Kara Dodson & Jacob Crigler – *Interview conducted in their house at Full Moon Farm in Triplett, NC by Willard Watson.*

**Q1 – Who are you, When and where were you born?**

KD - I'm Kara Dodson and I was born in Lynchburg, Virginia and lived in Blacksburg for a few years when I went to college and now I'm here, I live in Deep Gap, NC and really it's called Triplett or Elk.

JC - I'm Jacob Crigler, and I'm from Radford, Virginia, I was born in 1986. But it was just really a coincidence that we met here and we're both from Virginia, we didn't know each other before and now I live here in Triplett.

**Q2 – What did your parents do for a living? Did you contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way?**

JC – My mom had various jobs mostly in administrative positions, so not much that I did to help her with her job necessarily. My dad has always worked either at a landscape nursery, plant nursery, or for a long time he has worked for a tree farm in Virginia. Occasionally they would have some extra work so when I was a teenager in high school I would get paid to go help him work a little bit, tag some trees, count trees, move plants around. In terms of contributing income, as soon as I was old enough to have a job, legally, I pretty much always held one. I held up my own side of the things but I wouldn't say I necessarily like contributed to the family, it

was more disposable income I guess you could say so I could go out to eat with friends, if I wanted to, and that kind of stuff.

KD – My dad owns and manages a large pest control company that my grandfather started, him and his brother. My dad is second generation running that company and my family is on the board it's like a big deal in that side of the family, my dad's side. My mom didn't work when I was growing up, she worked when she had my sisters about 10 years before I was born. I started working for my sister when I was 14 in her catering business, it was not good. I don't like cooking. Then I started working for the pest control company when I was 16. I would do termite inspections on my own or I would go apply the pesticides with the crew. I got to see the manual labor side of that business, and when I went to college I just knew I didn't want to be part of a business, like a big corporation, it's not that big, there's 600 employees so it's pretty large. My income was like Jacob, it was mine to choose how I spent it, it wasn't part of supporting the family and that lasted while I was in high school and then I went to college.

**Q3 – What do you do for a living?**

JC - We are organic produce farmers. It's a new thing for us, we've successfully made it through one growing season. We do various odd jobs as well, I'm a carpenter and builder on the side. We have a band sawmill that we have built a barn on our property with and have gotten paid to build some other structures for some folks.

KD – Yeah it's a livelihood, a living. I also do massage work, and I have done that the last few years. When Jacob and I were doing an apprenticeship on a farm I did massage school at nights.

So it was kind of a paired livelihood, I could work in town doing that in the off season and in the farming season we would be here 100% of the time or most of the time, that is our plan, and that's what we tried this past year. It worked out pretty well.

**Q4 – How long have you been involved in growing your own produce?**

JC – A couple years ago we worked for Ian Snyder who runs a farm over in Ashe County. We kind of apprenticed under him. He is one of only a few horse farmers left in the region. That was the primary reason for wanting to work with him was to learn kind of the horse farming side of the business. All told, I think we are probably a good solid three years now of different levels of commitment to produce growing.

KD – When we worked for Ian we had cattle and land operation too. It was small but it was important to learn that when you start farming. Do you want to do livestock management? Do you want to kill animals that you raise to eat and sell? I think for us it was really cool to learn how the very small meat industry operates and local meat farming happens. It's ultimately not for us cause of the headaches with managing livestock, just the fencing, and breeding, capital, and then our property here wouldn't hold any livestock really beyond our own consumption, we've talked about that, but right now it's only plants. I think it's important to focus only on one farming aspect especially when you start and not just like go in with like oh, let's do chickens, and turkeys, and produce, and fruit trees, it's like you gotta really be focused.

JC – Ultimately, very often it is lumped just into one category of farming, we really don't have the motivation or the desire or aspiration to be livestock farmers or meat producers. We are

really in it to grow plants. We love being in the soil and watching the plants grow, and taking care of them. It is a totally different set of skills than raising meat.

