

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Recording. Okay, excellent. Well, thank you. Everyone for being here today and making the time. I just want to do a little bit of an introduction to our team so you know who you're speaking to. I'm Colleen Hanley. I'm the National Program Manager at New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, so I help facilitate a community of practice with farm practitioners and community leaders across the US. A big part of our work that we're working on now is around agricultural commoning and working with 4 commons in the US around how to set those up. And so this research will be really beneficial and helpful to us in that, and I'll popcorn it off to Caitlin. Oh, sorry. I also like to ask a question. I think it just helps us, like, you know. Get to know each other a little better. So maybe we could say, and I'll come up with something like something small but meaningful that happened recently to you and something small but meaningful that happened to me recently. I think I have to go with while my friends were. I had friends visiting which I know Tamar and Caitlin know. While they were visiting they asked me if I would officiate their wedding, and so that was maybe not small. But it was a meaningful moment. I'll popcorn it to Caitlin.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Hi, I'm Caitlin, the National Technical Assistance Coordinator, working closely with Colleen, supporting the field network and also providing direct TA (technical Assistance) to farmers. I farm this morning, helping some friends locally. So I'm a bit of a hot mess today because I've been up since 4, running and... small, but meaningful. I'm not sure that this is like the right context, but I did get to jump in the ocean last night. We're in a heat wave. You look like you might also be in a heat wave right now, but.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

We had it last weekend.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

We just like made the record for highest temperature in June eever. and yes, so I had a long day yesterday as well, and got into the ocean, and it was you know, good and frigid like it, like it should be. So that was meaningful. Hahaha I'll pass it to Tamar.

Question (Tamar Stollman):

Hey! My name is Tamar. I'm a graduate student studying food and nutrition policy, and I'm interning with New Entry this summer, working on this case study project. and yeah, it's just been so hot. So the other day I worked with my roommate and we installed a window unit in the

living room, and I've been sleeping in the living room. So that's been like, honestly, really fun for me. It feels like a sleepover. It's very exciting. There's air conditioning. The 1st night of the heat wave I didn't have anything, so I didn't sleep. So now, it's a blessing.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Totally. Yeah. And I'm Hannah and I farm with Humble Hands Harvest. And my small but meaningful thing is also related to air conditioning because we have a cool-bot on our farm and on like Friday, right before the heat wave. the 90 degree temperature started, it pooped out, and so none of our vegetables could be cold. And so I had to like move all of the vegetables to someone else's cooler, and then figure out how to get my cool bot back up and running. And yeah, my sweetheart was staying over for the weekend, and they helped monitored the cool-bot and troubleshooted it and stuff as I, as we like, got it back together, and that was very, very important to have that support. And now it's working. So.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

That is like always the way with those cool-bots. Yeah.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Well, thanks everyone for sharing some meaningful moments. I think, yeah, it's nice to reflect on positive moments right now. So I appreciate. appreciate the time. And, Hannah, you all have really put. You have a lot of resources online which I'm super appreciative of. We have some questions. So just starting with your background and structure I have read about. You know, the CAFO background. But if you could talk a little bit further around how your farm got started, and who was involved in that.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So in terms of our land access. Yeah, this piece of land was just a conventional cornfield for decades. And then the owners of it had like retired and moved to town, and then they started selling parts of their land. and they sold their house to someone, Rick, and they then were going to sell the rest of their like farmland, and Rick didn't want it or didn't have capacity to buy it, and so and so they were gonna sell it at auction. But the neighbor up the road was like. had some experiences with CAFO operators buying land in the neighborhood or trying to. And so he really didn't want that to happen, and knew that it would happen if it went to auction, and so and so he organized. His name is Steve. He organized a group of about 20 people to all buy the land together in order to just prevent it from being owned by some nefarious purpose. And so that

group that was in the beginning of 2014, when that group came together and was able to buy the land. And so they just directly worked with the landowner, and she named a price, and they bought it. And yeah. And at that point in time I was renting farmland in the area and was starting my farm growing vegetables. And so I looked at this opportunity and was like, Wow, this is a great neighborhood. and this could be a diversified farm like we could make something happen here. It's at the end of a dead end road. It's really sweet. but I was still like very new to running a farm business at that point. And so it was a little bit of a... yeah. It was interesting, because the group itself didn't actually have much of a vision for what they wanted to happen on the property. And I wasn't quite trustworthy yet, as a beginning, farmer and business owner. We didn't know if I was going to be successful or not. And And so it was a little bit of a thing for a few years of me being like, well, we could do this like, How can we make this happen? We could have a diversified farm here. the group being not totally ready to like... One proposal that I had was I could be your farm manager, and this group could continue to collectively own this land and and I could grow vegetables here and whatever. But we would need to put some infrastructure in. And the people were like, no, we're not gonna invest more money in this. so yeah. It became clear that it had to be my, that it was on me to like. Figure out how to buy the land and and do it. But the people were happy for me to buy the land, and they, in fact, made an agreement with each other at the very 1st meeting that I was at, where one person said, I don't think we should be speculating on this land. We shouldn't sell our shares of this land for more than we bought them for. So that was really cool. And that is very different than most ways of transacting in land. And so yeah, so I was able to buy over the course of basically 9 years. I bought people out share by share. for the price that they paid for it, or sometimes people discounted it for me. And a couple of times people actually just gave me their shares, which is really amazing. So we got this land at basically an incredible discount, like, probably I paid \$5,500 an acre. And now land in our county is going for 12 grand an acre. So So that's great.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Amazing. And what was the relationship with the folks who held the shares beforehand that you had with them? Like, Did you have closer relationships with some of them, and maybe didn't know others. Just curious about that.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, yeah, I knew some of them quite well, and some of them hardly at all. But they were all kind of yeah, we were all kind of in the same networks, the food Co-OP. they're the food Co-OP crowd basically of our of our town. So people who are a little bit like. excited about green things and excited about yeah, doing things like a little bit differently. Yeah, unconventionally.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And was it? I know there's 2 farmers, including yourself. That farm on the land now, is it? How many acres total.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So it's a 22-acre property.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

