

FESTSCHRIFT FOR CHRISTINE M. PORTER | VIGNETTES

Celebrating lessons and carrying on legacies from Christine M. Porter

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This compilation of vignettes emerged from an invitation to share and celebrate food justice and other lessons and legacies connected with Christine M. Porter, as she prepared to walk on in 2024. Twelve authors who considered her a mentor, colleague, collaborator, and/or friend have each contributed a unique written or visual vignette in response to this invitation. Collectively, these vignettes share throughlines that weave a narrative of how Christine lived, worked, led, learned, taught, and loved. Many describe how she embraced them as whole people—empowering, mentoring out and up, and actively inviting them into otherwise exclusive communities and professional pursuits.

Several also speak to how Christine illuminated the white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist systems that keep people from those pursuits,

among other injustices. They detail her commitment to the “Capital-W Work” of social justice in response to and against those systems. In short, Christine had an extraordinary ability to see these systems that rely on their own invisibility to continue, naming and making them visible for others, while still succeeding within academia. Some link that success to Christine’s concept of triple rigor (ethical, emotional, and epistemological), which allowed her work to flow first from her values—and increasingly from her heart (Budowle & Porter, in press; Porter, 2018). She urged asking questions that mattered, shifted in response to new and compelling evidence, and shared that she made her best decisions out of love despite any fear.

Through these vignettes, we hope that readers gain a glimpse into Christine’s whole self, her shared Work with others, and what one mentee described as “a triple rigorous life well led.” While this edited compilation certainly celebrates Christine as a person, we expect that she would be most

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gratified by another invitation: for readers to connect and carry on what they glean from these vignettes with their own journey in the Work.

Patti Provance | Friend and Co-Conspirator

Meeting as teenagers in Baltimore, Christine and I shared a lifetime of friendship. We were each other's first thought partners. We shared a deep curiosity and a sense of morality. Together, we took African American literature during our lunch period and formed our first ideas around race, gender, and justice, starting conversations we would continue throughout the years. Some of the traits that grounded her academic work were so much a part of her that they were practically innate, while others developed over time. Here's my snapshot of how her concept of triple rigor showed up in Christine's formative years and now shows up in her academic work.

Ethics: Even as a teenager, Christine relentlessly questioned anything that did not make sense to her. Questioning was more than making sense of how the world works—it was the method she would use to understand ethics.

Epistemology: Teenage Christine prided herself on forming a logical argument. Where I was emotional, Christine was logical. We accepted the binary, but also the hierarchy. Between the two, logic was clearly the winner.

Emotions: A line from one of Christine's favorite songs as a teenager, "I am a rock, I am an island," summed up her position on feelings definitively. Where I cried and wanted to talk about my feelings, Christine clearly did not. But, she was always deeply caring. The way that you could tell that Christine cared about something—or someone—was by how she would apply logic to any situation that came your way. If you had a problem, Christine was confident that she could find a solution for you by applying logic.

No one could be more surprised than me to see her academic work include emotional rigor. Emotions had long been the source of her motivations: from why she solved a friend's problems in

high school to why she chose her research. But now, emotions were given equal billing as a methodology and as a requirement for doing good research. Where motivations can be hidden and unspoken, methodologies are visible, seen, recorded. She chose to make emotions count.

One of Christine's greatest gifts was her ability to change. She would come to her own conclusion—still often through questioning and logic—and then she would apply the change, becoming her own evidence. There's no way to do the work that Christine set out to do without believing that people can change, and her life is a beautiful example—and evidence—that it's possible. ~

Megan M. Gregory | Mentee

The transition from Peace Corps volunteer in rural El Salvador to Cornell graduate student was rough. After being deeply connected to a community and waking up every day to work toward its well-being, I found it difficult to go to class, take tests, and jump through hoops that seemed designed to impress other academics—not to make life better alongside neighbors who struggled for the basics of life and for their dignity.

When my soil science professor shared information about a meeting to connect students with community health projects, I was intrigued. Down the hill at Cooperative Extension, I found diverse people eagerly sharing their ideas about gardening, cooking with kids, outdoor recreation, and more. At the center was Christine—laying out the vision, guiding people to groups, dashing between them, and taking copious notes. She was immersed in the Whole Community Project (WCP), a community-led health promotion program.