**Q5 – How did you decide you wanted to be organic produce growers?**

KD – It was really kind of my motivation to start in 2014, I knew I needed to leave my desk job, it was kind of driving me nuts. It's not that the job was bad it was more like my energy level and focus was not being served. I grew up with horses, I grew up driving horses, and new I wanted them to be part of my life. Jacob was on the road in a van, rock climbing across the country, he left me for seven months and kind of discovered his own self and that's when I signed up to do the apprenticeship. So that's when I decided, if I'm going to quit working at this non-profit, what do I want to do next? And it was like, well if it's a blank slate I want to farm, and I want to farm with horses specifically. I knew Ian from before, not well, but I just approached him and they needed extra help on the farm, it was kind of their chance to see if hiring someone would make the difference on the income on their farm. And so I lived on the farm, and that was a great deal, like as an apprentice I didn't make a lot of money but they provided housing and I kept my horse there. And Jacob wanted to come back to be with me, for the rest of his life. (laughs)

JC – It's true.

KD – I told him well if you're gonna come back we'll do this together; Ian has work for you.

JC – I don't think it was even that clear, I knew I was coming back to be with Kara, but it just so happened to be that Kara was living on a farm, in a barn of all places, in the loft of a barn. And

that's what I came back to so for me it all just fell into my lap, is really how I felt about it, because I had no preconceived notion that I would be in the position that I'm in right now as operating my own produce farm. I mean if you had asked me that even just a few years ago right before I moved back, I would have had no idea this is what I would be doing. KD – And we realized how happy we were living in that barn and working every day.

JC – Being outside.

KD – Yeah, outside working everyday together. It was kind of like we have this opportunity if we want to start a farm together, it was like, yeah let's do it, no pressure, no like big like let's do a 20-year plan and be committed to that, it was like let's try it.

**Q6 – How has work changed?**

JC – I would say in general; the very steep learning curve we experienced from this first season. It maybe hasn't changed the work itself more as it's changed our mentality or our approach to it. Just from anything, from being more efficient with how we use our time. And starting out with a blank slate here on this piece of land we have, building up the infrastructure, building up the materials, and the tool collection, and the equipment collection, all of these things added together just inherently changed the work as we go along. At the end of the day growing the vegetables is the same it ever has been from the dawn of time, you put the plants in the ground they grow, you know and you take care of them. KD - I think money has changed for us too. We are a little more willing to spend money on materials, or equipment because we know that now since we are going to stay committed to this it is an investment. Whereas before we might have

just done the manual labor ourselves or kind of worked around and had a temporary solution to fencing or right now we have been working on drainage on the property, before we would have had shortcuts because we didn't have the money or the level of commitment that we have now, so that changed I think, and just buying stuff, we are simple people we live in a small house we don't buy a lot of personal things, but we will buy stuff for the farm and it's worth it.

**Q7 – Describe a typical work day**

JC – Usually starts with coffee and feeding all the animals, two horses, a cat, two dogs, and nine chickens. So as soon as you start feeding one animal all the other animals know and they have to be fed right away. From there it can vary pretty widely, sometimes even before coffee we are out at the crack of dawn harvesting vegetables because a lot of produce likes to be harvested in the early morning when it is still cool, before the hot sun hits it. So coffee breakfast and out the door running.

KD – More harvesting usually, in the peak of summer. Harvesting takes several hours in the morning. And then we'll have lunch here, take a break, then weeding, or pruning, or applying pesticides, or irrigating, that's a typical day is just irrigating, that's a daily job when it's dry. Fencing, we do a lot of fence-work, not only for our horses but the deer, keeping other animals out is important.

JC - It's kind of a funny question because it's almost like there is a routine and there is absolutely no routine. You do whatever needs to be done in that moment. You wake up one morning and you notice a new pest on a particular crop, and so that becomes your day, you

didn't know it before, you weren't planning for it, but then that becomes your day or at least the next several hours of figuring out what we do for this pest management or this plant just doesn't look healthy like it needs some sort of a nutritional amendment, or you name it, it's a little bit fly by the seat of your pants, there's a lot of planning that goes into it but things just happen, you're working with the Earth and Mother Nature, you kind of just roll with it.

