

Sheena Butler: Hi everyone. Thanks for joining us in our breakout session. As you are coming in. We just ask that you put your name and location in the chat box, so we can just keep up with you. Nate and I are going to do our celebrity interview, so we hope you guys enjoy. And if you have questions, feel free to put that in the chat as well. So first just want to reintroduce myself. My name is Sheena Butler. I am the food policy council liaison for the Cumberland County, Fort Bragg food policy council. Nate, you want to introduce yourself?

Nate Crew: Yep. I'm Nate Crew here in Fayetteville, North Carolina. With my wife Amanda. We have Crew Family Orchards. We're both veterans got out the army out of Fort Bragg here. And we grow a variety of fruits particularly olives, but also over 20 other fruit varieties in Fayetteville and [Waygon 00:00:58] little town near here. Started planting trees in 2016 and it gradually grew into a bigger hobby and then obsession and now a family business. So that's what we're about right now.

Sheena Butler: Nice. I like the fact that you guys are doing this as a family. It seems very close knit and everyone's involved has an all hands in approach. So very cool. Nate, what inspire you to be a local farmer?

Nate Crew: Really started when I was a little kid, when was turning seven years old, we visited my grandfather out in California and that was a big trip because we didn't get to travel much. I grew up pretty poor. My parents always pretty poor to the point where there was some food insecurity, definitely there for a few years. There was was times where in a given week we'd have maybe pinto beans and oatmeal and that be it to eat. And were fortunate sometimes to get some charity from churches and stuff. But just seeing the trees that my grandpa was growing out in California and he didn't have a lot of land and he wasn't working with a lot either. But he had this huge apple tree in his yard and a bunch of different plum trees and berries and grapes and it blew a mind.

I was a city kid and just the life and the greenery and the vibrancy of it blew him mind. But just the abundance of amazing food. And I think that I was stuck in the back of my head. So years went by and traveled and had a little bit of career and went to the army and stuff. And I came back to wanted to grow fruit trees. I always had in the back of my head I wanted do that. That's what inspired me to do that. So here it is.

Sheena Butler: It seems like that one big trip was just a highlight of what you would probably center yourself around, which is now doing farming work and being an orchardist. That's really cool that you may have not been able to have a chance to go out as much but that changed a moment in your life, even as a young kid. So really cool there. When we were recruiting for the food policy council we really wanted to make sure that we included local farmers. We felt like their expertise and their input would be so beneficial for just a voice at the table. When we saw your name come across the application we were excited. We were like, "Yes, finally a farmer" someone who can definitely give us some insight to the work you all do especially around the seasons and things that we may not know going on or moving forward with our initiatives. What inspired you to want to serve? What made you say, "You know what I really want to try being on a council?"

Nate Crew: It was really honestly curiosity to see how much good was being done, how much I could add to the table. It sounded like it was something going after a good mission. It was brought to my attention through someone who was coordinator with the main farmer's market that we go to every Saturday. And of course as soon as I joined, I saw,

okay, this is good stuff. The data was shown where the sobering reality as of how we got to where we are with food insecurity and even in this community. Started curiosity and then it was encouraging and educational and now I can see it starting to turn in more of a practical direction as well. And that's definitely encouraging.

Sheena Butler: Absolutely, definitely. And yeah, you mentioned that you were a veteran before, so you have both sides there. What it takes to make sure that you are food secure as a soldier and you also now working as a farmer have both sides to give input onto. In last year 2021 and then from 2020, of course we all were very affected by COVID. And not only did it affect global but even our communities suffered a little bit especially it brought a lot of food insecurity issues to the forefront. In your business since you are still fairly new and you gotten started but you have a little bit of a time where you've been doing the business for a little while. How did that impact you? How did COVID affect you as a farmer?

Nate Crew: COVID for us actually served as a key early period of growth. When we really shifted and realized what we wanted to focus on. And we had for a couple years, we had been building the idea of being entrepreneurs and having family business. But early 2020 besides COVID there was a family tragedy that struck. And I found myself... We cashed in some savings, used a tax return, et cetera, scraped together some money and bought a little piece of land. I found myself just as kind of a therapeutic way, just out there working the land. And together with my wife, the idea of actually making the trees our main thing, if it's a passion then why relegated to just a hobby or something.

And just seeing how so much healing on so many different levels starts with healing the soil here in the sand hills in Northern Carolina. And growing good things from that and creating future abundance for everybody. So COVID was key in allowing us to, and we're still early enough from the business where we don't have a lot of employees besides ourselves. It's really us. And so it didn't really hit us as far as taking away the labor. The labor is really still just our own hands and our own brainstorm and each day to figure out the right next thing to do. And so COVID allowed some breathing space, made a little greenhouse for the business almost so we could grow.

