



Julia Asherman
Rag & Frass Farm
Macon, GA

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Diana Dombrowski: Okay. So we've just begun recording. Today is August 6th, 2020. My name is Diana Dombrowski, and I'm recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance with Julia Asherman.

Julia, would you tell us, please, where and when you were born?

[00:00:18]

Julia Asherman: Yeah. I was born October 26th, 1986, in Boston, Massachusetts.

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Diana Dombrowski: Great. And did you grow up in Boston?

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Julia Asherman: Yeah, I grew up in Cambridge, right across the river, my whole life lived there.

[00:00:38]

Diana Dombrowski: Nice. And what did your parents do? [laughs]

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Julia Asherman: My mom worked for a nonprofit and ran a community garden, and my dad is a self-employed computer scientist.

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Diana Dombrowski: Wow!

[00:00:56]

Julia Asherman: Yeah, worked from home in the basement.

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Diana Dombrowski: Wow! That sounds like two different worlds.

[00:01:04]

Julia Asherman: Yeah, they're pretty different. She's much more extroverted, and he likes to stay home and do computer stuff.

[00:01:14]

Diana Dombrowski: [laughs] So when it comes to your start in farming, do you think that comes from your mom's involvement in the community garden?

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Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[00:01:23]

Diana Dombrowski: Where would you trace that back to?

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Julia Asherman: Well, definitely. So she ran a community garden, but we also had a personal garden in the yard, and I definitely came from a strong gardening family, so my grandmother gardened, my aunts have gardens. That was just always a really big part of my life, I guess. It was normal to go outside and be in the garden. I think I got maybe my entrepreneurial skills from my dad, or just the notion that you can create your own job, from him, but definitely the plant stuff from my mom initially.

[00:02:01]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. That's really nice. Do you have any favorite memories of being in the garden with her or your grandma?

[00:02:07]

Julia Asherman: Well, actually, so even though—I mean, I really feel like as a kid, my mom would spend time in the garden and I would be outside, not necessarily helping with the garden. Most of my like strong childhood memories come from being in like rural Vermont, where we had family land and we'd go on vacation. So it wasn't really a cultivated space at all there, but I spent a lot of time like walking in fields, hayfields, and walking in the woods and identifying like wild things and actually doing some of that with my dad, too, like we went mushroom hunting and we would watch birds. So I feel like maybe I resonated more with that initially than the actual garden work.

[00:02:56]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, yeah. So there were farms out where you were living or where you were vacationing?

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Julia Asherman: Well—

[00:03:05]

Diana Dombrowski: Or was it mostly like [unclear]?

[00:03:07]

Julia Asherman: I'm sure, in hindsight, there were farms, and I definitely remember a neighbor haying our fields, but, no. I mean, it had been a farm at some point. It was just rural land at that point, raw rural land.

[00:03:19]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Vermont's a far distance from Georgia, so [laughs] how did you end up moving south?

[00:03:29]

Julia Asherman: So I went—well, actually via Chicago. I went to college in Chicago and moved to Georgia right after graduating, and I guess at that point I just knew I wanted to live in a rural place, and I took the first land opportunity I found, which happened to be in Georgia, and I had really nothing to lose. I was twenty-two, had no

like—this was also right in 2009, so we had just gone through an economic crisis, and I had gone to an art school, so I had no like immediate notion of what I would do for a living anyway. So I really wasn't picky about where I went. I just took the first opportunity, and Georgia was appealing because we have this incredibly long growing season, so even though I had never lived in the South, I just thought of it as an opportunity to live in a warm climate where I could grow figs and watermelon and other things that I had never really experienced growing up in a gardening context.

[00:04:35]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. So what was landing here like in Georgia? [laughs]

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Julia Asherman: There was a cultural shock initially, a lot of it just going from living exclusively in cities to living in a rural place, I think was the biggest shock, more than going from like the Northeast to the South, although there was a culture shock there, especially with religion. Growing up in like a very non-religious household, to going to the Bible Belt was pretty different. And initially I couldn't understand a lot of thick southern accents at all, and people also couldn't understand me because I talked really fast. [laughs]

[00:05:25]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. [laughs]

[00:05:26]

Julia Asherman: But, I mean, I adjusted. Honestly, I like living and interacting with people that are different than me, so I think—I mean, I think that’s interesting and I think it’s interesting to form real bonds and friendships and relationships with people who are not always in your comfort zone, so that I felt really good about. Even today, most of my local friends here where I live are over seventy-five, so I have more old man friends than people my own age in this area.

[00:06:04]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow! That’s really unique.

[00:06:09]

Julia Asherman: Yeah. I mean, that’s who’s around and that’s also who has the most farming knowledge and who takes an interest in what I’m doing anyway, but the older generation has so much knowledge and experience and just amazingly fascinating stories, really.

[00:06:30]

Diana Dombrowski: That’s really nice. You sound really open-minded and resilient.

[laughs]

[00:06:37]

Julia Asherman: I can see some resilience.

[00:06:37]

Diana Dombrowski: Ready to roll with [unclear].

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Julia Asherman: It's also really hot. It's so hot. And I remember—I mean, I guess in growing up, I didn't realize that it was really cold where I grew up. I just thought that was like a part of life. And now it's really sunk in that like you can adapt to either really cold or really hot, but it's hard to switch back and forth constantly. I can live in one really, really well for a long time, but that initial transition was pretty intense from going to a more temperate climate to a really warm one.

[00:07:16]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I can imagine that's the case. I grew up in Florida and just moved back to where my family is from, which is this area, but it took—I wore sweaters in Florida, you know, during [unclear]. [laughs] It's like nothing to everyone else around. So it's taken a couple of years to make that change, and I can imagine that was probably the case for you too.

