



## **Conversation with Friendly Vang-Johnson**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson :** Can you introduce yourself. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey to the work that you do today?

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** I grew up farming. My family was among the first, if not the first, Hmong people to farm in the United States. My people are an ethnic minority from Southeast Asia. We landed in the United States because we allied ourselves with the U.S. during the Vietnam War. While the U.S. was having the overt war in Vietnam, the CIA was running a covert war in Laos.

When the U.S retreated, they pulled out some of their key allies and my parents were on those first planes that left. So my family and extended relatives were among the first Hmong people to resettle, which meant that they were among the first to start farming.

Because I grew up farming, I've known what the work entails from an early age. It's arduous, and requires a dedication that I could not appreciate as a teenager. There are no days off. My parents were (and still are) super stressed out by it, and I said "I don't want to live like this." So I pursued higher education and I got a bachelor's in economics and political science. Then I went on to get my master's of public policy, in the hopes of avoiding becoming a farmer.

I had been working for the federal government for about 15 years in 2020, when COVID hit. I was living in Seattle with my husband and pregnant with my fourth child when the call came out asking, "Who's going to help our Hmong flower farmers?" You see, the iconic flower row in Pike Place market is predominantly made up of Hmong flower farmers. When the markets shut down, there was no way for them to sell their flowers. And so I said, "Well, sure, I can help...I'll take 20 bouquets. I'll call my friends. I'll call my neighbors. I'll sell a few bouquets. A friend said, "You should make a Facebook post, Friendly." And another person said, "You should make it public."

I got hundreds, and then I got thousands of people messaging me, "I'll take two bouquets," "I'll take three bouquets." Now, this was a problem because I thought when I made that post, it was just going to be people I knew....Thankfully, 40-50 other people stepped up and said, "Hey, why don't you just have the farmer deliver it to me in my neighborhood, and my friends and neighbors can pick it up from here?"

I had another guy who said, "I know a bunch of teenagers. They just got their licenses. They would love nothing better than to drive around the city of Seattle, drop off bouquets." I was like, "Thank you, Roger. Thank you, Katie. Let's do it." I became the de facto organizer because I knew a little bit of Hmong, just enough to tell the farmers where to go and how many bunches or how many bouquets [we needed].

We were helping every single weekend, thinking, "Well, just one more weekend, because surely COVID is going to end, and things are going to open up." Of course, we now know that that's not how it played out...Along the way, we started selling vegetables because we had a farmer who came to me and said, "Hey, I have 200 heads of lettuce, nowhere for it to go because all the markets are closed. Can you help?"

So I said, I guess we could email all these people who ordered a bouquet and ask them, "Would you like a head of lettuce when you pick up your bouquet?" And we quickly found out people do not want a random piece of vegetable like that. However, if you put a bunch of random vegetables in a box, then they will buy the whole box.

This was very bizarre to me because, again, I grew up farming, but in Minnesota, where the farmers' markets here are for working-class people. They are for refugees and immigrants. They are for people who are looking for culturally-specific items at a good price. Most of the farmers' markets are not geared towards a bougie audience like they are in Seattle.

So I was like, "Wow, this city is so rich that people will buy a box of vegetables that they don't even know or care what's in the box. This was exactly what we needed to help our farmers." Because our operations are sophisticated enough to where we can be like, "Okay, you can swap out that head of lettuce for a pint of blueberries." We can't. We don't have the software or systems for that. So truly appreciated people just buying the box in solidarity.

And because we always had surplus, we would bring it out to other people who were doing food distribution. We would bring bouquets out to the ERs at hospitals, give it to the doctors, the nurses,

the custodial workers, bus drivers, essential frontline workers. Everybody was getting food and flowers in 2020, 2021. We still continue it to this day, but on a smaller scale.

Why did we do that? To elevate the story and visibility of Hmong people to say, "Hey, Seattle, we've been here for 30+ years, doing this for you all, giving this you your top tourist attraction called Pike Place, and you don't even know who we are. You don't know our name." So many people would be like, "Are you Vietnamese/Chinese?" No clue about who we are and how we had served Americans even before we were Americans.

There would always be a handful of people, though, who knew the Hmong people. And it would always be something like, "Yep, I know who you are because you guys rescued my brother during Vietnam when his helicopter went down. I know exactly who you are. Thank you." So that's how 2020 went, [our] first season. By the end of the season, I had my baby. We had a youth program. We had given out several tons of produce, tens of thousands of dollars' worth of bouquets, and raised half a million dollars for the farmers.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Wow, that's incredible.**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** This was year one. Now, I thought life was going to go back to normal [But I] had a farmer approach me and say, "Are you going to help us out next year? Because now, in the fall, meaning November, December, is when I decide how much I'm going to plant next year. And if you're not going to help me next year, I do not want to overplant. I do not want to go and buy all those seeds and tools and supplies if I don't have a way of selling."

