Garver Akers
Southeast Organic Center Farm Manager
Rodale Institute
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Diana Dombrowski: All right. My name is Diana Dombrowski. I'm here on behalf of the Southern Foodways Alliance on June 2nd [2020] at 1:00 p.m. with Garver Akers. We're going to be interviewing for the COVID-19 Oral History Project. Garver, if you would, please tell us how to spell your name and tell us when and where you were born.

[0:00:22.5]

Garver Akers: Sure. My name is Garver—that's G-a-r-v-e-r—Akers, A-k-e-r-s, and I was born on July 7th of 1974 in Cleveland, Ohio.

[0:00:36.3]

Diana Dombrowski: Great. And could you tell us, did you grow up in Cleveland?

[0:00:42.8]

Garver Akers: [Laughter] Well, talk about a can of worms there. I lived in Cleveland until my mother remarried when I was three and a half, and she married the son of a commodity farmer in Illinois. We moved to his parents' farm for two years, then we moved to Nebraska, where he actually ran the administrative end of the Gasohol Commission for Jimmy Carter, so I went from a farm to seeing the politics and things behind farms and commodities and that sort of thing. Then we moved to Iowa when Reagan took the White House and Dad lost his job, and then we ended up back in Ohio when my mother left my stepfather, back to the same town, the same house, kind of like hitting a reset button five years later.

[0:01:35.4]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

[0:01:35.4]

Garver Akers: And then since then, as an adult, I've lived in another eleven states on top of that.

[0:01:42.0]

Diana Dombrowski: I can't wait to hear about all of them. [Laughter] Did you know at that time when you were younger and doing this traveling, this moving around, that agriculture was something you wanted to be involved in?

[0:01:53.7]

Garver Akers: Not in the least. At four years old, I was already being woken up at 4:30 in the morning to shovel manure. We went back to the farm to visit my step-grandparents when I was twelve, and I stood, after watching—no, actually, there's kind of a story here. In [19]77, I watched my grandfather—I didn't understand it, but I watched him fill out the subsidy papers to get on a subsidy program for a corn and dairy rotation. At that time, the family farm was 600 acres. By the time I visited when I was twelve years old, they were down to under 100 acres and leasing most of it out, and when I went back once as an adult, it is now just a two-acre property where my stepfather lives in the house.

[0:02:45.1]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

[0:02:46.5]

Garver Akers: So you saw the decline of not only the farm, but the farm community around it south of Chicago, and the consolidation. In a town of 1,000 people, it went from 50 family farms to three operating farms that are completely supported by subsidy and that sort of thing. So, get out of this digression, back to your original question. So when I went to visit when I was twelve and recognized this decline and started to get these relations and I saw the amount of work and that kind of thing, I declared boldly in the field, "I will never be a farmer, ever." I fell into farming because when most of my friends were finishing high school and starting college, I was in the middle of four years of treatment for a unique type of cancer, and I turned to nutrition as a powerful healing tool after I had learned that the same companies that manufactured my chemotherapies also manufactured war chemicals and could be implicated, possibly, in disease and other things.

[0:03:51.8]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

[0:03:53.5]

Garver Akers: So nutrition became a very powerful tool for me, and I got done with that when I was going on twenty. My life had completely transformed into something else and I decided I would be an entrepreneur. I actually decided that while I was still doing

chemo, and opened one small business, opened four others, always tried to do it by the bootstraps. Everybody was always picking on me for that, so, finally, for the last business I opened, I went and got investment, and that's the one business that went belly-up and we lost all the investment money [Laughter], which I paid back more than my share out of pocket. But at that time, I scratched my head and I said I need to be doing something where I feel like I'm giving back to what has empowered me in society and the earth and so forth, and at the time, I had taken on gardening as a hobby, was growing some of my own food, and I was eating a very clean diet compared to most people I know. So I decided that I would become an organic farmer, gardener, whatever that meant. I took three years to learn about it and decide where to go get educated, which probably leads me to another question you have. For school, I ended up—one of the first programs I saw was the program at UC Santa Cruz, the Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems, and it's arguably the oldest organic education program in the country for farmers. It was a wonderful immersion program, and you live on a 25-acre farm at the base of campus. You experience tractor scale, hand scale, everything in between, very open concept. Like, they taught, "This is *our* way, but we're teaching you to look at all ways and go out and teach other farmers," was their attitude. So we got college credit while being on the farm, living on the farm, and running the farm together. In fact, if I could have stayed forever, I would have. I had a chance to stay as an instructor the following year, but I chose to go take my career further. And I should probably stop babbling, because you probably have other questions.

[0:06:04.2]

Diana Dombrowski: No, this is great. You're answering all the questions I have about your education, what personally keeps you anchored in doing this work. So, please, please, tell me where you went from there.