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Julia Asherman: Yeah, definitely. I also think about temperature differently, so now that I'm growing in the South and growing plants and I'm aware of what the low temperatures are in the winter, to protect things, those were just like high daytime temperatures

sometimes where I grew up, but now I think of them as lows. It's just so interesting, the concept. It's all so relative.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. So you must have been growing some different things than you were used to seeing up north, too—

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Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[00:08:14]

Diana Dombrowski: —in the gardens and on the farm.

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Julia Asherman: Yeah.

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Diana Dombrowski: What was that process like for you?

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Julia Asherman: That was, I think, the hardest adjustment, was just really, well, realizing that the timing was totally different from what I—so that took at least two years to really understand the timing of my plantings here and how I just couldn't go by the

calendar or the dates that I was used to, and also most of the books, most of the farming books, most of the like gardening resources out there, unless they specifically say like this is for the South or this is for the Deep South, they are almost all exclusively in like the North, northern part of this country, and they don't even really mention that. It's almost like assumed. Like so much of the organic farming books especially are coming out of the Northeast or the Pacific Northwest, and so they're just not fully applicable. But it's just interesting that the default is that climate range instead of down here. Everything that's for the South, it says that in its title, basically. So it was really hard to figure that out. It definitely took a couple of years.

Then also just the things that I was used to growing, I definitely tried some of them. Some of them weren't successful. Some of them I've been able to make successful, but I've totally had to adapt what I think of as seasonally available and like even what I would consider a major crop for us is not even something I—like we grow a lot of okra now, but I didn't grow up with that at all. I'd never even had okra until I grew it, really. So it's just, yeah, it's just a totally different climate and region and food culture and what's available is totally—what grows well is totally different. So some things I miss, but there's a lot more that I love, that I would miss a lot if I moved back north.

[00:10:22]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I understand that, especially when you're growing it with your own hands and you're connected to it so closely.

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Julia Asherman: Yeah.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Have you been growing organically since you started?

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Julia Asherman: Yeah. I haven't been certified organic since I started, but, yeah, I've never grown conventionally. Yeah, I would say sustainable or organic. As I've gotten more skilled and knowledgeable in the growing, then I've sort of refined it and I now can be certified organic. Initially I probably wasn't following enough of the standards, but I definitely was never using any like synthetic chemicals.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I've heard that adjusting, especially for people who've come up north and moved south, to the type of soil in Georgia has always been a learning experience, in addition to the different weather patterns and that sort of thing. Do you—

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Julia Asherman: Yeah, totally. The soil color is just visually different—

[00:11:26]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. [laughs]

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Julia Asherman: —and also there's no rocks. Where I farm, there are no rocks at all, whereas where I grew up in the Northeast, there's so many rocks that you like almost can't dig without finding them, and stone walls is what they did with all the rocks. But there are no—it's amazing. There's no rocks, and it's very clayey. I have kind of a—I'm right at the dividing line between the coastal plains and the Piedmont, so we have a mixed sandy clay soil, so we definitely have clay, really heavy red clay areas, and then we have more coastal plains sandy areas, too, but they both have their own pros and cons and challenges and are just so different.

Southern soil has so much less organic matter than northern soil because we have so much rainfall and it's so humid and the soil is so digestive that it's just constantly burning up its organic matter, essentially. So it's a challenging—our soil would be marginal except for we're putting so much effort into improving it, but it is definitely a challenging soil to work with, I would say.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, it sounds like it. [laughs] I know that you've ended up growing this farm to something that's been really productive and you sell to a couple different farmers' markets at this point, is that right?

[00:13:03]

Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[00:13:04]

Diana Dombrowski: And I wonder what that evolution's been like. Could you take us through the arc of that from starting to where you are now in size and that sort of thing?

[00:13:12]

Julia Asherman: Yeah. So, I mean, I've always been a market farmer, a direct market farmer, starting at selling at farmers' markets, for a small farmers' market in Macon. Now I sell at three markets year-round, one in Macon, one in Milledgeville, and then over the last maybe three or four years, started selling at a larger—a very large market, actually, in Atlanta, which is two hours away, so that's a pretty far-away market, once a week, but it's definitely like a significant part of our income.

And then we also now sell directly off the farm. Pre-COVID [-19] times, we had a little roadside stand that we'd do like a market setup in. Now we just do a pre-order for pickup, but we are selling in Jeffersonville too. And then in previous years, like maybe the first three years, I did a CSA here and I've now just gotten away from CSA entirely and just do markets and pre-orders, which actually feels a lot like a CSA in that we're pre-packing things. But, yeah, so, I mean, we've really tripled the amount of market we're doing in the last three or four years.

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Diana Dombrowski: That's amazing. What led to the shift away from a CSA to more of the focus on markets?

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Julia Asherman: I think part of it was that at the time we were doing a CSA, our CSA customers were exclusively in middle Georgia, and it appeared to me that it wasn't really adding a revenue stream; it was mostly just directing our farmers' market customers to CSA away from farmers' market, so it was almost like we had the same number of customers engaged with us, we were just changing the way in which they were getting the product, and it felt like a lot more work to do CSA than it was to do a market for the same amount of sales because we weren't pulling from a different region. And then it also—I just don't think it's my selling style. I find it stressful. I like the pre-orders a lot better because I'm just listing what's available.

And the other reason is that when I started doing floral design for weddings, when we started growing more flowers, that wedding season really conflicted with our CSA season, and it was just too many important priorities. Like previously we prioritized CSA over market, but once we started introducing weddings, we had to prioritize weddings over everything else, and there just couldn't be two priorities, it had to be one. So we switched to adding weddings instead of CSA and kept market.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I saw some of the photos on your website. They're really beautiful.

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Julia Asherman: Thank you.

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Diana Dombrowski: Of course. [laughs] When you say “we,” talking about your operation, do you mean you and apprentices on your farm [Rag & Frass Farm] or who’s the group that you’re talking—

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Julia Asherman: So we would be—sometimes I say “we” when I just mean like the whole farm crew or myself and my partner. A lot of the decisions that I’m referring to, like weddings and to do CSA or not, happened a couple of years ago, so it was a different “we” at that point. But we do have apprentices and we also have part-time locals who work with us. So I mean, I just think of the farm as kind of like a family or a household, so there’s a lot of people involved, not just myself.