So I said, "I guess so, because we do have youth who still want to participate. We still have all these volunteers who are still willing to lend us their driveways and front yards. I can handle the paperwork, but we do have to start something a little bit more organized, so we can at least have website!" So that's how Friendly Hmong Farms was started.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Did any challenges arise along the way? Did anything change?**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** [There was a day] when we went to fill our first veggie boxes, I reached out to one of our Hmong farmers to see what they had for the box. The farmer explained, "Well, I don't have anything for you, Friendly, because hail came through my fields a few weeks ago and destroyed everything. So I have nothing." Luckily by then, I had already been networking with other refugees, Black, and brown farmers, and I said [to them] "Well, what do you all have for the box?" So everybody raised their hand, "I've got this. I've got this." I'm like, "All right. We'll throw it in the box. Bring it to my house, and the youth are going to put it in the box, and we'll get it out to the community." So that's

how we expanded beyond flowers, beyond just Hmong farmers, to include other Latino farmers, African farmers, Cambodian farmers. It blew up.

**Ashley Hopkinson: So ultimately, why the move to land ownership and how did that come up?**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** [My thought was,] "If our farmers never have secure tenureship, this is all just a house of cards. It doesn't matter how many bouquets I sell, or how many boxes of vegetables. It doesn't really matter how much advocacy I do, how many times I teach a young person, 'This is how you invoice. ' or 'This is how you set up a relationship with the small grocer so you can get into their system as a vendor .' It doesn't matter. It's all moot."

So I was racking my brain, asking, "How do I make money for these farmers?" ...We don't have a wealthy donor. We don't have an angel investor. All we have are these things that we can make come from the ground, and then we harvest them, and then we sell them. That's all we have."

And so [my ancestors] say, "You're going to make money writing." And I say, "I don't know what this means, because I am not a writer. I am not a journalist. I am not an author. I'm not even a blogger." I tell them, "This is something that you should know. Where I work, GAO, the first thing that they tell you when you come through the doors is, 'We don't care if you have a master's degree, a PhD, you don't know how to write. You are here to be an investigator, to be an analyst. We have people on staff who write. You're not one of those people.'" So I've never thought of myself as a writer, creative or otherwise.

In Fall 2022, somebody from the county called me, and he just said, "Hey, why don't you apply for this pot of money with the county to win some money to go buy farmland for these Hmong farmers?" Because there had been an article in The Seattle Times about how Hmong people were being displaced off of farmland. They were getting kicked out because they don't own it and all of this.

They understood the magnitude of the call and the politics behind it. The county executive wants to have a feather in his cap. "Look at me. Look at what I did for these little refugee farmers. I got them land." I know how this game is played.. My response was, "Well, I can't apply for that because we're not organized as a 501(c)(3). That's not how we're organized. So I put a pin in that and waited for instructions [from my ancestors to come]. The instructions come, and they say, "Well, this is what we're going to do. We need to partner up with this other organization.. [to apply].

**Ashley Hopkinson : So ultimately how are you able to secure the funding?**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** There was a presentation portion [in the application process] and somebody asked a question, pertaining to, “How do you know that you can do this?” I said, “Well we have 300 [people expressing support] and since we submitted our application, we have 700 people. [In total] 700 people have signed this petition, so we have a deep network of people who want us to succeed, and we will call on all of those people to succeed.”... “We all love flowers. We all love local produce. It's the backbone of the economic system. This is what we're about.” And so, at this point, we have won this \$4 million.

I have a degree in public policy. That's true. I can deconstruct systems, look at the stats, and all that. But what's really informing this work is my journey as a rising shaman. Now I have been able to touch that plane and [understand] “Something else is going on here. Something else is saying, ‘We need to be in right relationship with not only one another and Mother Earth, but with yourself.’” We have to be in right relationship with yourself, and yourself includes not just you in the ‘Earth suit’ that you wear, but it is your ancestors, it is your spirit, it is all the things that make us who we are.

I know that this story is long, and I have talked a lot. I have not even told you all of it, but this is how we have been able to win \$4 million to go buy farmland, move a million dollars' worth of produce for farmers, without staff, without delivery trucks, without cold storage, how we just keep kicking down doors. And people just don't understand. They're like, "Well, how are you able to get these farmers to come along with you in any way?"

