

25 Years of Cooking for the Revolution

An Interview with Keith McHenry

Lenny



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Keith McHenry is a cofounder of Food Not Bombs (FNB), an international movement comprised of autonomous groups that recover food that would otherwise be thrown out, then make fresh, hot, vegetarian meals and serve them for free in public. FNB groups also serve at protests and other events.

These days, McHenry works to coordinate food delivery and volunteer support for Hurricane Katrina survivors and to support the creation of local FNB groups, with a current focus on Africa. May 24, 2005 marked the 25th anniversary of FNB.

EF!J: How did FNB get started?

KM: FNB started in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1980, when one of the members of our affinity group in the Seabrook nuclear power plant protests and Clamshell Alliance was arrested for felony assault of a police officer. We were trying to raise money for his legal fees by baking cookies and brownies and trying to sell them in Harvard Square, and not too many people were interested. So we thought we should have a *schtick*, to try to get people to pay attention. And we had this big poster saying, “Wouldn’t it be a beautiful day if the Pentagon had to hold a bake sale to buy a B-1 bomber?” And we went to thrift stores and got military uniforms and dressed like generals, and tried to get people to think that we were, you know, trying to raise money for a B-1 bomber, and would they buy our baked goods? And we got a lot of people excited—you know, we really didn’t raise any more money, but we could see there was this kind of dynamic that was much improved by having this sort of street theater.

And then we had this other project called First National Bank project, and it showed that the board of directors of the Bank of Boston were also the board of directors of the Public Service Company in New Hampshire. And we wanted to have a soup line that was like the Great Depression. We’re saying, “Look, if you keep your policies like this, where you’re lending yourself money on questionable projects, it could lead to a situation like the Great Depression.” And the night before, we got worried there wouldn’t be enough protesters, so we went to the Pine Street Inn and talked to the homeless guys there and said we’re doing this protest, and we have free food, and would they wanna join in? And we had about 70 people show up.

And the hanging out with the homeless people, the interaction between homeless people and the businesspeople that were passing by, and the response of either anger toward us by the stockholders, or support of us by stockholders that hated the bank, was just so amazing that we just thought we should quit what we were doing and just start organizing by picking up food that couldn’t be sold and making meals, handing it out on the street, doing like basic street theater with food.

EF!J: And how did it end up turning into a national thing?

KM: In 1986, I moved to San Francisco and started a second FNB chapter. And on August 15 of ’88, we were serving food at the entrance to Golden Gate Park at Haight and Stanyan. And we’d been having conversations with the police; they were saying, you should get a permit, and we had written for a permit. But to our surprise, on this day, 45 riot police came out of the woods and arrested nine of us. So we then mobilized

again to have another protest the next Monday, where we marched down Eighth Street with our food and with pots and pans and with all the tables and everything, and 29 people were arrested, and that made world news.

And shortly after that, people from all over, mostly the US but also Canada, started to contact us, saying, we want to start our own group, this must be a really effective way of organizing if it bothers them so much. So C.T. Butler and myself, who are cofounders of FNB, published this flier called “Seven Steps to Starting a Food Not Bombs,” which then ultimately became a book called *Food Not Bombs: How to Feed the Hungry and Build Community*. And it’s basically through the flier, and word-of-mouth, and people seeing that we were arrested, that encouraged the creation of all these chapters all over the world.

EF!J: It’s my understanding that when the first chapter was started in Cambridge, the response from the authorities was fairly favorable. Do you have any ideas why the reaction was so different in San Francisco, and why it sort of became a pattern in the US for FNB groups to get arrested?

KM: I would say that the biggest change was that when we started in Cambridge, homelessness wasn’t a crisis, and we were considered a street performance group. By the time we started in San Francisco, the city government was having to face the political problems of there being homeless people on the streets of San Francisco.

The business community was very concerned that they might have to pay increased taxes to support services for homeless people, and they felt that overall, a strategy of using the police to drive them from the city was more appropriate, even though it’d probably cost even more. But at least it sent this message that you shouldn’t be a slacker, and you should be willing to accept whatever the lowest wages are and live, or otherwise face this military presence. So we ended up getting attacked specifically because it appeared that we were aiding the struggle of the people they were trying to drive from the city, and that we were a bridge between the homeless and the housed, and that we were organized and therefore could potentially organize the poor. And so we were considered “the leadership necessary for the insurrection of the poor,” and the police said that they were arresting us because we were making a political statement, and that wasn’t allowed. We could feed people, but you couldn’t be talking about changing the policies of society.

EF!J: Are you saying that somebody actually referred to you as “the leadership necessary for the insurrection of the poor?”

