Small-scale Food Initiatives in Southwest Minnesota: Oral History Project 2012-13

Institute for Advanced Study
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Interviewees: Justin and Kathleen Batalden Smith
Omega Maiden Oils and Smiling Tree Toys
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Interviewer: Peter Shea

Transcriber: Maria Frank

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Kathleen Batalden: I grew up just about five miles away from here, born and raised on a fifth-generation family farm. About 13 years ago it was, I graduated from high school, and probably like most other people my age, I couldn’t wait to leave, so that’s what I did. I studied undergraduate in St. Peter, MINNESOTA, and after that, headed out west to Boulder, CO where I focused on my studies—I got a Master’s in geography with immigrant and refugee populations, and I was really looking for ways that I could become involved in the non-profit sector in helping new Americans get to the U.S., resettle and adjust culturally, and get on their own two feet financially. And at that time, which was 2003, that’s when Justin entered the picture.

Justin Batalden: Yeah, we met at the very end of 2003. I was finishing up my undergraduate degree at CU Boulder while Kathy was finishing up her graduate degree. We were both in the geography program, and at that point, we were—I was getting ready to graduate and looking for something to do post-graduate… Where am I going with this? [Kathy laughs] …We stayed on in Boulder about another two years after graduating, and following that, we took about a year off and then decided that we’d like to move to West Africa and work with the Peace Corps. And so that was something we did; we applied to the Peace Corps, and we were accepted, and we…

Kathleen: That was in January 2008, after having lived a bit of the suburban life outside of Denver, Justin doing carpentry and myself working in the non-profit world, decided we wanted to see some more and headed to West Africa. We were with the Peace Corps, volunteers with the Peace Corps for about two years in Niger, West Africa…

Justin: Excuse me one second. [Moves off camera]

Kathleen: …a large land-locked country, quite dry, in the Sahara Desert, and put our past skills and knowledge to use. I served as an agricultural volunteer with—in the community that we lived in, and Justin did natural resource management, so we were kind of closely aligned with our jobs and our missions, but we lived in a quite rural village. It was actually quite large; there were probably close to 5,000 people in our village, but we were definitely out in the bush, off the grid; we had no electricity or running water or any of those amenities. We moved in and learned the local language, and after months of stumbling around and learning Hausa (the language) well enough, we started working with our agricultural and natural resource management jobs and did a lot of work helping farmers try out improved seeds [Justin moves back on camera] and do some vegetable gardening during their cold season. Millet and sorghum are their main crops there, so we helped with farmers’ cooperatives, getting some local supplies, seeds, fertilizers, and equipment in the community so that it was there when it was needed, and my other main work was working with women’s groups and animal husbandry activities starting—buying small groups of goats, for example, and starting group savings accounts and working together at a household level to improve quality of life. And Justin was more involved with the schools.

Justin: Yeah, there was a primary school in our village. It had roughly 350 kids in it, and we started a tree nursery there, a small garden and tree nursery in which we worked with a lot of the kids and learned how to collect seeds and plant seeds and then propagate the seedlings. We transplanted some just within the schoolyard, and then we also sold some of the seedlings to the
local people within the village. It was just a good way to learn how to produce some added, extra income from the resources that people had locally and just a good way to reforest the area. It’s an area that’s really heavily hit by deforestation, and it’s very dry, sandy soils, so it’s very hard to get things to grow. So just as an added way to be able to increase food security and household income, we worked with the school kids and did the tree nursery. We also did—we built improved cook stoves; we worked with people— [To Kathy] Had you mentioned that? [To camera] So we learned how to use the few resources that they did have more efficiently, and just did a lot of culture sharing. That’s one of the more big goals of the Peace Corps is culture sharing, sharing our culture with the local people, and then sharing the culture of the local people with our friends and family back here in the States.

So that brought us to the end of 2009, when we moved back to the States right at the end of that year, arrived home in time for Christmas, and basically looked at each other and said, “Now what?” because we knew we had some big decisions to make in terms of our next steps and our next goals in life, where we wanted to go with that. That’s ultimately what led to us sitting here right now. We really appreciated the close-knit community that we had while living in Niger. Living in a rural area with lots of wide open space and knowing your neighbors, those are all things that I grew up with in my childhood as well, and I had definitely come to appreciate and had missed since I had left home. For Justin, it was something that he realized he really enjoyed, since living in Niger was his first experience with that after growing up in the suburbs.

