

UC Santa Cruz

Cultivating A Movement

Title

María Inés Catalán: Catalán Family Farm

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6jw5t4dt>

Authors

Catalán, María Inés
Reti, Irene H.

Publication Date

2010-05-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6jw5t4dt#supplemental>

María Inés Catalán



Photo courtesy of CUESA

Catalán Family Farm

María Inés Catalán was born in Santa Teresa, Guerrero, Mexico, in 1962. She immigrated to the United States in 1986 and picked broccoli and carrots in the Salinas Valley of California. Her father was also a migrant farm worker, but her grandfather had owned land that the family farmed in Mexico. Catalán's life took a different turn when in 1994 she entered an organic farming training program at the Rural Development Center in Salinas. (This was an earlier incarnation of what is now known as ALBA, the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association program). This incubator program helps farm workers become organic farmers by providing training in farming and marketing, and leasing them land.

After graduating, Catalán became the first Latina migrant farm worker to own and operate a certified organic farm in California, and the first Latina in the country to found a farm that distributes produce through a community

supported agriculture program. María Inés and her family have run Catalán Family Farms on fifteen acres of rented land in Hollister, California, since 2001. Their farm was certified organic by CCOF in 2005. The Cataláns grow kale, chard, strawberries, tomatoes, corn, onions, pumpkins, chiles and carrots, among other crops that they sell through Laughing Onion CSA and at farmers' markets around the Salinas, Monterey Bay, and San Francisco Bay areas, including the Ferry Plaza Market in San Francisco, and the Berkeley Farmers' Market.

In addition to her farming, Catalán is also an activist who devotes herself to improving food security for low-income communities, especially Latinos. She worked with the group P.O.D.E.R. (People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights), in San Francisco's largely Latino Mission district, to deliver CSA shares to their members. Over the years her CSA project has also collaborated with schools and churches, and with the Homeless Garden Project's CSA in Santa Cruz; it has delivered boxes to people who are home-bound, and provided information about her CSA in Spanish. Catalán set up a farm stand outside the government office in Monterey County, on the day when women pick up their WIC (Women, Infant and Children) allowances. She founded her own non-profit, Pequeños Agricultores en California (PAC), to help immigrant farmers acquire organic certification, helping them apply for grants and loans and work towards owning their own land. Catalán Farms also invites local high school and college students to visit and learn about organic farming. A group of eighth graders camps out each year for a week at a time and works the land. In 2008 Catalán was honored by the Center for Latino Farmers for "her tireless work in advocating for organic farming and assisting limited resource producers using her own funds."

This oral history was conducted on July 27, 2009, in Spanish, by Rebecca Thistlethwaite. Thistlethwaite and Catalán know each other from Thistlethwaite's work as program director for the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association. The interview was transcribed and sent to Catalán for her

edits and approval. Then it was translated into English. The transcript appears here first in English, and then in the original Spanish.

Additional Resources

Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association:
<http://www.albfarmers.org/>

See the oral histories in this series with José Montenegro, Rebecca Thistlethwaite, Florentino Collazo and María Luz Reyes, and JP Perez for more on the history of ALBA.

Catalán was a featured speaker at the Second California Community Food Security Summit in 2004 at a panel entitled “Farming for Social Change: Activist Farmers Addressing Hunger and Improving Community Food Security.” See www.foodsecurity.org/.../summit04-panel-farmingsocialchange.PDF

See “Latino Producers Voices Heard in DC USDA National Meeting,” August 6-8, 2008
www.centerforlatinofarmers.com/events.html.

For an article on María Inés Catalán’s organizing of small Latino farmers in the Hollister area see
www.centerforlatinofarmers.com/sitebuildercontent/.../rcdr-clfapril2008.pdf

A short video oral history with María Inés Catalán appears in the Oliveto Community Journal at
<http://www.oliveto.com/ourcommunity/farmers/Catalán-farms-profile>

The radio program “A World of Possibilities” did a feature on “Hungry Harvesters: Migrant Labor and the Poverty that Produces our Plenty.” Their online radio archive includes a full-length unedited interview (translated by one of María’s daughters) with María Inés Catalán. See
<http://aworldofpossibilities.org/program/hungry-harvesters-migrant-labor-and-the-poverty-that-produces-our-plenty>

NOPA, a new sustainable foods restaurant in San Francisco wrote about their visit to Catalán Family Farms in their blog at http://nopasf.com/food/inspiration_from_Catalán_farms/ This article includes some stunning photos of the farm.

Beginnings

Thistlethwaite: Today is July 27th, 2009. My name is Rebecca Thistlethwaite and I am interviewing María Inés Catalán just outside of Hollister, California. How are you?

Catalán: Very well. Welcome. (laughter)

Thistlethwaite: Thank you. I'm going to begin with questions about your childhood, about your time in Mexico, and about how you came to be here. So, when and where were you born?

Catalán: I was born in Santa Teresa, Guerrero, Mexico.

Thistlethwaite: And in what year?

Catalán: 1962.

Thistlethwaite: And what sort of work did your parents do?

Catalán: Well, my grandfather was a farmer. He grew peanuts, cotton, chile, and corn, and he raised cattle. I always think of my childhood as a very happy one, because I played in fields of cotton. It was all picked by hand. It was a traditional way of farming.

Thistlethwaite: And more or less organic, right?

Catalán: Rather organic, because we didn't use chemicals or pesticides at that time. It was all very natural.

Thistlethwaite: And did your parents also work?

Catalán: My grandfather was also contracted for some years in the 1960s, for some seasons. Contracted to work in Texas. My mother emigrated to the United States thirty-five years ago, separate from my father. And out of all of my siblings, I was the last one to emigrate to the United States.

Thistlethwaite: When did you come to the United States?

Catalán: I came twenty-two years ago, more or less.

Thistlethwaite: What motivated you to move here?

Catalán: I think that was only in order to be with my mother and my siblings, because I was basically alone with my children in Mexico, then. That was what motivated me to be close to my family, and so I moved. I was the last one to arrive here, after my mother and my siblings.

Thistlethwaite: Did you bring small children along with you?

Catalán: I brought four children along, four children. The youngest was two months old, and the oldest was eight years old.

Thistlethwaite: And do you still have four children, or do you have more?

Catalán: No, no, now I have grandchildren. The family has grown, but not with more children. Just four.

Thistlethwaite: And your father was a migrant worker, right?

Catalán: Yes.

Thistlethwaite: And what was that like, for him and his family?

Catalán: For his part, what he tells me is that he only came to work, to earn a bit of money so he could support his crops [plant crops on his own land]. And my grandfather, too, to make a bit of money. They were accustomed to farming [migrant work], you know? But they also made their own decisions on their own land.

Thistlethwaite: And they worked in season?

Catalán: They would go for the season, yes.

Agricultural Work in the Salinas Valley

Thistlethwaite: Tell me a bit about your experiences as an agricultural worker in the Salinas Valley and other places.

Catalán: Well, it's work that thousands of us people do, coming to labor in the fields, doing only one sort of work. I worked maybe seven years packaging broccoli, cutting broccoli. It's a very repetitive job. You don't do anything but that one task for hours and hours and days and months and years. And you don't have any other option. You don't get to think about it; you just do what you're told. You're just another step in the agricultural process.

The Programa Educativo para Peguenos Agricultores (PEPA)

Thistlethwaite: What motivated you to join ALBA's [Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association] PEPA [*Programa Educativo para Peguenos Agricultores*] program, and how did you change your outlook on life?

Catalán: What happened is that my mother worked many years in the fields, and she injured herself while working. So she is in a program in PEPA that she was invited to join. She was eligible because she is handicapped for the rest of her life. My mother didn't want to come alone. She wanted to invite me and my brother-in-law and my sister along, to see what it was all about. I came just out of curiosity, to find out what organic farming was. I said, "Well, what is that?" "How?" So we all began taking classes, my brothers, my sister, my brother-in-law, and I. But when we heard the explanation of what it was about—that they teach you to handle tractors, that you make your own decisions with your own risks, that you could become a small-scale organic farmer—all of this begins to motivate you to have a certain financial independence, and to approach work much more reasonably. Little by little, my brothers had to return to their temporary work. I was the only one who finished. I graduated after three years. I was one of the first women to graduate from PEPA.

Thistlethwaite: And how was it, being one of the first women?

Catalán: I only knew that I needed to work and to be independent, in order to teach my children how to work. So I wasn't so much thinking, "Oh, then I'm going to be the first," but rather that I wanted to be able to support my family.

Thistlethwaite: But, did they treat you well, as a woman? Or in any special way?

Catalán: No, no. Nothing special. On the contrary, the men would say to me, "What are you doing here? Go home to tend to your husband and take care of your children." They would tell me, "You're not going to be able to handle these tools, they are very heavy." And yes, yes I could. There's nothing that's impossible. I learned to work with the tractor. I learned to prepare the soil. I learned about diseases, about pests. And many of the people who were laughing at me, or made me feel bad because they thought I wouldn't be strong enough, many of them got left along the way. They didn't continue growing. They didn't survive in agriculture; they just went back to their old jobs. And I'm still doing it.

Thistlethwaite: Are you the only person from your class who is still planting, or are there others?

Catalán: No, Florentino Collazo¹ was from my generation. Who else? Moises Magaña, he's another farmer from around here, from the San Benito area. We are crazy (laughter). Only people who are not in their right minds would struggle and suffer for so many years to be doing what they want. Yes, it was many years of struggle.

Thistlethwaite: How was your training, and how were your first years cultivating at the Rural Development Center? Did it prepare you well to be a farmer, or were you missing some things?

Catalán: Well, then it was just the basics. It was just about using the tractor, fighting pests and diseases, learning about seeds and varieties. But it didn't

provide a guide, or support for the trade. It was very, very basic. But yes, I think that whoever studied and studied hard is doing well, and whoever didn't is not around anymore.

It is a good base for my business now, having started there. It was very difficult, because I stopped working altogether and dedicated myself to studying and beginning to work. They were years in which paychecks weren't arriving at home.

Growing up at ALBA

My children weren't like other children from other families that got to go away for the weekend, or got to go on vacations to Mexico. My children were always on the ranch, Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. They would spend the entire summer on the ranch at ALBA. That's where my youngest children grew up. It's where they ran and played.

My daughter, when she would get angry, she would tell me, "I'm fed up. I'm really tired of you and this ranch. I don't know why you had to go into training, why you didn't just go into training to work in an office. Here you're always doing the same thing, walking in the sun and in the mud." She would get very angry, and throw tantrums. She would start to cry. But that's where my daughter grew up. There are pictures of her from when they first planted trees in that first little communal garden. She was there. There are pictures of my children there, from when they were very young.

Thistlethwaite: I would imagine that their experiences there, growing up on that ranch, in that garden, changed their lives quite a bit.

Catalán: I think so. They know where we come from, how we started out. They have been with me through it all, through all of the progress, through the suffering and the limitations and the deprivations. Through it all.

Thistlethwaite: Do some of them still help with the business?

Catalán: All of them. (Laughter) Actually, my oldest son, he is the sales manager. He helps with the restaurants, and the shops, and the convenience stores. He is the general manager. He helps me with some markets, talking to the representatives, and with some licenses, permissions, certificates. He's the one that takes over when I can't do something.

Thistlethwaite: He handles all of the paperwork?

Catalán: Yes. He likes sales. He goes through about four or five markets in a week. The youngest boy spends the week here at the ranch. He goes out on sales as well. And my daughter is studying. She is the only one who is in school right now. She is going to university in December in Fresno, and she's studying law. And she helps on holidays and on weekends, at the farmers' market. She helps me in sales, too.

Thistlethwaite: How nice.

Catalán: Yes.

Thistlethwaite: And do you think that any of them want to keep the ranch up in the future?

Catalán: I think so. I think so. Yes, I think that they have learned to be independent. That's the only way of life that they know. They have never worked for other people. They don't know how to work in the field for a company, with a boss that follows you around—you have only fifteen minutes for lunch, and they hurry you, and you always have to rush. They don't know that way of life. I think what they know is this: their own ranch, their own decisions, their own world, their own way of selling. I do think that whoever doesn't want to continue with it is going to suffer, is really going to suffer.
(laughter)

Organic Farming as Traditional Mexican Agriculture

Thistlethwaite: Do you think that other young Latinos, or children of farmers, are going to continue to go into agriculture?

Catalán: I think that what is needed is a bit more motivation. I think that we need to motivate the young generation and show them facts and proofs that this is our world; this is our agriculture. This is what we did before. It's a traditional form of farming. It's just that we've changed the name—it's organic farming. But in reality it's a style of farming that we're used to, or at least our parents, our grandparents. This is what they would do, you know? They didn't use pesticides back then, or any sort of chemicals. So it's the same thing. It's just that here, young people get the idea that if their parents worked in the fields, it's the worst

thing they could do, that it's the worst thing that could happen to them, that those are the sorts of jobs that matter least. But the truth is, it's not like that. I think that we matter; we matter a lot. Working in the fields, or working on your own account, I think that we are very valuable. The work we do is very important, because not everyone can take ten hours of cutting broccoli, chopping lettuce, or picking chili. Not everyone has that strength, you know?

I tell my children, "The day that I die, or the day I am too old to work, the only thing I am going to ask of you and my grandchildren is that you never forget where you come from, or who your parents and your grandparents were." Because sometimes they forget, and that's where the problem starts. They start to lose appreciation. When you cut somebody down, what's it called? To look down, to look down on the work of the farmer.

I always tell my grandchildren, "You are Mexican; you have to speak Spanish. This is a ranch and it needs work. This didn't happen all on its own. This didn't all just fall to us from the sky. I worked very hard so that you would have all of this, so take care of it." One of them is nine years old, and the other is eight. My grandchildren see that I'm always looking over things. I'm always looking after the new seeds, the new crops that are sprouting, and thinking about what we will plant, and what we won't plant this year. And they started to dig out here, under the trees. And I asked them, "What are you doing?" "Oh, Mama Inés, we are going to plant things, too." "What are you going to plant there?" "Well, something, some seeds. What are we going to plant? What seeds do you have?" They ask me, "Can we plant beans?" And I tell them, "Yes, you can plant beans."

And they began to dig to plant the seeds for beans, and I told them, "This soil isn't ready yet." "Why?" And I say, "My son, you have to put compost on it, and dig more, and mix the soil around very well with your hand—" "OK." And so they went and they brought their bucket full of compost. We have furrows and furrows and acres and acres here, and they wanted to plant right here.

But at least they already have this vision, you know? I don't know. I haven't seen sowing like this. (laughter) I said, "You have to add some water when you mix the soil with the compost, then the seed has to go like this, in waves, so it will germinate. You give it some water, and then you leave it. And every day you have to dig a bit, to see if the soil—if it is marbled, it doesn't need water. If it opens up, you have to give it more water." "OK." And who knows, I haven't seen how it's growing. (laughing) But I tell them that they should learn to plant and produce their own food. If they don't want to be farmers they don't have to be. They don't have to be. If in the future, they want to have healthy food for their children, they have to learn to produce their own food. It doesn't matter to me. If they don't want to be farmers, if they think it was just the only option I had, that's fine. If they don't want to do it, it's all right, they don't have to. But they should learn to grow their own food for their families. That's the only thing that I ask. So it's the only thing that I am going to leave behind, since I don't think there will be money. (laughter)

Changes at ALBA

Thistlethwaite: Speaking of ALBA and the Rural Development Center, in your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of ALBA now? I know that it has changed a lot from what it was in past years.