Sheena Butler: Wow. That's a holistic view when you talk about healing. So through your family's challenges there, you guys were able to not only just start a business but also heal whatever challenges you were facing at that time. You took almost like a mental health approach to it as well, it seems like. That's really insightful that we think along the lines of food just being there to not just nourish us, not to just feed us but to also heal us. I think that's a good point. And now that you've been working for a little while you and your wife are working together, you have your kids working with you guys as well. How are you guys serving the community? And in what capacity are you guys doing that?

Nate Crew: Well, I would say the first and foremost way is also the way that a lot of my farmer friends around here are, is making good local organic, nutrient dense food available at these farmer's markets. We have a farmer's market downtown Fayetteville Saturday morning and at a different farmer's market out near Hope Mills Sunday. That's the number one thing. And really just more recently through the food policy council, some of the local food pantries have come across our radar. So we've been able to... Even with the limited small business, have resources we got now we've been able to start supporting some of them. And just on faith putting out, I think first fruits is what it's called in Bible. So that kind of thing.

Sheena Butler: No, nothing is very good. You all are serving different areas of Cumberland so for the audience that may not know Spring Lake, Hope Mills, Fort Bragg, they're extensions of Cumberland. So we consider Fayetteville the hub here, but you guys are actually tackling multiple areas. So that's really nice that you expand your services even though you all are small. You are making a big impact by going to other communities as well, that may not come to the downtown area. When you chose the downtown area, was there a reason for that? Did you feel like it was a little under there? Or what was your reason for choosing downtown Fayetteville?

Nate Crew: It was an easy, common sense, starting place for us. A lot of local, not just farmers but entrepreneurs in general they'll start there. It's free for vendors. It's a service of the Fayetteville history museum there. And it's an institution of Fayetteville it's been around for decades and decades. Especially since COVID, it doesn't have as much the traffic and the big awareness as some of the other ones do. But it's really like a family community type of thing down there. You've got vendors there whether it's some elderly farmers or craftsmen, who've been coming for 15 years and it's great for the kids and it is central. A lot of the underserved neighborhoods in the Fayetteville area, you have two or three of those key areas that are a lot closer to that downtown Fayetteville area than if we're out at one of these bigger markets out in Hope Mills or one of the outlying towns.

Sheena Butler: Yeah. Our downtown area is definitely a place for communication. You see a lot of people strolling by and I think that's where you can find out a lot about resources that may be available too. You guys being posted down there is a benefit because it helps that access part and that education part where we try to figure out what resources are available. So now that we know that you're down there, downtown area, we can point people in the right direction. Especially on the days that maybe some businesses are not open throughout the week. You guys are serving on the weekend. So that helps to again bridge in those gaps that we talked about earlier on the panel discussion.

Now that you have been... You guys are doing really great work, you've overcome COVID, which is a great thing for you all. You've used that time to actually build a business and feel like this doesn't have to be a hobby. This actually can be something that helps to feed our family and also feed other families. What challenges would you say you've met in doing this business? Is there anything, any roadblocks that you've reached doing this so far?

Nate Crew: Yeah. In small to midsize local farming, especially the sustainable practices. There's a lot of general challenges that we share in common and friends of mine, same across the board. You got Green-Eyed Farms, purpose driven family farms, [Sparing Tuscan Feather 00:11:44]. Most of them veterans out of Fort Bragg like myself but we don't really fit into as easy of a niche in the agriculture system that some of the bigger and more established companies do. Not even just the big corn, soybean, and cotton growers around here but as an orchardist some of the competition is the big consolidated, commercialized, operations. A lot of them out of California then some out of Georgia and Florida where it's not holistic sustainable agriculture. But whether it's become goes certified organic or not there's a lot of the incentive, the heavily subsidized and able to tap into beneficial of crop insurance programs, things like that.

Where for a little family run business you can only spend so much time going through the red tape and the paperwork to try to take advantage of this or that new fledgling government program, where we got to be planting, we got to be harvesting, we got to

be going to markets, things like that. General small farmer challenges on like that. And then I guess on a more specific level access to resources that are here and could be more accessible. For example piles of wood chips, maybe that are collected by the county but not really accessible to local farmers, things like that. Little kinks that could be worked through in the system. From big picture to small picture there's little things, obstacles that constantly need to be worked around by small farmers, especially small organic farmers.

