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Interview with Kate and Eric Helt

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Kate Helt

Eric Helt

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Place: Dharma Farm
7955 Horn Road
Gambier, OH 43022

Interview Transcript

On Friday February 2, 2001 I interviewed Eric and Kate Helt in the living room of their home. I used a sony tape recorder.

Elena Rue: ER
Kate Helt: KH
Eric Helt: EH

ER: This is Elena Rue interviewing Kate and Eric Helt on February 2, 2001 at the Dharma Farm on Horn Road.

ER: First of all how did you guys get into farming?

EH: Well I think the straight answer is I had chosen to do this before Kate and I met. I had farmed one other time for five years in Vermont in the 1970's as a dairy farmer (not only as a dairy farmer, it was a dairy farm) and I was pretty much done with my professional career which was in medical care management and economics and teaching and consulting mostly in that business. I had kind of come to the end of my rope with that and decided I wanted to get back to farming. The early farming was sort of a hippy drop-out period and this is kind of more of a late-in-life drop out period. When I met Kate I was looking for farms and had been for a while. So we joined up and then eventually got married here last summer, but when we got together she started looking with me. That was about a two-year process for me and for her and I about a year. We kind of stumbled on this farm, we were looking for one about this size. This is a 94 acre farm...[looked at his wife] 92 acres which is very small. Farms like this are not...well...I guess you could make a living on a very small farm, but you would have to do very intensive cropping as a market gardener or something like that. So we never really intended to make all of our living from the farm.

KH: We sort of retired from business careers to the farm.

EH: We don't have any retirement policy. We aren't on anyone's pension. We both worked for ourselves mostly. So we just have our savings and investments that we live off of primarily. It was our intention to make more that it's clear now that were gonna make from the farm. That's how we got here, and we got here exactly two years ago Sunday

ER: Oh wow.

EH: February 5th didn't we finally close on this place? We bought it several months before that, but we had trouble getting the people off the place so we've been here exactly two years. Of which we spent the first winter entirely renovating this house which we didn't get done until late spring of that year...early summer. So we've been here two summers, this will be our third coming up.

ER: Did something specific draw you to the Knox County area...was is something special about the community or was it the location?

EH: Well we knew what we were looking for and we sort of had some criteria. Of course you become quite flexible and you can't find all those. We were looking for a farm about this size. I had farmed in Vermont and would have liked to go back to Vermont, but it's too farm from our families and it was sort of you can't go home again sort of thing...trying to go back and do something I've already done. Kate knew the Gambier area and this part of Knox county and I really didn't. When we kind of happened on this it was like "Wow, this is great." Being near a college and a good library and good bookstore was also on our list. We find the free entertainment at Kenyon is one of the real pluses of being here. We had looked at another farm in Knox county which we almost bought, but when we found this closer to Gambier and Frankly closer to Mt. Vernon because when you farm you really need services. You need repair shops you need the hydraulic repair place and farmers exchange hardware and the feed store. It's really an ideal place to be for us. There's still substantial agriculture in Knox county although it's fast going.

KH: It also gives our meditation practice some credit because as we narrowed it down, and Knox county was very attractive to us, as Eric said we spent six weeks looking at an Amish farm up in northern Knox county. We actually went up there to write a contract one day, but some parts of weren't just quite calling to us real strongly. We kept trying to listen to inner guidance and use our meditation practice and something about it just wasn't right and we ended up just walking away from that negotiation. The fella had call us the day before down here, we saw the farm and two days later we made an offer on it.

ER: Oh great.

KH: We sort of thought we were guided to it.

EH: It's a two-year process and all of a sudden in one day literally. One day of those two years to dispose of a farm that was very expensive and had a lot of buildings and equipment that we really didn't need. We could have made it work, but it would have been a mistake compared to this farm which was a lot less expensive and it was a lot closer to what we wanted. It all worked out in one day.

ER: Oh wow.

KH: It was hard to wait, but we learned by then that is was important to wait. When I met Eric, as I mentioned before, he was already looking for a farm. I was sort of at the end of a business sabbatical and a spiritual search – I knew I was ready to leave the city. I didn't know for where. I had thought about moving down to Florida where my dad was and is getting older. I always wanted to work outside, always wanting to work with animals, never thought about farming 'cos I didn't know a thing about it. Along came Eric who knew something about it and was looking for a farm.