Christine drew me in as a friend and co-conspirator, and it was a lifeline. She connected me with people grounded in their neighborhoods—people like Marie Hall, who had a vision to establish Victory Gardens where elders and youth could grow fresh vegetables together, and Jemila Sequeira, the WCP's director, who supported grassroots leaders and nurtured their visions to fruition. Christine encouraged me to join their efforts in Ithaca, New York's, Southside neighborhood. For our first meeting, Jemila brought Marie to campus on a dreary afternoon. As the conversa-

tion wrapped up, Jemila smiled and said, “Next time, you come to us.” It’s a lesson that has guided me ever since.

Much of Christine’s mentoring with me was fostering those relationships—relationships that she had because she was out and about, in the community, regularly. But Christine also mentored me through her example. I remember emailing her with a time to work on a community-student grant application. She responded simply, “Thanks! That’s the only free time I have that day. I think I’ll spend it with my children.” It was one of many times that her clarity and conviction shook me awake (morally speaking) and pushed me to prioritize relationships and community. Whenever I manage to do that, I hear her unapologetic words, and they ground me in what’s important.

Since then, my life has taken unexpected—but not unwelcome—twists and turns. On a Zoom call in December 2023 with Christine and other mentees, I marveled that five years prior, I would never have dreamed I’d be a community organizer. Christine laughed and said, “I could have told you *fifteen* years ago you’d be a community organizer!”

That’s Christine. Someone whose spirit connected with mine, understood “the work your soul must have” (Edwards, 2018, para. 8), and walked with me along the way—as she did for so many others. ~

Lacey Gaechter | Mentee, Colleague, and Friend at the University of Wyoming

Many of us mentored by Christine agree that one of her greatest qualities was her ability to shift her worldviews in the face of new and relevant evidence. Although this approach is perhaps the most important underlying premise of the scientific method, I expect that many of us have experienced academics’ disappointing lack of ability to change their conclusions, despite the evidence. But Christine would consider evidence, even when doing so required a profound change on her part. At the same time, she knew when to be steadfast, prioritizing capital-T Truths. (Of course, she could sometimes simply be stubborn, and I also love that about her.)

In Christine’s last weeks of life, it became very important to her that I (and all others who spent

some of that precious time with her) read two books by the children’s author Byrd Baylor: *The Table Where Rich People Sit* (1994) and *The Other Way to Listen* (1978). In *The Table Where Rich People Sit*, a young daughter calls a family meeting—something that Christine famously did as a child—to talk about their financial situation. The family in the story helps the daughter understand that they are rich regardless of their finances: rich in the color of a cactus blooming, bird sounds, and nights sleeping under the stars. Christine told me that reading this book shifted her own perspective of what kinds of wealth mattered—an early example of changing her worldview given new evidence.

I learned about the juxtaposition of Christine’s qualities—both adaptability and steadfastness—as a graduate student working on the Food Dignity project (Porter et al., 2018) and taking her Food, Health, and Justice course. With a genuine passion for knowledge that superseded what little underlying interest I have in abiding by social norms, I would regularly push back on things she said, interrupting her in front of the whole class to say, “I don’t think that’s true.” And she would make space for those discussions about little-t truths, basically saying, “all right, let’s figure out what’s true.”

One day in class in 2014, to highlight the impact of racism that systematically privileges one group of people via the oppression of another, Christine stated, “there is no such thing as reverse racism.” I chimed in, saying something like, “yes there is, because racism is just a preconceived notion about someone based on the color of their skin.” For the first time, instead of making space to discuss what was true, Christine shot me what I perceived to be “see me after class” eyes. She said no actual words to me and moved on with the class discussion. After class, I approached her and asked if we could talk about the definition of racism, armed with my two dictionary definitions. She said yes, and I advocated that both definitions were, indeed, correct.

Again, she didn’t respond with words. She brought no negativity, just silence and contemplation. She didn’t argue with me about the little-t truth that some define racism as simply being about prejudiced notions based on skin color.

