

Narrative: Tracy Orr, Assistant Manager, Johnson Ridge Farm, and First Baker, Owens Dining Hall, Virginia Tech

Blacksburg, Virginia

Interviewers: Dan Crowder, Sean Moore

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I have a public job here at Virginia Tech as first baker at Owens dining hall, that's my public job. On the farm I would be the assistant manager. My husband is the manager, so I just go behind him and take care of the books. I handle all the books, the finances, the paying of the bills, so I guess it would just be his helper, as he needs me. I do like the farm better, but Owens isn't bad. Owens is very good in a lot of respects. It's school-friendly, which, I need a school-friendly job. The benefits are great. You know, farming does not have benefits like health insurance, so I need both.

I grew up on a tobacco farm and I married into the family farm we're on now, so my personal background is in tobacco, what my husband is in. We're in third generation. Growing up on a tobacco farm was a lot of work, a lot of work. I remember telling my dad I thought it was child abuse that we had to go out and work in the fields every day, and he told me when I got a real job I'd find out what real work was. And now that I have worked and had public jobs, I know that that I wasn't bad off at all. But it's a lot of work, but families pull together and it's good, it's a good life.

Well, my typical day, if it's a weekday, my typical routine is wake up about 4 and get everything ready for the day, get my little boy ready for school, get his lunch packed, get my husband's lunch packed—he has a public job—get him out the door, get me and my little boy out the door. When we come in from our day, from our public jobs, then our chores start once we get off the school bus and out the car, we start the feeding. We have to feed the chickens, then we have to feed the rabbits, then we have to feed and water the horses, then we have to shelter the cattle. Of course, when we're doing the chickens we'll get up eggs. And once we get all those chores done, you know, we'll come in and start settling in for the evening. Just checking on all that stuff and getting everything fed and watered takes about two hours, so we get home about four and start on our chores.

The animals we have on the farm are the chickens, we have rabbits, we have miniature horses and a pony, we have 100% Angus beef cattle, that's probably it for the animals. Now, in the past the generation before us, they had sheep. My husband's mother raised sheep, she had

over a hundred sheep. She's in her 90's so we don't do sheep anymore, but it used to be a home for about a hundred sheep. My mother-in-law still lives on the farm, and she has seven sheep [laughs] that she goes and takes care of and that's her little job. She has seven sheep, one chicken, and a rooster. She does 90% of it by herself. We are fortunate in the fact that my husband's sister lives with her. So she and my mother-in-law live together, but she does take very good care of herself so... The farm has been in the family quite a long time [laughs]. Let's see, my mother-in-law is 90 and as her relatives passed away she inherited more and more of the farm. So she likes to say she's got the farm because she's outlived everybody. But there's 700 acres in the track of land, and I'd say they had that for over a hundred years.

Farming is definitely a family affair. I think all farms are going to be that way. A highlight of working on a farm is you can set up your own schedule and you have your family with you. Like you don't have to send your child to daycare or some public childcare facility, they can be right there with you. To me that's a huge, huge thing. You can instill the values you want to instill and you work together as a family is a value in itself. We have three boys: one is 21, one is 15, and one is 8. Everybody pulls their weight.

We try and keep our public jobs and the farm separate [financially]. We try and let the farm take care of the farm, which would be what we can sell cattle-wise and what we make on the farm at farmer's market. Then we take our public jobs and try and put that into our household bills, so, and I think so far we're balancing it pretty well. The hardest thing is balancing everything. The hardest part is keeping it all balanced. You know, sometimes it feels like the perfect storm, you're just going, going, going. And then you have to deal with the weather, so what you might plan could get changed by nothing you could control, so you have to totally regroup and regroup quickly to make it work.

Dining services is good for employment. If you're considering working at Virginia Tech dining services, one of the good things is you're working for the state and you've got, I feel, job security, you know, in such economic uproar, I do feel job security at Virginia Tech. So I would definitely tell people that wanted to pursue dining services career you might consider yourself a little better off than if you were applying at a Wendy's or a little mom-and-pop. I think Virginia Tech is very fair, I think that it is good. I would give them a good rating, they're fair to their employees. And I think that they employ a lot of people so for the economy of Blacksburg and the job security aspect it's good.