Justin: And another thing I really appreciated was that 100 percent of the communication was done face-to-face. There was—some people do have cell phones, but 99.9 percent of communication is done face-to-face, and people are held accountable for what they’ve done, and it was just amazing to see how little crime there was and how little dishonesty there was. It was just—we’ve never felt safer anywhere in our lives, but on the surface of it, the average Westerner would just be very, very hesitant to go and to walk down the street. But once we were there, I really felt like a part of the family, and so I think that is what drew us back to this area because it is an area, one of the few remaining areas if you will, where a lot of the communication is still done face-to-face, and people still—there’s a lot more accountability because everyone knows who you are, so you can’t do things dishonestly or you’re not going to be able to make a living. You can’t live in this area and be dishonest because people know who you are and the way that you operate, and so you have to have a certain level of integrity if you will. I think that’s something that really drew us to the area because we wanted that to be a part of our daily lives.

Kathleen: Yeah, and moving back to family, of course, and family roots, that’s something that a lot of families still have here. They’ve been here for generations and generations and maybe their ancestors moved from parts of Europe to here and something that’s, I think, quite unique for a lot of families in this generation, and in our generation as well, to still be physically in the same location that your ancestors were when they came is really meaningful to us and meant that we really felt like we wanted to continue on with their traditions, their lifestyles and their values and what they began.

Justin: Yeah, I think it’s a generational knowledge that’s way too quickly lost, that’s my feeling about it. It’s so easy—you can lose it so easily in one generation, and it takes multiple generations to gain that back. I think we’re sort of subconscious, but also consciously, trying to
keep the tradition alive. We keep—our family keeps beef cows and chickens and laying hens. There’s a lot of knowledge that goes along with that that you wouldn’t necessarily think of, but that’s really something that I’ve always marveled at is how much knowledge it does take. That’s something that I appreciate about the area, that people are resourceful and thrifty, and that’s just a character trait that seems to be slowly but surely disintegrating as people go more into a conspicuous consumption kind of attitude.

**Kathleen:** That brings us to early 2010. We knew that we wanted to live here, and then came the decisions of figuring out what it was that we were going to be doing and how we were going to make a living doing that. [Laughs] My family farms organic commodity crops, and that was just an avenue that would have been difficult for us to get into given the really expensive price of farmland right now. And on top of that, it just wasn’t—it didn’t especially pique our interest. We were both quite, I guess you might say, social people and really enjoy interacting with others, and so we were quite attracted to the idea of value-added businesses and direct-to-market kind of activities, selling directly to consumers, and really trying to find our niche in the organic and the local food systems in Minnesota, which I think is definitely growing, slowly but surely becoming more popular, and the opportunities in that area are growing. So we thought that we could work with our family and do more with our existing land, do more with what we already had, that was what sounded most interesting to us. My parents have put in so much work to keep the family farm, for starters, and going—transitioning to organic was one of those reasons, I think, that I’m sitting here today as well because going to organic just meant being more creative in a lot of ways, and trying to diversify. The camelina oil that we’re selling now was one way to add value and diversify the farm’s income.

**Peter Shea:** I’m interested in the business, but I want to push back in the story to your reason for leaving, the spirit that you had when you fled this area [laughs]. I mean, for graduate school, ultimately, for intellectual life, for a much broader horizon. Can you say a bit about what you were looking for in that venture outward, what you were imagining a good life, a satisfying life, or a meaningful life to be like, as you left?

**Kathleen:** I was eighteen and had just graduated, and I think what’s true of most eighteen-year-olds is that they’ve spent mostly their entire lives here. They’ve grown up here, and they know nothing else, and that right there, in and of itself, felt a bit… felt limiting to me. I had always felt like a square peg in a round hole, and I knew that leaving was going to present more opportunities culturally in terms of diversity. I grew up thinking I was never going to marry a farmer. [Laughs] It felt isolating in a lot of ways. It just wasn’t—working with my hands and in the dirt just wasn’t something that I valued at that age, and I suppose for a lot of kids growing up on the farm, you have to do that, and you don’t have an option otherwise so what else are you going—what child doesn’t naturally want to rebel against their parents at times? Leaving, it just felt—I was interested in studying business and geography and really just the diversity of the world, of the people and the landscapes. That’s what I was, I think, searching for when I left, and after undergraduate, moving up to graduate school as well, I had always had the urge in me to know that I wanted to get outside of Minnesota for a while. I wanted to experience something new and different. I didn’t know for how long, and I didn’t know where, but there was something in me that told me, “You’ll never regret trying it,” and I did, I think, all along feel—I certainly
liked the idea of eventually coming back and being closer to family, and I was hoping that that was going to work out in the long run, but I was just going with it as it happened.