[0:06:19.5]

Garver Akers: Well, sure. Well, what got me, I think, into there, I'm a school-of-hard-knocks guy, a little bit of College of Music and a couple other things I dabbled in before that, and I was a certified audio engineer. Music is where I lost my hat in the investor money. I had this insanely naïve thought that if I went to the food industry, I would see less corruption, but humans take their trash everywhere. Nonetheless, I found myself—I wrote a paper on designing a farm-to-patient, not just farm-to-hospital, but a farm-to-patient system. I wanted to get educated in how—I spent five hundred days of my life or more in a hospital. I know the system. I was a very proactive patient. That paper got me into the program in Santa Cruz. When we did the introduction the first day, there was all these people with multiple degrees. Of course, I ended up being the last of thirty-eight people to introduce myself. But we got past—I said, "Hey, I'm probably the least educated person in the room, but this is where I come from. This is what I've done." I saw very clearly at that time that it was a program where you get out of it what you make of it, so I pushed 120 percent all the way on that one, and I'm glad I did, because I got so much out of it. So I left there with the option to stay, but with this attitude like, "I want to travel the world." I didn't have any plans for family at the time or anything like that. "I want to travel the world and do a different farm in a different a country till I can identify where *I* could be the most helpful. So I want to do a season in my native climate in

Ohio." So I went to a wonderful place called Crown Point Ecology Center-- it's owned by the Catholic Diocese in Ohio-- where they protect 133 acres and they farm, oh, I'd say at any given time about 10 percent of that, and I want to say the year I farmed there we did 111,000 pounds of food, and about half of that went to the local foodbank and the rest to CSA and other things. The great thing about that experience was after California-- I was spoiled in California. We were in the middle of the Central Coast. You've got thirty-eight other people. Really, forty-nine other people were on the farm with you. You're not going to see some of the real blood, sweat, and tears. In Ohio, I got to get better tractor training. I was running this farm with only-- well, I was the assistant manager—pardon me-- but with a couple people under me and one over me, and there was a lot more to be learned there of the real struggle that a farmer would face. Then I was like, "Great, I'm going to continue my plan," so ended up in the Southeast in 2008 and thought it was going to be a one-year stop at Rise 'N Shine Organic Farm, a wonderful farm in North Georgia. It's probably one of the best farms in the state of Georgia now. He's evolved quite a bit there. Mitch Lawson is the farmer, when I say "he." While I was there, an old flame of mine happened to live a couple hours away, and now we're married and we have baby number five coming in August.

[0:09:38.0]

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, wow!

[0:09:39.7]

Garver Akers: So, nonetheless, that kept me in the South, and we would have liked to travel more, but we've had a very-- or professionally speaking, I've had a very colorful career so far in the Southeast. I wished to be on the front lines where change needed to happen. I didn't know that would happen in my own country. I learned very quickly when you split the country up four ways, that the Southeast is the hardest corner of the country to grow vegetable produce in if you look at it on an entire yearlong basis, for a number of reasons. We face a lot of the challenges that you would growing, being small farmers anywhere, but this whole region, I would argue we have more climactic instability, we have more microclimate diversity, and the topography and the way the topography, I've learned, reacts with weather and climate and how *that* affects soil is an extraordinary thing to behold down here, especially with all the different soil types. I mean, yeah, we have the stereotypical red clay everywhere, but really it's amazing how much diversity there is. I'm in the hardest, worst soil I'd ever seen at the last farm that I was managing here, east Auburn, Alabama-Georgia state line, and if I went eight miles south of that farm, we were in sand so sandy, you could build sandcastles with it. And even the microclimates between those two farms, of an eight-mile difference, I could point out the differences just on a visit. But I've been on several farms in the Southeast and spending usually a year, because they usually can't afford to give you a raise, on each farm, or helping other farms start as a consultant, I've seen the same thing. Everywhere I go, I've got the same formula the way that I learned about a farm, but I have zero expectations on the data coming back. What is this farm? How are we going to get this animal up on its feet? I probably have more experience starting farms in my career than anything else if you look at versus consulting versus management, and where the

commonalities are. And I stand to what I declared my first year; the Southeast is the most challenging quarter of the country to grow vegetables, and I've grown in two of the other quarters. I've got a lot of friends from the Northeast, so you could say I'm guilty of hearsay on that, but, yeah, I stick by that. I ended up in this job-- it was funny-- because after several different jobs and consulting gigs and things down here, I left the Southeast last fall, left to go to Maryland for a job that did not work out well. Wonderful people. They've had a CSA operation for eleven years. They're very successful. They thought they'd go out of their market. They asked me to come up and assist with their first hemp harvest for CBD [cannabidiol] hemp, and the tradeoff was that after that, I would get to basically run their vegetable program as a manager on the ground. I think they overshot their budgets and the hemp market fell off, and so, unfortunately, they had to let me go. But another door opened. I had talked to Rodale [Institute] several months before, hadn't gone anywhere, and right when this job was coming to a quick end in Maryland, Rodale happened to contact me again. So this Yankee is looking like he's down here to stay, so far. I don't know. [laughs] I think eventually I might go further south towards the equator, but Southeast USA. has got its clutches on me, so I'm happy to help out.

[0:13:24.6]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, Florida is a beautiful place. I'll say that.

[0:13:27.4]

Garver Akers: Yeah, Florida, I lived in Daytona for a minute. I consider that separate than the rest of Florida, so I'm willing to take what you say with an open mind. [laughter]

[0:13:36.6]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I understand. Do you think it's that challenge in the Southeast that draws you back here? You really enjoy that?

[0:13:43.7]

Garver Akers: I think that's a big part of it. I could find challenge anywhere, and depending on how you're framing the farm or business you're involved in, then you can identify those challenges and meet them. But beyond farming, too, culturally, I see a revolution kind of quietly happening in the Southeast. People, I think, are starting to learn what old ways to let go of and what old ways to hang on to and reinvigorate, and I see that whether I'm in Tennessee or Georgia, Alabama, or South Carolina, which are my main stomping grounds down here. When I first sold produce in the Southeast, people would come up to the farm stand and say, "Well, do you spray?" Now, several years later, if I sell produce at a farm stand, "What do you spray? Why do you spray? How do you spray? Is it biological? Is it chemical?" The sophistication of the consumer has gotten very elevated down here, and I think that is going to be very helpful and is already motivating a healthier marketplace and, on the supply end, a healthier farm culture, if you will.