Instead, she gently steered me toward the Truth of institutional and systemic racism, and why it mattered that I understood that definition but—most importantly—its impacts. She shared that this was a Truth she too had learned from pivotal community mentors in her work. She remained steadfast around this Truth when it mattered. And in doing so, she changed my worldview.

In 2024, Christine shared Baylor's *The Other Way to Listen*, which is, in part, about learning to listen to the silence. Reflecting on our single conversation of very few words—none of which argued against my actual point—from ten years earlier, I realize that Christine changed my worldview with what I now think of as *another way to talk*. She quietly guided me down a path of big-T Truth with love, and I realized I no longer cared about the path of little-t truth I had tried to take. ~

Alyssa Wechsler Duba | Mentee and Colleague at the University of Wyoming

I had the privilege of calling Christine my colleague, mentor, and friend. In 2010, as a fresh Oxford graduate returned to my hometown, I learned about the Food Dignity project (Porter et al., 2018) through a family friend. Steeped in discontent with my current job, I stalked Christine by taking her graduate class, “Food, Health, and Justice.” The class clarified my unhappiness as a struggle to reconcile academia, my privileged Oxford education, my commitment to justice, and my sometimes-problematic compassion. Christine agreed to long walks with me, a student and near stranger, and offered thoughtful personal and professional advice. One day, she invited me to join Food Dignity as the project coordinator, and we spent the next decade working together on myriad research and life projects. I coached her daughters at mountain bike camps. She supported me through meet-cutes and breakups. She attended my wedding. She met and loved my daughter.

Christine could speak with conviction on any topic aside from pop culture. No aphorism would go unchecked. We riffed for years on giving a man a fish versus teaching him to fish. Ultimately, we told a story of teaching women to fish but also planting seeds to grow materials to manufacture fishing poles. We discussed privilege and how

perceived compassion could result in co-opting the suffering of others. She invited in my whole self: my strengths and struggles. With this invitation, we sculpted the concept of co-passionate navigators, those who act from “a deep-rooted obligation to find ways around and through oppressive structures. ... [T]hese roots are in love and *compassion*; it is the systemic justice work together that transforms this into co-passion” [emphasis added] (Wechsler, 2017, p. 156). Together—and with a whole community of people—we helped build proverbial fishing poles and real gardens.

I never thought there would be a time when I couldn't reach out to Christine to ask advice, to gut-check why something felt unjust, or to muse on how to be a good parent. There would always be time to finish *The Work* together. Now I feel I can't progress without her, but that there's more I should do. Recently, a friend who also loved her reminded me that Christine had a gift of bringing together the right people at the right time in a good way to grow something amazing. After her death, I found myself in a Zoom room helping to plan a fellowship program with three people whom I'd met in completely different settings but all in some way through Christine. In fall 2024, I was invited to co-teach “Food, Health, and Justice” with one of Christine's other mentees. Her *Work*, my *Work*, *The Work*, continues. ~

Shannon Conk | Mentee

Forms. We fill them out for everything. New job—forms. Healthcare—forms. Gym membership—forms. Library card—forms. Almost always on these forms, we encounter a question about the “highest level of education completed.” Staring at this question, I always think about Christine. In part, that's because she invited me to work with her on the Food Dignity project, eventually resulting in my master's degree. But more importantly, through her, I learned how little that degree actually means in the *Work* and the Truth of food and social justice.

I learned a lot from Christine, first as her student and then as a mentee and friend. I learned important things like where to get the best baked goods in town and which singletrack you should bike if you only have one short hour between

classes or grading. I learned about not making decisions based on fear, the value and necessity of getting comfortable with discomfort, and a lot about humility. I learned about humility in the context of privilege, access to education, and the problematic “communities-have-the-problems, universities-have-the-answers” perspective that many of us come to believe as we collect letters and titles after our names, long email signatures, and bits of paper we frame for our walls. I learned about the layers of privilege inherent in access to “higher” education afforded to me by a society that is still deeply entrenched in white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism—and which doesn’t make me smarter or better or more accomplished than those who lack generational wealth and privilege for higher education. At earlier points in my life, I felt some sort of self-righteous arrogance when filling out a form and marking that yes, I did have a college degree. Working with Christine challenged me to think differently about the meaning that I derived from checking that box.