Sheena Butler: Sure. And that sounds like something that can... If we look at the food system, right, and you look at production is the top production is at the top. So if your production is broken in a way, then that's going to affect all other areas of the food system. I think that even though that's a challenge for you, that's really great that we can bring that forward to the council and also other community members. So they can be a part of that resolution, how can we solve this issue? How can we tackle this so that we have a healthier community and that our farmers are also being taken care of as well. In what ways has this challenge project, the things that we've been doing so far, in what ways have we been shifting power to our community residents?

Nate Crew: Yeah. I can see it starting to go that direction with a food policy council here in Fayetteville. There's a growing talk of the community gardens, community orchards as one of several solutions to meet the goals. And from my perspective that's one of the key ways where we will end up and hopefully we'll end up putting power back in the hands of those in the community that need it. And part of that is education too.

Throughout Fayetteville you've got homeowners and then you've got renters either way it's education to be able to, if and when you have the resources to care for an apple tree. So you can get an apple that's picked, ripen on the tree and picked this week, that has way more nutrients than anything you get in the grocery store. And that's just as possible in an underserved neighborhood on a common area where maybe it's not all home, but there's a common area. And so we're getting more to those solutions that are really going to put, I think I heard the term food sovereignty earlier today.

Sheena Butler: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate Crew: Put that back in people's hands.

Sheena Butler: Yes. Thank you. Thank you for that. Nate, I want to jump us into the panel discussion. I'm sorry, not the panel discussion but the chat. There's a question from our audience. And it says with the decrease in trust in our public health institutions, do you find that you're running into this hesitance or distrust at the local grassroots level as well? If so, how do we communicate with marginalized communities who have such understandable reasons to distrust the various institutions?

Nate Crew: [crosstalk 00:15:57] I personally find the opposite. I see the lack of trust public institutions but when I'm interacting with residents of Fayetteville the farmer's market, I find the exact opposite. Because it can't get any simpler than me and you as a person talking, shaking hands, say, "Hey, where do you live?" "All right, I live over here." "What do you got here?" "Fresh pizza." It doesn't get more trust builder than that. You see pretty soon, all right we're real people and we can deal with each other here. And it's even beyond financial transaction too. It's community building and trust, trust is just interwoven there, right in it organic. That's more my world that I see, that I deal with on a daily basis. So that's my perspective. The trust is excellent, you know?

Sheena Butler: Yeah, for sure. Being transparent and having community members at that table to talk about what's going on in their community. So that way they are part of the conversation and not... I think rose mentioned, we're not telling them what we want to do, but we instead are including them in the conversation as well. Another question is, talking about food security in terms of reducing wastage and ensuring food it's to where it is most needed. How do you collaborate with private for profit food vendors in your city? Such as big malls like Walmart, Hy-Vee, et cetera, to regulate their wastage?

Nate Crew: That's a good question.

Sheena Butler: It is a good question.

Nate Crew: Yeah. That's not in my camp specifically, but I know that Fayetteville urban orchard is actually involved with that and getting their... They mentioned two or three of the big grocery stores around here that instead of throwing the waste the stuff that's getting close to the expiration date, it's taking a food pantry. And that is the food pantry that gets a lot of traffic, very well taken advantage of by people in need. Beyond that I don't know if you can answer the question better than I can. But.

Sheena Butler: So I'll try to tackle it as best as I can. As a food policy council we haven't reached that level to talk about how to collaborate with private, to profit food vendors. But we do know that is something long term. That is something we want to consider because when we talk about partnering with larger grocery stores, like your food lines, your Walmarts, or your Publix here at Cedar. Those are going to be a little bit more... There's going to be a little more red tape that you have to go through in order to get them to maybe change some of the models that they have, or to consider certain foods or certain availabilities in certain neighborhoods. One thing I think working with first is maybe local mom and pop shops. Maybe there is a corner store that you can go to and they're willing to incorporate some different food options there.

And then also trying to work with the community to let them know that this is what you're doing. So that way food is not just sitting there and being wasted because no one actually thinks about gas station and fresh food, trying to change that narrative. So that way you start to change your community in a sense, changing mindsets. I'm hoping that steered a little bit towards answering that question. But this is another question looks like this might be geared to you, Nate. We are planning to start a fruit farm at our medical park to allow people to have access to free fresh fruits and nuts. I'm curious, Nate, how you feel about this as a farmer. We want to both support local growers while also helping alleviate food insecurity. We haven't received a... There are no other questions at this time but that's our question.

Nate Crew: That is an excellent idea. And I don't know any good farmer orchardist or anybody worth his or her salt, who would oppose a medical park using its own soil to grow good food. If we used all the available lawns space in America to grow food, nobody's losing. You can support local farmers and at the same time, grow your own stuff for your patients, for your staff, for yourselves at the same time. And it all works together. Mother nature has a way of doing that, working together. That soil out there on your medical park, I promise you that soil wants to grow something besides just grass for you. So absolutely do it.

