

**Colleen Hanley:** So you had mentioned that you started in 2020 became a business in 2021. I'm wondering if you could speak more about how the farm got started, and who was involved.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:** We haven't started with the farm. We have started as a food distribution program I have been involved for many years. I have been living in Henderson County since 2014. I'm from El Salvador. I came directly to this area because my brother lives here, and I have been involved for many years with Hispanic community as an advocate, and also, you know, just creating some social programs. And during the pandemic. Do you know, it was a hard time for many Hispanic, and we decide to start a food distribution. And we had a grant, a small grant that we were able to provide 10 boxes a week, you know, in 2020. And we named the program Abundancia. That means abundance, and they know why we were doing the food distribution. I just start inviting people from the community saying, Do you know that could be maybe make sense to start growing food, because we cannot always depend of a grant? But also many people didn't have a job at that time, and and honestly being able to be outside has been also a way to just be resilient at that time. And I started inviting people. At that moment, also, we involved some American, not just Hispanic. We have some also black people. We had a group, maybe with 12 different community members. And we started, you know, talking about the possibility of starting a cooperative. But while we were working together, we understood, you know, that we have very different vision about being and working together. And at that moment, maybe I expressed. You know, the idea of maybe that has to be just Hispanic, not because, you know, we haven't had a good relationship. But we really have very different context and and situation, and sometimes... I believe a lot that you know you cannot heal what is happening in a community if you don't work 1st with the community who need the healing first. It doesn't mean that other people doesn't need to heal, but I think it's important to start the healing around people who trust you, who know you, who has some cultural connection.

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Delia Jovel Dubón: we continue. Do you know, having having some some meetings? Let me, just, I'm gonna stop some notification in my computer

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Delia Jovel Dubón: because I don't like the sound.

And we started, you know this, this conversation at that moment we were 6 Hispanic involved. And with this, you know. I have to be honest. We haven't. We start with nothing, nothing. I mean no land, no tools, no seeds, no knowledge. Just you know, just this idea of we need to do something that can help us to deal with the situation, and something that we have some connection to, because in my case, you know, I was born in a small town, but because the Civil War, my family has to move to the capital, and I lost my connection with my own space with the

idea of growing food. Because my father, he has been a patient? [4:12] always. And we decide to start. I sent a message. I remember I put a message on Facebook saying, if somebody has a little block in Henderson County, if you want to share your space, we will be happy to start. And one farm in Henderson County answered that request. And we started working with, not with them, but working on the same field. And we have been done that since – we have been starting on 2020, and until last year, when we had the you know, the hurricane Helen, here, we finally – but I'm gonna tell you later why – we just make a transition in another land.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Yeah, that's actually a perfect segue. Could you tell us about the process of obtaining the current land you're on for your farm and organization, and how you acquired it, you know who holds the land tenure, the lease, and ownership arrangement?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, okay. We have very different moments. When we start, we have done this, you know, bare bone agreement with this farm who just give us a little space to start growing. That means any contract, you know. Just an intention of “Come on, guys, you can work here. We're not gonna use all the land.” We haven't write anything. And this farm was also tenant. That means they were not owners. They were still the main tenants of that land, because they rent from another farmer in this area who owns a lot of land. And we also decide not to be part of that agreement also, because our situation as immigrant. Honestly, the person who owns that land has been show a lot of support to the current government since 2020, and we were concerned, you know, about being involved on that conversation with the with the landlord.

On 2021 we had like a flood that has been destroyed almost all the stuff we have, because it's it's a flood plain in the area where we were farming. That's why, on 2022, we decide to rent another plot. And we start a agreement with a church here in Henderson County, and since 2022, we have a like a maybe point 3 acres in the in a church is where I am now because we have a like a small office as well. And we have been renting that that plot just to have another option, you know? Because on the field where we were farming before we haven't had irrigation. No water, no toilets. Nothing. That means it was a little bit car [07:41]. That's why we decide to go through this agreement with the church, and we have been renting that piece of land here.

On 2022. We have also thinking about the idea of how we can be able to have access to land, and we have been dealing with many different moments as well since 2022. We started conversation with a land trust organization in in this area, but honestly didn't went well. Just because you know, the pace of this organization are not the same as you as farmer, you know. It's like we're gonna find something in a little moment. And it's like, no, we need land now. And

honestly, we have been working with them since 2022, and we're still in some conversation, but it's like, "They know guys, you are not helping us. Thank you, but..." and I express already that to them several times. But I think many, many organizations just need, you know, that feel they are supporting a group, mainly a minority group.

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mainly a minority type minority. How do you say that minority group? That's what I mean.

And I think they have this illusion of we need to work with them because we're gonna support you. But that hasn't been a real support.

At that moment, also 2022. We start some conversation with another organization named Persimon Collective. That is an organization in this area who start, you know, like a cohort to request, you know, black farmers and and Hispanic farmers, what they need. And our main interest was, we want to have access to land. Land that we can own. And you know we have been talking about grants, about loans, option, but it take time before we were able to connect with a organization that is in Massachusetts. The name is Equity Trust. I don't know if you know them. Is through this organization that we were able to have access to a loan. And last year, after, you know, many deceiving moment, because we have seen many spaces, but nothing we were accessible in terms of cost. And it was maybe one week before the storm before Helene that we signed this land in Leicester. That means we have been able to purchase that land in September last year on 2024. And we have been working with equity trusts through a loan and personal collective provide some grant funding to start operation and repair because there is a house on the field, and the intention it's at least – well, one of the partners is my husband, one of the members of become my husband, and we are living now, but the intention is being able to provide, maybe 2 more housing option to other members, or maybe to community members who want to live on the on the site.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Well, congratulations!

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Thank you. And we're going to keep this land at the church as well. Just because we want to create as a educational space here.

**Colleen Hanley:**

So you have point 3 acres at the church that you're leasing. How long is that lease?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Well the lease – it's something that we renew every year, honestly, for a long term, and we knew this year that the pastor gonna move to another church. That means we don't know if the new pastor gonna have the same intention as well.

