

**ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW**

00:00:29:12 Q: Today is November 29 of the year 2000. I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communication at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and today we're visiting with Joel Berg who is the Coordinator of Food Security for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

00:00:43:00 Now, Joel, let's first talk about how long you've been with the Department of Agriculture and what did you begin doing with the Department.

00:00:50:16 A: I started on January 21, 1993, which makes me by far the longest lasting political appointee of the Clinton-Gore Administration and the Department, and probably one of the longest lasting in the entire administration. I literally was told by the transient team to show up a room at 7:00 that morning and that I would be told where I was going and what position I would be in.

00:01:15:23 A few days earlier someone had kind of joked with me that I'd be going to the Department of Agriculture because I had been in Kansas on Clinton-Gore campaign and I sort of thought that was a joke because I was basically an urban

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

guy. Honestly, I'd never been on a farm before in my entire life except for kind of a museum farm.

00:01:31:22 Never been on a working farm. I was qualified for at least a dozen other places more so than here, honestly, on the first day. So I showed up at seven in the morning. They gave me a packet and it said you're Acting Director of Public Affairs and Press Secretary at the Department of Agriculture.

00:01:46:12 Show up at 9:00. I rode over with two other people who were here on the first day. Had to convince the security guards to let us in and really was here even before the new Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Espey, was sworn in. So it was really an incredible time for someone like myself who had spent a lot of his earlier career working on campaigns or working for non-profit groups or kind of being a protestor on the outside of the formal government to then all of a sudden say, "Hey, you're someone in the government".

00:02:17:28 I almost felt like someone in Eastern Europe who was a

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

street car conductor (unint.) and then all of sudden you're a Deputy Assistant Foreign Secretary. It really was an amazing time and it actually got even more amazing just a few days after I started here as the Press Secretary and the Acting Communications Director.

00:02:35:18 Kids started dying of e-coli in the pacific northwest and without even really learning where the men's room was, we were thrust into a major national, I wouldn't call it scandal, but really one of the first public health crisis of the new administration and that was an absolutely incredible thing to be part of.

00:02:55:18 The other thing to keep in mind, when the department's fully staffed up, it has about 300 political appointees, give or take a few dozen depending on the day. For the first few months when I was here as Acting Director of Public Affairs and the Press Secretary, at most we had half a dozen political appointees.

00:03:15:11 In the Office of Communications, I don't know how many political appointees there are now, but typically there

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

are a dozen or two dozen. For my first three months, for the first month, there was just me, then I brought along two friends temporarily.

00:03:27:29 We had no idea who to trust. No idea, you know, frankly we're a little skeptical of many of the career employees. We were absolutely convinced they were just, you know, Reagan plants and some we learned not to trust, but most we learned to trust and many of whom we learned to trust better than some of the political appointees with whom we worked.

00:03:47:17 So it really was an incredible time to have very few people of so-called "your team" on board, to know very little about how the department functions and to then have kids start dying of e-coli food poisoning disease within a few days of getting here.

00:04:02:16 And particularly it's such a technical issue. We had, you know, some people in Food Safety Inspection Service coming and telling the Secretary, "Well, it's really the kids and the parents' fault for not cooking the burgers

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

enough. There's nothing the Department can really do without massive, unrealistic spending to modernize the system".

00:04:20:14 Then we had consumer groups coming and saying, "Gee, you guys are murderers". And it was just an absolutely incredible time that I'll certainly never forget.

00:04:29:25 Q: So there was really no warm-up time. It was almost immediately crisis response in this particular case.

00:04:35:29 A: There was no warm up. The-- I think the second or third day here we had a question about the employee freeze, the new hiring freeze that Secretary Espey had instituted. So a day later I was in the federal page of the Washington Post explaining that.

00:04:55:04 I quickly learned the hard way the difference between a food donation and the food sale. I was told there was going to be a donation or a sale to Russia and I announced it as a food sale and I got in big trouble because I learned it was a food donation and, to me, with

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

my background in national service and education issues, I was not an agriculture expert and I was always willing to admit that.