Sheena Butler: Absolutely. We don't have any other questions right now Nate. But I did want to get to another topic that you and I actually had talked about. And that was, how do you

think community members can use their power to generate creative and effective solution? We talk a lot about what can be done, but it's different once we start putting things to action and actually start getting out there and doing the work. How can our community members generate creative and effective solutions? What can they do?

Nate Crew:

My most instinctive answer to that, I might come across as former soldier. But real practical, just be ready to get your hands dirty, by yourself, with your family, with your neighbors. There's definitely a place for all the looking through the data and the dialogue and the consensus building. But at the end of the day, like right now, it's planting season. This month, next month, it's time to plant that tree. Anybody can go and look at that spot, find that spot. A tree that's going to benefit you, your family, your neighbors, that's going to bring people together and build community. I think just being ready to get our hands dirty together is what a lot of it comes down to in a practical way. That's my perspective.

Sheena Butler:

Sure. Yeah. That absolutely the idea that I think a lot of people are looking for solutions into our community. It's hard to pull if you will, to pull attention from the community member to let them know that this is what we are wanting to do for you all. But in a sense, it's not just us wanting to do it. Is to better our community as a whole. So building that trust, as you said, working hand in hand, getting down and dirty and going to, it's almost like a door to door type of thing. We got away from that for a while but I think it's because of COVID now, but we kind of got away from that door to door model. But it almost seems that way because you want people to start trusting you more. And for us to know we each other and know our resources that are available. Is there any questions or anything that you want to share with our audience? Just from the conversation that we've been having so far?

Nate Crew:

I guess to reiterate that last point where it came to. I love the mission of this whole organization and what we're doing all the way down to the food policy council in Fayetteville. And at the same time once we log off of this, once we're done this stuff for the day. It starts small the Chinese proverb, the journey a thousand miles starts with a single step. That's where you get to know your neighbors and collaborate together, work together, be more of a community. And then from there what good can you do beyond that?

And it starts with things like getting into the... Even if a lot of people say, "I don't have a green thumb, I don't have a green thumb." Well, it's trial and error like anything else. You plant a tree and if it dies, well, the tree's going to forgive you. Trees die. You plant another one next year. And Yahoo, YouTube, Google valuable resources but just growing things together, growing things together. We can't control inflation at the grocery store but we can control what we do or don't do with our own backyard or common areas near our house. You know?

Sheena Butler:

Definitely, definitely, yeah. Definitely give back up and try it again. And I think that's a model for all councils and all of food at advocates, people were working on grassroot level projects. It's hard. It is truly hard being a liaison was not something easy. I wasn't expecting some of the hard work that came with it but it takes to getting your knee scraped and getting right back up and doing it again. I second that as well Nate. Just trying to think of some things that we want to share with the food policy council. What we plan on doing, coming up is one thing we want to do is definitely make some action plans, right? We want to include our community members and talk about different areas that are beneficial to the community. But we also talked about that

equity piece, making sure that we're not excluding community members in our goal setting and in our year plans that we want to create.

when you had our conversation today in our meeting, is there any ideas that you want to just put to the forefront? Just like this is something that I really think is important and that we should definitely focus on, especially when it comes to our maybe marginalized communities?

Nate Crew: I think, the thing that comes to mind actually it touches on this next question that was just posted. Local sustainable Ag and bringing it to the attention of local officials because that's what we're getting to is actual council policy advice. And I think in practical terms, it's going to come down to looking at budget allocation. There's a parks and rec department. There's a budget for planting and maintaining trees along right ways, trees in green spaces, trees in parks. There are a lot of parks in the city or in the county whatever jurisdiction, that have enough space they got marginal areas where there could be something productive being done there. I'm talking permaculture, perennial, not something that's going to require a lot of year in year out labor but you have a budget for trash pickup for lawn mowing, you have a budget for those things. Then the budget can be adjusted.

The data is there that local sustainable Ag is where it's at. That's what we need for a better future for all of us. It's looking at, there's already taxpayer dollars being spent on this, this, this, and this. Well, we can tweak this and have let's say a pecan tree instead of an oak tree. Acorns might be edible but they're not really palatable. Not a lot of people are going to eat them but now you got a source of protein on public space that you already had a budget for mowing the grass under that anyway. So that's where my head's at with that question, as well as the question in the chat.