22. And acres in production?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

In vegetables we have 2 acres in production.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

You have livestock as well, though right?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yep. So we have a flock of sheep that grazes the whole farm. we do them every day and And then we have planted a chestnut orchard that's about 2 acres and an apple orchard that's 2 and a half acres. So.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Great, very diverse. Were you the 1st farmer, and then you brought on a second farmer, and you have plans to bring on more farmers? Can you speak a little bit about farmers on the land, and what land distribution looks like or enterprise distribution looks like?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Totally. Yeah. So I was farming and renting land for 4 years before this land, before I had acquired enough shares of this land to have some ownership of it and start putting in the infrastructure that was needed. So anyway, I had farmed for 4 years on rented land. And then that year that this land started, I was lucky enough to someone move to town, Emily, who She's actually my second cousin. So we had met each other growing up (haha). And She moved to town to work for a different vegetable farmer and I was like, Oh, my gosh! This is my opportunity. Like someone who wants to be a vegetable farmer. maybe they would share this business with me because I was definitely feeling like running a business by myself and renting land, Neither of those things were sustainable for me long term, and so I really needed a co-farmer and a kind of more permanent spot to be on. So, anyway, Emily agreed to try out co-owning the business with me. And so. So in 2017, both of us. launched the 1st season here on this land. So we share our business, basically, like 50 50, like, I have more money invested. But we have. Yeah, we've made a kind of worker owned co-op agreement where our patronage, the profits are allocated, based on how much we've worked. Not on how much we've money we've invested, or something like that. So, yeah. And then, yeah, our enterprises are all we both co-manage o-manage all of the enterprises, basically. We all have input different. Yeah, both of us have different like specialties, I guess. But we both have input and we both have veto power about everything. yeah, yeah. Trying to think of what else? Oh, yeah. And.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

What are the specialties?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

And future Co-owners. We definitely do want to have future co-owners. So for the past few years we've hired about 2 people per season in addition to ourselves. So we've had about 4 people running the farm seasonally at least. And so I think that's kind of the ideal number for this piece of land for this farm is to have 4 people. And ideally, yeah, we would be all co-owners. But we've just said we've made an onboarding process. That's basically 2 years of employment before buying in and then becoming a Co-Owner. And we haven't found those people yet. But maybe some of this year's people will be those people.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

I'm just curious, how far was your rented land from this property?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So the 1st piece of land that I rented was actually an hour and a half away. It was in southeast Minnesota. But then, after 2 years of renting there, I really wanted to move back to Decorah, so I found some land here that was actually just the next dead end road, over where I was renting.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

And that gave you the opportunity to sort of get to know your neighbors.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, I was able to get to know them.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Great.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And you chose an LLC structure with cooperative bylaws. Can you talk a little bit about why your farm chose that structure.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So when Emily and I 1st started farming together, we just like quickly made an LLC with pretty basic bylaws. But then, after our 1st year of farming together, there were some things that were yeah, that had kind of become clear over the course of that year of like we wanted ways to. Well, number one, we wanted a way for it to be like clear to the public that Emily was neither my wife nor my helper. She was my co-farmer (haha). And so Hannah Breckbill she/they: that felt pretty important to just like have a structure that we could point to. That's like, this is what we are. We are not either of those assumptions that people really like to make and the other thing. Yeah. And we wanted a structure where it would make sense. yeah, where it would feel fair to both of us, you know, even though I have a longer history with the farm, and so therefore had more money invested in it. That didn't mean that I should be paid more than Emily for an equal amount of work. And so we just kind of were poking around. And someone in our community was really excited about worker owned cooperatives at that point in time. And it was like, Oh, yeah, this makes a ton of sense for what we're looking for and for the fact that we are wanting to