**Colleen Hanley:**

And how many acres is on the farm that you purchased?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

The new farm is almost 9 acres. But it's not flat. It's, you know, here is the mountains. That means we have like a tree section that aren't farmable. And maybe it make 3 acres that could be used as a farmland.

**Colleen Hanley:**

You mentioned that you have a house on site there, and intention to build more housing, what other infrastructure is on the farm that you purchased?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

You know that space has been maybe a farm [13:11] years, because the house is from 1936. It's a very old house. And the family who were living there. I think they were farmers before. That means we found on the side the house. Another little house that is not in condition to make any repair repairs. That means we're gonna demolish it soon, if we can. We have maybe a small shed. Do you know where we can store stuff, maybe 2 small sheds. And I think maybe another one was available, but they fell down maybe during the storm, we don't know when exactly. That means we have – something that we can use is the house. We have done a lot of repairs already. The house and 2 sheds. 2 small sheds that we can where we can store stuff. That was the only structures.

**Colleen Hanley:**

So you'll have to put or like, in terms of cold storage or wash pack or deer fencing. Irrigation.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

We have put already a fence, but very small fence just in front of the – because we are in a, just in front of a important road, you know, that connect – it's not a highway, but it's a road that that become very busy. And we have done just that fencing on December just to create some protection as well. And we have built a a storage unit as well, just because it's something that we need it at that moment, because it was the winter when we start to do all the work. And we purchased also a container, you know, and the intention of this container is creating a cooler. We have a cooler also here at the church. It's a trailer. A mobile trailer that we have built as a as

a cooler. And the intention of this container it's been able to create half cooler and maybe half a, like a farm stand. We are thinking about the how we gonna build it is not ready, because now we are focusing on the house mainly because we still working. We live there, but we are not able to make all the things we need. But that is the intention of using that that container.

**Colleen Hanley:**

And in terms of who owns the new farm, is that you who has the title to it? Or how does that work?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Is the LLC who owns the the the land.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Is that 6 farmers are part of...?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

4.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Okay. Do you have a plan for what land distribution looks like? Like how you distribute land, or how the land is farmed cooperatively?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

You know, we're still in the process of creating. Well, we have a, do you know, like a operation agreement as a cooperative? But we are in the process of building something that can also include the land, you know. However, one of the thing we have been talking about, it's a big conversation, because it's something that we have to figure it out. But our main intention is, keep that land as a farmland. That means we don't have any personal interest of selling, or. Because the intention is make that land available to future farmers. Also Hispanic or bipoc farmers. That means the intention is keep the, you know, while the cooperative exists, We're going to have access to the space that you know to live in and producing the food and creating other business. That means we can, as a business, we can create profit by using the space, but keeping the land as a farmland for future generation.

And however, we still on the process of understanding what could be the best model. Because also, we were thinking about maybe creating like a nonprofit, you know, that can hold the land. We have been thinking about maybe other organization hold the space, and we are just users. We don't know yet, because it it's so many options as well. It is like each option has pros and cons and. However, for now that we are paying the mortgage It's their authority [18:42] who

pay the loan, and by example us, in my case, my family, who is already living on this, on the on the place, we pay a rent to Tierra Fertil, you know. A rent because we are using the house. And in that way we can have also some income that help us to pay the mortgage.

**Colleen Hanley:**

That's a big decision that you all are entering around how to hold the land for future farmers. I'm wondering how, you mentioned in Operations agreement. How are decisions made between the 4 of you and what governance practices for big decisions like this, or even small decisions like, you know, what to buy for the farm, gets made?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Well, that's the good aspect about being just 4, because I think we have already developed through the years, trials, and we know each other already. That means we have a great communication. The communication. It's key. And also, do you know the communication, but also express also the the vision of the farm. I think if you don't have a vision as a group. It's hard to take decision as well, because you can have like a different intention. And also, I have to be honest. We are all of us. We are on the forties, 45, and that make a huge difference, because we are thinking about creating some stability in our lives as well. We are not doing this just to prove anything. We are not doing this temporary. It's something that we want to do. As a, you know, in another moment in our life that means for us is important. Well-being is important. Not necessary money, but just being able to have stability. And that create other relationship also among us.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Is there a process for members to join or leave the LLC. Cooperative?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:** You know the agreement established, you know, all those situation, however, for now we haven't opened the membership because we are in a moment that we still understanding, you know, the ownership model. We are – because this is really different. We have said, you know, the business model. That is a LLC. And we made decision about the business, using democratic tactics and techniques and strategies. However, being able to own the land creates some other situation. That means we don't want to open yet the membership if we're still on that process of understanding what gonna be the involvement of each member. And maybe something, something that I have to mention is, you know, as a as people who live by example us, we move maybe 3 weeks ago to the space. And you know, we are using the house. We are using the, the space for living, and we are investing also as an individual on the on the house. That means we repair stuff, we buy stuff for the house. And that is something that also for us is key. How we can also take in account that investment, because it's – that we are also putting on the site or time is important as well. The work we do on the – and you know

we were able, by example, to pay for some hours, because we have been all involved on repairing the house. That means at least we want to make possible that each member has some – I don't know what's the right word, has some owner or has some – you know, now I'm 49. And I said, Maybe I'm gonna be able just to farm, I hope, until 70. I said that, but maybe could be less. At 70 years old. I hope that you know, to have, like some money from what I have built there as well. That means we plan to have like an amount, you know, if we sell this land to another other group of farmers, at least the members can have, like a small amount of money that can own, or you know what we have built on that space. At least, not about the older land, but at least about the spaces where we were living.