Peter: Can you say just a word about your undergrad stuff?

Kathleen: Sure. I studied at Gustavus Adolphus in St. Peter, and I double majored in business management and geography. That’s a quite small college town, and the student body when I was there was maybe about 1600 students, so for someone coming from my background, that felt like a good transition. It was kind of like a giant high school in a way, I think, [alarm chirps] which for me, that was a good step up. [Alarm chirps] My interest really…

Justin: False alarm.

Kathleen: My interest really— [alarm chirps] (Why don’t you just take it outside? One thing or another, these kids.) Let’s see…

Peter: Your interest.

Kathleen: My interest in geography was really piqued, I think, in studying at Gustavus, and that’s what eventually led me to CU Boulder. I went out there looking for a way to combine my two degrees, and what I had initially thought, was considering, was site location for businesses and planning the best physical locations given the business —their products or their services. At some point along in CU, I think maybe as I was discovering myself a bit more and my passions, I realized I wasn’t interested in improving the profits of businesses; I was interested in improving the quality of lives of people who maybe didn’t have that opportunity, so I did quite a 180 in graduate school, which was a little difficult to do in a two-year Master’s program. You don’t have a lot of time to change directions like that, but I did, and it just felt right the second that I walked in and told my advisor of my change of heart and found my path.

Peter: [To Justin] Do you have a comparable backstory?

Justin: I did my undergraduate at CU Boulder in geography. I did mostly physical geography, as well as some cartography and map-making, and I knew I didn’t want to have a nine to five office job, so I wanted to incorporate a little bit of both. Maybe some field study and field work along with perhaps some computer-based or office-based cartography or map-making. The route that I was going initially was headed towards maybe a federal land management agency, whether it be the Bureau of Land Management or the Department of Wildlife or one of the federal land management agencies. I was intending on doing something that route, but I ended up, post-graduate, getting a job building houses and doing carpentry and hands-on stuff, and that’s where I got the immediate gratification from, and that’s where I could find a job most immediately as well. And it was something that was in town, and at that point, I had met Kathy, so that kind of threw me for a loop, and that was about two weeks after I was set to graduate, and that kind of made me reevaluate the situation, so I no longer really wanted to leave Boulder because Kathy was still working on her graduate degree. So that’s a bit of my background as far as college goes.
Peter: Has carpentry always been part of your life?

Justin: Yeah, it has kind of on and off. My dad’s kind of a do-it-yourself kind of guy. That wasn’t his career, but he—on the weekends and stuff, he was a weekend project guy, so he always appreciated at least having—at least a basic kind of skills. In that way, I was—just appreciated doing as much as he could on his own, and I would always help him with whatever I could. Growing up, probably since I was eight years old or so, I would always be his right-hand man, and I guess it really piqued my interest after high school and into college and started living on my own, started doing a bit more projects on my own and just got a lot of satisfaction from it and learned more. I guess that’s…

Peter: What’s the genesis of the wooden toy end of this business?

Justin: In October—October 4th of 2010, our daughter was born, and we had been here for a few—we had been here for about five or six months at that point, and at that point, we were still really trying to figure out what it was that we were going to do to make ends meet, and when she was born, we received quite a few gifts from our family and extended family and friends. And we just—it just kind of came to us. We thought maybe that would be a good idea for a business for ourselves, considering my woodworking background and passion in carpentry, and Kathy had a business background in marketing, so we figured we could put two and two together and try to make it work selling wooden toys, so that’s how Smiling Tree Toys was born.

Kathleen: Yeah, and we’ve both always enjoyed handmade items especially, and I’ve always appreciated making them, giving them and receiving them. So it began as a pipe dream, as “wouldn’t it be great if we could do that for a living and make toys that people were going to support us by?”

Justin: Heirloom kind of quality.

Kathleen: Yeah, they were heirloom quality.

Justin: And I guess I always resented not having enough time to do—I didn’t really want too much outside of work, working with wood during work hours I didn’t really want to take much time outside of that to make stuff for myself and for friends and family as far as gifts went. So now that we were here, unemployed for the most part, we just took that time to really start designing and making things the best that we knew how.

