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Stories of Knox County Interviews

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Fall 2016

## Benji Ballmer

Benji Ballmer

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KENYON COLLEGE  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Stories of Knox County

Benji Ballmer  
Interviewed by  
Catherine Wessel and Alana Zack  
Fall 2016

Kenyon College  
Oral History Project

## Stories of Knox County

Interviewee: Benji Ballmer

Interviewer: Catherine Wessel and Alana Zack

Fall, 2016

Benji Ballmer: So, what happened was this. About a decade ago, two things happened at the same time. First, thing, we had our, my wife and I had our first kid, Dance, who was in here working out back. What happens with that, I think for a lot of parents, is that they begin to rethink all kinds of things based upon, you're now in control of another human life. So everything that you do, every input you make, is going to affect the outcome of an actual human being. So, that could be many things, but for us, specifically, the food system, or not the food system, but food in general. So we started with, and this is what got the whole ball rolling, one of the two things here, was, we started with raw milk. We lived in Findlay Ohio at the time, and we heard about, began to research what raw milk is. Which really, all raw milk is, is not homogenized or pasteurized. So it hasn't been heated up like the milk you buy off the shelf, which kill basically all the bad stuff, which is why they do it to be able to put that milk on the shelf. But at the same time, it also kills all the good stuff. So, we began to research what that meant and found a farm outside of Findlay that sold raw milk, which, in Ohio, you're allowed to sell raw milk as long as it's called a herdshare. Basically, as a customer, I go out and I fill out paperwork and I buy a part of the cow. So that farmer technically is milking my part of the cow and I'm buying milk that is mine. He is just doing the work. So I go out to the farm every week, I pick up my gallon or my five gallons, or however much I wanna buy, and I've got raw milk which is, everything you could imagine it is. It's old school, cream top, I mean, I can pull the cream off of there in the spring and the fall and make gorgeous butter, I can do anything, you know, I can make whipping cream out of it, I can leave it in, shake it up, pour milk over my cereal or whatever I'm gonna put it in, then put it back in the fridge and in an hour it's gonna be all separated again. That's what non-homogenized milk does. And so, we started with that and we began to drink raw milk and we began to make our yogurt and our dairy products, some of the different things, our butter, and all that kind of stuff from raw milk. Well then that leads to the next thing, which in our case was bread. Why is there so much gluten intolerance? Why is there, I mean, all these different questions that are out there, I'm a guy that dives to the bottom of everything, so I'm gonna go out and I'm gonna go as deep as you have to go; if that means that I need to buy a plot on Mars and raise a certain strain of wheat that is able to be digested by the populace, then that's what I'm going to do. So we began to, basically Sarah, my wife, began to cultivate a sourdough starter, which sits on your counter and it feeds off of the bacteria in the air, and you feed it, like, a living organism, and then when you need it for something, you use it. So we began to make all of our bread, all of our pancakes, all of our, if we ever did any kind of dessert dishes like a cinnamon roll, or anything like that, we were making it out of a sourdough starter. Well, I could talk for two hours on what it led to, but it just went from one thing to the next. And it was all based around the fact that we had a kid, and we were thinking, "Well what are we gonna feed this, this human being to make it the best version of itself that it can be?" So, we just went from one thing to the next. Well naturally, part of that progression that you make,