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Diana Dombrowski: That’s really nice. It sounds like you have a really diversified operation going in terms of what you grow and also who’s involved in making it work.

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Julia Asherman: Yeah, definitely I would say. Maybe a little too much diversity.

[laughter]

[00:17:36]

Diana Dombrowski: I'd love to hear more about that. [laughs] Maybe that comes into play, I don't know, when we talk about COVID. So if we could switch a little to talking about super recent farming history, you know, your operation, when would you say that you realized COVID was going to have an impact on what you were doing? Because I know we all saw it in the news and it took a while to realize like this is going to—for some people to realize like it's not going to be over and done.

[00:18:14]

Julia Asherman: So I should say that the main way that I have absorbed news the whole time I've been on the farm is via radio, so I listen to the news mostly on NPR [National Public Radio] while I work a lot, so that's how I—I don't really watch it on TV, so I don't know what the TV news is saying. But I would say I was following it in January, and in February when it started to hit the United States, I remember there was a conversation amongst scientists and experts on whether or not this was actually an epidemic or a pandemic and like when do we start using the word “pandemic.” And that's when it occurred to me like this is—and there were some scientists that I was listening to do an interview and they were basically like, “This is coming. It's going to happen. It's just how quickly it will happen.” That was their opinion. And I remember—so that must have been in early February. I remember thinking like at that time, “Wow. That could really affect farmers' markets.” [laughs]

And I think maybe it was towards the end of February or early March that I actually called a farmer friend in Atlanta, who I trust and would take serious concerns on farm issues to whenever I had them, and I just remember asking him, you know, “What

do you think this is going to mean if they shut down the farmers' markets?" or sort of thinking ahead to like if this is really coming and we're starting to see other places shut down—I think New York was shutting down at that point—like what will that mean for us? And partially thinking that through because our farmers' market season is year-round. So in February, March, we're getting really busy and our main season is starting and we have a lot that we're selling at that time. That's still a pretty critical sales time for us.

So the discussion amongst farmers and direct market farmers was already sort of happening in the Deep South when maybe farmers in other parts of the country, maybe it was on their mind but it hadn't started hitting the market managers yet because those markets were still closed. So when it really hit us in Georgia, we were fully open. Our markets were fully open and our season was fully in swing.

So, I mean, I feel like I was watching it slowly and thinking through what it might look like if markets—I was essentially preparing for markets to shut down because I didn't really know how policy makers would designate them. So I was sort of thinking of backups before I really needed them, but it still felt like no amount of thinking that really prepares you. [laughs]

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I mean, it's unprecedented, yeah, definitely.

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Julia Asherman: And at the beginning, I remember also just there being a distinct lack of information, like there was just a lot of questions that everyone had and no one really

knew the answers, and so it was really hard to make decisions about what do we do, what's safe, what's not safe, what's the best practice. Like some of those best practices, we were just guessing at what they should be and sort of borrowing from common sense and from food safety policy and food safety best practices, but there's still just like—I mean, at the very beginning, people still didn't really know how long the virus lasted on surfaces and like how it is being spread and how many days can you have it before you get symptoms, and we didn't even know how many people were asymptomatic. So there was just so much guessing and so much just not knowing, it made it really hard to be confident in any decision.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. When the—I think it's the state of Georgia, right, that would declare the essential business and classify a farmer's market as being essential, were a lot of your customers on board with that, or did you encounter a lot of skeptics? What was your markets' reaction?

[00:22:55]

Julia Asherman: Our market customers were consistently of the school that they would rather buy from us than at a grocery store. I think market customers, though the whole thing, from the very beginning, they knew that they were going to have to eat and they knew that they had to buy food, because they weren't producing it, and even I don't produce all of the food that I consume. So everyone has to buy food from somewhere. And as soon as it started to become clear that being distanced from people and being

cautious of what you're touching and who's touched it already, and also being conscious of the air that we're breathing, as soon as that started to become clear, people were freaked out to go to the grocery stores because things were being touched by an unknown large number of people, you're in this like enclosed space.

So from the beginning, I think people felt safer shopping at the farmers' market because we were outdoors, open air, so that alone feels a lot safer, and then also the supply chain was so much shorter. I mean, things people are buying from us on Sunday were picked Friday or Saturday by a five-person crew. So like only five people could possibly have touched that stuff, and we're all living together on one isolated farm in a rural place. I mean, we would ask them, "Do you feel safer doing this or at the grocery store?" and hands down, we never had anyone say that they felt safer at the grocery store. Every single customer said they felt safer at the farmers' market and that they wanted to support us.

And then some die-hard customers would even make the point that like they wanted to keep their immune systems really healthy, so they wanted to get fresh fruits and veggies as much as possible and not just eat canned food that they could stockpile and sort of house easily for a long time, which has its own advantages to have non-perishable things in the house, especially if you need to self-isolate, but people want to eat more than just like cans of beans and canned vegetables. They want fresh stuff too.

So there was never really an issue with customers coming to market. There was more pushback as we started to create boundaries and best practices at the market and getting everyone on board with following them and agreeing that those were the best, and some of that really wasn't the market or the market customers, it was mixed messages

coming from the top, coming from the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], coming from the government, the federal government, about what is or isn't significant, and I think that made it really hard. Like before there was a mask mandate or before the CDC even made the mask recommendation, you know, people would wear masks, but it would be sort of like socially strange to do so, and then as soon as it became socially acceptable to do so, it's socially strange *not* to wear a mask. So some of that really just had to do with culture and like the messages we were trying to filter through that were coming from all the experts at the top.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And you were mainly relying on radio to kind of filter that through? I would imagine NPR—is that the case? Am I understanding?

