

ELISE MARGOLES
Elysian Fields Farm – Cedar Grove, NC

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Interviewer: Kate Medley

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Kate Medley: This is Kate Medley interviewing Elise Margoles at Elysian Fields Farm near Cedar Grove, North Carolina, on July 7, 2011. And so now I'll get you to introduce yourself and tell us what you do.

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Elise Margoles: Okay; my name is Elise Margoles and I own and run Elysian Fields Farm, which is primarily a vegetable farm, where I sell my produce at the Carrboro Farmers' Market, and I also have a CSA program.

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KM: And tell us where you come from and your birth date.

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EM: Okay; so I'm originally from Maine, and my birthday is June 24, 1975.

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KM: How did you start farming?

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EM: So, I started to get interested in farming when I was in college. And then when I finished school, since I didn't know what I wanted to do, I decided to work on a farm. So I went to Upstate New York; I was going to college in Massachusetts. And went to Upstate New York and

did a summer internship at a farm up there, and wasn't sure how I was going to feel about it but ended up really loving it, just being outside, and just the whole process of it was really great.

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And kind of from there I just knew that's what I wanted to do. I ended up after that coming down to North Carolina and working on a farm down here. And after that season, decided I wanted to start my own farm and started looking around for property in and around the area here and was lucky enough to find this piece that I've been on for the past ten or eleven years.

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KM: Take us back to college—or maybe it was before then—and tell us a little bit about what first inspired you in this direction.

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EM: So I think actually what inspired me was more—because I've never actually been a very good cook, but what actually inspired me was more the environmental aspect of organic farming. So for me, it's always been about organic farming and not just farming, and that's just a personal thing, you know. I'm not going to try to push it either way.

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I really like the idea of it being local also, which is, I think, more environmentally friendly, because we're not trucking it across the country. But I also do think it tastes better when it's local and fresher. So that was actually where it started; I kind of just started to become more environmentally conscious.

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You know, growing up we didn't—recycling and things like that weren't really a—and I think I just started thinking about it more when I was in college and kind of started thinking about the way food was grown. So it was more from that angle, of like how food is grown.

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And that, you know, I think that's really where it took off and that's kind of what got me to that farm in Upstate New York. Also, you know, I will say just for lack of nothing else that was like grabbing me, like college, I went through and you know, nothing— I majored in International Development, but I just really did not know what—. I did that for lack of nothing else driving me. So I really wasn't sure where I was headed. I've always liked, you know, being outside, and I've always liked being physical. So I think those are the motivations that sent me to that farm, yeah.

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KM: What did you grow up eating? What was the food of your youth?

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EM: That's a good question. My mom was always really good about feeding us healthy food, so like, we'd be the kids at school who had bean sprouts and like cut-up carrot sticks and everybody else would have, you know, the little snacks. And so you know, being mad at her at the time about it but now like thanking her for it.

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But yeah; we weren't allowed to have soda in the house. We weren't allowed to have any kind of sweets or anything like that. [*Rooster in Background*] So I think that definitely, like, set probably some kind of tone also.

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KM: Uh-hm.

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EM: For just being healthy.

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KM: And so how did you learn to farm?

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EM: Definitely learned to farm just by doing it. Going—you know, yeah. I went to college for four years, but it definitely—none of that is helping me on this farm today. **[Laughs]** Although *maybe* in some senses, I don't know. But yeah; I've learned how to farm pretty much by doing it. And the internship that I did in Upstate New York and then the one I did down here, really both of them, you know, just watched exactly what was going on and what they were doing, and tried to model my farm after them—which, you know, neither of those farms actually sold at Farmers' Markets. They were both CSA-only, and so when I first started my farm I thought that was what I wanted to do was just a CSA. And it still is a strong passion for me, but it's kind of funny because Ken—my neighbor, Ken Dawson—when I first moved to the area, stopped by and he was on the Board of the Carrboro Farmers' Market at the time and they were trying to get some more farmers to join the Wednesday Carrboro Market at that point, because it was still new and there, you know, wasn't, you know, that many vendors or that many customers at that point. And so he was like hey, why don't you—I see you're a farmer and you're new to the area, okay; why

don't you apply to the—here's an application. You should apply to the Carrboro Farmers' Market.

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And I was kind of like, “Hmm, I don't know.” And then I was like, “Yeah, yeah, okay; I'll try it out,” you know, and so that's actually what got me into the Farmers' Market. And I just needed that little push, and I just fell in love with it, you know, just the whole—the whole thing. But—yeah; I don't know where I was going with all that.

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KM: How did you get to North Carolina?

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EM: So yeah, I've always been up north and then the way I found both internships that I worked on, the one in Upstate New York and North Carolina, was through the ATTRA, so it's Alternative Technology Transfers to Rural Areas, A-T-T-R-A.org. And it's a great site. It has all kinds of articles and information for farmers, but it also has a listing for the whole country of farms that are looking for help and, like, what they're looking for and their contact information. And that's how I actually now advertise for my interns, and that's how I get most of them. But that was—it was nice for me because I was up north, but I did want to try out some areas in the rest of the country, and so it was a great way to get connected with those farms.

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So I set up, like, a road trip to kind of visit a few of the farms around the country and made my way down the East Coast, visiting the farm in North Carolina that I ended up working on, went to Florida, and across to Arizona, and then back home again up in Maine, where I was

at the time. But fell in love with this farm in North Carolina and just stayed for a couple days and met some of the people in the area and, you know, having never been in the South before, I was totally shocked at how great it was, because in the North they don't make it sound like it's very great. **[Laughs]** Unfortunately they're missing out big-time, and I just loved it.