KD – I think delivering food is part of a typical day too, you know the business aspect, we have to take food to restaurants or do our CSA pickup for our customers, that is usually part of our day planning, who's going to run to town and who is going to stay here on the farm and keep working. I think it's cool that we are late in the day farmers, we are not 4 a.m. farmers, those people exist, we are more like 9 p.m. farmers.

We'll wake up later and harvest and then appreciate our morning and then we'll work late. I think that is a good healthy recognition of our work day. Because you can push yourself, let's wake up at 5 (a.m.) and do everything before 8 a.m.

JC - But that's not our style.

KD – Yeah, we chose to work for ourselves for a reason.

**Q8 – When do you work?**

JC – Seasons absolutely that is the cornerstone of everything we do really, we plant by the seasons, not everything grows well different parts of the year, and this time of the year heading into late November and heading into winter we are pretty much wrapping up the last of what is

growing. So seasonality is definitely a huge part of it. I would say late February to early March into late-October, mid- November is our main chunk of time that we are really going hard at farming.

KD – Plant production…

JC – Plant production, yeah, and then more narrow on a weekly basis its usually six days a week sometimes even seven of being out in the gardens in the fields, doing all the things.

KD – And we can choose if we want it to be a 12-hour day or a 4-hour day. Like Jacob said it depends on the weather, it depends on the pests, it depends on you know, we have our second jobs, if I have to go into town to do massage work, as my second job, or if he has a carpentry job he needs to go pick up. We do have to be really flexible, and that will be different next year and in the coming years for us because we want to hire people and so we will be more rigid in our time schedule so that will be a change.

JC – It truly is way beyond a typical job schedule, because it is not a typical job, it is our life. It's what we do, it's what we think about when we wake up in the mornin', and what we think when we're goin' to sleep. It's what we do.

**Q9 – What do you do with downtime at work?**

JC – The creek, our property is on Elk Creek, which is a beautiful creek, a very healthy mountain stream. Where it runs through our property it's big enough to definitely cool off in, sit down in the water and cool off, so that's a quick getaway. Further on down the road the same creek

gets a lot bigger and there is an awesome swimming hole, so that's like in the heat of the summer, right in the peak of the season that is our go to get away for downtime. Outside of that, I'm a rock climber, we are both rock climbers, so we go climbing as recreational opportunities.

KD - We go hangout with our friends or invite them down here, and try and maintain friendships cause you could definitely get sucked into not leaving the farm. So I think we do try and make an important time to reach out to our family and friends and make time for them and not get kind of holed up down here. Downtime is self-care, that's a good way of putting some terminology to that. If we're not gonna be working here we need to take care of ourselves, we'll go to yoga sometimes as a way to make sure our bodies don't break down. The creek is part of that, mentally letting go.

JC – Also being on the land and not working is both really challenging to do when you feel like there is so much that needs to be done, but it's also a really important way to connect with our property and the land that we're on in a different style than just working all the time. So just taking the moment to go to the creek or to walk the dogs up through the woods just to be in the trees and step away and breathe a little bit.

**Q10 – What type of people do you work with?**

JC – Restaurants. We work directly with a lot of chefs of local restaurants. You get a whole mixed bag of people, mostly really awesome, food-loving, motivated, inspirational people as chefs, so that's really cool While Kara does not enjoy cooking, I do, o to be able to see and hear

about our food being turned into these amazing and delicious meals for people is really amazing for us to see happen.

Also we run a CSA which is Community Supported Agriculture, we have just local families who buy in to the membership and we provide them with a weekly box of produce. Again, you get a whole wide range of folks there, this being our first season it happened to be a lot of closer friends that we kind of already knew and a few folks that we didn't know that well, so getting to know those people.

KD – We work with the county extension service and work with Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture, so other farmers, we work with them whether they sell us their garlic so we can plant that or we go to each other's farms to learn about irrigation, or planting, or greenhouses, there's a lot of workshops that are hosted locally.

We don't hire anyone right now, or work day to day with any specific people, but we are constantly trying to learn from other people so if that constitutes working with them.