ER: What kind of preconceptions did you...well probably you more 'cos you hadn't farmed before, did you have about farming that you feel different about now? Things that you imagined farming would be.

KH: Well, I didn't have too many preconceptions have no idea, and Eric had shared enough of his experience for me to have a pretty good idea that it was a lot of work, which turns out to be very true. I think the economics of farming are shocking to me. I'm surprised how hard it is for people to make money in agriculture today. The hard work part of it is good. We both like that. Fortunately we both gravitate to that so that wasn't a

surprise. There weren't any big surprises for me I guess 'cos I didn't have the preconceptions. Eric might have had more surprises.

EH: Well, the last time I had farmed we made a living, this was with my first wife and my daughter who was between 5 and 10 year old. We actually made a living and that's all we did. It was a dairy farm. We didn't have enough money to buy health insurance and we didn't have enough money to buy a car – we had a truck. We didn't have much money left over, but we did make a living from the farm. You couldn't make a living from this farm I don't believe. We have neighbors and friends who are new to farming. There are some people making a living from farming like the Sprays, who are organic farmers off of 700 acres, but they've been at it for 30 years. So for someone just trying to start today it's essentially, but they've been at it for 30 years. So for someone just trying to start today it's essentially not possible to make a living exclusively from farming that's why so many farmers of their spouses work out. I thought you could make \$25,000 a year. I thought that was doable, but it's not with just gross. Maybe we could get our expenses to \$20,000 and we'd net \$5,000 and you'd have some other benefits. Basically you'd get cost of living, a lot of your food and other things you'd get to load onto your expenses for the farm. I wouldn't call it tax loss exactly, but that's a simple way to talk about it I suppose. So you're living where you're working so there are certain efficiencies to that. Some expenses may not be 100% farming you can make farm expenses. The shocking thing about it is... we'd have to kind of slow down - even though we have other money and other income – slow down our expenditures. Otherwise the loses would just be so high that we'd be jeopardizing our savings. Do you understand what I'm saying? ... between the costs of the farm, which was \$240,000 and another \$50,000 renovating the house – so you're at roughly \$300,000 and when you include all the equipment there's another \$70,000. That includes lawnmowers and shovels... and then more money on top of that with monthly expenses (diesel fuel and see and many trips to the hardware store to repair things) If you can add those numbers in your hear so can see... as I said you can't gross \$25,000 (you could if you have more capital expenditure, if you spent \$100,000 on a milking parlor and buy 30 or 40 dairy cows...) very easily you could get to a half a million dollars invested in a farm that would only produce a gross income of 10,000-30,000 dollars a year. Then you have to be heroic to keep your expenses down below the \$10,000 - \$30,000. Those numbers are not that far off and your friend can tell you from the conference last week that those numbers people are reporting. That compared to my earlier experience, which was unbelievably labor intensive, (dairying is and we also bottled milk so we had to wash milk bottles, bottle milk and deliver milk) and I was 35-40 at the time and now I'm 60. Whether you like it or not, and we're both in pretty good shape, the labor that it takes to just survive on this kind of money... I mean, the labor output that it would take we just can't get to to do 25,000 a year. We could, but we're not willing to. When I say we could, I'm not sure we could.

KH: I was going to say...when we have our gardens going in April, and then go into September and even October is the weather's good, it's not unusual to work a 12 hour day. We can both still do that and enjoy working out.

EH: We work 12 hours a day easily in the summer. I don't know how much more you can work. If I was 35 I could go a little faster, but not much.

KH: When we were younger we probably did work 15 hour days.

