions and think about things together. It's been one of the major outcomes of the program. Incredibly valuable for somebody's who's just getting to the end of his third year, to have that network in place already.

Dave: You're in now. You're a part of us and you're moving into this phase where you start to formulate like, "All right. This is where I'm going, and I know I can lead my organization in that direction." That's a great segue for the last question. Where do you see us going in the next 30 years? What's your personal vision for CDFI, OFN? What do you see as the most important?

Daniel: What I'm going to do is an answer from my experience and from my place within CEI. I'm not sure I have a grip on the industry just yet, but I have great faith and belief in the promise of some of the work that I'm doing, which is in supporting and developing agriculture and food based businesses. I really believe, particularly with the more rural CDFIs, but frankly, across the board simply because of the connections of urban to rural when you start talking about food, and food delivery, and healthy food…

I really think this food sector is not a fad, that there's going to be a tremendous amount of development potential in distressed rural communities within the food sector across the board, from across the spectrum of food related businesses from agriculture through the processing manufacturing through retail, but then again, closing the loop again. While I don't know, obviously, if this is going to be a central idea to CDFIs, I hope it will be because it's a piece of work that not all CDFIs engage in and there's real opportunity and real potential to build a lasting livelihoods in this sector. I think our industry could really demonstrate vision and leadership within food and agriculture.