Catalán: Okay. Back then, it was a support center for farm workers that wanted to be their own bosses and to be organic farmers.

Well, first the positive things. The good thing is that everything is modernized now. It's all set up with computers, and support systems in the markets, and there is a lot of support available for farmers. Everything is at their fingertips, from what I see from way out here. I haven't involved myself very much there, but what I see is that they have it all at their fingertips now.

The bad thing is that they are making it very, very academic. Now they are offering more book-based classes. Listen, a farm worker has a need for novelty. They say that necessity is the mother of invention. When you have no necessity, there will never be invention. I would rather see that the mission and the vision haven't been lost, that they are still supporting agricultural workers. It's about teaching them to produce their own food. The children from the high school—it's good because they have a notion to learn. But it wasn't so academically focused. English—I swear to you that at these levels I don't speak English. Well, yes, a little, the varieties, the names of all of the vegetables I have to know, and all the numbers, yes. I have to know enough to go and sell my goods, yes. But telling a farm worker that he has to learn English—it's necessary, but the fundamental thing is giving them the first kick, you know? The first push is to teach them. And then, with time, one sees the necessities. I had the language barrier. I had

the obstacle of being a woman. I had various obstacles to overcome but I've done it. I pay for it, because there are people selling at the farmers' market who speak very good English, including Americans working with me. I say, "I'm going to start taking English lessons," but what I really want is better administration, because that's where I'm doing poorly right now. But I do think first things first. Teach them the system, about certifications, permissions, pests, diseases, preparing the soil, and all of that.

Thistlethwaite: And then maybe later, when there is more motivation—

Catalán: The second step, yes. First things first.

Thistlethwaite: But not all of it at once?

Catalán: Not so much.

Thistlethwaite: Computer training, English, and all?

Catalán: No, no.

Thistlethwaite: Yes, that's a lot.

Catalán: Yes. I was the founder of an organic market cooperative. And I was the first Hispanic woman to start with the CSA [community supported agriculture] project in Salinas. Back then, my need to learn sales was so great that I started going to conferences. At that time, I wasn't eligible for grants. ALBA didn't have any funds. When I went to learn how to develop a CSA, everything was in English. I remember that we went to a conference in San Francisco, and we had to sleep in the car. We'd have coffee and a donut all day, because we didn't

qualify for the lunches. We were there for three days. And I would say, "All of these things that I'm going through have to add up to something someday, because this can't all be in vain." And sure enough, now we have our own CSA. We have it all. And I was the first.

Starting a CSA

Thistlethwaite: And how did you start your CSA?

Catalán: Oh, my God. Well, after I stayed up until one o'clock in the morning reading the CSA manual, I couldn't even tell you what it said. I tried to understand what it was saying just by looking at the shapes, looking at the drawings, of the different vegetables that they had to offer, and a few examples that they gave. The first year I almost went crazy planting. I was so happy that I was going to harvest and sell at CSA. I wanted to sell to my people, to Hispanic people, because they speak Spanish. But the result was that nobody from the Hispanic community wanted to buy vegetables. It's less desirable when we're used to being able to go and buy three bunches of cilantro for a dollar, or four bunches for a dollar. How are you going to pay, what was at the time twelve dollars for twelve different things? And many people worked with broccoli, or worked with lettuce, or worked with radishes, with onions. So they didn't want to buy from me – or rather, they didn't buy from me. There was a volunteer at Rural Development, and she was the one who began to promote me on the local radio station. The first people that bought from us were Americans; they were the ones who began to support me. And there are still about five families that

have been with us since we started. Five families. Now they pay in advance for the whole year.

I think that people had no confidence in me because I was a woman, and I didn't speak English. How were they supposed to trust me and send a check, when they weren't certain that I was going to be able to deliver their vegetables? There was nothing to back me up, just my word and their blind trust that I would get it done. I started out with twelve people, twelve families. But I had enough produce for fifty. (laughter) It was very, very difficult, because I wasted a lot of goods. There weren't enough members supporting me, and I was having trouble with the language, of course, as well. It was really difficult.

Thistlethwaite: And so, the volunteer helped out with the administration, and—

Catalán: And communications, and everything. But there were times when we had volunteers, and times when we didn't have any. So there were highs and lows.

Thistlethwaite: So that's when you started to sell at the farmers' markets, too? To sell off the remainder of your goods?

Catalán: I started going to a farmers' market on South Main Street in downtown Salinas. My children were around eleven or twelve years old at the time. And they would say to me, "Mommy, I want money." And I would tell them, "Well, then, go and sell some." And so the idea of selling there was because they wanted money. I remember that I would bring them and leave them there. I would set up their table, and they would sell cucumbers and squash. Sometimes

they would sell forty dollars worth. They would tell me, "Mommy, I'll give you twenty dollars, and I'll keep twenty dollars." Part of why they would come is because they liked to exchange with the fruit sellers, with the bakers, and with one man who sold silver. At that time, they were all crazy about silver. One of them would go one week, and another the next, to sell produce in order to exchange for silver chains or bracelets. And they would arrive with a crate of fruit. "Mommy, look, I got—" They'd have bread, or fruit that they got for the vegetables. Then, afterwards, the director and José Montenegro², who was the director of Rural Development, held some meetings, and we started to collaborate with the WIC [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—better known as the WIC Program], when there were no coupons. At that time, there were no coupons. We had to show the system that there was a need for people to eat vegetables and fresh fruit. I had to come and set up a table over there, at the WIC office in Salinas, where the classes come in. With a small table there, I would sell thirty, forty, forty-five, fifty dollars worth sometimes, on a good day. All day I would be there to educate people, and talk to them. I would be there. And we're recognized as the first ones. We are still there.

Thistlethwaite: Are sales better now?

Catalán: No.

Thistlethwaite: It's still mostly just to educate people?

Catalán: Now it's—well, because it started to bring in some money, many people, many farmers, wanted to come as well. And when they were looking for

farmers' support, only María Inés supported it, because she was a bit crazy. But now we have three farmers and one selling fruit. But yes, it's more or less, more or less. The first year that they gave out vouchers, nobody was there but us. We sold a lot. At least it made up for all those years that they didn't have vouchers, and we were there suffering all day long.

Thistlethwaite: And you still had the CSA?

Catalán: Yes.

Thistlethwaite: And how many members?

Catalán: One hundred family members.

Thistlethwaite: Wow. And what, for you, are the advantages and the disadvantages of a CSA?

Catalán: Well, for me there are no disadvantages. The odds are always in your favor. I don't see any disadvantages.

Thistlethwaite: It works well for your family?

Catalán: Sure, sure, and for the business. The farmers' market still has its disadvantages, but not the CSA. In the CSA, the people are conscientious. They support you. Everyone knows me, and they consume whatever the ranch produces, whatever varieties are available that season. So, that's always a clear advantage.

Thistlethwaite: And do they pay in advance?

Catalán: They pay in advance. Sometimes some of them pay you for the entire year, and others for six months, and others for three or four weeks. There are no disadvantages. You harvest; you wash your goods; you know what you are going to harvest and what you are going to bring along. You go, and you make a quick delivery, and that's it.

Thistlethwaite: And they take everything. They don't say anything, like, "I don't want that in my box," or "It's too much," or, "It's not enough."

Catalán: There will always be people that don't like certain things. The boxes get sold anyway. We've done what is easier and more manageable for the families. We have central locations where we deliver certain quantities, and we leave one or two boxes of vegetables open, depending on the season. Here's an example. If you're a member and you've paid, and you say, "Hey, I asked you not to give me parsley or artichokes, and this box contains parsley and artichokes," what you can do is you can take the artichokes that arrived in your box, and put them in another box. And you can say, "Hey, but I do like carrots." So you grab two bunches of carrots and you put them in your own box. And then somebody else comes, and they say, "Hey, I already told you that I don't want carrots." So leave the carrots. "Oh, but I do want artichokes and parsley." That's a way of doing things that is more manageable for me, and better for them as well, because in the end they are only going to get the things they want. It's impossible to satisfy one hundred people. The boys that do the washing and packaging have to do every box just the same, all the same. So, when it gets to loading time, they load everything the same, and then they unload it all the same. One guy is the one

who harvests, and another is the one who washes and packages, and another is the one who delivers. It's very difficult to make up one hundred specialized boxes.

Selling at Farmers' Markets

Thistlethwaite: And of the farmers' markets, which are the ones that you attend now, and where are they?

Catalán: The best, thanks be to God, and to all of the people involved. There are many people who have supported me along the way, and without their support I would never have been able to get to where I am now. There are people who have met me, who know my story, who have known me for years, and know how hard I have worked, know all that I have done. And they have really, really helped me. Right now we are attending a farmers' market in the marketplace in Ferry Plaza, in San Francisco, every Saturday. And I'm at the one in Berkeley three times a week. Those are the best markets in the whole country, in the whole country. So, just imagine. But like I say, I didn't get there with just my good looks, saying, "Hey look, I want to sell here and you are just going to let me." There were many people who supported me and helped me, and that's why we are where we are. So we're doing three days in Berkeley, one in San Francisco, and just Saturdays at the pier in Ferry Plaza. And it's been three months since we opened a daily one in downtown San Francisco, [at] Mission and 4th Street. The building is called Metreon and it's open every day from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. So it's like the Mexican market—it's inside a building, it's nice. I think it's going to work out well when it's raining, when it's cold, or for the families with young

children who can't go pushing the baby carriage down the street, along the open-air markets. So maybe that's really going to be good for families, and for us. We really suffer in the wintertime because of the air, because of the cold and the rain, when we go to sell. So we hope that this will work out for the best, for the families, and for us. In Oakland, we have three; we do three a week. In Castro Valley, there's another one, where one of my boys goes, I don't remember the name. And we do Salinas and Campbell.

Thistlethwaite: Campbell. And you're still at WIC?

Catalán: Yes, still.

Thistlethwaite: And do you also sell at Martin Luther King School [in Berkeley, California.]

Catalán: I sold there last year. This year I definitely can't, because business has really grown, and I have to be here. And paying someone to go for me isn't worth it, because I only liked going in order to chat with people. We would go and give workshops, and make dough. We would make tortillas there. It was my thing, something I liked to do. And I liked giving classes to the ladies, holding workshops and all. But now I definitely can't anymore. I just can't do it anymore.

Thistlethwaite: And you said once that you try to balance out selling to rich people, so that you can sell to less well-off people, too. Do you still feel that way?

Catalán: I still do. I still do, because the people that can pay, do. And they pay well. Yes. But I also like giving things away to people who cannot pay at all. One example is Salinas. In Salinas, the majority of people are low-income. What we

are doing is, we are printing out coupons. What I want is for people to come back and buy things, and take the produce with them, because if it doesn't get sold it will just get fed to my animals. In Salinas, we are giving people seven dollars, in two coupons. We're distributing them.

Thistlethwaite: Your own coupons?

Catalán: My own coupons.

Thistlethwaite: That's a good idea.

Catalán: So that people will come and buy things. I know that it's my business, and that's what I am always saying year after year to the new people at the market, and to the personnel at WIC. When we have meetings, I tell them, "This market is losing its vision, because when we got together with the director, the idea was—when we spoke with the people who were going to give us the money for the coupons, we told them that they were for low-income people, that we were going to give them a bargain, that we knew that organic food was more expensive but we were going to put it at a level, sell it at a reasonable and fair price, for both the farmer and the consumer. And most of all for Hispanic people, who were the ones—" And what's happening? They've forgotten about it. They only see this as business, as, "No, why would I give anyone a pound of tomatoes for a dollar? No, I'll sell them for three; I'm not going to give them away for a dollar." Yes, for three, but only where people have money and can pay that sort of price. Not here, where people don't have any money and can't pay. That's what I said. So, if they don't agree with my philosophy and my way of seeing life and business, well, I'm sorry. I sent an order for my coupons to be printed, and

I'll go distributing coupons everywhere. And I tell the women, "Don't lose it. It's worth seven dollars; it's seven dollars." "Don't you want us to lower the prices of produce?" I'll give people seven dollars with this piece of paper, but only if they go and buy things.

We, as Hispanics, shop where the prices are cheaper. That's why that farmers' market hasn't grown. That's why not many people go. Why? Because if the town supermarket is selling tomatoes for ninety-nine cents a pound, sometimes seventy-nine cents a pound, why would people pay \$1.50 for it at WIC, when the supermarket has it every day, and they can go whenever they want and buy it for ninety-nine cents? I tell them that I'm there, and people follow me and see me there and get closer. "Take three pounds for two dollars. Go on, take three pounds. It's cheap." Everyone wants to buy from me. That I know. Nobody can fool me. I have years of experience. If you're selling tomatoes—maybe heirloom tomatoes are a bit more expensive to produce. But Beefsteak tomatoes and Roma tomatoes, if you're selling them for seventy cents, at fifty cents a pound, you're making your profit. Your work is paid for. How can they tell me that they have to sell them for \$1.50 a pound in order to break even? It's not right.

So we've lost a lot of people. It really bothers me, and I'm angry. I know how this market started out. I know that our vision, our goal, was for people to come. And they always complain that, "Oh, we don't get much cash, and they don't advertise, and people don't come." Well, how are people going to come if it's much more expensive? People are not going to go; we are not going to go. They are going to buy the coupons, but only because they tell them that they can

exchange them there, that they can buy things there. But people are not going to come back. Not this way. They are not going to come back this way.

Thistlethwaite: It's always a problem when farmers have to earn enough to cover their costs but customers don't have enough money to pay the right price in this region. Everything is more expensive here—water, rent, and all. Do you have any other ideas or solutions as to how we can resolve this fundamental problem, that people don't have enough money to pay for the good, healthy food produced here?

Catalán: What should we do? What can we do? People can pay the right price. Do you know when an organic farmer loses out? When he has to waste his produce, throw it away. That's a real loss. While people are paying something, anything, for goods, it's all right, you can survive. But you're not going to survive if you don't sell it, and you have to throw it away.

Thistlethwaite: So the problem is over-production?

Catalán: The problem is conscientiousness: educating people, educating our own community. That's the problem. Instead of going and paying a dollar for a pound of Serrano pepper, they can come with me and say, "Okay, sell me a pound of Serrano pepper, and sell me three pounds of tomatoes, and three pounds of tomatillos and cucumbers and squash, and I have or I want two dollars or I want it for one dollar." It's more just a lack of information, a lack of information available to the people, letting them know that it's better to support local markets, local farmers, knowing who is producing the food they are eating,

and not just buying it at the supermarket, where you don't know who is being supported. That's what's missing. That's the problem.