EH: If someone was to ask about what is it to start up in farming today, that's the impossibility of it economically. It is impossible. The federal government has certain loan programs where they will give you a lot of protection, you still get the loans from the bank, but they'll insure it, if you do things their way. They'll allow you to buy the capital to do grain farming or dairy, but grain farmers (soybeans etc.) are probably getting 30% of their income from government subsidies. And those have just come back on an emergency basis in the last 2 years, as you know the freedom to farm bill from 1996 essentially tried to take away the government subsidies, "ok, we'll make this a competitive market and get the government out of it," well that lasted 2 years. The rough estimate is that a third of the farmers would go out immediately without this level of government support. Dairy, sheep, and beef farmers aren't getting that kind of support. Just the grain farmers are getting this kind of support. So, it's not possible to go into farming today, which has very big consequences for a lot of issues. Not the least of which is urban sprawl. Since you can't make a living at this what are the people who own the farms supposed to do? Some of them keep going, the Dudgeons next door, both Chuck and his wife work off the farm and they still farm 300-400 acres. He doesn't start farming till he gets home at 4:00 in the afternoon. Winter and summer he's got to get the cows fed after he gets home from work and he starts work at 7:30 in the morning. I don't think the average American has any idea the heroic efforts to which people are going to remain in farming. That's the story. The truth is we have other income.

KH: If we hadn't been in other businesses and made money elsewhere and been able to sell those businesses we could have never done this.

EH: We have no debt. We pay cash for everything. If you talk to people around here, that isn't even a possibility. If you're having a conversation with a farmer it's always going to be about debt, when you can get a loan and when you can't. We've never told anybody, and I'd rather have it not be in the newspaper either, that we don't have any debt. That's beyond their comprehension. Nobody has that much money to them. They borrow money for everything and then the return on it is miniscule 1% and the loan costs is a minimum of 7% how does that work? Obviously it doesn't you have a 6% loss on your debt service alone. That's the reality of it. My hats off and it makes my heart hurt to know what these people do, both spouses working out.

KH: And a lot of these farms, even in those cases – of course there are a lot of generations of the same family – fortunately the land is debt free by now in a lot of cases. Even so, livestock, feed and all of those expenses...we just marvel at how many people stay in it and how they do it.

EH: There are exceptions to that, but you have to look at every case. The exceptions that that are when people have done something special. Like the Clutters who farm a lot of this land and grow popcorn. Over on 62 if you go south they have a bagging facility. They clean and bag their own popcorn and they sell it to grocery stores, but they're in the marketing and distribution business which is a whole other business. My hats off to them that they do that.

KH: She might have some other questions, it's hard.

EH: Ok, it's hard to get stopped because it's a stream of consciousness because it is so blatant.

KH: Well you caught us coming out of the Conference for Innovative Farmers of Ohio and Eric was program chair and that was the issue that we were dealing with this year. What are the real economics of it.

EH: And I'm an economist and a business person. People always say, Well, maybe we could..." and I say, "No you can't." We'll tell you one more story. We have friends that are corporate drop-outs, and you may know them, the Rickards, so Bruce and Lisa are corporate people, he went to Cornell and she went to one of those fancy schools in the east, Sarah Lawrence or something like that – a very good school. They're very bright people and hard workers, 10 years in the sheep business. And Bruce said to me the other day, "When I first started I thought this was a management problem and that we'd just kind of bring out brain problem to bare." They're smart, he's a good researcher. He's better than me that's for sure he'll investigate this and that before he makes this investment, so they're good managers. And he said, "I found that it wasn't a management problem, the prices are just too low, not commodity prices for lamb and wool are just too low." You can't do it, but they're doing as well as anybody I know, but again I don't their financial situation completely, but I know it well enough to know they don't have any debt. They're living off what they make pretty much.

KH: And they keep modifying their lifestyle accordingly. Have you interviewed them?

ER: I didn't myself, but some other people in my class did and they wrote a piece on it and I read it. I know that they really try to be conservative about what they spend their money on, is it worth it, do they need this?

KH: Makes you really look at your choices.

(Discussion about the Rickards' lifestyle for about 1 minute)

EH: Everybody who's doing it has a special story, whether it's the Sprays starting as a certified organic grower 25 years ago, (establishing their markets and their methods) they know what they're doing they are good at it. For somebody new becoming an organic grower, 10 years of experience would be minimal to get up to speed.

ER: If you were going to live off of it.

EH: Right, if you were going to be good at it. Or the Rickards or the Clutters who are local people (it's not just dropouts, the Sprays and the Clutters are longtime farmers), but they've figured out the preverbal niche, and there aren't many.

ER: Did you guys know what you wanted to farm right away or did you have to experiment a little bit. I know that the Rickards experimented with different animals and what sort of fit their lifestyle. They thought dairy was too much work for what they were looking for.