and this is the second thing that happened, is you began to see, well, I could grow a lot of this myself. So, I began to just grow food in my backyard. You know, I did all kinds of stuff. From amaranth, which is a kind of ancient grain, to tomatoes. Just the thing anyone grows in their backyard, you know? And begin to figure out how you then use that stuff to, not just eat in the moment, but eat proactively, preparing stuff for January when there won't be tomatoes available. So, as we did all that, what that led to was, I was working for a company called Fresh Encounter at that time, in Findlay, they're the largest independent grocery retailers in Ohio. So, I was working for them and doing some stuff for their ad and their marketing, and different things like that. But in the meantime, I was pursuing this hobby and this passion, and in doing that, I was talking to them about it, and I'm like, "Listen guys. We own grocery stores." We have this one in Findlay, especially where we lived, it's kind of this flagship store. I said, "We should do a community garden outside of the store." So the first year, we tilled up a bunch of land, like two thousand square feet of land, and we did a community garden, which basically was ten plots. We partnered with a food drive non-profit organization in Findlay, got people that wanted to garden, taught them how to garden, gave them the seed, gave them the equipment, showed them how to do it all, and they did fine. Naturally, you're gonna have numbers that... you're gonna have four people that do really good, three people that do medium and then two people that never show up again. That's gonna happen no matter where you do it and no matter when you do it. It's just the way things work. So, it was fine but I was looking at it, and I'm like, "This is a pretty big piece of land." And the idea was, if they grow stuff and they wanna keep it, great. If they grow too much of something, we'll buy it back from them and put it in our store, and then sell it to the community, and be like "Hey, this was grown right outside by such and such!" You know, kind of this little cute program that was more a PR thing than it was an actual, we're gonna have a ton of food to sell. But what that led to was, realizing, "This is a big enough space," And I began to see the way farming went, that you can grow a ton of food on that space. Well, that winter, I met a guy who had graduated from Michigan State with a degree in organic agriculture. Well Michigan State, they train you to grow underneath high tunnel hoop houses, which are the big, you know, if you're coming to this warehouse from Kenyon, you pass the Farm on Kenyon Road on the left, they've got high tunnels there. So, he basically taught me how to do that. We built a high tunnel on that piece of property that the community garden was on, and began to farm that space as one big unit, and then used volunteer workers to come and work the space and then in payment for working, they got food. And then we had a bunch of food, and that's when we started doing farmer's markets and putting food inside of our store. Well, in doing all of that, of course I'm diving for the bottom, so I'm naturally going to see that there are some major agricultural issues happening in our country that have been happening, frankly, since about Nixon's era, way before any of us were even born. But, there's reasons that that all has transpired, to get us to the point that we're at now, which is in pretty bad shape, I mean we're in pretty dire straits as far as what people think the agricultural system is and what it actually is. So, me and the owner of the Fresh Encounter group, and then the guy, his name's Ted Peterson, he's from MTSO, actually, in Delaware Ohio, where he's at now, he's got a farm there, began to collectively brainchild a business plan that was, and when we did the hoop house, I had a little small CSA, basically friends and family, there was about eight people, I still have the original list, that were buying a CSA share out of that hoop house. So we began to brainstorm this

business plan of, you know, part of the issue is, for a small grower, there's lots of them and I could go into what they are, but there has to be a sales channel that exists for guys and gals who are growing on a small scale. One acre, or a half an acre, to five acres, to ten acres intensively. Because all of that product, if you're going to farm that intensively, it takes so much work that you don't have time, most of the time, to market yourself. For every one farm that's really good at marketing themselves, an example would be, you know, one that we would all know, or one that if you were from Columbus you'd know, would be like a Jorgenson Farm out of New Albany. They do a good job at marketing and they have events at their farm and they do weddings there, they do all that stuff. It's kind of an agritourism spot but they also grow food. But for everyone that's as good as they are, there's literally a hundred that don't have the time or the money or the know-how to market themselves, social media wise, magazine wise, restaurant wise, whatever it is to get their name out there. And so they need somebody to do that work for them, and be the clearinghouse essentially, where they can just sell all their food to, or as much as they want to sell. So we developed this machine, that we called Yellowbird, which, the urban definition of the yellowbird is your one true love. So, and it goes on to say that in most instances, you only know that it's your yellowbird, whether it's in human form or something else, after you've already neglected it and you realize too late, "That was my one true love, and I've lost her, or I've lost it." And that's how we looked at the food system, and so are we too far gone to where when we realize what our one true love is, that it's too late to recover it? So, we built this thing and we said, "What if we stood in the gap, created a mechanism that would allow the small farmer to sell into a place where..."-- It's not a food produce wholesaler, there's lots of produce wholesalers in Columbus, and lots of them claim to be buying local, what that really means is, "We're gonna pay you rock-bottom prices," which is what they deal in, commodities, they're buying all their food from South America, California, Canada, at the lowest possible rate, and then they're gonna try to turn around and sell it for the most they can sell it for. And that's why the system's broken, because the system perpetuates that model. So, we say, "We'll come in, and we will pay, we'll go out and see how much we can sell it for, and we'll turn around and pay backwards to the farmer and pay a flat amount, whether that's sixty five percent or seventy percent, you know, whatever it is that they need to survive, so where they may be able to sell at an auction or to a wholesaler, their tomatoes, for thirty cents a pound, you know, most of the year, we were paying, John and I with Yellowbird, were paying one eighty, sometimes two dollars per pound. An actual wage that would pay the farm what they need to be able to operate as a small farm. Because right now, there's very few guys and gals that are able to exist as a small farm without also having to have a full-time job as a fireman, or a carpenter, or whatever it is that they're doing that's also a full-time job. 'Cause it just doesn't pay the bills to grow food. So, we're trying to say, "Listen. We're making no qualms about the fact that we're a for-profit company. We're not a nonprofit company, we're not running it as a charity where you donate money and we're gonna run off of people's whatever." If we can't exist in a free market society, pay the grower what they deserve, and get that money out of that food on the other end, on the sales end, that's what I always say to the grower: "You tell me what you need out of it, and I'll pay you that, then don't worry about it. I'll go sell it and find somebody who'll pay what it's worth." Because that's, if anything's worth the money that we're paying, it's gotta be our food, right? So some of it's idealistic and some of it is, a lot of work to try to get people to understand

