



NCSU | NCA&T | NCDA&CS

NC GROWING TOGETHER

*Connecting Local Foods
to Mainstream Markets*

*Students in the Local
Food Value Chain:*
**Experiences from
the 2015 NC Growing
Together Summer
Apprenticeship**



Background

2015 APPRENTICES

Shirlee Evans

Cumberland County
Cooperative Extension

Tracy Grubb

NC 10% Campaign

Erin Lowe

TRACTOR (Toe River
Aggregation Center
Training Organization
Regional Inc.)

Kristen Miller

NC Choices

Eva Moss

Firsthand Foods

Gigi Lytton

Lowes Foods

Josie Walker

Feast Down East

North Carolina Growing Together (NCGT) is a five year USDA-funded project that aims to bring more locally-produced foods into mainstream retail and food service markets, strengthening the economics of small to mid-sized farm and fishing operations and their communities.

NCGT is an initiative of the Center for Environmental Farming Systems, a partnership of North Carolina State University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

NCGT uses a value chain approach to make connections, build relationships, and sustain meaningful food systems change in North Carolina. Value chains differ from the broader term supply chain in that they assume more collaborative, interdependent, and risk-sharing relationships between partners.

One of the main NCGT project activities is to work on the intermediary steps in the supply chain, including aggregation, processing, and distribution, in order to understand and remove barriers that may prevent local foods from entering large-scale markets. Apprentices work to carry out this mission by working with their mentorship organizations.

NCGT's Summer 2015 Local Food Supply Chain Apprenticeship Program selected seven apprentices to work with local food hubs, businesses, and organizations that are working to transform the food system in North Carolina. They are Shirlee Evans, Tracy Grubb, Erin Lowe, Kristen Miller, Eva Moss, Gigi Lytton and Josie Walker.



KRISTEN MILLER

NC Choices



Kristen at a 2015 Women Working in the Meat Business Workshop

In a busy tiled classroom at the NCSU Beef Education Unit, Kristen Miller, a rising senior studying Poultry Science at NC State University, is hard at work at the 2015 Women Working in the Meat Business workshop. She brings meat back and forth from the butchery demonstration, to a back room, where the meat is cryopacked and distributed to workshop participants.

Kristen also keeps track of the many different cuts of meat as the speakers, Meredith Leigh and Karen Fowler, demonstrate various butchery techniques and explain how to cook the meat. While much of Kristen's work is behind the scenes for this event, it is clear that she is very comfortable around meat, which is not at all surprising, given her background.

The story of Kristen's interest in local meat starts at her family's farm, which has been passed down for generations. Her family raises beef cattle and, on the day of the workshop, she proudly wears a belt buckle that reads "Heritage Farms," with the year the farm was founded, 1856.

While very familiar with the small and mid-sized farming experience from working on her family's local farm, Kristen also experienced commercial livestock through an internship with Tyson, where she worked in a kill plant. Because of her range of experiences from family farm, to commercial plant, Kristen is a good fit for NC Choices, a Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS) initiative. According to NC Choices Program Director Sarah Blacklin, the initiative aims "to advance local, pasture-based meat supply chains." They do this by working "across the supply chain with processors, distributors, butchers, retail shop owners, buyers, and of course, farmers." Much of their work involves educating the different parts of the chain about what happens in the chain as a whole, including considering how to explain meat pricing and labels to everyday consumers.



Kristen helping Karen Fowler at the 2015 Women Working in the Meat Business Workshop



Kristen and Sarah Blacklin, NC Choices Program Director

KRISTEN MILLER | NC Choices

Continued

As the NC Choices apprentice, Kristen has been able to play an important role in educating and supporting the different parts of the meat supply chain. She has contributed to a number of important projects, including cost analysis pricing spreadsheets that break down all of the individual costs of producing beef, chicken, and pork.

Kristen describes how this project was originally projected to extend beyond her time with NC Choices, but they were able to finish it ahead of schedule and send the information to a graphic designer, to become a useful tool for the future.