I see farms in the Southeast cooperating far more and communicating far more in the last year or two than I did in the previous decade I was here before that. I think small farms in the Southeast are starting to learn that we are not competition; we are allies. We create our market, which is a fabric of small farms, and *that* is how we change the greater

good, you know. And bigger farms and medium farms, too, but it's a matter of scale. We need a lot of small farms and we need some medium farms and we need a couple real big farms. I really see it that way, and I think the Southeast is starting to agree with me.

[0:15:38.8]

Diana Dombrowski: It sounds like this position is perfect for you to have a bigger impact.

[0:15:44.2]

Garver Akers: I hope so, I hope so. The funny thing about farming is if you're really farming a lot, especially semi-hand-scale or hand-scale vegetables, you don't have time to do anything else. You don't have time to go to conferences. You don't have time to really network and rub elbows, and I kind of got out of touch with where the Southeast was heading and I got a little bit pessimistic and negative. Just after leaving to Maryland for a couple months and coming back and starting new, I'm seeing other synergies I wasn't aware of.

For years, I complained we have less resources down here than other parts of the country. We have less just minutiae of the whole farming movement and what that involves. But the advantages that we've had, the rest of the country to look at—the West Coast is five to ten years ahead of the Great Lakes and the Northeast on organic ag. The Great Lakes and Northeast are five to ten years ahead of most of the Southeast, with the exception of North Carolina, which some areas are starting to look like somebody cookie-cuttered a part of California and stuck it over there. And I mean that as a compliment. But

we do have the rest of the country to look at, though, as far as the pros and cons and the mistakes, the learning curves that have been made on all sorts of things, and I'm seeing the results of that, finally. So when I heard about what Rodale was doing here and got to understand better what the intentions and the mission was, I said, "Hey, wait a minute. This is exactly what the Southeast needs."

When I first heard Rodale was coming out, I was like, "Okay, they're opening another farm. They're publishing more material, doing some more research. I really hope it filters in." But then when I found out that they were letting go of the publishing company, that they were opening three farms across the country outside of the Pennsylvania activity, which has happened for eighty years, and really their mission was to do more research, do education outreach, but try to motivate more farms into actual certified organic, and that turned me on.

The funny thing about that is a few years ago, I was one of those guys walking around going, "Don't bother certifying unless it meets your marketing needs," and I became a cynic in that way, because when I started I was a big believer, but, like, it seemed like the oversight, the regulation of organic certified for a while was becoming watered down, allowing too many lax principles, allowing too many exceptions, and too much oversight in areas where it didn't need to be, was my opinion. And it seems like other people started to realize that, too, and I quickly realized that the Rodale Institute is one of those. They've actually come up with a concept that is—other people have used terms like "beyond organic" and things like that. Rodale has come up with a concept of creating a new organic certification that goes beyond the existing. It would be a second third-party thing.

Whether or not that takes off I don't think matters as much, because we see so many labels out there on products now anyway, but the idea, their motivation to get behind that kind of thinking. Let's refine organic certification, because organic certification is probably the most realistic ticket all the small farms to get on the gameboard and to really change the system. We can fight and cry all we want and we can sell microlocal as much as we want. That's great, but those microlocal dots have to be connected, otherwise this system, the organic small-farm system, which is the most successful sector of growth in agriculture for the last twenty years, will still be under the thumb of systems bigger than it, with more lobbying power. So if we want to play the game, you've got to play the rules of the gameboard. I see that. I understand that, and I think Rodale, what they're doing with these new farms and the type of outreach they're committing to, I'm inspired. I take it seriously, and I think this is a really wide step to take.

[0:20:06.4]

Diana Dombrowski: I'm so excited. I can't wait to just hear more. [laughs]

[0:20:09.9]

Garver Akers: Yeah, me too. The tricky thing is we're down here inventing the wheel while we're riding on the wheel.

[0:20:16.3]

Diana Dombrowski: Right, right. One of the questions I have based on this huge diversity of experience you have is whether or not this COVID time, this pandemic adjustment economically, whether or not that's influenced how you plan to help farmers be as resilient as possible in a market that can go up and down like this.

[0:20:42.1]

Garver Akers: Yeah, certainly. The whole COVID thing, if you will, for us has been an interesting ride, because I know, and I don't think Rodale's hiding the fact that they wanted to get this project going even sooner, and by the time they hired me and got me down here, I was the first Rodale person to be employed and be at the facility up until just a month ago or so, when we hired our research director for the center. She's still only working part-time because of COVID and having to move her and her family up here, so I see her about one or two days a week and she works from afar full-time to balance that out. But I kind of got in here ready to go, ready to start networking, meeting farms, "Hey, I know I'm behind the eight ball." It's Georgia. It's already the first week in March when I arrive. "So what. Let's get this thing moving." First week in March, March exploded on us as far as the COVID scenario.

Now, on the farm, on paper, we're technically in a lease on a preexisting farm called Many Folds Farm. Quick history, they were a sheep dairy that had opened a couple times, to my knowledge, and although they had an excellent reputation, they definitely, like a lot of small farmers, had a difficulty enjoying it, I think, while trying to keep it profitable, is my impression. With the help of the Serenbe [Farms], the director of the

Serenbe community outside of Atlanta, they put together a think tank, more or less, some sort of event that got Rodale interested, and so we are on their 300-acre property.