00:05:19:15 I've certainly learned a lot. I didn't know the difference, but I soon found out. (Unint.) were just exhausted. We'd just come off an incredible campaign. I had been on the Clinton campaign for a year. Then I was on the transition team working on national service issues.

00:05:33:18 And then I was at the Department of Agriculture. I brought one friend with me a few weeks later who was a speech writer who later ended up actually becoming Janet Reno's Communications Director at the Department of Justice. We had no sleep, no help, all these issues thrust upon us and, of course, we made a great amount of mistakes.

00:05:51:20 There was one speech we had for the Secretary that had the number "million" in it when the number should have been (unint.), and I can tell you, the Secretary wasn't

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

particularly happy with that mistake. And there wasn't so much not even understanding the issue. It was just too tired to catch it and too much work.

00:06:07:09 But really the e-coli situation was thrust upon us. Every other department had a little time to get their feet wet, a little time to learn the ropes. And we had an emergency literally within days of getting here. It was just really an incredible thing just personally and professionally to have kind of a sense this is important happening around you but just kind of got swept up underneath it.

00:06:31:06 I've never, I don't think, been on an active military base in my life. All of a sudden I was going with the Secretary to Andrews Air Base in a military jet and went to Washington state, Olympia, Washington and back in a day so he could testify at a hearing.

00:06:47:00 And it-- it really-- it really is instructive for the new people working on the transition now with whoever ultimately is the winner what they can learn about what

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

to do and what not to do, and how important it is to pretty quickly get a feel for which people within the bureaucracy you can trust and which of their information is at least vaguely accurate or they're trying to get you accurate information.

00:07:09:16 Q: And you mentioned national service. That's an area that you went on to direct here at the Department of Agriculture. Tell us about that work.

00:07:16:16 A: I've-- I've worked on this issue of national service for years before coming to the Department. I joked about that I didn't know about agriculture issues and I didn't by and large. But I was one of the nation's experts in the issue of national community service.

00:07:28:19 I worked for a group, The Progressive Policy Institute, the then Governor Clinton was involved in. I worked on the campaign on national service. I was the one who suggested let Clinton go to the City Year National Service Program after which he modeled a lot of (unint.).

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:07:41:24 I-- I've kind of been in the background as a wonka kind of policy expert. Not very pro-- high profile. I don't want to make a false claim I invented the thing. But I was someone there in the background. I worked on the President's transition team on national service. And that's really what I wanted to do with my life.

00:07:58:10 It was exciting to me but an issue I had worked on that Clinton made a centerpiece of his campaign that he was really going to turn into reality. And I wanted to do that.

00:08:07:03 So on the transition team-- I went to my then boss on the transition team, Al Fromm, who was-- knew Mike Espey, knew Clinton through the group I worked for, who was also my boss previously and worked in national service. I said, "I want to work on this issue. I have this offer to go to agriculture".

00:08:22:06 And he said, "Mike Espey's a great guy. Go to agriculture. This stuff won't be up for months". But

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

within eight days of coming to the Department, on January 28 of 1993, I wrote a memo to then Secretary Espey outlining what we could do for national service.

00:08:37:10 Because within even just a few days being at the Department, worrying about all that we did with nutrition, all that we did with rural, economic development, all that we did with hunger programs, and learning of our history in the '30s on the Civilian Conservation Corp.

00:08:52:22 USDA in the 1930s ran far more Civilian Conservation Corp slots than any other federal agency through the (unint.) Service and through the Soil Conservation Service which is now the Natural Resources Conservation Service. So I knew there was incredible potential for USDA to run federal programs working on AmeriCorp, and having an inside track with their transition I knew that there was a strong inclination of the administration to allow federal agencies to compete for the right to run part of the AmeriCorp program.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:09:24:22 So on January 28 of 1993, I wrote a memo to Secretary Espy outlining the things that we could do for national service, having an environmental team, having a rural, economic development team and having a hunger and anti-poverty team. And a few weeks later I got back a handwritten note from the Secretary that says, "Great ideas. Let's talk".

