

## **Planting Seeds of Hope**

by: Sarah K. Loose

Many people knew Bev through her gardens. She took such pleasure digging her fingers through the soil, caring for budding plants, delighting in the mix of beauty and utility of the living things she nurtured. As we gardened together in the last few months of her life, planting winter squash in the summer, both of us knew she might not be around to eat them. I often thought about how she was creating such abundant life – even as her death approached. It was satisfying in a way, to think about the seeds she had sown producing sustenance and life even beyond her own. A way of planting her own perpetuity, perhaps.

I treasure those moments we shared together in the garden, as she taught me to work the earth and care for its bounty. But how I first came to know Bev was through her planting seeds of a different kind, in her work with rural communities through the Jefferson Center.

### **Planting Seeds**

Bev founded the Jefferson Center back in 1994 with the vision of providing an opportunity for rural working people to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to make change in their communities. Having grown up in a rural area herself, always hungry for knowledge and a chance to share her ideas and dialogue with others, Bev knew firsthand the isolation and disempowerment that people in rural areas can experience.

As she once explained it to me, “Imagine if you were living in an isolated rural town. Little access to books or theaters or discussion groups and seminars. All your life, you have been led to believe that your opinions didn’t matter. People referred to your folk as ignorant, backwards. Suddenly somebody shows up at your door and invites you to sit down at the table to talk about your life. Wants to hear what you think about what is happening in your community, in your job. She tells you there are others interested in what you have to say; people in other communities who are experiencing many of the same things, people willing to work together to make their communities a better place. And she invites you to come to a gathering to meet them and to share your story.”

That’s what Bev did through the Jefferson Center. She gave rural working people the chance, the permission, in a sense, to do what they so rarely have the opportunity to do – to really take their life stories and experiences and analyze them, make sense of them as they relate to politics and economics and the social history of a place and a community and a region. She recognized the importance of knowledge based on experience and helped rural workers create new knowledge – knowledge to serve them in bettering their working conditions and their communities.

In that way, Bev planted seeds of hope. Seeds of possibility, in places and communities that are usually forgotten, ignored, or worse, written off as impossible. She traveled the back roads, in search of those left out at the table where decisions affecting rural communities are made. She sought them out – poor working folk, new immigrants, people of color – and believed in them. She believed in their capacity to make change, to solve their own problems, to create a better life for themselves and their families.

## **Cross-Pollinating**

As a white woman from a rural, working class family, and having worked many blue-collar jobs herself over the years, Bev identified with the rural community members in her work. But she also branched out from her own roots and reached across barriers of race, class, culture and even language to form genuine, mutual relationships with people from all different backgrounds. And she helped others do the same.

In that sense, Bev was a cross-pollinator. She was a pioneer in multicultural work, bringing very different people to learn from one another and work together for change. Jefferson Center gatherings would include a tribal member from the Hoopa tribe in Northern California, a Latino community leader recently arrived to southwest WA from his hometown in southern Mexico, a Cambodian refugee dedicated to forestry issues, and an Anglo, Vietnam vet from southern Oregon. Bev saw the destinies of all these people as intertwined. With a truly global perspective, she saw that only justice for all is justice at all.

Not only did Bev bring together different people, she brought together different ideas. She challenged academics and working people alike to find relationships between seemingly disparate disciplines. How does US labor law relate to community-based forestry? What does sustainable forestry have to do with international trade agreements? Why would closing down a rural hospital have such a big impact on natural resource workers?

These hybrids – of disparate ideas and peoples – became catalysts for new thinking and creative solutions in the work for justice.

## **A Hand in the Dirt**

With one hand dug deep in the dirt, the other turning the pages of an academic journal, Bev was a complex combination of practical and theoretical, of action and reflection. Intellectually brilliant, a truly innovative thinker – she was always pushing activists and academics one step further in their own thinking. She might very well have gone on to become a famous professor or political figure. In a sense, she was.

But she was always firmly rooted in the hands-on work social change. And rather than be the public face of the groups she was working with, she used her own privileges to make sure that those whose voices had been traditionally silenced could be heard. She made sure that workers represented *themselves* at national conferences or in D.C. to lobby, and to tell their own stories and share the challenges they face as rural workers.

But Bev wasn't silent either. She could be quite opinionated, and made sure that her own voice was heard, too. When she disagreed with something or someone, she wasn't afraid to say it. Passionate. Intense. Stubborn. But above all, untiring in her efforts to ensure that marginalized populations begin to take their place in a not-yet-democratic enough society.

Bev is gone. But the seeds she planted continue to bear fruit. A ripened sweetmeat squash ready for harvest and an organization, the Jefferson Center, that has made a difference in the lives of many, many working people in rural communities throughout the Northwest. I feel incredibly fortunate to have learned from Bev how to cultivate both. And I'm honored and humbled by the opportunity to keep on planting.