add more people long term. And we do want to figure out what our exit strategy is, so that either one of us could leave the farm without ending the farm. Yeah. Yeah! So that's kind of why we chose it and and so basically, our exit strategy is like we, we keep track of how much money each of us has invested into the farm business and every year we allocate any surplus to each of our kind of capital accounts based on how much we worked that year, and so for a number of years, we really tried to keep it equivalent, like each work, the same number of hours in a year. But then Emily had some health stuff come up, and so I was working more, and so we just allocate the profits, kind of prorate them. anyway. Yeah. And so the exit strategy is, if I'm gonna leave the farm, then my capital account converts to a loan to the cooperative that they have, that the business has to pay back to me over time, and We'd make an agreement of how that would work.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And there's not an agreement currently on that process. That's because no one has left yet?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah kind of, except that this year Emily is on Sabbatical, so she is not working on the farm, but she is getting paid out of her capital account. at kind of a monthly rate. And then she's planning to come back next year, and then restart. So, we have a kind of practice round exit strategy this year that's happening.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Cool, well, In terms of land tenure, I know that it's owned, and you put it into a commons. Could you talk a little bit about that, and legal arrangements, agreements, how that works.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So yes, we call it the Commons. Legally, it's just owned by our farm business. So what happened was that when we were first starting the farm, we did some fundraising to build our well, or whatever. At that point I was like, okay. we didn't have our cooperative structure in place yet. But I was like, Okay, I'm gonna like, keep track of this money that we fundraised because this does not belong in, like my personal bank account or Emily's. It belongs with this farm and with this project. and so then, when we made our cooperative structure, we were like, okay, so I have a capital account. Emily has a capital account. And so does the Commons, or the community. And so yeah, basically, a third of our profits every year are allocated toward that. And the idea is

that if we were to disband the business, that money or that value that the community has put in is going to be given back to the community in some way. Hopefully, with another land project or something like that. so that that's our kind of structure for for accounting for the way that our community has supported us. Has supported this thing, and we want to make sure that we in turn are supporting what the community wanted to support with those dollars.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And there's no easement on the land. So it's more of a theoretical commons. With the idea that the business will hold it in perpetuity. Am I my understanding?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

mmhmm.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

and then, in terms of you, have a house on site. Can you talk a little bit about how ownership works with the house and other infrastructure on site, like what shared infrastructure there is on site.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Totally. Yeah. So, we built the house here. And the farm business actually owns the house, and I live in it. Emily does not. So I am both tenant and landlord. Emily is only landlord, and then we have other people who live here who are only tenants. yeah, so it's a little bit weird. And it's probably not actually like the like advised route to go in terms of ownership, in terms of security of ownership. But we wanted to do it because, yeah, why did we want to do it? I think mostly because I personally am not interested in having my own house. I have always wanted to live with other people and be in collaboration with other people in that way. And so yeah. And it felt like having a house that was big enough to actually provide housing for the people who work here seasonally would be really beneficial for the farm and for the people. Like we're able to provide a better rate of rent than most other places. Especially yeah, new places. so yeah. So we just kind of decided, okay. We made the decision for the farm business to own the land, and the house is on the land, and so we just decided, yes, the farm business will own the house as well.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Does that rent go to the farm businesses account?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So we have 2 separate bank accounts, one for the house, one for the farm. But the farm actually has been like helping out with the house. when we haven't had enough renters, or whatever. So yeah, so it's a little bit... the boundary is porous, but there are 2 separate bank accounts.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Is the House considered a part of the Commons? Or is it like an equity building aspect of the farm?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

I would say, it's both like we actually, we did fundraise also to build the house. And so, it's definitely part of that commons. And also, Emily is pretty focused on like, wait, how am I gonna get what I've invested back out of this farm when I retire. and so the fact that there will be people paying rent even after we're finished paying the mortgage on this house is helpful for Emily to be like, 'Oh, yes, we are secure. We will be able to like recoup what we've invested here.'

Question (Colleen Hanley):

What other infrastructure do you all have on site? You mentioned some cold storage and...?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, yeah, we have a greenhouse, and a movable high tunnel. And we have a pole shed that has our that has our cooler in it. There's a well, and there's a deer fence around the vegetables. That's basically it.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Cool. The deer makes reminds me of an important question around collective, like pest management, and how you and Emily manage pests collectively, like systems that you have in place for that, because it comes up a lot on shared farms.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Haha, Yeah, I mean. I mean, since our enterprises are shared the the ones of us with aptitude towards certain tasks are the ones who do it. So Emily's the one who roots out the mice in the cooler or whatever. And I'm the one who yeah, it deals with wasps, and so whatever.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

I know you have structured meetings in your bylaws? But are there any other like governance or management practices in place to determine division of work? Or is there a formal governance structure? is it you know you all know each other's strengths, and so, like, you were just saying, you handle wasps, and Emily handles mice?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. Yeah. At this point there's not a lot that's super formal. We both try to know and understand each other's jobs so that we can take over for each other if needed. And yeah, I think I think we mostly have done a good job of that. You know Emily's off this year. But she still did the organic certification, so that I wouldn't have to, which is very kind of her and I'm the one who does like basically all of the finance stuff. And so if I ever take a sabbatical, I'll probably like keep doing most of that but otherwise, yeah, we have we share knowledge of what's happening. And I think we would need to formalize it a little more once we have more worker owners. but yeah, I mean a big part, a big thing that both of us really value is, we have been doing an annual retreat every winter. Where we just go through all of our what happened in the year, and we make our plan for the next year. And we we troubleshoot. And we think about yeah, all of the higher level details, and also all of the like emotional details of what's going on. That's a really valuable time that we commit to But otherwise, most of our most of our work and thinking happens like we're just really happy when we are like in the field weeding next to each other. And we can like check in, you know. And so, a lot of it happens just organically that way.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Very, very cool that you have such a good relationship to like navigate the ins and outs together harmoniously. I'm wondering, we know, you talked about the earned income distribution. And