Because all of these other programs or organizations that have won [grants] and they can't seem to do it. They keep holding their workshops, and farmers aren't coming. Or if they are, they aren't applying those skills that are being taught in the workshop about, “Here's how you put together a business plan,” “Here's how you develop a social media marketing presence so that people will come to you at the farmers' market.”

**Ashley Hopkinson :** Can you say more about how you’re able to reach farmers?

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** "Well, first of all, that [business plans or social media] were not the nature of the problems to begin with. It wasn't that we needed to teach these farmers anything. It was that we needed to listen to them. We needed to really elevate their leadership and see them as experts. We need to be like, “You need to come to the table.” So a very specific example.

As we look for farmland, I have told people these farmers who are identified in our grant, they need to be the ones to say, "Yep, I like this farm, and I don't like that farm." And if they don't like a farm, we aren't buying it with the money. It has to work for their family. We need to put them in powerful

positions to lead and guide this work. It is not me. It is not my educated, no accent, English-speaking Earth suit person who's going to make this decision. We need to really put those people who are most affected in a position to effectuate change.

I know that other people waking up and asking, "How do we break these patronizing patterns of viewing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, refugees, and those who don't speak English?" I say to people, "Yeah, I want to end white supremacy. The only way we're able to do that is by supplanting it with something, and that other something is us. It is our indigeneity. It is not getting another degree. It is not, "Oh, I'm just going to get really rich, and then I'll be a philanthropist." It's not that.

We better all embrace our indigeneity and be like, "My ancestors knew something. They knew something about how to do economic development, how to do infrastructure building, how to do agriculture, sustainably." We are at this nexus of racial justice, climate justice, food sovereignty work, human rights. We are right here. For me, there really isn't any other way to move. The people who are most affected need to be leading the fight. Those of us who are "educated" or privileged need to exercise the power we have to ensure that that is the case.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you, Friendly. I appreciate you sharing. It gives a lot of context for why you're doing what you're doing. You mentioned the importance of listening to farmers. Can you tell me a little bit about the farmers you have worked with? What has been an insight and a lesson you've learned along the way that you think other people could learn something from?**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** So what I have learned is that whoever you are, the funder, the organizer, if you want to work with these farmers, you're going to need to build trust because they've been through a whole hell of a lot. They have all sorts of [experiences] with people coming in and being like, "I want to help you," "I'm going to help you," "I got this grant to help you.".. [But this work] requires long-term, deep investments. Deep investments in culturally responsive ways. I'm not just talking about translated materials. I'm not just talking about, "Oh yeah, we bought them lunch, and we made sure that it was rice and egg rolls." I'm not talking about that. It goes way beyond that.

I was giving this lecture to a class of undergraduate social work students. They asked the question: "Well, how do we know that what you're doing with these farmers is actually what they want? Is it a democratic governance process that you have in place in all of these things?" I said, "Well, I think if any of you were to walk up to a lot of these farmers, and you were to sit there and just say, 'Hey, on Friendly's website, she talks about land reparations, racial justice, and food sovereignty work. Do you feel like she's moving that agenda along [these key issues]. They would look at you and [ask] "What is this terminology?" But if you ask them a basic question: "Do you trust this person?" They would [say]

“Yes, that woman there, who for the last five years has helped me move tens of thousands of dollars. The one with all these Black and brown boys in her yard [as part of youth work]. That one who was pregnant and then she was still delivering things. That one, yeah, she's got our back.”

So I said to them, as I will say to you, if you all want to make a difference, if you all want to really be part of the movement, not just studying or theorizing about it, BE OF SERVICE. I know you're going to go out there. You're going to become awesome social workers. You're going to be the one saying, "Sign this petition," "Enroll in this medical care program," "Get the vaccine." Before you go and ask one thing of us in our communities, you better show up. You better show up, and do so time and time and time again without asking for a thing first. Be of service, build relationships of trust. Demonstrate who you are and that you are in it with us. This is the ethos and praxis that counters extractive, patronizing, racist, classist behaviors that harms all of us, and Mother Earth.

So that's what I've been doing for the last five years. I just keep showing up. Farmers call me, and they're like, "I've got 200 heads of lettuce." I'm like, "Let me buy it from you. Let me figure out how to move it." "Oh, you can't deliver it? Let me find a volunteer to come and pick it up from your farm." "You don't know how to invoice? No problem, let me teach your son / daughter how to invoice.”

**Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned the importance of listening. Can you share more about what that means as it relates to your work?**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** It's meeting farmers where they're at and doing everything that is within your power to move the agenda, to inform them about their agenda, to have them shape the agenda. I am very blunt or very frank with the farmers and everybody on the advisory committee about what it is that we're really after, because after we won this \$4 million, people were like, "Well, yay. We're going to go out there and get some land." I'm like, "Yes, we should all be very, very proud right now. We did it. This is a huge, momentous occasion, but I want you all to understand something. So what we are actually doing is not spending \$4 million to get you on land and you on land, and you on land. What we're actually doing is providing a proof of concept because our goal is to spend this \$4 million, but then to go back every single year and ask for more money. What does that mean for you? It means that I need you to be really engaged, meaning if you have questions, I need you to call. Don't wait for us to call you and give you an update. I need you to tell me, 'We don't like this piece of property and why.'"

With this \$4 million, even though it sounds like a lot of money, we probably aren't going to be able to get everybody on land. And so, there's going to be some tension. There's going to be some friction here [but] the worst thing that can happen, coming out of this inaugural pot of money, is that people leave this process and they say, "Oh, they didn't help me. They just took my story and won money, and



it wasn't for me." We cannot afford that..so we need to all help [and] hold each other accountable for the outcomes that we're after and understand we're not doing it just for ourselves.

When you're listening to farmers, when you're serving them, you really have to hold yourself accountable to how they're directing you. And then you have to say, "You have to help hold me accountable. You have to do it. And I will submit to that." And it's *not* because I'm in a hired position and I'm afraid, "Oh my gosh, I'm not fulfilling my job duties. My supervisor's going to catch me messing up." I'm of the mind, and others need to be of the mind, "My community is my supervisor. I am accountable to them."

**Ashley Hopkinson: I was thinking more about what you mentioned with community supported agriculture and the shared risk that maybe hail comes, and I don't get what I want, but when I open this box, there will be some vegetables or fruits or flowers. Has that changed over the years? Have you seen a shift in how the community is responding to the farming efforts?**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** We moved away from that individual CSA box, in part because I physically moved. [Also] without someplace to aggregate and for produce to be held and for four to six different farmers to come and bring their one thing to put in the box, it was not possible. So we had to evolve. We had to innovate. [To consider], this model doesn't actually work for us. So what does?" So now we have moved on to, "What we need to do is we need to start selling produce to food banks."

And so what we've been doing for the last two or three years now is: I will make a call to a food bank, and I'll say, "Hi, I saw that you guys won all that money from the state. I saw that you said that you were going to buy from Black and brown farmers. I would love to help you with that." Basically, keeping them accountable for what they said that they would do.

Sometimes it's hard because these farmers are so small scale. They don't know how to invoice. [So we say], Okay, we'll help you with all of that. We'll help you get their produce. We'll invoice for you. We'll make sure delivery happens. If there's a problem and tomatoes come in and they're green and you expected red, we'll smooth it out. But you're going to buy from these farmers, right?"

People have said to me, "Well, Friendly, how does the trust create economic benefits for the farmer? Because if they don't own the land, and you're just going to give them a 99-year lease, that doesn't actually position them to win by building up equity in the property." It's a lot of re-education that needs to happen about the wisdom and power of indigenous, collective, regenerative agriculture. I'll explain, "It's true, they will not own the land, but while a farmer can own a piece of land on their own, they can also lose it all on their own. I believe that our model will be better in the long-run, because we



not only get them land. We will provide wraparound services and advocacy that will make sure that they get fair pricing for their produce and to help them break into these sales channels. We want to do things like get them connected with culturally responsive health [care.], childcare, technical assistance, get them in front of legislators.”

They're better off. Why? Because now they're not alone. They're not isolated. They're not out there hustling day and night because they're like, "Well, if I don't keep my mortgage payments up, I'm going to lose this property. If I break my leg one season, that's it. Bank's going to take my farm." I said, "You all are trying to win at a game that was set up for you not to win. Don't play that game. You should play the game where it's built on your strengths. Again, Indigenous wisdom, knowledge, and collective wellbeing will lead to your abundance. Play it from your strengths. Do it that way."

One of the ideas is to work with graduate social work students who have to do some sort of practicum and say [for example] “Why don’t we set up a practicum where you come and you do a project, but you're out in the fields with the farmer? Don't just lecture at them and give them recommendations to go see a therapist or join a support group. "That's not culturally responsive. Instead, go out into the field. You work with them during your practicum. You can talk about all this stuff [but] you need to build deep relationships with them. You need to keep showing up. Build up trust. So that when you want to give some advice or gather some data, it will be received well and it can actually be effective.”