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But yeah, and then realized that there was such a great market, too, just seeing like what was going on that farm and how many farms are in the area and how agriculturally focused everybody was. It was just awesome. Yeah; so that's how I ended up in North—so I decided I wanted to be on that farm. I came down here to do that internship.

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KM: What was that farm?

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EM: So it's Sustenance Farm, and they are about forty-five minutes south of Chapel Hill. And they don't do markets, and I'm not sure if they're doing the CSA anymore or not. They're more of like an educational kind of farm. They like to kind of focus on having a lot of people out there and doing workshops and whatnot.

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KM: So you showed up at Sustenance Farm. First impressions?

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EM: Of North Carolina?

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KM: Of the South, of the farm—?

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EM: Of the South, yeah; just fabulous. I mean, I loved it, and I knew right away that I wanted to stay here. And I was looking for that, too, though; I was looking for a place to kind of feel more comfortable in and that I could settle in and set some roots and—. Yeah; it just definitely—I started taking classes at the community college in Pittsboro also while I was farming. They have a sustainable ag program there, and it was in its first couple years at the time. The farmer that I was working for, Harvey Harman, had started that program, or helped start that program, back then, and, so I was able to also while I was working on that farm take classes in organic agriculture at this community college. I don't know if you've heard of it. It's in Pittsboro, CCCC, Central Carolina Community College, and so I was able to take, like, I think I took four classes the fall—or the spring semester, and then I took, like, another four the fall semester. But I've also taken over the years a class here or there, which has been really helpful. [*Frogs in Background*]

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KM: Compare growing climates from Upstate New York to North Carolina.

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EM: So yeah; that was really different, so I'm really glad that I was able to do some farming down here before I bought my farm, because it's definitely really different from what I

experienced up North. So up North, there's just one growing season, and you can have lettuce and greens and tomatoes all summer long. So yeah; you can have lettuce and tomatoes at the same time, radishes in the summer. And then here we have three growing—well four, I guess—winter, spring, summer, and fall. But I just do spring, summer, and fall. And spring and fall are just the cool-season crops like lettuce and radishes and then summer is just tomatoes and eggplants and whatnot. And so we can never have those at the same time, or they may overlap a little bit, but not much.

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And so yeah; that was definitely really different.

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KM: And the bulk of that learning curve happened at Sustenance Farm?

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EM: Yeah; it happened there, but it's still happening. I mean, it seems like every year I learn something new. But also, you know, when I started out I definitely still had a lot more to learn and I think that I—like I just dive into things, and so like I would make mistakes and learn as I go, and you know that works, too. So [*Laughs*] as long as I learn from them. And so yeah; I think that just, kind of like, by trial and error and by working on that farm. And you know, another main thing though, too, is just the network of farmers in this area, because there's so many farmers that are doing very similar things that I am, and the great thing is that we're all helpful to each other as opposed to, you know, threatened by each other—which could be a scenario, possibly.

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So it's really just a nice thing to be able to look at what they have and ask how they did it or, you know, that camaraderie.

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KM: So you left Sustenance Farm, and then what?

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EM: So after I left the second internship at Sustenance, for about a year, while I was trying to find the right piece of land and start my farm, I worked at a historic garden just doing landscaping and was looking around. And it's actually there, the handyman at that historic garden, I asked him if he knew of any land for sale. And he said, "I do, up in Cedar Grove." And I was like, "Oh, well that sounds good. Where is Cedar Grove?" And so—

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KM: And where is Cedar Grove?

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EM: So Cedar Grove is thirty minutes north of the Carrboro Farmers' Market. So thirty minutes north of Chapel Hill, fifteen minutes north of Hillsborough. And at the time I was living in Pittsboro, which is about twenty minutes south of Chapel Hill. So I didn't know where Cedar Grove was because it's about an hour north of Pittsboro. And so he said he would happily show me this piece of land that was next door to him that was for sale. And so I came up here, went up there, and he showed me around. And this actually was the piece of property that I farmed on my first year and then moved from, so I'm not farming—I've stopped—I rented land my first year,

and then bought the property that I'm on now the following year. So I've been on the property that I'm on now for ten years, but the first year I rented. And that was mainly to give my aunt and uncle a—to prove to my aunt and uncle, who were my investors at the time, that I was serious [*Laughs*]. Which I think was probably wise of them to do: you know, kind of say, “Okay. You want to start a farm. Go ahead and do it for a year and show us, you know, that you're serious and that you can make a living on it.”

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So after that year, yeah, I found the other piece. Oh, and so my aunt and uncle ended up investing by helping me buy the land, and so in that sense, I've been paying them back every year for my mortgage. And you know, in order to get them to that place where they felt comfortable with that, I wrote a—you know, I took a class at the community college in the sustainable ag program on how to write a business plan. And I wrote a business plan. And I gave that to them, and also they wanted to see me do a year of a trial run. And so with those two things, they felt willing to kind of invest in the farm.

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KM: And how old were you at that time, and what was that year like?

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EM: So I was twenty-five—or twenty-four or twenty-five, maybe twenty-five—that first year that I rented the land, and—did you say, “What was it like?”

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KM: Uh-hm.