Kristen says “that’s something I’ve enjoyed because I’ve helped from the beginning and I’m about to see the finished product.” She has also helped create documents that will aid farmers who wish to sell their meat to grocery stores. Beyond documents and helping with the workshop, Kristen also helped develop a survey regarding label claims, and went to several local farmers markets to poll people about which claims are important to them and which are confusing. Standing under a tent at local markets, she’s asked people to participate in a “bean poll” where shoppers use beans to cast votes for the labels that are important to them. This is vital information, as label claims are significant elements of communicating value to consumers. By conducting this research, Kristen herself has learned a lot about labels, as well as how to communicate label claims to consumers.

When asked about her thoughts on the apprenticeship, Kristen describes how she’s enjoyed being a part of the NC Choices and CEFS community because people work together to accomplish their common goals and they are dedicated to their work: “There’s a lot of planning that goes into everything,” she explains. After working with NC Choices, she says she has a better understanding of all the work that goes into each resource, presentation, workshop, and conference that they undertake. Working with NC Choices has helped her to better understand the meat industry as a whole, as well as the different



Kristen at the farmer's market in Carrboro, NC

KRISTEN MILLER | NC Choices

Continued

parts of local meat supply chains. She says, "It makes me a little more well-rounded, because I'm more aware of the local foods now where I was more on the commercial side of the industry [before]...it helps to know the differences between them and the challenges that they each face."

After graduation, Kristen dreams of taking over her family's farm. She is confident that even if she doesn't work full time on the farm, she will do something in agriculture that enables her to make a difference in local food systems, using what she's learned from working with NC Choices.



GIGI LYTTON

Lowes Foods



Gigi at a Lowes Foods in Chapel Hill, NC

Walking into the Lowes Foods headquarters in Winston-Salem, one encounters the same feeling of Southern hospitality that you would while shopping at a Lowes Foods store. It is clear that the idea of “homegrown” is more than just a catch phrase, as the Lowes Foods supply chain apprentice, Gigi Lytton, found out.

Sitting at a table in the Lowes Foods offices, Gigi, a Global Studies and Medical Anthropology student at the University of North Carolina, explains how she has witnessed the “real time logistics” of local food supply chains in the food retail business. By examining the efforts that Lowes Foods has made in getting more local food into their stores, she has a better understanding of the challenges faced by the retail links in local food supply chains.

Coming into the apprenticeship, Gigi knew that her interest and passion for sustainable food would be helpful, but she was surprised by how her own background in retail helped her better understand corporate culture and the challenges companies face in focusing on local food.

She was able to make use of this knowledge when immersing herself in the Lowes Foods employee training methods, as she looked for ways to include more education to help “hosts” understand and be able to explain the importance of local food. Having worked in retail herself, Gigi felt this gave her some perspective in considering the points-of-view of Lowes Foods employees. In addition to employee training, Gigi also helped with a DSD (Direct-Store-Delivery) book, by contacting vendors and consolidating their information into a resource that will aid Lowes Foods stores in purchasing local product.

Beyond the ins and outs of the stores themselves, Gigi explains how Krista Morgan, the Lowes Foods Locally Grown Accounts



Gigi and Krista Morgan on a visit to a peach farm



Gigi and Krista at Joyce Farms

GIGI LYTTON | Lowes Foods

Continued

Representative, showed her some of the intermediary steps in the supply chain through their visits to both farmers from whom Lowes Foods buys produce, and distribution centers. Even when she has to wear a big white coat and a hair net to do so, Gigi says she really enjoyed meeting growers and processors and witnessing links in the local food supply chain. The experiences have been eye-opening when discussing her previous thoughts about barriers to local food in grocery stores. Gigi explains, "I thought of it as arbitrary barriers for no good reason...but there are actually pretty good reasons."

In addition to witnessing some of the intermediary parts of the chain, Gigi also gained a good bit of experience with the consumer end of the chain, working on the Carolina Crate program and conducting consumer surveys.