Beyond forms, I also think of Christine when I’m riding my bike in Moab and Happy Jack and whenever I pass by community gardens or marvel at the productivity of my own little raised bed. I think of how when I came to her house, she’d always offer a cappuccino, snacks, and maybe a good book to borrow. I think of how patient she was with me as I unpacked my privilege and complicity in the systems of oppression. I try to emulate her commitment to lifelong learning and seemingly infinite capacity to give to others through both tangible gifts like espresso drinks and thoughtful, intangible gifts like patience, care, and sometimes even tough love. And, I find myself perpetually leaning on the wisdom that I was lucky enough to absorb from her as I navigate the joys, confusion, and heartbreak of life. ~

Ben Cousineau | Mentee

In some ways, it’s strange that Christine reminds me so much of my time in Wyoming despite how little I interacted with her during that period. In 2013, I moved from the Midwest to Laramie to pursue a master’s degree at the University of Wyoming. It was a pivotal time in my life; I was working on coming out and navigating the changes

and challenges that went along with living more authentically. I was fortunate to find support in a small circle of Christine’s graduate students who worked on the Food Dignity project and remain some of my closest friends to this day. While I didn’t know Christine well, my friendships with her students exposed me to things she cared deeply about, like food justice and other injustices in the world.

During my last day on campus, I popped into Christine’s office and said, “I wanted to thank you. Your students have been a huge source of support for me and have become my closest friends here.” She was gracious, but she later admitted to me that she wasn’t quite sure who I was when I wandered into her office that day.

Fast-forward nearly a decade, and this time it was Christine popping into my office (well, my email inbox). She was looking for someone to fill a part-time coordinator role for the Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability (INFAS), for which she served as the executive committee chair at the time. One of her now former students, whom I counted among my closest friends, had recommended that she reach out to me. At the time, I was still mostly a stranger to Christine, but she trusted her community, and that trust extended to me.

Working alongside Christine in INFAS, I witnessed many of the qualities about her that I had heard my friends talk about over the years. Christine was a strong, visionary leader, and she could be tough when she needed to be. But her leadership style was also different than many others’—there was something that felt welcoming, safe, and supportive about her approach. I learned through working with Christine that effective leadership is not just about achieving a specific vision or goal (in contrast to what many of our systems teach us), but about being able to “see” others, creating space for them to join in shaping a shared vision, and then empowering them to participate in achieving it.

That’s probably why I think of Christine when I think of my time in Wyoming: she saw and empowered the same people who saw and empowered me during a pivotal time in my life. While Christine is known for her career in supporting community-

based food justice work, what sticks with me most is that she was a skilled community-builder herself. I remain grateful that Christine created multiple communities that I was welcomed into. ~

Lindsey Lunsford, Tuskegee University | Colleague, Mentee, and Friend

Once when I was talking with Christine, I evoked the idiom about the goose that laid the golden egg. Swiftly and gently, as was her way, Christine replied that the egg doesn't have to be gold to be of value. It could be lavender or periwinkle or black or any other color that I thought was beautiful. Gold isn't the only color that matters. Simple but life changing. That sums up a lot of the way Christine's teachings have impacted my life. Christine had a gift of seeing and helping others to see the power and value in things not always seen or appreciated. And as one could hope from a mentor, she was able to help me see the power and value I did not yet see in myself.

When working with Christine on a large grant proposal, as a first-time principal investigator applicant, I was intimidated by the forms and red tape that surrounded the grant application portals. Or to paraphrase Winona LaDuke (2020), it's "white tape." After sharing with Christine how I admired her ability to skillfully sift through the information on these major grant platforms, she remarked that what she had mastered was the language of what she called "grantspeak." She explained that grantspeak is as intentional as redlining or food apartheid: an invasive and archaic system of keeping and upholding power, designed to mystify and exclude other people from power. With Christine's help, I quickly learned to decode these systems designed to exclude me, and I realized there was so much more I could do from within them.