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EM: It was really hard, you know, and it's—you know the—I get so much more perspective on it as each year goes by now, just—. I mean, it was really hard and I really do think I could have benefited probably from working on a couple more farms in the area before I started. And you know, that being said, it all worked out fine because I'm happy, and I think that my farm is doing well, and I'm happy with how things are going. But in retrospect, you know, I'm sure that could have helped. And you know, as I have some young women who are now like twenty-five who are working for me and wanting to start their farms, I can give that advice, you know. Say, “Well, you know, you could start and it'll probably work out like it did for me, but it might be a little easier on you [*Laughs*] if you, you know, wait and get another year or two under your belt of working for some other farms.”

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You know, that being said, like I said, it all worked out. And again just the help of some of the other farmers in the area giving me some advice, being able to learn by watching what they were doing, really made a difference. But yeah; that first year was really hard. I think the hard thing about it for me was that, you know, there are different approaches. Some people start out farming, and maybe they're working a part-time job, and they just kind of start a little at a time. And then maybe put money—more money into the farm each year. And I just kind of wanted—I didn't want to do that; I wanted to farm full-time. And so I was, you know, putting up a greenhouse and, you know, getting the fields disked—and plowed and disked—and everything that spring and trying to start and farm that spring, and it was definitely a lot to handle for the first year.

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I would not want to relive that first year. **[Laughs]** But, you know, I made it, and I actually still have some CSA members from then, so—. That's good because it's been you know eleven years now, so—yeah.

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KM: Do you remember any particular moment of that year that—?

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EM: Oh yeah; I definitely remember a few moments.

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KM: Any you want to share?

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EM: **[Laughs]** Really?

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KM: Or was there any moment where you thought to yourself, “What have I gotten myself into?”

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EM: Yeah, definitely, but I mean I never doubted that I wanted to, which has been like—that's been a great thing all along. Or, well jeez, I say that, but like last year in August I was like, “Do I really want to be a farmer?” **[Laughs]** But I mean, I think August aside—like August doesn't

count, okay, because it's so hot and you're so tired. So aside from August, I haven't doubted it, which has been a good thing, because like I said, up until I discovered that this was what I wanted to do, I really had no idea. And so it's nice to just be like, "Wow; I'm happy and I like what I'm doing." So yeah; there were definitely some moments where it was like, "Oh my God! This is really hard." You know, and probably crying, you know. But, you know, that just kind of made me more—I think just determined, like, "I'm going to do this," you know. But it's definitely—it's been challenging.

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KM: And then you dove in with this plot of land.

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EM: Yeah.

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KM: And describe to us what it looks like out here, what you have to work with.

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EM: Okay; and so after I rented that piece of land for a year, my aunt and uncle and I decided to buy a piece of property, and I ended up getting a piece just a few miles down the road, which is nice because I really like this community here in Cedar Grove. And this piece is just perfect from—I mean, I fell in love with it right away. It's forty acres; it has a three-acre spring-fed pond that's just gorgeous, and we can irrigate from that, and I can swim in it, and my friends take boats out on it and catch bass [*Laughs*]. And the property was raw land. It had a few tobacco

barns when I first moved here, and some sheds and whatnot. It's probably about maybe sixty percent pasture and forty percent wooded, so it's a nice combination. And definitely plenty of space to grow on; I have really sandy, sandy soil. This used to be old tobacco land, just up until the year—actually until I moved here, so yeah.

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KM: Do you remember anything—I mean not specifics, but what do you remember of your original business plan or your original vision for farming?

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EM: I definitely think that the financial aspect of my business plan was very naïve. But you know, I've gotten a lot better sense of reality on that over the years, and that's good. But as far as the vision, it's kind of been the same aside from—well it's been the same in the sense that I really wanted to do a CSA at first, and what I really wanted to do was like, create, like, a community—like, know the people who were eating my produce, like that's really what I wanted to do.

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And you know, so one thing that's been great, though, is I haven't only accomplished that through the CSA, but I've accomplished that through the Farmers' Market. And in going to the Market and seeing people regularly and, you know, talking to them and getting the feedback on how they've cooked my thing or, you know, what they've done with it that week or, you know, what they think of my display or this, that, or the other—it's just that feedback and that connection is really what I wanted. So in that sense, you know, that's kind of been my goal and I guess, you know, my marketing outlook in the business plan from the beginning. Really the only

thing, like, I think from the get-go is just—that I had a lot to learn about was just the business aspects of running a business [*Laughs*], because that's something that I never had any experience with and it doesn't necessarily come to me naturally. So like, being a manager, or, you know, being my own accountant or things like that have been, you know, a little challenging. But I've gotten a lot better at it over the years, you know.

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KM: I was told that you started one of the first CSAs in the Triangle area. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

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EM: Yeah; so back when I started it—I guess it would have been 2000 or 2001 at this point. I not only wanted to do a CSA, but that was a good instigation also because there weren't any others that I knew of in the area. And I think the first year that I had mine, there was another farm that had their first year of CSA as well—Timberwood Organics, and they still have a CSA running now, and so that was a nice thing.

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And since then there have been so many that have popped up, and it's just amazing that my CSA numbers have grown, but I'm still filling up every year. And then so many other CSAs have come, and they're filling up, and so just the demand and, I think, what people have learned about CSAs is just increasing. What was the other part of your question?

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KM: I would imagine, though, that in that first year you did a lot of explaining the concept of a CSA.

