

Beginnings

Rabkin: This is June 9, 2008, and I'm at McHenry Library at UCSC. This is Sarah Rabkin, and I am interviewing Jim Leap. Jim, I'd like to start with some background about you. What can you tell me about your family's history in California? I know that your family goes back a few generations.

Leap: Yes. I'm a product of the Gold Rush, [of] mostly English descent. Many of my relatives came to California in the 1850s, some even earlier.

Rabkin: Were they coming from the United States or from Europe?

Leap: Mostly from the United States to California in the early to mid-1800s. Some came after the Civil War from the South—that was on my father's side. Some came out from the East Coast.. My great-great-grandfather was a tin miner in Cornwall, England. When the Placer mines started to run out in the later part of the Gold Rush, they needed people that had experience shoring up mines, so that's how he ended up in California.

Oh, there're a million stories. My other great-great-grandfather, and his business partner, who was a sea captain, settled a little town that is actually named after him, Bird's Landing, in the Delta, near Fairfield.

Rabkin: Bird was his last name?

Leap: Bird was his last name, yes.

Rabkin: And at what point did your family start farming in this area?

Leap: Well, it actually skipped my generation. [laughs] The miner had a son, who became a blacksmith, who started making plows in the Stockton area and started farming wheat in the Stockton area. My great-great grandfather Bird became a wheat farmer and was actually one of the first people to use the Combine Harvester in that area. The harvester was developed specifically for California, and was built in California. It was one of the first harvesters used [for] mechanized harvest of wheat. And then one of his sons (my great grandfather) purchased land in Winters and grew apricots. He had a large farm and drying yards for the cots, but he lost that all in the Depression.

My father's side of the family weren't directly involved in agriculture. So it skipped a couple of generations.

Rabkin: When and where were you born?

Leap: I was born in Fresno, California, February 8, 1955.

Leap's Father and the United Farm Workers

Rabkin: I understand that your father was active with the United Farm Workers in Delano, [California]. I'm wondering what influence, if any, that may have had on your own path.

Leap: Oh, one hundred percent, direct connection, absolutely.

Rabkin: Tell me more.

Leap: Okay. There're so many great stories. [laughs] My father's brother started an insurance company in Merced in the fifties, and it was very successful. My father worked for him for a while, and then decided he needed to do his own thing. So he moved to Fresno, and started an independent insurance business there. But he was very progressive, and he witnessed a lot of racism when he was growing up in Merced. He became very aware of the way that people were treated differently, based on their skin color. So he basically became a political activist. And as an independent insurance agent, he was approached by the UFW when that organization really started to gather steam. It would have been in the mid-sixties, to the best of my knowledge. The UFW was gaining assets, and they had buildings and vehicles, and they were building infrastructure, and they couldn't find anybody in the Delano area to cover their insurance. Nobody would touch them with a ten-foot pole. It was part of the political movement against them, really. The insurance business is pretty conservative.

So the UFW approached my father, and he said, sure, he would do it. Why not? He could tell the story a lot better than I could, but he ended up writing policies for them and representing them. He became the insurance agent for the UFW, and he was down there on a weekly basis a couple of days a week. At any rate, the companies that he worked with

eventually dropped him. A long story short, he ended up losing his business.

It was an interesting political time. Now we're into the—I'm guessing mid-seventies, and Jerry Brown just became governor. Jerry Brown and a couple of progressive thinkers started the California Conservation Corps, and the California Conservation Corps picked up a bunch of ex-UFW people. So my dad got a job with the California Conservation Corps as a center director. He did that for a number of years and then eventually retired.

Rabkin: So he wasn't doing insurance for them; he was doing administration for the Conservation Corps.

Leap: Yes, he was a center director. He moved all over the state, filling in for center directors that were in transition. So he stopped with the UFW at that point.

Rabkin: And you were still at home at that point when he was working for the Conservation Corps?

Leap: No.

Rabkin: You were already out. So you weren't doing this moving around.

Leap: No, but while he was still working with the UFW and still had his office in Fresno, I was in high school. That would have been in the very early seventies. He was instrumental in the formation of a very strong progressive political movement

in Fresno County. He ran for State Assembly, and he was the county director for the McGovern campaign, and the Bobby Kennedy campaign before that. He had helped build a very strong, a very progressive political organization. His whole platform was: "Support the UFW. Support the Farm Workers Union." And his whole other platform was: "Let's do alternative transportation. Let's build light rails." He was so far ahead of his time.

Through those connections and relationships, he hooked up with George Ballis, who was very active in the movement to hold the reclamation law to the letter of the law, the 1902 Reclamation Act that specified 160-acre limitations in the Westlands water district for farm land irrigated by the federally funded irrigation projects. George Ballis was involved with another organization called the Westside Planning Group that my father was involved in, too. And it was actually through that connection that I was introduced to the notion of farming— [laughs] There're so many connections. It would be fun to get the oral histories from the people who were directly involved. I think George Ballis is actually still alive.

I don't even know quite how to piece it all together. Because of my father's involvement with the UFW, I was exposed to a lot of different people and political concepts related to land reform and labor issues. We went to Teatro Campesino plays,¹

¹ "Teatro Campesino "farm workers" (*campesino*) theater"), is a theatrical troupe founded in 1965 as the cultural arm of the United Farm Workers. The

and we stood in picket lines and boycotted grapes, and I got exposed to the whole UFW scene, and got to know some of the activists and some of the organizers. I became very good friends with one of the organizers. At that time, they were paying—probably still to this day, they paid a union organizer five dollars a week. He needed to make money in the summer. So of course, he grew up as a farm worker, as a migrant farm worker with his family. That was Bobby de la Cruz, who's now a labor organizer in the L.A. area. His mother was Jessie de la Cruz, who, in terms of the hierarchy of the union, was right up there with Dolores Huerta.² She was, and still is, really well respected, an amazing woman.

Anyway, I became friends with them, and I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with them (Bobby and his family). So Bobby said to me one day, "I've got to make some money, man. I'm going to pick grapes this summer." I picked grapes with him. It was a total eye-opener for me. We were union grape pickers, but man, I had no idea what field work was like. I was, what, eighteen years old. When I became aware of the conditions in the field I realized that something is

original actors were all farm workers, and El Teatro Campesino enacted events inspired by the lives of their audience. Early performances were on flat bed trucks in the middle of the fields in Delano, California. The founder and initial director of the troupe was Luis Valdez, a Chicano from a migrant farm worker family, who attended San Jose State University, worked briefly with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and returned to Delano to found the troupe. Valdez later gained fame for his play *Zoot Suit*, which was produced on Broadway, and for directing the Ritchie Valens biopic *La Bamba*.²

² Jessie de la Cruz was one of the founders of the United Farm Workers [UFW] and one of its first women organizers.

really wrong. We were picking piece rate. It was 110 degrees in August, four people on a team, and you get paid by the ton. So you work as fast as you can possibly work. It's beyond the kind of stamina that would be required to be a pro athlete. And the heat and the dust and the spiders. It's backbreaking, and just hustle, hustle, hustle, day in and day out. I was so blown away by the whole thing.

So, the story goes on. As I mentioned earlier, my father had been involved with an organization called the Westside planning group. At the time a guy by the name of Sal Gonzales was the director of that organization. George Ballis was involved with that organization as well. They got this idea, a lot like the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Organization [ALBA].³ They thought, "Why don't we start a program that teaches farm workers how to farm, to empower farm workers to farm?"

So Bobby de la Cruz, my friend, and his family signed up. They said, "Yes, let's do it." This organization hired an agronomist and a couple of master's students from Fresno State, and they helped these families rent land, gave them all the tools and the skills and the experience to grow their own crops. And these guys, the de la Cruz family, rented, I can't remember if it was ten or twenty acres, planted cherry

³ "The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) provides educational and business opportunities for farm workers and aspiring farmers to grow and sell crops grown on two organic farms in Monterey County, California." See <http://www.albfarmers.org/> Also see the oral histories with Jose Montenegro and Rebecca Thistlewaite in this series.

tomatoes, which was a specialty crop that was relatively unheard of at that time. It was one of those unique things. They made enough money that first year to buy the land they were renting.

This was when I was in high school and I was trying to figure out what to do with my life. Where am I going to go? My father and I put everything we had into getting [George] McGovern elected for president. My dad was the county director of the campaign. We actually won in the city of Fresno, but I was so disheartened by that whole thing.