what that food's actually worth, but let us do the work, you just grow the food. You're the rockstar. I can slap a cute logo on anything and go sell it, put it on the side of the van and go put birds all over the place, and figure out how to create the monster that people want to be a part of, the community, where I'm telling them where their food's coming from, why that's important, what's in the box this week, why that's important, how to get healthy, how to eat better, I can do all that. Let me do all that, I'll buy your food. You just stay where you want to be, which is on your dirt, amending your soil and raising your family and growing great food. So, if we can do that and create one success story, five success stories, twenty success stories, of all these people that are doing all this growing of all this food the right way, and taking care of the soil, which makes the plants healthy, which makes us healthy, like, ultimately in the universe also running off the same energy source, it's the sun. So naturally, we want to put something in our bodies that's seen and harvested the energy from the sun, which is ultimately grass. That's the biggest solar panel on the planet, which, if you're an omnivore and you eat cows, you want your cows to have eaten grass. So if you're eating grass, which humans can't digest so that's an issue, but the cows can, so we can eat the cows that digested the grass. Second to that, then, is plant-based diet. If eighty percent of your diet is fruits and vegetables, and nuts and grains, that are digestible, then you've got a good thing going, not by my opinion, but scientifically, medicinally, all that kind of stuff, is going to make a difference in your life, in your energy, in your sleep, in your relationships to people, you can't separate out and tease out, you know, we're in a society that is dualistic, which is Western. Basically means there's a right and a wrong to everything. Well, that's only come about in the last couple hundred years since Hellenism basically. So that necessarily isn't the healthiest way to think, which is, "I'm gonna put a wall around everything. This is my work life, this is my family life, this is my friends life, this is my sports life," this is whatever it is. That's not the way human beings are designed to work. And so, you've got to intergrate all of these things together so that you've got, as much as you can, "This is my work life, this is my family life, this is my friends life," as a healthy human being. So, all of that starts with, in my opinion, food. So, as we begin to look at all these different things; Paleo Diet, Atkins Diet, vegans, vegetarians, and omnivores, and all these different things, I don't think any one of them is the right thing. It's not like I think, oh, "I'm an advocate for Paleo diet." I think there are great things about the Paleo diet, but I think there are great things about vegans. So when you look at it, it's not so much what you're choosing, like, you shouldn't eat meat. Well, there's something to be said about that. Probably, the middle ground for that is, you probably should eat less meat, and the meat that you do eat should be raised sustainably and humanely and on a pasture-based diet, which is where all the energy comes from anyways which is in the grass. So, as we begin to think about all that, and people are hot-button topic on all that, we've got an opportunity to basically step into the gap and give them the information and the power to make a vote every day. That's what I say all the time. And I didn't come up with it, I copied it off somebody else. I vote every day with my dollar. I may vote once every four years, which I choose to do, but that's, hot-button issues. Huge issues that then are gonna die back down, and we'll never see again for another four years. So, every day, what are you going to do with your dollar? In Europe, they won't grow GMO grains because the public won't pay for it, right? So, you know, they voted with their dollar, and the people who are growing the food have made a change, because if no one's paying for what you're growing, obviously you're not gonna grow it.