00:09:50:07 You know, I've gotten very few things back from him in writing at that time so I went to him on a plane when I was still his Press Secretary. We were traveling somewhere. I'll tell ya, you know, he wanted someone with more agriculture knowledge as his press secretary. I wanted to be doing something else.

00:10:03:18 He liked the work I was doing on reinventing government and other things. But, you know, there were some tough times, I'll admit. So I went to him with this note he had written. I said, "Sir, is this your handwriting?". He goes, "Yes. Why? Are you surprised I like something you did?".

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:10:18:21 And we kind of had a laugh on it and he clearly wanted to go ahead with national service. I wrote testimony for him that he delivered before a senate committee considering the National Community Service Bill which then became the AmeriCorp program. He gave a fervent testimony.

00:10:33:08 He said in the testimony -- this is 1993 before we even had a Bill -- that he wanted USDA to do these few things: the environmental team, the rural development team and the anti-hunger team. And then basically I went about, with the Secretary's support and the support of the White House, creating my own job at USDA which was going to be to head up the USDA National Service Program.

00:10:55:25 There was an interim period there that I was Director of Public Liaison in the Office of Communications and had a lot of dealings with interest groups. But even in that time I had my mind really set on the national service position.

00:11:11:12 Or in the Public Liaison position, it was really

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

interesting. We-- we-- we had a feeling, without sounding political, each-- each side, so to speak, has their-- their priorities and our-- our-- our feeling when we came in with Public Liaison was that there are a lot of environmental groups, nutrition groups and other who we would deem as progressive groups who hadn't had as much interaction as the Department-- as we would like.

00:11:36:16 So I set about to make sure these folks were invited in. And I-- I'm not particularly an animal rights activist myself, but I knew some of these groups had a large following so to one briefing I actually invited in PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals).

00:11:50:08 I thought, "What a great thing. We're opening the Department to these diverse groups". A few days later, someone from the Secretary's Office called me in and really read me the riot act. And this is a very nice person. Never seen them lose their temper.

00:12:02:01 He said, "Gee, you brought in an acknowledged terrorist group. How-- how can you do that? Never invite them in

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

today". So I learned even in that job important lessons.

00:12:11:24 And I think the other important thing I did is I worked on NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and it was kind of my idea to get the President to do a conference call with farmers around the country that was monitored by farm broadcasters that the President did do with then Secretary Espy from the White House, did get media around the country and was a minor, minor, minor little footnote in the important fight to get NAFTA passed.

00:12:38:25 Which also for many of us in this administration was difficult personally because many of our friends from our former life were on the other side. Most of us came from Democratic activists and most Democratic activities didn't like NAFTA. They thought it was a horrible, dangerous thing for the country.

00:12:54:17 Many of us that worked for the President felt otherwise. So that was an interesting time. But even in that, I was really setting the groundwork to create this USDA

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

National Service Program and eventually we applied to the newly created Corporation for National Service and got a grant to run this national service program.

00:13:14:00 But really, before we could even do that, we had to-- I had to raise money within the Department so to speak. Ultimately, the first year of the program we had thirty million dollars of USDA money matched up to only about two and a half million dollars of grant money from the Corporation for National Service that ran the AmeriCorp Program.

00:13:32:01 So I really had to go around to undersecretaries and agency administrators passing the hat, in some ways kind of conning them into thinking I was the President's best friend or the Secretary's best friend. I fervently knew that the President wanted this done, but I also learned how quickly that didn't necessarily matter even to appointees of his own administration.

00:13:52:00 And the key really was Paul Johnson who was then the Administrator of the Soil Conservation Service before it

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

became the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Every other administrator I went to I had to explain what AmeriCorp was. I explained why the President wanted to do it.