KH: Similar for us and since Eric had had some experience we had some ideas, but I would say as long as we're here we'll always be experimenting. Especially with the economics being the way they are. We'll always be experimenting and trying something new. But we had done some work ahead of time and knew we wanted to try free range chickens, to try some direct marketing of that. We liked sheep, we had done research on these areas and thought we could do something with sheep. Eric, since he had done some dairy before, asserted and I agreed that it is too labor intensive for 2 people of our age. It is too much. We have a couple of cows that we're raising for our own beef. We had done

some research ahead of time together and decided, “Yeah, we’ll start here in the area,” and we keep looking.

EH: Well we came to a conclusion about it, again we are still experimenting and I don’t know where we’ll go from here. But one thing we did discover, and I think Bruce and Lisa did too, and that is that your best investment of time and money is to raise your own food. Bruce’s estimate was that it’s worth \$6-8,000 a year for them and it’s a comparable figure for us. You can load your expenses that it takes to grow that. People don’t know whether you’re eating that broccoli or selling it at the farmer’s market so it’s an expense of doing business. You get to have your expenses be a deduction against whatever your income is while you’re growing your own food.

KH: You also don’t want to have that in the newspaper you have IRS after you.

ER: Well, I’m not writing about the economics of it.

EH: That we would say after two years, that growing our own food and meat and eggs and poultry and cutting our own wood – all those things that we all have (land and equipment) and the capability to do.

KH: Our goal is more about self-sufficiency, that’s almost becoming our real priority. It was a priority before, but now that we see the economics of these other things, we’re honing in on that more and saying as we do that what else can we give up. We don’t do TV, we’re trying to do some of those lifestyle things as part of how we want to live out here.

ER: Did you sort of have an idea of the different lifestyle for when you started farming or did you start to realize that you needed to make these changes?

KH: Each of us, before we even met each other, wanted a different lifestyle than we had. That’s part of what drew us together. Getting out of the city and getting into the country and the rural lifestyle was part of that. I’d say coming to the farm was partly to realize that goal to consciously change our lifestyle. It was becoming an energy drain and a negative. The more we realized that the materialistic consumer society was just going to suck you dry and that wasn’t what either of us thought life was all about. It was more like they went together. The rural life and that, and now that economics of it get is more conscious of it. We try to think about it everyday, “Do we need that? Do we want that” and don’t just want to contribute to landfills. We’ve gotten to the point where we look at everything we throw out which is pretty much just packaging. How can we get less packaging, how can we buy it differently.

ER: And we’ve discovered that farming is a commitment to stay home so we don’t go very far. My daughter lives in Indianapolis and that’s the only child we have and I have three grandchildren so we like to go there. Up till now, with one exception, I’ve been going by myself, and Kate’s been staying back. One time we went and someone stayed here, we have to have someone stay here ‘cos we have animals. That’s quite different. I’ve been a dairy farmer and so I know what it’s like to not be able to leave, but even when you have animals in the wintertime there’s just too many things that can go wrong to be gone for very long. It takes good people and good help.

(Kate tells about give of a free housesit from Rickards, 30 seconds)

KH: We were both fortunate in that both of us at these ages, and having had the business careers, have traveled a lot. It would be hard if you were young. This dairy farmer that we

worked with last summer, he and his wife and child were going on a five day vacation at Myrtle Beach and she said it was the first vacation they've ever had in seven years. So that's hard.

ER: What do you guys think the biggest challenge is that you face as being new farmers in the area. Was it hard to get into the farming community or do you feel that there's a farming community here in Knox County? One of the angles I'm going at with this article is whether it's really different for new farmers coming into the area if there's a clash between old farmers and new farmers.

EH: They're aren't any new farmers. There aren't many people like us or the Rickards. Or if you took somebody like Troy Cooper who's an extension agent here in the county, he and his wife come from Idaho I think (they're Mormons actually), he works a fulltime job so I suppose he has contacts.