So there were different dynamics when COVID started, because they had their own rules for how their farm crew—it's more or less a property maintenance crew—would interact with each other, how they would interact with us. Then I had to think about anybody coming externally on to the property, as well as going to other farms or accomplishing other needs. I was willing—with my past, I know a lot about immunity and how to safeguard myself. I was willing to come and work at the farm as long as I had appropriate distance from folks. But it did get a little bit tricky, especially when I'd have to glove-up and mask-up and make Home Depot runs or whatever it took for the necessities of the farm.

So it's definitely affected our time, our timing going in, although I wonder if it is kind of a blessing in disguise, because essentially, for us, it's a new startup farm, and it's a startup farm—awkward point of the year to be starting up in Georgia. So it's kind of a buffer to make sure that we're walking instead of running into this, which I think is really good, because we are a big organization with one guy here, everybody out of state so far. So we've got bumps in the road, communication snafus to work out and things like that, and I think with the right attitude that this situation is kind of setting a pace for us, if you will.

But the difficult part really gets back to, I think, more of the essence of your question, the way I took it, how does that affect outreach and communication with other farmers, that sort of thing. When I first got hired, one of my directives was to come down and network with farmers, immediately travel to as many farms as I possibly could, shake

hands, working with the network I already have in the Southeast and kind of filling the gaps, was my impression. Since then, with the new pace of things, the research director, she kind of made the comment to me, "Let's wait till I'm there full-time, because that'll be even more time to see what happens with COVID, and let's go out together and have kind of a formula in the way that we meet farms and approach farms." And that's great. I think that's a good systematic approach.

In the meantime, Serene Farm is kind of a sister farm for us, so we've been able to borrow equipment from them and I've been able to help them. Well, I hope I've helped them with a tomato disease problem. And a couple other area farmers, either I've approached or they've approached me, with distancing in mind and that sort of thing, which is good, because it's good to know that people know we're here. It's good to know that we can make contacts without a lot of effort. But, yeah, I can't wait to really get out there and talk to folks. I never saw it coming, but being a farm educator is fulfilling to me as much as working in the field, for sure.

[0:25:37.9]

Diana Dombrowski: I was wondering, with all the hats you wear, how you describe your occupation. [laughs]

[0:25:44.1]

Garver Akers: Well, the short version is I'm a professional biologically-minded sustainable farmer and an amateur scientist, which the scientists would probably roll their eyes in the company if they even hear me say that, I'm sure, and rightly so. No, but I say

that kind of tongue-in-cheek and making fun. But I was all in it for just being the most sustainable farmer I could be, and then a couple of consulting jobs took me in industrial soil [unclear] remediation and things of that nature. So in the last couple years, I've really stepped up, I think, my understanding of the sciences involved in a good way, so I can kind of communicate with these folks and hopefully get on the same page with them.

But, yeah, I mean, basically, it's a farmer historically—look at this way. A farmer historically has always had to wear all hats, right? But that used to mean I'm farmer, ditch digger, animal caretaker, property manager. That evolved to also being the accountant and also being the mechanic and carpenter and electrician and those sorts of things. Well, now we're in the Information Age, so I also have to know how to communicate through Zoom. I've got to know how to use Microsoft products. In fact, I see more—when I look at farmer applications these days, when I've been doing job searches in the past few years, I see more insistence that I need to know Microsoft software than I ever see anybody asking if I pulled a weed or operated a tractor.

If I've got interns, if I've got apprentices, other coworkers, I have to be a psychologist, to some degree, or team leader and just have good, healthy psychology to have a good team, if you want to look at it that way. I've had to teach people. I've had to teach children. I've had to teach people whose language I didn't speak. I've had to teach people in higher-up positions that I'm under. But I value the learning and the teaching and the reciprocation of that process. I've had to be the PR guy on the news and that kind of thing. I've had to run out of my office after doing 30,000-dollar greenhouse purchases, run into a field and pick up a hoe and jump in the field and get in there and get sweaty and bloody with everybody, and you know what? That's my favorite place to be.

So, yeah, you've got to wear all hats, and that means a different thing, I think, with every age we're looking at. There's farmers now, some of the apprentices I've had, particularly my most successful apprentice, he's branching off into agricultural digital communications and he's doing things that I'll never understand. He'll be able to take what I've passed on to him, what we learned together of biological farming, and take it to steps beyond me, and that's what it's about.

[0:28:56.3]

Diana Dombrowski: That must be a good feeling.

[0:28:58.1]

Garver Akers: It is, it is, yeah. It's a labor of love, for sure. You take a lot of flak from your family and loved ones sometimes because it's not the easiest road. This is nice to be in with an institution like this where I feel like I can grow, because in the last five years alone, my family's moved seven times. We move more than a military family, and all too often, it's because a farm is not ready to grow with you, not because of anybody's particular failure.

[0:29:35.5]

Diana Dombrowski: Well, I'm glad you'll be able to put down some roots in Georgia. It sounds like you've had good experiences before too.

[0:29:44.3]

Garver Akers: Yeah.

[0:29:46.2]

Diana Dombrowski: If we're talking about COVID, I wonder how the different recommendations and guidelines from national, state, and county levels, has that influenced at all the work that you're doing on a daily basis, trying to negotiate that?