00:14:08:16 I had to explain what their agency could do. I met with Paul Johnson. He said, "Oh, AmeriCorp, the National Service Program, here's what our agency can be doing. I wanna spend twenty million dollars on this. When can we start?". It was a really incredible thing.

00:14:21:23 He had actually served in the Peace Corp. I'm not sure if it was in the Kennedy years or shortly afterward and I've certainly found the people who have graduated from the Peace Corp understood immediately what AmeriCorp was, a domestic peace corp. So the fact that Johnson came forward and was so enthusiastic, ultimately we got ten million dollars from NRCS.

00:14:40:10 But it's not one of the bigger agencies of USDA. It's one of the medium size agencies of USDA. It was really helpful that I could go to other agencies in the spirit

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

of kind of internal competition and go to then to the (unint.) Service, "Well, the smaller agency, your competitor in your mission area, is giving ten million dollars. Can you match that?".

00:14:57:23 And we got the (unint.) Service to come up with ten million dollars. And then we got a number of other agencies to pony up money and then we were able to put forward this application. And because most of the money was coming from USDA, not from the scarce Corporation for National Service grant fund, they basically let us run as big a program as we could possible have.

00:15:17:06 And starting in the first year we had about twelve hundred people in the USDA AmeriCorp program. Now to put that in perspective, most AmeriCorp projects were not run by federal agencies. Most were run by non-profit groups.

00:15:33:06 A small amount of the slots in the program, and there are twenty thousand slots in the program, meaning people who would serve mostly full time for about a year of service

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

and then get a college scholarship in exchange, there are twenty thousand of them in the first year of the program and only two thousand of those twenty thousand were set aside for the entire federal government.

00:15:54:04 And USDA had twelve hundred of those two thousand basically because of Mike Espey's fervent support of it, because Paul Johnson came forward with the money and, you know, without taking too much credit, that I was just kind of a bull dog about it and was fairly single-minded and wanted to make it happen.

00:16:12:15 And the other thing is they had a formal launch of the program in the Fall of '94. So not only were we the biggest program and not only were we the biggest federal program, as I said, there were two thousand slots over all, we had twelve hundred. So our program was bigger than every other federal agency combined.

00:16:29:18 But we were bigger than any non-profit program. So for the first year of this landmark program, we were the largest component of AmeriCorp.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:16:36:28 The other thing is we were really pushing hard that on the day of the so-called launch of the program, and we'd be lying if we didn't say there weren't some political considerations (it was two months before the mid-term election of 1994, which ironically the Democrats got killed) but it was thinking there that we wanted to get this launched and get some good publicity before that election.

00:17:01:02 And ironically enough a plane crashed in the White House the day before and that was in the White House grounds and that was the whole press coverage of the event. If they mentioned the launch of AmeriCorp, it was only as a footnote that it-- it-- it-- the plane crash disrupted the ceremonies.

00:17:18:17 And we've had a lot of luck like that, good and bad. But the point was there was a lot of pressure for all AmeriCorp projects to be up and running that day. And to be honest in retrospect, a lot of other programs that were smoke in mirrors, they were paper programs but there

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

weren't people out in the field.

00:17:33:25 So we were really pushing to get people out in the field by the launch. And on the launch of AmeriCorp, I would say the vast majority of people actually serving in the program on the first day it started were part of the USDA AmeriCorp Program. I got a lot of flack from people-- a vast majority of people I was working with were career people.

00:17:52:24 I'd had meetings in let's say March of 1994 and say, "Okay, we want to start this in September". And they would say, "You mean 1995". They'd never heard of launching a thirty million dollar program the legislation had only been in-- in place for a few weeks and here was this punk kid (I was all of 29, never worked in the federal government before) telling them that we were gonna launch this brand new program in the fall of a few months later.

00:18:22:04 And the most important thing I-- I-- I learned is that you have to separate quickly the people who are gonna

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

tell you something's not gonna work just because they say nothing's gonna work and the people who are gonna say, "This isn't gonna work but here's another way it will work".