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EM: Gotcha; sure, yeah. I made up some brochures, which were helpful, I think, and kind of put them around, and so within those brochures that, you know, kind of tried to explain what it was. And as the years have gone on, it hasn't been—. You know, even the second or third year, what I did was I got a website after that. And then, you know, I think one thing about the Triangle area is we do have a lot of transplants from other parts of the country, and so maybe people came in who had already heard about it or, you know, the word was kind of spreading. But you know, aside from that first year of sending out the brochures and then setting up the website the second year, I haven't had to really push. I actually haven't had to advertise, which has been really nice.

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Actually, the only one way I do advertise is there's some websites on the Internet where if I were just typing in "community-supported agriculture" in Google, it would bring me to these websites. And if you type in your zip code, it'll tell you where you can find a CSA near you. And so I've listed my farm on some of those sites. And that's the only way I've ever really had to do it. So you know, it actually hasn't been too much explaining, I guess.

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KM: So here we are in 2011, sitting underneath your packing shed. And tell us about your business now, tell us what you do.

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EM: Okay. Yeah, it's just amazing how much it's grown since the beginning. It's really **[Laughs]**—it's funny; just, we're having such a good year this year, and you know, not that—there were good things about the first year, but it was definitely so much harder that it is interesting for me to look back and see how much things have changed. And then also there's a guy who worked for me last year who is my age when I started, twenty-five, and she's looking to buy land right now and start her farm and just kind of dealing with how to go about doing that, that it's making me think a lot about what it was like back then.

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But you know, this year—right now, I mean, things are better than they ever have been, and I think that's a product of just like, for me, trial and error and experience and looking back at last year in the winter and saying, “Well what can I do better?” And I think it's also a product of the fact that the weather has been pretty decent this year, which always helps.

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So this year we're doing 110 CSA members like we've done the past few years. I think that's a pretty good size for us. It works for me to have that number and then the Wednesday Carrboro Farmers' Market and the Saturday Carrboro Farmers' Market, and those are the only ways that we sell our produce. We do sell it to restaurants, but they usually will just come to the Farmers' Market and buy from me there, so I don't really do deliveries or whatnot with them.

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And that works out pretty well for me to have two full-time employees. So it's me and usually two women full-time. They work forty hours a week, and I've been this year trying to take Sundays and Mondays off, although it doesn't always happen—like this week I wasn't able to. **[Laughs]** But I'm trying to just work a five-day work week and keep it, you know, closer to

like fifty hours a week for myself. It just feels healthier. It doesn't make me burn out as fast and yeah, it's been good.

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I mean, I've got this one girl, Beth, who has been working for me the past four years who is just fabulous, and she has kind of taken more of a managerial role this year. And I think just with the both of us getting better over the years, things are just running so smoothly. The other woman who is working for me, Liz, is just really on it and eager to learn. She's got some family land in Saxapahaw that she's hoping to farm next year as well, and she's twenty-five and looking to be a farmer. And so she's really motivated and things are just going well; yeah.

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KM: And what are you growing, and how does that compare with what you were growing ten years ago? What's worked and what hasn't over the years?

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EM: Okay; so we really grow just about everything, but we definitely grow more of some things. Right now we're flooded with tomatoes, and that's a good thing because we can sell a lot of tomatoes and everybody seems to love them—and I love them. And that's actually something I've gotten a lot better at over the years is growing tomatoes. They're really challenging, really hard to grow, and that's been something that's been a really profitable thing for the farm.

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Strawberries in the spring are really, really nice. We don't do a pick-your-own or anything, but you know, they're great for the CSA. We pick them and give them to the CSA and sell them at the Market. Oh, let's see; we've got a lot of eggplant and peppers right now. Oh, the

melons; we've got a lot of melons, which are always really heavy to carry out of the field but they're so yummy. Yeah; was there another part to that question?

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KM: What were you growing ten years ago and—maybe it didn't work, or you've phased it out, or there wasn't an audience for it?

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EM: Yeah. I've definitely honed in over the years more on certain things for the Market. So for the Market I'll definitely do more of certain things, although I do try to have a wide variety. For the CSA, you know, I try to have a wide variety, period. And so you know, there's not usually an excess of any one thing necessarily, but for example, you know, one of the things I've prided myself on these past few years have been, you know, trying to do really good onions, carrots, and tomatoes, I guess would be another one.

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You know, ten years ago, those weren't things that I was—getting into it I wasn't focusing on and trying to really do something different or special—oh, radishes, too. **[Laughs]** Nobody would think really that radishes would be a popular item, but I've—I've been really pushing all the different colors and varieties of radishes in the spring in the past few years, and it's really worked out well for us. So I think in the beginning I didn't have a focus on any one thing; I was just kind of trying them all out and seeing—you know, for me, I think it was sort of like, what's going to sell at Market, but still having to grow all the diversity for the CSA. I want to give them a little bit of everything, obviously thinking about, “Well, what do I like to eat? What do most people like to eat?” You know, broccoli is generally more popular than kohlrabi,

and that's just, you know, one of those things, so kind of maybe growing more of one thing or the other. But really just kind of learning what I like.

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Oh, one thing about my soil here is because it's so sandy also, I don't have the orange clay that's typical for Orange County. And it actually helps me be able to grow root crops, which I've really—seeing as since I've learned about my soil over the past ten years and what really thrives in it, I've really grown to liking to grow the things that thrive in it because it makes me happy when something does well. **[Laughs]** So that's why I've really enjoyed growing carrots, for example. Because my carrots will grow very straight and very long, you know, like ten-inch, straight-down, you know, beautiful carrot, and it's gratifying. You know, so I'm trying to do the things that I can with the soil that I have, whereas, you know, some of the folks that have the orange clay, it's harder because it's a tougher soil and it really—the root just can't grow down it. But also at the same time, you know, there's always an upside and a downside to different soils. So you know, the red clay holds onto nutrients much more than the sandy soil; the nutrients in the sandy soil will just leach out when it rains. And so that's definitely a downside; it's harder for me to grow things that are really heavy feeders of nitrogen and whatnot—like broccoli, for example. **[Laughs]** I always have a hard time with broccoli.