[0:30:02.6]

Garver Akers: My direct work at this time I wouldn't see exactly so, and I keep my finger on the pulse of things, and what I am seeing is a mixed bag of pros and cons with this for the small farmer, especially the southern small farmer and the ones that I personally know in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and so forth, because a lot of them, in the season, it was very obvious a lot of farmers had their bottom line damaged immediately because people couldn't come to their farm and purchase as much, because people couldn't meet with them in farmers' markets as much, because if they did any wholesaling or if they did any value-added food or any food with any shelf life, unless they were relying on those things as the backbone of their business, they took a serious hit. But at the same time, I've also talked to some farmers who are having their best seasons they've ever had because they happen to be in markets where they can sell with social distancing or at economies of scale that allow for them to be distant in the first place.

So we're seeing a mixed bag out there, how it's both hurting and helping farmers. That's in the immediate superficial take. But down the road, where's this all going to go?

You hear people throw around terms like “the new normal,” “When do we get back to normal?” I’m definitely of the idea that I don’t want to go back to normal. I don’t want to go back to the way things were. I believe this is an opportunity to be a wakeup call, and at the very center of that wakeup call is humanity and our resources and what it takes to sustain ourselves.

I’m already hearing people that used to ridicule, make fun of organic produce or organic farming, if you will, any of these things, suddenly pick up their interest, realizing they might want a healthier, more local line to their supply on the consumer end, and I think that is going to be very good for small farmers. I think this can potentially help small farms get a leg up beyond the monetary success the organic farming industry has had, which is kind of funny. I don’t know any other business that can show monetary success and then be just held back because of social and greater economic ideals. But I think this COVID situation could be a tool, if we look at it that way, to shine more of a spotlight on why we do what we do, how we do it, and why that is important to the health of the consumer, which I could have talked about till I was blue in the face before, but now I think more consumers are going to listen, and that will be good for the farms.

[0:32:50.5]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. It sounds like you’re used to finding a silver lining with the challenges that you’re grappling with.

[0:32:57.7]

Garver Akers: Man, you've got to, you've got to. I've been let go of farms. Maryland, they let me go two weeks before Christmas. I got back for my wedding at another farm, they let us go the day we got back from our wedding. It's a hard industry. And I'm not pointing the finger and making blame. It's just hard. Where do you go when you've got a small farm? The resources, not only are you paying for the fertilizer, you're paying more to ship the fertilizer down here than the fertilizer costs in the first place, in some cases. And you've got employees to take care of, and then, all of a sudden, one day you're like, "We can't meet the bottom line. We have no insurance." Most of our employees, heck, most of the farm managers are paid less than a teacher's salary, and we all know the teacher's salary is the benchmark in our country for where poverty kind of begins and ends, or at least struggling. Maybe "poverty" is too strong of a word.

So, yeah, I could tell you some horrible—I've seen charlatans like you wouldn't believe in this business, and my family has really bore the brunt of it. But at the same time, what good is a labor of love if you can't find that silver lining, if you can't find something to motivate you, to keep you from all-out burnout and keep you going? I don't see those kinds of experiences happening here at Rodale, though. This is a different animal. I'm used to being a production farmer, a community-minded production farmer, if you will, and here what motivates this organization is different and what motivates me to be successful in my eyes and in the eyes of my employer is a far different paradigm than that when you're pushing for every dollar you can squeeze out of every vegetable every week.

Downside of that for me at this point is right now we're in the planning stages and I don't have—and this is also COVID—I don't have the public interaction I'm used to. I

don't get to talk recipes with my customers over the farm market table. But that will come with this. Our produce is going to have to go somewhere. I have a feeling a lot of it will go to other institutions, possibly, and/or be marketed to the public. We haven't crossed that bridge yet, and that's not the important part of this mission.

[0:35:21.1]

Diana Dombrowski: Well, I wonder, with all of that going on and all of the sudden obstacles or opportunities, depending on your perspective, what morale is like with your coworkers and with farmers that you are in contact with right now.

[0:35:42.2]

Garver Akers: Well, the farmers I'm in contact with—well, let me start internally. Coworkers, it's kind of hard to tell. It's fuzzy, because we're all having Zoom meetings. The science department is doing what the science department does. They're coming up with research. They're analyzing research. They're scrutinizing each other's research. I've had the privilege to sit in on some of their meetings. We've put off having interns here. I was expecting to have some interns by now in the field with me. We should have a lab tech here working directly with the scientists and that's been put off. So I kind of felt like I was on an island for a while.

Then the folks on Many Fold Farm, their crew, there's a gentleman named Wes who is the farm's, as far as I understand, business manager and basically an operations manager, and they had to go down to one guy a week. And I say "guy" appropriately, because they do not have any ladies. But they did go down to one guy a week, or day. I'm

not sure exactly how they did it, and I rarely saw anybody. It was like a ghost town, which was a good thing, of course. They've stepped it up. They've ramped it back up. They've got all the people back on, but they're rotating shifts safely, to my understanding. Then I interact a little bit more with them now, but we all mind distance and wear a mistake when appropriate or that kind of thing. So because I'm already here by myself, it's not a big change for me directly. I was already fairly isolated.

Serenbe Farm, though, right up the road, wonderful farm and a wonderful community, I don't know all the details. I believe their CSA is specific to people that live in the community, and I do know that the manager, who's only been on that farm for about a year, so he's barely had time to learn his farm, all of a sudden he had to lay off his assistant manager. He got the word right when his interns were coming on. So now they're just gearing back up. So this guy, he's ready for his first real season. He got to learn that farm. He got to solve some of the challenges he inherited. He's ready to just get out there, and then, boom, this thing just blew up in his face. And he's doing it. He's making it work, but I remember when I first visited him after he had to lay off his assistant manager and you could feel in your heart what you saw in his eyes. It was—well, it's hard. I've been there. I've had to lay people off. I've been laid off, and it's really tough. For me, that was a very visceral "This is the situation. This is the reality of things now."