00:18:35:05 So the best example is, you know, I was focused on the media, I was focused on the vision of it, the philosophy, bringing together diverse people from all backgrounds. But career people are going to me, "Ah, where's your manual? Where's your operations manual?".

00:18:48:27 I say, "Oh, we don't need that. We have the philosophy". They say, "Well, how you gonna pay 'em?". "Oh, we'll take care of that." "No, who's gonna have the accounting codes, who's gonna make sure the National Finance Center issues their-- their-- their paycheck? How are you gonna ship their uniforms? How's their liability insurance gonna be covered? How are you gonna handle employee complaints?"

00:19:08:05 And at first I was totally bristling against that. "This is ridiculous. These are blockheaded bureaucrats trying

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

to stop this." And the most important thing I've learned of everything in my eight years in government is that people like that who are sincerely trying to help you to figure out how to make this stuff work are absolutely vital.

00:19:27:21 We could have gotten through this program without all my vision and philosophy, but if the people in the program didn't get the paycheck, it would have been a total failure.

00:19:35:07 So people like Ron Demunbrum (ph.) in the Office of Communications, a guy when I started who I thought I would have nothing in common with, I have no idea to this day what his party affiliation is, but I do know other politicals I came and dumped em in a basement or in a small cubby hole somewhere cause they thought he was a Republican.

00:19:51:11 He had different views on a lot of cultural issues than I would have, but we've become really good friends and he did an incredible job and he's one of the unsung heroes

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

of creating this incredible program. So someone people thought was this horrible, you know, conservative who shouldn't serve with the administration, ended up serving Bill Clinton better than the vast majority of his political appointees.

00:20:10:19 There were other people like DD Fiori (ph.) in Natural Resources Conservation Service and Dave White who put together the operations manual, people like David Gibson with Rural Development, Beverly Pitts-- Pritz with FSA. So just for, you know, historical record, I got a credit for it.

00:20:28:16 I was fortunate and yes, I worked hard. I worked seven day weeks, you know, nights for many of the years AmeriCorp was being created, but there were all these career employees who-- who when motivated properly were in the office with me at midnight or 1:00 a.m. the day before we had to file our application to get this done.

00:20:46:09 So it really did show-- I'm going on a filibuster about the government could work. The career people and

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

political people could come together. People understood it made sense, it combined a liberal notion of expanding access to higher education and solving social services with a conservative notice, that we really ought to make sure people work and no more "something for nothing", that we ought to reward work with a college scholarship like my father was able to go to college on the GI Bill after serving in World War II.

00:21:16:23

So it was a-- You can tell I'm excited about it. I still am. And when we lost the program, it was almost like I not lost the overall AmeriCorp Program, but lost USDA's (unint.) into the program. We were kind of a sacrificial lamb for-- to keep the overall program going in the political debate, but it was almost like I'd lost a member of my family.

00:21:35:29

I wouldn't say I went into depression, but I was very saddened by it. I thought it was a triumph of politics over common sense. But in the long run, I'm thrilled the overall program continues. Just two really quick stories.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:21:49:02 It was an incredible opportunity to go into rural parts of the country that as someone who grew up in the suburbs of New York City, went to school in New York City, I really didn't understand still existed the poverty and isolation in much of rural America. I thought, "Well, that was eliminated in the great society".

00:22:07:04 So to go to Appalachia, to go to the Navajo Reservation in the southwest, to go to (unint.) Mexican American developments on the border, to go to the Mississippi Delta, place that there still wasn't running water everywhere, the people still had to go to the bathroom in ditches outside, to see veterans who are living in shacks with instead of roofs plastic over their roofs with holes coming through it really was eye-opening.

00:22:33:12 And the fact that through AmeriCorp we were able to get people running water, help repair their roofs. I can't imagine there are many things in my life that are gonna be more rewarding than that. And I really made it my business to go out and visit these projects.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:22:46:18 We had a few hundred projects around the country. I said twelve hundred people in the first year of program. I probably personally met with at least eleven hundred of the twelve hundred people. Out of over three hundred project sites, I probably personally visited at least two hundred and eighty of them.