In particular, the surveys enabled her to witness how important communication and education are to making positive changes in supply chains. In addition to the survey, Gigi says she gained a lot of valuable information from talking with customers and store employees one-on-one. Krista also understands why communication is so important to enacting change, stating "a big thing that I see is guest or customer education...and then on the vendor side, I'd like to see the prices be more comparable to market pricing. The two biggest things that I see for why someone wouldn't buy local is the price is too high and the customer doesn't understand why the cost is high, so once you address it, people are more likely to buy." Both Gigi and Krista agree that conversations are important in increasing demand for local food, and Gigi has enjoyed just talking with store employees or consumers in the Chapel Hill store where she has been working.

Reflecting on the apprenticeship, Gigi acknowledges the many perspectives and challenges at each stage of the chain, from the growers, to the processors and distributors, to retail employees, to consumers, and how education and communication can help to add value to these local food chains.



Gigi and Krista on a visit to a watermelon farm

GIGI LYTTON | *Lowes Foods*

Continued

She explains, "I think that I'm learning some pretty important stuff as far as translating what the business is like versus what the vision of sustainably produced food and locally produced food is...it's interesting for me to see how the two visions can intersect."

Talking with Gigi about her future, her ambition and dedication are evident. In the future, she hopes to focus on one-on-one communication in her pursuit of a post-graduate career in nutrition: "In the same way that I'm learning the different ways you need to communicate complex ideas like why local is important, I would imagine that you could use the same ones for nutritional education...you have to be able to understand how to break down complex concepts to people in a way that makes sense and matters to them." She understands how important it is to educate others about sustainable, local food, in order to help them make positive changes in their lives. Gigi hopes to take what she has learned and funnel it into her future discussions with others, regarding local food and nutritious eating.



JOSIE WALKER

Feast Down East



Josie standing in the Feast Down East office

Standing underneath the shelter of the old train depot in Burgaw, NC, one can imagine how it once was when trains regularly passed through it. These days there are no trains, but train cars do house the coolers and freezers belonging to the Southeast North Carolina Food Systems Program, also known as Feast Down East. This is where Josie Walker, a rising senior studying Agricultural and Environmental Systems at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, has been working over the summer.

Today, local farmers have dropped off boxes of produce for distribution, and she helps her fellow staff members move these to the coolers and the delivery truck. She communicates with the other staff members about what else they are waiting on, explaining how much of the product that they have just received is headed for restaurants in the nearby area. Josie articulates all of this with confidence, as, after all, she has learned a lot about how the food hub functions, in addition to working on other exciting projects with Feast Down East.

At the hub itself, Josie has been working with Molly Rousy, who has showed her the everyday tasks that are necessary to run the hub, including taking orders, signing in product, labeling it, and packaging it for distribution. Working in the hub, Josie has learned a lot about the process and details involved. All of these tasks are important in maintaining the standards that restaurants and farmers have come to trust from Feast Down East.

Molly explains, "We've built our brand name enough that people have confidence that when they see it, the food they are going to get in the establishment is going to be local and chefs will use that on their menu...they know they can trust us and they see the value in saying they buy from Feast Down



Josie checking product in Feast Down East's cooler



Josie and her colleagues go over details for the day's deliveries

JOSIE WALKER | *Feast Down East*

Continued

East." Josie has been a part of making those different restaurant orders happen and she's also helped to aggregate buyer information into a master list.

In addition to working at the hub itself, Josie has also been instrumental in researching and prepping for the implementation of a new food hub in Leland, NC, not far from Burgaw and Josie's hometown of Princeton. She has visited several nearby farmers markets, reaching out to farmers about joining the new hub.

When asked what she liked the most about working on the Leland food hub, Josie says, "Meeting the farmers and talking to them, finding out what they do, what they are trying to do... and just getting something going off the ground." To help with that task, she also conducted a survey to reach out to farmers and understand their needs and concerns about joining a new hub, so that those things might be addressed. Several farmers have already expressed their interest in joining, which has been exciting for Josie, who says "I like to feel like I'm contributing something and what I'm doing actually matters." It's been a neat experience for her to pave the way for the future and to build relationships with so many farmers in the process.