**Colleen Hanley:**

That was just a couple questions for me around. You talked about investing in the house and the repairs and improvements, and then also building capital from your business. What is, I guess, how do you distribute that equity or interest among the members of the farm for retirement when you are ready for it?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, okay. We don't have yet a plan of retirement. It's a little bit complicated because we don't farm full time. That is, maybe something that I didn't said before. Each one of us has another job. That means we work with, you know, because it's something that maybe sometime. And and I like to share that. It's sadly. You know, I know that many people said you can make money by farming, but honestly, it's not the most profitable business. That means we do this because we have a big connection with the idea of creating well-being through farming. And well-being, not just for individuals, but also for a community, and also for the environment. That means is more a lifestyle instead of just thinking about making profit. And that means, you know, it's we, normally, each member when we're talking about the operation of the farm. Each member has, you know, a detail about how many hours. You have work monthly. And we pay by hour. That means because we don't have the same schedule, you know, each one of us has work just the weekend, or just during the afternoon or just. We work together on Sundays by example during the morning. That means each one of us has a different schedule and timing every month, but we pay for those hours. And what we do at the end of the year, you know, if we have some profit, or if we have the, you know, a donation, or if somebody provide a grant, what we do is we gave a bonus, you know, like a, you know, we do gift cards, or we do like a \$500 a year, at the end of the year, just a compensation. But honestly, I will not say that it's a salary. What we do is a compensation for the time we each one of us put on this work.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Yeah, that makes sense. And I can see the passion and dedication that you all have for stewarding the land. So really I'm appreciative for that.

So with folks working different hours, how is work divided among the group and like, what are you farming? Is it people are responsible for individual beds, or are you coordinating production of crops?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, honestly. It has been interesting before we have the land. Now we live on the land. Before it was like we had to make a lot of trips, you know, during the day. And you know we have a Whatsapp group. And we daily communicate about, you know, what we need to do today? Who is available? Who can come? I would say that the person who has more flexibility is Maria. She's a retired person, and I spend a lot of time here at the church, you know, doing administrative job, but also going to the greenhouse and taking care of the garden here. And now that we live in Leicester, of course, when we arrive at night or during the afternoon, we see the crops, and that means we are always communicating the needs we have daily and by example, I am the one that is in communication with clients or communication with the farmers market that we need to attend and we are just, you know, we have a market this weekend, we need to harvest on Friday, or we need to do something during the week. That is through communication texting and calls that we manage also the needs on the farms.

**Tamar B. Stollman:**

So quickly. You just mentioned the greenhouse at the church. What else do you have? Do you have other structures there? And then? I'm just curious about like irrigation at the church, and also in Leicester.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Okay here at the church we have install, it's not a greenhouse. It's a high tunnel. It's a high tunnel, 50 by 16. And honestly, because the soil here in Calvary is really bad. It's rocky. We decide to go through raised bed. That means we build raised bed, and it's where we grow. The irrigation system we use is hose. Because, you know, honestly, when you have raised bed, it's complicated also to install a irrigation system. Because we have. They are installed a little bit everywhere, the raised bed. And also, I think, because our prediction is for market. The irrigation system make you lose space when you grow in raised bed. That's why we use hoses. That means we came, somebody that is here, water the plants using a hose. In Leicester. The intention is having, but we don't have yet is having irrigation system installed because it's going to be our spot. But this year we were unable to start that because it was so many changes and moving. And we start growing. And because we had a lot of rain this year. That was amazing. That means we didn't require the irrigation system at least this season. But hopefully, for next

year, we we plan to install that system. And just to answer that question, here in calgary, we have the high tunnel, we have around 20 raised beds that are honestly we grow a lot of food on that space. And we have the cooler. That is a mobile cooler we have built. That's what we have here in this space that is a like an office and storage that we rent as well.

**Tamar B. Stollman:**

I see. And have you had any challenges in getting water like? Is the water from the church through the church, through the city?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes. You know, we had the chance that – the church has also a garden. That means they have also, well, they have been growing because they have more resources than us. They have 2 big greenhouses, amazing. And we are almost, we are neighbors. And they have installed, you know, how do you call, faucets, you know? For each garden. And it's, I think, city water that means and what I, what we have understood is the water is it's included on the lease.

**Tamar B. Stollman:**

And I just also wanted to ask related to the like LLC, the legal structure and how you own the land is. But you're also a cooperative. So is the cooperative built into the legal structure, or is it kind of more based on just sentiment?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes. Well, to be honest it, it it depends. Each State has a different system by example. In North Carolina the cooperative model doesn't exist. That means it's not a structure that you can. Some other State, mainly in the North. You have the cooperative as a legal entity. In North Carolina we don't have. That means the only option we had is it was a LLC partnership, and we have that. However, for us the cooperative. It's, of course, is more related to the system and values we use. Of course.

**Colleen Hanley:**

And related to that you had mentioned that you had a democratic decision making of choosing this LLC. Cooperative. Why was that what you all chose?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Do you know, I have been always thinking about creating power together? That means that has been all something that I have been always related. And also, do you know, because at that moment some of us didn't have a regular status on United States. The model that were more open to involve undocumented people were the cooperative model. And also, do you know, it's

a movement. We believe that the cooperative model has a lot of it's a big network in United States and also outside United States. And being able to be supported, you know, for that network. It was also important for us. And really as well it is related to, we believe that the only way to try, you know, when you are immigrant is working together. Honestly, you cannot do stuff by yourself. It's it doesn't make sense. And mainly when we're talking about farming, honestly, farming. If we see the way nature work, it's by putting the pieces that you know each part of the nature make its job. And that's the way that we see. Each one of us brings something important, and we want to hold that capacity together.

**Colleen Hanley:**

When you all decided to do this together and build capacity together? Was there, like everyone invested a certain amount? How did the sort of creation work with a buy-in for cooperative?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes. Well, it's interesting, because, now the operation agreement established \$500 as a membership fee. I don't know if it's the right term. But because every each one of us that we still on the cooperative, we have been putting so many time and work without having any payment with a side that the members pay with their time. That means we haven't. But maybe that's another thing that I need to share with you. Okay, we haven't paid for the membership. However, we have provide some personal money to purchase the land because at that moment we needed, you know, to have some clear engagement because we were purchasing land. We decide to each member provide around \$12,000 for putting that money to the process.