00:23:03:23 So I spent two-thirds, three-quarters of my time on the road and I'd always, if nothing more than symbolic purposes, go out and do work with them. So I'd-- I'd-- I'd-- I'd go out, I'd, you know, my bad carpentry, help hammer the house, I'd go deliver, you know, food to a-- a-- a-- a food pantry, work in a community garden.

00:23:21:13 I will tell you the most backbreaking work in my life was helping build a trail on a national forest. Digging through dirt and rocks at a few thousand feet altitude where the air's a little thinner, I really respected the people who did that work for seventeen hundred hours, about ten months out of the year. That was hard work, but it was a great experience.

**ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW**

00:23:43:10 Q: That's a terrific summary of that part of your career. But you moved on into what's called the Food Security area, another critical area of interest to the Department. Tell us a bit about that.

00:23:55:23 A: Well, I was always interested in the hunger issue and even in AmeriCorp one of the components of it we had was AmeriCorp-- was anti-hunger and nutrition work even within the AmeriCorp Program. So Danny Glickman became Secretary in the last year we had the AmeriCorp Program and he made it known that he was very interested personally in this whole issue of gleaning.

00:24:21:05 He had been a congressman from Wichita, Kansas, and everyone has the stereotype that Wichita, Kansas is all wheat and Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz. And I actually lived in Wichita for a few months in 1992. It's not. It's a fairly major city and it's one of the aviation capitals of America.

00:24:36:18 In any case, when Glickman was congressman from Kansas,

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

he noticed that the Boeing Plant, one of the huge Boeing Airline Plants in-- airplane plants in Wichita through out all this excess food. So he and his wife Rhoda approached the leadership of Boeing, which of course he knew as a congressman from there.

00:24:52:12 Said, "Can you set up a program to donate this instead of dumping this?". And they got this done. So then when he became secretary of Agriculture, he thought to himself, "Hey, I'm the food guy. You know, I'm in charge of the nation's food. I can do something about this".

00:25:06:16 So he expressed interest. He went to the various mission areas. But, you know, the bureaucracy is really great at carrying out the tasks that have been clearly defined by it by congress and by the leadership and by the government administrative mechanisms.

00:25:25:21 But our bureaucracy, and I think the rest of the federal government, still ain't that hot at doing something new and doing something that crosses traditional agency lines. And, frankly, even some of the people involved in

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

the feeding programs here weren't that crazy about this gleaning idea of the Secretary.

00:25:40:23 They thought it was flaky. They thought it wasn't an important thing like food stamps. But, you know, they kind of (unint.) through the motions. I, on the other hand, number one, being an ambitious sort who never, you know, thinks it's a bad idea to do what the boss wants, knew that the Secretary wanted this done and I'd find a way to do even though it wasn't necessarily my job at the time.

00:26:00:27 Two, we were kind of closing out the AmeriCorp Program and through good management and Ron Demunbrum, who I mentioned before, helped us save over a half of million dollars out of the grant funds. Everyone spends more than they get or uses their year-end money to buy computers they don't need here sometimes or buy fancy, new whatever that show up sometime.

00:26:21:00 I'm not saying it's always unnecessary. But somehow bureaucracy spends its money. We found a different way

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

and had leftover money, some of which we gave back to the American people, but some of which we spent on what we called the "summer of gleaning".

00:26:33:12 So we used AmeriCorp members in a special summer program to start gleaning. And we proved the thing works. So after AmeriCorp ended, I went to the Secretary and said, "You know, you love the stuff. How can we continue what we are doing with gleaning without necessarily having the AmeriCorp Program to carry it out?".

00:26:51:03 And he said, "Great. Let's do it". He gave me a position called Coordinator of Food Recovery and Gleaning. In 1997 we had a national summit on food recovery and gleaning. It was keynoted by Vice President Gore. The Secretary spoke (unint.). It was the first national meeting ever really purporting this issue.