Talking with Josie, it is clear that she is driven and always looking to do more. She explains how she felt like her work with Feast Down East only scratched the surface of what is possible and she keeps thinking of things she could do for them, even though the apprenticeship has ended. She will certainly put that drive to good use in the future, as she plans to start her own farmers market or start an herb farm after she graduates from N.C. A&T.

When thinking about how her experiences have helped prepare her for the future, she responds, "There are lots of details I know to look for now." She explains how she will be able to use what she has learned, as she tackles her goals. As she puts it, one of the most important parts of supporting local food supply



JOSIE WALKER | *Feast Down East*

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chains is “making connections with people...and being able to make connections on things that actually matter.” Whatever she ends up doing, she will certainly continue to have conversations with farmers about what they are growing, and with consumers, about how they can purchase local food and support local farmers.

Josie checking on frozen product



Josie and Emily Mauro, Feast Down East Health and Nutrition Intern, at the Poplar Grove Farmers Market



TRACY GRUBB

NC 10% Campaign



Tracy at work in the NC 10% Campaign Office

Walking into the NC 10 % Campaign office is a little like walking into a war strategy room, as there are people bustling about, computers open to charts and graphs, and maps on the walls indicating the different North Carolina counties. Of course, the only strategies coming from this office are ones that involve getting more North Carolinians to pledge to spend 10 % of their food budget on local food.

Tracy Grubb, a rising senior in Plant and Soil Sciences at NC State University, sits at a round table in the center of the room, working on a presentation on infographics related to sustainable agriculture, animal welfare, and label claims. She describes how her presentation highlights her research into terminology and labels that often overlap with one another or are ambiguous to many people. She explains how ultimately, this research will be used to help educate buyers about terms like “sustainable,” “free-range,” or “natural.”

This research is just one of the projects Tracy has been working on as the NC 10% Campaign apprentice. She has played an important role in supporting several of the educational components of the campaign. As Robyn Stout, the NC 10% Campaign Statewide Coordinator explains, “We know there’s a need for this type of education, we just don’t have time to develop it...what Tracy’s done so far is compile what’s out there in a way that also informs us of the issues that folks have.”

Because so much confusion surrounds label claims, Robyn explains that Tracy’s work will help to “translate” these terms and figure out specific definitions for some of the more confusing claims.

In discussing labels, Tracy stresses the importance of starting conversations about these topics, to help clear up some of the



Tracy with Robyn Stout, NC 10% Campaign State Coordinator



Tracy at work in the NC 10% Campaign Office

TRACY GRUBB | NC 10% Campaign

Continued

questions people have such as “what does it really mean to be sustainable and local?” Tracy can sympathize with people’s frustrations with labels, as she herself did not always understand the distinctions between claims.

“That’s a large part of why we are doing this,” she says. “Even as a label reader and a student in agriculture, I still have a lot of questions about what these claims really mean and I can see where purchasers and people in restaurants may not have time to look at these things.”

Tracy’s own interest in local and sustainable foods stemmed in part from being a mother who was concerned about what she was feeding her children. Reading food labels, she realized she didn’t know what a lot of these terms meant, which was unsettling. Her interest in understanding labels grew into a full-blown desire to go back to school at NC State. Working with the NC 10% Campaign has also enabled her to learn about NC Cooperative Extension and all the various way that extension services are helping to get more local food into supply chains.

She explains, “I think sustainable agriculture is really important and I think the work that Cooperative Extension does is really important because you need that connection between the policy makers and education.” After getting a closer look at the way programs like the NC 10% Campaign are working to influence policy and educate members of the community, Tracy says she may even pursue work in a Cooperative Extension office after she graduates.