Thistlethwaite: And do you think that message is something that people are going to understand or listen to?

Catalán: Well, yes, we are very intelligent people. If you talk to people and you tell them, they understand and they know what is good for them. Right now, the problem here is the big businesses, the big companies. It is inconvenient for them to say that a local market system can be managed by small-scale farmers. That's never going to happen. They won't let it happen. We're talking about a lot of money. That's where the problem is. Because when you're a small-scale farmer, you don't have time to advertise. You don't have time to involve yourself in the community, and that's what we should be doing as small farmers, getting involved. We should be letting the community know that we're here, that we're doing this. And we should be letting them know what they can get with us, and that through buying with us they are supporting the environment, and the local economy, and a family. Those are the sorts of things that we have to tell the community. What happens is that, as a farmer, you just don't have enough time. Either you're a farmer or you're a publicist. (laughter)

Thistlethwaite: You can't be both?

Catalán: Sometimes that's impossible. But the truth is that we can survive if our own community buys our produce.

Thistlethwaite: What motivated you to initiate the AMO cooperative, and how many years did you work at the cooperative?

Catalán: I don't remember the years. It was quite an experience for me as a woman. And it was because of the need for a market – that is, the need to sell our products. That's always a necessity for a small-scale farmer who is just starting out. And I've always said it, and I'll keep on saying it: the market system in the United States is run by a handful of agro-industrial corporations, and we just don't have the capacity to be a part of that system. We are not big enough, and at that time we were not very conventional, and nobody wanted to buy with us. We started chatting a lot with four other farmers, and me, as a woman, talking about what we were going to do with this produce, and what we were going to do with that produce. And we began to join together, to hold meetings to discuss what we would do in order to survive, in order to get people to buy our goods. And that's how AMO Organics was born. Many people don't know the meaning of AMO Organic, what it means in Spanish and English.

Thistlethwaite: "I love Organics."

Catalán: (laughter) No. In Spanish it stands for Asociación de Mercadeo Orgánico [Association of Organic Markets]. I saw an interview once in some newspaper, and they had asked someone who belonged to AMO, and they didn't know the answer of what it meant. But AMO Organic is the Asociación de Mercadeo Orgánico. And in English, too. It's the same. We started out as me and four men, and began to offer out our produce, like in Whole Foods in Monterey. We began to work together. I was the first treasurer. Everything was done by

hand, and we handled sales together. We shared all the work, and decided who would do deliveries on what days. We bought a tractor for us all to share, and we bought other things between us, as well. Everything went very well, because all five of us knew what we wanted. We just wanted to sell together and get our money and then divide it up. We opened an account in the bank, and we started depositing checks. I was the one who took care of the checks for the men. We deducted a percentage of our sales, in order to arrive at our own general fund. That's what we called it.

[The problem arose when] this person arrived, and began to tell us, "Get yourselves incorporated by the government, then you guys can apply with the government for funds from private foundations that give money to people like you." And blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So, since he was someone who worked for ALBA, we thought that he was well informed, that he really wanted to help us. We stopped working for the Rural Development Center to dedicate ourselves to building ourselves up. We got incorporated as a non-profit, and we started to apply for funding. He gave himself the title of general manager, so he would earn a lot. He was a manager of a non-profit corporation, but a manager nonetheless. I told him, "But that's a lot of money. We're not even making that." "But you guys are not going to pay me. I'm going to apply for grants, and that's where my salary will come from." "Oh, how nice!" While it wasn't coming out of our pockets, it was all well and good. So we started receiving grants, and in one of the proposals, that man wrote that we were going to grow in membership, that we were going to include more farmers. So we opened our doors to let new people in. But we already had equipment, we were already incorporated, we

already had a sales team, we had a manager, we had an office, we had a new tractor, we had a truck to send out for all of our needs. Then came the other six people, another six new small-scale farmers, and everything started to get a bit shifty. The man began to not want to work outside of his house. He would work from inside his house, and he would even send for the president to go over so that he could sign his paychecks. We didn't know what proposals he had sent, if he had sent any at all.

He said that he would handle all of the administration, and I gave him all of the paperwork. When I gave him the paperwork for one of the five farmers – I would know how much money one of them had, and how much money another had, and how much money another had, in the general fund. All of us already had our own capital, our tractor, all of that. It was ours, we hadn't asked for anything from anybody, and it was going well for us. But we grew so quickly. And we rented some land here, about a hundred and some acres, and the eleven of us, eleven farmers, stayed here while the manager stayed in Salinas. He stayed there, living in Salinas, and he wouldn't leave his house. He wouldn't come out here. He would only come out here for meetings. He would send for the president, for him to go so he could sign his paychecks.

And I began to have doubts. In my first three years here, I volunteered for a state women's organization called Líderes Campesinas, in California. I was a part of the board of directors, and I learned a lot. They provided us with a lot of training. So I began to question him, because what was happening— At one meeting, he wanted us to authorize him to sign the checks for – I told him, "You

can't sign the checks because you are an employee. You can't sign them." So those are the sorts of internal problems that started. The cooperative became divided between some of the old members and some of the new ones. And two sides were formed, and it split. It all ended. The guy went on vacation the last year. He went to Colombia. He was Colombian, and he was still taking his salary, even though he hadn't yet received any grants from his proposals. He had stopped writing proposals; he had stopped bringing in money. So he was taking his salary from the sales that we were making, and from the general fund that we had from before.

When he went away, he left us in the red. We had no money. He had lost all of our capital, and he sent no reports of the money he had already received. He didn't send anything. And the taxes weren't paid. In short, it was a complete disaster. And what a shame, because it was all because of our lack of information. Because many of us had just learned to write our names. We were manipulated.

Thistlethwaite: And did you lose the tractor, too?

Catalán: We lost everything. We lost everything because we let someone else manage us. Because the men – surely many of them didn't even know what a board of directors was, and didn't know their responsibilities or their rights. They didn't know anything. They didn't know that the power that they had was as a board of directors. They themselves were the owners of the corporation. We couldn't manage this corporation. We were already sending Hawaii watermelons, melons, and other produce. We were sending goods to Canada,

and to any state here in this country. We were already sending produce. And everything just ended. Many of the others stopped farming altogether. Like the president of the cooperative, he couldn't continue farming because really— They didn't suffer what I did in order to have what we had. Or, they wanted everything handed to them, I don't know.

Thistlethwaite: But you are still organizing some farmers, right? In one form or another?

Catalán: (laughter) Yes. I think that it's my – it makes me feel good to support other people. Last year, the USDA recognized me for leadership in my community, for supporting the small-scale farmers. It's a national recognition that they only give to already incorporated organizations or various rural agencies of the USDA or employees. And the fact that they gave it to me, an independent small-scale organic farmer, left me like, "You're talking to me?" But yes, they recognized me on a national level.

Thistlethwaite: Wow.

And what is the name of the group that you work with now? What is the purpose of that group?

Catalán: Look, once again I started out with that concern. I still had that anxiety. I was left with this little thorn inside that maybe it was my fault. I wanted to see if really I was the one that failed in that first organization, with what happened. Two years ago, I helped out at the USDA as a volunteer with the census. I was trained to help the men fill out the census. It was confidential and everything. I

received funds from the USDA of Sacramento to hold an event. And I began to meet other people. I arrived here at this ranch five years ago. And here in Hollister it's been eleven years. [interview interrupted for a minute]

Thistlethwaite: Can you tell me again [about] the organization that you are with now? What is the group called?

Catalán: Small Farmers in California.

Thistlethwaite: And you are trying to organize them, to help with the markets?

Catalán: Yes. First of all, all of the regulations, the certifications, the commissioner, so they know what the commissioner does, what [California Certified Organic Farmers] does, what the state does, all of that. That's what we do, and we are working a lot. Catalán Family Farm supports them economically and checks and makes sure that they learn what organic certification is, what they should use, and what they shouldn't use.

Organic Farming Philosophy

Thistlethwaite: And speaking of your organic philosophy, why did you choose to cultivate organically, and what does organic agriculture mean to you?

Catalán: Well, for me, it's something I grew up with. For me, it's nothing new. It's something that reminds me of playing in the cotton fields, playing in mountains of peanuts, corn, watermelons, and melons, of herding cattle, and riding on horseback. And I wanted – if one day I had grandchildren, I thought, I would want my grandchildren to grow up the same way – the same way I did. It

was something that is impossible for many people, because, you know, just imagine, you arrive here, and you have to live in a little room, in an apartment. How can you dream of having your own ranch and having your grandchildren grow up the way you did? That's impossible for millions of people, because they just work in fields where children aren't allowed to go because they are sprayed with chemicals and pesticides. That's what I liked about it, that my children could come with me day after day, and that I could take them there and teach them. My children have learned that way.

Thistlethwaite: So they could live in a safe place and play?

Catalán: Yes. Yes. Now my grandchildren have young goats, they have chickens, they have horses, and cows. They are growing up the way I wanted to see them grow up. They run around all dirty, full of soil, of mud. They know all of the tomatoes, all the variety names, the colors, and all of the vegetables. They have learned very well.

Thistlethwaite: And do they all live here, on this ranch?

Catalán: Yes. Only two children don't live with me, but they come from time to time. They visit, and they like to come here.

Securing Land for the Ranch

Thistlethwaite: And speaking of this ranch, are you now the owner?

Catalán: No, not yet. We're in the process. We have a legal document in which the owners commit to passing it on to us. The deal was that they— When I was

left without a house, someone called me in Spanish and said, "I am Juanita Velazco and I've been buying your vegetables for a year, and I spoke with Kathy," she told me, the American women from church, the leaders. "And she mentioned that you needed a place to farm." And I told her, "Oh, yes, can you believe it, they closed my trailer. I don't have anywhere to live." And she said, "How? Is that possible?" I told her, "Yes." And she said, "Well, my husband and I just sold a property, and we would like to help you." And they didn't know me – or rather, I didn't know them. I would only look at their checks and give them the vegetables, but they didn't know me personally. She told me, "We have some money. We can invest it. Go and look for a ranch and then come talk to us. When you find one, come and talk to us."

But the man called me later, and told me, "I would like to hold a meeting with you or your husband. I would like to meet with you. How do you plan on paying me? How do you plan on buying it?" He came and he looked at the ranch, the very small ranch, and he said, well, you can't live on that. And so I told him, "Look," and I brought him all of the forms that I had from the past years of the CSA, how many people we sold to, where we would deliver, receipts of checks from restaurants. We began to sell at the farmers' markets, because he asked me, "How are you going to make the payment?" That is, "How are you going to pay the rent for a ranch," if we were to get it or buy it. I told him, "Look, if I pay, to pay the rent, I can keep paying it. What I want is something secure."

He told me, "Well, my wife really wants to help you out. Just because of that, I will invest my money in a ranch. I am a businessman and I would prefer to

invest in a condominium and get out—I don't know anything about farming, and I don't want to know anything. Give me your word that you are going to stick with the ranch, because if you leave it to me, I don't know what to do with it." I said, "Well, even though I'm a woman, I give my word, and I keep my word." I told him that I wouldn't leave the ranch. We just wrote up a paper; if I die my children have to keep up this commitment. "And if you die, you have to—" He told me, "I'm not going to put in even a fifth. I'm not going to put even a penny more into the ranch. You all have to put in for the month, pay off the month, and if the ranch needs repairs, or the house needs repairs, you have to carry it out."

So we started looking for a ranch. We looked at one, and we didn't like it. So we looked at others, until we found this one. And the man said, he told me, "Oh, Mrs. Catalán, I didn't believe in you. Who is this person?" He said, "I didn't believe in you." And I told him, "If I plant ten thousand heads of lettuce, I want eight thousand dollars. Two thousand will be lost, but eight thousand will be sold." He stayed looking at me, "You want to earn more than the corporations?" I told him, "Well, of course! I'm going to grow these few heads of lettuce with love, and I already have people who will buy them, who will eat them." Now we respect each other quite a bit. We have a very good working relationship, and they still keep insisting that we stay with the ranch, and that's the plan. Because we've already set up a packing shed; we've already set up many things. We are investing a lot of money in the ranch, but the hope is that it will go towards our future. Because of legal problems, we weren't able to make that transaction. What we are doing is incorporating our business. It's a small company now,

legally. It's a fictional person. It is going to set up its own credit, and we are going to see if—

Thistlethwaite: And do you at least have a contract here?

Catalán: Yes, yes, yes. Now we do.

Thistlethwaite: So, it's all secure?

Catalán: Yes.

Women Farmers

Thistlethwaite: How nice. Are there any specific obstacles that you encounter as a Hispanic farmer? As a female farmer who is also Hispanic?

Catalán: I lost my partner, the man who sent me to school, because he didn't support my development and growth in that way, as a woman and especially as a businesswoman. That person didn't support that internal change I was going through. And he had the option to leave. He left me. He abandoned me because I wasn't the same woman anymore. I was the same woman, but I no longer had the same – like that. And culturally—in our culture, it's very difficult for a woman to begin making the decisions. It's very difficult. That's the biggest obstacle, culture. And I think that I'm breaking it in a way. My [current] partner and I have only been together for five years. He's very traditional but he knows and he respects my decisions. He knows that I'm the one who is in control of the business, and he just follows instructions when it comes to the business. Well, we're going to see who takes control.

Thistlethwaite: Who wins.

Catalán: (Laughter) With the business, I make the decisions.

Laughing Onion CSA

Thistlethwaite: And regarding your business, how did you choose the name, the Laughing Onion Farm?

Catalán: The Laughing Onion is not the name of my business. It's the name they wanted to give to the CSA. The business is the Catalán Family Farm. And under Catalán Family Farm comes Laughing Onion CSA Community Support. It's the name that a volunteer gave to the project. We needed a name, and we needed something for the people to identify with. Not as María Catalán, but rather as a project, a way of selling our goods. And I told her, [the volunteer] "Well, you come up with a name." And she said, "María, we need a name. What are we going to call it?" "Oh, man, you come up with one. I don't have time!" (laughter) She brought me this one. "Oh, how cute," I told her. "It's really cute! This is what it will be." And when I presented it to my children, "Oh, no! The laughing onion? You could have put a watermelon, at least, or a melon. No! We don't like it." And I said, "No, it's staying the way it is, because she worked on it. It's staying." "Mom! But, does it have to be an onion?" But I told them, "It's staying."

Thistlethwaite: And does it already have a logo and everything?

Catalán: Yes, that's how many people recognize it in Monterey, and in that area.

Thistlethwaite: And how do you advertise? Is it necessary to advertise?

Catalán: Through the farmers' markets, and through opportunities we get to be on the radio, or be on television. Everyone —

Thistlethwaite: But you don't need a website, or business cards?