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So I guess just—and what do I grow and how that's changed over the years—it's definitely come about by like learning about my soil and learning about what will sell at Market and learning about what I enjoy doing, too.

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KM: You touched on it briefly earlier, but tell us about your introduction to the Carrboro Farmers' Market.

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EM: Sure; yeah. So like I said, I really just wanted to do a CSA, but also kind of be more—just kind of create a community around knowing who is eating my food and whatnot. And when I first moved up to Cedar Grove, my neighbor Ken Dawson came over to introduce himself, because he heard there was someone who was going to be farming in the area. And he wanted to know who that was, because he had a farm in the area, and he brought over an application to the Carrboro Farmers' Market with him. And I hadn't been thinking about a farmers' market, but, you know, he kind of made it sound like a good thing, and I thought maybe it would be a nice complement to the CSA. So I did apply and I got into the Wednesday Carrboro Market, and at that point, you know, the Wednesday Market was just a few years old and was still needing some more vendors and some more customers. It's not that way anymore; well, we could always use more customers, but the vendors we've really gotten filled up and there are *a lot* of customers, too, which is great. And that's just the product of ten years I guess, you know people learning about it.

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So that's kind of how I got introduced to it and I remember my first Market [*Laughs*]. I made I think \$35, which is just so funny. [*Laughs*] I love telling some of the younger, like the girls who are working for me now who want to start their own farm. And it's funny because—yeah, anyway—I won't get into that. But it's just funny now to go to a Wednesday Market and, you know, make hundreds of dollars [*Laughs*]. But you know, that's ten years.

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Anyway when I first started going I was really shy, too. That's something that's changed about being forced into being a business owner is that I've had to really learn how to be more extroverted—and it would be nice if I had a partner maybe who was more extroverted and I wouldn't have to do that. But like I really had to—I really—I didn't have that, so I had to really just come out of that.

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So I remember the first couple years the Market was really challenging for me because there's lots of communicating with customers. And I actually want to say, though, that probably the Market has been one of the best things for making me more outgoing in my whole life, just because of the practice that I've had with communicating with people. And it's been a really good thing in the long run even though it was like really hard—yeah, going on a tangent there.

[Laughs]

00:30:57

KM: What's the community of the Carrboro Farmers' Market like?

00:31:03

EM: Hmm; well, I guess there's definitely the community, so when you say “community of the Market,” I think of first, like, the community of farmers at the Market is the first thing that comes to mind. But then there's also the broader—I guess the customers and sort of you know the volunteers and whatnot, but I always think of our annual meeting. Like if you say that—“the community of the farmers”—it makes me think of our annual meeting, when all the farmers have to come and we all have a potluck and we all kind of have this two- to three-hour business meeting together that can get kind of crazy and kooky, and, you know, but at the same—you

know, at the same time [*Laughs*]—. At the same time, you know, it's always fun when you haven't seen—it's usually in February, so you know some of us haven't seen each other in months. So it's always fun to catch up and learn what new stuff is going on in different people's lives.

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And then, you know, there's always people who—somebody is not happy about something or somebody wants to try something new or suggest this and so it's—it's interesting. We try to follow Robert's Rules of Order, so there's about, you know, like eighty farmers in there, with maybe family members or whatever, and it's a big thing. But we usually—we have a president. Well, you know, we have a board and a president and it's usually pretty productive and held pretty well, I think.

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And so yeah; and that's one of my favorite—the reason why I bring that up is because it's one of my favorite things. I look forward to it every spring, because I really do enjoy all the other characters at the Market. You know, everybody has got their own interesting—each farmer has got their own interesting thing going on, and I enjoy catching up with people that I haven't necessarily seen all winter. And then—and I guess in the broader sense, like the community, it—when I think of the whole community surrounding the Market, like the customers, I mean there definitely are certain customers who are just *so* dedicated it's amazing. And I know their names, and I know about their lives and, you know, they know when I'm going to have this or they know—and they ask about it and they know—it's just really nice to see that level of involvement with the Market. And I enjoy those people and then, you know, there's all levels of people that I've never seen before or, you know, people that I maybe kind of recognize, and it's all good. It's all fun.

00:33:14

KM: Yeah. Indulge us for a minute, take us through some of the cast of characters that stand out in your mind.

00:33:20

EM: Oh okay. Let's see; one thing I do when I get to the Farmers' Market is I—you know, get my stand set up and then my mother, who helps me at the Farmers' Market, will watch my stand while I go make a loop. And I like to get my breakfast, but I also like to just say hello to everybody. And so, you know, when I go around, I really enjoy—I don't know; just, it's like, some of the time it's just a quick hello, but it's just, you know, fun to see someone. There's, you know John Soehner, who is—he'll see you coming, you know, ten feet before you get there and yell out your name, "Elise!" you know, just like he does with everybody. And it's just fun to hear whatever, you know, he's been up to, you know, the past few nights and all that.