While working with the NC 10 % Campaign, she has appreciated reaching out to people who were once like her: people with an interest in food, but who do not know where to start. She has enjoyed starting conversations about these topics and finding data that she can use to educate others and persuade them to buy local, especially in Saxapahaw, where she lives. She admits she’s been acting as a sort of ambassador for the NC 10% Campaign, asking people if they are involved,



Tracy and Robyn discussing campaign details

TRACY GRUBB | NC 10% Campaign

Continued

encouraging them to get connected, and answering questions they have. She explains, "As local foods become more important...I think in some ways it's going to be imperative that there are people in place that can usher us into the future of food." For right now, Tracy is focused on completing her studies at NC State and continuing to start important conversations about local food. It is also clear that she could be one of those future local food leaders, herself.



Tracy talking about the NC 10% Campaign with shoppers in Saxapahaw, NC



EVA MOSS

Firsthand Foods



Eva in front of Chatham Marketplace Co-op in Pittsboro, NC

“Apprenticeships are the new internships,” is a sentiment that Eva Moss, the supply chain apprentice for Firsthand Foods, agrees with entirely. Sitting outside of a local bakery in Durham, she explains how she will even correct folks when they call what she is doing an internship. A recent graduate in Anthropology from Sewanee: The University of the South, Eva’s path to Firsthand Foods is an interesting story. She was originally a vegetarian, but after realizing she needed to add meat back into her diet, she began investigating sustainable options for meat.

When investigating the NCGT supply chain apprenticeship, she thought it would be neat to learn more about local, sustainable meat supply chains through Firsthand Foods, a local meat food hub. This has been a positive experience for Eva, who had studied sustainable food in school and worked on a permaculture farm, yet felt she lacked knowledge about the middle part of local food supply chains. She says, “what was really missing for me was the market...what happens to that when it leaves the farm and how does that whole space of transition and movement, and selling and buying, influence the way that policy and laws are agreed upon and implemented.” Over the summer, Eva has learned much about these middle steps of the chain from working with Firsthand Foods.

One of the things Eva learned, as she puts it, is that “meat is such a hard space to finagle...there are so many steps in that supply chain.” She’s enjoyed witnessing how Tina Prevatte and Jennifer Curtis, Firsthand Foods’ Co-CEOs, have made strides in helping local meat producers increase their sales by taking and filling orders, in addition to processing farmer product. Eva says her mentors are careful to be equitable and act with integrity, which she admires: “They are running it with so much integrity and with a focus on storytelling and equitable profit.”



A photo Eva took while on a farm visit with Firsthand Foods



A photo Eva took from a sausage tasting in Chatham, NC

EVA MOSS | *Firsthand Foods*

Continued

Eva has taken on several projects for Firsthand Foods, including creating a marketing scheme for whole animal utilization specifically focused on selling bones to consumers. Eva describes how she was able to use her own talents in visual art to create a design for the box, which was a neat experience. She also worked on a major case study for the Wallace Center and the USDA, which documents Firsthand Foods' relationship with Carolina Dining Services. One of the goals for the study is that it will be used as a resource for others interested in starting a similar relationship with a university dining service.

Eva is excited that her work will still be used even after she finishes her apprenticeship: "Writing that report, I'm going to have a published document with the USDA that's also going out to the Wallace Center...so that's a dream to have a publication down before I'm even in grad school." In addition to these two main projects, Eva has also observed a lot of the day-to-day operations and participated in documenting and advertising many of the important Firsthand Foods events through social media.

All of these experiences have enabled her to not only learn about the challenges that local meat suppliers and local meat hubs face, but also to hear the stories involved with local food. Much of the success of Firsthand Foods has stemmed from their focus on relationships, explains Prevatte: "that's why we've been able to maintain the growth that we've had... I think this whole business hinges on relationships."

Over their four years, Prevatte and Curtis found that visiting farmers, processors, and customers can be challenging with a small staff, but that it is vitally important to continuing to help farmers sell their product.

The emphasis on relationships and the story of their local meat has been fascinating for Eva, who has appreciated "the amount of effort Tina and Jennifer put into relationships."



