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2-15-2001

Interview with Elaine Hartley regarding Down to Earth

Erin Molnar

Elaine Hartley

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Recommended Citation

Molnar, Erin and Hartley, Elaine, "Interview with Elaine Hartley regarding Down to Earth" (2001). *Interviews*. 11.
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ELFS-EKM-F021501.C

Accession number: ELFS-EKM-F021501.C

Researcher's name: Erin Molnar

Event: Interview with Elaine Hartley regarding Down To Earth

Place: Craft Center, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH

Co-workers present: None

Erin Molnar: This is Erin Molnar interviewing Elaine Hartley for the Foodways project for the Rural Life Center. First, I just wanted to get your impressions of the store, if you were describing the store what you would say.

Elaine Hartley: The store is, within, I think within the last four years, we have actually doubled in size because we have more space now to accommodate the food. And the first room in the store contains mostly supplements, so that would be like vitamins and minerals and sports supplements. And when you walk through into the back room, or the next room, that's filled with all the food including refrigerated items, frozen foods, foods that we bag up, pre-packaged foods also, canned goods. We do have some things that we prepare, some nut mixtures. We bag up a lot of bulk items. We have both organic and non-organic foods in that room. I don't know, do you want...

EM: Well, we can go into the background: when it opened, why you decided to open it.

EH: I have been an employee there for about fifteen years. Dick Snow owns the store. And it's been there 22 years, so it's been a long time. And it's kind of surprising to think about a store like that thriving in a small community such as Mount Vernon. But, and there are also now, even at that time, there was another health food store, that mostly caters to the Seventh Day Adventists. But, this store actually started out in a woman's basement even many more years ago. Probably the store in actuality has been in existence maybe 35 years. But it was, Dick bought the store and moved it into its present location and it's been there for that long.

EM: That's great. Was it a conscious expansion, four years ago, to make the store bigger?

EH: It was. Part of it was because he bought the building. More and more people were requesting food and that's not his interest as much as it is the supplements. Now, I'm more interested in food. But, I was really pleased he was willing to do that. Which was by demand, people wanted foods that the local grocery stores weren't providing.

EM: Is there, would you say that there is a particular clientele that you serve?

EH: Boy, that's hard to say. I know that I was asked that question before. We do have, you know, a fair amount of students from Kenyon, a lot of faculty that come from Gambier to the store. There's such a variety of people. We have a lot of retired people come in. Generally speaking, I would say, that people have become so much more aware and have determined to be a little more responsible for their own health that they're

making, they would like to have choices and they're coming into the store as a result of some sort of conscious choice to responsible for their own health. And sometimes that because of some specific problem, but not always. Sometimes it's just that I feel better when I eat these foods instead of stopping at McDonald's, you know. It's interesting the variety of people that come into the store – all age groups, different lifestyles. We have people that are farmers that come in, we have professional people, we have young people that are still in high school.

EM: Do people come from all over Knox County, or is mostly just the immediate area?

EH: Actually, we have people outside of Knox County. Dick's prices are pretty competitive, especially on the supplements, so that has brought people in from Mansfield, Newark, Delaware. But definitely all over Knox County.

EM: That's great. Are there any other health food stores in Knox County now?

EH: There are three: there's GNC, which is at the shopping center and that's very specific to supplements – I've never been in there, so I can't say for sure, but I've heard that it caters to the weight lifting, that kind of thing. And there is the Seventh Day Adventists store, which is the Quality Health Food Store. And they, that's a very different store too. Now, they don't have as many supplements as they used to and they have mostly foods that come from Worthington foods and some bulk foods.

EM: So, it's not direct competition?

EH: Actually, it's not at all. And that's kind of interesting too. There is a new Kroger's that is going to be built and I feel a little concerned about that because they will have a health food section. And I feel so strongly about small stores that have wonderful, friendly, personal relationships, that I'm hoping that this big store won't become a threat to the little store. But, you know, we'll just have to wait and see.

EM: There's a Wild Oats in Columbus – has that affected your business at all?

EH: No. No, and I shop Wild Oats for things that we don't carry. But, no. If anything, it's complemented that store because people will shop down there and they'll find something that they really like, and then they ask us to get it in so that they won't have to go that far to get it. So, that's interesting how that works. It's worked out just fine.

EM: Is there anything that you think the store could add to better serve the community?

EH: Oh, yeah. If it were my store, I would have a little deli, a place were people would stop in for lunch. And that's a whole other licensing, it takes a whole other effort. And it would be a lot of work, but definitely that. And fresh produce, but now that Howard has organized this market, at least during the growing season on the square, that's been wonderful. So, that's good. But I wish we had a little place for fresh produce in our store.

EM: Do you, where do you like to shop?

EH: I do most of my shopping at the health food store and then I go down to Wild Oats a lot. And occasionally I go to the grocery stores in Mount Vernon, but not for the bulk of the food that I eat.