JC – We do work with a lot of different people, but on the day to day it is pretty much just me and Kara here on the farm. But we are connected to so many other people because of it.

**Q11 – Does your occupation have any special sayings or expressions? What are they? How did they come about?**

KD – I think one of the more unique things about our farm is using the horses so any kind of terminology that references working with the horses or the equipment. So, "gee" and "haw" is

“right” and “left,” and that’s the language I tell the horses to help guide them with what we’re doing, or “come up” is “go forward,” and “whoa,” everybody knows “whoa.”

I think that’s cool, it’s very simple terminology and then communication that isn’t verbal or a saying is body language with a horse and driving a horse is very unique to what we do, but really any farmer if they have animals has their own language that they use with the animals. And that can be said too with the land, your intention, and your vibration, and your attitude is felt by the Earth. So that’s your own language and your own expression. How you are treating your work but also this companion that is the Earth and your animals around you. I think that is pretty unique to us, but horse farming, people farm with cows too, steers, using animal power, that’s centuries old so I don’t know where “gee” and “haw” came from but people, probably of European background have been saying that for hundreds of years.

JC – Can I throw in a PG-13, the name of our farm is Full Moon farm, a really lovely neighbor of ours, kind of quipped a little saying that we do stick to sometimes, and it’s that “we’re not half-(expletive) it.”

KD – So that’s our expression we use on the farm?

JC – Yeah, we are Full Moon.

KD - The full thang.

JC – We go hard, we commit and we try hard.

KD – The whole (expletive), and we farm by the moon phase more or less, it’s something we try and work with, I think we’re still experimenting if it’s effective. That’s an old way of farming

with the signs of the moon so you've got some astrological terminology or meaning behind it that is kind of unique to us. And I guess any kind of planting terms in the field you have the "isle," which is where you walk between the rows of plants, the "isle" or the "furrow." I think a lot of the wording gets muddled or made up on the fly because we are new to this and then when we bring other people into it like volunteers they're new to it so you can't say too many things that are very obscure, so you kinda use descriptions a lot.

**Q12 – What special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed? What techniques and methods?**

JC – Well with working with horses, that's a whole skill set in and of itself. That is everything from daily care of those horses, feeding them, checking for injuries, and healthy weight, healthy hooves, to actually harnessing them, bridle on their head, hooking lines to their bit, having the skill set and knowledge how to drive them. As Kara said, speaking to them in their own language you know for them does not include many English words.

The horses that's a whole skill set. The infrastructure we've needed to build on this farm that is a whole skill set. I mean you hear so often from people that farmers tend to be one of the most skilled people and it's for a very good reason because you have to just know how to do so many different things. So there's all these things that don't have anything to do with plant production, and with vegetable production but are essential to running a farm that you gotta know how to do. We've learned how to run plumbing to be able to do our irrigation and

washing our vegetables. We've learned how to run electricity for simple purposes, we've built a barn.

KD – I was thinking even office skills. We apply for grants, so being able to sit down at a computer and create a budget and write a grant, or write a farm business plan, or do invoicing for restaurants. And then marketing, we do all of our market design work, it's very simple but it's our way of communicating to people - do you want to buy into our farm? Do you want to buy a CSA share? Do you want to buy from us at the market? We're doing that this season, or even marketing to restaurants you have to grab them with your product and your quality and prices.

I think our farm is very low-tech on the office work I hear of other farms, and some farmers will spend several days a week in the office, but they're managing bigger accounts, they're managing pay roll. And that's kind of where the skill set might grow for us is payroll and managing people's time and even becoming better carpenters and better with new machinery or tools

JC – And then there is the produce as well, that is such a huge chunk of knowledge in and of itself. Everything from basic growing skills that will kind of get you to be able to grow almost anything, to the more specific plant by plant, species by species, and understanding the soil and the microbiology activity that's happening in the soil and the way nutrients move through the soil, and water moves through the soil and how that interacts with the plant roots and from there up. That's a chunk of knowledge that we spend many, many hours reading through books and trying to stay up to date with the information that is coming down the line from other

farmers. There are people who have been doing this for 30 years and they won't claim to know it all yet, it's a constant learning curve. Ours was very steep in our first year, I don't know that's probably pretty true for a lot of people and then maybe it kinda plateaus or rises slowly past that but you are always learning.