So we've got to be able to step in and vote with our dollar. Now, when we vote with our dollar, and we've put that box out there, base share costs twenty five dollars a week. I got two emails today alone, I can show them to you, that say, "I am spending less money on food—not more—by buying your box because now I don't go to the grocery store and just fill my cart up with stuff I know is going to go bad. I know what I'm looking for, I go specifically for something, and I buy those five things." Things that you can't necessarily get in Ohio, like cinnamon. That'd be an easy one. Avocados. Lemons. So, as they're doing that, we're trying to basically say, and here's how to bring the full circle to this soliloquy: What we found out, as a husband and wife trying to buy food for our kids, we wanted raw milk, we wanted sourdough bread, we wanted grassfed animals, we wanted grass-fed eggs, we wanted yogurt that was made homemade with raw product, we wanted cheese that was made the same way, all these different things. Maple syrup, et cetera et cetera. We had to go to each farm to get those products. So, my wife stays home with the kids. She has the luxury of being able to go and get them and spend four hours plus a week just driving to get the milk, to get the cheese, you know. We found it all, it's out there, it's not like the product is not available, it is available. But, how do you get that, first of all, into the city, second of all to a dual income family where both the wife and the husband may work all day and don't have the time to go out, or the luxury to go out into the farms. But they want to make those choices, they want to eat the way we were eating, or at least have the available option for whatever their diet is, this is the product that we want to get. So, we said Yellowbird steps in and we go to the farms, which is why our warehouse is where it is. We're not a produce wholesaler in the middle of Columbus where, you know, you've got, and I can name five midsize produce wholesalers that are in Columbus that are all competing with each other, all have for thirty years and have all done it the same way for thirty years. And they'll say to the grower, "Yeah if you can bring your food to me, I can try to get rid of it and sell it, and then pay you back a portion of that price." But who can get the product to them if they're two hours outside of the city? So we came out, and we literally said, I knew Knox County, I lived in Findlay, but I knew I needed to be close to Columbus and I knew Knox County. So I came here and I said, "I'm gonna move to Mount Vernon." We had friends that lived here with kids, and so it was a natural choice. "We're gonna move here, and then we're gonna go out and we're gonna find the growers," 'Cause we know the food's out there. So, you know, if you look at a Google Maps, which I've got a star on every one of our farms, you know, all the farms are out here like this (gestures to map) up into Holmes County, and all this kind of stuff. Well, that's a two hour plus drive from here (gestures again) to Columbus. But they can bring the food to a hub, which is, you know, here's small farmer number one, two, three, and four, here is Yellowbird, and here is Columbus, let's say it's restaurants, it's CSAs, it's farm markets, it's all these different outlets for the food into the city. Well, until now, what's happened is Farmer number one has had to drive into the city, go to all the restaurants and meet all the chefs. He's had to go to all the farmer markets, he's had to sell his CSA. And then, the problem is, Farmer number two comes in and goes to the same farmer markets, the same restaurants, and the same CSA's, which, I love farmer's markets. I love every farm, I buy tons of food from farms that have their own CSA. I'm not trying to say I want to take everyone from every farm that ever existed and bring them in and Yellowbird does it all. I'm saying, build your own forty, fifty, one hundred member CSA. It's great because you can get full price for everything that you've got. But you can grow more food

than that, and you have to be able to make it work and pay the bills. So grow another hundred members worth of food, I'll buy it from you, and I'll feed it into our multi-hundred member, eventually multi-thousand member CSA that is serving people who these guys can't get to necessarily, and the other advantage is, when you buy a CSA from a farm, most of the time what happens is, the farm's able to grow ten items, let's say twenty items. Which means, every week you're going to get the same box. So you're going to get lettuce, kale, cucumbers, tomatoes, and it's gonna be a short run of tomatoes. I'm only gonna be able to get tomatoes for four weeks out of the year when that farm has 'em. Well, as a company like ours, we've been buying tomatoes since May, and they're still out there. People don't know where they're at except us, there are still tomatoes being grown. Because of the weather especially. So now, as a member of Yellowbird, for, we do thirty-two weeks out of the year right now, of the CSA, you're going to be able to get tomatoes, locally grown, which are obviously the best, everybody knows that, it's no comparison taste wise, I could blindfold you and cut 'em, you know, cut the thing you got at the grocery store that came from Canada that was picked three weeks ago green, and turned red in a warehouse with gas, or the food that was picked, you know, twenty-four hours, forty-eight hours ago, that's completely red because it grew on the vine, which, on a side note, just for your own interest, all of the nutrients that go into the product, in nature, happen in that last forty-eight hours, when, that plant is pumping that tomato full of everything, which is why it turns red, which is why if you don't pick it it'll fall off. 'Cause now, you know, that's the way, what is nature trying to do? It's trying to reproduce herself. She's trying to put seeds into the tomato, which are full of nutrients, that are gonna fall to the ground, that are gonna make another tomato plant. That's what's happening in the world, in nature. So when we pull that tomato three weeks early to be able to put it onto a semi-truck, to be able to send it across the country, full of oil, to wherever it's going, to whatever grocery store it's going to, that is almost a zero nutritive value, if that's even a word, you know, nutritious value. But if you wait, and you pull it in that last forty-eight hours when it's being pumped full of nutrients and whatever, when I eat that tomato, now I'm getting all of the things I should be getting as a human. The lycopene, and the vitamin this, and the vitamin that, that's all available now. Which is why it's important to eat food that was picked when it was ripe. Which, just naturally is going to lend itself to eating close to your home because they can't travel very far before it goes bad. So, when this happens, what we're saying is, "Okay, do your thing and sell to restaurants, sell to CSA's, but you can kind of curtail some of that, get some time back that you would normally spend out doing this, get some energy back, get some money back, and gas money back, bring it to us, one, two, three, and four., and we'll go out, we'll sell to restaurants, we'll sell to CSA's, we'll sell to Kenyon. We'll sell to whatever, you know, all those different places, and we'll do that work for you." We've got refrigeration, we've got trucks, we've got bodies, we've got all those different things. You get it to me, one hour trip or less from wherever it's at being grown out here, or we'll come and get it from you if you need us to, which we do all day on Tuesday, which you guys have seen. I mean, we start early Tuesday morning and by the time it gets here, those guys have all put in a full day already driving their vans around and getting food. We'll bring it in, and then we'll take care of the sales machine, which is then the box that, that's our main driver on sales is that box that we then send out, full of food. We have an add-on egg, an add-on cheese, an add-on chicken, an add-on pork, which basically is, you know, partnered with all the local farms so if you're an