[00:26:37]

Julia Asherman: Yeah, for the news it was radio, but I was doing a lot of research. And then once we realized like we—when I say “we,” the farming community of Georgia and of the Southeast, which all had open markets or most had open markets, like farming friends in Florida and the Carolinas, once we—there was like a one-week period where it like—I feel like all of a sudden we all were like talking about it and we were all talking with each other and creating these very long, complicated, thirty-person email threads of market managers and farmers and NGO stakeholders from all over the region, discussing like what various markets were doing, what precautions was this market taking, and then we were all just sharing that information and adopting policies from other markets.

I mean, there was like a week or two weeks where it was just like a thousand emails a day of all of us trying to figure it out and then sharing that information with our entire networks across the Southeast, because the Southeast, or the South, really had to figure that out while markets were open, as opposed to being able to figure it out and then implement it a month later or two months later, because this was in March. So some of the markets in other parts of the country still had time to figure out—I mean, they were closed, some of them, so they were either figuring out if they were going to open or how they were going to open, but we were figuring out like what are we going to do in three days when market is here, you know, and it almost felt like every single week everything—you know, we would make some other new big step in what we felt like were our safety practices.

So like the first week, we like put everything out, but we only let one person approach the tent at a time, and we had a separate person handling money from handling produce, but we still allowed—this was before any sort of mask mandate, but we still allowed people to approach, they just couldn't touch. And then like the next week, there was no baskets, no tablecloths, still two people, but nothing that couldn't be sanitized. And then the week after, no one could come under the tent. And then the week after that, we roped off the tent and like marked the ground with how the line should stand. It just like evolved, and then at some point, all the vendors got relocated and spaced out. I mean, it was just every single week there was some new added change to how we were going to do things.

[00:29:31]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That process sounds chaotic, because you know you're getting different information from these local versus federal sources, but at the same time, it sounds like you had a network established of people you were used to communicating with and that maybe rapidly expanded to kind of tackle this. Is that an accurate picture, or how would you describe it?

[00:29:56]

Julia Asherman: Yeah. I mean, it did feel chaotic. I also think that because—so the market, particularly the market in Atlanta, which is just a much bigger market than our middle Georgia markets, our middle Georgia markets are so much smaller, that it was just very easy to make changes and have it not—we could just opt to make them, and there's not really ever too many customers to the point where it's crowded and we have to manage the line. So I would say it was the Atlanta market that was really setting the standard that we were bringing back to our middle Georgia markets.

But I also feel that the Atlanta market, our stand in particular, I think, was always taking a slightly more strict safety precaution set than some of our other farmer friends at that market and other vendors, and partially that's because we live two hours outside of Atlanta, so I felt like every time I went to that market, I was leaving a fairly safe space of my county, which only had two cases or something at the time, and going to a hot spot. So I felt very, very aware of the fact that we were leaving, that we were driving to a hot spot and coming back to the farm. So I wanted to be *really* careful that we weren't bringing it with us from Atlanta to our like small rural community, which is also mostly older people, and I also really didn't want to have to sterilize or sanitize everything. So

from pretty early on, we adopted, before it was mandated at the market, we adopted a strict no-touch policy and roped off the tent. I think we might still be one of the only vendors that actually won't even allow people to come under the tent, and we sat our tables back from that rope about two and a half feet so that we are actually not able to stand in proximity to the customer.

So we've been doing that for so long that it almost made it easier to navigate the hecticness, to just take the most precaution from the beginning. So even though there was an evolution to it, I think we were standing out at the market as the vendor who was—I guess it would come across as being the most unwelcoming. [laughter] But, I mean, we were really like, “You can't touch.” There was lots of signage saying “You can't touch.” And then when people still couldn't help themselves, we actually made it impossible for them to touch.

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Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

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Julia Asherman: So in a lot of ways, that's been now the normal for us for so long that there's really not been that much adjustment in a long time now. We just got there in the first like three weeks, three or four weeks.

[00:33:08]

Diana Dombrowski: I remember that [unclear] period where a lot of people, including my family, were sanitizing, you know, all their groceries when they got home, and then that kind of faded out to masks everywhere all the time, and we've definitely encountered a lot of varied adoption, I guess, in those methods where like people walking like in large groups of people, you know, the mask thing is really controversial here in this area. Have there been protective measures that are controversial with markets that you're working with at all?

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Julia Asherman: Yeah, I mean, the markets seem like they all are on the same page, or at least have been for a while, that masks are required at market and have been especially for vendors, but are also for customers, but enforcing that is challenging and sometimes people will do this thing where they wear their mask but they like have it under their chin or like they have it under their nose and it's really not effective. I'm definitely not afraid to tell those people, "You need to put your mask on or we're not going to serve you." But our customers are really, really good about it. They want to wear their masks.

I do think that—I've noticed in this general, middle Georgia and rural Georgia is just not taking it as seriously as the city, so I still see a lot of people not wearing masks, even in places that say masks are required. It seems like there's not really a kind of enforcement. You still see people come way too close to other people's personal space, and then if you ask them to like step back, sometimes they're offended. I mean, there is like—I think there's a level of disbelief in some communities that this is real or that this is serious, and, ironically, that's even in communities where most of the population is

older and more vulnerable. I'm not totally surprised, because I know a lot of people who also don't believe climate change is happening, and that, to me, seems undeniable. So I think people—and I think there's a political component that's happening too.

So for the most part, the only places that I'm going is market, and those places are pretty strictly masked up, but you do find those people. There are people who just refuse to like either wear them or accept them or believe that they're effective. Then I just—I don't know what to say about those people. [laughs] But I don't let—I think of it as protecting myself and protecting other people, so I don't want to be near people who aren't wearing a mask and I also will wear a mask for the benefit of the other person, even if they don't see it as a benefit to themselves. It still makes me feel better.