**Q13 – What are things about your work outsiders would not expect?**

JC – I don't think people expect that we are young. Farming is so often attributed to older generations and older folks, the handful of neighbors we have near our farm here, I don't think any of them expected us to move in here and start a produce farm because of our age.

KD – I think that is a hard question because so many people don't understand nature, they have been so removed from it, they might not expect us to just be able to just squat down look at the broccoli plant and be able to tell how soon it's going to be able to make a broccoli head just by looking at the leaves or the height of it. I think a lot of people don't really understand or wouldn't expect a day to day relationship that a farmer has with walking through the field and looking at every plant, because people don't spend much time outside, the majority of the population doesn't go outside or touch a plant, or put their hands in a creek. I think maybe the stereotypical image is being on a tractor so you are removed from actually being on the ground through using machinery. And being a big farm, I think a lot people assume you have to have a lot of land to grow food and make an income. So the biggest thing people don't expect about our operation is how small we are, and how low tech we are, and that we did a lot, just two people and we'll grow and bring more people onto the farm.

JC – I think that is a good point about the income, I think a lot of people also would think that not just based on the amount of land we are growing on but just in general, just not believing or understanding that you can in fact make a living doing this and make an income. I think people approach us, “Oh how’s your farm going?” Or, “How’d your season go?” Almost like they are asking with the expectation of we’re just gonna be broke-(expletive) farmers, this first year might be kinda true but it’s our first year, we’re growing and it is doable.

Q14 – 37 – What were originally the most difficult aspect or your job?

KD – Sometimes I think the physical labor was the most difficult aspect of the job, knowing limits and knowing how hard you can work. But I think any farmer that is in a relationship with either a spouse or a partner would say that your other person that you’re working with 100% of the time can be the hardest part.

JC – 100% of the time?

KD – Yeah, its constant, we are coworkers, we are a married couple, we have so much responsibility, and we don’t fight. We haven’t weakened because of this, we only have a stronger relationship because of it, but I’ve heard from a lot of older farmers, the relationship is the hardest part, and I would totally agree with it. Because you love this work so much you would never want to give it up but at the same time you don’t want to harm your relationship with someone you love because of the stress of the work, it’s not that person that’s being difficult it’s just the work is hard. A lot of people say that’s the hardest part and I would totally agree.

JC – For me I would definitely say this first season the hardest part was just handling the stress of it. Like, there's a whole crop is succumbing to pest, or disease or we have this whole crop that's coming in beautifully but we kind of haven't necessarily made sure it was going to be sold and it doesn't keep very well. It's gotta all be harvested within the next day or two and it's all gotta be sold within a day or two of that. Its balancing that high level of pressure of we did all this back breaking work to get these plants to this point, this is the whole point of it to get them to this point where they've produced whatever it is that they are producing, and now you gotta make sure it gets sold or its just time and work and money down the drain. So being able to handle that high level of pressure and stress for me was definitely a huge challenge, something I'm working through though, learning.

**Q15 – What is/was the most satisfying?**

KD – Being outside every day is satisfying, whether its sunny or rainy or snowing, you are just in awe of how great the world is and the good people too that are either buying food from you, or just encouraging you, I think that is really satisfying, just the genuine connection you get with people. And for me personally, I really get satisfaction out of working with the horses, they are just great teachers and they're good listeners, they're very calm, and they put me in a good place mentally, so that's really satisfying, and we get to eat amazing food every day, organic, fresh, tasty, we know how it's been handled, we know what pesticide or none at all has been handled with it so that's satisfying for sure.

**Q16 – What advice would you give someone beginning this line of work?**

JC – Make sure it's what you really want to do, or even if you're not totally sure it's what you want to do, you have to commit to doing it, you can't half (expletive) it.

KD – (laugh)If you're not sure, make sure you commit.

JC – That's pretty confusing.