omnivore, if you eat cheese, if you eat eggs, and you can't get to those farms, we can get to those farms. Ideally, where we're going is, we've got a whole shopping experience. We know where you can get everything, I mean, you can get almost everything that you would eat in a well-rounded diet within a hundred fifty miles of Columbus. Now, you can't do it all year. I can't get tomatoes in January because of the amount of heat it would take to try to get tomatoes into a greenhouse or something, it would be too expensive probably. But, we can give people enough tomatoes throughout the growing season, and give them the tools necessary to create salsa, spaghetti sauce, canned tomatoes, all of these different things that then, if they want to eat local all year, they can. And so, that's where sometimes the small farms don't have the resources to be able to equip the people to do what it is that we're equipping them to do, and we're doing it through newsletters, Instagram, Facebook, you know, all the things that you use to basically give them the information, the recipes, the links, the connections to be able to do an even better, I just get emails everyday where it's like, I just got one that said, "I share it with my neighbor. We share with our neighbors. One of our favorite things to do," they get it on Thursday, they get it on Thursday night, "We get beers and we go to each other's house and we just break the box open and just divvy it up. We're gonna take this, we like this," because they know it's too much food for one but they figured out how to share it, and now you're getting, you look at the word agriculture. Two parts, agri-culture. For ten thousand years, all of culture was formed around nomadic people who travelled where the food was at, and built culture around what kind of food was available at this place in the world. So, it was around the prep of food, and the fermentation of food, and the picking of food, and the growing of food, and the trading of food, and that's how culture developed, because you had to have food to live, it wasn't that we went to a grocery store. That didn't start until like the 1940's when Piggy Wiggly came out, literally. So, all of your culture is not formed around, what is Kim Kardashian wearing to the award show tonight, it is, "We've got to eat literally to live. So, how are we going to grow grapes, pick grapes, ferment grapes, and then drink the wine that come from the grapes together. And if I've got wine and you've got leather, I'm going to trade wine for leather," kind of a thing. So, now you look at what these people are doing, this classic example of getting beers, getting together, heaven forbid we look at each other in the eye and not look at our screen, and interchange this and do it around food. Because now you've got story, you've got, we're eating together, probably, multiple, at least a night a week or a night a month, because we're doing this thing, we're cooking at home, we're eating around a table, all those different things are a lost art that you can't tell me some of the breakdowns in society don't stem from the fact that we're not just being humans, together. And especially in my opinion, centering it around food and the spiritual experience that happens when you eat and share a meal together. So ultimately, that's what we're trying to create. We're trying to, and maybe I'm idealizing it too much, maybe I'm making it too romantic, whatever. But you've got to hold people's hands anymore to show them how to have a meal around a table and what goes into it. If you look at the slow food movement, which started over in Italy, they say, your meal should be as long as it took to make the meal. So, we eat at home, we literally don't eat out, ever. So I know what it takes, I mean, my wife's at home cooking right now. If she doesn't start at three o'clock at least, maybe earlier, there won't be food at five o'clock. So if we sit down, it would be a slap in the face to her for me and my four children to sit down and eat that food in twenty minutes, and be like, "Well what are we doing now, what's next?" So in