[00:36:34]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And I wonder, because doing that, I personally, you know, do the same thing when I'm walking around in public, and I definitely see it that way, but I'm not at the same level of like impact, at least physically, that apparently you have been. Would you mind talking about how working in the heat with the mask has been for you?

[00:37:03]

Julia Asherman: Yeah. Well, I should contextualize it by saying because of COVID, the main Atlanta market that we sell at, which I call it the main market because it is like 80 percent of our farm's income comes from this one very large weekly market, so this one

market represents a much larger percentage of our income than all of our middle Georgia markets combined, so it's a really significant thing for us that we can't just not do.

That market has not been able to go to its normal location for the main season, so when COVID happened, we were in our winter location, which is a parking lot, and then normally we would go back to a park that has a lot of shade, starting in April, but that park is a public park, so the city has not wanted us to come back to it, so we've been forced to stay in the same winter market location, which is a private parking lot, so we don't have an issue with being allowed to be there, but it's a parking lot in full sun, and, you know, in May or June or July in Georgia, it can easily be—I mean *easily* be over 90 degrees, I mean, and that's not even uncommon. So to be on asphalt in full sun, wearing a mask, is hotter than anything I've ever experienced, and it's actually harder to breathe.

So we have a two-hour drive to market, to this market, so we leave the farm at 5:00 in the morning, we get up at 3:30 or 4:00 to get loaded, and then we get there by 7:00, then set up by 9:00, and then we're there until 1:00, then we pack up by 2:00 and then we sit in traffic and get home to the farm sometimes at 5:00, sometimes 5:30 if there's a lot of traffic. So when you do a twelve-hour day and it's above 90 degrees for most of that, and you're wearing a mask, it's dangerous. I got heat stroke for the first time in my farming career from that, and, unfortunately, some of the side effects of heat exhaustion or heat stroke are fevers and chills, because your body temperature's actually just too high, too hot, and so when that happened to me, which was maybe two or three weeks ago, I mean, I knew that it felt like heat stroke and I knew that I had had a *really* intense market day which had been preceded by a very intense watermelon harvest

[laughs], which is pretty much the most physical harvest we do, so I knew that there was like a strong possibility it was heat related.

And I had also felt like heat stroke is definitely something that we need to be careful about while we're wearing masks in the summer, so we've been drinking more Gatorade this year than we've *ever* drank. I mean, I almost never drink Gatorade, but now I insist that people take it to market and we have it all over the farm all the time just because this is so easy for it to happen. So I knew that it was likely that, and I also knew that I hadn't had any like unusual exposure and I'd taken all these precautions, but still, during the time of COVID, when you get a fever for two or three days that is above 100, and you feel chills, there's an emotional panic to that. So, I mean, I had to immediately isolate myself. I got a rapid—I scheduled myself for a COVID rapid test, and, thankfully, the test results came back negative, and they came back negative shortly after I started feeling better.

But during that period of time, I mean, as I was sick in bed, I was also thinking like, I mean, what email am I going to write to my customers to tell them that someone on the farm has COVID? How am I going to—what are we going to do with all this produce that we're not going to be able to sell? Or how do we safely isolate? I mean, there was just like a whole lot of thoughts that went through my mind at that time, and, I mean, it's August now, so it's still something we have to be conscious of. Yeah, I mean, I think it's a real balance, because people need to be safe from the virus and they also—part of my responsibility is to make sure that my crew stays safe, especially from heat, because that's always something we're really concerned about. It's just never—I've seen

it happen to workers and to other people. It's never happened to me. And I'm pretty used to being really, really hot. So it was scary.

[00:42:17]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, that sounds really [unclear].

[00:42:20]

Julia Asherman: Just glad it was, you know, two days and over and worked out okay.

[00:42:26]

Diana Dombrowski: Those two days must have felt like a really long, long two days.

[laughs]

[00:42:26]

Julia Asherman: Yeah, it did, and it created a level of anxiety for everyone on the farm, too, that was really unfortunate, because, you know, everyone knew that it could be heat, everyone knew that that's what I thought it was, everyone else has felt heat, at least a mild heat stress during this year, so we all know that it's easy to feel like run down when you're working a physical job in the hot sun for long hours, but it's still just—I think there was just like a really—there was a mood that I know everyone felt, but I didn't get to see it, I just know. [laughs] There was just like a very strong like “What should we do? Should we all stop and go to our rooms?” You know? It was a strange, strange thing to navigate.

[00:43:24]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, it sounds like it is. And by other members of your team being impacted, you mean because it's an unusually hot summer, by heat stress in different ways?

[00:43:36]

Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[00:43:37]

Diana Dombrowski: Or is that just par for the course for [unclear]?

[00:43:39]

Julia Asherman: Well, everyone on our crew, except for me and Brendan [phonetic], my partner, is new to the farm, so some of them are new to farming in general and some of them are new to farming in the South, so not everyone has the same stamina level or the same like expectation or even like understanding of their body. Like I just know how it feels when I'm overdoing it, but a lot of people don't know that if they're not used to feeling that or keeping themselves in check. I mean, all the time I'm always reminding people to drink, drink water and take breaks, because a lot of the time—and actually the worst heat stroke I've ever seen, which was in a friend of mine, she felt fine while she was overdoing it. It was not until a day later that she was really, really sick. So it can really creep up on you, and it's something that we have to pay extra attention to anyway.

But the mask thing is really—I mean, it’s just hard to breathe, hard to like fill your lungs all the way with real oxygen. So I’ll be really glad when it’s not a part of our life anymore. And, thankfully, because we’re a household on the farm, we share communal space, we provide housing to the crew, so we have essentially become one farm household, so we don’t wear masks while we’re working in the fields every day. We wear masks at market or anytime we leave the farm, and then we wear them when we’re handling food in the packing shed, but when we’re weeding or whatever, we don’t wear them, which is good, I think, for us.

[00:45:35]

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, yeah. Doesn’t sound like it would be possible otherwise.