Catalán: We're a bit behind on that. We're just starting to create a website. Someone is doing that for us. And we're going to start making our own boxes for packaging our produce. We're around; we're listed on various business websites, like for restaurants. The ones that buy from us put us on their sites. We're listed on the farmers' market sites. We're around. There are little stories featured about us. But we're developing our own website, too. We participate in a few cooperatives. We put in organic produce, and they put in eggs, honey, lavender, and things like that. We work with some non-profit groups in San Francisco, where they create their own flyers for their community. Our CSA works in a way where we have volunteers that organize certain areas of their community, and then they create their own flyers. In San Francisco it's called the CAJA. It's the *Comunidad Apoyando una Justa Agricultura* [Community in Support of Just Agriculture].

Thistlethwaite: CAJA? A good idea.

Catalán: So, that's us. If it's in Monterey, in the area, it's Laughing Onion, Catalán Family Farm. On the other side, here, in the Kaiser, Santa Clara, and Los Gatos, they create their own method of payment, their own methods of inscription and— well, everyone supports it in one way or another. It's helping us to survive, because I don't have anyone in particular handling the administration, and I need someone. So, the idea is to have our own office here,

because it's in urgent need, and to try and coordinate here all of the— Because I'm doing it all, sorting tomatoes and coordinating volunteers. I'm chopping cucumber and discussing things with the guys. And I'm going crazy.

Thistlethwaite: It's like your office is in your truck?

Catalán: Oh, yes. The kitchen, and the dining room is sometimes full of papers and documents. We're trying to do it all better, at a higher level. We're selling more than a half a million dollars a year. Not that I have that money.

Thistlethwaite: It's sales.

Catalán: But it's money that comes in, that is paid and that goes out in bills. Money goes towards everything. But it's a budget of half a million. And my children say, "Where is the money? Did you spend it all?" (laughter)

Thistlethwaite: You're supporting the local economy, right, with seeds?

Catalán: The guys, yes.

Thistlethwaite: And do you have employees, too?

Catalán: Yes, many. Many. Here at the ranch we have six in the field, two washing and packing inside here, three drivers, and about fifteen girls that help me on the weekends, girls from the school nearby.

Thistlethwaite: For the farmers' markets?

Catalán: Yes, for the farmers' markets.

Thistlethwaite: Wow, that's really complicated, isn't it?

Catalán: Sometimes I finish work on Sunday afternoon and, oh my God, I just don't want to have anything to do with it anymore. I don't want to hear anything about it. Because from Friday on my daughter helps me to coordinate the girls, but there are times when at four in the morning they are telling you, "No, Fulana is not coming to the market." And you just say, "What will I do? What can I do?" In places like San Francisco, or Berkeley, or Oakland, we need five people at each stand. Rebecca, people wait in line to buy from us.

Thistlethwaite: They're fighting to get to your produce?

Catalán: Yes. It's full, really full! We're written about in the newspaper, the best garbanzos, the best tomatoes, the best strawberries. We've been in first place, the best strawberries in Berkeley, for five years. So I can't complain. I don't have any money, but you see, it's a really nice feeling, being recognized that way.

Challenges

Thistlethwaite: And what aspects of the business keep you up at night?

Catalán: The winters. (laughter)

Thistlethwaite: Deciding what to plant, and the money?

Catalán: There's no money in the winter. There's not much production; little is sold. There's the rain, and the air, and the cold. And there are no sales. That keeps me up at night; it keeps me up.

Thistlethwaite: And what are you doing in order to expand your production in the winter? Are you building tunnels?

Catalán: We sell all year round, and we produce all year round. Right now we are already buying the seeds that we will harvest in December.

Thistlethwaite: And do you have time to take vacations? Any day off during the week?

Catalán: [Catalán shakes her head to indicate that she does not have time to take vacations.] Today is my day off. But I like to survey what is left over, how much produce comes back from each market, so that I don't send so much the next week. We have many things that we need to do.

The Effects of the Global Economic Crisis

Thistlethwaite: And is the global economic crisis affecting your business?

Catalán: Of course it is. It's affecting everyone!

Thistlethwaite: In what way? Less sales, or higher expenses?

Catalán: Look, first of all, the price of fertilizer went up, and seeds. Before people would buy two heads of lettuce, and now they buy one. If they would buy two pounds of tomatoes, now they only want one. People are more careful with their money. They are afraid of spending too much, because there is not enough. Many people lost their jobs; many people now want to volunteer just to get their box of vegetables, because they don't have any money. People who were paying

me in advance for six months of produce are now telling me, "If you want, I can help you."

Thistlethwaite: Do you take volunteers?

Catalán: Yes, yes, yes. There is a lot of work to be done. It's better for me. That way I don't have to deal with any money. (laughter)

Desire, Perseverance, Strength, and Insanity: Qualities Needed to be a Successful Farmer

Thistlethwaite: And what advice would you give to people wanting to go into a career as a farmer?

Catalán: I would say they have to have a need: a need, a desire, perseverance, strength, and insanity. (laughter) I think I've always said that my need was the cause of my achievement: my need. I had a need to provide food for my children, to make a bit of money. I had that need to be able to survive and that need brought me to where we are now, through my work. Money has to come in for thirty families, not people, but entire families who depend on a good growing plan. That's going to determine whether or not they have any food. So, for me it's a commitment, it's a big commitment. Now it's just María Inés and what I can feed my children. I would take them squash, whatever there was I would feed to them. Now, I have my children, and they are responsible for their own families, and the people in our group who are working, who rely on sales.

Thistlethwaite: There are thirty families participating now?

Catalán: Between workers and farmers. And I think probably more. So, just imagine. I have to be thinking about what we are going to plant. I have to plan for fifty-some acres, and decide how much we are going to plant for each crop, so that we will be able to sell it.

Thistlethwaite: And sell it all.

Catalán: And sell it all. And to have that money get to those families, because the money that comes in isn't just for me.

Thistlethwaite: A lot of stress, I'd imagine.

Catalán: Yes, and then they tell me, "Ms. María, do you have any money? Can you lend me twenty dollars, because I don't have enough for gas. Look, we need fertilizer and it hasn't arrived. Oh, and when is the plant going to arrive, when should I pick it up?" Oh, my God.

Visions for the Future

Thistlethwaite: And these days, what are your hopes and visions for the future of your ranch, and for your family?

Catalán: Well, I'd like my children to keep it going, and to keep doing what they're doing. It's a position that many people would like to be in, that many people are fighting to be in, to get what my kids already have. I would like them to keep it going, but if it doesn't turn out that way, I'll be happy to do it myself while I'm alive, because it's what makes me happy. They will have their own happiness, but whoever doesn't keep it up is going to suffer, and suffer a lot,

because it took a lot of work and sacrifice and tears. I had to stop being a daughter, stop being a sister, stop being a woman, stop being a mother, many times, because I have always prioritized my business. So if they don't value it, and they don't take care of it, it's their own problem. And I'll be content that, as long as I am living, I'll be doing what I love to do. If God has it that I keep living and I can't work anymore, I've already told them that, though it may be in soil away from home, I'm going to keep planting.

I would like to give motivational workshops someday, to young farmers. That's what I want to do in the future: to support them, to guide them, to advise them what comes first and what comes later. As Hispanics, we [do things] backwards. I always give them the example of white people. First they study, they prepare themselves. I think that they only marry and have kids when they retire. When they are retired, they are raising their children. (laughter) But they are already secure for their final years, and so they have time to take care of that child. I've seen a lot of cases like that. And we, as traditional Hispanic people, first we get married. We don't study; we get married, we have kids, and then later we want to get ahead with a wife and children, when it's three times as difficult to get ahead that way. But that's how we are.

I tell my children, "Go to school, go to school." "Ay, mama, no." But if they each already have two or three kids, you know? So I tell them, "No, it's because we are backwards." And I don't blame them. That's the pattern that comes from family, from parents, grandparents, and children. Before we're thirteen or fourteen, we are getting married, and then at twenty-five, twenty-six, thirty, we

want to get ahead when there is already the big responsibility of three, four, or five kids. So, when? That's why it's difficult to leave our jobs, that's why. Instead of studying, preparing ourselves, equipping ourselves, we only start doing so after marrying and having children. Then we want to get ahead when we are already surrounded by children. Really. And I tell them that I'll go to school so that they will, too. I love it. I love to sit down and learn, and look at books. I would like to go back to school.

Thistlethwaite: And maybe teach one day?

Catalán: Yes.

Thistlethwaite: How nice. Well, I think that's everything.

Catalán: Oh, my God.

Thistlethwaite: Do you have any final comments, or anything you would like to say?

Catalán: Yes. Well, that we, as simple people, without an education, many times we have dreams and our reality kills our dreams and doesn't let us get ahead. So, find a way, if you have a dream, to not let your reality kill your dream. Believe in yourself, and find a way to make your dream come true. Grab hold of that dream. When I finished my three years of study and received my diploma, I was happy because I was a small-scale independent organic farmer. I would see that in my pockets I didn't have more than seventy-five cents, three quarters. And I would say, "How am I going to grow anything if I don't have any money?" So my reality was telling me that I couldn't, because I didn't have

enough money. But my dream—I believed that I could. I worked for Rural Development cleaning bathrooms, cleaning offices, cleaning that ranch, in order to pay the rent myself.

Later, for many years I worked. I struggled a lot with the market. My reality was telling me that I couldn't carry on, because I didn't have any money, and because I had seen a lot of loss in the past three years, and I couldn't go on. I couldn't go on, but my dream was telling me that I could, I could. And I wanted to do it. I wanted to do it. I would say, "If I'm going to work for someone else, I'd rather work for myself here all day and through some of the night."

I started out by myself, with my children. And we worked cleaning, and planting only ourselves because we didn't have the money to hire anyone. And we sold little. I started out mostly in direct markets, and my dream became true because I held onto it. My brother would tell me, "Leave it, come and work with us. You'll get your weekly check. You work twelve or fourteen hours every day, and you have no money. What is it all for, if you have no money?" I would never have any money. My brothers would give me packets of tortillas, packs of chicken. They would help me out because I had no money. They would give me a gallon of milk for my children, because I had no money. And now they are still working there, and I'm working just the same way, right? Or maybe worse. But even sometimes, when they make more than I do, I still feel good about it. They keep working in the field for another company, and I tell them, "See, I should have listened to you and gone to work with you, but no, I'm here." (laughter)

But yes, it's—you have to have a lot of willpower, and believe in yourself and your dreams, and make your own dream come true. You can't let your reality kill your dream, because that's where it all ends. I keep struggling. It's all a struggle. These past two years have been very bad, but we are still living, we are still surviving. People tell me, "Mrs. Catalán, you're so successful." And I tell them, "What? What success? I'm just surviving." "That is success! Surviving!" "Ah, I thought that success was having money. Ah, so surviving is success? Ah, yes, then I am very successful!" (laughter) That's the truth, and we're still here.

María Inés Catalán en Español

I [Interrogante]: OK, hola. Hoy día es el 27 de Julio y yo me llamo Rebecca [Thistlethwaite] y estoy entrevistando María Inés Catalán. Como estas?

R [Respuesta]: Muy bien, buenos días. Bienvenida. (risa)

I: Gracias. OK, voy a empezar con preguntas sobre su niñez, su tiempo en México y como llegaron aquí ustedes so cuando y donde nació usted?

R: Yo naci en Santa Teresa, Guerrero, México.

I: Y en que año?

R: 1962.

I: Y que tipo de trabajo hicieron sus padres?

R: Bueno mí- mi abuelo era agricultor. El sembraba cacahuate, algodón, chile, maíz y tenia ganado. Ósea siempre yo recuerdo mi niñez muy bonita por que jugaba en costales de algodón, se cosechaba a mano. Era una agricultura tradicional.

I: Mm-hmm. Y mas o menos orgánico, verdad?

R: Mas bien orgánico por que no se usaban químicos ni pesticidas en ese tiempo.

I: Mm-hmm.

R: Todo era muy natural.

I: Y sus padres también trabajaban?

R: Mis padres- mi padre (inaudible), mi abuelo también vino algunos años contratado en los 60's temporadas, contratados a Texas a trabajar. Mi madre emigro hace 35 años a Estados Unidos, separados de mi padre. Y de todos mis hermanos yo fui la última que emigro a Estados Unidos.

I: Y cuando vino a los Estados Unidos?

R: Vine hace mas o menos 22 años.

I: Y que motivación tenía para moverse aquí?

R: Pienso que era solo por estar con mi mama y mis hermanos por que yo estaba básicamente sola con mis hijos en México ya. Y eso fue la motivación de estar junto con mi familia y emigre. Fui la última que llego aquí después de mi mama, mis hermanos.

I: Y llevaba niños chiquitos?

R: Traía cuatro niños, cuatro niños. La más pequeña venia de dos meses y el mayor venia de ocho años.

I: Y todavía tiene cuatro hijos, o...

R: Todavía tengo (risa).

I: O hay más?

R: No, no, ya tengo nietos. Ha crecido la familia pero no hijos, solamente cuatro.

I: Cuatro.

R: Si.

I: Y su padre fue un brasero, verdad?

R: Si.

I: Y como fue la experiencia para el y su familia?

R: Para el lo que el me platica es de que solamente venia a trabajar, a ganar algo de dinero para poder sostener sus siembras y a mi abuelo también para agarrar un poco de dinero. Pero era algo como ellos estaban acostumbrados a sembrar, verdad? Pero ellos tomaban sus propias decisiones y aquí solamente trabajaban haciendo una sola cosa.

I: Mm-hmm. Y trabajaban por temporada?

R: Por temporadas se iban, si.

I: Y cuéntame acerca de su experiencia como trabajador agrícola en el Valle de Salinas y otros lugares.

R: Bueno yo pienso que es- es un trabajo que hacemos millones de personas, venir a trabajar al campo donde trabajamos haciendo solamente un tipo de trabajo. Quizás yo trabaje un promedio de siete años empacando brócoli, cortando brócoli. Entonces es un trabajo que repetitivo que no haces otra cosa mas de que hacer el mismo trabajo por horas y horas y días y meses y años. Y no tienes- no hay otra opción, ósea, no piensas que es lo que es mejor, solamente haces lo que se te dice. Eres un numero mas en el sistema agrícola.

I: Y que motivación tenia para entrar al programa PEPA y como cambiaste su visión de tu vida?

R: Lo que paso es que mi mama trabajo muchos años en el campo y ella se lastimo trabajando entonces ella esta dentro de un programa y ese programa lo invito a conocer el programa de PEPA que quizás mi mama era elegible por estar deshabilitada ya de por vida. Y mi mama no quiso venir sola, quiso invitar a mi, a mi cuñado, y a mi hermana para saber que era eso y yo vine solamente por curiosidad para saber que era agricultura orgánica, no? Ósea, dije pues que es eso? Como? Entonces empezamos las clases todos mis hermanos y mi hermana, mi cuñado y yo. Pero al paso de- al escuchar nosotros la explicación de que se trataba, que te enseñaban a manejar tractores, que tomabas tus propias decisiones bajo tu propios riesgos, que podrías llegar a ser un pequeño agricultor orgánico, ósea todo eso te empieza a motivar a tener tu propia independencia económica y el trabajo con mucha mas razón. Y poco a poco mis hermanos tuvieron que regresar a sus trabajos temporales y solamente yo termine. Me gradué a los tres años, fui una de las primeras mujeres que se graduaron de PEPA.