Peter: What was the timeline on this business? How long did it take for you to get up?

Kathleen: We—

Justin: Probably—like six months or something like that. [To Kathy] Close to it? Three to six months.

Kathleen: Yeah, three, four months of a long, harsh Minnesota winter.
Justin: Yeah, plenty of time inside.

Kathleen: And being able to devote that entire time, having a little baby as well was obviously a time suck for us, but that’s about how it took for us to have our initial product line and have ourselves up online and ready for sale.

Peter: So you’re selling oil online and toys online?

Justin: Yes. Two separate websites.

Kathleen: Yeah, two very different businesses. The oil—we do have online, direct sales, but most of our sales are going wholesale to retailers who are then putting it on their shelves. But it is all basically home-based, so Justin’s in the woodshop, and I’m on the computer.

Peter: What kind of time does it take now that it’s up and running?

Justin: It’s a fulltime job for us; that’s for sure, probably about fulltime and a half, one and a half time. We’re each putting in fulltime, forty or fifty hours a week.

Kathleen: Justin basically stays busy in the shop, keeping—producing toys, and I do basically everything else related to toys: all of the marketing and customer services and the accounting, bookwork, all of that. And in terms of Omega Maiden, the camelina oil, I guess I’ve taken on most of that: the advertising and marketing, and sales, part of that, and Justin and I both are involved with getting the oil to the press and having it pressed and getting that finished product ready to go. In a lot of ways, we’re both giving 100 percent, times two [laughs], which adds up to some really long days.

Peter: Can you say just a bit about the marketing, the challenges of doing a business from the country, an online business, and marketing a new product? What’s it like?

Kathleen: Just with the availability of the internet and all of the e-communications and everything, in general, I don’t necessarily—I don’t feel very handicapped in terms of our physical location with our business. It definitely has disadvantages at times because we aren’t located near a metro area where there’s a large metropolitan population, so whether it’s going to sample at co-ops or trying to get our product to a distributor or going to—we don’t have huge farmers’ markets nearby. We have to drive 150 miles to get to that large population base, so in that way, in terms of the oil, that’s difficult. When you’re looking at it from the aspect of the wooden toys, our target market and our primary customer is not located near us either, so I guess it’s the larger population bases and I suppose people with a bit more disposable income as well in more urban areas are also those customers looking and finding our toys. But with the internet here, that’s really what allows us to be living here and doing what we’re doing, of course, and that’s quite—in terms of logistics, the national shipping carriers service us, obviously. Those kinds of things are just fabulous because we’re able to still have this lifestyle that we’ve always idealized and live at a lower cost of living relative to urban areas, which has been helpful as small business owners who are starting up and are trying to earn enough money to live off of. In a lot of ways for us, it’s the best of both worlds. I don’t necessarily feel that isolated just because
our businesses are able to take advantage of a lot of opportunities that a business in an urban area can, for the most part, but we’re also able to have that lifestyle that we’ve…

Peter: Have you learned—in the course of putting this together, have you learned some things about how to do this kind of rural-based business? Anything you would pass on to the graduates of Gustavus who might want to try this? [Laughs] …Have you had any surprises, is part of the question.

Justin: …Yeah… Lots, I’m just trying to put it into words.

Kathleen: I think in some ways, we’re not—we’re very proud of where we are living and our family farm and our background, but at the same time, I think anyway, the images that are conveyed on our websites about our businesses, our photographs of our products, you don’t necessarily equate that with someone who’s living in quite a rural area. There’s a bit of a… I don’t what the word is. Quite a contrast, maybe, between—people maybe wouldn’t imagine the little white farmhouse that we’re living in and the look or the feel of the toys or the specialty culinary oil coming out of it. I think inasmuch as you should be proud to tell your story and where you’re at, working in and contributing to rural economies, at the same time you need to take advantage and make the most of presenting yourself in a professional manner and show people that you’re really good at what you do.