[0:38:32.2]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Have you all been involved in connecting farmers to resources during this time?

[0:38:40.5]

Garver Akers: A little bit, not so much officially yet.

[0:38:44.4]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I know you're just starting and everything, but I wondered if Rodale is maybe doing that on a larger scale, trying to connect growers with webinars, even, or something.

[0:38:57.1]

Garver Akers: I believe so. No, at their institute up in Pennsylvania, one thing that's new in the last year or so is they actually have actual organic consultants there, and they're actually going out to farms and being the intermediary. Then Rodale, just in the few months I've been with Rodale, watching what's going on with the website, they're changing the face of Rodale, because we're not a publishing company anymore, and they're changing the face of Rodale and starting to develop systems to be put in place to back up outreach and education and resource connection and things like you say, like webinars and things of that nature. We will be pushing that a lot on our end.

We don't have enough on our end right now to be doing that much outreach, but when I do, I'm actually gregarious when I am talking to the farmers in the community that I do know. I ended up giving an impromptu earthworm compost team-making clinic at Serenbe Farm last week just because they wanted to know how to do it, so, "Hey, let's talk about it."

We got over there, stood far apart from each other, made a list, said, "Hey, this is how you do this. Connect A to B. This is where you get your castings. This is where you get your product. Don't buy that bin; buy this one because of this nuance or that subtle thing." So those things will begin to happen naturally, I guess, and we—

[0:40:23.7]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, [unclear] naturally to you like that. Yeah, that's great.

[0:40:27.4]

Garver Akers: Yeah, it's awesome. And Rodale's setting together—and we, somewhat autonomously down here at the center, are also putting together our own protocols of how we want to talk to farmers; when we want to do that; how much time do we devote to that; what questions do we ask them; are there strengths and weaknesses involved in resources; are they operating technologically in a manner that's appropriate for the scale they're at; have they faced that inevitable question "Do I invest more in labor and go low tech or do I invest more in tech and go low labor?" This experience brings that stuff up, and Rodale's got a lot of experience behind it, so I think we can really be helpful in those avenues.

[0:41:18.0]

Diana Dombrowski: I think it's so exciting. I can't wait to stay tuned and speak with you again in a couple months when there's time to reflect after all of this.

[0:41:26.9]

Garver Akers: Please do. Hit us up. The best time would be—we should start having our first harvest in October.

[0:41:33.3]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I can't wait. I wonder how you are planning for that. Do you have dates and schedules?

[0:41:40.6]

Garver Akers: Yeah.

[0:41:41.6]

Diana Dombrowski: Are you still waiting—

[0:41:42.6]

Garver Akers: Yeah, I mean, we do, but we're writing the dates and schedules as we're doing things at the same time, because we don't have our staff here yet, so I'm spending more time than I'd ever like to behind a computer organizing systems, making records, keeping logs, pulling old data from old farm work I've done and seeing how I can translate things to here, while ordering things and shopping, renovating. We've been given a *very* nice building on this farm for a facility, and so turning that building from a sheep creamery, dairy, into the Southeast Organic Center is what we're in the middle of right now.

[0:41:42.6]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

[0:42:23.1]

Garver Akers: So, yeah, it's quite a process. [laughs]

[0:42:26.5]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, it just sounds like so much possibility.

[0:42:29.3]

Garver Akers: It is.

[0:42:30.8]

Diana Dombrowski: It's so exciting, yeah.

[0:42:33.2]

Garver Akers: It is. It's fraught with possibility and it's needed. This is the answer to so many stressed-out questions I was asking myself in the middle of so many fields in my last twelve years in the Southeast, and I really do feel that way and I do feel privileged to be a part of it.

[0:42:52.9]

Diana Dombrowski: It's just so nice to hear, really. It must be a bright spot for the people you work with.

[0:43:00.3]

Garver Akers: I hope so. I hope so. And the timing couldn't be better. Like I spoke of, I've been seeing cultural, agricultural, and social change happen in the South just accelerate in the past couple years, and I think we got down here just about the right time. And we're going to do a lot of stuff I'm really excited about. We hope to have programs onsite. It's one thing to tell a farmer, "Feed the soil, not the plant," and, "Feed the microbes and be more biological, more regenerative."

Well, that's fine, but all the farmer can see is the plants and soil, so let's bring the farmer on the farm. We have a huge lab here. Let's bring the farmer into the lab. You get to see on a screen what that microscope holds. We'll be able to show you "This is the protozoa. This is this microbe. That's a spirillum and that's the pseudomonas and that's the mycorrhizae," and all these things. "This is the life you're *actually* farming." That was an important step for me. When that change happened in my career, I became a better farmer, for sure. So that we'll be able to do that kind of thing here is just awesome. I love it.

[0:44:14.6]

Diana Dombrowski: It really is just so exciting, and I'm so happy for you and everyone else who will be able to benefit from that. I just had one or two questions—

[0:44:26.2]

Garver Akers: I had one follow-up I wanted to give you.

[0:44:27.6]

Diana Dombrowski: Please. Yeah, absolutely.