order to then, do homage to one, the food, to two, the chef, to three, the family, you've gotta take the time to sit down and unload your burden of the day, we've been doing this for thousands of years, around a centered place of culture. And most of the time, that's centered around food and drink. So in doing that, that's really the romantic version of what I'm trying to create. How do you do that? You do it through a twenty-five dollar box of really good food that is seventy percent staple product that people know how to use, garlic, tomato, onion, cucumber, whatever, then twenty percent something that they've never tried before; kohlrabi, rutabaga, you know, oyster mushrooms this week, some things they've never seen before but they're willing to experiment with and find out that, "Wow, this is amazing. And we're gonna create new dishes around it, we're gonna create new dishes around it, we're gonna be adventurous, we're gonna experiment, we're gonna do all these new things," and so there is an actual sales mechanism which is, a twenty-five dollar box of food, but that is so much more than that. And that's what we're really creating here. It's not, although I am providing a value that's gonna be thirty five dollars worth of food that you're only paying twenty five dollars for, it is the best you can get, it is local, it is grown organically, it is all these different things. It's also, then, a synergy thing where one plus one equals three, it doesn't equal two. We've got to create a community that's buying into all of the things that I've talked about for the last twenty minutes. It's not, "Well, I wanna support," there's always gonna be someone that's gonna be like "It's the best food and I'm gonna pay for that," or "It's the best value and I'm gonna pay for that." Certainly. But there's gonna be lots of people that are like, "I want to learn about all these farms that you're telling us about each week. I want to go to the farm. I want to meet the farmer." So you've got to have events, you've gotta have dinners, you've got to have all these opportunities where you're just connecting the dots, it's not about me. It's not about Yellowbird. All that will take off on its own, based around the fact that I am introducing the eater to the grower. And if the eater wants to go directly to the grower, which they will in some cases, go directly to the farm either at the farmer's market or to the farm or whatever, I'm not saying, "Don't do that." I'm saying, "Please do that!" If we did that, I wouldn't even be needed. I could go do something else. But what I'm doing is saying, "I can make it so that if you can't get to the farmer's market, if you can't get to the farm, if you can't do all these different things, I can have a box for you every single week to your place of employment, or to the place that you shop at, 'cause that's where all of our drop points are." So we've made it easy enough and consistent enough for long enough that people are already emailing me, "What am I gonna do during the winter?" And I'm like, "Well we've thought about doing a winter box," which we probably will do this year, do a shortened winter box of root veg and people that can grow greens in hoopouses and greenhouses. But we've transformed a contingency of people to know, the whole thing has always been, this is the very first piece of swag that we ever printed right here, which is who grew your food. Right? That's the question to ask, it's not me, I can grow food, but I saw a bigger need that needed met, and so I felt that call, my uncle once said to me when I was young, and I've always thought of it ever since, the phrase is, "Let him who sees the need consider himself the one called to meet the need." So I saw, I'm almost dragging my feet, I said, "Crap, I see what I have to do." I had my house for sale, was gonna buy five acres and grow food, that's what I was gonna do, but it was like, I saw the need and I had to answer that call, and in doing so, this is what it's led to. So obviously, it's pointing back to the grower, it's having the consumer ask "Who grew your food?"

and knowing that's more important than any labels, any of the USDA can put on anything. So if I know the person that's growing and I've been to their farm, I've seen how they're doing, I've eaten their food right out of the ground that has nothing sprayed on it that's dangerous for me or for my family, now I've got something—I've got a connection. Even though I'm not the one growing the food, I'm still connected to the Earth, all the way back to the sun and all the way back to the guy who's growing it, and really what you're doing is you're paying this guy to grow your food the way that you want it grown. And they're more than happy to. I've got fifty guys that would do exactly what you wanted them to do if they knew that you were gonna pay for it to get it done. And I mean, these guys aren't getting rich, obviously. So it's not like you're paying, well, gosh, I can pay seventy cents a pound for tomatoes at the store, but this guy wants two dollars a pound. Well, first of all, it's apples to oranges, literally almost, you know, it's not even the same product, but second of all, if you knew that your dollar was going to the guy that lived twenty minutes away and it was keeping his lights on, of course you're gonna do that, because you know, none of us are that disconnected from the fact that that's the way socioeconomics works and if we were spending our money right where we're at, obviously our communities are going to be loads better because our money's not travelling outside of the state or outside of the country to pay for an inferior product with inferior nutrients, grown who knows where, using what techniques? Even if it says USDA organic, I'm not to that farm in California, I don't know what techniques they're using to grow food that can fill up a Wal-Mart?! It can't be, I'm skeptical of that. So anyways, that's the answer to your first question.