Justin: I would say you have to be willing to work for free for a little while, and that’s a pill that’s pretty tough to swallow. But it’s true and that’s not necessarily a freedom that some people have, but I think that that’s something that we learned, that you have to be willing to work more or less for free for a while just to be able to get yourself and your business up off the ground because it’s not going to pay immediately. You also have to be willing to see the big picture and to see longer term because you’re not going to get a paycheck every week; you’re not going to be getting a regular paycheck, so it’s not the same as it is working a nine to five job, but I think a lot of those things that you give up as far as the regularity of a nine to five job, I think you make up for in the quality of life that you can get around here, being your own boss and determining your own schedule and that kind of things. That would be my biggest…

Kathleen: As you’re saying that too, one thing that comes to mind is: being creative is just a necessity for any small business owner, but I found, having grown up here, I think that when I moved back, I was pretty sure in my mind that I knew everyone who was living here and I knew what everyone was doing, and I’m happy to say I was quite wrong in that, so there’s a lot of options, I think, in terms of working with different suppliers or vendors that are around here that you might not know of when you first settle to a rural area like this. So certainly, taking advantage of those opportunities but at the same time, realistically you do have to get your feelers out, and you will have to be partnering and working with people who are hundreds of miles or several states away or other countries, so I think there’s a challenge, but also a great opportunity for rural—your close, local partnerships, but also at the same time, you’re at the same time reaching out and taking what it is you need from outside regions as well.

Justin: The physical space, as far as what we do in our toy business, just having enough physical space to do it is something that is much harder to come by in an urban or a suburban area, so
that’s something that we literally would not be able to do if we lived in an urban area just because we wouldn’t be able to afford the space. And then of course, we would—considering the higher cost of living, we probably wouldn’t be able to make ends meet if we were doing what we’re doing, living in an urban area. Whereas here, we are able to make it work because of the lower cost of living, and we have the resources locally to be able to do it, and we have the infrastructure. I think, just speaking of opportunity and adding on to what Kathy said, there really is a lot of opportunity in a rural area for people to start small businesses because you have a chance to give yourself a bit more flexibility financially because you’re not spending as much money on your cost of living so you can put that money towards starting a small business. I think that’s something that really inhibits people, as far as the start-up goes, is that they don’t really have the time and the money to do it, so I think moving to a rural area really frees up both of those things really well.

Peter: Are you still working for free?

Kathleen: No—

Justin: —No [all laugh], not as much anymore.

Kathleen: Well, yeah we’re—it seems like, as far as our Smiling Tree Toys, right around the six-month mark or so was when things started selling themselves a bit more, and we felt like we were pretty close to a point where we were just making ends meet. That was something we were thrilled about; that’s a short time for a new business, I think. Our philosophy has also been to grow slowly and grow as we can afford it.

Justin: That’s important.

Kathleen: So we didn’t take out a business loan to begin with, and Justin already had a good amount of equipment from his past work experience so that was certainly helpful. We weren’t quick to rush out to build a new shed, a new workshop where our toys were to be. Justin’s working out of our one-car garage. We didn’t insulate, though maybe we should have [laughs], for the first winter. Justin would agree we should have. We’re taking steps as we can afford them, and that’s true of the oil as well. We don’t own an oil press right now. We certainly wish we did, but for the time being, we—

Justin: —It’s hard to justify.

Kathleen: Yeah, especially with a new product like camelina oil, we wanted to prove the market first, but we also wanted to, as we could afford it, purchase a press and a building and grow from there.

Peter: Am I understanding right that at the end of about six months, you’re making it?

Justin: Yeah, we started—I guess we should step back and say, it was in March of 2011 that we really launched the toy business, so it’s been a year and a half. Yeah, at approximately six. Six
months was really probably when we started getting paid for our time, and then three weeks ago we hired a fulltime employee, our first, so that was the second big milestone I guess.

**Kathleen:** And in terms of the oil, we’d have to say we’re not making it there. [Laughs] We haven’t seen financial rewards from that yet; any money in our sales, which are modest, thus far the money’s going right back into it to continue to grow. But again, a lot of that, I think, for us is the challenge we’re dealing with of educating consumers and the grocery buyer about what this is to begin with and why it’s good for you and why it’s a sustainable product to be growing and purchasing.

**Peter:** You mentioned in passing the things you learned about your neighbors, coming back [Peter and Kathy laugh]. The things you discovered were all around you, that you hadn’t paid attention to growing up. Can I hear a little more about that? [Laughs] It’s kind of an exciting area.

**Kathleen:** Sure. I think so. And that may be true of just the last generation as well, of other people like ourselves who are looking to do things like this. One of the things that felt like a sign to us as we started our wooden toy business and moved out here was that just by chance, Justin made a phone call and through maybe a couple degrees of separation, we realized there was a man living here about, what?, six miles away from us who has a sawmill.