[00:45:38]

Julia Asherman: There’s a lot of farms—I’ve talked with a lot of farmers out there, depending on where they are, you know, a lot of farms have all of their workers not living on the farm coming from all of these different households, and there are farms that are wearing masks the whole time throughout their entire day unless they’re completely alone outside in the field, but a lot of farming work is like work that multiple people do together, and so, I mean, there are farms out there that are wearing masks all the time, and I just hope they’re not in the South. [laughs] Although it’s been hot a lot of places, you know.

[00:46:17]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. So has the team of your apprentices and your part-time workers stuck around, for the most part, and like stayed?

[00:46:24]

Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[00:46:26]

Diana Dombrowski: I wonder if people have kind of just isolated or decided to leave or—you know, it sounds like you guys have a system where people feel safe to be there.

[00:46:35]

Julia Asherman: Yeah. Well, we did initially—we had a person come early on, who left—I want to say it was like a week later because a close family member or a close family member of a close friend got the virus, so she wanted to go quarantine with her partner for emotional support. It was her partner's dad got the virus and was really not doing well, so she went to go be with her partner to emotionally support him through that. So she did leave early. She left almost right after she got here because of the family emergency. So I did sort of know, going into the season, that it was likely or it was at least possible that there would be just like a lot of family emergencies, but that has been the only one that directly affected us.

One of the people that works here, one of the girls that works here, her mother had the virus before she arrived here, but that was in a different state, and, thankfully, she recovered just fine, but it was very stressful.

[00:47:59]

Diana Dombrowski: I'm sorry, I lost you for just maybe the last like twenty seconds.

[00:48:01]

Julia Asherman: Okay, cool.

[00:48:04]

Diana Dombrowski: I heard that someone working there, a friend or close family member got sick, so she and her partner chose to leave. That was the last thing I heard. I think the recorder got [unclear], so I don't know what you're talking about. Could you tell [unclear]? [laughs]

[00:48:20]

Julia Asherman: I mean, we've been affected, like the crew has been affected in different ways. Like one of the people that works here currently, her mother, who lives in Massachusetts—that's where she's from—had the virus months ago, like back in February, March, so that was very stressful, stressful for her just to have a family member going through that, but she was never hospitalized. She recovered. I think she felt terrible. I think she felt like shit, but she was fairly mild symptoms, comparatively. So definitely people have been directly affected.

And I think there's also just—I mean, there's just been like a level of emotional support we have to have for each other and like considering ourselves a household and

knowing that this is a safe space, and we're like not just—we have had a closed-door policy on the farm, we don't let people come on the farm during this time, and we all have sort of had conversations with each other, and I've had conversations with everyone who works here about the need for us to be taking every single precaution every time we leave the farm, even if people are looking at you weird or whatever they're doing, that we need to do that to keep each other and ourselves safe, but also to keep the farm safe, to keep the farm as a business viable, because if someone here were to get the virus, we would definitely have to shut down operation for a period of time, which would affect a lot of things. Beside income, it would affect crops and, I mean, it could be very devastating. So I think everyone here really sees how important it is for us to stay safe and healthy and take all the precautions and also respects that, and I think feels safer because everyone else is feeling that way too. So we're pretty good about all being on the same page about that.

And I definitely think that there's something about being on a farm in a rural place that is like actually very comforting and very safe. [laughs] I mean, for a while, it felt like is this what the end of the world is going to feel like? Because if so, this is exactly where I'd want to be. We can definitely tell that other people wanted to be here, too, because we got a thousand new emails of people being like, "I decided I want to farm. Can you hire me?" [laughter] We're like, "We're not hiring right now because of the virus." But, yeah, it seems like a lot of people instantly felt like they wanted to get out of the city.

[00:51:04]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely.

[00:51:07]

Julia Asherman: Sorry, we have a train going by. [laughs]

[00:51:09]

Diana Dombrowski: No, I'm glad it's not us, because we have one near our house too. I totally get it. I grew up in Orlando and my parents retired back here, where they're from, but I'm so glad that we're here, you know. Like I miss certain things about the city, but like wow. [laughs] It's so nice to have a buffer like that, you know.

[00:51:32]

Julia Asherman: Yeah. And, actually, I would say market has changed a lot in the way we sell certain things. Like the office work has changed a lot, but most of the day-to-day work for us has not changed at all. I mean, the plants are totally unaffected by this virus. Like they still need water or fertilizer or to be planted, regardless of what's going on in the news, so we've actually—I mean, I think that we've actually been able to like keep a lot more emotional and mental health and security just by having this like existing routine, where we don't listen—I haven't listened—I actually stopped listening to the news because I just sort of could predict what it was going to—that things weren't going well, and we were doing everything we could be doing. You know, if we're going to plant something or weed something all day and, you know, at home, essentially working from home anyway, you know, for us it's been very safe and nice to have work that

continues fairly regularly. I mean, the real thing that's changed is office work and the way we sell and when we leave the farm is totally different, but most of our time on the farm is the same.

[00:52:59]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, that sounds like really a blessing. [laughs]

[00:53:04]

Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[00:53:04]

Julia Asherman: Absolutely, because it's been so disruptive for the daily life of a lot of other people. I'd imagine that one big change, but one that you probably were able to make more easily than others was switching to online and that direct sort of marketing. Did you build up what you'd been doing with CSAs for that, or how did that come about?

[00:53:26]

Julia Asherman: You know, it's funny, I don't actually feel like that was easy or smooth. It might have looked easy to the customers, but as you could tell from me trying to download the correct browser to have this recorded, I am very not good at computers and really don't enjoy them and have no intuition for them. When I had done CSA, it was before I knew of any CSA platforms or management software, so I did that all analog

style anyway. So it was difficult for me to decide which platform to use and to learn how to do it.