I: Y como fue como una de las primeras mujeres?

R: Yo solamente sabia que necesitaba trabajar y ser independiente para enseñarle a mis hijos a trabajar. Entonces no estaba pensando tanto en que, "Ah, pues voy a ser la primera," sino que solamente quería poder sostener a mi familia.

I: Pero le trataban bien como mujer o algo especial?

R: No, no, no, no. Nada de especial, al contrario me decían los señores, "Y usted que hace aquí, vágase a su casa a atender a su marido, a cuidar a sus hijos." Y decía yo, pues pero luego me decían, "Usted no va a poder con esos fierros,

están muy pesados." Y si, si pude. Entonces ya no hay cosas imposibles y aprendí a hacer mi trabajo con el tractor. Aprendí a preparar la tierra, aprendí sobre enfermedades, sobre plagas y muchos de los que se reían de mi o me hacían sentir mal por que pensaban que yo no iba a poder, muchos se quedaban en el camino. No siguieron sembrando, no sobrevivieron en la agricultura, regresaron a sus antiguos trabajos. Y yo sigo todavía.

I: Y usted es la única persona de su clase que sigue cultivando o hay otros?

R: No, este, Florentino Collazo fue de mi generación (risa). Quien otra persona? Moises Magaña, otro agricultor de aquí del área de San Benito. Y además como...

I: Efraín Avalos?

R: No, no. Efraín, el llegó después. Habremos como cuatro ahora.

I: Que son locos todavía?

R: Si, que estamos locos. (risa) Solamente una persona que no está en sus cinco sentidos puede batallar y sufrir tanto año para poder estar haciendo lo que quiere. Y pues si, fueron muchos años de batallar.

I: Y como fue la capacitación y sus primeros años cultivando en el centro de desarrollo rural? Le prepara bien para ser una granjera o le faltaba?

R: En aquellos era lo básico, solo el tractor, preparar plagas, enfermedades, aprender algo sobre semillas, variedades pero no había, este, una guía, un apoyo para el mercadeo. Era solamente algo muy, muy básico. Pero si, el que lo aprendió y lo aprendió bien creo que le está funcionando y los que no, pues no están ahora.

Fue algo muy, muy- una muy buena base para mi negocio ahora el haber empezado ahí. Fue algo muy difícil por que yo deje de trabajar completamente y me dedique a trabajar, a estudiar y a trabajar y fueron años que no llegaba un cheque a la casa y que mis hijos no eran como otros niños de otras familias que los fines de semana salían a pasear, que iban de vacaciones a México. Mis hijos siempre en el rancho Sábados, Domingos, días festivos. Veranos completos ellos pasaron en el rancho en ALBA. Ahí crecieron mis niños los mas pequeños, ahí corrieron, ahí jugaron. Y mi niña cuando se enojaba me decía, "Ya estoy harta, pero muy harta de ti, de este rancho por que yo no se por que tenias que haber ido a un entrenamiento, por que no te fuiste a un entrenamiento que te fueras a trabajar a una oficina y no ha seguir haciendo lo mismo, andar en el sol y en el lodo." Y se enojaba y hacia sus berrinches, se ponía a llorar y pero ahí creció mi hija. Hay fotos de ella cuando en el primer jardincito que tuvieron, comunitario, plantaron arboles y ella ahí esta. Esta ahí fotos de mis hijos ahí que están muy pequeños.

I: Y me imagino que la experiencia de ellos creciendo en el rancho, en el jardín, cambiaron su vida mucho, verdad?

R: Pienso que si, ellos saben de donde venimos, como empezamos. Ellos han estado conmigo en el desarrollo, en el crecimiento, en los sufrimientos, en las limitaciones, en las privaciones, en todo, en toda esa vida.

I: Y todavía algunos de ellos ayudan en el negocio?

R: Todos.

I: Todos?

R: (risa) Actualmente mi hijo el mayor, el es gerente de ventas. El ayuda a los restaurantes, tiendas y bodegas. Es gerente general, me ayuda algunos mercados a hablar con los representantes, algunas licencias, permisos, certificados. El es el que cuando yo no puedo, el lo hace por mi.

I: Maneja todo el papeleo?

R: Si. El que sigue, el le gusta vender. El hace como cuatro o cinco mercados a la semana. El mas pequeño se la pasa aquí en el rancho, va a vender también. Y mi hija estudia. Es la única que esta estudiando ahorita. Ella se va a la universidad ahora en Diciembre a Fresno y ya esta estudiando para abogado. Y ella ayuda en días festivos y finés de semana Farmer's Market. Ella me ayuda a vender, si.

I: Que bueno.

R: Si.

I: Y piensa que algunos de ellos quieren continuar el rancho en el futuro?

R: Creo que si. Creo que si, si pienso que ellos han aprendido a ser independientes. Es la única forma de vida que ellos conocen. Ósea, ellos no han trabajado para otras personas. Ellos no saben trabajar en el field para una compañía donde traes un mayordomo que anda atrás de ti- tienes 15 minutos solo para lonche y que te están apurando y que tienes que apurarte. Entonces ellos no conocen ese tipo de vida y creo lo que conocen es esto- su propio rancho, sus propias decisiones, su propio mundo, ósea su propia forma de vender. Ósea, yo si pienso por que el que no quiera seguir va a sufrir. Va a sufrir mucho. (risa)

I: Y piensa que otros jóvenes Latinos o que son hijos de agricultores van a continuar van a continuar entrando a la agricultura or...

R: Creo que falta un poco mas de motivación. Creo que falta mas resaltar, motivar y mostrarles a los jóvenes con hechos, con pruebas que este es nuestro mundo, esta es nuestra agricultura. Esto es lo que hacíamos antes, es una agricultura tradicional solo que aquí se le cambia el nombre- es agricultura orgánica. Pero en verdad es una agricultura que nosotros estamos acostumbrados, por lo menos nuestros padres, nuestros abuelos, eso era lo que hacían, no? No aplicaban pesticidas en aquel entonces, nada de químicos. Entonces es lo mismo, es lo mismo nada mas que aquí el joven tiene la idea de que si sus padres trabajan en el campo es lo peor. Es lo peor que le puede pasar es las personas que valen menos. Pero en realidad no es así. Creo que nosotros valemos, valemos mucho. Trabajes en el campo o trabajes por ti mismo creo que tenemos mucho valor y el trabajo que hacemos tiene un valor muy grande por que no cualquiera aguanta diez horas trabajando cortando brócoli, cortando lechuga o pescando chile y tampoco no cualquiera tienen esa fortaleza, no? Yo lo único que yo les digo a mis hijos, "El día que yo me muera o el día que yo este viejita, lo único que les voy a pedir a ustedes y a mis nietos es de que jamás se les olvide de donde vienen, quienes son, de donde vienen, quienes fueron sus padres y quienes fueron sus abuelos." Por que a veces se les olvida y es ahí donde empieza el problema, no? Empiezan a imaginar, empiezan a no valorar. Cuando haces menos a una persona, como se le llama? A menosciciar, a menosciciar el trabajo del trabajador agrícola. Yo a mis nietos siempre les digo, "Ustedes son mejicanos, tienen que hablar español, este es un rancho y esto requiere trabajo. Esto no llego solo, esto no nos cayo del cielo. Yo trabajo mucho para que ustedes lo tengan todo esto, cuídenlo." Uno tiene nueve años y el otro

tiene ocho, mis nietos. Y como miran que yo estoy siempre en el catalogo, siempre estoy viendo las semillas, lo nuevo que esta saliendo, que vamos a plantar, que no vamos a plantar este año. Y ellos aquí afuera debajo de los arboles comenzaron a escarbar. Y les dije, "Que están haciendo?" "Ay mami Inés, es que vamos a sembrar también nosotros." "Que van a sembrar ahí?" "Pues algo, algunas semillas, que cosa vamos a sembrar? Que semillas tienes?" Me dicen, "Podemos sembrar frijoles?" Le digo, "Si, pueden sembrar frijoles." Y empezaron segín ya escarbar para poner la semilla de los frijoles y les digo, "Esa tierra no esta lista todavía." "Porque?" Digo, "Mi hijo tienes que ponerle compost, escarbar mas, revolver bien la tierra con la mano..." "OK." Y ya fueron y trajeron su bote con composta. Tenemos surcos y surcos y acres y acres aquí y querían sembrar aquí. Pero por lo menos ya tienen esa visión, no? Y no se. No he visto su siembra como este. (risa) Yo dije, "Tienes que poner agua cuando revuelves la tierra con la composta, luego la semilla tiene que ir un tanto así de onda para que germine. Le pones agua y la dejas ahí todos los días la tienes que escarbar, mirar si la tierra si hace bolita no necesita agua. Si se te abre, necesitas ponerle agua." "OK." Y quien sabe, no he visto su siembra. (risa) Pero le digo que deben aprender a sembrar y a producir su propia comida. SI no quieren ser agricultores que no lo sean, que no lo sean. Si para sus hijos ellos quieren tener comida saludable en el futuro, tienen que aprender a producir su propia comida. No me importa- ósea si no quieren ser agricultores, si piensan que esa fue la ultima opción que tuve yo pues esta bien. Pero si ellos no quieren hacerlo, esta bien, que no lo hagan. Pero que aprendan a crecer su propia comida para sus

familias. Eso es lo único que yo pido. Entonces es lo único que le voy a dejar, por que dinero no creo. (risa)

I: Hablando de ALBA y el centro de desarrollo rural, en su opinión cuales son las fuertes y debilidades de ALBA ahora? Por que yo se que ha cambiado mucho de los años atrás.

R: OK. En aquel entonces era un apoyo para trabajadores agrícolas que querían ser sus propios dueños de ser agricultores orgánicos, verdad? En la actualidad voy a- no se.

Mira, primero lo bueno. Lo bueno es que ya esta todo modernizado, todo con computadoras, tienen apoyo en el mercadeo, tienen mucho apoyo para el agricultor. Todo lo tienen a la mano, a lo que yo veo desde acá afuera. Ósea, yo no me he involucrado tanto ahí pero lo que yo miro es de que ellos tienen mucho, mucho- todo lo tienen a la mano ahora. Lo malo es que lo están haciendo tan, tan académico que ahora están dando clases del *journal*. Oye, un trabajador agrícola tiene necesidad de superación. Cuando dicen que la necesidad es la madre de la superación. Cuando no tienes necesidad, nunca va haber superación. Entonces muchas de las veces- a mi me gustaría mas ver que la misión y la visión no se ha perdido, que sigan apoyando a trabajadores agrícolas. Es, como te diré, pues enseñarles a producir su propia comida. Los niños del colegio- pues es bueno por que tienen nociones para aprender por que ahí como pero que no fuera tanto el enfoque tan académico. El ingles- yo te juro que a estas alturas yo no hablo inglés. Si, un poco, las variedades, los nombres de las verduras. Tengo que cobrar- los números, si. Tengo que ir a vender, si. Pero el que tu le digas a un trabajador agrícola que tiene que aprender inglés, es

necesario pero lo primordial es darles la primera patadita, no? El primer empujón que es enseñarlos y con el tiempo uno va mirando las necesidades. Ahora yo tuve la barrera del idioma, tuve la barrera de ser mujer, tuve varias barreras pero ahora yo tengo quien. Yo pago por que venden en los Farmer's Marquet personas que hablan muy bien inglés, incluso Americanas están trabajando conmigo. Entonces ya digo, "Me voy a ir a la escuela de Ingles," pero lo que quiero es mejor administrar por que es a donde estoy mal ahora. Pero si creo que lo primero es lo primero, enseñarles el sistema, la certificación, todos los permisos, las plagas, las enfermedades, prepara el terreno y todo.

I: Y tal vez después cuando tiene mas motivación...

R: Segundo paso, si. Lo primero es lo primero.

I: Pero no todo al principio?

R: No tanto.

I: Computación, Ingles, todo?

R: No, no.

I: Si, es mucho.

R: Si.

I: Usted inicio una huerta en un jardín comunitario en Salinas, verdad?

R: No.

I: No.

R: Yo fui fundadora de una cooperativa de mercadeo orgánico. Y fui la primera mujer Latina que trajo el proyecto de CSA, Community Supported Agriculture a Salinas. Era tanta mi necesidad de aprender como vender que me iba yo a conferencias. En ese tiempo no calificaba para becas, no había de fondos

en ALBA. Cuando fui a aprender como desarrollar un CSA, todo era en Ingles. Recuerdo que fuimos a San Francisco a una conferencia y tuvimos que quedarnos a dormir en el carro, tomamos un café y una donut todo el día por que no calificamos para el lonche. Eso fueron tres días que estuvimos allá. Y yo decía, "Todo esto que estoy pasando tiene que servir de algo algún día por que no es posible que todo lo que estoy pasando no vaya a tener frutos." Y si, ahora tenemos nuestro propio CSA, tenemos todo. Fui la primera.

I: Y como inicio su CSA?

R: Oh my God. Pues después ya que yo me dormí a la una de la mañana mirando el manual del CSA, yo no sabia ni lo que decía. Yo trataba de entender lo que decía solamente mirando las formas, mirando los dibujos, mirando las diferentes verduras que ofrecían, algunos ejemplos que nos dieron. El primer año me puse como loca a sembrar y estaba yo feliz por que ya iba yo a cosechar para vender CSA. Y yo quería vender a mi gente, a la gente Latina por que habla español, verdad? Y el resultado fue que nadie de la gente Latina quiso comprar verduras, y menos adelantado cuando estamos acostumbrados a ir y comprar tres bonches de cilantro por un dólar, o cuatro bonches de rama por un dólar, como vas a pagar en aquel tiempo eran doce dólares por doce diferentes cosas? Y mucha gente trabajaba en el brócoli, trabajaban en la lechuga, trabajaban en el rábano, en la cebollita. Entonces no me querían comprar- mas bien, no me compraron. Había una voluntaria en Rural Development y ella fue la que me empezó a hacer promoción en el radio local y empezamos a- las primeras personas que nos compraron fueron Americanas, personas Anglo que fueron las que empezaron a apoyarme y todavía hay como cinco familias que están con

nosotros desde que empezamos, cinco familias. Y ahora pagan por adelantado todo el año. Ósea la gente no confiaba en mi por que era mujer, no hablaba Ingles. Como iban a confiar en mandar un cheque si no estaban seguros si yo iba a cumplir para entregarles sus verduras. Ósea no había ningún algo que me respaldara, solamente mi palabra y que ellos confiaran que lo iba yo a hacer. Y empecé con doce personas, doce familias pero había producto para cincuenta. (risa) Entonces fue algo muy, muy difícil por que perdí mucho producto. No había suficientes miembros que apoyaran y se me dificultaba el idioma, claro, también. Ósea, fue algo difícil.

I: Y la voluntaria ayudaba con la administración y...?