A photo Eva took of Tina setting up a meat case at the Food Matters Market in Hickory

EVA MOSS | *Firsthand Foods*

Continued

Learning about how many people are involved with processing and marketing local meat has also inspired Eva for her upcoming graduate work, where she will be pursuing a Masters of Food and Agriculture Law and Policy at Vermont Law School. She hopes to eventually work in the non-profit sector, using her experiences with Firsthand Foods to enact positive change in the local food world.



Eva on a farm visit



An image of Eva's camera. Part of her apprenticeship work included documenting Firsthand Foods' farm visits and events.

SHIRLEE EVANS

Cumberland County Cooperative Extension



Shirlee and farmers from the Fayetteville Farmer's Market



Shirlee and farmers from the Fayetteville Farmer's Market

Sitting in her office in the Cumberland County Cooperative Extension office, Shirlee Evans busily answers emails and returns phone calls with a confidence that can only come from knowing what she is talking about. Shirlee, a rising Junior in Agricultural Business Management at NC State University, seems comfortable in this space, as if she has worked there for years, rather than a couple of months. The familiarity and ease with which Shirlee navigates her responsibilities at the Cooperative Extension office stems in part from spending many years of her life on her family's farm, Evans Family Produce Farm, helping her father and learning from his experiences. She explains how he started out growing only okra and how she and her siblings used to help him harvest it as small children. He continued to add a variety of crops and increase his production, becoming a full time farmer around the same time Shirlee started high school.

When she started college, Shirlee relates how she wanted to take her life in a direction other than farming, choosing Criminology as her major. After spending some time in school, however, she realized her passion for farming could not be ignored. Now she plans to pursue a degree in Agricultural Business at NC State University. Shirlee explains, "I find myself wanting to come back more than I ever wanted to because it's home, it's something that I know and I guess that's why it's so easy for me to relate to other people--because it's just something that I know; I know this like the back of my hand."

Because of that newly renewed love for farming, Shirlee has enjoyed the work she has done during the span of her apprenticeship with Cumberland County Cooperative Extension. In particular, she has really enjoyed working with small family farmers and her understanding of their concerns and desires has been instrumental in helping her reach out to them: "I can



Shirlee with the staff from the Cumberland County Cooperative Extension



Shirlee at work in the Cumberland County Cooperative Extension office

SHIRLEE EVANS | CCCE

Continued

understand how the farmers feel and what the farmers are going through...I'm able to relate to the farmers in the way that I know what they are looking for." Being able to relate has been very helpful in the work that Shirlee has been doing to promote and support the Fayetteville Farmer's Market, and in particular, with getting farmers to commit to the market.

Her prior knowledge and connections in the Fayetteville farming community are assets that Kenny Bailey, Cumberland County Agricultural Extension Agent and Shirlee's mentor, anticipated would be very useful for her as she set out to grow the Fayetteville market. Kenny explains, "She probably knows a lot about that simply because she has helped her father run his market... that's one of the reasons I wanted her in there." Because of Shirlee's efforts, the market has grown and continues to grow. She also successfully registered the market as a non-profit--an accomplishment that she is proud of, as it is something that will outlast her time with Extension.

Beyond drawing in farmers, promoting the market, and establishing it as a non-profit, Shirlee has also worked to create a list of local farmers and what they sell, which can be given out as a resource to help people buy locally. All of her work has been very helpful for Kenny, who explains that Shirlee has been a real asset and accomplished a lot of the things he wanted to accomplish, but simply did not have time for, on top of his extension work. For her part, Shirlee explains how Kenny and the Extension community were invaluable in supporting her and encouraging her to succeed.

Shirlee knows that she wants to continue to work on her family's farm in the future, and her experiences with the supply chain apprenticeship have kindled a desire to do more for small family farms. She explains that while she knows she has made helpful contributions during her time as an apprentice, it is not enough: "I want to do so much more...I want to achieve more and I want to get more done...what I know now, I want to add on to it and keep going." She plans to use the momentum and



Shirlee and a farmer at the Fayetteville Farmer's Market



Shirlee and a farmer from the Fayetteville Farmer's Market



Shirlee and the DJ from a local radio station and local vendor

SHIRLEE EVANS | CCCE

Continued

knowledge she gained from the apprenticeship to guide her in her agricultural business management courses and to help her make a positive impact on small family farms, wherever she can.