Christine saw both the limitations and potentials of these systems and moved within them. That's visionary leadership. I once told Christine, "You move as if you've seen the way the world could be when we do it right." To get to that "right," it will take seeing and bringing out the best in ourselves and in others—in all the beautifully colored goose eggs—especially when they do not see it in themselves. That's the power of a good mentor like Christine. Once I overcame my fear of

engaging with those platforms, I was able to remember why I was even attempting to engage in them in the first place. I had a passion for the work we could do once we navigated them. My love for the work got me through the fear of not being able to do the work. The love for what I could do pushed me past the fear that I might fail.

And that's the biggest lesson Christine left me with: to love my way through it. Her spear was always sharp, but her arrows pointed towards love. ~

Erica Hall, INFAS At-Large Member

Recently, I've been working on a project that reflects on my role as the at-large member on the INFAS Executive Committee to identify opportunities and challenges for community leaders working in this space. INFAS "connects food system scholars, educators, and action-researcher activists across the United States" (Agricultural Sustainability Institute, n.d., para. 1). But, it's an academic network mostly consisting of faculty and students. As the director of the Florida Food Policy Council, I am a community leader who often works at the interface of community-university food justice efforts—but I'm one of the few non-academic members of INFAS. And when I joined the executive committee in 2022, I became the first community leader to be elected by other INFAS members and occupy the role.

When asked why I wanted to pursue this role in the first place—joining a largely academic network as a community leader despite all the challenges of working with universities—my answer was simple: Christine. It was all Christine. She had the vision, and the universe connected us. Christine had followed the work I was doing with organizations like the North American Food Systems Network (NAFSN) and the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (JAFSCD), which we had in common. We were on a NAFSN Zoom meeting, and she pinged me privately, saying "you need to a part of INFAS—what you do and who you are is what we are striving to do." As the INFAS Executive Committee chair at the time, she wanted INFAS to better incorporate community expertise into an academic world.

I was hesitant at first; though I had worked with universities through community-based participatory research partnerships before, they so often take community leaders' contributions for granted, not even intentionally but through their bureaucracy. INFAS seemed like just another elite academic organization, living in an academic bubble. Christine told me that I could bring a view and voice to those concerns and show that there's life outside of the bubble. She made the case to the executive committee that having a community leader in the at-large role was important for those reasons, and she helped me shape my biography and put my name in for the at-large member election. She made space for me and invited me to the table. She was a visionary, always setting the table for inclusiveness. ~

Derek T. Smith, University of Wyoming

While on paper I was supposed to be one of Christine's mentors, that could not be further from reality. Arbitrary things like age or years of work experience don't make a mentor; reflective and lived experience makes a mentor. Our journey together was one of sharing each other's strengths and weakness. Christine propped up my weaknesses and helped me to grow and become a better human and man in a dynamic and complicated world. And she leaned on me when needed, which was completely imbalanced by the volume of selfless sacrifice, wisdom, and gentle guidance that she gave, unconditionally, to me and others. It became a running joke after our mentorship meetings about who was doing the mentoring, to the point that we abandoned the approach.

Instead, we adopted a new informal approach of two colleagues growing in friendship and being intentional about engaging in lively, strategic risk-tolerance or life-balance debates. This was guided by our common goal of strengthening each other and our work, striving for self-improvement so that we were best equipped to pursue and achieve our goals. Christine was unrivaled in aspirational goals, both personal and professional. In this arena, she has permanently imprinted on and impacted me the most. I surmise this is likely true for most others lucky to have known Christine. Her goals were underpinned by a "no challenge is too grand

if you are committed" mentality; undaunted courage to tackle the biggest beasts; absence of fear in doing what's right for others, the environment, friends, and family; and making good decisions out of love despite fears. To me, the biggest takeaway from a very public challenge that she professionally tackled is that "the world needs more Christines."

Aspiring to achieve an ounce of Christine's wealth of strengths is contagious. Respectfully courageous and always informed by real evidence, she inspired others to be themselves; pursue their dreams regardless of others, societal expectations, and norms; and speak up. It was impossible to not rally around her enthusiasm, humanitarianism, and passion. Thoughtful, kind, compassionate, the heart of a lion, brilliant, courageous, innovative, and always looking to the future to create permanent and lasting change that improves others' lives. These are Christine's indelible marks on the world.