**Colleen Hanley:**

That's really helpful to.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Maybe I have to express that at least that money has to be reimbursed when, if we left, you know that's 1 of the commitment we have.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Okay. Thank you. That's helpful to understand. You've mentioned a couple challenges around like legal arrangements, but there's no cooperative structure recognized in North Carolina around land access with, like the pastor transition. And then also you know the land that you were on that maybe didn't feel super secure because the landowners' political ideals. And I'm curious if there's yeah what, you would say, are the biggest challenges that your cooperative has faced around legal and land access?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes. You know something that I mentioned a lot, and that's the reason why we have also some social programs, you know, related to what we do, not just the food, because that's maybe another thing. We continue the program of food distribution. We have been doing that since 2020. And now we have around 120 families that receive food once a month, because because it's what our capacity make, what is possible, for in more capacity. And we have some grants for the food distribution. We provide some donation from the farm, but it's we don't have the capacity to provide to all these families.

And I will say education. I means having some technical knowledge about farming in North Carolina, because we came from Central America, and we have a very different weather, humidity, seasons. And I think the fact that some of us we are not necessarily bilingual, you know, or just understand the language of farming. It's already a challenge. That means we have been dealing with the fact of we have just information in in English or. And do you know, that's why, in 2023, we start something named Escuela Campesina, that is like a farming school in Spanish, where we, you know, we share in the knowledge that we continue learning. That means it's a very basic school. That means people – we met once a month, and we provide classes about farming, about flowers, about herbs, about health. We provide many different subjects, but in Spanish. And that has been for us really important, because honestly, access to knowledge is key also to whatever intention you have.

Second is access to funding, of course, you know. If it's not grant, you honestly cannot have so much options in terms of creating a farm. And also, do you know, it is sad that because we are a cooperative. The process to request by example, we have been working with a organization who provide loans in North Carolina. And because we are a cooperative. It was so crazy ask for a loan, it's like each member has to provide information about financial about status, about credit, you know, record, and it was like a We don't have credit here. We don't have that record. And that has been also a, and also, do you know, many people don't trust in in cooperative. Many people, and I will say that also institution that promote businesses, they have the idea of, you know, working in with working with other could cause that you're going to lose your money, or you're going to lose the business, and that for me has been really frustrating. Because and I will mention by example, I don't know if you know that organization, but it's an organization here in Western North Carolina that work to create businesses. That's their intention. They provide technical assistance. But it's always creating individual business. They don't promote collective business, and that is frustrating honestly, because this organization, one that each individual has a business. And that is the honestly in my mind that is the pathway to really lost your money. Because if everybody want to have a business, you are just creating a system that don't have the capacity to make a successful business, and that's really sad. Honestly, I'm really mad with this idea of every individual that has a good idea has to have a business. No, that don't have to be the focus.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Thank you. Yeah, that's a really good highlight of how culture views, you know, individualism views cooperative and working together.

I want to go back to, like, you know, working collectively, and this idea that it might not work well, and you'll lose your money. We hear a lot about collective management farms systems to be in place to make sure it's efficient. I'm curious you mentioned Whatsapp. Is that how you all like scout for pests, and make sure things are looking good, and on the farm and on the business side?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, and and I have to be honest about that, because yesterday I had a conversation with a somebody who is supporting us with mentorship. And she always mentioned systems, and honestly, that is maybe cultural, but the system we have, and I will say, maybe I cannot make, I cannot generalize, but as Hispanic, we don't have systems. We don't have the system that people have here. We have our own system that are related to what we need, and what we have the capacity to do as well. Because, do you know, when somebody asks us about having a system for pest. If we haven't seen that pest, we don't have a system. We're going to create the system when we face that problem or crop planning, you know. It's nice to have a crop planning, but when you farm full time, but our – us we don't farm full time. That means we are creating systems that are more spontaneous, I would say, that are related to the way we can manage. Of course we will be happy to, you know, to have everything in a computer, having a platform, having – yes, I remember we work with with a farm, and that is located in in Durham, named Transplanting Tradition. That farm work with immigrants as well from Burma, and they provide some technical assistance. And then, you know, they have created amazing system. But the big difference is Asian people they farm as a very spontaneous action. That means people love farming. It's something that passed generation by generation. In our case we have lost that Hispanic farm for 2 reasons. Because it's a job that you have. It's not by choice. It's just because the system is the only job that can provide you. Or because you love to farm. That's the 2 groups I would say. And by example, I remember they bring off a big, how do you call that? It's like a, it's a big folder, do you know, with many documentation. And we were happy to have it. But we don't have time to check on each one of those tables and forms, and we don't have time honestly. And that is another different, you know, this farm they do almost all the management of the farmers, and the farmers just farm. And for us, it's you have to farm, you have to work, you have to manage the, you have to go to the farmers market. Sometime in the farming universe you have to do everything. Also your taxes, of course. That means it's so much, it's so much. And you are not paid for that. And that is other aspect that is also a challenge. Farmers

are one of the profession that you have to have knowledge about everything, but not for that you have a better income.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Yeah, I know you really have to wear every hat, it seems. Yeah, I'm curious what your big crops that you all are bringing to market are like, or what you're growing.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Okay, you know, our production is really diverse. That means we. We also have that – We love to try. Every year we try new crops every year we made decision about, you know, doesn't make sense to grow this because we have to. We donate every food that we are not able to sell. We donate to different spaces. That means it's not a loss. We don't talk about lost, because we always provide that food to someone, and we have around, I would say, 30 different crops. But in a very small scale. That means we have diversity, but small prediction. And I think that's something that we love to do, because in that way we can, we can always innovate about a crop. That means I will say that we have a lot of success with baby carrots. Cilantro. We have a lot of success with fruit when we have fruit. I would set water melons and melons. Okra is a very successful crop for us. But we grow onions, we grow potatoes, we grow kale. We have a very diversified list, that is, around 20, 25 crops, different crops.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Oh, amazing! And your farms consumer base, what's the market like? And how do you sell those crops?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, okay, until last year, we have 2 specific market, farmers market. And we were able to sell food to some organization that provide food, free food, you know, for some nonprofit who provide food to the community. And I don't know if you have listened about this program name HOP. In in this area it maybe start 2 years ago is the HOP program. And the whole program was like a Medicaid.

