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When smart food policy meets a clueless governor

By Myriam Marquez

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When Patricia Robbins was 11, her bucolic life on the family farm 10 miles from Dade City was no more.

No more growing corn or okra or watermelon with “Daddy” — the grandfather who had reared her. No more getting a dime for recess at school, her grandmother told her. A nickle, at best.

Robbins’ grandfather “was the sole breadwinner of the family” so upon his death in 1953, “we lived without any income,” she noted. As a farmer, he had decided not to pay into Social Security.

“Grandmother sat me down and said, ‘Our life has changed. You do not have to worry, there will always be food and this house over our heads, but we will not have any money to buy things. We will sell something from the farm every year and that will be all until the next year.

“ ‘We will never sell our home and we will never borrow from anyone, because you have to pay it back.’ ”

They sold her grandfather’s horse and plow the first year. “We both cried as that was so much a part of the memory of him. Mama had a strong sense of values, cared about others, grew our food, sewed all my clothes, taught Sunday school.... I did without a lot of things, but love was not one of them.”

And so it was. Robbins’ grandmother, Florence, taught her lessons in self-sufficiency, but the little girl on the farm also learned about how neighbors can help neighbors. And she learned that government could help in small ways that delivered big returns.

“When the old USDA cheese program was in place,” Robbins said, a neighbor would take her to pick up cheese and powdered milk. “That was such a treat and when the cow was dry, we had powdered milk for cooking.”

Robbins’ past helps explain her passion for helping the poor and hungry.

As cofounder of FarmShare, a nonprofit organization that sorts, packs and distributes food throughout Florida, Robbins was smacked hard by Gov. Rick Scott’s recent veto of \$750,000. That money is crucial to help pay for refrigeration of food and transporting it from here to North Florida. Pantries at churches and synagogues, soup kitchens, senior centers and homeless shelters throughout the state depend on this program.

Now farmers will have to get creative to qualify for federal payments for donated food because FarmShare’s program has been crippled. Will the farmers pay for the refrigeration and transport of this produce? How many South Florida farmers are making big bucks in this economy to do that?

Or will they be forced to dump the food they can’t sell because the vegetables are a bit small or too big for the market — just dump it in the landfill?

What was Scott thinking? Talk about clueless.

About 200 agencies in Miami-Dade alone depend on this program. The Pompano Farmers market also participates.

Now everyone's scrambling to plug this hole created by a novice governor whose staff didn't seem to have a clue as to FarmShare's bipartisan support and its smart economic policy. Robbins is hoping the federal government can step in, or private donors, or a combination of both.

"This is personal for me," Robbins said. "Through no fault of anyone's a child and a grandmother had to survive.... So as long as I can, I want to help that child and grandmother because a long time ago, that child was me."

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