KM: Yeah, in a local newspaper, the general of the Salvation Army was quoted as saying, “FNB is the leadership necessary for the insurrection of the poor.” Also, internal police documents said a lot of stuff about that; they would report, “Homeless people are now becoming more aggressive, and are refusing to accept their incarceration and arrest, and are starting to say that they have civil rights.” And there were several internal police memos that said, “Homeless people have even started to free their friends from police custody, believing that they have the same rights as regular people.”

EF!J: Do you consider FNB to be a revolutionary group or movement, and why?



photo courtesy Keith McHenry

Keith McHenry gets arrested by San Francisco police in 1988.

KM: Yeah, I think of it as a revolutionary movement, and there has been a debate, particularly since about '88, about whether it's better to be a charity or a social change group or revolutionary group. And there also has been some debate about the definition of it being a revolutionary group or not, whether it's a charity or not.

But our idea is to be building close relationships with lots and lots of poor people, and having this ongoing connection with them. So it's different than a charity or soup kitchens, where there's the homeless people and the people getting the food, and then the people providing it. We're really inviting the homeless people to join, or everybody to join. We also try to be providing information and education about how the society is working, and promote this idea amongst homeless people that their situation is not because of personal failing, but because of how society is organized.

You know, many people, for instance, are homeless because they became ill, and because of the health care system in the US, and the lack of security and employment—so to show it's not a personal failing, and that we want to restructure society so people wouldn't be the haves and the have-nots. And that, I think, is the basic idea that's revolutionary.

EF!J: Do you think that most FNB groups today are building toward that revolutionary idea, or do you think they've adopted more of the charity model?

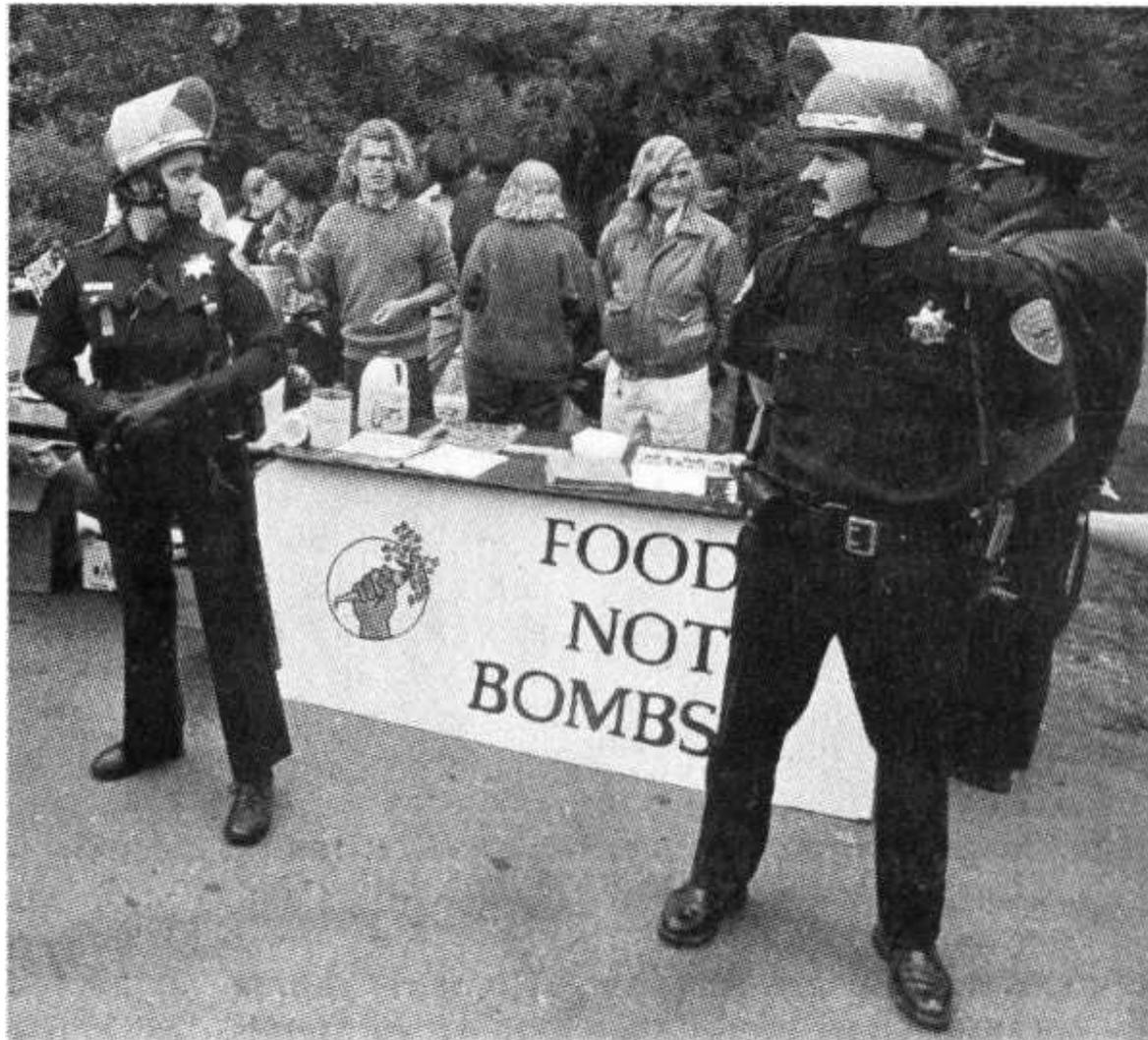
KM: In the US, I would say it might be sort of roughly 50–50, that half the groups are sort of more focused toward charity, and that the other half are more toward revolution. And maybe it's more accurate to say half of the people *in* FNB—where even in the groups that are sort of doing charity, many of the members are actually about revolution, but some of the people with more energy and time might be seeing it more as charity. And there's been this debate since '88.