At that time I was also involved with some friends who were involved in the anti-nukes movement, and I became disheartened with that, too. I started thinking direct action is the way to go. It hit me one evening. I was in a meeting with the "no nukes" crowd, and they were planning a direct action. Some of the more radical activists were going to jump over the fence and get arrested at Diablo Canyon. I didn't want to get arrested but I wanted to support them. So I was there at the protest as a support person.

Farming on a Commune in Fresno, California

But then I thought in this meeting: this all makes sense, but what even makes more sense is just turn the lights off, you know, cut the power, and make an individual stand. So then I started thinking about the farm workers. My dad was telling me about all that was happening with my friends who were doing really well in this agricultural training program. Based

on what I'd seen on the picket lines, I thought, wow, if I really want to make a difference, if I really want to be an activist, the best thing I could do would be to find some land, plant some crops, treat people with respect and basically set an example of a viable option. What I eventually ended up doing on my little four-acre farm, was doing all of the work myself, and selling crops direct and local. All of that stuff kind of came together, and through that series of steps that I just mentioned, that's what I ended up doing for a number of years. .

Rabkin: So you graduated from high school in '73.

Leap: Yes.

Rabkin: Was that a public high school in Fresno?

Leap: Fresno High.

Rabkin: Did you go from there to finding land and beginning to farm?

Leap: I met some very interesting people that were also volunteering a lot of time in the McGovern campaign, and they were starting a commune. [laughs] This is where it all gets really crazy. They were going to be back-to-the-landers. They said, "Come on. Join us. This is going to be really great. We're going to buy land and grow our own food." I got really enthralled in that, and was involved with that for several years. That was at the exact same time that the de la Cruz family was doing their cherry tomato farm project. So we thought, "Okay, we're here in town. We've got a house. We're

saving money to buy land. Let's rent some land here in town and grow some crops, and see what it's like, and you know, kind of get our feet wet."

So we rented ten acres, bought a tractor. We had money, because we were all working. There were actually six of us. We rented some ground from a farm advisor, Don May. So he gave us a little bit of guidance. We also worked a lot with Pedro Ilich. Pedro was a small farm farm advisor in Fresno County at that time. Our farm cooperative grew ten acres of sweet red onions, and I loved everything about it. The commune kind of fell apart, and in the settlement (we had all of these assets), I said, "Hey, just give me the tractor and the cultivators and the truck." So I went off on my own.

Learning about Small Farming in Fresno, California in the 1970s

Rabkin: What did you love about it?

Leap: I loved everything about it. It requires every skill set you could possibly imagine. You have to know about so many things [laughs] and timing is so critical on everything. I loved the whole thing—loved the pumps and the irrigation and the tractors and the cultivators and the growing of the crop and the planting of the crop. My dad, years ago, did some backyard gardening for me and my brother, just to show us how to do it, and I kind of kept up with that and always had a little garden, or some plants growing.

And then through the sweet red onion project, I met a local grower, Yoshimoto Kamine. Yosh's dad, Moto Kamine, along with Yosh, ran a very diversified vegetable operation, not organic, conventional. I got to be friends with Yosh. He was about my age. Moto Kamine was one of those [Japanese Americans who] was sent away to the intern[ment] camps. He was working his way back up the ladder and had this really diverse farm.

I approached Yosh—Yoshi, and I said, "Hey, let me just work with you for a year." (This would have been about 1976.) I said, "Let me just work with you for one season, twelve months, but I want to do everything. I want to pick, pack, irrigate, drive the tractor, do deliveries. I want to be exposed to everything. Just pay me what you pay your workers." So that was pretty incredible; he let me do that.

He also had a welding shop, and they were building farm implements. I learned how to weld. I learned how to drive tractors. I learned how to irrigate. I did deliveries. I learned how to tie down loads. I learned all this stuff, a lot of it from the farm workers themselves. He had a solid crew of guys that worked with him year round. I spent a lot of time with them, and they had a lot of fun teaching me Spanish. I had already had six years of Spanish in school, but I really got my conversational Spanish down and learned a lot of amazing stuff.

Rabkin: So most of the farm workers on this farm were Spanish-speaking?

Leap: All of them, Yes, every one of them. And illegal. I witnessed their constant struggle with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the INS. The INS was very active at that time and there were a lot of political games being played. I witnessed so much. It's fascinating. The Kamine's were contracting with a grower/shipper. On one large field of red onions they hired a labor contractor for the harvest operation. When it came time to pay the field workers, the contractor called the INS, and many of the field workers got picked up. I saw stuff, too, where in the fall, if some of the field workers were ready to go back to Mexico, and the INS came, they'd say, "Take me home." The ones that wanted to stay and do a little more work, they'd run off into the vines and come back two hours later.

I witnessed so much, I was even more convinced that I wanted to have my own farm. My in-laws had a little piece of ground out in the country. I had the equipment from the commune. My partner at that time, who was in the commune with me, her parents had this piece of property. I was working for the Kameni's, and then that evolved into another job. I ended up taking a manager position with a large fresh market onion grower/shipper. After I was done with my one year with Kameni's, I went to work with the grower/shipper for three years to get even more experience. During this time, knowing that I was going to eventually start my own farm, I started to acquire used farm equipment from farm auctions.

So anyway, my wife and I had this little quarter acre that we planted out. This would have been about 1978. That was

around the time that Wilson Riles, who was superintendent of schools, and Jerry Brown got together and said, "Let's create a way for schools to have access to fresh produce." That evolved into the establishment of the California Certified Farmers' Markets. 1977 was the first year that farmers' markets were actually allowed in California. So I was growing this produce on this quarter acre, at a time when there was not a "Certified" farmers market anywhere in the Fresno Area. At that time there was very little easily accessible information about growing practices, especially organic growing practices. Of course, there was no organic certification then either.

Rabkin: Were you trying to grow organic?

Leap: I was doing my best. But it was really hard, because there just wasn't any information. All the information I had was [about] conventional. So I was trying to do the best I could do. Fortunately, I had a neighbor who was starting out at the same time I was, who rented ground right in my neighborhood at the same time I did, Tom and Denesse Willey of T&D Willey Farms. Tom hooked up with an African-American farmer in our neighborhood, Mr. Po [?] who had come out from the South and had a little plot of land and was growing mostly beans and greens and potatoes. Tom got a lot of great crop culture information from Mr. Po, and then Tom would share it with me.

I had another mentor, a gentleman named Ben Franklin, who was an African American grower out on Jensen Avenue. I met him through the onion deal, because he was growing onions,

too. He was just the sweetest, nicest guy. But he was conventional. He wasn't organic. He shared with me everything he knew. At that time, in those days, information amongst growers was held very tight, because the markets were so competitive. For example, with the sweet onion deal, everybody had their secrets. Everybody had a different way of doing things. Ben Franklin literally took me under his wing and told me that any time I had a question, any time I needed to borrow an implement or anything, he was there for me. He opened his doors completely to me.

Rabkin: What kept him from feeling that anxiety around competition that all of these other onion growers were feeling?

Leap: I wish I knew. He was a sweet, sweet guy. I think he thought, "Here's a young guy who's really trying hard, and I can help him out." His neighbor across the street was a good vegetable grower, and Ben Franklin's trick was, to get information from this guy, he would go over there with a bottle of whiskey in the evening, get the guy loosened up a little bit and then ask him questions. [laughs] There was a whole little community. I wish somehow someone had collected more information at the time and documented some of this stuff. It was pretty incredible.

But anyway, back to the story. I had the little quarter-acre patch. We were doing some direct marketing. It was so powerful to grow stuff, load it in a truck, take it to the farmers' market, and then end up with cash in your pocket. It was really, really powerful. It was so real. I can't think of a more

real way to earn a living if you're going to be a player in this economic game. I just can't think of any other way to do it that would be more direct or honest.

Rabkin: How had your commune folks generated income from their farming operation?

Leap: Oh, we were all working day jobs and saving money and pooling money. Then we did this farm thing on the side. I was certainly the most engaged, of all of us, in the field.

Rabkin: How did you market what you grew?

Leap: Wholesale. We grew ten acres of sweet red onions. So we wholesaled. That's how I made all of those connections with the onion brokers and other farmers. We sold all our cull onions at the flea market. [laughs] And one of the commune members worked in a grocery store, so we started some grocery store sales, too. That's how people did it then. Now it's all really different. It's all changed dramatically. In those days, there were produce stands. You could sell direct to grocery stores. There were no "certified" farmers' markets.