And then the platform that we ultimately chose to go with, which is FarmersWeb, was a platform that we had previously been experimenting with like a year or two ago for restaurant sales because that was a platform for farmers to sell directly to restaurants. So after COVID hit, I realized that platform was shifting to be not about restaurants, because all the restaurants closed down and was trying to adapt to be more direct to consumer, and it was an affordable one I had already like engaged with a little bit, so I adapted it to the farm, and also they were sort of beta-testing how to change direct to consumer, so it actually worked out well because I was able to like figure out things that were frustrating or that could have been better and tell them about it, and they were like, “Oh, great. We’ll change that. We want to be more useful to non-restaurant industry because restaurants are closed right now.” But it was also frustrating, because it didn’t do everything we needed it to do, and it was probably a little bit more of a learning curve than it needed to be just because I was using a platform that was also pivoting at the same time.

But now I feel like I’ve got it. It’s become a part of my routine. That’s a huge thing for me. I just need things to be a part of my routine, so as soon as I could like make that happen, I felt way better about it, and I think that we will continue to use it definitely through the pandemic and probably after the pandemic, because it has increased our sales and I think that we are going to see more income this year than even last year without the pandemic because of adding this online revenue stream. And part of that is because while it’s available to all of our customers, including our existing customers, it *is* pulling customers that we didn’t already have, and we’ve been able to add a home delivery

partially because I guess our Milledgeville Market, which is the third market that we've been selling at, that market closed due to COVID, and so instead of just abandoning those customers, now we've been able to offer products that they can pre-order and get home delivered into that county every week.

So we've maintained those customers and made it even more convenient for them, really, and we're harvesting to order, so we're not harvesting more than we can sell for that. We're just harvesting what's already been sold, so there's less speculation, and we've been able to like create relationships with new customers that we never had before, because everyone knows how to order online. Although not everyone is like going to a physical farmers' market as part of their weekly routine, almost everybody has buying online as part of their weekly routine, or maybe it's not a routine, but they do it. So that's been really interesting and beneficial for us, actually. So there's been like positive lessons, and like things that I never, ever would have gone to online sales, ever, because that's just so not who I am and not my strength at all, so if something like this hadn't happened, I would just never have done that, ever.

[00:58:02]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. That's so dramatic. It's such a dramatic change, yeah.

[00:58:08]

Julia Asherman: Yeah. I couldn't believe—

[00:58:09]

Diana Dombrowski: And happening [unclear].

[00:58:10]

Julia Asherman: —I was doing it. I was honestly like, “I can’t believe—.” I was like doing it and being like, “I can’t believe I’m doing this. I can’t believe I’ve allowed this to be part of my existence,” but it had to happen, and especially because there wasn’t a few weeks where some of the—like that market has been closed. Milledgeville Market has been closed. The Macon Market has been open. The Atlanta Market closed for a few weeks, and we needed a way to sell without the market, and I was never quite sure which markets were going to stay open or closed.

And like imagine if a market manager gets sick or like market staff gets sick. They can’t just like continue to function. So for the vendor, you know, it gives me peace of mind to know that I can make sales and communicate with my customers, regardless of the market. I mean, I’m still doing market and I still need the market and that’s still really important to us, but even if the markets were to go away, we would have a way of continuing like somehow, some way, and I’m glad that we set it up then, because now it’s just there and we’re using it. Otherwise, it would have been inevitable. We would have had to do it at some point. I’m just glad that’s in the past.

[00:59:29]

Diana Dombrowski: That’s awesome. That’s really great to hear. I know that a lot of the people I’ve talked to have at least been, you know, willing to do these interviews are somewhat connected to community support networks, you know, and different NGOs

that are working and helping people to be resilient, so it's really cool and like kind of inspiring [laughs] to hear about what you've been able to do. So thanks for sharing.

[00:59:55]

Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[00:59:55]

Diana Dombrowski: Those are my questions, but if you have more that you'd like to be on record about your experience to date, like please let's like take the time to put that, you know, down, and after this afternoon, the plan is to reconnect after COVID or at least within a year. I don't know if we'll still be dealing with it. I really hope not. But, you know, to kind of give everybody a retrospective, you know, chance to look on the experience as a whole instead of living it in that moment. So by no means do I want this to be like the last contact we have or the last time you get to say your piece, but at least for today, is there anything else that you'd like people to know about what it's been, how it's been for you to deal with this?

[01:00:45]

Julia Asherman: I mean, I think the only thing I want to add, just so I don't forget, has to do with some of the federal programs that have come out that have or have not been useful to us. So the first, the EIDL, the Economic Injury Disaster Loan, it should just be made known in some type of record that we as farmers were specifically excluded from getting that, and that was very frustrating. Initially—

[01:01:18]

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, I didn't know that.

[01:01:19]

Julia Asherman: —that was available to small businesses, but farms were excluded. Farming cooperatives were not excluded, but farms were, and they might have changed that after a month or two, I can't remember, but in that initial round of funding, we were not—none of the small farms that I know were allowed to even apply for that because we were farms, and that was really frustrating.

The Paycheck Protection Program, we did apply for that and get it after the second round, after it was renewed and re-funded, and that was really significant to us. It allowed us—it gave us peace of minds that we could offer—like that we could let people have paid leave, you know, or protect ourselves should we need to do that, and so that was really significant. We still haven't found out if we'll actually be forgiven for our share of that, but I think we will be, and that was useful to us when we were finally able to get it.

And then the most farming-specific legislation, I think it was the CARES Act that had a relief package specifically for farmers, there's talk even now about how inadequate that has been. That hasn't reached really any direct market farmers that I'm aware of, because the whole basis for that relief is—it's, (a), for commodities and commodity growers, and it's based on price dropping. So if the price of whatever, apples, has

dropped by over a certain percent, then you, as an apple farmer, are able to get x number of cents per pound of apples that you grew.

However, as direct market farmers, we're really not affected by commodity prices. I mean, our prices are set and are kind of fixed, and we're not looking at—we're not shipping internationally, we're not growing as a commodity. We're small, we're direct market. So whether or not the price of something we sell drops on the market has almost nothing to do with us, because what's more significant to us than the price on the market is if our markets even exist, if the farmers' markets exist, are they closed, are they functioning, are they able to attract customers, things like that.