00:34:06

And then, you know, I always enjoy saying hi to Kevin Meehan, who has got some interesting stories, and he's always got good coffee. And then I always want to say hello to Ken [Dawson] and see what he's got going on at his table, because he always has a really impressive display, so it's always interesting—and see how much rain he's gotten or this, that, or the other. And he's just got a lot of wisdom, so it's always nice to just hear whatever little thing he's got to say.

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And then as I keep going down I'll see—Alex and Betsy will be there, and I always enjoy checking out their stand and Alex usually comes up and gives me a little half-hug and [*Laughs*].

Betsy and I have some mutual friends that some of my friends used to work for them and she'll always be like, "So how is so-and-so, and what's going on with so-and-so?" And let's see; I definitely—Leah Cook, who has been the president of the Market for the past few years, is a good friend of mine, and you know, I love going up to her stand and shooting the crap for a little bit. It's always fun, and her neighbor Joanne Horner at the Market is someone who I really enjoy speaking with as well.

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And then there's, you know, Leslie Heinz has the greatest biscuits and like donuts and just sticky, sugary, yummy things that I always buy. And yeah; so I mean Kathy and Michael Perry—well, Michael Perry and Kathy Jones of Periwinkle Farm—it's always fun to say hi to them. Yeah; it's good.

00:35:32

KM: And who are some of your regular customers that stand out?

00:35:35

EM: I was just thinking about this one woman. Her name is Karen and she's become a CSA member the past few years, but before that she was also a customer, and she's still a customer. And she's just really a dedicated Market shopper and she must just really love to cook. You know, I think it's just a passion for her, because she'll buy a lot of stuff, and I know she goes to other Farmers' Markets, too, not just the Carrboro Market.

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But she sends me emails about stuff she's cooked with my food and then will send me recipes. And it's just so nice to get that feedback. And then you know she knows how my mom

is, for example—my mom is a teacher, and in the summer when she has off she'll help us out a little bit. And we have just a few blueberry plants. My mom really likes to pick the blueberries. And she does a really good job at picking blueberries, because she's very particular, like you know—. Because sometimes there will be blueberries that look like they're kind of ripe. It's a fake-out; they're really kind of reddish. And my mom can tell the difference, and she'll take the time to pick only the blue ones.

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And Karen has figured this out, and so Karen will only buy the blueberries if she knows that my mom picked them. *[Laughs]* So it's just kind of a funny, you know, relationship to have with a Market customer where she comes up and says like, "Did your mom pick those blueberries?" And we say "Yeah," and she's like, "I'll take all of them," you know. So anyway—

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KM: Anybody else?

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EM: Let's see; she stands out. Oh, I don't know; I mean there's definitely like a couple older guys this year who come and just buy tomatoes every Wednesday and Saturday from me. And they fill up these huge bags and just say how good they were and it's just nice. I guess specifically nobody is coming off the top of my head, although, I mean, I know there are tons of regulars. I mean there's one guy, his name is Vic and he comes every week and he's very sweet. And you know, I know that he buys regularly from a lot of people and he has certain things that he likes. And we know to like, when we have the first Sungolds, to save him a pint of Sungolds,

because he's going to buy it. You know, we don't even have to worry about asking or, you know, we just know that that's what Vic is going to want. So it's nice to have that.

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KM: Overall, how would you describe your demographic of customers at the Carrboro Farmers' Market?

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EM: Hmm; that's a good question. I think it's definitely all ages. I think that there are definitely a lot of, like, couples in their twenties or early thirties who have newborns. I see a lot of baby carriages and a lot of babies. And then definitely like older folks in their fifties or sixties. There's a program Women with Infant Children [*Editor's note: Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a federal nutrition assistance program*], so there's, you know, just I think also infants and a lot of kids. I don't know how to answer that. [*Laughs*]

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KM: Describe to us your regular Market routine.

00:38:36

EM: Okay; like, getting ready for it and everything, too?

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KM: Getting ready for it all the way through to how you sort of celebrate at the end of it and relax.

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EM: Well, for the Saturday Market, we definitely do a lot of our work on Fridays to get ready for it. And I try to get to bed early on Friday night because I have to get up, you know, *really* early on Saturday morning. So I usually get up about 4:00 on Saturdays to go to the Market, and that's mainly because even though the Market starts at 7:00, there are hard-core Market customers who are there at 6 o'clock in the morning shopping, and so I want to have my stand set up.

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A lot of times, we'll make a good chunk of the money that we're going to make for the day between like 6:00 and 8:00, you know, just because people that are—I feel the people that are there early are really serious shoppers. **[Laughs]** And they're going to buy a good quantity of stuff. And then also, you know, some of the chefs will come that early too, just to get, you know, good stuff. And then they usually will buy a lot of stuff when they do buy stuff.

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So I get up at 4:00 and I definitely drink some coffee, **[Laughs]** and just kind of get ready and get the truck loaded up, and I've got a half-hour drive down into town. And it usually—you know, it takes me a good like probably altogether like a good hour to set up my stand, just because I've got to take everything out of the bins and put them in baskets, and I really like to arrange things just so, you know. I'm a stickler for things to be neat and stacked high, and kind of like try to put you know things that will enhance color next to each other like, so I wouldn't put red next to red you know, it would be like red, green, red, so—. **[Laughs]**

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I get way into it, so it takes a little while to get things set up. And then, you know, our routine has been—when Market is over, 12 o'clock is usually when Market is over and I really— at that point, I'm pretty whipped and I know I've got to come home and irrigate or, you know, water the greenhouse or what have you, feed the pigs, so I try to get going. But before I get going too quick, I like to stop off at Neal's Deli, which is a restaurant or a deli shop in Carrboro that has really great sandwiches, and they buy local produce actually for all their side dishes and whatnot. So we'll get something to eat, get it to go, and head back and then the best part of the whole day is taking a two-hour nap in the afternoon, which I always do.