I ended up working for KorMal [?] Company, which was the grower/shipper I mentioned earlier. I worked for Komini for a year. I was actually managing fields for Kamini that were contract fields with KorMal Company,. They offered me a job, and I thought, "Okay, I'll do that," but I made it really clear that I was going to start my own farm eventually, and that I didn't want to make any really big commitments. I worked for them for three years and was a field manager. We had

hundreds of acres of onions, and we did cherry tomatoes, winter squash, lots of eggplant. So I learned the whole eggplant thing, again, conventionally.

So in all of this time, I'm getting really familiar with farming systems, the whole network, how things work together. I had my own little quarter-acre project. Then in 1979, I started looking for my own land to rent. I learned how to weld, because Yosh and Moto Komini had a welding shop, and KorMalCompany had a welding shop, and they were building onion graders. So in the wintertime, I helped weld onion graders and do repairs. I was learning mechanics and all of those critical skills.

Also, I figured out the whole auction scene. So I was buying farm equipment, because I knew what I had and what I wanted to piece together. So I was buying all the implements and necessary tools. I had an interesting relationship with KorMal Company, because they would lease my equipment from me for use in their systems. So I developed a whole system. I had a tractor and cultivators and various tools, and then they would lease it from me, and they also leased my truck from me. It was a good relationship that worked really well for all of us. I gave them plenty of lead time so they started setting up their own system.

Becoming a Small Organic Farmer in Fresno, California

So when I was ready to leave, I stepped on to my own piece of ground that I rented. I rented this beautiful little four-acre

piece out east of Fresno on Locan Avenue in '79. It was a pasture, which actually worked out to my advantage, because it was so vibrant and healthy. It was heavy ground.

I stopped working for KorMal Company at the end of 1979 and started my own farm in earnest in 1980. I was at the Germain Seed Company on Jensen Avenue, buying seed. I'm starting my own farm, and it's in the springtime, and I see this little flyer for this "certified" farmers' market starting in Fresno. So I picked it up and I called the guy. It was Richard Erganian who started the Vineyard Farmers Market on the corner of Blackstone and Shaw. I thought, Oh, that's pretty cool. I called him. It was his first year, and told him what I wanted to do and he supported me one hundred percent. He had had a couple of growers. In fact, Benny Fouché was one of them who became a small farm farm advisor and just recently retired from UCCE [University of California Cooperative Extension].

So we started this little farmers' market in this little parking lot on the corner of Shaw and Blackstone in Fresno. I built my clientele. I planned my farm carefully. Because the farmers' market venture was total uncertainty, I divided my farm in half. I was going to do half wholesale and half farmers' market. I was very familiar with eggplant production, and I was pretty familiar with bell pepper production, and I knew all of these other crops, like onions, and I was familiar with the mix of crops from my own little quarter-acre project. I knew how to grow squash and tomatoes and many of the warm season crops. So I did close to an acre of eggplant, and a half-

acre of bell peppers, and then a whole variety of crops for direct sales. And it was one of those one in ten years where eggplant prices were just crazy. So I made a bunch of money on eggplant, and I was selling it to the broker who I had worked with. It was kind of—I felt guilty, you know? I could make \$300 a day just picking and packing eggplant by myself. And \$300 a day might not sound like a lot of money, but at the time, I was renting my ground for \$100 an acre for a year, and I was renting my house for \$100 a month on ten acres. So my overhead was not real high.

So I made good money and I put that right back into implements and equipment, and built a greenhouse. That got me off to a solid start. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't had that little break. That got me through the winter. I still had to do odd jobs to make ends meet. I pruned grapes in the winter. I drove a forklift for another grower that I knew. I had to make up all these little odd jobs. I worked construction. I did just about everything. But the farm went really well. My clientele was picking up at the farmers' market. So I had a number of really fun and interesting years there.

Then I ended up renting a house across the street from my little four-acre piece that was on ten acres of bare ground with no irrigation. I planted oat hay on that ground, and became an instant oat hay grower, which was a fantastic lesson. I'll never do that again. [laughs]

Rabkin: Why?

Leap: There's no money in oat hay. You have to have a thousand acres to make it work. But it was fun and very educational. I was really having fun with this whole farming thing.

Rabkin: Did you have people working for you?

Leap: I hired people from time to time, and it never worked out very well. I was so efficient and so fast at harvesting, I could grade in the field. Anybody I'd ever hired—they'd make more money than I would make. When the farmers' market really got big, I had to have help at the market handling the cash and keeping the produce stocked. In the summer months, the farmers market was a madhouse for the first three hours on Saturday morning. So I did hire people to help me with that, but for the field stuff—I was kind of unique in that way. I did all of the field work myself. I had a bunch of systems down, and I was really efficient at it. I had all the implements and equipment that I needed. It was all mechanized, and I'd plant to moisture. So it was very efficient. My irrigation systems were really efficient. I had it kind of dialed in so to speak.

Rabkin: Were you partnered or married at the time?

Leap: Married, yes.

Rabkin: Did your wife work with you on the farm?

Leap: She worked a little bit with me. She helped out when I needed help. She would plant transplants on the transplanter

while I drove the tractor. We had a greenhouse and a nursery, and her thing was cut flowers. So she would do the cut flowers and bouquets and dry arrangements. I'd grow the garlic. She'd braid the dried flowers into the garlic, and we'd sell wreaths.

Rabkin: And those got sold at the farmers' market as well?

Leap: We sold them at the farmers' market.

Rabkin: Were you farming organically at this point?

Leap: I was not organic at that point, no, but I was using, for the most part, organic practices. All my customers at the farmers' market knew me and trusted me, and I couldn't see going to the trouble, going through the certification. It would have been different if I was a little larger scale, or growing wholesale. But that was in the early days of organic, and in Fresno at that time there was not a lot of awareness about organic. In fact, when we did our first little quarter-acre patch, it was organic, and I called it organic, and people kind of steered away from us at the farmers' market, like, "Who are those weirdos?" [laughs]

Rabkin: It was actually a scary label.

Leap: It was in the early days. People didn't know enough about it. And the people that did know about it would hang crystals over our produce and see which way the pendulum swung.

Rabkin: [laughter]

Leap: There was so much abuse in the organic deal at that time. People that I knew who were growing produce, or had access to produce, would just buy stuff, load up a truck, go to the farmers' markets in the Bay Area and call it "organic." The rumor on the streets then was, "Oh, if you just stick an 'organic' sign on it and take it to the Bay Area, you'll sell it out like crazy."

Rabkin: So you actually saw people buying conventional produce wholesale, taking it to farmers' markets and labeling it "organic."

Leap: I didn't actually see it. I just heard about it. I had people selling next to me at the farmers' market that claimed to be organic that were not organic. So, no, I never got certification while I was farming in the Central Valley.

Rabkin: So you were trying to avoid using chemical inputs when you could.

Leap: Yes. Oh, absolutely,. Then I finally figured out the fertility thing with the cover crops. But when you're farming on that kind of scale, cover cropping is expensive, costly. In those days there were some very benign synthetic fertilizers like calcium nitrate. It's nitrogen extracted from the atmosphere with hydroelectric power. It was made in Scandinavia. It was cheap and plentiful and very benign. I had a choice between that for nitrogen, or the fuel costs and the time out of production to do cover crops, and it was a lot of

times much easier to go with the synthetic option. But over time, I saw the benefit of what the cover crops do to the soil. It just takes time to work through all of those details and see how it all pans out. My neighbor Tom Willey was organic at that time, so I learned a lot from him.

Rabkin: So there were advantages of cover crops that you couldn't get from buying calcium nitrate.

Leap: Oh, absolutely. Yes, huge benefits. You don't really see it right away. It doesn't jump out at you. So yes, it was a scramble. And then, I guess, if we're continuing in this vein of history [laughs], in 1983, it was one of those heavy rain years—I don't think they called it "El Nino" back then. I don't think they knew what "El Nino" was, but it was definitely an El Nino year. It just rained and rained and rained and rained. I was looking at my fields in June. I'm not getting stuff planted because the ground is too wet to work. I opened the newspaper and started looking for a job and saw an ad for a job. It was one of those things, you know, when you're looking for something, sometimes it just jumps right out at you. I opened the newspaper and looked at the help wanted, "Wanted: Crop Production Manager for federally funded program to train Native Americans how to farm. You need desired number of years experience in growing vegetable crops." I applied and I got the job.

Community Program in Training Native Americans to Farm

Rabkin: You were made for this job.

Leap: I was made for that job, Yes. It was unbelievable. A very creative grant writer wrote a grant for the Native American Association in Fresno County. Of course, grants get written in interesting ways. I've since cautioned grant writers not to do this, but what they said in the grant was, "We're going to set up this amazing training program and community garden. We're going to have a farm, and we're going to teach people how to farm, and at the end of one year we're going to be self-supporting based on the sale of product."