you mentioned that you've had some donor-based campaigns, it seems. How is your farm business funded mostly like, what does that look like? Distribution, wise in terms of earned income and sources where it's coming from.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, So, our donor kind of campaigns have all been for like big capital things like the well and the house basically. So so those I don't think of as like part of our just like income in a given year. So yeah, most of our income, I would say at least 75, or 80% every year is from just sales of food, or seeds and then we participate in a number of programs that provide grant funding. So like, there's mentorship programs where we hire people and they participate in mentorship programs. And we get a little stipend. Or there's also Practical Farmers of Iowa has has some they. It's called the Cooperators program, where different farms do different, like scientific trials on their farms to figure out different things. And we get stipends for accomplishing those trials. So yeah, so in a given year. We have, we get, maybe, like, \$5,000 worth of grants, maybe one like post pandemic year. We got \$20,000 worth of grants. But yeah. mostly, it's just the food that we grow that we that funds us. And then the house itself. Basically, we charge just a pretty minimal amount of rent, so that the house is able to break even basically.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And do you? I found some documents online with Tamar's help. But I couldn't find a business plan which I'm sure you probably wouldn't have public. But do you all have a business plan and who's responsible for like updating? has it changed over time?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So I think both of us participated in like beginning farmer programs in which we each crafted a business plan. I wouldn't say that we have like a document right now that is a business plan document. But we have, you know, at our annual retreat every winter. We like make a budget for the year. And so that's basically a business planning time. yeah, that gets updated every year. And yeah, some shifts have happened. Now we're leaning more into seed production, which is pretty fun. And we haven't quite figured out if that actually cash flows well yet or not. So yeah, it's all in process.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

One thing that's come up for, especially Caitlin and doing technical support with some up and coming shared land projects are like major costs. So I'm curious what your major costs are, and like how those expenses get covered and are shared between the Commons funding pool. And then you all's capital accounts.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Totally. Yeah, I mean, basically, when we were incurring major costs like building the pole shed or digging the well, or all of those things, basically, they would. yeah, that was basically a form of investment for one or all of us. So maybe I bought or put in the money to build the pool shed, and then Emily put in the money to get the market van and that kind of thing, and so those all just like went to our different capital accounts at that point in time. Yeah, so yeah, basically, anything that we haven't been able to cash flow through our business, like labor, or whatever which we just we. We pay as part of kind of our operating expenses. Anything beyond that that we've had to like dig into personal or donated finances for, we've just kind of allocated separately to capital accounts.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

What sort of accounting systems or software do you use for keeping track of all this.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Totally. Google sheets is all I've got. Just a month ago we got decent Internet on the farm. Until then there was not, and so I like, couldn't do quickbooks. It just didn't make sense, or whatever. So I've gotten really good at knowing what's going on with my excel spreadsheets.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Do you think you'll switch to a quickbooks, or you feel like Google sheets works for you?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

It works for me. Yeah, I feel fine.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

You talked about retirement, and building equity and how these capital accounts function as a loan that can support the retirement pathways. Could you share a little bit more about how your farm builds equity, and what that pathway to retirement looks like in the distribution of equity?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, I mean, honestly, we don't fully know the answer yet. But yeah, I don't know. I guess every year we kind of look over our assets, our balance sheet, and every year it's been like, Oh, wow! We have a lot more than we did last year. So equity appears to be building. And so that all does get allocated to the capital accounts which include the Commons. part of the politics behind this is that I don't actually want to accrue or I don't actually want to profit a lot from the capital that's been donated to me, so I don't actually want to have my entire retirement funded by my payout from this farm like I do want to be saving separately for retirement. Cause ideally like, in an ideal world, my equity in the farm would be like pretty minimal as would every worker owner, and mostly the Commons would own it. That would be my ideal. The community is what this farm is for and what it's about and is what's supporting this farm. And then the workers are like making the work happen to be able to feed the community, and then they're passing it on. So that that's kind of the political ideal of what we're trying to do.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Can you briefly share, your strategies for ensuring that operations are profitable enough to be able to kind of set that retirement cash aside?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah...(pause) It feels a little bit like magic or luck, or something. where our 1st few years were not very profitable. We broke even, but we were not paying ourselves really much at all. I think we were paying ourselves a thousand dollars a month during the growing season only. And now we're paying ourselves \$15 an hour, which feels like, Wow, I'm swimming in money. Both Emily and I are very frugal people. And that goes over into our farm business so like to convince each other that we like need to buy something big is like a process, I think. We've never taken an operating loan. we've relied on CSA of as our operating loan type type thing. We've never gone too far under, basically. Yeah, I don't know what more to say. Really, although, yeah, it's it has been feeling like, clearer and clearer that wow, our business is viable, like we're doing fine as the years go by, which is great.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And are you all currently setting aside money for retirement? Or is that in the future projections?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

I think both of us, like individually, are but not as part of our business.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And then another question that comes up a lot is like health insurance. And is that something that you all are able with your, you know, profit to have.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, both of us qualify for Medicaid. So we use that. Which feels a little bit unfortunate. Given that we pay our employees the same amount that we pay ourselves. but our employees don't. the taxation is different because we're owners and their employees, and so they don't qualify for Medicaid, and so that sucks. But anyway.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