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And then, you know, having Sunday off is so nice after that, but it's really—it's a good day, you know, all in all. It's always a long day; you know, sometimes I don't lay down to take my nap until about 2:00, and you know, I've been up since 4:00 and kind of working.

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And then the Wednesday Market—I do my CSA deliveries on Wednesdays also, and so I'll deliver—we'll pack those up Wednesday morning. And a lot of times that's just a busy day for me, if not busier than Friday, where I'll do the deliveries and then go to the Carrboro Farmers' Market straight from doing deliveries. And I have about fifty people that pick up at the Carrboro Market also, their boxes there, and so setting up my stand while also, you know, divvying out those fifty boxes can be a little hectic, so yeah it's a good day.

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KM: What is it that really sets the Carrboro Market apart?

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EM: Hmm; that's a good question. I mean, I think that one of the things is that it's been around for so long, over thirty years now. And it really has some really great growers and I think some growers that really—kind of like Alex and Betsy Hitt, for example, who just—you know, I think Alex really started out with the heirloom tomatoes and just—Betsy doing, you know, cut flowers—I mean, just innovative, kind of groundbreaking things in the farming world.

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And so I think that, you know, there was already this really strong reputation in the Market before I joined it, and I think I'm really lucky to be able to be a part of that. I think that the growers that sell, I think the fact that we have, like, in place really good kind of bylaws and rules for the Market, the way we govern ourselves, that is nice. One of our rules in particular that I've always really liked is that the farmer has to be the seller at the Market—that we can't send employees. And one thing I really like about that is that—I mean, I would want to do that anyway, just because I want that connection with who is eating my produce. But I think it's good because I think the customer probably would want that connection with the farmer who actually, you know, knows—you know, they can ask questions like, “What variety is this?” or like, you know, “Will have you this next week?”

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And you know, an employee may know those things or may not, but it's nice to, I think—for the customer to know whose business, you know, they're buying from, and it really creates that kind of intimate relationship. And also like, just like having a strong kind of knowledge base for what's going on at the Market there because the farmers are actually there, yeah.

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KM: If the Market is going through any growing pains now, like, what are some of the challenges you guys are sorting out right now?

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EM: That's a good question. I think that one of the things about the Market is—hmm, so I was on the board about four years ago, maybe. I can't even quite remember, and before that I volunteered to be the secretary for a few years, and so I would go to monthly board meetings because I was doing those positions. And at that point I was really on the up-and-up of what was going on, you know.

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And there was always, you know, certain things; there was always this or that or the other and new things coming and, you know, lots to deal with. Since I haven't been doing that, I found myself not really knowing what's going on as much. And I definitely—we get newsletters and from our wonderful market manager, Sarah [Blacklin], and so I know in general what's going on. But you know, too much of the things that the board is dealing with probably I'm not too clued in on, I guess.

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But let's see—

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KM: Where do you personally see room for improvement?

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EM: Okay; oh, I guess like one of the things we've always struggled with—and I don't even know though is we don't have much parking. We're, like, in this tight space, you know, with limited parking. But you know, Carrboro is such a walkable town, and there's parking in like a lot of other areas of the town, and then people could walk over, that maybe that's not an issue. But—and it's not really an issue that we can deal with as a Market necessarily; it's like, if there's not space in the town, then there's not space in the town.

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I don't know; aside from that like I think that things are really good. You know, we just got this ATM machine that's, like—it just would have never even occurred to me. And you know our market manager is so great where she like looks at all the other markets and what they're—you know the successful markets around the country and, like, what are they doing and then tries to apply those things to ours, and it's awesome. She does a great job.

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With the ATM I think that'll help because everybody—there would be a lot of people sort of asking like, “Do you know where there's an ATM?” And it's like, “Maybe at that gas station across the street—I don't know.”

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So you know, that probably will help sales a bit, I think. As far as where it could grow, I mean I think—one thing that seems to me as the years have gone on is that—and we've really gotten filled up with vendors—is that the Board is being really particular about, at this point, who they're letting into the Market both Wednesday and Saturday. Not that they weren't always, you know, particular, but it's just extra particular it seems, because they're trying to be careful, I think, to not have a lot of the same stuff at this point, since we have a lot of produce and whatnot, that we're kind of, I think, looking at more specialty items.

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So like for example this year, we let in a guy who is doing—humanely raised North Carolina pork hotdogs that he’s making, you know, and so that’s kind of a specialty thing that we hadn’t had before. And so you know as a—kind of things—people like that are—kind of more getting accepted. And I see that being more where we’re headed. As some people, I guess, would get older and kind of leave the Market, the newer spots would be, you know, a little bit more diversity and whatnot; yeah.

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KM: Okay; farmers in the South have long been mostly men, increasingly older men. Is it hard to be a young woman farm owner?

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EM: I don’t know, because I’ve never been a young *man* farm owner! But [*Laughs*] I think it’s actually—it’s been fine, you know. Like a lot—what’s funny is that—because I think coming to Cedar Grove and there being a lot of good ole boys around here and them being farmers, I wasn’t sure how I was going to be received and kind of being—thinking that maybe, “Oh no.”