So it's just really been—it's worth noting that some of the programs that have been out there and specifically the one program that was for farmers has only reached growers who grow a *lot* of certain things, but for small growers who grow a lot of things and not huge quantities of any one of them, and who aren't commodity growers, it hasn't benefited us at all. So I don't know any farmers in my community or even in other states that are like me, family farm size, direct market farmers, diversified vegetable farmers, I don't know any that have benefited from that program. So that's just worth putting out there.

Hopefully by next year, when we talk again, we can have some other program that has actually provided relief to us, but essentially other than the PPP, which is based on payroll from over a year ago, so it doesn't even reflect how many workers we have this season, we haven't gotten any relief from the government at all. All of the relief we've gotten, we've gotten from ourselves or from our community or from farmers' markets

that have managed to stay open and adapt, but it hasn't been from the government. So at least that [glitch in recording].

[01:05:29]

Diana Dombrowski: That's good to know.

[01:05:30]

Julia Asherman: [glitch in recording].

[01:05:31]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I think [unclear]. Yeah! [laughs] Also because that's like that's so totally exactly what people who are looking at these interviews later are going to be really curious about, you know, because like no one's going to remember what the name of—or few people are going to remember the name of the reporter who was saying *x* thing on the radio, that like this happened, but that really significant legislation is very expensive, it's in the news a lot, and it's so important to document whether or not it's effective.

[01:06:09]

Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[01:06:10]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, for real people living their lives.

[01:06:13]

Julia Asherman: Especially because I'm pretty sure they were like—[Secretary of Agriculture George E.] “Sonny” Purdue [COVIDI] was like, “There’s \$19 billion headed towards farmers who need relief right now.” And there was like weeks where no one knew what was happening or like what that money would be, and then it all went to this interestingly irrelevant to us like formula for how to calculate that and for which—I mean, not even all the things we grow are on the commodity list, let alone—I mean, if you only grow like less than an acre of something and you’re going to get ten cents per pound, I mean, it’s just like not relevant.

So it’s a bummer not to get any of that relief, but what’s also worth noting is that most of the small farms I think have really been able to survive this, at least many of them and a lot of the ones I know have been able to survive this because even though there are challenges, there is something really resilient baked into a local food economy. Like the smaller that supply chain is, the less supply chain disruption affects my ability to produce something and sell it, the more connected those customers are to the farmer. Like all of those things make it fragile and delicate and very low margin sometimes, but also so resilient. So a lot of farms, I think, that have not benefited from any of the big relief packages have still managed to stay afloat through just like having a more sustainable model in the first place, and that’s kind of encouraging.

[01:07:55]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. I know that from the certification standpoint, we're definitely concerned, like we're in dairy country—

[01:08:08]

Julia Asherman: Oh, yeah.

[01:08:07]

Julia Asherman: —and [unclear] market is experiencing [glitch in recording], but we're expecting to kind of be like at a net for people we lose versus people who come on, but are really encouraged by the number of consumers who are turning to organics in this market, because there's a lot of different sources pointing to that trend, and we're hopeful about not what the end of this year looks like, but certainly the next, you know, as people reevaluate, I think, the models that they're using in different ways over time, yeah.

[01:08:46]

Julia Asherman: Yeah, I'm curious to see what we'll see in a year. [laughter]

[01:08:52]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, I know.

[01:08:53]

Julia Asherman: [glitch in recording].

[01:08:54]

Diana Dombrowski: Let's stay hopeful. [laughs]

[01:08:57]

Julia Asherman: Oh, [glitch in recording].

[01:08:59]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Me too. It sounds like you guys are doing really well, and I'm glad to hear that, that you've been able to hang in there.

[01:09:06]

Julia Asherman: Yeah.

[01:09:07]

Diana Dombrowski: And, yeah, thank you for sharing your time.

[01:09:09]

Julia Asherman: Thank you.

[01:09:10]

Diana Dombrowski: The next step of the interview like from our perspective is we'll get the audio all zipped up and cleaned up, you'll get a copy, we'll transcribe the audio, you'll get a copy of that, and then it's going to be available online in the archive there at the University of Mississippi, so you can share it with your family and your friends.

[01:09:36]

Julia Asherman: I'll be curious to hear this back at some later date when it's not fresh, like a time capsule—

[01:09:45]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. [laughs]

[01:09:45]

Julia Asherman: —of a strange time.

[01:09:47]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. [laughs] Yeah, thanks again. If you have anything you'd like, you know, to add or share, please, you know, let me know. We're like super happy to supplement and definitely want to stay in touch, so I don't want this to be like a one-time deal, you know. We'll stay connected.

[01:10:08]

Julia Asherman: Well, thank you.

[01:10:10]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. [laughs] I'll let you know how the project develops, and, yeah, talk sometime soon.

[01:10:16]

Julia Asherman: Yeah, thank you. I'd be really curious to know what themes, after you've interviewed a lot of farmers, what themes emerge or like what multiple people have said, even if it's just like a synopsis. I'd be fascinated to hear that.

[01:10:31]

Diana Dombrowski: Totally.

[01:10:33]

Julia Asherman: Cool.

[01:10:34]

Diana Dombrowski: Cool. Yeah, I'll definitely let you know how it pans out, and that's probably going to be a reflection we do at the end of the summer, so I'll reach out then, too, after your transcript comes in and, yeah, there'll be different points along the line where we can touch base. So let me know how you're doing, too, and take care.

[01:10:51]

Julia Asherman: Thank you. And do I just disconnect, like it's going to stop recording and all that?

[01:10:56]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. It's all going to be gravy, yeah. [laughs]

[01:10:59]

Julia Asherman: Well, thank you so much.

[01:11:01]

Diana Dombrowski: Thank you.

[End of interview]