The money was flowing for that first year, because we actually had the grant. We set up a community garden in town, and we set up a ten-acre demonstration farm on the edge of town. We worked with a number of tribes in the area. Native Americans came from many tribes, from the foothills and from out in the valley, and signed up to have a community garden plot, or signed up to do the training program. It was quite interesting.

At the community garden, which was not too far from the co-op extension offices, we had a beautiful piece of ground, in an urban setting. We purchased all of the necessary tractors and equipment. We set up community garden plots and we set up trial plots. All my farm advisor friends—Pedro Illich and another guy who was a weeds specialist, Bill Fischer, saw this as an amazing opportunity. Because of affirmative action,

ethnicities had ratings, and Native Americans had a high number. So the farm advisors were very excited to work with me. We did a number of field trials at the community garden site. With Pedro Illich, we trialed plastic tunnels and row covers and hot caps (all early season production strategies), which he was really into. And with Bill Fischer, we did weed trials, including herbicide trials. I had fun with the whole thing. It was great working with the farm advisors.

So at the end of that one year, when the grant funding had ended, we were folding up shop on that project, Pedro Illich was there, and he was talking to me. He literally grabbed me by my shirt and he said, "Look, if you don't go get a college degree, I'm never talking to you again." He meant it. [laughs] I was like "Oh." So we talked about it. I asked him "What do you mean? What are you talking about?" I was thirty years old, graduated from high school, just kind of jumped straight into this farming thing. He said, "Look, you're doing all of this work on your farm. What are you going to do if you break your leg?" I started thinking about it. It started to make sense.

Studying Agriculture at Fresno State University

My grandfather was a medical doctor in Merced, and he was always pushing for me to go to college, "Go to college; go to college." He had me on the college track ever since I was two years old, which was maybe one of the things that kind of steered me away from college. So I went to my grandfather, who was at that time probably ninety years old, and I said, "Grandad, I'm thinking about getting a college degree." He

said, "Yes, let me know how I can help." He covered a lot of my base expenses, and then my mother also helped out with books and tuition as well. I enrolled at Fresno State, kept farming, and the whole thing worked really well, because Fresno State is on the semester system—two semesters, fall and spring. Then I had the whole summer to farm.

I studied agricultural science at Fresno State. It took me five years. That would have been 1985 to 1989. I graduated with honors, loved every single class I was in. I was one of the best students in all of the ag classes I took, because I had so much experience leading up to college. I could relate to everything, and everything made sense.

Rabkin: Did you feel like you were learning useful information?

Leap: I learned a lot of useful information. I learned a lot of non-useful information, but I learned a lot of useful information. I learned the jargon. I learned soil chemistry. I learned plant pathology. I learned entomology. Much of the technical information that I use every single day on this farm here I learned at Fresno State. It's the jargon. It's the lingo. It's what you say and how you say it. I learned all about herbicides and all about conventional farming, which was very helpful. Because if you don't know that, you can't advocate against it, you know?

So I'm just happy as a clam, right? I'm in school, and I'm farming, and the farm is efficient, and I'm actually making money, and I have this financial support from my family to

attend college. I graduated. I was really excited about farming after I graduated, because I could see that, boy, now if I have full-time to do this farming, I could do well. I actually made fairly decent money my last year of farming, with not a lot of overhead.

A friend of mine who was the veg crop technician at Fresno State heard about this job here at UC Santa Cruz, so he brought the job application to me at the farmers' market. He was going to apply for it. He thought about applying for it and he thought, "No, no. This is the perfect job for Jim. I can't do this." So he brings me the application one day at the farmers' market in the fall of '89 and says, "You should apply for this job. This is perfect for you." My response was, "No, no, no. Randy. I just want to farm. I just want to farm. That's all—I just need a couple of years of—"I had everything down and everything was working, and the market was strong, and I had all of these great customers. I could see that I could make a decent living. Or I thought I could.

Rabkin: You were at this point selling at the farmers' market still?

Leap: The bulk of my sales at that point were farmers' market, and a few restaurants would pick up produce at the farmers' market as well. Ever since I'd started, my whole thing was quality. And that's why I couldn't hire anybody, because no one had the eye that I had to pack the quality that I wanted. It was all about quality and freshness. I didn't compromise on any of that. The restaurants really loved that, and I had a

clientele at the farmers' market that really loved that. Things were going well in that regard.

Randy kept coming back to the farmers' market and asking me if I had submitted the application. He knew when the deadline was. He kept coming back to the farmers' market, "Did you send it in? Did you send it in?" Finally, at the last minute, he says, "Look, just send it in. You don't have to accept it if you get it, or whatever. Just send it in and see what happens." So I said, "Okay, Randy." So I filled it out and sent it in.

Rabkin: [laughs]

Leap: By now it was January of '90. They called me. They said, "We want to interview you." So I went over to Santa Cruz and interviewed, and I was thinking about it. It looked interesting. I thought, how fun. My mind was fresh with all of this information from college, and what I wanted to do really was continue with college, get a master's degree at Fresno State, and become a farm advisor. That was my long-term goal. That made the most sense for me because I really enjoyed working with the farm advisors, and I really liked that whole idea of farm research. So this new job opportunity was taking me off track a little bit.

So they called and said, "Come to the interview." I did the interview. They called me back and said, "The job's yours if you want it." In the meantime, I had met with my accountant who kind of dropped the boom on me. I didn't prepare my own taxes. I don't know if you've ever seen tax returns from a farming operation [laughs], but it's incredibly complicated. I

didn't realize it at the time [but] I had kind of painted myself into a corner. I was a mechanic. I had a neighbor who had a mechanic's shop, who let me use any and every tool. I rebuilt everything. I built a lot of my own implements. Through some tax law I was unaware of, I had to start paying what was called personal property tax, which is really a tax designed for yachts and motor homes and things you don't use much. But that applied, for some reason, to farm implements. So I got hit for this tax for all of my farm implements. So I said, "Okay, that's fine. I spent fifty dollars in materials to build that bed shaper." They said, "No, what would that cost if you went out and bought it new?" So I got taxed on everything. With this personal property tax, I got hit for all of my implements and tractors. When you purchase a tool or implement or tractor, you can write it off against your tax liability. But that write-off is for either seven or ten years. I'd been farming for exactly ten years. I'd just lost all my write-offs too.

Before I'd met with my accountant, I was thinking, oh, I can start buying health insurance for my family now, because my income had been steadily increasing. And my accountant said, "No, you're going to be paying quarterly self-employment taxes, plus you don't have any write-offs." From her perspective, my only option was to expand my operation, go into debt, borrow money. And it's like, "No, no, no, no, no."

So all of this is happening concurrent with this amazing job opportunity over here at UC Santa Cruz. And then, to top it all off, my back was killing me, because I was doing this oat hay enterprise, which was insane, and harvesting all my own

vegetables, and I hadn't had a vacation since I was in high school.

Accepting the Position at the UCSC Farm and Garden

So this new job opportunity kind of made sense. It was like, "Okay, let's move to Santa Cruz." So I called them back and I said, "Yes, I'll accept the job." They said, "Great. When do you want to start?" or "When can you start?" I said, "Well, how about in September?" (This was in February.) They said, "Well, we need you Monday." I said, "Oh, my God." I had all my crops in the ground for the spring. I was still harvesting crops from the fall and I was doing the farmers' market. I had all my seeds purchased, all my inputs purchased for the whole year. I had this horrible decision to make. I realized I really wanted the job.

So I took a huge loss on that. I accepted the job. I started on Monday, like they wanted me to. And I went home every weekend and kept farming, kept going to the farmers' market, I don't know how I did it all. That summer I started selling the farm equipment and closed the farm down, and moved my family over here. We found a house to rent for \$975 a month in 1990, and my total take home pay was \$1,500 a month. I was getting paid not even as much as the shuttle bus drivers. It was definitely a challenging situation.

Rabkin: This was a full-time position.

Leap: It was a full-time position. I managed to get all the little pay increases that came along , but it was a rough go for a bunch of years there, and it actually ended up in a divorce. We had a little cash to fall back on when we first moved to Santa Cruz because I had sold all of my farm assets. We went through all of the cash just paying the rent and trying to live in Santa Cruz.

Rabkin: Were you raising kids?

Leap: I had two daughters, yes. So it was an intense time. But the job was the right fit, and here I am.

Rabkin: So I would have asked you what initially appealed to you about the CASFS position. Some of that's pretty clear from what you've already said, but is there anything you haven't told me about when you heard the description of that job, what you thought about?