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What do you say that when you have medicine is a, when you have to go to the doctor and take medicine. How? How do you call that? Prescription.

Yes, it was a Medicaid prescription. Each box of food was paid by Medicaid, and many organization has been doing that the last 2 years. But that program just end on July. That means some of the organization who purchase food from us. They are not able anymore to purchase that that food. That means in this moment we are growing mainly for farmers market and also

for the community. I would say, because what we do is we provide some food to Abundancia program, and we try to be paid by the – we have a fiscal sponsor. The fiscal sponsor hold the funds for the Abundancia, and they pay Tierra Fertil for the food we provide. That's in this moment a challenger honestly.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Yeah. Your funding of the work you do is really interesting to me, because it seems like you have some loans. You have some grants with your fiscal sponsor. You have some markets for your goods, and you also donate. Yeah, could you go a little more into detail about how the organization's funding is divided, and how the earned income is distributed? Is it reinvested back into the cooperative? You had mentioned, like not being profitable, yet just curious about that end of things.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, you know, as a small business well, we have an account, business account. However, we have started like a grassroots group. That means when we start the food distribution before, to be a cooperative, we were like a grassroots group, you know, people from the community doing something for themselves. And at that moment, do you know, we had some proposal of grants. However, we were aware that as an LLC we can, we cannot receive grant funding. And so this organization requests to have a fiscal sponsor. And that's why we since 2022, we have been working with a nonprofit who receive that funding, that is grant for the food distribution and for Escuela Campesina, that is the farming school. And this organization managed the funding, you know, that is used to the social programs. That's why one of the, okay, this fiscal sponsor requests some fees to be our fiscal sponsor. We pay like a 10% of each grant to make possible for them to keep that money, you know, to be managed, the money. And because, you know we have these 2 program. Whatever is related to this program are paid by the fiscal sponsor, by example, if we have some food. We have some donation, but also sometime we have, like a, you know, 60 bunches of cilantro. It's the program who pay Tierra Fertil for those 60 bunches of cilantro. Because, honestly, we need to be sustainable as well. We cannot do everything free. That's the point that I also like to mention. If we do everything free, we lost everything we have, mainly now that we have a loan. And that means we need to take care about also be sustainable. That is something that we think always. That's why, do you know, being able to have this land is, make us think about how we can create other agribusinesses to continue operating as a farm. And the idea of maybe creating a nonprofit. It's a organization that can hold this program in that way, we don't have to pay, you know, 10% to another organization. But maybe us make that possible. And hopefully, we are already start some process to create a nonprofit. But it takes time, of course. But that's the idea, the non profit, the fiscal sponsor manage the social programs we have.

**Colleen Hanley:**

And how much of the businesses earned revenue is coming from like programmatic, versus you know, a loan, versus the revenue from the produce you're selling at market?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, honestly is, is not so much by example is May, the most part of those, the income from the cooperative came from sales. And when I said sales, I will mention, not just produce. We sell services as well. By example, I have been hired for Transplanting Tradition by example, to make, to provide classes in Spanish and organize people around farming. And by example, we have been working with families that already grow in their houses or in community gardens, and I go and provide some technical assistance to these families, and the time, Transplanting Tradition, pay Tierra Fertil for making that work. And that is part of my job made possible, you know, to have those services. That means Tierra Fertil receive money from selling produce and services.

**Colleen Hanley:**

What is the split in terms of the revenue from produce and services?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

I will say that 60% is from services and 40% from sales.

**Colleen Hanley:**

It's a really interesting business model. And we know Transplanting Traditions, actually. They're part of our community of practice. So.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

You have already talked with them or not, yet?

**Colleen Hanley:**

Not for this study, but they are, they come to our like, we have networking sessions online, and we have a gathering in person each year. So they'll join us for that as well, and I can send that information if you're curious to read.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes. Where are you located?

**Colleen Hanley:**

Yeah, we're in Beverly, Mass, but we every year, because it's a national group. We move to different States. So this year it's in Austin, Texas, where we're all gonna get together. I'll make sure I send it your way.

I'm curious that the services, though, and the products. Is that all in your business plan and like, how does your business plan model change over time? Who created it? Who's responsible for updating it? Is it something you'd be willing to share?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Your question is mainly about how we do those changes, and this or?

**Colleen Hanley:**

Yeah, do you have? Did you all write? You have the operations plan. Do you also have, like a business plan where you, the 4 of you wrote out. This is what we want to do. And here's how we hang to it?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, you know we have done a business plan. Also, Equity Trust requests a business plan from us. And we were really ambitious when we made that business plan. Because one of the thing we were thinking about the farm that we have now is also how we can create that space as a community farm where we can have events, where we can have worship, where we can have a tiny house that we can rent, or we can have like a kids events. We have proposed many stuff. But also, do you know, that we have to recognize that it's a big investment. It's a lot of – to be able to have that capacity to provide all those services gonna require time. That means, now we are focusing on, okay, be stable, the family who is living there have a stability and receive that that rent payment. Hopefully, next year we're gonna be able to have the second housing for this other member. We are thinking about also next year been able to create the farm stand. You know. That means we go by our capacity, because the money we had as grant go really fast on repairing the house, and honestly, has been a lot. A lot of money investing on repairing and creating the space. And I have to be honest, many of the work we have done has not been compensated. That means it's creating the space because we need that the space become active in terms of prediction and everything.

**Colleen Hanley:**

What are the major costs? I've heard a lot of repairs. Are those the major costs you're facing right now? And then the mortgage?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, I think mainly now it's set in the space. By example, we had to pay a lot for cutting trees for cleaning the space for repairing, for, yes, building stuff. That has been the most, the biggest cost. Second, of course, the mortgage. And I will say, third, it's paying the members. That's the third aspect. And because at least we are very committed to make possible that each month, you know, people has that compensation that go between 500, 600, 400. It depends how many hours we have done, but honestly not everything is paid.