KD – That's great advice.

JC – I guess the point I'm trying to make is that this is not the type of work that you can kind of just try a little bit, you really have to do it, like going to work for someone else on their farm first, a successful farm that is operating at high capacity, go and work for them first and then imagining all that hard work you do for those people and then kind of in your mind doubling it, because once you run your own farm you are doing all these behind the scenes stuff that as an employee you don't have to think about or don't deal with. And do that first and ask yourself, "Is it something that I can really handle and stick to?" Because we've always told ourselves from the very beginning, just because we are committed 100% right now if even just five years from now if it is like messing up our relationship or whatever, we can back out of it, we're not holding ourselves to this as like our lives work for the next 40 years or until we are dead. That'd be cool, I mean if that's how it works out and we're successful that'd be great. But it's a lifestyle, it's way beyond a job, it's six or seven days a week, 10 to12-hour days, full on. So just make sure you're ready for that.

**Q17 – Describe a memorable moment from work.**

KD – I'm gonna come up with a scary moment.

JC – Those are the easy ones.

KD – Remember that time we almost got hurt? Yeah, we were logging with the horses and they were pulling hard, I was not able to totally control their speed and we stopped, we pulled the logs everyone was fine, we stopped, my nerves were a little shot, and we were like, well let's just do one more job with them, and we hooked them up to the homesteader, it's a cultivating tool, it's two horses and a little cart behind it if you can imagine that. So we hook up the horses, and I'm holding the lines before I get on there, and Jacob's hooking the front neck yoke, and they were bothered by the bugs, that was the big thing, the horse flies were biting them, and they were getting really antsy, and one of the horses threw a fit and she got one of her legs stuck on the other side of the metal bar called that's called the tongue.

JC – That's in between the two horses.

KD – So the horses are on either side of this metal bar and she got her leg over it, so that means she was straddling it and she started rearing and bucking and falling on the ground, and the only thing I could do was hold the lines and I told Jacob to get out of the way and she did that for two minutes, it felt like 30 minutes and she finally stood for long enough that we unhooked them, and it was really scary and it was like after that, we put the horses up, we tried to keep our cool and then we had a talk about like, "Alright, do we get rid of the horses? Did that scare us enough that we can't do this anymore?" And we kept the horses and we keep working with

them and they're good and it's like you can't let one really scary near death experience totally scare you out of doing this.

It was really good of us to have that conversation of totally honest, that scared the life out of me. If that had gone wrong, Jacob would've had a broken arm, I would've had a broken leg, the horse would've had a broken leg and we would have had to put it down. That is just like real talk, and I think it brings kind of what we do into a really big moment, we still want to do this work with horses, and just because it was scary we will remember that forever. And it was a good point in our first year, just how serious are we and what human error did we have in the whole thing, it wasn't just them it was a lot of us.

JC – And to kind of end on a more positive memory, one of the restaurants we sell to is Bistro Roca, the head chef of Bistro Roca also just happens to be our neighbor, so that was really convenient, we have become good friends with him and he invited us up to the restaurant for a meal that he comped and what was so exciting about it was that they had a featured plate that evening that was, all the vegetables on that plate were from our farm, I think there was a piece of fish too, obviously we didn't grow the fish, but it was a full circle moment of all this hard work we've done, we had been selling to restaurants through the area for several months leading up to that so it's not like this was our first sale or anything like that, but we got to dress up and be fancy, go to the nice restaurant, and enjoy a really amazing meal. And just to see the vegetables listed on the menu item that evening, and Kara was in tears talking to our waiter. And it was a very important moment from taking care of those plants in the dirt to now we're all dressed up and being fancy and it's being served on this beautiful plate, and being treated to that was just something I won't forget for a while.

KD – We really appreciate the community we live in and very specifically the people who are not farmers who are supporting farmers like the restaurant chefs and owners and then the extension agency is crucial I just can't imagine us getting this far without the help of the entire extension service for North Carolina, and our Watauga County Extension Office.

JC – And Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture

KD – Yeah (they are) a very important non-profit and the encouragement of people means a lot.