Leap: Yes. What I realized was—you see, I always had a desire to teach, and I always did this on my own farm, and I did it with the Native Americans, and I did it with my Co-op Extension friends. I was frequently invited to speak at farm conferences while I was farming and I always really enjoyed that aspect of being a small farmer. I think that's what really padded my resume for the CASFS job. I had this whole history of teaching and extending information, and I really enjoyed it. But when you're on your own farm struggling every day with your own problems, you don't get a chance to look up and look around and see what's going on much. You're kind of in

the trenches. I realized this job would allow an opportunity to learn and teach, and it was going to be a much better use of my skill set than just me being in my own little world, picking and bunching carrots and taking them to farmers' market. Sure, you have social interaction at the farmers' market, and you can bring school kids out to your farm, and you can do all that. But this was going to be so much bigger. And it was and it is.

Working as the UCSC Farm Manager: Juggling a Multi-faceted Position

Rabkin: So there are various ways in this job that you are teaching and interacting, and one of them, of course, is working with the apprentices in the Ecological Horticulture apprentice program. So maybe you could tell me about the various aspects of that part of your job, and even perhaps walk me through an overview of a typical cycle, a typical six-month period working with those apprentices. I'm curious about what your days tend to look like in each of the seasons.

Leap: [laughs.]

Rabkin: I realize we could spend a lot of time on that.

Leap: Yes, you could. That's probably the thing I love most about my job, is that I'm in a random world of balancing numerous demands that require a rather unique skill set. Farming is fascinating and interesting, and I love the

troubleshooting aspect, and I like helping people. So I've kind of fallen into this thing. [laughs]

There is no typical day. I am involved in absolutely every single aspect of the farming operation there—from facilities, infrastructure, tractors, implements, design of the systems, irrigation. I do all the tillage. I do all the cover cropping. I've had, for a number of years now, a field production assistant who handles the things like seed orders and crop planning. I still get to help with that too.

I'm also in charge of field research. We've done a bunch of really interesting field trials over the years. I work with faculty, grad students, undergraduate students with senior projects, visiting researchers and UCCE farm advisors and specialists. Every day, I'm just juggling, and every day I have a list a page long, and I have to prioritize. There're some things I just never get to. I get to the priorities. It's absolutely fascinating. [laughs] And we pull it off. Every single year, we pull it off. This is my nineteenth growing season, and we've managed to get cover crops in the ground every single year and pull off a beautiful array of crops, even in the El Niño year.

There's no way to characterize a single day. I wish I had brought my list for today. I'm buying irrigation supplies today. I'm doing this interview. This is not atypical. I get interviewed for all kinds of things. Students always want to interview me for their projects. I write letters of recommendation. I'm involved in so many different things. I did a field walk this morning with the apprentices, and we

looked at onion thrips, and we talked about apple coddling moths and bio-control in broccoli (because we have cabbage aphids). These are all of the things that we have there on the Farm that we're looking at and doing. We talked about dry farmed tomatoes, and suckering tomatoes, and determinant versus indeterminant. That's just what goes on every day.

When I'm done here, this afternoon, I'm going to go back down and I'm going to walk the Food What?! kids through the blueberry trial, and tell them about the trial and what we're doing and what we hope to accomplish.

Rabkin: Which kids?

Leap: Food What?! is a new program in conjunction with Life Lab that is taking high school kids and giving them a farm field experience.⁴

Rabkin: Food What?!

Leap: Food What?! I don't understand it, but I think the kids do.

Rabkin: It's part of a contemporary lexicon.

Leap: Exactly. So tomorrow— The flailmower is broken. I'm going to pull the roller off of that and replace a couple of

⁴ See <http://gardenclassroom.googlepages.com/home>. See the oral histories with Gail Harlamoff and Erica Perloff for more details on the Food What?! Life Lab program.

bearings. So I'll have to go and buy bearings, and deal with that, because we have to mow the farm, because I'm getting the weed whip crew from campus in the next day or two. They're going to weed whip the whole farm. Yes, it just goes on and on and on.

Rabkin: I'm going to ask you later specifically to talk some about your Cooperative Extension work and also some of the specific field crop trials and organic techniques research that you've done. But maybe we could stay a little bit with the apprentices for now. Give me a sense of what kind of an education you're taking those apprentices through over the course of the six months that they spend with you.

Leap: That's a good question. They don't get a lot of time with me. In a classroom, for two hours, I teach them irrigation; another two hours tillage practices; another two hours fertility management. I'll spend two hours with them at some point here talking about all the things you need to know about starting a farm, just the basics—from certification to—the things that people don't think about, lease agreements and taxes and all of that stuff. We call that class "Starting a Farm." Then next week I'm teaching a class on farm mechanics. I'm going to explain how a diesel engine works and how a gas engine works, that kind of stuff.

Then once a week, I'm involved briefly in a field walk like the one I just described, where we're actually in the field looking at cultivation techniques. Just last week, I showed them how I set up a planter, and adjust the planter, and plant to moisture.

So they get little snips of all of that stuff. But I'm so busy in all of these other worlds that I don't spend a whole lot of time with them. The other instructors, the two garden managers and the field production manager, have more one-on-one time with them to get into the specifics of botany and crop planning and all of that kind of stuff.

Where my time is allotted is one of the interesting challenges of the job. My position, as Farm Manager, is state funded. There are some interesting questions about how state funding relates, or intertwines, with apprentice instruction. That's an interview topic for a whole other day, probably.

The Strengths of the Apprenticeship Program

Rabkin: From your perspective, do you see strengths and/or weaknesses of the apprenticeship as a training program for careers related to sustainable ag and farming?

Leap: I see tremendous strengths. Because I see what people do. I'm not totally convinced that people wouldn't do what they do anyway, but what I gather from talking with apprentices is they get a spark. They get inspiration working with us all at the farm and the gardens that pushes them to the next level in terms of community involvement and really making it a political act more than just growing food for income. So many apprentice alumni end up doing so many amazing things. And like I said—I'm not sure—They'd probably be doing those amazing things anyway, but I think they get a lot out of the apprenticeship program. It's very powerful.

Rabkin: It sounds like the community aspect of it is a big part of that power.

Leap: I think the community aspect is even bigger than the plant part. I think they learn more about people than they do about plants.

Rabkin: I realize your teaching relationship with the apprentices is somewhat limited. But I'm wondering whether you've had any particularly memorable mentoring relationships over the years with any of the apprentices.

Leap: Oh, sure. But I have those same relationships with other start-up growers in the area, whether they're apprentices or not. I really like having the opportunity to assist start-up farmers. Because I remember all the mentors when I got started. I remember Ben Franklin and how helpful he was and how critical that was. I want to give back in that regard. I'm always happy to extend information or answer questions of apprentices, especially in this region, but I do it all the time via e-mail from apprentices all over the globe. But just working with the folks here in this coastal region, people are not shy about asking questions and asking for help, and I'm always happy to help them if I can.

Rabkin: Are there former apprentices who you've kept up relationships with since they left the program?

Leap: Oh, yes, many. Oh, absolutely. They're all over the place doing amazing things. I've visited some of their farms when I get a chance. I don't get away from the Farm very

much. [laughs] I have had the opportunity. I used to be able to have time to go to conferences and give presentations, and I'd always visit apprentices in the area, but my job has changed so much now. Based on my own conscientiousness, I feel obliged to be here on the farm, as opposed to being out and about, for a lot of reasons.

The Changing Aspects of the Position

Rabkin: You say your job has changed a lot. How so?

Leap: My job has changed *a lot*. When I came to the farm in 1990, we had a fifty percent time field research position, another fifty to one hundred percent time lab research position at the Farm. We had a farm manager. We had the garden instructors. At that time, the garden instructors and the apprenticeship coordinator were paid with state funds. We've lost all of that! Just within the last five years, we had an outreach position that was funded for a number of years and then eliminated. The Center [for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems] has been reorganized. We used to have a financial analyst. If we needed to buy something, we'd just say, "Hey, I need to buy something." And even within the division, if you needed help understanding the budget, there were people you could go to. Well, those days are gone. With centralization on the campus, all of that admin stuff falls on us. So I've assumed many of these roles and responsibilities of this host of people.

Rabkin: All those positions you just named have gone away, and you're doing all of that work now?

Leap: To the best of my abilities. I'm scrambling—I get called on for a lot for public outreach. When the Farm Bureau Focus Ag group comes to the Farm, I do the presentation. I give the tour. I give tours to many of the important people that come to the farm. So I'm kind of like the public outreach person. I also oversee all the field research. And then I also supervise a number of apprentice staff positions. So I'm in a supervisory role, which can be time consuming. It's not really, because we have really good people working there.