What is your farms consumer, base? How did you determine That? What market research went into it?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

We sell directly, mostly to consumers in Decorah, Iowa, which is a town of 8,000 people. We do farmers market, which is our main source of income, and also CSA, and then we have a few accounts with different restaurants and with the food Co-Op, and now we're also starting seed sales to seed companies. I would say, market research has been done just by showing up to farmers market and seeing what works and what doesn't and then refining year by year. When we first started, we were like, 'Oh, my gosh, like, we need to go to Farmers market in Decorah and also in Cedar Rapids, which is 2 and a half hours away, and maybe also in Rochester, which is an hour and a half away.' And, so we were trying to do all of that And then at some point, we realized, oh, actually, if we just focused and brought all our food to Decorah, it would all get sold. So we don't actually need to go that far, you know. And so that was a great realization. Yeah.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And that you said 85%, roughly, of your income is from the CSAs and the farmers market?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, well, all of our food sales is 80%. Yeah. When the LFPA existed we were doing a lot more wholesale now it doesn't.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Adjusting. And the seed production, are you including in that?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yes, yep.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Do you have any loans, or is it the rest philanthropic, like donor based, or grants? Do you have any grants?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. We have a loan out for the house, a mortgage on the house, and I still owe, I think, \$12,000 to my uncle, who helped me 1st buy the buy some of the land, so those are the only loans we have, and everything else has been funded by ourselves or donors.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Amazing LFPA, though I know it's something that we're all at New Entry, really not happy about. So, trying to do some advocacy around that and sorry to hear that it's impacting your business as well. I know a lot of farmers who are being impacted. It was such a win-win situation.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

And I just have a quick question.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Thinking about getting the loan for the house and construction loans tend to like need more money down and are slightly riskier. And then, as collateral, were you able to use your land?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, yeah, we were, which was really nice. Yeah, our loan officer was really very helpful and continues to be very encouraging all the time. He's like, Wow, you've got a great ratio, you guys, it's like, Yeah, we don't have any other loans besides.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

That's great! That's great!

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And in terms of like values that you share with Emily. Could you talk a bit about the values the visions shared, and what you would be looking for in members that you bring on to the farm, who share those same values?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, I mean, I think both of us have shared values around Well, around community, I guess, and wanting and kind of wanting also smallness like not trying to be bigger than what what we can do. And over the years we've really started to have a mutual appreciation of just balance or like ease and wanting that to be part of what farming is about. And so, I feel like we're working towards towards that as well, which is really fun and feels radical. And yeah, and inclusion of our community in things and also Emily's, a bird nerd I'm not, really. But I'm playing along. It's really nice to have a farm that provides habitat for a bunch of a bunch of creatures. And so happy about that, too.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

You. I'm just curious. I also have a friend named Emily, who loves birds. and I'm wondering what like habitat creation for the birds looks like there.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, I mean, we have on our farm, we have meadowlarks and bobolinks, so grassland species that have started nesting here since we started farming here. And that's yeah. It's really fun to know that they wouldn't be here if we weren't here, you know, doing what we do.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And with your values and sort of you know I love how you put that like the balance which feels radical. Do you have like where you're situated. Have you had any? You know, cultural misalignments with neighbors or anything you've had to navigate in that?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Not actually. We haven't had too much trouble with yeah, cultural misalignments. I think there have been. I think one of this. The like things that we've come up against is the fact that we have asked for money from people and money is just a really uncomfortable topic. And so there are people who are like, 'Oh, those girls always asking for money.' There's also people who assume that we have a lot of money because we've asked for it before. And so they assume things about what we're capable of doing or like. We should give them stuff. But we don't have that to give, you know whatever. And so yeah, that feels like one of the most complicated things that has come out of our way of being a farm. We have a lot of money because we've asked for it before. And so they assume things about what we're capable of doing or like. We should give them stuff. But we don't have that to give, you know whatever. And so yeah, that feels like one of the most complicated things that has come out of our way of being a farm.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

How has your organization navigated that conflict, and more generally between you and Emily, how do you navigate disagreements and conflict?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

When we've gone through hard times or like friction between us, we have, we have a number of friends who are who are good like conflict people, nonviolent communication people who just have different methods for supporting us in in hard conversations. So we've hired people to support us through those kinds of things. yeah. And then, in terms of the more public facing

stuff, I'm kind of the communications person for the farm, and I've just made a practice of being kind of as transparent as I can figure out how to be. Without giving, you know, too much information. And yeah, and everything has... Yeah, there have been some pretty sticky things, but it's all been resolved with just like transparency and calmness.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

What would you say are the benefits and the challenges of working collectively as opposed to working independently?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. I have actually great insight on that right now, because Emily is on sabbatical. And so not actually working with me right now. And I would say, one thing that I love is that Yeah. One thing that I love about working for myself is, I have like full flexibility. And I can make whatever schedule I want, and I can do whatever I want. And as soon as I start working with another person I have to think harder about Okay, what is my schedule? When will I be here? When will I be available or not when? When will we accomplish this task and does it work with this person's schedule and all of that. And so that's yeah. That's one just very basic thing. That yeah, that I noticed. It was really clear to me when I was farming by myself initially that it just wasn't fun to be holding the whole thing, because it's really hard to remember why you're even doing that. If you don't have, if I don't have someone to like hold it with who also is like invested in the same thing for similar reasons. because, yeah, I feel like I can get through a lot more if I'm if I'm with somebody in doing something hard. yeah, and it's also just really nice to like not have to do everything. Like, I don't have to think about organic certification. And that's great. I can spend my time doing other things. And yeah, and yeah, I think our personalities between Emily and I are pretty well matched where our main conflict is about Hannah wanting to have a chaos schedule, and Emily wanting to have a very set schedule. And so having to negotiate that kind of all the time. But yeah, but otherwise we really are quite aligned and are able to support each other in doing what needs to happen and needs to be done.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

When Emily is farming, is she also relatively close to the farm? Because I do know distance can be...