EM: Is there anything else, my specific topic is food markets. So, I'm trying to get a little bit of everything, everybody's thing. Is there anything that you feel that you could add?

EH: When you say food markets, that's mainly just like retail stores...

EM: I'm taking a historical look at it, actually. I spent the morning at the Knox County Historical Society today and I looked through a bunch of old newspapers and I'm going to write about Pitkin's and other small markets in the area. I think my angle is going to be how those places, like you said about the lunch counter, I read that the lunch counter at Pitkin's was a very community oriented place – people went there. And how it's interesting in the early 50's, Pitkin's expanded and at the time there was another supermarket coming in and that's when Kroger first came into the area and I think Pitkin's closed in 1957. And so, then I'm going to move into supermarkets and how Big Bear and Kroger are now and the only person you see is the cashier and she gets you through as quick as possible. But, now we're moving back towards, like the farmer's market.

EH: We do have some local people who bring in eggs, for example. Now we have some milk from a local dairy farmer who is organic, but he has his milk processed somewhere further north in Ohio. But anyway, that's kind of interesting. There's a little, oh, then we have honey, local honey. And there's an Amish person who makes Sorghum, molasses. So we have that, but I'm trying to think if there's any, there's always the road side stands that are evident during the growing season. Like the Amish are sometimes over here and I guess there's a stand out on Route 95. One of the things that may change an awful lot in Ohio is they are, there was legislation passed, that people were going to have a license to sell their eggs and a license to sell their produce and we will have to pay a fee in order to sell those eggs. I would really like to know who's behind this, but I think I know who's behind it – it's the big ... egg farm that's had all these problems in the past. And it's just that big business is coming in and lobbying to get this passed in the name of well, we want safe produce. It's a crock because, it's just hurting the little person, who doesn't really have all these disease problems anyway. Because they're little and the chickens run free and they don't run into all the salmonella. This whole legislation thing could be a threat also, not just the big businesses that come in. But, hopefully, I don't know. I just value so much being able to know people on a first name basis and to feel that we have time to answer your questions and to help you in whatever way that we can. That there's nothing, you just can trade that for Wal-Mart, or Kroger's.

EM: One thing that was really interesting to me today was that at the end of all the articles when they talk about Mr. Pitkin and his sons that ran the store, they give a little, the last paragraph is always, “The Pitkins belong to this church, and they are also involved in Kiwanis and Elks.” I don’t know what the cashier at Kroger does.

EH: Yes. There was a community when you’re reading about that, you get such a sense of community. Like for example, Dick’s grandfather had Snow’s Tavern, which was, within the last 20 years, it’s been shut down and there’s something else there now. But, this community intertwining that has been desintegrating since the 50’s and 60’s. There’s still some left and I just, I don’t want to let go of it. I just hope that the little places can hang in there, but I don’t know.

EM: Do you, by any chance know, why Dick bought the store? Was he interested in it as a business man, or was it personal?

EH: Actually, Dick, up until this past year, has been a licensed mortician. What a strange other profession. He would often help with one of the other local funeral directors as, on a part-time basis and run the health food store. And then his responsibilities have become enough for him that he can’t really spare the time anymore, so I think he’s going to let his license go. But, in the beginning, I really do believe it was only because, as a business venture. And he’s a very smart man, who retains what he reads and he’s become a really good resource in the community for alternative health care. His lifestyle, however, differs and he’s not as much into it as I am. You know, I live pretty much what I sell. My food is very important to me, so I represent a different aspect of the business than he does. But I think we’re a nice complement although now we’re three, three and a half, we have a part-time employee and two full-time employees and Dick owns the store.

EM: Have there been people who have come in the whole 15 years that you’ve worked there?

EH: Yes. Definitely. I’ve seen children grow up in the store and I’ve been priveleged to observe, people make changes and make better health, and as a result with better health. And that’s wonderful, to be able to witness that. I don’t know. We are not a place that diagnoses, by any means, or even can say this is what you should be taking, or this is what you should be eating. But we are a resource place, so we have lots and lots of books and information that people can gather in order to make their choices better. We have a lot of experience that we can share, which also enters into people’s ability to make better choices. I don’t know, I like being there. It’s a wonderful place. I’m an artist in my heart. I appreciate being part of this alternative health care, food business.

EM: I asked all the questions on my list.

EH: I’m not very good at this hour at coming up with things, but I know my last interview, I was just sort of brain dead. I can’t really think of anything else.

EM: I guess that's all that I can think to ask about markets. Thank you so much for your time.

EH: Oh, you're welcome. I know, I don't know if you've looked into Big Bear used to be in another location, before they moved up. That's kind of very interesting too, their business dramatically changed and not to the better because of their move. A lot of people, including myself didn't care for what they did to the land. I don't care to go up there because of that. So, some changes are not always to the advantage to these big businesses and I don't think it was to Big Bear.