R: Y la comunicación y todo. Pero había tiempos en que había voluntarias y había tiempos en que no había. Entonces todo eso- había altas y bajas.

I: Y de allá empezaba a vender en los Farmer's Markets también, para vender el resto de su producto?

R: Empecé a hacer un Farmer's Market en South Main y mis hijos tenían como unos 11 o 12 años en ese tiempo y me decían, "Mami, quiero dinero." Les decía yo, "Pues vayan a vender." Y la idea de vender ahí fue por que ellos querían dinero. Entonces yo recuerdo que los traía y los dejaba ahí y les ponía su mesa y vendían pepinos y calabazas, así. A veces vendían cuarenta dólares y me decían, "Mami, te doy veinte, me quedo con veinte." O por lo que venían era por que les gustaba cambiar con los señores de la fruta, con los del pan y con un señor que vendía plata. A ellos les encantaba la plata en ese tiempo. Una semana iba uno y otra semana iba otro a vender para poder cambiar cadenas, pulseras de plata. Y llegaban con su caja de fruta. "Mami, mira cambie..." Ósea

ya tenían pan, ya tenían fruta por las verduras. Este, después la directora con José Montenegro que era el director de Rural Development tuvieron algunas reuniones y empezamos a colaborar con el WIC cuando no había cupones. En ese tiempo no había cupones. Teníamos que demostrar al sistema que había necesidad de que la gente consumiera verduras y frutas frescas. Tenía yo que venirme a poner una mesita ahí en la oficina en Salinas del WIC a donde entran a las clases. Una mesita ahí vendía yo \$40, \$30, \$45, \$50 a veces cuando me iba muy bien. Todo el día estar ahí para que miraran la gente y ahí estuve. Ósea, estamos reconocidos como los primeros.

I: Y todavía están allá?

R: Todavía estamos ahí.

I: Y las ventas son mejores ahora?

R: No.

I: Todavía es para educar a la gente?

R: Ahora es, este, como empezó a haber dinero pues mucha gente, muchos agricultores querían venir. Y cuando se busco el apoyo de los agricultores, solamente María Inés apoyaba por que estaba loca. Pero ahora habremos tres agricultores y uno de fruta. Pero si es mas o menos, mas o menos. El primer año que dieron cupones nadie estuvo mas de que nosotros. Vendíamos muy bien por que por lo menos fue la compensación por los años que no hubieron cupones y que estuvimos ahí sufriendo por todo el día.

I: Y todavía tenías el CSA?

R: Todavía.

I: Y cuantos familiares?

R: 100 miembros.

I: Wow. Y que son las ventajas y desventajas de un CSA para ti?

R: OK, para mi. No hay desventajas. Ahí las llevas todas de ganar. No veo que haiga desventajas.

I: Funciona bien para su familia?

R: Claro, claro, para el negocio. Todavía el Farmer's Market tiene desventajas pero el CSA no. El CSA la gente está concientizada, te apoya, me conoce y ellos consumen lo que produce el rancho, las variedades que hay en temporada. Entonces eso es una ventaja para ti.

I: Y pagan en adelanto?

R: Pagan adelantado. A veces unos te pagan por todo el año, otros por seis meses, otros por cuatro o tres semanas. Ósea no hay desventajas. Cosechas, lavas, sabes lo que vas a cosechar, sabes lo que vas a llevar. Y vas y entregas rápido y ya, puntos clave.

I: Y la gente come todo, no dice nada, no quiero eso, no quiero eso en mi caja, es demasiado, no es suficiente.

R: Siempre va a haber gente que no le guste ciertas cosas. Las cajas se van iguales. Pero nosotros hacemos- hemos hecho que sea más fácil y más manejable para las familias porque donde tenemos lugares centrales donde entregamos ciertas cantidades y dejamos una caja de verduras o dos, dependiendo a la temporada, abierta y un ejemplo; si tu eres un miembro y tu pagaste y dices, "Ay, les mande a decir que no me pusieran perejil ni alcachofa y la caja trae perejil y alcachofa," entonces lo que haces es agarrar las alcachofas que vienen en tu caja, ponerlas en la otra caja, dices, "Ah, pero a mí me gustan las

zanahorias." Agarras dos bonches de zanahorias y te los pones en tu caja. Viene otra persona y dice, "Ay, ya le dije que no quiero zanahorias." Déjala sus zanahorias, "Ah pero si quiero alcachofas y quiero perejil." Entonces eso es una forma como mas manejable para mi y para ellos también que van a tener solamente lo que ellos quieren. Por que es imposible cumplir a 100 personas cuando los muchachos que lavan y empacan tienen que hacerlo todo igual, todo igual. Entonces a la hora de cargar, cargan todo igual, descargan. Uno es el que cosecha, otro es el que lava y el que empaca y otro es el que entrega. Entonces es muy difícil hacer 100 cajas especiales.

I: Y de los Farmer's Markets, cuales Farmer's Markets asistieron ustedes ahora y donde?

R: Los mejores. Le doy tanto gracias a Dios y a la gente. Hay mucha gente que me ha apoyado que sin el apoyo de estas gentes yo no hubiera podido llegar a donde estoy. Hay gente que me ha conocido, que conoce mi historia, que me conoce por años todo lo que trabajo, todo lo que he hecho y que me ha apoyado mucho, mucho. Ahorita nosotros estamos haciendo Farmers' Market en el mercadero, en Ferry Plaza en San Francisco los Sábados. Estoy haciendo Berkeley tres veces a la semana. Son los mejores mercados en todo el país, en todo el país. Entonces, imagínate. Pero como te digo, ósea, no fue solamente que yo por mi linda cara, "Ah mira, quiero vender y ya me van a dejar." Hubo mucha gente que me ha apoyado y me ha ayudado entonces por eso es que estamos donde estamos. Y estamos haciendo tres en Berkeley, uno en San Francisco, solo los Sábados en el embarcadero en Ferry Plaza. Tenemos tres meses que abrimos uno todo los días en el centro de San Francisco entre la

Mission y la 4th street. El edificio se llama Metreon y esta abierto todos los días de las 10 a las 8pm. Entonces es un tipo mercado México, es adentro de un edificio, esta bien. Creo que va a funcionar cuando llueva, haga frio, por las familias que tienen bebes que no pueden andar puchando la carriola en la calle, en los mercados abiertos, quizás eso va apoyar mucho a las familias y a nosotros, no? Por que es un mercado- nosotros sufrimos mucho en el invierno por el aire, el frio, la lluvia cuando vamos a vender, esperemos que funcione para bien de las familias y de nosotros. En Oakland tenemos tres, hacemos tres a la semana, Castro Valley hay otro donde mi muchacho va, no recuerdo el nombre. Hacemos Salinas y Campbell.

I: Campbell. Y todavía esta en WIC?

R: Todavía.

I: Y también venden la escuela Martin Luther King o...?

R: Vendí el año pasado, este año definitivamente ya no puedo por que ha crecido mucho esto y tengo que estar aquí y para pagarle a una persona que lo haga no conviene por que a mi me gustaba solo por platicar con la gente. Íbamos y dábamos talleres y hacíamos masas, hacíamos tortillas ahí en- ósea era algo muy mío, pues, que me gustaba hacer y dar clases a las señoras, talleres y todo. Pero definitivamente ahorita ya no puedo, ya no puedo.

I: Y una vez usted dijo que trata de balancear vender a los ricos para que pueda vender a los más pobres y todavía tiene ese sentido?

R: Todavía. Todavía por que los que pueden pagar, pagan y pagan bien. Si. Pero también me gusta darle a la gente que no puede pagar. Un ejemplo esta Salinas, Salinas la mayoría de la gente es gente de bajos ingresos. Lo que estamos

haciendo nosotros estamos imprimiendo cupones para que- por que lo que quiero es que la gente regrese, compre, y se lleve la verdura por que si no se vende, se lo comen mis animales. Y estamos dándole siete dólares en dos cupones en Salinas, estamos distribuyendo.

I: Sus propios cupones?

R: Mis propios cupones.

I: Buena idea.

R: Para que la gente vaya y compre. Yo se que es mi negocio y ese es lo que yo siempre estoy diciendo año con año con los nuevos que están en el mercado y con el personal de WIC cuando tenemos juntas le digo, "Es que se esta perdiendo la visión de este mercado por que cuando nosotros nos reuníamos con la directora la idea era- cuando hablamos con los que iban a dar el dinero para los cupones les decíamos que eran para la gente de bajos ingresos, que íbamos a dar barato, que sabíamos que la comida orgánica era mas cara pero que nosotros íbamos a ponerlo a un nivel- a un precio razonable y justo para el agricultor y para el consumidor. Principalmente para la gente Latina que era lo que..." Y que esta pasando? Se les ha olvidado, solamente ven esto como un negocio, como que ay no, por que le voy a dar a dólar una libra de jitomate. No, si yo la doy a tres. Yo no se las voy a dar a dólar. Si a tres, pero donde la gente tiene dinero y puede pagar, no aquí donde la gente no tiene dinero y no puede pagar, dije. Entonces si no están de acuerdo con mi filosofía y mi modo de ver la vida y ver el negocio pues lo siento mucho. Mande a imprimir mis cupones y yo ando repartiendo por todos lados cupones y les digo a las mujeres, "No lo pierdan. Son siete dólares, son siete dólares." No quieren que bajemos el precio del

producto? OK, le voy a regalar siete dólares con ese papel a la gente pero que vayan y compren. Nosotros como Latinos vamos a donde nos den mas barato. Por eso ese Farmers' Market no ha crecido, por eso no va mucha gente, por que? Por que si el supermercado del pueblo esta a 99 centavos la libra de jitomate, a 79 a veces, como van a ir a pagarla a \$1.50 al WIC cuando ellos ahí lo tienen todos los días y pueden ir a la hora que quieran y esta 99 centavos. Yo les digo, yo estoy ahí y toda la gente me sigue y me ve y se arrima conmigo. Llévense a tres libras por dos dólares, andeles, llévense a tres libras, esta barato. Toda la gente quiere comprar conmigo. Ósea, yo se. A mi nadie me puede engañar, yo tengo muchísimos años de experiencia. Si tu das el jitomate, el heirloom quizás es un poco mas caro producirlo pero el tomate de bola y el roma si tu lo das a 70 centavos, a 50 centavos la libra, tu sacas tus gastos, tu trabajo es pagado. Pero, ósea, como me pueden decir a mi que tienen que vender a \$1.50 la libra de tomate para que le sea costeable, no es cierto. Entonces se ha perdido mucha. A mi me molesta y me pongo de malas cuando yo siendo yo- yo se como empezó ese mercado y yo se cual fue nuestra visión y nuestras metas que la gente fuera. Y siempre se quejan que "Ay, es que no se vende mucho cash, ay es que no hacen promoción, ah, es que no viene la gente." Pues como va ir la gente si esta mas caro? La gente no va ir, nosotros no vamos a ir. Van a comprar los cupones pero no mas por que les dicen que ahí los cambian, los compran ahí. Pero no va a regresar la gente. Así no, así no va a regresar.

I: Y piensa que- por que siempre es un problema cuando los agricultores necesitan ganar suficiente para cubrir sus gastos pero la gente no tiene suficiente dinero para pagar el precio justo de esta región por que todo es mas caro aquí, el

agua, la renta, todo. Entonces tiene otras ideas o soluciones de cómo podemos resolver ese problema fundamental de que la gente no tiene dinero para pagar por la comida justa, sana de aquí?

R: Que debemos hacer? Que es lo que se puede hacer? La gente puede pagar el precio justo. Sabes cuando pierde uno como agricultor orgánico? Cuando lo tiras. Esas son las perdidas, eso si es perdida. Mientras la gente pague algo por el producto, este bien, puedes sobrevivir. Pero no sobrevives si no vendes y lo tiras.

I: So el problema mas es sobre producción?

R: El problema es concientización, educar a la gente, a nuestra propia comunidad. Ese es el problema. En vez de ir a pagar un dólar por una libra de chile serrano pueden venir conmigo y decir, "OK, véndeme una libra de chile serrano y véndeme tres de jitomate y tres de tomatillo y pepinos y calabazas y tengo o quiero \$2 o quiero \$1." Es mas falta de información, no, a la gente, hacerles saber que es mejor apoyar al negocio local, un agricultor, que conozcan quien produce su comida y no irlos a comprar a un supermercado que no saben a quien están apoyando. Eso es lo que falta, eso es el problema.

I: Y piensa que ese mensaje es algo que la gente van a entender o escuchar?

R: Claro si somos bien inteligentes. La gente si tu hablas y les dices, entiende y saben lo que es bueno. Ahora lo difícil aquí son los negocios, los comercios grandes. A ellos no les convienen decir que un sistema de mercadeo local sea manejado por pequeños agricultores, nunca va a pasar, ósea, ellos no lo van a permitir. Estamos hablando de mucho dinero. Ahí esta el problema. Por que cuando uno es pequeño no tienes tiempo para hacer promoción, no tienes tiempo

para involucrarse en la comunidad que eso es lo que debemos hacer como pequeño agricultor, involucrarte, decirle a la comunidad aquí estamos, hacemos esto y aquí puedes conseguir con nosotros esto y apoyas el medio ambiente, apoyas la economía local, apoyas a una familia. Todo ese tipo de cosas hay que hacérselas saber a la comunidad. Lo que pasa es que como agricultor no tienes el tiempo suficiente. O eres agricultor o eres relacionista publico. (risa)

I: Pero los dos?

R: A veces es imposible, es imposible eso. Pero la verdad es que nosotros podemos sobrevivir si nuestra propia comunidad consume lo que producimos.

I: Puede contarme acerca de la cooperativa AMO y como --

I: Que motivaron ustedes a iniciar la cooperativa AMO y por cuantos años trabajaron ustedes en cooperativa? (risa) No necesita decirme todo.

R: No, no recuerdo los años, no recuerdo los años. Fue una experiencia buena o mala, fue una experiencia para mi como mujer y fue la necesidad del mercadeo, ósea, la necesidad de vender nuestro producto; lo que es siempre la necesidad del pequeño agricultor principiante. Y siempre lo he dicho y siempre lo diré, que el sistema del mercadeo de Estados Unidos es manejado por unas cuantas corporaciones Agroindustrias entonces nosotros no tenemos cabida para ese sistema- no somos grandes, en aquel entonces no éramos convencionales y no había gente que nos quisiera comprar. Y empezamos a platicar siempre con otros cuatro agricultores y yo de mujer, siempre hablando sobre que íbamos a hacer con este producto, que íbamos a hacer con el otro. Y empezamos a juntarnos, a tener reuniones de que haríamos para poder sobrevivir, que la gente

nos comprara- y así nació AMO organic. Muchos no saben que dice AMO organic, que quiere decir en Español y en inglés.

I: I love organics.

R: (risa) No. En Español dice Asociación de Mercadeo Orgánico.

I: Ah, si.