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So she right now she lives in town, which is 10 miles away. So she's a 15 minute drive from the farm. She really values the like boundary between work and home. And I really value the ability to just like do a 10 min task and then do something else, you know, whatever. So, it works for both of us, I think, to have it that way.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

It's great that you have both options.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And could you give us just A clear image is this... I'm coming out of conversations I've had with another group of farmers who are trying to figure out how they want to set things up. In terms of running the business together like what that looks like? Are you moving the sheep, and Emily's out, you know, tending the cut flowers. Yeah, sort of like that visualizing that relationship for us.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Totally so. The vast majority of our work is in the vegetable field. Emily has historically taken on kind of wash station stuff while I've done the harvest stuff with the rest of the crew, usually. So that's one like clear division that we've had and And then we've had the sheep chores. Take maybe maybe an hour a day, and maybe a little bit less. So that has either been...It's actually rotated between kind of everyone on the farm. so this year sheep are on me. But there have been other years where Emily's the sheep guy. And there've been other years when one of our employees is the sheep person. Trying to think of what other kind of divisions or non-divisions there are. yeah, I would say, Emily's kind of been the lead of the greenhouse, and she's also been the lead of planting, and I've been the lead of like, just field work, and weeding and prepping beds and that kind of thing. So yeah, so anything that involves like record keeping Emily's been the one to like make the spreadsheets, and then all of us follow the spreadsheets.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

What tools and equipment are you all using on the 2 acre vegetable? And if I know you have deer fencing, but if any, for the sheep?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, yeah, so the sheep have electro-net fencing with solar chargers, so they're very mobile, and We haul water out to them in buckets, so it's it's not high tech at all. And the vegetable equipment, we have a small tractor that could do tillage and mow and has a bucket on it. so that's our main thing. But we have converted to no till. So, we're not tilling in the vegetable field anymore. We are just using tarps to kind of prepare space to plant into and a lot of hoes and hand labor and a lot of compost. So yeah, actually, really loving the no-till system. But it is very intensive with labor.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Have you started incorporating like cover crops into the No till system, and had success with that?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, totally, we use cover crops. And then we tarp them and then we can plant our next crop.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Are there any shared culture or traditions with/in your farm organization? ... (Network Interruption) I am wondering if you have shared cultural practices or community traditions that shape the group at your farm.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

one fun practice that we have implemented that emily, and I implemented after our first year and we've kept it going is that we share lunch as a farm team on days that we're all working together, And we rotate who actually makes lunch for the crew. But when you're making lunch for the crew you're on, you're being paid. You're on the clock, and so then it's a really nice way to get to kind of care for each other, I guess through the season. So that's yeah. That's one big thing. And we also sing a little meal blessing before our meal. Our lunch meal, which is also fun. People like workers have been excited about that, too. Yeah, And then We have in the past done a lot of hosting of events here. Like pre-pandemic, we were doing a monthly potluck which we haven't gotten back to since then. But we still like host different kind of gatherings for people. And that has been really... that has felt really good to either get local people out to our farm, or even to get people from further afield. We have hosted a queer farmer convergence which has been really fun to get people out to a part of Iowa that they would never see unless they got invited.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Nice. With the sort of open houses and bringing people onto the farm when you are thinking about renters, do you consider that alignment and sort of being clear on like this is, and maybe do you all use the kitchen to cook the farm lunches?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yep, yep, we use the kitchen. So yeah, if you're gonna live in this house, you have to be okay with people showing up to the farm. And you have to be okay with sharing space with farm workers and friends for lunch and other times. So yeah, that's like a big non-negotiable item for me. I need people to be able to feel welcome on my farm. . so I had to be very explicit and very clear about that with people who live here.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