But then all of the purchasing— We all handle all of that now. It's all pro cards. We're taking care of that all ourselves. When I go to buy something, I'm the one who's tracking all the paperwork, submitting paperwork. When we hire somebody, we do the hire process ourselves. We don't get a lot of support from staff HR like we used to. We just don't get a lot of the support that we've historically had. I used to have funding for interns and field assistants, and that's all gone. Every year, we seem to be losing support. That's frustrating.

Rabkin: Where did that financial support come from that you've now lost?

Leap: Well, some of it was state funds that the Center lost through budget cuts to the state. Some of it is re-allocation within the Center for other projects and other things. It's pretty clear to me the apprenticeship program is being kind of weaned off of state funding. Now there's an interesting kind

of dynamic, because the bulk of the Center staff now are off-site. They're at Oakes College. So the Farm is kind of this little thing that nobody really understands. Through this strategic plan process that we're going through now currently, we're trying to figure out how to change it for the better to make it work within the confines of the university, how to make it work financially and functionally.

Rabkin: Do you have hopes or visions for how that might best ideally be done?

Leap: I really don't. I really don't. I keep coming back to the fact that the apprenticeship program is an expensive program to run. There's a lot of liability. We don't charge enough money, or we aren't generating enough grant funding to really cover ourselves the way we need to be covered in the ideal world. So something has to give. Something has to change. I don't know what that would be, but I'm not absolutely convinced that a non-land grant UC campus is the best place to have a practical vocational program.

I've asked on a couple of occasions how important the Farm is to CASFS, and everybody assures me, the leadership and the people in advisory capacities, all assure me that the Farm is extremely important. So my point would be, well, if it's really important, then we've got to figure out how to fund it. That's the process we're in right now, to try to figure out how to make it work and be a viable entity on this UC campus.

Rabkin: How much do the apprentices themselves pay for the program?

Leap: Right now, it's about four thousand dollars a year. Four thousand dollars a year for a six-month residential [program]. If you compare that to other programs, that's nothing. There's a lot of in-depth workshops that would charge four thousand dollars for two weeks. It's definitely a bargain, and the apprenticeship staff would argue that they really want to keep it a bargain so that people can afford to do it.

Rabkin: Not just rich people.

Leap: Not just rich people, right. I understand that.

Rabkin: Let's go back to the apprentices for a minute. What are you seeing as the big challenges and opportunities for people coming out of the apprentice program now?

Leap: I see tremendous opportunities. I see nothing but opportunities. The Internet and email and all of this stuff has just been incredible. All of the apprentices now all have e-mail. The classes, starting a couple of years ago, all keep track of each other. They send out these group letters. They keep track of what people are doing. Last year, there was this group e-mail that came back—somebody organized it all. It was like: thirty-nine apprentices—here's what everybody's doing. I read through that thing and I thought, oh, my god, we are doing the right thing here. This is absolutely right on. They're all working. Every single one of them had some amazing job or opportunity making the food system better all over the world. Clearly, just hands down. It covers the gamut, but it's urban gardening, community gardening, working with youth,

working with elderly, working in advocacy, working in a nursery, starting farms. And the farms that they're starting are just incredible. They have websites, and they involve the community. When I read through that, I think, [laughs] I'll be a volunteer. I don't need to get paid to do this, because this is so powerful.

Rabkin: Do you see former apprentices having difficulty finding work in this field?

Leap: No. Not at all. Not at all. If they've kept their nose to the grindstone while they were apprentices, they get really good recommendations from us and they get incredible jobs all over the place. Especially the second-years, the ones that go through the second-year process.

Rabkin: To what extent is the sustainable farming community in the Central Coast peopled with former apprentices?

Leap: Oh, fairly significantly.

Rabkin: Can you think of some specific former apprentices who are farming in these areas?

Leap: Sure. Joe Schirmer of Dirty Girl Produce is doing just a bang-up job. There's so many of them, it's hard to name them [all]. But Blue House Farm, Ned and Ryan up the coast here; Nancy and Jared at Pie Ranch.⁵ Two different people—a

⁵ See the oral histories with Nancy Vail and Jared Lawson in this series.

couple and then another individual have been running the Everett Family Farm. They're ex-apprentices, Teresa [Kurtak] and Michael [Irving] for the last three years and now it's Kirsten Roehler. Brian McElroy was an apprentice, and is now coordinating the organic program for Driscoll's, which is the largest strawberry grower in the world.

And you look statewide, too, it's incredible—Sonoma County, Napa County, the Central Valley. And you look at the farmers' markets anywhere you go in this country and quite often the best farmers at the market went through this program. There're so many examples of people all over this country. They go into the community, they get something going, and then it takes off.

The Future of Organic Farming in California

Rabkin: What do you see as the future chances for these small and medium-scale farmers, especially in California, given the land values and the difficulty of acquiring farmland?

Leap: I think right now they are so well positioned, because fuel costs are going crazy. So the Buy Fresh, Buy Local movement really starts making sense. Food prices are going up with fuel prices. I look at some of the prices that people are getting at the farmers' market and at Whole Foods. I do the math in my head and think back to what I was selling stuff for through the eighties. I think, man, I could do just fine on a small-scale farm, on two, three, four, five acres, absolutely.

Rabkin: Where you're not having to put a lot of money into fuel.

Leap: Romaine lettuce boxes. It's a wax carton. Three years ago, they were a dollar a box. They're three dollars a box right now. T-tape has doubled in cost recently. Yes, shipping and fuel costs and anything related to petroleum, especially around shipping and packaging, is getting cost prohibitive.

I just heard the other day it costs seven thousand dollars to take a truckload of lettuce across the United States. Seven thousand dollars. So as that kind of reality sinks in, people are going to be getting on their bike and riding to the farmers' market. And there's plenty of land. Land is still expensive, and that's a challenge, especially in California, but there still is a lot of affordable cropland and lots of opportunities.

Rabkin: What about access to farmers' markets for new growers just breaking in?

Leap: That's one that really gets me upset. I think the Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Market association is making a huge mistake by limiting the number of producers that can go to a farmers market, and really making it hard on the newcomers. You really have a long, long, long waiting list. Ferry Plaza [in San Francisco] is a good example, too. I just think that's a shame. I had some conversations with some of the board members at the Santa Cruz Farmers Market a couple of years ago. Kelly's Bakery started this Westside Farmers' Market a couple of years ago. We (CASFS) thought, that's perfect. Let's get in on the farmers' market. The individuals

who initiated the Kelly's market were happy to have the UCSC farm as a vendor. We actually did that market for one season. But then when the board of the Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Market Association decided to do the big Westside Farmers Market, which is a very nice market, they said, no UCSC Farm up there. I asked them why. They really didn't want us there, because they feel like we're subsidized, and that's unfair competition. I can totally understand that. The thinking that I don't understand is they figure there's x number of customers that are going to come to the market, and that each customer is going to have a twenty dollar bill in their pocket. And so if there's twenty growers there, then each grower gets a dollar of that consumer's twenty dollar bill. So if you add thirty growers, then each grower is going to be making less money.

I used to think that was the case. In the farmers' market I did in Fresno in the Central Valley, I expressed that concern one time to the market manager, because he was bringing in a new grower who had the same crop list that I had. I expressed my concern that I didn't want any competition. And the market manager said, "Look, you have records of what you've been selling, right, and you're going to continue to keep records." He said, "Let's just watch your net over time." He said, "I'll make you a bet that your sales are going to go up." And he was absolutely right, because that new grower made an opportunity for more consumers to come to the market.

Now, maybe there's a limited consumer base here. I don't know. But it just drives me crazy that the new young growers

on the block here just can't break into the farmers' markets, or it's challenging. They can, but it takes a lot of time. They are told what they can and can't bring. I just think that's nonsense.

Rabkin: What would you say to a market manager who says, "Look, I am very loyal to the people who have been selling in my market for x number of years. I don't want to jeopardize their customer base." The story you just told speaks to that. But, say they're nervous about a limited customer base. What might you say to them about trying to improve the outreach or the customer base, or how they might deal with that problem?

Leap: Yes. That's a good question. I'm not sure. Maybe they do know what they're doing. That's a tricky one. [pause] I don't know. I did a market in San Luis Obispo. I did the Morro Bay market when I was in the Central Valley and tried to get into the Higuera Street market, and they said, "Yes, you can come here. But you're going to be a block down there for a couple of years until you prove yourself. And then you can come into the market."