END OF SIDE 1 (TAPE 1)

EH: I guess I would be candid to say, I thought it would be really cool to be a dairy farmer, that was what I call the moral high ground. There was nobody that had a more moral superior position is Vermont than dairy farmers. You walk into a room and you run for Selectmen, which is the same as a trustee here, you get elected. They're all dairy farmers all three of them. Here, farming now, "How could you be so stupid to be in farming? There's no money in it. What are you talking about?" So, to enter this business would it's like, "Tell me a little bit more. Is you daddy backing you or are you a gluten for punishment? You and your wife will have to work out and then you'll lose... Tell me some more about what this is." There really is no entry to the farming business. You'd have to look pretty far – between Rickards, Troy Cooper, and us. Although maybe a few children of farmers picking it up, but even then, that's a touch and go thing for those that I know about. That's very difficult to do.

(Talks about a Mt. Vernon high school student, daughter of farmers and Dudgeon family, about 1 minute)

So, it's a question for something that's not actually happening anymore

KH: But, in fairness a flipside of that since we are new and are trying to farm, as Eric said we met with some skepticism from people assuming that we were just here working out (living in the country and traveling to jobs), but when people find out you're not they have been open, friendly, and helpful. We have very nice neighbors, and our organic farmer's group, which has put us in touch with people. The extension office will put you in touch with people. Almost without exception anybody we've contacted with questions or help or resources has been very open and helpful. They do, as Eric referred do sort of wonder what you're doing.

EH: Well they ask where you work. Immediately that's what there first question is, and if you don't have an answer to that they ask where does you wife work. They don't say do they work they say where do they work.

KH: They do understand that since we're older and have retired from other jobs – they get it, but

EH: They're still skeptical

KH: But they're friendly and very open and very helpful. This area, in particular, is very open in that regard. We also felt very fortunate in having been drawn here because of that.

ER: Do you think that they take you seriously coming into an area and starting...

EH: No. They don't take themselves seriously. That's not fair. Erase that.

KH: I never got the feeling that everyone doesn't wish you well they're probably wonder how you could do that. But our neighbors, whenever they see us, say "How are you lambs, how are you chickens?" They're very supportive in that sense.

EH: As a positive thing, I've only been here two years and I'm already on the Harrison Township Zoning Commission and the commissioners are farmers (Chuck Dudgeon, Bob Elliot who owns the big dairy farm on 229 and 62 and his brother Ron is on the Zoning Commission too and Roger Fossit)

KH: This is a big testament to how open it is we've just been here for two years to offer him a position on the zoning commission is not a small thing, but he showed up at the early meetings and showed a real interest and enthusiasm and energy to help supporting agriculture and keeping the agricultural integrity of the area which is hard with approaching suburban sprawl.

(Interruption – stop tape)

EH: The people have been very open. There's a particular way that farmer's do this gig, they want to end up on top, they want to be right. They're independent, self... whatever, but I'm like that too. They figure you out real fast... we have a friend who owns a farm in this county who's a dentist and he's an organic certified farmer, Jon Johnson and his wife D.J., but they don't really farm. Somebody has cattle on their farm. He kinds of goes around, he has some equipment and does some stuff, but he doesn't have time and he knows it. He has a dental practice in Columbus. They would be less open to Jon once they found out that he wasn't really farming.

ER: If he's not as serious.

EH: Yeah you gotten be kind of getting your hands dirty quite a bit and when Jon's not at his dental practice he's on a ski vacation or something. It's not that someone disrespects him for it, they're probably envious, but they wouldn't let you in at the same level until they find out, "Have you had the same experience I did?" That's what I loved about farming in Vermont ... that shared experience. When you go out to milk at 5:00 you know that dozens of other people who are doing the exact same things. They're dealing with a lot of the same issues you are – is it going to rain tomorrow on your hay? There's a comradery about that. And that's not happening here. It's not like it was in Vermont and that is in part the difference in 20 years.

ER: Do you feel that you guys can relate to the native farmer's in the area?

EH: Oh yeah.

ER: There's not a gap...

EH: I think the gap in when you're doing something totally different. If you're farming 200 acres - Tyler Brown owns about 250 acres and farming another 1000 that he rents. He's a grain farmer and he has all kinds of different equipment for soy beans etc. We don't plant any corn or soy beans so I wouldn't have anything to talk about with him except for tractors. Mine or so much smaller that that's not even something to talk about.