**Colleen Hanley:**

And with the repairs and infrastructure and clearing, is all of that able to be paid for by what the business is making? Are you doing it like you mentioned by capacity, little by little, or are you sometimes asking members for, like a big project, to put money into a pool to do this project?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

We have already put this \$12,000 at least 3 of us, one of the member, just provide half because he was not able to provide the whole amount. And I will say that, our biggest investment is our work time. By example, do you know all of us, we are conscious that we need to clean an area. And sometimes we don't count those hours, you know, it's like, and, but I try to track those hours, because it's not money, but it's an investment, again, and that's the piece that it's sometimes hard to explain. Because it's impossible to if we if we pay each hour of our time we were like out of the business.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Yeah, it's sweat equity.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, it's that mainly that.

**Colleen Hanley:**

How would you describe your current, the current farm cooperatives, financial situation?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Okay, because honestly, some of the money we use to repair the house and make in investing, by example, the cooler, the container we purchase, that is grand money. That means we were able to purchase another high tunnel that we need to install, of course, because it's not yet there. That means what we decide to invest when we have the grant is invest on equipment, because it's the only way to be able to continue operation as well. You know, we didn't think about we need to pay our time. We said, Okay, we're gonna need a high tunnel. We're gonna need a malware [1:05:06]. We're gonna need a container, and we're gonna be able to make

those purchases. Now that we have the money. And in that way, maybe we can start operating in some way and create income that gonna make possible to pay us. That's the the vision we have. We need to have the capacity of producing and creating and developing the business.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Thank you. I want to shift gears a little bit and go back to the social and cultural dynamics of your group. You had mentioned earlier that you know, it started as a group of 12. And then you realized how important share culture was. It went to 6. It's 4 members now. How did that cohesive group of 4 come together and like, what are the values, visions and cultural practices or traditions shared?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, I will mention that we had in 2023, like we lost 2 members. That was a little bit, a conflict, I would say. And it was a sad moment, honestly, because, and I will mention something that it's really hard and not so much people talk about it. It's about women involved in farming. By example, we had 2 members, women, no, 3 members, it was. We were 7 at that moment, because, you know, we have been different moments, and maybe something to mention – You can change your, you know, we have to register every year the business. And it's when you register that you put the members, you know, the official members. However, during the year we have people that said, you know, I gonna try. And I want to know how things work with you. That means it's people that work with us for a time, but it's not necessary become a member. I don't know, that means it's people who want to be part, but they want to try first. And at that moment we were 7 people working, and maybe 5 members at that time. And honestly, it was really sad always that our woman who left the cooperative. And what is the main reason? First, husbands. It's like, you spend so much time on the field. It's so hard. You know, growing food is not something that's gonna give you money. That means stop that. Some people love it, do you know, to do it? But because, you know, it's not something that provide money, it's like you don't have to continue.

Second reason is because also, do you know, as a woman, sometimes we don't have the capacity of using some equipment. You know, it's like, and because we do a lot of work with our body. That means we need to take a lot of weight. We need to move stuff we have. We have to be on during the heat, you know, during the summer, and it's like, physically we don't have sometimes the same capacity of supporting the, you know, the heat and supporting movement from one place to another, moving to one farm to another. And we start to having that conflict. I do a lot, and I don't receive enough money, and that is the circumstances that starr making having some conflicts. That's, but you know it was really simple. If we don't make money, we cannot pay, we cannot. And do you know something that we always have been really,

intentionally, it's the food we produce is for us. First before I go to sell to farmers market. Whatever we produce is for us. That means, if you need something, take. And that has been our way, do you know, to make possible that everybody feel that they receive something that is not necessary money, but that is something that. I think in any community people believe that if you are involved in something you have to receive something. And money is something that is important, you know, in our communities. That means, it's, you know, I cannot ask a woman who is a single mom, or is a woman who stay at home to take care of their kids to come to the farm working with me several hours, and I'm I don't give any money. And that's why we decide at that moment we're gonna stop the the membership. We we because we cannot promise a payment or a salary, because we don't have the capacity yet.

**Colleen Hanley:**

And what are like some other examples of conflict and disagreement that maybe you've had between the 4 of you? And how did you move forward or through?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, I would say that a big challenge is we don't understand what it means my voice [01:11:18]. I will say that in our community. We have very, we have internalized a lot to follow others. That means because we have been employees or we have been just somebody who have been follow instruction from someone else. And we, when you want to create like a democratic space where each voice is important, people don't know how to express that voice. And that is a big issue, because by example, you know, I always, often I lead the the meetings among my colleagues, and it's like, what do you think about this? And some answer are, What do you think is good, Delia? You know. What do you think? And it's not about what I think. It's about what you think. It doesn't matter what you think, or at least start expressing opinions. That is something that has been a big challenge. How people feel. It's a learning process about sharing what I think. And that has been something that we try to daily develop. When I, when we ask, What do you think? It's what *do* you think? It's not about what you want to follow, you know. And that is a challenge, honestly, in our community, because people has a lot of mistrust or self-trust. And they think that what they gonna express don't gonna be correct or don't gonna be right. And that's why people prefer to follow something or somebody who know already what could be better.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Regularly are the 4 of you meeting to like have these conversations of what do you think of this, and what engagement?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

We have a good relationship. That means we always said, Oh, Maria, please, I am asking you, what do you think? Don't say what any of us think. And that means we have like a like a system where we among us we try to create that answer that came from your heart and not from other people. That means we have our own system because the trust we have. And do you know, sometimes I have many, a couple of months ago we have an exercise we had an exercise about, Okay, what I love for from what I do and what we hate about or work together. And it's interesting, because, do you know, it has, it take time to listen each one of us. But that we hate sometimes is what we continue doing. That means it's a learning process is remind us, you know, you said that you don't like that, that I don't mention that I gonna come to the to the greenhouse, and that's why, remember, just said I cannot go, or yes, I can go, because the communication gonna be always the the right time, the right answer, you know.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Do you do those exercises as a group often like? Do you meet every week, or meet every month or?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes. Do you know, last year, well, the years before we were meeting, maybe every 3 months just because it was, you know, we were on the process of moving from one farm to another. Now that we feel more stable in terms of locations, we do once a month, and every month we try to take care of what it's disturbing us. What I don't like, or something that I don't feel right. And also making decision about operation and stuff. We do always an exercise to just release what we have in our life.