Rabkin: So that's how they handle new people. They put them in the ghetto?

Leap: Yes, they put them in the ghetto.

Rabkin: [laughs] Out on the fringes?

Leap: Yes.

Rabkin: Interesting.

Leap: I just think there's going to be more and more opportunities for direct marketing. I don't know. Those are good questions.

Rabkin: As you look to the future of sustainable agriculture in this region, are there changes or developments that you see coming toward us on the horizon, like how this landscape is going to change economically or—

Leap: I mean, taking a real long shot at it, when you look at the commodities that are produced here in this region, the high value commodities—the best examples would be raspberries, strawberries, and lettuce that get shipped out of the region—I think as shipping costs increase, that's going to force some changes in production systems nationwide. It might make more sense ultimately as fuel costs are raised, too, to be growing less of the really high value specialty and more of just basic food crops. But, you know, that's easy to say, because we're in such an incredible climate and such an incredible area. The Pajaro Valley used to be a big potato producing region. Then apples came in. Now it's all strawberries and raspberries. It's whatever makes the most economic sense for the growers, because of the high values of the land. But as the values of these other crops increase, I think that they're going to come back into the fold here. I think people are going to have to really look at those land values and make some exceptions for locally produced foods, commodity items.

Rabkin: So you could imagine apple orchards sprouting up where apple orchards used to be in the Pajaro Valley, for example.

Leap: Yes. Or I can imagine the Salinas Valley looking very different in ten or twenty years, too.

Farm-Based Research

Rabkin: Let's look at your Cooperative Extension work. You work with area growers on farm field trials. What kinds of work do you do with local growers?

Leap: The main thing that I've done with Co-op Extension at the Farm here has been— Let me try to remember back to some of the first work we did here. I did a bunch of stuff with Jeff Mitchell, who's an Extension specialist statewide, doing work with no-till and conservation tillage farming systems. For about five years, we tried really hard to experiment with no-till and conservation till and strip-till here at the CASFS farm. It was all pretty unsuccessful.

When I first came here, Richard Smith, who was, at the time, the small farm farm advisor for Monterey, San Benito, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara Counties, did some trial work with cover crops here on the UCSC farm. That was back in the early 90s.

A number of years ago I met Aziz Baameur at a small farm work group meeting in Davis. A few years after that he took a position in Santa Clara County, which served a three-county area, which is Santa Cruz, San Benito, and Santa Clara

Counties. He was the small farm farm advisor. UCCE had a field station over in Santa Clara where he could do trials. They actually had a plot of land. I don't know who owned it. It was the Division of Ag and Natural Resources, or whatever, but it got sold because the Division of Ag and Natural Resources could no longer justify the costs associated with maintaining a field station in the Santa Clara Valley.

So Aziz lost that site as trial ground. He does on-farm trials, but he approached me five years ago. He said to me, "I want to do a blueberry trial, and I think this farm here would be the perfect place to do it." All of his colleagues—there's Mark Gaskell down in the Santa Maria, San Luis Obispo area. He's got a couple of trials. He's got a trial with a grower and then a trial at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Manuel Jimenez, who's a small farm advisor up at Tulare County, had a trial. Benny Fouché, who was a small farm advisor up in the Stockton area had a trial. So Aziz, just being in that circle of friends, thought, well, why don't we do one here on the Central Coast, see how they do?

So I talked it over with the Center director who was at the time Carol Shennan, who said, "Absolutely. The more stuff we do like this, the better off the Farm's going to be. That's the perfect kind of outreach activity to network with the local farming community."

I somewhat reluctantly agreed, because blueberries are tricky, and I didn't need any new work. So four years ago, we put in this trial. So it's been good. We've done field days, and now we're picking blueberries and collecting data and getting

information out to the farming community, and it's all good. That's been good also, because when we do the field days we bring in other advisors from other areas. Irrigation advisors from Monterey County come and talk about irrigation on blueberries, and Laura Tourte, who's the UCCE county director comes and talks about the economics of blueberries, because she's an economist. Then they all see the Farm and they go, "Wow, this farm is incredible. I had no idea." [laughs] It's good to get people to the Farm every once in a while. There's an interesting misperception about what goes on at the Farm at UC Santa Cruz. It's historic. It goes way back.

Rabkin: What is that misperception?

Leap: Oh, that it's just kind of this hippie training farm that's like farm summer camp.

Rabkin: So people don't understand how rigorous it is?

Leap: People don't understand that it's a very impressive, dynamic farm that's very well managed and aesthetically beautiful. We found that when we did (it's a little off topic, because it's off the Co-op Extension thing) but the Farm last year was a recipient of the "Sustie" award at the Eco Farm Conference, and then they put us on the panel of successful organic growers.⁶ So here we are, our thirty minutes of fame on the stage at Asilomar.

⁶ See "UCSC apprenticeship program receives top honor in sustainable agriculture" *Currents*, January 29, 2007: "Established in 1988, the "Sustie"

Rabkin: This was the 2007 Eco-Farm Conference?

Leap: Yes, 2007. We presented what we do to the best of our abilities. We picked ten apprentices, and we highlighted what they're doing in the world. People in the audience were crying. People that I've known for years from farming in the Central Valley came up to me after the presentation and said, "We had no *idea* you guys were doing that." [laughs] This goes back to the outreach potential of the collaborative field trial with Cooperative Extension. Those things are kind of powerful.

Then we got written up in the *Cal Ag*. We did the symposium for the fortieth, last year, 2007.⁷

Rabkin: This was the Back Forty celebration?⁸

Leap: This was the Back Forty celebration. *Cal Ag* came and said, "Hey, we want to do an article on you guys." They did

award is presented each year by the Ecological Farming Association to "stewards of sustainable agriculture" who have made a significant contribution to the well-being of farming and the planet. Past recipients include chef Alice Waters, publisher Robert Rodale, and several graduates of the apprenticeship itself. Jim Leap and apprenticeship coordinator Diane Nichols accepted the Sustie on behalf of the apprenticeship during the conference's awards banquet on January 26, 2007 at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove."

⁷ "Breaking New ground: UC Santa Cruz Celebrates Sustainable Innovation in Farming, Food Systems" (University of California *California Agriculture* October-December 2007) <http://calag.ucop.edu/0704OND/resup01.html>

⁸ On the weekend of July 27-29, 2007, the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems held their fortieth reunion/celebration. See http://www.ucsc.edu/news_events/text.asp?pid=1470

an article that generally talked about the Farm, and then focused on the blueberry trial and Sean Swezey's farm extension work. That's a really big deal. That wouldn't have happened twenty years ago. So it all kind of ties together with the Co-op Extension discussion.

Rabkin: And UCSC farm is a certified organic site. Is that correct?

Leap: That's correct.

Rabkin: Does that bring in people who are interested in working with you to do organic trials?

Leap: Oh, it does. And we don't really have the staffing to handle this, but we get tour groups from all over the world. I've toured just about every country you could think of at the Farm, people interested in the certification process and just want to explore what this whole certification thing is like, how do you grow things organically. CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] sends a lot of those tours our way, too.

Visions for the Future of the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems

Rabkin: In the course of the interview so far, you've occasionally mentioned things that CASFS doesn't have the staff to do, that you're sort of limping along trying to do, for example, leading these tours for people who come to you through CCOF and are interested in organic certification and

so forth. Do you have a mental wish list of, if CASFS could have everything it needed to really do its job? What would be on that list?

Leap: Well, if CASFS could have everything it needed to do its job, all of our offices would be on the Farm. We'd have housing for the apprentice program for the apprentices, just simple basic housing. We would have an outreach coordinator position. We'd have a student intern coordinator position. We'd have a field research position. And we'd have a facilities maintenance position, or that would be handled by campus. Those are the big ones. We don't have a groundskeeper. I'm the groundskeeper. Does that make any sense for a twenty-five acre site? I'm the groundskeeper. [laughs]

Rabkin: So in addition to managing farm operations, you're making sure that the borders look good.

Leap: That the weeds get mowed, exactly. [laughs] I guess, taking that even a step further, I don't have any place to park tractors and implements out of the rain in the winter. They're just out in the weather. So we buy a three-thousand dollar grain drill, and I sit there and watch it rust into the ground. Things like that just make me sick.

The other big wish list item would be, we could do such a cool demonstration of so many different recycling and energy savings systems. There's no reason why we have to be on the grid. We could be completely off the grid. We could have our own well. There is a well down in the gulch below the farm, but the politics kind of keeps us from being able to utilize it.