We can kind of commiserate about commodity prices or the speed of traffic on the road and how we have to deal with it. The suburbanization is a tremendous burden to farmers. It drives up the taxes – people who aren't doing the same thing you are. You're afraid if you go out there you're going to get run over by them on the road or they're going to be impatient that you're going to be a nervous wreck by the time you get to where you're going. It's not a farming community anymore – that's where you have the comradery.

KH: I would say through our local chapter of OEFFA we have met some of the older farmers who are doing similar things – raising sheep and chickens. Then you do have a lot in common.

EH: That's when you have a lot in common. You're raising broilers – let's talk!

KH: Probably like you are in school. You're all going to the same school and all getting the same basic education, but you end up gravitating towards those who have the same interests as yours or who are going in the same direction you're going. That's who you really connect with.

EH: For us that's a minority.

ER: Do you feel that you've found a niche in the market since you're not doing cattle, do you think you've found a place in the market?

EH: I'll yield to the niche marketer.

KH: I'll preview what I know 'cos you know Eric won't be able not to talk about this. Sort of the theme of the Innovative Farmers of Ohio last week was that there is no silver bullet and what we were addressing was the idea that of course there are these little niches that some people are finding and some of them are making a success of them, but there are usually unusual circumstances in those cases that don't make it something that anybody could do. We're kind of anti-niche in that way. While we're looking for things that make economic sense for us we really don't find that those silver bullets exist quite as they are. But working on self-sufficiency, making our own food, figuring out what we like to grow and what grows well on this land, each farm has its own niches. I think it will take many years to find the combination of things.

EH: I don't know how many farms there are in Knox County. You wouldn't find many articles about homesteading - we're essentially homesteaders – that raising your own food is the best return. The vast majority of farmers don't have a garden. If they raise beef cattle they have a freezer full of meat. The extension service doesn't have a whole lot of programs on food self sufficiency for yourself.

KH: We certainly yield to the fact that with a year and a half on the farm we still have a lot to learn yet too. We still hope to find some niches.

EH: We're still looking and it's a real high. People like our range fed chickens and we raise exceptionally lamb. Why, I don't know.

KH: Grass fed is best.

EH: Grass fed is best. They love our eggs...When you're talking about \$3-4000 in which you have expenses of \$30,000.

KH: While we honor the fact that people find them and make them work. We're kind of resistant to the press that implies there are magic answers and we don't want to draw young people to this lifestyle under false premises. Saying that there are some magic corners and they can make a million dollars.

EH: But as Bruce says, it's not a management problem, so if it's not a management problem what kind of problem is it?

KH: We just like to be able honesty in farming.

EH: We have to be careful because we're as committed to creating an alternative society and way to live as anybody you're going to meet, but it always gets back to this, "Well, if you can do it we can do it." But it isn't like that. "No you're not going to do it. Not unless you get really realistic about it." There are some rules here and you're not going to break the rules.

KH: Well we could break the rules...

EH: But you're not going to get more than \$0.65 a pound for your lambs most of the time. If you want to sell them on your own that's fine. You could get a \$1.80 for your lambs, but remember you're going to have to cart them up to DJ's and get them slaughtered, you're going to have to pay him for the slaughtering, then you're going to need a freezer to put them in... (He continues with the drudgery of selling) for one minute.

KH: But some of these things like Howard's helping us do around this area like the farmer's market and homegrown – that saves each of us from having to put flyers everywhere. We're looking at what doesn't work, but we're also here to say, "Okay, how can we make this different?" Obviously some community support is very important. How the Amish go about it is very interesting, looking at our typical capitalistic independent, "I'm not telling you that 'cos you might steal my secret," doesn't work in agriculture. We're interested in looking at this and saying, "How can we do this differently and make it work?"