EM: Do you get the impression that since the expansion was prompted by more interest, do you think that people are also seeing more, not just the health benefits, but the community aspect and the detriment of big business?

EH: Some people are sensitive to that and they express that. We have several customers, and actually, the ones that I can think of actually all live over here in Gambier, that value this small intimate kind of relationship – caring – and go out of their way to support. I don't think the majority of people do that, there are too many people that need convenience and that do not have the awareness that a small business is a valuable asset to the community and that it's important and when we lose this it's a reflection of a lot lost. Just as when we do harm to the earth, we are doing harm to ourselves. A lot of people don't make that connection. So, the threat of big business is just very real and we aren't all real thoughtful people. People don't think. And, so, that's a sadness. Whether or not, it'll just be interesting to watch how, specifically, when this new Kroger's is built this summer – it's being built right now – when it opens this summer, how we will all get along.

EM: They're planning on having a full health food...

EH: As far as I know. Now, when Wild Oats moved into Columbus...

EM: Do you know when that was, by any chance?

EH: Pretty much so. I'd say 2 years ago. They moved into a neighborhood that was very close to the Northwest Natural Foods. And they were sensitive to the fact that they were big business coming in, and they actually, whether or not this was a good thing, I don't know, but morally I guess it was the right thing to do, if they had that inclination, they did buy Northwest that was in that area and gave them the option of reopening after a certain time. And I think they have reopened and I think that the little Northwest store that is on Northwest Boulevard about a mile or two miles from Wild Oats is doing okay, it's still operating. However, their other store, which they had opened in New Albany, and that's the one when I would go down to see my daughter, I would stop there, that has closed. And I know for sure that they just can't compete and keep a second store. I don't know. The world is changing.

EM: It's so hard because we, I'm from Cleveland, and we just got Wild Oats, and we also have another health food store, called the Mustard Seed and I always went to the Mustard Seed, but sometimes going to Wild Oats is this-much-more convenient, but the Mustard Seed is independently owned.

EH: It's tough because I'm not saying I'm not subject to, I mean obviously I go down to Wild Oats. I don't know. I had an experience, I know that Radio Shack is not small business, but I went there to get a recorder last night and they were so helpful and went beyond the call of duty with helping me with this. And this was a little cheapy on sale thing that they could have dismissed with take it and run, but he went to great lengths to show me how to use this thing because I have to record a special phone conversation tomorrow and I thought then how important, I know how I valued that, but for example, had I gone to Wal-Mart, I would never have had that experience. And, I value that so much and I just almost want to cry when I think about that being gone. And I sometimes find, I have to be careful when somebody comes in and says, "Well, I bought this vitamin at Wal-Mart and I wondered..." And I'm thinking, "Why didn't you go to Wal-Mart to ask these questions?" I've got to be careful about that because that's not a very good attitude. But, they don't have people at Wal-Mart to answer questions. If you buy Vitamin E at Wal-Mart, there's nobody around to tell you, "Are you on a blood thinner? Maybe you ought to be careful about taking this Vitamin E, because it is, it has a slight blood thinning quality." Nobody's there to tell them that. I don't know.

EM: That's odd. I always find that odd because supplements like that have effects to your body, similar to medications and people will just go and buy them. I am so nervous when I buy anything. The vitamin store that I go to, I'm like, "This is why I need the vitamin. Which form should I take?" And they'll walk me through it.

EH: We really need to do that. We really need to think about it, like you were just saying. When you're taking something into the body, it is not to be taken lightly in my eyes. And the same with your food. It changes everything when we swallow something. I don't know.

EM: Thank you.

EH: I'm glad you're doing this. I'm glad that Howard is doing this project.

EM: I hope... We've talked in class about how we're not supposed to make the articles too political, too like buy local foods. But, I hope, I really hope that that message gets across.

EH: Well, just the farmer's market has been just wonderful. And it has, I think, almost, that's one reason why I love Seattle, is Pike Market, which is this wonderful place where everyone comes and buys local and artists are there, but I just hope that, that's a spark. That starts people understanding what we're talking about, understanding what the value of this, that just the gathering of people, we're not just talking the financial thing of helping these farmers or whatever, a lot of them are just doing this on the side. It's a

whole thing, it's the socializing and getting the good food and helping to support the farmers. It's all of that.

EM: It just makes another connection to the food you eat. It's one of those things that I think is so hard because it's so clear to me, and I don't understand why everybody else doesn't get it.

EH: I have that problem too. And the children that have no idea that milk isn't just in this carton, in this jug. Milk comes from a cow. We're so far removed from the source, that, well, there are so many obvious things that happen when we get removed from the source. Lots of stuff.

EM: So, I just hope that the series has a good impact.

EH: Thank you for your participation.

EM: Thank you for helping. We really appreciate it.