Outside the US, it seems to be very clearly about revolution. Generally speaking, people are about ending capitalism and transforming society in the rest of the world, and American FNB activists are a little more confused about that.

EF!J: It's the 25th anniversary of FNB, and it's also the 25th anniversary of Earth First!. And I've got two linked questions. The first one is, do you think it's a coincidence that both groups were founded in the same year, or do you see some connection, in terms of what was going on at the time? And what kind of relationships, in your experience, have FNB and EF! had over the past 25 years?

KM: I don't think it's a coincidence. In 1980, Ronald Reagan was running for president and then got elected. And so there was this crisis of how to deal with what we thought would be this corporate control expanding because of his election. And the other thing that was happening at that time was that a lot of the existing environmental and peace groups were kind of reformist, they were kind of pro-state, and it was particularly clear that many of the environmental groups were also very closely linked to oil companies and things like that. So I think that an idea of having more decentralized movements that were focused on direct action—because of the failure of the more reformist groups since the Vietnam War—and with Reagan coming to power—was what influenced these two movements to start.

It took a little while before FNB people and EF! people in the US started coordinating activities—part of it being that in Boston there really wasn't an EF! happening. FNB itself started sharing free food with EF! in Northern California—we would do the kitchens at basecamps and be providing food, and a lot of the FNB people were also EF! activists. And also around that same time, Prague FNB and Prague EF! were essentially the same people. They basically started both of those organizations at the same time. And you had some similar crossover with EF! and FNB in England around that same time. So now, I would say, often people are both in many, many parts of the world. You know, it's common for EF! and FNB to have a lot of overlap in people.



San Francisco police block access to a Food Not Bombs table.

EF!J: Do you think there's anything in particular that FNB and EF! have taught each other, or have to teach each other?

KM: Well, I think for instance that EF! doing direct actions out in the woods played a big influence in the FNB movement seeing itself as providing food for movements that weren't about homeless people. So I think in a certain sense, that helped influence us to start sharing food with Native sovereignty issues in different parts of the world. Although we did a little bit of that even at the beginning—we fed Mohawk Nation activists in 1980—but I think that gave more people the idea that a role FNB could play is in feeding resistance movements on a broader scale.

I think also, it seemed to me when San Francisco FNB started, and the way EF! had been previous to that, EF! didn't seem to be so progressive or connected to the left—it seemed actually more like a right-wing kind of movement, even though the goals were something that the left certainly could support overall. But it seemed like the population of people that were participating in EF! were not really—you know, didn't share a lot of the politics that we had, and that there was some mixing of what FNB was doing and the idea that we had with the people that were doing EF!, and that moved it more into a kind of a left radical movement instead of a conservative radical movement.

EF!J: Any last thoughts?

KM: The FBI seems to be very interested in FNB in the last year. And the Joint Terrorism Task Forces in Denver and St. Louis and North Carolina have been trying to do what they can to intimidate FNB activists and to get them to stop. But I think it's very important that people see more that the FBI's interest in FNB is actually a compliment, like the FBI's interested in EF!. Because we are effective. And they see us as terrorists, because we are terrorizing the concept of capitalism, not because we use violence or anything. As the FBI has kind of indicated in some of its memos and stuff, they're really worried about projects like FNB because many people who aren't activists at all, they come across FNB because it's public, it's in the streets, it's doing outreach to the general public, it's not just organizing amongst other activists, it's trying to really bring in the general community into the activist community and it's been effective at that. People often get their start as an activist by cooking with FNB, and that leads them to learn about all these other social movements.

So I really encourage people to either organize with their local FNB or start their own chapter. And I encourage other organizations to contact FNB, to invite them to bring free food to their projects and to be able to think of their protest as not having a limitation because people need to go eat or something, but that their actions can last days and days.

For more information about FNB or for free information on how to start a chapter, contact FNB, POB 744, Tucson, AZ 85 702; (800) 884-1136; www.foodnotbombs.net.

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