[0:44:30.0]

Garver Akers: One thing on the COVID note especially, one hard lesson I had in the Southeast is that when the average American, I believe, thinks of a farm or thinks of gardening season, we think of one continuous season, when is your frost date, when does your last frost happen, when can you get stuff in the ground, and when's your first frost going to happen that will end your season, no doubt, unless you're doing season extension or all the things we do now. When I came to the Southeast, I didn't understand that the way the climate—now, this is kind of a blanket statement for the Southeast, because there are definitely differences in the different microclimates, but I learned real quick, especially east of Auburn, that we had to split it into two seasons.

We were trying to farm tomatoes in July when it's too hot at night for tomatoes to actually produce the cells that make a flower. I'm looking at all these small farms around me struggle along with me, and employers I've had in the Southeast, and I'm going, "What's wrong with this picture?" I started noticing the biggest farms that are down in the Southeast United States that are producing any kind of organic product, in the loose sense of the term, are splitting everything into two seasons. Anybody from Florida

already knows that, but for some reason, that was like a secret that stayed down in Florida and parts of Texas.

So people, all of a sudden, myself included, became more aware of that. We learned that the farm by Auburn, for instance, our best tomatoes came out of the ground or came off the plant right about Halloween. Now, that's cool. We learned our strength. We could have twice the yield and twice the quality, Halloween, but the problem with that is the consumer is trained to want a tomato on July 4th, so the farmer in the South, "What do I do about that? When they want pumpkins, I have my best tomatoes. And I can grow a fine pumpkin in the middle of the summer here."

So we had to start to play with that as farmers, and I came into the institute kind of warning them of that. Now, I've got a tighter whole-season window than I had down near Auburn. My last frost is a month later, my first frost is almost a month earlier, so I still have two seasons, but I'll have to use a lot more season extension in order to—

[0:46:47.2]

Diana Dombrowski: Is that due to elevation?

[0:46:49.4]

Garver Akers: I am on the last of the Piedmont Shelf, basically. Once you go an hour south of me and you drop off the Piedmont, they have, arguably, at least six more weeks in their season, just an hour south. And there's microclimates even north of me that probably have a little bit more season. But I'm so happy to be aware of that, because as I go to different areas, different microclimates and different farmers, we need to be able to

relate to their season, their time windows. “Maybe this method is or isn’t right for you because of this factor dictated by climate or the middle of summer,” or whatever it is.

But the silver lining there is we can take advantage of season extension here like nowhere else. We can grow probably year-round here better than, I would guess, anybody that’s off of the coastal warmer, like, Zone 8, 9, and above climates. So that’s something we really want to focus on down here. The farm I was at in Auburn, we started three and a half acres when I walked in there, half acre in high tunnels, and by the time I left, I mean, they’re pushing to be a 100-acre farm. Now, when I left, they had two and a half acres under high tunnels that we put in, and the success in the product was more than evident. COVID has really pushed that, because these folks lost their spring season. So many people here did, and so many people that didn’t are the ones that happen to be in the right market geography, are benefiting from that, but that’s definitely the minority. So I’m very curious to see where these farms stand at the end of this year.

[0:48:37.2]

Diana Dombrowski: What you’re describing to me reminds me of an energy, like theory or perspective on energy development, talking about like the hard path versus the soft path of energy, where the hard path brings everything together and everyone’s connected on the same grid and it’s like a very rigid, slow-to-change sort of system, and the soft path really focuses on sustainable sources of energy that can be focused and tailored to what is good for specific regions, like smaller areas, and really making a system more resilient by focusing on what makes those areas unique and harvesting what they can best provide. So, yeah, it’s just—

[0:49:34.2]

Garver Akers: No, I understand that well. You're speaking my language quite a bit.

[0:49:40.1]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I learned that, because I actually went to school in California as well]. [laughter] And I also grew up north but worked in the Southeast. I know that we must be speaking the same language somehow. [laughs]

I wanted to ask one or two just more personal questions before we wrap up and then invite you to please share anything else that you'd like to about Rodale. But I did want to ask if you're okay speaking about what your health has been like and your family's and what you've done to protect yourselves during this time.

[0:50:20.7]

Garver Akers: Oh, sure, yeah. Well, again, the timing of this, you couldn't write a script better than how uncanny it's been. So the week I get down here, the COVID thing starts happening. The week after I took the job, just a few weeks before that, we found out that my wife was pregnant.

[0:50:40.8]

Diana Dombrowski: Congratulations, yes, yes.

[0:50:44.6]

Garver Akers: So we come down here and we move into a home here and I had to get on the job right away, and finding a rental in that period of time was a challenge, but we did, and hope to buy in a year or so. We'll see what happens. So Bonnie, my wife, has stayed at home. She homeschools our other children anyway, so she's home quite a bit, although it definitely brought some challenges. In the past, on her end, personally, we've always gone to a midwife. Well, again, as soon as Mirksha [phonetic], our midwife, went into hospice, which has been tough to see. She's arguably the most gifted midwife I could imagine.

So this is the first time I've ever had a farm job that didn't include health insurance, and so she started going to a clinic and had to deal with how is she going to—when I have to be at work, she's got to get to a clinic that's not allowing her to bring extra kids. So we had a lot of juggling things to deal with in those respects.

Thankfully, since then, we found a clinic that's run by an MD, has all the hospital prerequisites that the insurance will take care of it, but they let the midwife do the work, and they're a little more sensitive about when or when children can't be around, the other children and those types of things. So that's a good end to that part of it, or not end yet. We've got a couple more months of that.