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But one of the great things about moving here was that friend of mine who showed me this piece of land that I ended up renting or introduced me to Cedar Grove is a good ole boy, and he kind of instantly put through the community that I’m all good, you know. So I was like—I got “I’m all good,” you know, from the get-go, which really helped.

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And so, you know, what's funny though is it's not just me; because there is another friend of mine who farms in Cedar Grove who is a younger woman, Leah Cook, who is about fortyish, but all the guys, all the tobacco growers and the cattle, you know, the beef guys, I mean they show us a lot of respect. And it's—I think because they know how hard we work because they're farmers, too. And it's—so to them there's no difference.

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We have this local tire shop, Pope's Tire, where all—if you go there kind of in the afternoon sometimes you know all the tobacco growers like to just kind of go and hang out in the waiting room and just chat. I mean, sort of like, we don't really have anywhere for people to meet up in Cedar Grove, so they turned the tire shop [*Laughs*] into that. And so if I ever go in there and they're there, I mean they're all so nice to me, you know. And they go, “How are things growing?” And, “Don't work too hard,” you know, and like everybody's really accepting.

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So in that sense, in the community that I'm in right now, it's been really good. And I haven't been really treated like any different, I don't think; I couldn't imagine. But you know, at the Farmers' Market, I think that there are some people, who especially when I was, you know, in my twenties, who were more kind of like, “Really? You're the farmer; really?” You know, [*Laughs*] and I think even now some people, when they come up to the stand, who may not know the rules of our Market, like assume that I'm not the farmer—and that's fine, you know.

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But I actually think in some ways it's like helpful because people—like, I think one thing I've noticed is like the employees that I've gotten over the past few years have been young women who are single who want to farm and kind of want to learn how to do that from someone

they know did that also. So that's actually been something that's helped me get some really good employees in the past.

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KM: As a farmer, who are your heroes?

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EM: Oh; yeah, well, I've definitely named a few already. I mean, for sure I think from the get-go some of my heroes were Ken Dawson and Alex and Betsy Hitt, just local heroes, just amazing. I mean, I think any of the people that I named earlier; also, you know a good friend of mine, Leah Cook, who sells at the Market is a hero of mine. I mean, she started the Carrboro Market at the same—the Saturday Market the same year I did, and she does a lot of really great cut flowers, and it's just been really nice to have her as a comrade, and through the years as we've both grown.

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I guess like anywhere outside of that, like, you know on a broader scale as opposed to locally, like I don't necessarily have heroes. I mean, I read some agricultural books and I know some of the bigger names in the country, but I guess my heroes are the ones that I see and what they have on their table and I'm like, "Wow. You did a really good job," you know. **[Laughs]** So, definitely, you know, those farmers that I just mentioned are people that I've looked up to and wanted to try and emulate.

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KM: What's next for Elysian Fields as you grow your farm?

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EM: Well that's an interesting question. I really feel like I don't want to, like, get any bigger, I guess, so as far as growing what I want to do is just get smarter. And [*Laughs*] I want to, you know, just each year try to do more with what I have in a better way, so, you know, just really try to hone in on what each crop really needs and get better at that to increase yields from what I'm doing, and maybe be able to, you know, cut down on how much I'm doing because I'm doing it better.

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I'd like to, you know, focus in on ways to cut costs, you know, so that I don't have to get bigger to make more money but just, like I said, get smarter. You know, aside from all that, like I said, I really like the size that I'm at; I like the amount of CSA members I'm doing. I like the two markets that I sell at, and I don't want to sell at any more markets, and I don't really want to increase in CSA, and I like that quantity of what we sell calls for three full-time people including myself. I think that three people working together is a good dynamic for me, and I enjoy that. But I think that one thing is that I really would like to have children sometime in the next couple of years, and so the biggest changes that will come about will probably be from that, because, you know, I don't really know how that's going to play into things.

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And I think, you know, honestly when I have a family, I'm not sure if I'll be able to, you know, be a part of the farm to the extent that I am now. And backing away a little bit might come in, and kind of looking at other people that I can rely on, like this woman who has been with me the past—working for me the past four years, kind of taking more of a manager role. So there's definitely going to be some changes in those regards hopefully one day.

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KM: Are there things that I haven't asked you about yourself or your farm or your way of farming or the Market—that we should talk about?

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EM: Maybe the restaurants a little more—because you are doing [an oral history with] Karen and Ben Barker, right? Yeah; one of the greatest things about the Market for me has been that I've been able to create a relationship with the restaurant owners in town, because I definitely was a little bit nervous or shy to sort of just cold-call restaurants [*Laughs*], so—in the beginning. So just meeting the chefs at the Market has been a really great thing for me.

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You know I feel really lucky to be in an area where we have so many great restaurants, and then the chefs all go to the Farmers' Market and walk around and talk to everybody, and it's just really a nice thing. And it has been—yeah, like a really good thing for the farm as far as selling quantity at a Market.

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KM: Like who do you see there?

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EM: I'll, weekly, sell produce to Miguel who works for the Lantern Restaurant and Kevin of Acme restaurant in Carrboro, Ben and Karen Barker of Magnolia Grill in Durham, and then—that's just off the top of my head, but there are definitely plenty more. And one of the great

things, too, that's so nice is if I ever go to eat at one of these restaurants, that I usually get treated so well, and that's just such a nice thing, just the farm—I think the restaurant owners and chefs really appreciate having the Market as well for their business. So it definitely serves us all really well.

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KM: Well, thank you for sharing your stories with us.

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EM: Thank you.

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[End Elise Margoles Interview]