EH: That's a good point. There is a natural healthy food group of consumers in Knox County and as Bruce and Lisa pointed out from their experience in the farmer's market, most of them live within a five mile radius of Gambier in this county. When you start to think about this issue is the experience that people have with pick your own. Pick your own strawberries seem to very good for a period, it's declined 'cos people are too busy to do that. We try to sell whole chickens, but people in the city have to buy split chickens that they can stick in the oven 'cos they're on the go. All that affects the viability of this. That's why I'd say with regards to the Rural Life Center, and we are interested in that and really appreciate what you're doing and have had a lot more contact with Karla, that it's great. This is a huge intellectual, political, economic problem. My thing is that the extent to which you chase some silliness about it that doesn't account for what is going on in the whole then you're just wasting your time and eventually you'll just burn out. We know, just in our short time of being involved, people are already burning out and being gone. (Talks about these people for one minute and talks about what he thinks will happen in the future – illness due to manufactured food and poor eating for about 3 minutes)

ER: What do you feel the benefits you bring to the community as new farmers? Do you think you have new attitudes towards new perspectives that you can bring to the community?

EH: Yeah, that's just what we were talking about now. Those are the perspectives that we're bringing to the community. It was my idea to have the conference last weekend, nobody else wanted to do that, nobody else wanted to look at what are the actual income and expense numbers for four different kinds of farms. It was stark, if you'd have been there. Karla leaned over to Kate when someone was telling what their annual income was and said, "Is that per year?" That's a contribution – let's get down and see what this really is. (Talks about the zoning issue and paper products in their home) I've been going

at this for many years and finally I've realized that maybe coming up with new ideas and new solutions, which Kate and I have been doing, maybe there's some spiritual dimension of this that needs to be accessed through meditation.

KH: We hope some of what we bring is new energy and new enthusiasm, support of the local farmers, we're very supportive of everyone we meet. We want to know how we can contribute and how we can help. We're very excited about Howard's efforts and want to continue to work with him. On a more personal level, we've both read and resonated with Tick nat Han's writings and he talks about the best way to be a peace maker in the world is to make peace in your part of the world. On a real individual level what we're happy to do here is we bring our energy and the money we've made elsewhere and we buy this land and it hasn't been farmed by the people who lived here for a very long time. It's been rented out and chemically farmed and the soil was pretty well run out. We're taking care of that soil and trying to bring it back to it's natural healthy state through organic means. That's something we hope to contribute to the area by making these 92 acres healthy again, strong again, viable again. We kind of look at it a microcosmic way to, we'd like to work right here and make this piece of land better and that contributes to the community, to good clean water running off of our property.

EH: How do you think your attitudes towards farming differ from those of farmers who have been here for 30 years? Do you think there's much difference?

EH: Attitude.

KH: That's an interesting question. Well sometimes I think because we're still enthusiastic we're determined to do some kind of viable farming here, some who have been at it for generations are skeptical at best and probably find us a little naive.

EH: Someone used a word last year and I tried to really relate to it and I think it was, "Farmers are apathetic," I would say depressed. It is a characteristic. There's no discussion about hope, there's no hope in it. Which is a wise thing because while there have been cycles in agricultural prices for a long time the reason for these low prices is not cyclical. The reason for the low prices at the present time is that we've massed huge market power on the buyer side. There are very few buyers anymore so there are very few outlets anymore. They have tremendous powers, they'll never let these commodity prices rise. I would say we have more hope because we're looking around for how we can get what we want and make our contribution on this farm and we have a lot more latitude than they do. In part because we see more possibilities. My neighbor's wife said the other day when I invited him to this conference, "Oh, we loves those things about the numbers he should go to that." He has trouble 'cos he's been doing things the same way his dad did so he has trouble seeing new possibilities. When you've been doing it a long time and you are doing it the way your father did and you're doing it the way the extension service and chemical agriculture has taught you to do it, you don't back out of those things. You have to be courageous to be able to get your mindset changed. It's done, but it's really hard to do. It's like deciding to be a carpenter, we could do it, but it would take such a huge change in our worldview. It's not that you don't know it's an option, but is it an option for you? Our attitude is more upbeat, but we have more options and they have few options. They don't want to have to quit farming and they don't want to have to sell their land.

END OF TAPE 1

KH: I'd say there's no impediment to getting into farming or getting help or resources from the local community or people who have been farming for generations. They're very open and helpful and it's not a block as far as we can see. The block is economics.

EH: Do you think that your lifestyles and values are similar to the farmers that are living here?

KH: I think we aspire to them being closer than they are because part of our goal of moving here was to simplify our lives and get away from a lot of that mass consumerism and materialism of the city life. I think they've been successful in doing that by staying out here. Doing the best they can, raising kids, it creates a problem for them to. I would say fundamentally maybe yes, that's why we're here. From experience and how we've been living, no. We recognized when we came here we spent a lot of money just renovating the house, we didn't have to do that.