**Justin:** Out on the prairie.

**Kathleen:** Right out on the prairie. Which just doesn’t—

**Justin:** —Which you would never think.

**Kathleen:** Justin’s first words out of his mouth, I think, was, “What’s he doing out in the middle of the prairie with a sawmill?”

**Justin:** It just doesn’t make sense.

**Kathleen:** [Laughs] Yeah, so for example we can get some of our black walnut wood. He’s harvesting, salvaging from farm sites that are just being bulldozed under or there are trees that have fallen, and we’re able to take that straight from him, locally produced wood, which is wonderful.

**Justin:** And then we just took that as a sign because it was really serendipitous, and we took that as a sign, and we said, “Maybe this is something we should be doing.”

**Kathleen:** The other young couples we’re finding who are our age who have also done urban living, that seems to be a—if you haven’t grown up here your entire life, it’s not uncommon, it seems, to find a couple our age who only one of them maybe grew up here, moved away for a while, came back with a spouse, and got a little disillusioned with the urban or suburban life that they had had. So there’s other couples doing CSA’s, community supported agriculture, and vegetable market gardening or…
Those alpacas over here. There’s a family with a small herd of alpacas.

Kathleen: [Laughs] That’s true. We just discovered the other day—

Justin: —Which is sort of an alternative livestock operation. One of our substitute mail carriers, they have a herd of goats, and they do…

Both: Goat cheese.

Justin: There’s a lot of opportunity as far as that goes.

Kathleen: There’s an abandoned little, quite old bakery-café in Lamberton near us that just was purchased the other day. A young couple, the woman of whom grew up here and is a few years younger than myself, is moving back to open it and start their own little café. It’s trickling down, and every time we hear of these stories—the other day we came upon a local vineyard and winery two weekends ago when we were out on a drive, and every little one of those things just gets us a little more excited and really confident, I think, in the movement that’s making its way, the rural revival if you will, of some kinds of alternative lifestyles outside of commodity farming.

Peter: I’ve had friends who have talked about moving out this way, and on the one hand it’s how do you deduce between, “I’ll have nobody to talk to,” and “They’ll kill me”? [Laughs] Now you knew you weren’t going to get killed because your folks lived here. You had protection from a very well-established family, but the nobody-to-talk-to is a scary thing, and I’m wondering how that played out for you.

Justin: Yeah that definitely takes some adjusting; there’s definitely an adjustment period.

Kathleen: And there’s truth to both ends of that spectrum that you said, but I think Justin can especially talk to that because he didn’t know necessarily what he was getting into when we moved back.

Justin: I think that you could say, if you did a word count, for example, your daily word count—the words that come out of your mouth, they may be fewer, but I think the quality of conversation is much greater, so I think it all depends on how you define conversation and how you define human interaction. If you value quality interaction, I think you really get that around here, just not all day, every day. But I think that’s part of the beauty for me, and obviously the beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but for me, that’s what I’ve learned to appreciate. I would much rather see fewer people a day, per day, and be able to take the time to have a quality conversation and to solve the world’s problems rather than anything else. I think there is definitely some truth in the fact that you’re more isolated, but you can isolate yourself anywhere, and also that same applies with communicating and meeting people. You can do that anywhere as well, and the same thing holds true here; you just have to know where to look for it and where to put your efforts.

Kathleen: One thing that came to mind as Justin’s saying that, I think in some respects, in my generation, and also perhaps because I moved away for a while and did come back, to some
degree I think there’s an expectation almost of me being perhaps a little more alternative-minded as I come back to this area. For lack of a better way of saying it, I can perhaps get away with a few more things [Kathy and Peter laugh] just because, not only of my generation, but also that I’ve left and come back, so people do expect maybe a few differences that are outside of the traditional lifestyles or norms around here. We take advantage of that, I think.

Justin: Yeah, we do because we don’t shy away from—people already know to a large extent that we are anomalies, if you will, so we don’t shy away from proving that to people, I guess you could say—

Kathleen: —Yeah, and at the same time, of course, we appreciate and absolutely respect the traditional, the lifestyles that people have always lived here and that they are, and that’s one of the things we love. But we also appreciate the diversity of others who might be doing things a little out of the norm.