00:27:09:28 And we also released a report indicating that 96 billion pounds of food or about 27% of the food that's produced for human consumption in this country is actually thrown out. Not all of it-- not all of it's edible. Some of

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

it's (unint.), some of it's peel, some of it's, you know, out-of-date, but a lot of that's edible.

00:27:28:05 So we really-- I'm not saying the Secretary or myself created this movement. In fairness, it had been going on for decades. There have been people working in the trenches, in non-profit groups for decades and decades. But we really did raise the national attention to it.

00:27:42:10 And through gleaning and food recovery we learned two things. Number one we learned that the federal government really could have a new way of governing in partnership with non-profit groups. Clinton always talks about this third way, neither the extreme left or the extreme right. I think AmeriCorp was the embodiment of that.

00:28:00:03 And Gleaning and Food Recovery and Community Food Security are in the embodiment of that. It wasn't just about throwing the problem to non-profit groups cause there was a lot we could do as the federal government to help them. To hook farmers up, for instance. We know

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

farmers and I learned about farmers.

00:28:13:17 Joked I had never been on a farm when I started. Well, I've been on a lot of farms now. Even driven a combine. God bless the person who had me do it. And the combine still works. But the point is, we can hook farmers up with food banks so we've done that.

00:28:26:11 So it's not creating a brand new federal grant program where we spend billions of dollars, but it's also not just throwing the problem on non-profit groups. It's the federal government creating a partnership. So we learned through gleaning and food recovery partnerships really could work.

00:28:41:07 And on gleaning and food recovery we facilitated the donations of hundreds of millions of excess pounds of food for virtually no new federal spending other than my salary and I'd probably be working here on something else anyway. And directly we donated over thirteen million pounds of food that just would have gone thrown out or been plowed under.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:29:01:08 But the other thing we learned with food recovery and gleaning was that it wasn't just enough to get people excess food. It wasn't breaking the cycle of poverty. It wasn't helping people move to self-sufficiency. It wasn't really connecting the hungry with the problems of the farm economy and how small farmers are really being driven out of business.

00:29:20:21 So there was an-- already a flourishing movement around the country called "community food security" that was based on hunger, but it was really based on this broader idea of food systems, reconnecting farmers with the people who eat food. And I and others convinced the Secretary on the Small Farms Commission-- the Secretary had suggested to the Secretary that he focus more on these issues.

00:29:42:14 So he agreed to create the Community Food Security Initiative which I headed up. So I've been pretty lucky. Three jobs in a row. I essentially created my own jobs and convinced the secretaries at the time to let me do it.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

and got a fair amount of support from within the Department to do it.

00:29:58:01 I'm not saying there was never a turf, and there wasn't backbiting or people worried that I was infringing on what they were doing, the secretary was going down a blind alley. But by and large, it was successful and that's why I'm the longest lasting political appointee.

00:30:10:15 Most political appointees honestly, at least at this Department, did not have -- I wouldn't say most -- a good deal did not have job satisfaction cause they didn't necessarily feel they were in the right place doing the right thing based on their skills, really advancing an agenda.

00:30:27:09 Sometimes they felt they were, you know, pushing paper or just moving back and forth on issues that never were resolved year after year after year. We had the same problem. I, however, always felt I was the luckiest person on the planet. I had jobs I loved. I got to help real people.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:30:41:06 I got to travel and see people who were helped by what we were doing and everyday I was busy. You know, I worked my tail off but everyday I was busy with something more to do. And really the Community Food Security Initiative is a capstone. It brought all those things together.

00:30:55:25 President Clinton just the other day went to the Capital Area Community Food Bank and talked about the Community Food Security Initiative. I helped, my small role, set that up. Two years in a row he went to D.C. Central Kitchen. President Clinton did to talk about these issues. A great program that combines job training with food recovery.