Then my children have been feeling, because those poor children have been moved around so much due to my career and being homeschooled that they certainly lack certain social opportunities, and now that we're in one place that we plan to stay for a while, they were so excited this spring to meet friends and build their own community, and they haven't been able to do that, and they haven't been able to for years. So to have that—at least this time, it wasn't Mommy and Daddy telling them we have to move again

or something like that, but it was, “Hey, there’s a dangerous situation and we have to act responsibly.” So that’s part of it.

Beyond that, we don’t have any family in the immediate area and we haven’t built a social network here, so for us, we feel like we’re on standby waiting to start our lives here a little bit. But, hey, if hitting the reset button means creating a better normal, great, I’m all for it.

[0:53:30.9]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. You always know how to find the silver lining. It’s awesome.

[0:53:35.2]

Garver Akers: Got to, got to. [laughs] The way my life has been, I don’t have a choice. [laughter]

[0:53:40.0]

Diana Dombrowski: Well, those are my questions for you, and I wonder if you have anything that you’d like any listeners to know about what you do and the mission of the center you’re working with, who might be listening in the future.

[0:53:54.3]

Garver Akers: Well, I don’t know. [laughter] I don’t want to get into too many glittering generalities when it comes to my ideals or anything like that.

[0:54:04.6]

Diana Dombrowski: Go on. Yeah, you have time. [laughter]

[0:54:08.4]

Garver Akers: I started in this very idealistic and with a willingness to put myself out there mentally and physically to get the job done when it comes to spreading the message about food being medicine and medicine being food, essentially, and why we need to be in touch with it directly on a human level, get rid of these middle men, get rid of these companies that are lobbying for their interests and not ours or at least—pardon me—influence them to change, is a better term than "get rid of."

Over the years, I've had to make certain concessions. I've had jobs where I ended up working 85 hours a week for 100 days straight, and for the first time in—after chemo and radiation, I didn't have one pharmaceutical drug for 24 years. Not one treatment. Nothing. Until I worked 80-some hours a week for 100 days straight and ended up having some problems again, and wake-up calls. I'm good. Don't worry about me. But it taught me a lot about farmer burnout. It taught me that it's a sad thing for a small farmer to meet the bottom line, that I would realistically say half of the people in my industry do burn out, if not more.

But this really is a message to the consumer more than anybody, and the layperson outside of farming. We have to take our personal health seriously, which means we have to have a real relationship between ourselves and our food. We are beginning to understand in our country what that really means. I think we actually always

did until industry led us a different direction. I could get on a soapbox and preach about a lot of different things, but if we're eating clean and we look at it like perfection, something you can't achieve, but always have to strive for, if we're learning new and better plateaus of how to eat clean not just for us but our environment around us, then we're all doing our little part. It's really that simple.

We vote with our dollars and how we spend them. Food is the first thing we probably ever spent a clamshell on in humanity, I would guess. Ben Franklin said that farming is the only honest profession, but I think since his time, it became quite dishonest, and, unfortunately, the consumer is the one paying for that financially. The consumer is the one bearing the brunt of that in their health, and if we want to be healthy people, we have to have healthy food supplies with integrity that we can trust. I can say a lot of buzzwords and phrases like "Know your food, know your farmer," but I don't want to be a t-shirt or bumper sticker that turns somebody off because of the style in which I'm saying it. It's a very human thing. We all learned to grow our food before we learned to sell any other product on the planet, arguably. We've got to get back to that, and we do.

We have the Information Age now. We have so much technology. I'm all for the technology entering the marketplace. I'm little worried about the robots thing. I think "Certified Human-Handled" might be the next label you see on some cartons.

But, nonetheless, we're at a crux. We can make a decision. Can we take the food system back into our own hands or not? I didn't know when I got into this professionally twelve, thirteen years ago if that ideal and that message was going to hit the consumer, but things like this COVID-19 situation are putting these hard truths or hard facts right into people's laps. That is the reality.

Do you want to pay for your health on the front end or do you pay for your health on the back end? We hear a lot of clichés and quotes and things leading to that these days, but it is very true. My hospital bill when I went through what I went through as a teenager with cancer was $5.2 million, $5.2 *million*, and the sad part of that is I didn't pay for that; my fellow citizens did through Medicaid, through organizations, subsidies, grants, other things backed by different institutions that all move the American dollar around. So wouldn't everybody rather have just paid for me to eat healthy in the first place and maybe had a better chance at being healthier? Wouldn't we like to all invest in that for ourselves? It's important stuff. It gets right back to our humanity. It really does.

[0:59:05.8]

Diana Dombrowski: I hear you. Thank you for sharing all of that with me.

[0:59:09.4]

Garver Akers: My pleasure. Thank you for giving me an avenue to share. I've been mired with so much paperwork and numbers lately, it's nice to just talk to somebody, you know.

[0:59:19.5]

Diana Dombrowski: I feel the same way. [laughter] I'm looking forward to the next time we can talk too.

[0:59:23.9]

Garver Akers: Absolutely, absolutely.

[0:59:25.0]

Diana Dombrowski: Thank you. I'm going to close the interview out. I'll send the audio when it's all ready and cleaned up, and if you have anything you'd like to add, please let me know, but—

[0:59:36.9]

Garver Akers: Well, only thing I'd like to say is, please, when you get up in this neck of the woods, please come see us. We'd love to have you here.

[0:59:43.4]

Diana Dombrowski: Yes, absolutely. Thanks again for your time.

[0:59:46.8]

Garver Akers: Certainly. Thank you.

[0:59:48.3]

Diana Dombrowski: Take care.

[End of interview]