Peter: I can’t resist asking, what counts as out of the norm? What kinds of wild and crazy things do you guys do here? [Laughs]

Kathleen: I knew I’d get in trouble if I started down this path [laughs]. Maybe they’re not that crazy, but maybe in terms of…

Justin: Just not conforming to social expectations, I guess. Yeah, pursuing—

Kathleen: Our interests; we joke that—we have a number of African masks and jewelry on our walls here, so we joke to say, we’re probably the only ones in this county and several counties around that have African décor on our walls, or we’re maybe listening to some reggae music out in the woodshop. [Laughs]

Justin: Yeah, I think we’ve been lucky enough to somewhat have the freedom of choice to pursue what we’re really passionate about and what we enjoy doing, so I think in that way, that’s what we do that puts us outside of the box or outside of the norm because most people don’t have the freedom of choice to do what they want to do. They do what they have to do to pay the bills, and that does not, of course, mean that they enjoy what they do, so I think that in that way, we’re doing something really out of the norm, out of the box, because we’re doing something we really enjoy, and it’s a lot of 60-hour weeks, and it’s a huge challenge, but at the end of the day, it’s totally worth it, and we wouldn’t have it any other way.

Kathleen: And we drive a Subaru, which is definitely out of the norm.

Peter: [Laughs] We have two, so I think you’re definitely…

Kathleen: You know when we’re coming, and you know where we are when we’re in Lamberton; you know what store we’re at because everyone knows that car.

Peter: You were—I’m thinking about—you’ve got this reference point, Africa, and you were educated enough to know some things about what you were seeing in Africa, and you also did a
lot of different things while you were there, and I’m wondering how that experience as a lens for stuff you see here—do you get Africa flashbacks? Do you get weird Africa connections or disconnections? I’m just curious because that’s the really original thing. Nobody else around here has Africa as a frame of reference for southwest Minnesota [laughs].

Justin: Yeah, that’s true.

Kathleen: Absolutely.

Justin: That’s true.

Kathleen: In some ways, it’s hard to find an aspect of life, of daily life, that we don’t in some way relate to our time in Niger.

Justin: Or it doesn’t somewhat determine our behavior or our attitude towards something.

Kathleen: I think it’s a hard question to really put into words, but there are a lot of aspects coming from a rural lifestyle, and comparing a close-knit agriculture community here versus that in Niger. There’s a lot of similarities in terms of people really being—heavily relying on each other emotionally, financially, socially. Everyone knowing everyone else’s business, for better or worse, things like that are just across human nature, especially in rural areas. Those are true of a lot of cultures, but in terms of physical environment, it couldn’t be more different, so when we were sitting in hot, dry, 110 degree desert days and pulling water that we had to filter and living with people who oftentimes didn’t have enough to eat, you come back here to basically the agricultural heartland of North America probably with some of the best soils around and climate that’s really comfortable, there’s contrasts like that that we do our best to share with people, I think, but there’s some things you just can’t explain to people like that.

Justin: Yeah, it transcends…

Kathleen: Definitely, there are a lot of things, especially if you’ve lived here your whole life, you just can’t imagine. You just can’t imagine it, really. Whether or not you’re interested in knowing… I don’t know. [Laughs] It’s a challenge. Places very near and dear to us that, outside of our immediate family, most people here may not think of, rarely, ever. They see pictures every once in a while, and probably they’re not very representative of what life is like, actually, there, but they’re probably not going to know anywhere. But we share experiences when we can, and we’re quick to talk about how wonderful it was when we can because…

Justin: People assume otherwise, a lot.

Kathleen: Yeah, I think a lot of people think that we sacrificed two years of our lives and gave up everything to do that, which you can say we did, to a point, but we would be the first to tell you that…

Justin: We gained a lot—
**Kathleen:** We gained a lot more than that. You could almost call it selfish of us to want to go somewhere like that to learn and really be a part of a people who had very little but shared whatever they did have with us. We consider ourselves lucky, some of the lucky few who have been able to do that.

**Peter:** Were—as a geographer, what are the odds [laughs], traveling with a geographer through rural Minnesota as part of what’s essentially a geography project, what are the odds [laughs] of running into a geographer?