In the housing, have you had any conflict arise that you've had to navigate with, you know, working and living together, and also having people who are just renting, and what has that looked like, and what has been the outcome?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. Actually, last year was a dumpster fire of a year in terms of dynamics on the farm with employees who lived here. Pause. So yeah, definitely not proud of how that happened. A little confused still about how it happened. Pause. I think the issue last year was that we did have one person who was a friend of mine who was living in the house, but not working on the farm and they had... I mean whatever. Long story short, I think the employees that I hired were frustrated by work, or like shocked by how intense farm work is, I think. And they complained to this housemate who wasn't working on the farm and then the three of them all decided that I was an evil boss and landlord and and shouldn't be charging so much in rent, and shouldn't be whatever whatever. And both of the employees ended up quitting early. So Emily and I finished out the season with just the two of us, which was actually really nice. So, it was really, yeah, it wasn't great, and it didn't end well. so I don't have much wisdom to offer there other than I now know that I'm going to be really explicit about about what it means to live here, and what I require from a housemate.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Yeah, no, that's helpful. Just like to highlight the need for transparency and communication.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Right. Yeah, I guess I was just wondering, has that made you shift how you might put like a rental agreement, or we're gonna have a 6 month check in, or how you decided like, this isn't the right fit. You have to leave...?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. I think. What ended up happening, Both of the employees left, anyway, and the the other person who had been my friend, I gave them a 30 days notice and had them leave. And so our rental agreement, the way it's structured is a month to month lease mostly because we wanted people to be able to work for the season and not be required to keep paying rent in the winter if they weren't going to live here. so But yeah, having a month-to-month lease also does give me power to be like 'And this isn't working. And so, we'll end this.' yeah, I don't think any changes have actually happened. But I now kind of am more understanding of like that types of actions that I can take

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

And probably appreciating that that was in place.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Definitely.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Shifting gears a little bit, I'm wondering if you have, utilized technical assistance and what external resources or partnerships you've used on the farm for a variety of things. Could be events, could be. You know, the housing, could be production.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. yeah, in terms of production, we have a couple. One extension agent in Iowa in particular, that I text when I have a question of like, 'Is it going to be too hot under the row? Cover this weekend for my squash?' we've also worked with the University of Wisconsin Extension, who does stuff specifically with cooperatives. And so we've had conversations with about cooperative questions that we've had with them. And otherwise, I would say, mostly our technical assistance has come in the form of fellow farmers in the area that we're in conversation with about what to do about this or that? Which is how we got started tarping and how we got started with a number of other things so

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

And I think you said you were a math major. Right?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Is that where sort of your financial acumen comes from? Or did you just learn that along the way?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, mostly, I just learned it along the way. I like numbers. So I'm not the type of person who shuts down when confronted with numbers. Yeah, it was kind of a fun project to figure out how to set up a farm's finances, and I do our taxes by myself, which is kind of wild, I think I realized, but the first year that I was farming taxes cost like \$600 for me to pay someone to do it. And I was like, 'I don't have that money'. So I learned how to do it myself.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Is that information that you'd be willing to share with us, to give us more of a sense of how these projects look financially on the back end? And if not, that's okay. Just curious.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, no, I'm happy to share numbers. Yeah, yeah, they're in a spreadsheet somewhere but yeah.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Thank you.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

That's that would be really helpful. We have, you know, a lot of farmers There's a mix of people, you sort of push to quickbooks and then quickbooks sort of does the accounting for you, but it is nice to be able to break it down on spreadsheets and be able to like. See the process of it. And if people don't want to pay for quickbooks, which is expensive.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Yeah, yeah, and just like understanding what different financials look like on different setups of shared land is helpful and even in different regions. So thank you. And the tax. understanding like different taxes. I guess, wondering any impacts like, if we think about reflections that you've had in your time. As the shared farm. What impacts it's had for people who've touched point at the farm or and the broader community.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

The impacts of us being a cooperative farm? totally. hmm. yeah, I think I think, being in a small town, in a small community, you're always like representing the things that you're a part of yeah. And so I feel like through us being a cooperative farm and being like talking about it and talking about the fact that yeah, we're a worker owned Co-OP. We we believe these things. We share these things has made our community think of itself as a place that has a cooperative farm in it, you know, which there's pros and cons to that, because people have ideas in their heads when they think cooperative farm that aren't necessarily true of us. But it does feel like. like there have been other businesses that have like thought about 'Oh, what does it look like to be more cooperative in the way we're structured?' or whatever which is really, really cool.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And, what are the biggest challenges that your model has faced? Could these challenges have been prevented if structure and government governance documents, or other aspects of the business were approached differently?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

I would say that the biggest challenges we've faced have not been from a governance, angle or even a finances angle. Like Emily had a messed up hip, and was struggling for a number of years before she finally figured out that she needed surgery, and then she had to recover from surgery. So that kind of thing has been our biggest struggle, and it has informed the way we structure ourselves, and it has informed like not Everyone can work the same hours as everyone else at all times. And and so how can we Give each other accommodations? And how can we kind of compensate each other for the accommodations we're given? and that kind of thing. So, yeah, that's been a a yeah, an important aspect of our journey, I think, to learn how to care for each other, even as we're caring for the business. Yeah.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Do you...?

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Caitlin, Tamar, Please ask questions. I feel like I've been asking a lot. So I just want to open it up and create space for you.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Just curious about labor in the area and finding employees, and especially given like, yeah, people get hurt and have to take time away.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah. So As I said, we hosted the queer farmer convergence for a number of years, and then we became like this shiny thing that you could Google queer farm and Humble Hands Harvest would come up. And so, we got a lot of applications actually from around the country from queer farmers who wanted a place to work. So for several years that was our main pool. So it was. We were bringing people into the community to work here. but especially after last year's