R: Entonces cuando yo mire una entrevista en un periódico le preguntaron a una persona que perteneció a AMO y no supo responder que decía AMO entonces AMO organic es Asociación de Mercadeo Orgánico. Y en Ingles también. Es lo mismo. Y empezamos cuatro hombres y yo de mujer a empezar a ofrecer nuestro producto como a Whole Foods de Monterrey. Empezamos a trabajar juntos, yo fui la primera tesorera. Todo lo hacia a mano, las ventas las hacíamos juntos. Nos repartíamos el trabajo, quien entregaba que día, quien entregaba que otro día. Compramos un tractor entre todos, compramos otras cositas entre todos. Entonces empezamos a- todo iba muy bien por que los cinco sabíamos que queríamos. El problema empezó cuando vino una persona y nos empezó a lavar el coco, que ustedes pueden recibir dinero por que en aquel entonces ni siquiera sabíamos que nosotros nos podían dar dinero, ni como. Nosotros solamente queríamos vender juntos y recibir nuestro dinero y repartírnoslo y abrimos una cuenta en el banco y empezamos a depositar los cheques. Yo era la que hacia los cheques para los otros señores. Nos descontábamos un porcentaje de nuestras ventas para poder llegar a tener nuestro propio fondo general- nosotros le llamábamos. Llego esta persona, nos empezó a decir, "Incorpórense ante el gobierno, pueden ustedes aplicar para dinero del gobierno para fondos de fundaciones privadas que dan dinero a la

gente como ustedes," y bla, bla, bla, bla, bla, bla. Entonces como era una persona que trabajaba para ALBA, para [dual de lo??] antes, pues creímos que era una persona preparada, que en verdad si quería ayudarnos. Dejo de trabajar para Rural Development Center para dedicarnos a ayudarnos a nosotros, nos incorporamos como no lucrativa, empezamos a aplicar para fondos y la idea fue el plan de nosotros es de que el quiso- el se dio el titulo de gerente general entonces el tenia que ganar muy bien, verdad? Por que era un gerente de una corporación no lucrativa, pero gerente. Entonces le digo, "Bueno, pero es mucho dinero, ni nosotros lo ganamos." "Pero es que no me van a pagar ustedes, yo voy a aplicar para fondos y de ahí va a salir mi sueldo." "Oh, que bueno." Mientras no salía de nuestro bolsillo, que bueno estaba todo. Empezamos a recibir los fondos y en una de las propuestas el hombre puso que íbamos a crecer mas con otros, a traer mas agricultores entonces abrimos la puerta para que otros nuevos vinieran. Pero ya teníamos equipo, estábamos incorporados, ya teníamos una gente de ventas, teníamos un gerente, teníamos una oficina, teníamos un tractor nuevecito, teníamos un troque mandado a hacer para nuestras necesidades y llegan las otras seis personas, otros seis pequeños agricultores recién salidos. Y empezó todo estaba mas o menos. Empezó, hombre, a querer no trabajar de afuera de su casa, trabajaba dentro de su casa, solamente mandaba a traer el presidente para que le firmara sus cheques, no sabíamos que propuestas había hecho, si había hecho o no había hecho. El dijo que el iba a hacer toda la administración, le entregue yo todo el papeleo. Cuando yo lo entregue uno de los cinco agricultores, yo sabia cuanto dinero tenia uno, cuanto dinero tenia otro y cuanto tenia otro en el fondo general. Ósea todos ya teníamos

nuestro propio capital, nuestro tractor, todo eso, era de nosotros, ósea, no le habíamos pedido a nadie, nosotros íbamos bien. Pero crecimos tan rápido, rentamos un terreno aquí como de ciento y tantos acres y estuvimos los once agricultores aquí y el gerente en Salinas, viviendo en Salinas y no salía de su casa, no venia aquí. Solamente en reuniones venia para acá. Al presidente lo mandaba a traer para que le fuera a firmar los cheques de su sueldo, de lo que se iba a pagar hasta allá. Y yo empecé a cuestionar, ósea, yo siempre he sido- cuando yo estuve los primeros tres años yo fui voluntaria para una organización estatal de mujeres que se llama Lideres Campesinas en California; fui parte de la mesa directiva y yo aprendí mucho. Nos dieron mucha capacitación. Entonces empecé yo a cuestionar por que pasaba esto- en una reunión quería que se aprobara que el podía firmar los cheques para- le dije, "Es que tu no puedes firmarte los cheques por que tu eres empleado, no puedes firmarlo." Entonces empezó esos problemas internos empezaron. Se dividió la cooperativa en algunos viejos y otros nuevos y se hicieron dos partidos, y termino. El hombre se fue de vacaciones al ultimo año, se fue a Colombia, era Colombiano y estaba cobrando sus sueldos y sin haber recibido las propuestas, todavía sin recibir fondos de las propuestas todavía. El dejó de hacer propuestas, el dejó de recibir dinero, entonces de donde estaba cobrándose su sueldo eran de las ventas que nosotros teníamos y del fondo general que nosotros teníamos antes. Cuando se fue nos dejó en números rojos, no teníamos dinero. Se perdió nuestro capital, no mando reportes del dinero que ya se había recibido, no mando nada, no se pagaron impuestos, ósea, fue un desastre completamente. Y que pena por que

fue nuestra falta de información por que muchos de nosotros apenas y sabíamos escribir nuestro nombre, fuimos manipulados.

I: Y perdieron el tractor también?

R: Perdimos todo, todo perdimos. Entonces por dejar que otra persona nos manejara por que los señores definitivamente muchos de ellos no sabían ni lo que era una mesa directiva ni cuales eran las responsabilidades ni cuales eran sus derechos, nada, nada. No sabían que ellos- el poder que tenían ellos eran como mesa directiva, ellos eran los dueños de la corporación. No pudimos manejar esa corporación. Ahorita nosotros ya mandábamos a Hawái sandilla, melón, producto, mandábamos a Canadá, a cualquier estado aquí del país, ya mandábamos producto. Y todo se termino. Muchos de ellos ya no siguieron sembrando, como el presidente de la cooperativa ya no pudo seguir sembrando por que en verdad, no sufrieron lo que yo sufrí para poder tener lo que había entonces a ellos- o lo querían todo a la mano, no se, no se, yo no se que.

I: Pero todavía usted sigue organizando algunos agricultores verdad, en una forma?

R: (risa) Si. Creo que ese es mi- me siento bien apoyando a otras personas. Acabo de- el año pasado me dio un reconocimiento la USDA por ser líder en mi comunidad, por apoyar a los pequeños agricultores. Oye, es un reconocimiento nacional que solamente se los dan a organizaciones ya incorporadas o diferentes agencias rurales de la USDA o empleados. Y habérmelo dado a mi como un pequeño agricultor orgánico independiente para mi me quede, "Me están hablando a mí?" Si, me entregaron un reconocimiento a nivel nacional.

I: Wow.

R: Entonces...

I: Y como se llama el grupo que tiene ahora y que es la función de ese grupo?

R: Mira, otra vez empecé con esa inquietud. Yo me quede todavía con esa inquietud. Yo me quede con esa espinita de que en verdad o fui muy mala, quiero ver si en verdad fui yo la que falle en esa primera organización o que paso. Hace dos años ayude a la USDA voluntariamente sobre el censo. Yo estaba capacitada para ayudarles a llenar el censo a los señores, era algo confidencial y todo. Recibí fondos de la USDA de Sacramento para tener un evento y empecé a conocer a otros. Yo aquí llegue a ese rancho cinco años. Aquí a Hollister hace once, once años. Entonces la—

[Part 2]

I: OK.

R: Por que ya van a empezar a llegar mis hombres.

I: Puede decirme otra vez como están cooperando esta asociación que tiene ahora, como se llama el grupo?

R: Pequeños agricultores en California.

I: Y esta tratando de organizarles para ayudar en su mercadeo?

R: Si. En primera, todas las regulaciones, las certificaciones, el comisionado, que sepan que hace el comisionado, que hace (CCOF?), que hace el estado, todo. Eso es lo que hacemos, estamos trabajando mucho. Catalán Family Farm apoya económicamente y controla y vigila que ellos aprendan que es certificación orgánica, que deben de aplicar, que no deben de aplicar.

I: Y hablando sobre su filosofía orgánica, por que escogió de cultivar orgánicamente y que significa para ti la agricultura orgánica?

R: Pues para mi es algo donde yo crecí. Es algo para mi que no es algo nuevo. Es algo donde yo recuerdo que jugaba entre los costales de algodón, entre montones de cacahuates, de maíz, sandillas, melones, arriendo vacas, montando a caballo, y yo quería si algún día yo tenía nietos yo quería que mis nietos crecieran igual- igual como yo. Y era algo, pues, para mucha gente imposible por que imagínate, llegas aquí, tienes que vivir en un cuartito, en un apartamento, como soñar a llegar a tener un rancho y que tus nietos crezcan como tu creciste, eso es imposible para millones de personas por que solamente trabajan en los campos donde los niños no se permiten ir por que se aplican químicos y pesticidas. Y eso fue lo que a mi me gusto, que mis hijos pudieran andar conmigo día tras día y que podía traerlos ahí y enseñarles, mis hijos han aprendido.

I: Y vivía en un lugar sano y jugar?

R: Si, si. Ahora mis nietos tienen chivos, tienen gallinas, tienen caballos, vacas, entonces están creciendo como yo quería verlos crecer a ellos. Andan todos sucios, todos llenos de tierra, con lodo, conocen todos los tomates, los nombres, los colores, todas las verduras. Saben muy bien.

I: Y todos viven aquí en este rancho?

R: Si. Solamente dos niños no viven conmigo pero vienen de vez en cuando vienen ellos y les gusta venir.

I: Y hablando de este rancho, ahora usted es dueña o?

R: No, todavía no. Estamos en el proceso, tenemos un papel legal donde los dueños están comprometidos a pasarlo a nosotros. El trato fue que ellos cuando yo me quede sin casa, alguien me llamo en Español y me dijo, "Yo soy Juanita Velazco y yo te compro verduras desde hace un año y hable con Kathy," me dijo, las Americanas de la iglesia, las lideres. "Y me menciono que tu necesitabas un lugar donde sembrar." Le digo, "Ay, si, fíjese que me cerraron mi tráiler, no tengo donde vivir," y me dijo, "Como es posible?" Le digo, "Si." Me dijo, "Mira, acabamos de vender una propiedad yo y mi esposo y queremos ayudarte." Y no me conocían, pues es mas yo no los conocía. Solamente yo miraba sus cheques y ellos recibían las verduras pero no me conocían a mi personalmente. Me dice, "Tenemos un dinero, podemos invertirlo, busca un rancho y háblanos. Cuando ya lo encuentres háblanos." Pero el señor me llamo luego, me dijo, "Quiero tener una reunión con usted o su esposo. Quiero tener una reunión con usted, como piensa pagarme? Como piensa comprarlo?" Por que vino y miro el rancho, bien chiquito y dijo, pues, esto no da para vivir. Y le dije, "Mire," le traje todas las formas que tenia yo de los dos años pasados del CSA, cuanta gente me compro, a donde entregábamos, talones de cheques de los restaurantes. Empezábamos a vender en los Farmer's Markets, por que me dijo, "Como va a pagar el pago?" Ósea, "Como va a pagar la renta de un rancho," si lo llegamos a tener o lo tengo que comprar. Y ya le empecé a decir, le dije, mire si yo pago para pagarme la renta puedo seguirla pagando, lo que quiero es algo seguro. Y me dice, "Mire, solo por que mi esposa la quiere ayudar, la quiere ayudar de verdad. Solo por eso yo voy a invertir mi dinero en un rancho. Yo soy hombre de negocios y yo prefiero invertir en un condominio y me quito de tanto- yo no se nada de

agricultura, no quiero saber nada. Si usted me da su palabra que usted se va a quedar con el rancho, por que si usted me lo deja yo no se que hacer con el rancho." Le dije, "Mire, hasta ahorita aunque soy mujer, yo tengo palabra y mi palabra vale. Y yo le digo que yo no le voy a dejar el rancho. Solo y siquiera hacemos un papel, si yo me muero mis hijos tienen que seguir con ese compromiso y usted también si se muere usted tiene que..." Me dice, "Ya no voy a invertir ni un quinto, yo al rancho no le voy a poner un penny mas. Ustedes tienen que dar el mes, pagar el mes y si el rancho necesita un arreglo o la casa necesita un arreglo, ustedes la tienen que hacer." Oh si, ya empezamos a buscar un rancho, mirábamos uno, no nos gustaba, mirábamos otro hasta que encontramos este. Y me dice el señor, me dice, "Ay señora Catalán, yo no confiaba en usted. Quien es esa individua?" Me decía, "Yo no confiaba en usted." Yo le digo, "Señor Enrique, si yo planto diez mil plantitas de lechuga yo quiero ocho mil dólares. Dos mil se van a perder pero ocho se van a vender." Y se me queda viendo, "Usted quiere ganar mas que la corporaciones?" Le digo, "Pues claro! Yo voy a crecer con amor esas poquitas lechugas y yo ya tengo quien la va comprar, quien se la va comer." Y ahora nos estimamos mucho. Tenemos una muy bonita relación y ellos siguen insistiendo que nos quedemos con el rancho y ese es el plan por que ya hicimos una bodega, ya hicimos muchas cosas, estamos invirtiendo mucho dinero en el rancho pero la esperanza es que sea para nosotros en el futuro. Por problemas legales ahorita no había podido hacer esa transacción. Lo que estamos haciendo es incorporamos nuestro negocio, es una pequeña corporación ahora, legalmente. Entonces va a tener su

propia- es una persona ficticia, va crear su propio crédito y vamos a ver si de esa manera pueden—

I: Y por el mínimo tiene un contrato aquí?

R: Si, si, si, ahora si.

I: So, esta seguro?

R: Si.

I: Que bueno. Hay desafíos particulares que enfrenta como una agricultora Latina? Como una agricultora mujer también Latina?

R: Culturalmente yo mi pareja que me mando a la escuela lo perdí por que no soporto el que yo me haiga desarrollado y crecido como mujer y como persona de negocios. Entonces esta persona no soporto ese cambio dentro de mi y el tomo la opción de irse. El me dejo.

Me abandono por que ya no era la misma- era la misma pero ya no tenia la misma- este, y culturalmente es muy difícil para una mujer por nuestra cultura que llegue a ser la que tome las decisiones, es muy difícil. Ese es el desafío mas grande, la cultura. Y creo que yo lo estoy rompiendo. Mi pareja, tenemos cinco años apenas, muy tradicional pero el conoce, respeta mis decisiones, sabe que yo soy la que tengo el control del negocio y el solamente sigue indicaciones en el negocio. En lo demás, pues, el que tenga- pues vamos a ver quien manda.

I: Quien gana.

R: (risa) En el negocio, no, las decisiones las tomo yo.

I: Y de su negocio, como escogió el nombre la Laughing Onion Farm.

