

An 'empowering' experience: Community leaders attend global conference

By Eve Newman

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Community members working for food security in Albany County recently took part in a conference that allowed them to talk about their work in front of an international audience.

Three members of Feeding Laramie Valley, together with Trish Penny from Laramie Rivers Conservation District and Tony Mendoza from Laramie Soup Kitchen, were part of a 10-person group that presented at the Action Learning Action Research Association World Congress in November in Pretoria, South Africa.

Action Research Action Learning Association, or ALARA, is a global network of organizations that aim to use research to advance social change on a local level.

The theme of the 2015 congress — the reality versus the rhetoric of collaborative research — caught the eye of Feeding Laramie Valley Founder Gayle Woodsum in winter 2014 and inspired her to gather a group and apply for the conference.

Feeding Laramie Valley, along with community partners at four other sites around the country, has been part of a project called Food Dignity, with academic partners that include the University of Wyoming under professor Christine Porter.

Woodsum said there's a pull between the academic world, where much research is based, and the community arena, where research gets put into action.

“Those of us who do grassroots work where we're trying to make social change and trying to improve things at the community level — that's what we struggle with all the time,” she said.

Feeding Laramie Valley aims to fight food insecurity by improving access to locally grown food. Food Dignity, funded by a five-year grant from the USDA, aims to learn what kinds of approaches work best when it comes to building sustainable food systems.



Community leaders from Laramie

Community leaders from Laramie and around the country visited Pretoria, South Africa, in November to present at a conference on collaborative research and social change.

Woodsum said academics have the goal of seeking knowledge and answering questions, which is different than the goals of people working directly with individuals in the community.

“Their level of investment is automatically not going to be coming from the same perspective as those of us who are doing frontline work in the community,” she said.

The Laramie contingent, together with Food Dignity partners from Ithaca, New York; Ashland, California; and Davis, California, developed a presentation about their work and the community/academic partnerships they’ve created.

“I feel like there’s a strength in combining both the community and the university together,” said Penny, conservation education coordinator for Laramie Rivers Conservation District. “It’s collaborative.”

Tony Mendoza, head cook at Laramie Soup Kitchen, said he was struck by the fact the Food Dignity group was the only group at the conference to include community partners as presenters.

“It was very empowering to see us standing shoulder to shoulder, the 10 of us, addressing a world conference,” he said.

The Food Dignity group was also the only group to present from the United States, and one of a few that touched on food security. Other topics at the conference included reintegration among people coming out of prison, access to clean water, access to electricity, HIV/AIDS and health care.

Mendoza said their talk sparked questions and comments from the audience. One audience member said he didn’t realize anyone in the United States was hungry.

“That was very striking,” Mendoza said.

Lina Dunning, who works for Feeding Laramie Valley, talked about her work collaborating with UW on a possible new minor in food sustainability. She said she learned from other presentations about the importance of genuinely partnering with community members, even if that means mixing up established routines.

“But the people are always different and they have different ideas, so you have to be reminded that it’s new to those folks, and you might have something to learn,” she said.

Reece Owens, who works with Feeding Laramie Valley’s interns, said he learned from other presentations that every effort will have struggles and hit roadblocks.

“It’s not just a local thing,” he said. “They have them in every organization. It was good to see that it wasn’t just us.”

Penny said she was inspired by what’s happening elsewhere in the world.

“It’s nice to see what others are doing and the commitment they have to their projects,” she said.

She said she felt re-energized by the conference and has been researching new greenhouse designs that could work in Albany County.

“I’m looking forward to spring again,” she said.

Woodsum said she was able to connect the work to feed hungry people in Laramie with efforts across the world.

“What we do has global importance,” she said. “It’s part of creating change for justice and equity and security for people everywhere.”