EH: Well, some of it we did. The holes in the floor etc. As we get to know people, the guys who does our welding etc, the word that comes to mind is that their like survivors. It's just like a battle of survival. Much of which they enjoy, there's a certain kind of independence to it. I wouldn't call it fun, but there's a sense of independence. I'm getting just as crabby as a lot of them I don't want to go to Columbus either. (gives an example of one of these people for one minute)

KH: Ask me that question again, I want to think about it.

ER: Are you lifestyles and values similar to the older farmers?

KH: As I thought about it there are two parts to that. I think are values are similar, that's how we ended up here. It's almost like our value system drove us out of the city into here. It was incongruous to how we were living. Lifestyle, because we're coming from the city, is something we're trying to modify to get in line with our values. We didn't even like where it was taking us, lifestyle wise. It caused you to spend and entertain – to call it entertainment. Now to go up to Kenyon to a concert of the bookstore we think is a wonderful evening out. What did we do in the city? Go to night clubs or out to dinner and spend a bunch of money on food and wine that wasn't even nutritionally good. It's like we had to get away from that lifestyle to be true to our values. I think are similar and I think with our lifestyle, we'd like it to be more similar.

EH: One of the values is that you know how to do things that are related to survival. (Talks about electrician Bob) They have so many skills and are so knowledgeable about how things work, whether it's a tractor of electrical or water or what. You gotta think about these things with any sort of problem. There's all kinds of things that we would call applied physics or chemistry or electronic things. There's a lot value put in that knowledge, but it's hard to get paid what it's worth. That's the value I share with them that I respect. I'm hungry for it. There's a satisfaction in taking one of these problems and solving it. It's a lot harder. I have a PHD and farming is the hardest and most complex thing that I've even done by far, nothing even comes close. You can't manipulate like you can in management. It won't manipulate, it's going to do what it's going to do whether you like it or not. That's tremendously satisfying and that's what this value system is related to, the amount of respect for those systems.

KH: It brings a sort of humility and the realization over time of how little you can control. You can do a lot and it may turn out badly because of the big things you can't control. There's a real respect for the whole earth system because of that. Where in the city we found that it was more of a culture of manipulation and control.

ER: Is there anything else that I haven't asked that you think is relevant?

EH: I guess one of the questions I would have for you is what are your readers going to be listening for? Who are they?

ER: It's going to be in the Mount Vernon News so I think what we're trying to do is outline the various ways that food is in almost everything we do. It's always there and a lot of our lives revolve around food. One of things that we found is that people need to change the way they think about it. We can't just tell people to buy locally, they have to be more aware of what a big part of their life it is and how much of their lifestyle is affected by it. I think that's something that we're trying to make people aware of. We're trying to cover the different aspects that we think are important.

EH: That's good. Obviously it's an awareness issue.

KH: I'm backing to what else we can cover and thinking back to when Eric said that there is no solution, but for me there is a solution and that's a change in consciousness. We know personally what drew us to farming was a change in consciousness on an individual basis for each of us. We're beginning to see that we might be a part of an overall change in universal consciousness to shift ourselves out of this wrong thinking we have about things as basic as food. I guess that's an important angle of it to us. It is a bigger picture. Yes we're new farmers, but we're actually just people later in life trying to look at life more broadly and what is it that we're here about and what is it that we want to leave for the generation. It certainly is healthier land on which they can raise their kids and raise food. It's a big picture. We'd like on an individual basis to be part of that shift in consciousness.

EH: The other part of the attitude change is the book *World Works for ALL* (talks about this book and respecting others people moving into the country for about 5 minutes)

KH: The zoning commission will be an interesting experience because the only way we're going to come to a solution is we're going to have to work together. It's going to have to incorporate the needs of everyone - for some farmers that's the only way for them to retire or leave anything to their children is to sell their land. There has to be a way for them to achieve their goal too. Working together in a mender mentality is the answer really. We're just hoping to be a part of it.

ER: Great, thank you. This is Elena Rue interviewing Eric and Kate Helt on Friday February 2, 2001.