**Colleen Hanley:**

And from those exercises, and your experience and hearing from other members experiences, what would you say are the benefits and challenges of working collectively?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

The first benefit, I think we learn a lot with develop the capacity of continue learning. That is, I would say, the one of the first big good aspect of working together. Because it's like a you are, you have always the inputs from someone else.

Another one it's having a support network, honestly. Because between us go beyond the farm operation, it's like, I have a daughter and one of the members, if I have an issue, you know. She take care of my daughter. If someone have an issue with their car, somebody of us can help or move to. That means we are not just a farm partners. We are a network of support. That means it's that is another aspect that is really important for us. There, I will say, by working together, you identify better also your capacities. I think we understand where each one of us are better

or not. That means because we see what we do like, No, Maria, it's maybe you take care of this, because that's your strength. And maybe someone else gonna be doing something where they have, this person have more capacity. That means it's understanding in which area we are good or not. That's another good aspect.

About challenges, it's what I have mentioned before is that being participative, or being or develop democratic process is a learning process as well. That means, I will be honest on that, as a founder member, I feel committed, do you know, to make this sustainable and long term process. And I am concerned about, you know, something could happen to me, you know, something could happen to me, and I think a lot about the secession. What is gonna happen if I have an issue, or if I have, I don't have any more the capacity of being part of this, how we create that capacity. But that take years, do you know, is that's something that yes, make me think about. For now I can share what I know and what I have learned during the years. But I will be happy in a moment how we can create capacity to make this work a long term. And that is a challenge, because normally, in any organization, there are one or two leaders, you know, what it happened if these people are not anymore there? And maybe the system are the answer. Maybe, we don't know. And that is something that that's always something in my mind. Another big challenge is, of course, the financial aspect, because, you know, each one of us have a different situation, I think, economically, and legal as well. And it's always thinking about how we can provide health care, how we can think about the, by example, the retirement process. Yes, we will be happy to have that those options, but it's impossible for now.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Thank you for those reflections. What are the core values that you four share, and cultural practices that you might share traditions that keep you together in this work?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

I think, firstly, solidarity, honestly. I think whatever, if we keep or not the business, it's about being supportive with all of us. And you know, we are four members, but we are always thinking about, we are four official members, but we have a community around us. That is, that means it's not just us. That means the work we do is a way to support our community. And we always think about how we can, thing that the business structure is like a platform that support, also a community that that's something important. Another value it's trust, you know. Well, we we all know that. Trust, it take time before you have trust, but you can lost it in 10 seconds. That means we try always to be very clear with ourselves and say, You know this is not possible, or this is potential something that we can do. Other value is related to protect ourselves, protect each other. That means in in different ways protect us. Maria, she's almost 67. And by example, we are really aware about that. Don't do that because that's so much. It's go to the shade and

do what it's easier. Not because we don't believe that she is capable, because she loves to make her work, but we are conscious that we have to protect her back. And that means trust, solidarity, protect each other, support each other. It's something that is really key in our work.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Thank you. I guess you have mentioned some partnerships like Equity Trust, Persimmon Collective, the cooperative network, both in and outside of the U.S.. What partnerships have been most helpful? Am I missing any? And I'm like, really curious about the cooperative network and what that looks like.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, we are members of the U.S. Federation of Worker cooperative. That means it's a federation in United States that provide a lot of technical assisting and education. Honestly, we are really happy to be part of of that important network. We have a couple of churches, you know, who provide their facilities to make possible or food distribution. We work also with some local organization as ASAP. I don't know if you have listened is Appalachian,

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Delia Jovel Dubón: progress. Let me. I don't remember the.

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Delia Jovel Dubón: It's a blush. And

01:24:40.690 --> 01:24:44.340

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project.

01:24:44.680 --> 01:24:49.250

Delia Jovel Dubón: It's an organization in this area. I'm gonna put on the chat the name.

This organization also provide technical assistance, education in farming, support, also through farmers market, network. Is a very nice organization. But of course, Transplanting Tradition is a great partner for us, because they provide technical assistance, and also pay for some of my time. We work also with other local organization like Sedic, that is, is a nonprofit in this area who provide funding for the food distribution we work with. I have a list of partners I can share with you that list or you can see in our website as well. I have a picture of where you can see the partners is on the bottom of the first page.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Oh, great! We'll go to the website. Thank you. That's helpful. And yeah, I, the U.S. Federation of Worker cooperative seems like a really great resource as does all these other partnerships. I think it really aligns with the values that you've shared of that. You know, solidarity and connection. It makes sense that you have such strong partnerships and connections.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

We feel really proud of being able to create that network of organization that support us. We are really really excited, that people also – And maybe it's because we are the only Hispanic cooperative in this area. That's maybe the reason why people are very supportive about what we do. I think the other reason is because, and this is a good and a bad reason sometime. It's our ethnicity, honestly. I think some organization have this, this intention of support group bipoc groups and sometimes they open the space for organization like us. And I mean is bad, because sometimes by example, we, we are part of a farmer's market that is really hard to have space. But we have the space. And when people ask me how I what I have done to be part of that farmers market, I always mention my skin because they have this policy about support bipoc, small entrepreneurs.