Christine's legacy endures, reaching out to me in different ways, for different reasons, and maybe for no reason at all at the most random of times—good or bad, peaceful or stressful, during a run or having coffee. Most of the time I have no idea why, but I keep asking why. And then I just smile and sometimes laugh or cry. Knowing Christine, she's doing the same and probably laughing with this mentee and wondering how long it's going to be before I stop asking why. Rather, I can just appreciate and understand that her spirit and life lessons forever live on in me and will be practiced by those blessed enough to call her a friend, colleague, acquaintance, mom. I am eternally grateful to have called Christine a friend, colleague, and mentor and that her spirit continues to live on and inform my life pursuits and ambitions. ~

Learning Design with Christine

Katherine McKinney, Tandana Foundation | Collaborator

A steady stream of babies floating downstream in a river. Those within the public health field may immediately grasp the meaning of this imagery from the parable of the river. The first paragraph of the parable ends after villagers create a rescue squad to save as many babies as possible. While they cannot save all the babies, the villagers feel good about

their work. Christine included this first paragraph as a hook for the material in the first week of her University of Wyoming online course, “Creating Conditions for Community Health.”

I was a learning designer helping Christine with her course, and I will never forget the pull of this hook. I remember shrugging my shoulders after pondering the paragraph, thinking, “Yes, they’ve done all they can. Is that the takeaway?” How much I had to learn.

The learning design project had a condensed timeline and limited scope, but I still found myself devouring the course material during work and free time over the next few weeks. I had never been exposed to Christine’s Work, and now I was thrown into the middle of it, brainstorming ideas with Christine to infuse her learning material with her passion and appeal.

Broadly, the material in the course related to identifying and addressing environmental influences on individual health behavior or status. Students chose a community health issue important to them and assessed the issue in light of the research surrounding it. After the assessment, students developed an action plan supported by scientific evidence to improve the environment in their communities. Although the course was an exemplar for engaging online learning, featuring creative formative and summative assessment, active learning strategies, and thoughtful use of educational technology, my focus was on the last week of coursework, in which Christine returned to the parable of the river.

Christine never provided the ending of the parable. Instead, the final hook was the same paragraph as the first week. Christine asked students to think about the parable again after reading it. After my work with Christine in the preceding weeks, I revisited the paragraph and had an entirely new response to the dilemma: *Why don't they travel upstream and see where those babies are coming from?*

When I see the word “legacy,” I often think of either the abstract or the concrete—ideas that outlast the thinker or a treasured heirloom handed down. Some legacies, however, exist between the

conceptual and the tangible. As someone outside the field of public health who vastly benefited from working with Christine, I view the online courses that she helmed as a significant part of her legacy, one that will pave the path for future practitioners to continue the Work. ~

Denyse Ute, University of Wyoming

My path intersected with Christine as I began my journey back into academia. I was fortunate to take “Creating Conditions for Community Health” with her, a course that impacted my writing and helped me shape a clearer vision for my work.

Even before we officially met, Christine had already touched my life. I had witnessed her influence through the Growing Resilience project, which supported many of my relatives, my mother and sister-in-law among them. The simple joy of seeing my mom grow her first herbs and tomatoes was powerful. My sister-in-law continues to garden to this day. She’s now a Master Gardener who shares both her knowledge and harvests with our family and the community.

Later, I enrolled in “Food, Health, and Justice.” By then, Christine had made her journey to the other side. I learned of her passing during that semester, and the punch of grief hit me. I prayed for her spirit to find peace and felt the deep sadness through her mentees and colleagues. She had once reached out for prayers, and I was among those who prayed for her. In that class, knowing it was designed by her, taught by professors she mentored, I could still feel her presence. Her voice and teachings lived on through every lesson. The course was filled with insightful readings and reflections that I continue to carry with me and weave into my current work.

Christine lives on through the seeds she planted in all of us. And we will continue to grow, to water those seeds through acts of resilience, care, and community. I thank her for caring for my community on the Wind River Indian Reservation, for thinking of us and fighting for us through acts of care. ~

(continued)

Benches (2024)

Sarah Konrad, University of Wyoming

Linoleum cut relief print, limited edition of 10

Christine's vision of the garden bench where friends and loved ones could visit her into the future inspired this linocut print, completed in October 2024.



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