ERIN LOWE TRACTOR



Erin moving boxes of produce at the TRACTOR food hub

Nestled on a country road amongst the Blue Ridge Mountains in Burnsville, North Carolina, sits the TRACTOR (Toe River Aggregation Center Training Organization Regional Inc.) food hub. Erin Lowe, a recent Biology and Environmental Studies graduate from Swarthmore College, knows the roads near the food hub well, as she has often biked them in order to get her apprenticeship.

Inside the facility, Erin has learned the ins-and-outs of food hub operations, including signing people and product in, labeling boxes of produce, washing, grading, and packaging produce, and many other important details. She moves around the facility pointing out the grading and washing areas and showing visitors boxes of beautiful cabbage in the cooler. The center itself is Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certified, which is a benefit to the farmers who bring their produce to the TRACTOR hub. Robin Smith, Director of TRACTOR, explains how they benefit the local farmers who are a part of the hub, and also how, through their partnerships with local businesses, they are benefiting the local economy: "It truly is a community project because we try to keep all of our business local...About 90% of what we buy for the facility has been local," she explains.

Though they accomplish much in the Burnsville community and surrounding area, Robin acknowledges that their limited staff makes it difficult to accomplish everything they wish to do, which is why having Erin as an apprentice has been such a benefit.

Robin brings up the new and improved TRACTOR website, which has been one of Erin's major projects throughout the apprenticeship. Through Erin's work, the website now displays a better sense of what TRACTOR is about, includes a donate button, and in the future, it will contain even more content about the growers from Erin's farm visits. Both she and Robin



Erin on a farm visit in Yancey county



Erin explaining the ins and outs of TRACTOR's facility in Burnsville, NC

ERIN LOWE | TRACTOR

Continued

are proud of the website's progress and they joke about the "bare bones" state it was in before Erin worked on it. Erin says, "seeing how far the website has come-it really looks a lot different....having a project that I could sort of take ownership of was a nice thing too."

Besides revitalizing the TRACTOR website, Erin has also been exposed to all of the aspects of the food hub, including witnessing what goes on at the TRACTOR facility, going on a produce delivery, helping with produce intake, meeting local growers, and harvesting with them in their fields. One of the best aspects of her experience has been interacting with the TRACTOR family and learning from the experiences that they bring to the table. Sitting in the TRACTOR office with Robin and Erin, they remind each other of stories and crack jokes. It is clear that Erin has become a part of the TRACTOR community.

As a result of her immersion in this community, Erin has seen a different side of sustainable farming. Coming in to her summer with TRACTOR, Erin already had months of experience working on several organic farms, as well as knowledge of sustainable agriculture from her academic studies. She felt she lacked knowledge about local food systems as a whole, however. Sitting in the TRACTOR office, she explains, "This was the logical next step...if I was going to work in anything agriculture related, I wanted to get a good understanding of the whole food system from start to finish...I wanted to learn more about the link between production and consumption." Experiencing those intermediary parts of local food supply chains has helped her to better understand some of the challenges that small farmers in Yancey county face when trying to sell their food.

She says, "I've definitely learned a lot about those sorts of things...and I think food hubs are helping to solve some of those problems." Many Yancey county farming families have been farming for generations, which was surprising to Erin, whose previous experience was with mostly first generation farmers. Getting to know Yancey county farmers has helped her question



ERIN LOWE | TRACTOR

Continued

her own assumptions. As Erin explains, “I realized that I really should be asking different questions...I was not getting the answers I was expecting and so that was definitely something that surprised me, just because their background is so different from the other farms I’ve worked on.”

After learning about those intermediary steps in local food supply chains, Erin will take what she has learned and channel that into her next step: working for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and their grassroots outreach program. She knows that her work with NSAC will allow her to use what she has learned to further support small family farmers.

Erin on a farm visit in Yancey county

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