experience, that is less interesting to me. And so now we're more focused on on people who want to be part of a cooperative and who are actually kind of serious about wanting to become worker owners and have some kind of experience actually doing cooperative work or living cooperatively or whatever it is. And, also in Emily and my journey of being like well, actually, it would be really nice if we didn't work 40 hours a week, but instead worked like 30 hours a week, you know. And can we? Can we aim in that direction? Yeah. So we're just beginning to think about part-time employees instead of full-time employees. And that feels like it opens a different set of possibilities and a different set of challenges. So yeah, anyway, we're still in progress in all of that.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Does that shift lead you to look more locally? Or do you think that sort of cooperative draw could still come nationally?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, I think the cooperative draw can still come at least like regionally and in fact, it is like we have two people, a couple who are moving here in August to start working for us, who are co-op people, which is, I'm very excited about working with them. But also we also have two just college students this summer, which is the 1st time we've hired like, like super short, seasonal kind of college student thing, which is great and they're great. And yeah, they didn't come to us because of me being queer or because of the cooperative thing. And they just came because they were in in town for the summer and needed a job and wanted to work on a farm. And it's like, cool. Yeah.

Question (Tamar Stollman):

I just wanted to ask, I'm curious about your Commons model, just the past couple of months, or the past month or so I've been doing like research about other organizations that do Commons and a lot of them work either with like an organization that helps them with commons or supports them in some way. And I thought that your model and idea was really interesting. So, I'm just curious, like, how did you come to this idea? And did you have any inspiration for forming this Commons beyond, just like wanting to give back to the community?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, that's a great question, and I'm not sure I remember the answer to it in terms of my development of my understanding of Commons, but I think it was kind of fun. I think the Agrarian Commons model was starting at the same time that we were trying to develop the Commons here and then, like a year later or so, I discovered the agrarian commons, and I was like, 'Oh, my, gosh, cool!' So it felt like, yeah, it was all just kind of happening at the same time when these different Commons organizations and just us with trying to figure out how to own land with integrity, I guess. Yeah. So all this happening at the same time. So I somehow had read about the concept of commoning before that name became before we applied the name Commons to it. But I don't actually remember where I was reading that or thinking about it.

Question (Tamar Stollman):

That's okay. I appreciate that.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And because there isn't like an easement or a land trust involved, I'm just wondering legally if could it be divided like the 40%? And what is the future? Is it dependent on you and Emily and other worker owners? Integrity?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, at this point, it's dependent on our integrity. And I have been wondering how to like enforce these ideas against ourselves. You know in the future, and I haven't figured it out yet. so yeah, open to hearing ideas. And also I do feel open to an easement. I do feel open to the kind of the Agrarian Commons model, which is basically a community board that that decides about land. And yeah, I, I, personally would be like really interested and excited about that. I think Emily has a lot of hesitation about that which is, I think, valid, because we do own this land right now. And why would we not? Why would we give it up? You know, it's kind of her thought. yeah, so yeah, that's kind of a work in progress. And hopefully, we get time to to actually solve that problem in the coming decades. But I'm trying not to be in a hurry about it, because. yeah, feels like we can. I definitely trust myself and Emily and I believe that anyone that we can bring into the business we can really entrust with the intention behind what we've done so far.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

And another question that came to mind because of y'all being an LLC with cooperative structures. Can a cooperative in Iowa hold title to land? Or is there a reason why you didn't form a cooperative? Because I know some states there's anti-collusion laws and things like that.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, yeah. I think a co-op in Iowa can hold up to some number of acres of land. So that's not a that's not an issue for us. The reason that we couldn't incorporate as a cooperative is because it requires 5 members to be a cooperative in Iowa. And so there's just 2 of us right now. So yeah.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Would you all ever incorporate formally in the future if you have 5? Or would you keep it as an LLC with co-op bylaws?

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Yeah, I think we would if it made sense. If we had 5 members, I think we would. Cause I do like very much identify with the cooperative movement. And so it would be exciting to get to officially be a cooperative. but I'm not actually holding my breath about obtaining 5 members. so, kind of happy with the way it's structured now. I feel there's a lot of flexibility there, and it feels good.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Any other questions?

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

I think I'm good. I really appreciate how thorough and open you've been. It's great to hear your story. It's really I started a farm in 2009, and this wasn't on my radar, and I really wish it was because I felt that, like aloneness and just feeling like, how do I do this differently? So it's exciting to see people choosing a different path and having it feel sustainable. So yeah, I just appreciate you sharing your story.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Thanks.

Question (Colleen Hanley):

Yeah, I also really appreciate your time. As a next step we'll follow up and just request those secondary documents. And also, once we review and start drafting stuff, we'll send it to you so that you and Emily can have final collaboration and review on everything. Make sure things are looking good for you also get any like, you know, if you have a capital project coming up, and you want us to plug it with this really make sure that we're plugging those donations and supporting you wherever you can for your time. I'll also be in touch, It's kind of awkward timing, because this is the end of our fiscal year at Tufts. So, I'm going to wait till July 1st and then submit for 250 honorarium for your time today. And yeah, just really appreciative and grateful. I think our team will stay on the call to debrief. But don't want to keep you any longer, because I'm sure more and more questions will just start popping up the longer you're on this call with us.

Answer (Hannah Breckbill she/they):

Cool. Well, it's very fun to talk about this stuff, and I'm grateful to get to do that with you all, and grateful for your work. And yeah, we'll be in touch.

Question (Caitlin Kenney):

Thanks, so much.