R: La Laughing Onion no es el nombre de mi negocio, es un nombre que quisieron dar al proyecto de CSA. El negocio es Catalán Family Farm. Y bajo

Catalán Family Farm aparece Laughing Onion CSA Community Support. Es el nombre del proyecto que lo dio una voluntario. Necesitábamos un nombre, necesitábamos algo que la gente nos identificara y no como María Catalán si no como un proyecto, una forma de vender. Y le dije, "Ay, pues, busca un nombre tu." Me dice, "María, necesitamos un nombre. Como le vamos a llamar?" "Ay, hombre, búscalo tu. Yo no tengo tiempo!" (risa) Estaba en la Universidad y me trajo ese, "Ay, que bonito yo le dije, esta bien bonito. Así queda." Entonces ya cuando se los presente a mis hijos, "Ay, no guáchala! Como cebolla riente? Siquiera hubiera puesto una sandilla, un melón. No! No nos gusta." Yo dije, "No, se queda por que le costo trabajo y se queda." "Mama! Pero, cebolla?" Bueno, le dije, "Se queda."

I: Y ya tiene su logo tipo y todo?

R: Si, esa es la forma que lo reconoce mucha gente en Monterrey en esa área.

I: Y como hace promoción ustedes o es necesario para hacer eso?

R: Por medio de los Farmer's Markets, oportunidades que tenemos de ir a hablar a la radio, hablar a la televisión. Todo mundo—

I: Pero no necesita un sitio web o tarjetas?

R: En eso estamos un poco atrasados por que apenas estamos creando nuestra pagina. Alguien nos la esta haciendo. Ya vamos a crear nuestras propias cajas de empaque para el producto. Estamos donde quiera, en algunas paginas de diferentes negocios estamos como en los restaurantes estamos nosotros- que nos compran a nosotros nos ponen en su pagina. En El Farmer's Markets estamos en las paginas. En diferentes partes estamos, hay pequeñas historias de nosotros. Pero lo que estamos haciendo es desarrollando nuestra propia pagina.

Somos partes de algunas cooperativas, nosotros ponemos productos orgánicos, ellos ponen huevos, miel, lavanda y todo. Somos parte de algunos grupos no lucrativos en San Francisco donde ellos crean su propio flyer para su comunidad. Nuestro CSA funciona de una manera donde tenemos voluntarios que coordinan ciertas áreas de su comunidad y donde ellos crean su propio flyer. En San Francisco se llama la CAJA. Es la Comunidad Apoyando una Justa Agricultura. Se llama la CAJA.

I: CAJA? Buena idea.

R: Entonces eso somos nosotros. Aquí si es en Monterrey a esa área es Laughing Onion, Catalán Family Farm. En otro lado, este, en los káiser, Santa Clara y los gatos, ellos crean su propia forma de pago, sus formas de inscripción y, ósea, es toda la gente apoya de una manera- nos esta apoyando a nosotros a sobrevivir por que yo no tengo una persona especialmente que este haciendo la administración que la necesito. Este, la idea es aquí tener nuestra propia oficina ya por que urge y tratar de coordinar aquí a todos los- por que estoy sorteando tomate y estoy coordinando a los voluntarios. Estoy cortando pepino y estoy hablando con los señores y soy una loca.

I: O su oficina esta adentro su troque?

R: Oh si, y en la cocina, el comedor esta a veces así de papeles y si. Ósea, estamos tratando de hacer todo ya mas mejor, mas al nivel que esta. Estamos vendiendo mas de medio millón de dólares anual. Claro no tengo el dinero.

I: Yes, es ventas.

R: Pero es dinero que llega, así, que se vende y que se va en pagos, en todo se va el dinero. Pero es un presupuesto de medio millón y lo que mis hijos dicen, "Y donde esta el dinero? Te lo gastaste?" (risa)

I: Estas soportando toda la economía aquí verdad, con semilla?

R: A los señores, si.

I: Y tiene empleados también?

R: Si, muchos, muchos. Aquí en el rancho andan seis en el field, dos lavando y empacando acá adentro, tres choferes y como quince niñas que me ayudan los finés de semana, muchachas pues del colegio.

I: En los Farmers' Markets?

R: En los Farmers' Markets.

I: Wow, bien complicado, verdad?

R: Yo termino a veces la semana- yo trabajo, el día de ayer trabajo. A veces que termino el día Domingo por la tarde que, oh my God, ya no quiero saber nada, no quiero saber nada por que desde el Viernes me ayuda a coordinar a las muchachas mi hija pero hay veces que a las cuatro de la mañana le están avisando, "No, no va ir fulana al mercado." Y nada mas dice, "Que hago? Que voy a hacer?" En cada puesto como en San Francisco, en Berkeley, en Oakland, necesitamos cinco personas en cada puesto. La gente, Rebecca, hace fila para que le cobremos.

I: Están peleando para su producto?

R: Si. Lleno, Lleno! Salimos en el periódico, los mejores garbanzos, los mejores tomates, la mejor fresa. Tenemos ya cinco años teniendo el primer lugar

en fresa en Berkeley. Entonces no me puedo quejar. No tengo dinero pero vieras que bonito se siente que te reconozca la gente.

I: Y que aspectos de este negocio les mantiene despierta de noche?

R: Los inviernos. (risa)

I: Que va a sembrar y flujo de caja?

R: No hay dinero en invierno, no hay mucha producción, se vende poco, las lluvias, el aire, el frío, no hay ventas. Eso me quita el sueño, eso me quita el sueño.

I: Y que están haciendo para extender su producción para el invierno tener túneles o...

R: Nosotros vendemos todo el año, todo el año producimos. Nosotros ahorita estamos ya comprando las semillas para tener producto que cosechar en Diciembre, si.

I: Y tiene tiempo para tomar una vacación o...?

R: No, no hay tiempo para mi.

I: Nada? Y un día de descanso en la semana?

R: Hoy es mi día de descanso, hoy es mi día de descanso. Pero me gusta estar viendo que quedo, cuánto producto regreso de cada mercado para la próxima semana no mandar tanto. Hay muchas cosas que tenemos que hacer.

I: Y esta afectando tu negocio esta crisis mundial económica?

R: Claro, a todo mundo!

I: En qué forma? Menos ventas o los insumos más caros?

R: Mira, en primero el fertilizante subió más, las semillas, la gente si compraba dos lechugas antes ahora te compran una. Si compraban dos libras de

tomate solo quieren un tomate ahora. Ósea, la gente esta mas cuidadosa con el dinero, tienen miedo de gastarlo por que no hay. Mucha gente perdió su trabajo, mucha gente ahora quiere ser voluntario para poder tener su caja de verduras por que no hay dinero, gente que me pagaba por adelantado seis meses de producción ahora me dicen, "Quieres, te ayudo."

I: Y acepta voluntarios.

R: Si, si, si. Hay mucho trabajo de hacer. Mejor para mi, así no manejo dinero. (risa)

I: Y que consejos le hace a alguien que quiere entrar a la agricultura como una carrera?

R: (Conversación Superflua) Es mi nieto el mayor. Yo pienso que deben de tener necesidad: necesidad, ganas, perseverancia, fortaleza y estar locos. (risa) Creo que yo siempre he dicho que mi necesidad fue la madre de mi superación, mi necesidad. Yo tenia una necesidad de darles de comer a mis hijos, de ganar algo de dinero. Yo tenia esa necesidad de poder sobrevivir y esa necesidad me ha llevado a donde estamos, bajo mi espalda. Tiene que llegar dinero para treinta familias, treinta familias, no personas, familias que dependen de un buen plan de siembra, va depender que esas familias tengan el sustento. Entonces para mi es un compromiso, es un gran compromiso. Ahora no nada mas es María Inés y que les daba de comer a mis hijos lo que había- me llevaba calabacitas así, lo que hubiera les hacia de comer. Ahora con mis hijos y ellos son responsables por sus familias y las personas de nuestro grupo que están trabajando, que tienen necesidad de vender.

I: Hay treinta familias que ahora están?

R: Entre trabajadores y agricultores. Y yo pienso que mas. Entonces, imagínate. Tengo que estar pensando que es lo que vamos a sembrar. Son cincuenta tantos acres que tengo que saber cuanto vamos a sembrar de cada cosa para que poder vender ese producto.

I: Y vender todo.

R: Y vender todo y que ese dinero llegue a esas familias por que yo todo lo que estoy vendiendo no es todo solo para mi. Entonces...

I: Mucho estrés, me imagino.

R: Si y luego me hablan, "Señora María, no tiene dinero? Présteme \$20 por que no tengo para el gas, mire que necesitamos el fertilizante y no ha llegado. Oh, cuando va llegar la planta, cuando la voy a recoger?" Oh my God.

I: Y últimamente que son sus visiones y esperanzas para el futuro de su rancho, de su familia?

R: Mira, me gustaría que mis hijos lo conservaran y siguieran haciendo lo que están haciendo. Es un lugar que muchos quisieran tener, que muchos están empezando a luchar para poder llegar a donde ellos ya están. Me gustaría que lo conservaran pero si no es así, me conformo en hacerlo yo mientras yo viva porque es mi satisfacción mía. Ellos tendrán las propias suyas pero el que no lo haga va a sufrir y va a sufrir mucho por que costo mucho trabajo y sacrificio y lagrimas por que yo tuve que dejar de ser hija, tuve que dejar de ser hermana, tuve que dejar de ser mujer, tuve que dejar de ser madre muchas de las veces porque yo he puesto siempre mi negocio en prioridad. Entonces si ellos no valoran y no cuidan, es su problema de ellos. Yo me conformo de que mientras yo viva, hacer lo que a mi me gusta hacer. Si Dios me deja que yo siga viviendo y ya no

pueda yo trabajar ya les dije que aunque sea en masetas afuera de mi casa voy a sembrar. Y me gustaría dar talleres de motivación algún día a los pequeños agricultores, eso es lo que yo quiero en el futuro, apoyarlos, guiarlos, asesorarlos en que es primero y que viene después por que a veces uno quisiera- nosotros como Latinos estamos al revezados. Yo siempre les pongo el ejemplo de las personas anglo. Primero estudian, se preparan, creo que ya hasta cuando se van a jubilar se casan y tienen hijos. Cuando están jubilados andan cargando sus bebes. (risa) Pero ya tienen su vejez asegurada y tienen el tiempo para cuidar a ese hijo. Yo he visto muchos casos así. Y nosotros como buenos Latinos, primero nos casamos, no estudiamos, nos casamos, tenemos hijos y después queremos salir adelante con una mujer, con hijos jalando cuando te cuesta lo triple de sacrificio para poder salir adelante, superarte. Pero así somos. Yo les digo a mis hijos, "Vayan a la escuela, vayan a la escuela." "Ay, mami no." "Pero si ya tienen dos o tres hijo cada uno, verdad?" Entonces les digo, "No es que nosotros somos al revezados." Y no los culpo, ósea, ese es el patrón que vende familia, familia, familia, de padres, abuelos e hijos. Ósea, primero de 13, 14 nos andamos cazando y ya a los 25, 26, 30, queremos superarnos cuando ya tienes una gran responsabilidad de tres, cuatro, cinco hijos. Cuando? Por eso estamos- por eso es que nos cuesta trabajo de salir donde andamos trabajando, es por eso. En vez de estudiar, prepararnos, capacitarnos, hasta después casarnos y tener hijos, nosotros empezamos. Queremos superarnos ya cuando estamos llenos de hijos, en verdad. Y les digo que yo me voy a ir a la escuela para que mis hijos vayan a la escuela también. A mi me gustaría regresar a la escuela. A mi me encanta, me encanta sentarme y aprender, mirar libros y me gustaría volver a la escuela.

I: Y tal vez enseñar algún día?

R: Si, si.

I: Que bueno. Bueno, yo creo que es todo.

R: Oh my God.

I: Tiene algunos comentarios finales o cosas que quiere decir?

R: Si, pues que nosotros como personas sencillas que no tenemos un estudio académico muchas de las veces tenemos sueños y nuestra realidad mata nuestros sueños y no nos deja superarnos. Entonces buscar la manera como si tu tienes un sueño, no dejar que tu realidad mate tus sueños sino creer en ti y buscar de alguna manera creer en ese sueño, aferrarte a ese sueño. Cuando yo termine los tres años que me entregaron mi diploma, yo estaba feliz por que era un pequeño agricultor independiente orgánico y miraba mis bolsillos que no tenia dinero mas de que 75 centavos, tres quarters traía. Y decía yo, "Como voy a sembrar si no tengo dinero?" Entonces mi realidad me decía que yo no podía por que no tenia el dinero pero mi sueño, yo creía que si podía. Yo trabaje para Rural Development, lavando los baños, limpiando la oficina, limpiando el rancho, para pagar la renta de mi dinero. Después por muchos años trabaje- batale mucho con el mercado por que los blockers se fueron a banca rota. Mi realidad me decía que no podía seguir por que no tenia dinero y por que había habido muchas perdidas en los últimos tres años y yo no podía seguir. Yo no podía seguir pero mi sueño decía que si podía y que si podía. Y yo quería hacerlo. Yo quería hacerlo, decía yo, "Pues si voy a trabajar a otra persona pues trabajo aquí y trabajo todo el día y parte de la noche." Y empecé yo sola con mis hijos, trabajábamos limpiando, plantado solo nosotros por que no teníamos dinero,

nada de dinero. Vendíamos poco. Empecé mas en mercados directos y mi sueño se hizo realidad por aferrarme tanto a el. Mis hermanos me decían, "Deja eso, vete a trabajar con nosotros. Recibes tu cheque por semana, tu trabajas todos los días, 12, 14 horas, no tienes dinero. De que sirve si no tienes dinero?" Nunca tenia dinero. Mis hermanos me andaban dando un paquete de tortillas, un paquete de pollo. Ellos me ayudaban por que yo no tenia dinero, me daban un galón de leche para mis hijos por que no había dinero. Y ahora ellos siguen trabajando ahí y yo trabajo igual no, o peor pero a veces que los trabajadores ganan mas que uno pero me siento bien. Ósea, ellos siguen trabajando en el field para otra compañía y yo les digo, "Ves, te hubiera hecho caso y allá anduviera contigo y no, estoy aquí." (risa) Pero si es algo- necesita uno tener mucha fuerza de voluntad, creer en ti y soñar, y soñar, crear tu propio sueño que se haga realidad, no dejar que tu realidad mate tu sueño por que es adonde acaba todo. Sigo batallando, todo es una batalla. Estos últimos dos años han estado muy malos pero estamos viviendo, estamos sobreviviendo. Me habla la gente y me dice, "Señora Catalán, que usted tiene éxito." Les dije, "Que? Cuales éxitos? Estoy sobreviviendo." "Eso es éxito! Sobrevivir!" "Ah, yo pensé que el éxito era tener dinero. Ah, entonces sobrevivir es tener éxito? Ah, entonces tengo mucho éxito!" (risa) Esa es la verdad y estamos aquí.

I: All right.

¹See the oral history with Florentino Collazo and María Luz Reyes in this oral history series.

² See the oral history with José Montenegro in this oral history series.