Alana Zack: Wow, well thank you!

BB: Maybe that has it all, but...

Catherine Wessel: There's still a few in there. So how long ago did you move to Mount Vernon?

BB: It'll be thirty years in January.

CW: Okay. And did you already have some connections with farmers here or did you go out and meet all of them?

BB: No, I did this. I walked into the Woodward, which is our local foods store in downtown Mount Vernon, and at the time, they were a couple doors down. They had a shelf with all of their farms' business cards on the shelf, which is great. And I literally just walked down, and just went \*pick pick pick\*! I picked every card out and it was January, so it was that year, it was two or three winters ago when it was super cold for a super long period of time. So I just started making calls. You know, this is who I am, this is what I'm doing, I don't know who you are or what you're doing but I'd love to come out and meet you, I'd love to come out and see your farm, and I literally just started going out and meeting everybody I could meet. I went to Fox Hollow, I went to Pheasantview, I went to Anne & Dan, Trudell, Anne's raspberry farm. I went to one after the other, but simultaneous to that, I was also driving into Columbus and walking into every restaurant and meeting every chef and going to every place that I could think of that would be a good drop point. So every independent grocery store, Lucky's Market, Hill's Market, Weiland's, Huffman's, you know, all the places that are not Kroger, Wal-Mart, Giant Eagle, etc, Whole Foods even, and saying, "Listen. I can give you guys, I'm going to get people to grow food for

me and I'm gonna make it possible for you to do local, because local's the thing and everybody wants to be able to buy local and whatever, and I'm gonna make it possible for you to be able to buy tomatoes seven months a year, locally, from Ohio, that are raised organically and sell them on your shelves." Well, time's gone on and the picture's developed and it turns out that most retailers and most restaurants are not, it's a lot of work to do what it that we're doing. It's a lot of headache and it's a lot of planning and it's a lot of, outside of their normal way of ordering food. Some will stick with it, some will try it, almost nobody will do enough buying of that product to make it worth the stop or either the farmer or for Yellowbird. So what we've done is we found that the CSA is gonna be the driver of this whole thing. Now, the good news is that in the meantime, I met John Marsh from Kenyon early. Went in and met him two winters ago, and told him two winters ago, "I'm hiring you because of what you know that I don't, and your connections and the way that you've built the local foods program for Kenyon." So, in doing that, I was two years later, I was good on my word and we were able to bring him on. So, the cool thing about that is, and especially now, is that we're connected to Kenyon. So yesterday morning, Mike, who replaced John, came by with his truck, rolled the door up, we had fifteen hundred dollars worth of product that was on two pallets that they had ordered from us and we rolled it off. What that means is, we're able to buy food without having to be afraid of being stuck with it, and having it go bad, and us having paid for it, because we don't do consignment, we pay for it. Once we, once that food hits us, we own it. So, it's in our coolers and so with Kenyon, where they're at, and the position that they take, we're able to buy, let's say we've got five hundred CSA members. We're able to buy six hundred dollar-bunches worth of carrots, fill up the CSAs for the week, and have a buffer so that if the product's bad and we have to throw away one bunch, or we get extra people that week, or less people that week, there's always a play in how much we're ordering. So if we've got a hundred extra bunches of carrots or turnips or watermelon radishes, whatever it is, we can then say, "Hey Mike, we've got all this stuff hangin'" and he'll say, "Oh yeah, just put it on a pallet, put the bill together, I'll show up, load it onto my truck, we're serving, essentially, if you're eighteen hundred students," I don't know what the actual number is, but let's say eighteen hundred, "that's eighteen hundred CSA memberships really," because they're feeding you all week, three meals a day. So being able to then take that food and push it through something like that, and it can't just be Kenyon, it's gotta be, we're designing what we're designing to be able to take what Kenyon has done and go to Oberlin and go to Wooster, and go to Denison, and go to these other places that want and have the ability to do that, because we've got to be able, what we've done is just the tip of the iceberg. We're not on anyone's radar for making any change other than the individual changes we've made in the individual families. Which is great, because we're affecting change over here (gestures to map), but we've got to be able to affect change over here. We've got to be able to say to the grower, "Last year we bought twenty thousand dollars worth of food off of you, now next year we can buy forty. The following year we can buy eighty." And then, they get to the point, let's think about it, let's say they sold us forty thousand dollars worth of food. It cost them, in labor, seed, time, maybe twenty five to thirty thousand dollars of cost to get to that forty, so they net ten in the end, well no-one can live on ten thousand dollars a year, but man, the work they put in, they should be able to live on it. So we've gotta be able to get what they need price-wise, we've gotta be able to get them to scale where they're growing something that's in big