So we're on city water, which makes no sense to me. We should be trapping rainwater from all of our buildings. We should be hooking up with campus to take rainfall off the buildings here to store it to use as irrigation water. I mean, there are so many cool, cutting edge things we could be doing if we had the resources. So we are literally limping along. We should have electric tractors. We should be growing biofuel crops and running our tractors with biofuels. Things like that. I'm just like, let's get going. But it all takes money.

Rabkin: Might there be grant money available to fund some of these kinds of projects?

Leap: I think there would be.

Rabkin: Is there anybody on CASFS staff who has the time to look for that funding?

Leap: Well, we just hired a new development person.

Rabkin: It sounds like the geographic split that occurred when CASFS people could no longer use offices on the Farm proper and moved to Oakes College, it sounds like that has made a significant difference in the nature of the organization.

Leap: It has. It's kind of disturbing.

Rabkin: So one of the qualities that you cited early on when we started talking about your CASFS work, one of the aspects of the job that really appealed to you, was this sense of a community of people. This was one of the ways in which the

apprentice program was strong, because they're working with each other, and they're also working with the various staff people they have contact with. How do you see the strengths and weaknesses of CASFS as an organization working together?

Leap: Oh, I think we need to work together, and I'm hopeful that we'll be able to pull it together. We absolutely need to work together. When I first came here, the field research was completely separate from the apprenticeship program. The Farm was divided. There was literally a line. There was no intermingling. When I got there, I made the decision to attempt to breakdown those subtle barriers. I started involving the apprentices in field research, and involving the researchers in the apprenticeship program, and inviting the researchers to have lunch with the apprentices. Now we're kind of comingled in a really nice way. But we need to rekindle that with the whole program and get everybody on the same page, so to speak. That will be a challenge.

Rabkin: You mentioned some kind of self-study that CASFS is currently involved in?

Leap: We just finished an external review. And we are right in the middle of a strategic planning process, and we hired a consultant to help with that. So we're getting to the challenging part of that right now. We created all the framework for the goals. But now it's like, okay, how are we going to implement all of these things? What changes do we need to make programmatically to make it all work?

Rabkin: Have you had a chance to voice this wish list of yours in the context of that strategic planning?

Leap: Not quite yet. I've voiced it through a lot of emails.
[laughs]

Rabkin: As you look back on your experiences over the past nineteen years or so in this position, are there pivotal events or watershed moments that you see in the job, or in the organization, that stand out as historic markers?

Leap: Well, let's see. I came in '90. When Carol Shennan came, things changed a little bit. She really worked hard to build bridges to the campus community. But she was so overwhelmed in that position that it was very, very challenging for her to juggle everything that she was doing. She was half-time faculty and half-time Center director, and didn't have a development person, and didn't have really an assistant or an associate director. But she stepped things up a notch in terms of our relationship with the campus, for sure.

Rabkin: How so?

Leap: She worked with staff to the best of her abilities to send the message that we really were a part of this campus. An example: if there was an event in the Division of Social Sciences, like the annual staff breakfast or something, she would say, "You guys are staff in the division. You go to that. Get your faces known."

Rabkin: So that was a change from previous practice.

Leap: That was a change. She was very successful at getting federal funding, which was a huge boost to the Center. And she was very much involved in the natural sciences, but she also respected the social sciences. So she did a good job of bridging those two, but keeping the natural sciences going. Some of my concern now with the new leadership, is I'm wondering where the natural sciences is going to fall out.

The Rolling Cultivars

Rabkin: I'd like to really shift gears in a major way for a minute, because I want to be sure before we finish up to ask you about your musical involvement.

Leap: [laughs]

Rabkin: The Rolling Cultivators have come up in more than one interview to date. And since you've been a part of that group, I'd like to ask you to tell me a bit about your participation with that musical group, and also how music making might tie in with being a farmer and an educator.

Leap: Oh, it totally ties in. [laughs] That's interesting. How much time do we have for that? I was fascinated with music when I came to the Farm. I've always played music, and I've always loved old-timey music. I played banjo when I was in high school. When I came to the Farm in 1990, there was an apprentice named Rob Horgan who's in a couple of local bands. He's in Sidesaddle, and Crosstown, and Bean Creek.

Rabkin: I thought Sidesaddle was an all-women group. Did that change?

Leap: It used to be years ago. They've got a couple of guys now. I heard him play his banjo one day in his tent. I was like, "Hey, Rob, what's going on? I heard you playing banjo." I was kind of picking up guitar then. So we started playing a bunch of music. We played farmers' markets. He stayed local here and played a lot of music and had a lot of fun. We did farm dances at the Farm Center, just banjo and guitar, and rocked the Farm Center. People loved it.

Then in 1997, Nancy Vail was an apprentice, and she was learning how to play fiddle. She'd spent a year in Japan teaching English. In her spare time there in Japan, she picked up fiddle and was getting pretty good at it and played a lot of Irish tunes. So she and I started playing a lot of music. And I'd have to mention Matthew Werner, who was a post doc researcher at the Farm in the early 90s. He was just an exceptional musician. He was in a band called Mariposa. He taught me a lot of stuff about the intricacies of music and how to connect musically with other people.

So I had all of these little music circles going. And then Nancy came with the fiddle. Then Nancy and Rob and I got a bunch of songs down in common and played a dance at the Farm Center and people loved it. So Nancy and I called ourselves the Rolling Cultivators, because the rolling cultivator is this implement we use that everybody loves. It's a "Lilliston" cultivator. So we came up with the name, Rolling

Cultivators. And then all these other people—students and various folks have stepped in and stepped out of the Rolling Cultivators.

In the last couple of years, Jan Perez, who's one of the social sciences, social issues staff, started playing mandolin and started doing voice. Then Amy Carlson, who works at Life Lab, we discovered randomly one day—she was walking by the Rolling Cultivators as we were playing "Star of the County Down" as an instrumental. We didn't do any vocals. We were mainly a dance band. We're playing "Star of the County Down" and Amy Carlson walks by one day and says, "Oh, I know that song. I have words to that song." She says, "You mind if I just sing it one time?" She came and she just blew us away. It turns out she's got a master's degree in voice performance.

So then the Rolling Cultivators took a whole new kind of thing where we were doing vocals. Then Jan Perez and Amy started doing vocal harmonies. And then Joji Muramoto, it turns out he's walking by one day and he goes, "Would you guys mind if I joined you some day? I play a little guitar." It turns out he's a very good guitar player. Joji and I have done research together in the fields of the Farm there for years. He wasn't there in the very early days, but we've done numerous field trials and still do to this day.

So then it got kind of exciting, because it was all CASFS staff. And then we started getting invited to UC functions and things to play, and we could present ourselves as the all-staff band. So we played the staff picnic, and, we have played at the

campus sustainability conference and at Social Sciences events and at our own Harvest Festival.

Rabkin: Talk about outreach.

Leap: Oh, it's the *perfect* outreach for the Farm. People love the music. It's really fun to get up to a mike when you're in front of two thousand staff and just say, "Do you guys know there's a farm on this campus?" [laughs] So that's been lots of fun.

Rabkin: Do you see music making, music performance, community music events as connected in any way with sustainable agriculture, or the culture of agriculture?

Leap: Oh, sure, yes. Absolutely. I mean, music is in our roots. Most of the best musicians I know or have heard of, are folk musicians who are tradespeople and working-class people. It just speaks the language of the soul of the soil and the earth, definitely. What we're challenged with now in this day and age is we have to be careful not to put people off. It can turn into a class and culture thing. Somebody coming here from the Bronx as an apprentice, an African American person, might be put off by me, this white guy, playing a banjo that was an instrument that was brought over by the slaves. There're all those issues that we have to deal with.

If it was up to me, I would like to branch out, and I would like to be doing all kinds of different ethnic and cultural music. I think that would be really cool. But we always kind of come back to bluegrass, old-timey, and fiddle tunes. [laughs] So our

next challenge is to introduce a little bit more ethnic diversity in our set list.

Rabkin: It makes me think of Pete Seeger who used to make a big deal about the banjo being originally an African instrument.

Leap: Absolutely. Music was so central in the United Farm Workers movement, so central. The Teatro Campesino—in fact, Luis Valdez's son, Danny Valdez, performed a lot of the music live for the Teatro Campesino, but also just for the gatherings. Danny was always there. Pete Seeger, Joan Baez. It's always been a part of the labor movement. So it just kind of fits right in. So Patricia [Allen] is saying, "Oh, you guys need to learn some labor songs." I'm like, "I'm all for it."

Rabkin: Thank you so much, Jim. It's been great.

Leap: Sure, you're welcome.