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Interview with Big Bear Grocery Store Manager, Mark Potter

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Mark Potter

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Event: Interview with Big Bear Grocery store manager, Mark Potter

Place: Big Bear Grocery Store in Mt. Vernon Ohio

Co-workers present: none

On Thursday October 19th at around 9pm, I began my task of interviewing someone at Big Bear grocery store in order to gather a broader understanding of the local food suppliers and the food network within Knox County. I was not yet ready to interview someone so I casually observed the storefront and the produce section and then headed to the information desk. I asked the woman if there was anyone I could talk to about how the store was run and where most of the food comes from. She seemed busy and told me to ask a man standing at the front helping bag groceries. He told me I should come back during the day and talk to a manager. I thanked him, bought a plantain and left.

The following Thursday, October 26th, I returned to Big Bear at around 10am. This time I was prepared to do the interview. I walked to the front desk, introduced myself as a Kenyon student and asked if there was anyone I could interview about the store. She told me to go to the office at the end of the hall, which is in the front of the store to the right side of the registers if you were facing the storefront. I began to walk towards the office and could see that there were three men discussing something in the front room of the office. The office was small, seemed like a small hallway that was divided into two separate rooms that could be sectioned off with a door. I paused for a second to try to figure out if they were in the middle of business. One of the men spotted me and asked if he could help me with anything.

I explained that I am a student from Kenyon College and am taking a class where we are researching the local food network in Knox County and I am interested in interviewing someone about this store. They seemed interested and I felt that the interaction was informal and comfortable. They wanted to know about me, what I was majoring in and why I was taking this class. They told me to tell all the Kenyon kids that they had a new organic section, something we could not find at Kroger. I laughed and knew I was being categorized as a nature-loving privileged Kenyon student, all of which I am. Although it was nice to have a friendly conversation I knew we had gotten away from the point of the interaction. I asked again if I could interview any of them at some point about the Big Bear store. The two talkative men, who were standing in the front, pointed at the man sitting in the chair in the back room. They told me that he knew everything I would want to know. I became a little more serious and addressed only the store manager. I asked if there would be a good time to conduct the interview. He said he could spare about half an hour at around three today. He said that the middle to late afternoon was usually not too busy. I thanked all three of the men and returned to Kenyon to prepare myself for my first formal interview.

I was nervous and knew I had to practice with the tape recorder before I could actually use it. I got my roommate to practice with me. We sat far apart and close together in order to test the different volumes. I got a lot more comfortable with the recorder although I still do not like the sound of my own voice on tape. I dressed a little more conservatively, borrowed a watch, read over my question from last time and headed towards Big Bear at around 2:40.

I got to Big Bear a little bit early and Mark Potter, the store manager, said that he was a little busy but we should do the interview right now. I went into the small office in the back. There was a computer and three chairs. I sat down right at the corner of the two desks. He was finishing something on the computer. I asked if I could shut the door so the recorder would not pick up all the outside noises. He said he would rather not. I did not exactly know how to react and felt a little bit nervous and uncomfortable. I started the recorder and he seemed a little preoccupied about its existence. He answered all the questions but seemed to be in a hurry and did not want to elaborate. I had a hard time asking follow up questions and hurried through the questions I had written down. The setting made me feel rushed and scattered. The phone that rang twice, the beeps from the registers in the back of my head and his body language made me feel that I was wasting his time and should hurry. When the phone rang for the first time I asked if he wanted to get it, but he said that it would go to the information desk. So I continued the interview. The importance of having a quiet place that is disturbance free is not only important to keep the interviewee focused but also the interviewer. The Big Bear manager was busy and this was the only way to capture a bit of his time and thoughts on tape. I was not ideal, but all that was possible. I should have been able to block out some of the outside noises and hopefully I will get better at it in the future.

I started out the interview by asking about his life. Mark Potter is the store manager and has been working with Big Bear since 1973 when he started part time on summer break. He started in Zanesville and has worked at about 10 to 15 different stores over the years. As store manager he is responsible for all that happens in the store, making sure they are properly staffed, workers are on time, buying supplies and “basically everything we do here”. There are about 80 people who work at Big Bear and it is divided into departments. There is a manager in each department that answers to him. At this point I should have asked how many different departments there are.