I love what I do at Owens, I love Virginia Tech. My philosophy behind Virginia Tech when the students are in, when school is in, it's a lot of demand, you're on go all the time. So I just feel during the school year they just ring you out like a dish rag, so by the time graduation rolls around we're just ready for a break, but the summers are not as hard, so I guess if you take the whole year, take a 12 month period and look at it, it balances out, but you do 80% of the work during the school year. But I enjoy my job and would not give it up. I try and take the summers off, I don't always get to do that. But I take a lot of time off in the summers, and I do dedicate the summers to working on the farm.

When my husband and I got married and we tried getting started we didn't have any equipment. We were sharecropping with the neighbor so we depended on our neighbor to help us harvest our hay, which is a huge thing for the cattle, so we decided to go ahead and buy our own hay equipment, which was a pretty good investment. We had to borrow the money, which is why I'm doing fried pies [selling them at the Blacksburg farmer's market] to help pay back that bank note. Thankfully, we are able to keep up. We've gotten some equipment since we've been married and this has helped a lot, working the farmers market. Everything goes into the big circle of taking care of the farm.

Well, the fried pies job at the farmers market is something I learned from my mother. I mean, I remember my grandmother doing it, but I wasn't so interested in it at that time, but I learned it from my mom. I remember one time our little community needed a volunteer fire department, and so the women of the community made these little fried pies and sold them like on Main Street as a fund raiser for the fire department, and it went really well, so I tried to do the same thing here for our farm, and it's gone pretty well.

The history behind a fried pie, it started out as, when ladies just... People didn't throw nothing away, times were hard, so people would take their left-over fruits and scrap dough and make these little hand held pies and give them out, like if you would help me get my hay in or something, help me with my garden. As a way of saying thank you, I'd give you a pie. So that's how they got started. I just liked that story, it's just such a goodwill camaraderie type thing, and it has done very well. It's been very supportive of what we're doing on the farm.

Local is great; of course, I'm a local farmer so for me I love that whole scenario. Buying local and supporting local is a very good thing, and I think that every town, every city, every suburban, small, big, should do that because you're just taking care of your own, and that's what

we need to do. So I think it's great and I think Blacksburg does a very good job of it, and the people of Blacksburg do a very good job of it.

I don't mind having two jobs because I grew up working hard, and so to me it's just a way of life. It's not a way of life for everybody. I don't mind it because I do enjoy the farm so much. This is probably not a good scenario for you all but it's a whole lot like having a baby: the labor sounds so horrible, going through the 9 months of pregnancy, and the labor, but the love is so great that you don't mind the hardship of it. So that's kind of the way farming is. We enjoy it, and that's a way of life for us, so we're willing to put up with some of the hardships. And as far as the farm is concerned, you can't like it, you've got to love it. And you've got to love it every day. You've got to want to do, you've got to want to work, you've got to be able to work together. And if you can do all that, then you would enjoy farming. You have to have a good work ethic, that's crucial, have good work ethic. You also need to be smart, you have to be able to figure things, you have to have a lot of common sense, and you have to have good knowledge as well.

I've never felt like I wanted to walk away from farming. I have felt overwhelmed....I think I said earlier it's been the perfect storm, but I've never wanted to walk away. I'd like to move up within the dining service chain; I'd like to be able to move up to a management position. As far as the farm is concerned, I can see us expanding with our cattle, trying to get a little bigger in that respect, just get moving forward one day at a time. The cattle industry kind of goes up and down, the prices never stay the same. You try and catch it when the market is good, sell our cattle when it's good. But as far as... no, we don't feel like we're hurting by what is going on out west. We just don't have the big expectation, it's all just... we're happy with what we get. I think there is a lot of satisfaction in a job well done and anybody that is willing to work will succeed. So it doesn't really matter where you are or what country you are in, if you have got it in here [*gestures to heart*], you will succeed and you will be ok.

I guess one thing, a comment that I would make is: folks who farm, generally it is passed down. The land is passed down, the equipment is passed down, and the knowledge is passed down, just like the knowledge of frying a pie is passed down. You really don't have folks come out of college and say this is what want to do, I'm going to go out and buy a three hundred acre farm, and then I'm going to buy all this equipment. I would say it's very much so passed down generation to generation.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.