Sheena Butler: Nice. All right. And we have another question that says, how are you all modifying your programs to prepare for coming food shortages? And just to answer that question, we haven't even tackled just that conversation yet. But that is definitely one that we are... It has been thought about a little bit. We haven't actually had a deep conversation about it but should be thinking about it, right? Because COVID blindsided a lot of people and even now we're going still through a food shortage. Where there may not be food on the shelves or you may have to go to several places before you can find bread or eggs or milk so forth.

And I think Nate you talked about being able to grow something right there in my backyard or having a local area in my neighborhood. Where I can just go pick up fresh fruits and vegetables or something that could help sustain my family for a little while before the grocery stores get replenished. But having that thought process is to change it to where we not just depend on the grocery stores but now we're looking at more sustainable actions. So is there any answers that you have to that question?

Nate Crew: I would say sustainable actions. Exactly. It's sustainable equals thinking long term, you know what I mean?

Sheena Butler: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate Crew: So maybe we have inflation going crazy right now, right? So there are short term solutions. We have short term solutions all around which are excellent. Food pantry, someone can go get food right now. There's a Chinese proverb though that says, "The best time of plant a fruit tree is 20 years ago." Second best time is right now. It's a

long term thing, more than just people whose businesses, is my business to plant as many trees as I can every spring. But across the board that's one solution where you can make your family, your community, your neighborhood resilient. And when I would say, if food shortages come in the future, the future is very uncertain but if the sun's always going to still be shining, the rain's still going to be falling and you're going to have soil there that can do something for you. So putting those to work is one way to tackle coming food shortages, I would say.

Sheena Butler: And in our community, I think one thing that we definitely address a lot is our students and not forgetting that students have a break. They have a summer break, they have holiday breaks. And we're finding that in our community there is a food insecurity issue that we didn't really know about until some research was done. And not only food insecurity, but even just childcare or being able to support themselves during those holiday times. Because like you said, there are resources here available but at some point in time that they shut down and they close. So what are we doing? And what are we doing to bridge in that gap where we can still offer accessible food to them? And where they can still live and feed their families without having those resources maybe open 24 hours a day or every day that kind of thing. Those are definitely actions that we want to start taking as we move forward as a council. Is there any final words of advice that you would like to give to audience that are watching us right now Nate?

Nate Crew: Just starting to think in practical terms I guess, excellent conversations to have and at the same time inflation is happening right now. The problems have been identified, I think most of them they're still dated to look at. But the solutions are starting to materialize to take shape out of the mist and latching on to whatever the niche is. I love the food policy council you and the team and everyone y'all brought together, all of us. We each have our niche and if there's gaps to be filled we'll fill those over time. That's a sort of a quasi governmental group but no matter what it is, if your salary job, entrepreneur or whatever. There's a niche where you can be latching on in one of those solutions and implementing it right now. I just get busy.

Sheena Butler: Well, our final question is any suggestions for how to engage residents with mobility limitations such as your elderly in they're growing their own food?

Nate Crew: That's a good question. That's a good question. I'm not into vegetables and herbs as much myself. Some of my friends are, but there's a lot that can be grown in pots, in window areas. And especially you have that much more options if there's a wheelchair ramp accessible backyard for in the summer, keeping pots outside and having access to them off the top of my head, that's the main thing. Of course, it's key to have a caretaker, whether it's in the family or part of an organization to be assisting that person and having access to foods that you have to go out and get. You can't grow your own wheat field, you need bread and the basic staples like that. So both self sustainability but also assistance. It's a community coming together taking care of each other.

Sheena Butler: There are options for growing inside of your own kitchen for growing inside of plant boxes if you will. So definitely there are some resources out there and hopefully in your area wherever this individual who asks a question, wherever you're located you can partner with someone to potentially look that up. Nate was talking about YouTube. There are ways to do things that are more of a sustainable level. So that's even a introduction for kids to get used to knowing how to grow and what that looks like in the process that it takes. That's that education piece. So, yeah, definitely.



Nate Crew: And if I can, if that was a local person who submitted that question. A couple people that come to mind, Lauren from Leaf of Life, [Alder Long 00:33:31] from intellectual vegetable those are two excellent sources for that small scale herbs and vegetables angle.

Sheena Butler: And she is a community grower as well. And she actually has a lesson plan that goes along with that growing inside your own home. And growing in your backyard as well. Awesome. My final thoughts on here is just to, don't forget your resources. I think as we are growing as a council and as we are continue our work in the challenge team, we have really been able to do a lot of great things because of the resources we have and because we've been partnering. And we don't want to recreate the will as we talked about earlier today but we want to make sure that we are partnering with people who have the same ideas as we do. And who actually can even add to what we are thinking about as well. So thank you all for joining us during this discussion time. Thank you Nate for agreeing to do this with me. And so we are going to go onto our next segment.