00:31:12:17 Secretary Glickman has done dozens and dozens and dozens of events related to this. And my really hope now is this can continue no matter what happens in the transition. For those of you who may be watching this in the future, this is the oddest time on the planet to be a political appointee if you're Democrat with hopes to have some position in the new administration knowing that, you

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

know, if the Democrats don't prevail, you lose your job and the country's going someplace that you may have a different view of.

00:31:40:05 And you may find this hard to believe but when we're recording this, the election was a few weeks ago and we still don't know for certain who the President of the United States is. So it's a little frustrating. I had all these great plans for what we would do in a transition.

00:31:53:21 And I wasn't assuming my side was gonna win. Many times I thought we were gonna lose. So I have four scenarios in my mind: what to do if Bush became President and there was a Republican Congress; what to do if Bush became President and there was a Democratic Congress; what to do if Gore became President and there was a Republican Congress; and what to do if Gore became President and there was a Democratic Congress.

00:32:13:12 I did not have a scenario of what to do in the transition if there was no President for certain a few weeks into

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

this. Which is very frustrating cause part of my (unint.) frankly was to figure out how to get a career person to take over my job. And I know a lot of politicals create the system where they get to somehow become career civil servants who take over the job that they used to have.

00:32:34:13 I've always said that was wrong. I said it was wrong eight years ago when our predecessors were doing it. I'm saying it wrong today when I, if I really wanted to, could create a pretty good high paying job for myself. I still think it's wrong.

00:32:44:28 If the other side wins, they have the right under the Constitution to run the executive branch. But I was hoping that we could get someone who both sides could agree on, could be a good, solid career civil servant who could continue this work.

00:32:57:15 And right now I get a few dozen e-mails a week from grass roots food pantries, food banks, nutrition organizations saying, "Gee, I wanna get food. I wanna donate food.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

I'm concerned about food safety issues. Who can I go to?
How can I get help".

00:33:11:24 And my only real concern now is that not continue. So
I'm gonna work very hard with whoever wins whenever they
do start the transition to see that that continues here.
Although I'll say, no matter what happens at USDA, we
have planted seeds across the country on all these
issues.

00:33:28:18 We've handed out over twenty thousand citizens guides to
food recovery that helped grass roots groups understand
how to donate excess food. The President signed into law
a bill passed by congress. If you want to talk about,
you know, a lot of people are gonna talk about conflict
with congress and goodness knows we've had our share with
that.

00:33:44:12 You know, our appropriations committees have not liked
what we were doing with community food security because
they thought, in my mind, very erroneously that we're
creating the new initiative. So we've had our problems.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:33:53:18 A new office when we weren't in a new bureaucracy. So we've had our problems with congress. But if you want a good example of when this system works, is congress passed, and the President signed into law, the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act in 1996 that allows people to donate excess food to the hungry and not get sued and not get thrown in jail if goodness-- for bad-- due to no fault of their own someone gets sick down the road.

00:34:16:23 So that's a good thing. That's on the books. We have USDA employees around the country now who are gonna be with the Department, many of them for decades more that are more attuned to the issue of hungry, even if they're not working on our hunger programs.

00:34:28:17 We have grass roots groups who we've helped provide this new vision. So I'm personally very comfortable and whatever that I do next that we really have set a new path forward and ironically what we are doing is something that both presidential candidates in their campaigns said they supported.

ORAL HISTORY
CONVERSATION WITH JOEL BERG
COORDINATOR FOR FOOD SECURITY
LARRY QUINN INTERVIEW

00:34:48:02 Both said they wanted to help faith-based organizations.
We're doing that with the Community Food Security Initiative. Both have said they want to help non-profit groups. We're doing that. So I am hopeful this work will continue at the Department.

00:35:00:00 But if-- even if it doesn't, I think we've really helped create a new momentum for a new way of tackling these issues around the country.

00:35:08:21 Q: Thank you Joel Berg, Coordinator of Food Security for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I'm Larry Quinn with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Communications in Washington.

END OF INTERVIEW