**Colleen Hanley:**

That's, yeah. That's really interesting. And I like how you touched on both good and bad experiences, because I think these things are nuanced. And there's no, you know, one experience of how it impacts with your relationship building. I'm curious around the, you, so that even though you all are four, you know, you're more than that because you serve this community. And you're connected to this broader community. What impacts have you seen your work have in community?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Do you know, something that maybe has been important? Well, in 2020 nobody were talking about fresh food distribution. 2020 we were in mind the conventional food distribution that was canned food, mainly. Do you know, the the most part of food pantries were canned food. And making possible to, you know, to provide fresh food has been like, people are so excited when they, and they still are excited when they come and say, Oh, we have avocados, we have onions, we have cilantro we have. It's like, the beauty of having something that I gonna use in my in my in the food I gonna cook. That mean that's the, just being able to provide the food that people gonna buy in a, for them was amazing. And I think people really appreciate that. We have always new people that come, do you know, because for many years, for many years, I mean from 2020 to 2024 before the storm, we had a list of people coming, you know, to receive the food. Now after the storm, with the site to be open to any Hispanic that comes. And we have always knew people. And they said, Oh, my goodness! I have never seen this kind of food in any

food pantry. I receive food, and I please let me know when you're gonna provide this food again. And also the fact that is Hispanic that are providing that food, that make a huge difference. Do you know it's not because we are not open to have volunteers from, you know we had some time high schoolers who came to support us, or the you know, American people who want to support, but the fact of having another Hispanic putting the food in your bags. It make a huge difference. It's like, we are making this. It's not anybody supporting us. It's ourself. And that is, I will say, that is a message for all of us. It's we can make possible many things. And we can show up that we can move also changes in our community. And that's, I think that's the most important impact. The other aspect is showing that farming it's also an advocacy tool. That means we advocate for a system that need to change. You know, by farming in the way we do because we use organic practices. We are not a focus on profit. We are focusing on well-being. That's another big change. And by sharing that people feel attracted to – I would be happy to grow some food in my garden, or I want to grow in pots. It doesn't matter. But I think changing that idea of farming conventionally has create some other approach from our community.

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**Colleen Hanley:**

Thank you so much. I want to create space for Caitlin or Tamar. I've been asking a lot of questions. So I create space for you all to ask questions. But yeah, I just want to reiterate how grateful I am for your wisdom, and thank you for all of the thoughtful learnings that you shared, and pass it off to Caitlin and Tamar.

**Tamar B. Stollman:**

Yes, thank you so much. I was just curious if you all either like Tierra Fertil or Abundancia, have, like a strategic plan or business plan, or maybe like a set of goals. That you're working towards, that you've written out or follow in some way.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

In terms of the business. Of course, we have the goal, you know, to be a sustainable farm, to continue developing capacity and expanding the operation we have. As Abundancia, because it's mainly like a service. You know, it's a community service. We don't have a strategic plan on that. We are already happy to been able to give every month this amount of food to the community. We have been thinking about something related to change a little bit the way of provide free food always, because we have also this experience that when you continue providing free food, you lost the value of what you grow and what food it is. Creating that charity system of always providing free, free, free. I think you lost some values or the value of what you do. We were thinking about the option of creating like a, like people by example, providing at least 5, 10 dollars, you know, for what they receive, because we provide a box that

is around 45, 50 dollars. You know, people can maybe give \$5 every time, and in that way you can make a commitment also from the families. But it's hard. I know that some people said, why are you going to make us pay for the food. It's, I think we need to change those those mind before. That means we were thinking also about creating like a cooperative shop. You know, here, you know, having beans, having rice, having stuff that people can buy a lower price. Some ideas. But we don't have a plan, honestly.

**Caitlin Kenney:**

Yeah, thank you so much for your time and these reflections. And it's there's so much insight here, and I'm really excited to listen to it again, but I feel like I've learned so much. So thank you for that. My question, because I am in the position of giving technical assistance as well as you are. I'm just curious of like what do you wish that system looked like? And how can we change and make it better?

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

Yes, do you know the experience we have with, I will mention technical assistant and mentorship. We work with, I don't know if you if you know this organization here, it's Organic Grower School. We work with them, and I will say that one of the limitation of technical assistant, it's time. It's like a, you know, sometimes we create system thinking that all farms are the same. That's impossible. Each farm has its own reality. And I believe a lot of being very close to the farmers. And when I said close, it's be in touch with also the space where people grow. Do you know, often we have technical assistance by phone or by Zoom. It's nice, but it's not something that's really gonna transform the way we farm. That means I love more the idea of being close with the farmers. And I know it's it's complicated, too. It's not easy. Do you know we cannot be with each farmer. But I think we can create this more adapted systems by knowing better the way people farm, the time they invest, the knowledge of the farmers. All those aspects.

**Caitlin Kenney:**

That's great. That's very helpful. Thank you.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

You're welcome. And maybe something else, Caitlin, is related to. By example, we have started working with Extension office by example, and it's like, it's a universe that has been really hard for us, because it's like, you have to connect with the specialist of very specific. That means, if you ask for squash bugs, let me find the person who is specialist on that. That's, that is like, Okay, I maybe don't gonna find the right person. And it's like they are always busy. They never have time for you, you know, when you need them. And by example, with Organic Grower

School we were able to have a mentor. But that mentor never have time. That means it's like, Okay, we have a mentor, but he has been never able to come to the farm by example.

**Caitlin Kenney:**

Yeah, it's not taking that holistic view, and I think often not considering what people's goals are, vision, and yeah, wanting to. Yeah.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

And maybe another. I'm sorry, that I coming to me in my mind, is, it's as well, you know, some mentors have this idea of the only way that farms can farm is by using this process. And it's like our farm works, you know, we don't see that things don't work. It's maybe don't work as the way *you* think gonna work.

**Caitlin Kenney:**

Right.

**Delia Jovel Dubón:**

But I think it's the cultural aspect are important, too. Because the way, we had yesterday a conversation with this mentor that I mentioned before, and it's like a, she was like, I'm surprised for what you have done in 3 months, you know, we have growing food in in the new spot. And everybody was, How you do this? If you are repairing the house, if you are doing this and doing that, how you were able to grow this food in this weekend? It's okay. Yes.

**Colleen Hanley:**

Well, thank you again so much. I'm gonna stop recording