I asked if he was responsible for purchasing goods for the store. He said that he does not do it directly but it was his responsibility to see that it is done. He said that the corporate headquarters make the decisions on what items to sell, the different brands and the pricing. He decides what quantities are needed for his store by judging from the history, a bit a guess work and knowing the customers. He said that the corporate headquarters change the items that are for sale and they often must have things that don't sell well in order to satisfy all the customers. It seemed to me that the corporate headquarters that are in Syracuse New York make most of the decisions. Big Bear stores are located in Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York and parts of Vermont. He told me that customers come from all over Knox County, (Mt. Vernon, Apple Valley, Fredricktown, Danville and Centerburg) and choose Big Bear because of the friendly service, cleanliness, and the high quality of merchandise. He said that he relates to his customers all day long. Most of his day is spent on the sales floor. There was a small pause after this question, I wanted to see if he would elaborate on any thing. The silence was a little awkward. I then asked him how his store might relate to the smaller stores or the farmers market. He had a little difficulty with this question and finally said that those operations are going to draw people no matter what his store does. Those people are looking for something locally grown and Big Bear does not have many items that are from Knox County. I asked if there was any local food and he replied that there could be some, but again it was all purchased at the corporate level. I asked if he knew where

most of the food came from. He said it was all shipped in. The produce depends on the growing season and what is available, but most comes from California or Florida. The source of the meat varies and he had no real idea, he said he could look on the boxes. Some of the produce could be local but he knew that there are a lot of Ohio items such as melons and corn that are grown down along the Ohio River. Again he emphasized that he did not make those decisions.

There was another pause and he continued by talking about Buy Ohio month that happens every August. All the items that are from Ohio are highlighted with red tags that say what they are and where they come from. I should have asked more about this, such as what items they usually highlighted. At this point I explained what our project was and what we were hoping to accomplish. He said that his store had some capabilities in buying locally grown food, but that a strict set of criteria would have to be met. He said that the produce manager would know more about this but he was on vacation right now. He thought that the most important part would be the pricing. He said, “we won’t spend more for it locally then we can get it for from our warehouse.” I asked him what the benefits or liabilities of buying locally grown foods would be. He said it would show that Big Bear supported the local community. At this point he seemed a little bit anxious I began to wrap up the interview. I asked if he had any thing to say that I did not ask about. He said that he thought that I was mostly interested in locally grown food and in terms of the meat there was not really any but with in the produce I could possibly find some. I should have asked about dairy and cheese. He said I could come back and talk to the produce manager and that I could go back into the produce fridge to look at the boxes.

I thanked him a little too quickly and stopped the tape. We then continued taking a bit about the new organic section as we walked to it and a bit more about buy Ohio month. He said that buy Ohio month was run at the state level and that Big Bear just participated. He talked a bit about how the organic section had not been doing so well but it was starting to pick up. A woman who works in the store came up to him with some problem that I did not try to figure out. He told me he should go take care of it and quickly took me to the produce fridge. I walked around recording where most of the items had been shipped from. This month they were featuring Ohio apples, greens from Willard Ohio, cucumbers and tomatoes from Florida, lettuce and carrots from California, cabbage from Urbana Ohio, radishes and collards from Willard Ohio and caramel apples from Newcomerstown Ohio. I returned to the front of the store and asked Mark to sign the release form, he did so quickly and returned to the situation at hand. I thanked him again and left the store.

When leaving I felt as though the interview had not gone so well and that I did not get enough on tape, but I did find out some important information. The setting of the interview was not very conducive to a good and undistracted interview but next time I will try to not be as flustered so I can actually think of follow up questions to ask. I am going to return to Big Bear soon to talk to the produce manager, Jim Hooser, in order to get more specifics on their abilities to buy locally grown food. For a first interview it was not horrible but I definitely hope and need to improve my interviewing skills.