We're not going to do that. We need to think about our whole health, not just our monetary or economic health, but our physical health, our mental health, our spiritual health. How do we move in a way that is towards our wellness?. It's not by following white structures [or] capitalism. It's not going to come that way. The way we farmed in the past, as newly arrived refugees or people just trying to survive is not healthy. I don't want to farm the way my parents farmed. I don't want to give up every single day between March and September to the field. I don't want to say to my daughter, "Nope, sorry, you can't sign up for swimming or gymnastics because I need you out in the field." We're not going to do that. There has to be balance, especially if we want the next generation to take up the work, understand the vision, and continue the legacy.

**Ashley Hopkinson: You were saying we definitely need to be in right relationship with nature, with ourselves. We need to be more spiritually connected, feel more spirit-led. But what else do you feel is missing from the conversation when we're talking about food justice?**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** Oh gosh, that's a really big question. I'd have to think about it a little bit more. I mean, clearly, cross-racial organizing...With the Farmland Trust. This is not just about Hmong

people...on this advisory committee, there were Black people, there were South Asian people and Latino people.

**Ashley Hopkinson : How would you define collective wellbeing?**

**Friendly Vang-Johnson:** It is wellbeing that encompasses not just us as humans in this moment, but our non-human siblings. It's the collective wellbeing with healing intergenerational trauma and wounds, and these lands, the spirit of these lands—she is just aching. She has been so patient with us, so and so giving, right? And we have just been taking her for granted. So that to me is collective wellbeing...

I tell people who I am so that they can know I am part of a collective, and what I seek is collective wellbeing. The work I engage in, the successes I have led is only possible because of the identities and skills that stem from the collective. I am the child of refugee farmers, a community activist, a shaman born from a lineage of many shamans before me. The work that I'm carrying forward and how I'm moving, it has and will continue to take time. So back to the main point, it takes time. You better show up again and again and again. Don't wait for this invitation or don't expect gratitude for every little thing that you do. I'm not here to [say] "Well, I brought you this food. Where's the thank you card? How come I'm not invited to the powwow?" No, that's not your place and it should not be your goal. We must work in the ways that we do because something much deeper is driving it: collective wellbeing for us now and into the future....

We need to work across races, across ethnic lines, but we need to do it in this very authentic way. In a way that is culturally responsive, that acknowledges the trauma that we have all been through. Not to [say] "You should just get over it [because] I'm a new person. I am sincere and that stuff that happened to you / your people wasn't perpetrated by me / my people." That would be you just perpetuating white supremacy." I don't care who you are, or how much money you are bringing to the table. Know the context. The context matters. As our lovely vice president has said: You didn't just fall out from a coconut tree.

In the past and even now we continue to make these land acknowledgements and we give...One of my youth said to me once, he was like, "I don't think that's fair. I don't think that you should have to pay anything, Friendly, because you're Hmong and you didn't do those things. You weren't here during the early colonization or whatever." And I said, "No, I do those things because I want to acknowledge that our ability to even survive on this land came on the backs of other people, attempts to decimate other people." That is the history that has led to my people's ability to be in the United States. That's what it's about. It's me being able to look at Black people and Indigenous people and being like, "I see you. I

see your history. I'm right there with you. I want to tell you about my history. Your people were enslaved? Yes, my people were also enslaved. We have more in common than we are taught.”

So that runs in my blood, too, that runs in my history. I want to be able to talk about that with you, with my Indigenous brothers and sisters and be like, "I have a bond to you. I can feel your ancestors. And they want you to come back, they want you to come home. They want you to call on them because they are powerful...There has been so much genocide perpetrated against our people. Neither of our peoples should be here, yet we persist.

I think one of the reasons why we, as Hmong people, are here is because we have an unbroken line to our ancestors, an unbroken way of talking to land, of being in connection, which is shamanism. I'm not saying that we're perfect or that we somehow have a secret weapon or total wellness, because there's a lot of dysfunctionality that comes from the trauma of surviving colonialism and war.

But honestly, we should not be here. And so I think about that and all I can come up with is that we do have this tool to seek collective well-being. We have this tool that allows us to survive in all of these different contexts amongst all sorts of different people. I'm just amazed at my people and our role throughout history, wherever we have gone.

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*\* This conversation has been edited and condensed.*