enough quantity that it makes a difference for them, and give them that consistency so that not necessarily next year, but we've grown every year with our growers where, now, there's a light at the end of the tunnel. If we can hold course and grow how we've grown and consistently buy from you what we've bought from you plus twenty percent, thirty percent, forty percent, now you know that you're gonna have a payoff where you may break even in five years. And in ten years. But, you know, like I said, it's a small rudder has to turn a huge ship, and that's where we're so deep that I don't know, if we can't turn it around, I'm gonna sink the ship trying and I'm gonna go down in flames doing it. If we can, then let's keep biting off and keep, you know, I tell people all the time when I sit down with them, if they're a restaurant owner or a chef, "You're not gonna like me at first. I'm gonna call it how I see it, I'm gonna tell you what you're doing and I'm gonna call BS if I see it." Which basically means, most of the time, they're not gonna end up doing business with us. But at least they know, now, we've gotta get people that are committed and willing to go through the growing pains of changing the way that they order food, see food, eat food, serve food, prep food, store food. Because that's what it'll take to be able to create a local food system that makes any difference for anybody.

CW: How many farms do you buy from?

BB: Well, guys just growing straight produce, like peppers and tomatoes, probably in between twenty and thirty in any given calendar year. But, we also probably buy from another ten to twenty people that are like, this is an example, Stutzman's pancake mix. Stutzman's, they're in, they're outside of Millersburg, and they grow grains, wheat, corn at times, buckwheat, and so this is a pancake mix here. Here's what's in it. Organic whole spelt flour, organic buckwheat flour, organic corn flour, aluminum-free baking powder, real salt. I mean, there's nothing preservative in there, there's nothing garbage in there, it's all grain, the spelt, the buckwheat, and the corn, they grew themselves, the salt I'm sure they bought, I don't know what salt they use, but normally it's probably like a sea salt or something, not a synthetic salt, and aluminum-free baking powder. So it's like, there's nothing in there that is not a whole food and they're growing it out in Holmes County and then creating a value-added product. So we can now put this in the box, and so people that want, you know, pancake mix, spelt flour, buckwheat flour, spelt berries, some of that kind of stuff, all of that grows in Ohio. Dry beans, black beans, kidney beans, lima beans, that all grows in Ohio. We just don't buy it from Ohio because we don't know it's available in Ohio, so we just buy it from Mexico or wherever we're buying it from. Well, let's put some guys that are growing the amount of beans we must eat as a populace in any given year, let's dedicate ten percent, five percent, one percent of those sales to those guys, because it would make a drastic difference in our economies in Ohio, and in our families' lives of the guys who are doing all that work.

CW: So, from the farms and the people that you buy from, is there a typical amount of their output that you get, or does it vary all across the board?

BB: Varies all across the board, you know. We've got people, what's happening is this. Guys that are growing, gals that are growing food for us over the last three years, have seen our growth, I mean they want us to grow, I've got people, I've got one guy this winter, Blossom Acres, his name's Eli Yoder, Amish guy, he's got like a seventy-member CSA, he's gonna turn

his whole CSA over to me. He's like, "I'd rather just grow, I'll give you the business and now I can just grow food." Same guy and then multiple other guys, I know Pheasantview's another one, who's out in Fredericktown, you know, they're like, you know, farm markets are great, to an extent. There's a lot of inconsistency in farm markets, 'course they don't last all year most of the time, and it's kind of a crapshoot. You show up, you may sell two hundred dollars or you may sell twenty dollars. And that's the way it's always been, and kind of the way it's always gonna be. So, if he knows, "Hey, I can go to one place for thirty minutes," I'm talking about me, "Drop it off here, sell a thousand dollars worth of food in one shot, I'm gonna do that rather than take on my Saturday after working all week, go stand at a farm market for two to four hours, and maybe make two hundred dollars." So, I've had guys that are like, "Would it be ok," they literally ask me, "Would it be okay if I stopped going to this market and started selling all that food to you?" And I'm like, "Yea, I don't want to tell you what to do," 'Cause I don't wanna say, "Stop going to the farm market," 'cause that's not my part either. But, I see it for them and I'm like, "Yes, bring that thousand dollars worth of food here, and let me, I don't get a, I like to sell, but the buzz for me is in writing the check to the farmer. When he drops his food off and I cut him a check, and he drives away with cash in hand, I've been him. There's nothing better than that. I've done the work, I've (interview cuts)