**Kathleen:** Two geographers at that.

**Peter:** Yeah, I’m sorry, two geographers. I’m thinking of you as a carpenter of course; that’s your training also. Are there things—putting on your geographer’s hat for a second, are there things that you think about or things that you’ve—you have a way, a possibility for thinking about what’s going on out here that—what’s some contrast cases? What’s some different—that’s pretty rare out here. What kind of stuff goes on between your ears in your geographer’s mode?

**Kathleen:** That’s a good question…

**Justin:** I constantly think about how interconnected things are, I guess. Just physically, with the national road system, I always think of—the ease of connectivity is something that just strikes my mind because there’s a lot of big trucks and stuff that comes through town, and there’s literally tons of grain that’s being hauled off in every direction every—24/7, so that’s something that in my geography mind I always think about. I just how I—if I take a right, I can go 1,500 miles across the country, and if I take a left, I can go 1,500 miles the other direction, and it’s just that easy. Yeah, I don’t know.

**Kathleen:** One of the things that strikes me is really the fact that you can get in your car and drive 150 miles and be in what feels like a different world in the middle of Minneapolis is quite, in and of itself, amazing. But one of the things, that I think of often, I’m continually looking at things, and I’m saying—I’m looking for the reasons and this history of why they’ve become what they have, and I don’t necessarily think that’s a viewpoint that someone who’s lived here their entire life, never left, takes on things, whether it’s community organizing, or different social events or interests that people have around here, and all those kinds of things. Religious backgrounds, all those things, to me, I look at it from the point as historically how that’s come to be, not just that’s how it is but how it came to be—

**Justin:** —Evolution kind of—

**Kathleen:** —And simple fact that—because of where you are, where you were born on this earth, that’s determined a lot about you. [Laughs]

**Peter:** You mentioned the five-generation farm and the whole business of carrying on a heritage, or carrying on a legacy, and I’m curious what the content is for you, in what way you see yourself passing on a real legacy to your daughter.
Kathleen: Sure. I think in its simplest sense that’s physically being at our family’s roots, where we’ve always been. I am the fifth generation, my father being the fourth, and physically being here, on that farm site where it all began is in the simplest way—just being here, having Alanna grow up to know that [coughs]—to know the land, the area, to know how we’re living off it, that’s where it starts. Then beyond that, there’s a lot of traditions that my parents—even their generation, I think, especially—I’ve hung on to that maybe others in their generation have left, whether it’s picking apples and using an old wooden press to make apple juice, or raising hens, egg-laying chickens, and having eggs every day, composting and picking native berries…

Justin: Tapping our maple trees.

Kathleen: Tapping maple trees and doing our own maple syrup run every springtime. Those are all those kinds of things that, even when I was growing up, were probably quite unique to my family—what we were doing, and I didn’t necessarily know that at the time. And now, it’s perhaps even more unique in our daughter’s generation to still be seeing those things, and to know—to understand that a pickle comes from a cucumber that you pick in the garden and to know where that gallon of milk is coming from and how the egg got in that carton. Those are all things that I don’t want her to not know when she’s growing up. What she does with it, of course, is up to her when she’s older, but I want her to know those things that my family has always known.

Peter: It’s a really idyllic picture you’ve painted of not considering moving any time soon. I grew up on a farm. I left for a reason [laughs]. But when I left, my parents bought machinery. Before that, we did it all by hand, so it’s a little bit closer to your Africa example. But what I’m most curious about is, what’s been hardest for you, coming back?

Kathleen: …I think that a lot of it is… It’s a couple things. A lot of it is the cultural diversity that isn’t here nearly as much. That’s not to say that you can’t seek it out, but it’s certainly not—if you were in a metro area, cultural events and just meeting people from different walks of life with different interests, that’s something I miss most of all. I also miss being… being quite young out here, we don’t have nearly the same number of young people with small children and growing families versus most people—the majority of the population is retired or close to retirement, and that’s definitely been a big challenge as well. It comes down to social aspects for us and the cultural diversity, but one thing we do when perhaps we are feel a little stir crazy, want to get out, go do something… We always remind ourselves we can always go to the—whether it be the Twin Cities area for the weekend and get our dose of a fun music concert or some other venue or something that sounds interesting to us, we can go and do that and come back to a daily life that we really appreciate. Nine days out of ten, I would rather be here and make that drive to go to these other scenes that I need to see versus being in a really densely populated area. I would be wishing; I know that. The grass is always greener. I know that if I were there, at times enjoying that diversity that’s there, I would be looking for wide open spaces and a nice big lawn for our kids to run around in.