

Interview with Timothy Reed

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Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

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Maniscalco: Today is August 12, 2008. We're sitting in the FFA barn. I'm sitting here with Timothy?

Reed: Yes.

Maniscalco: How are you doing?

Reed: Oh, doing great today.

Maniscalco: Now, you're an agricultural teacher for a certain school?

Reed: Southwestern High School.

Maniscalco: Really?

Reed: Yes.

Maniscalco: Okay. I guess we'll start out with the easier questions, so let's just do age and date of birth.

Reed: I'm thirty-six years old. Born on September 30, 1971.

Maniscalco: Where were you born?

Reed: Harrisburg, Illinois. I grew up in the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois. So Hardin County was the location that I was.

Maniscalco: Now, did you have a lot of immediate family around where you grew up?

Reed: Quite a bit. My family farmed with my uncle, and those two families raised cattle and horses growing up.

Maniscalco: So growing up on a farm, I'm sure you had lots of chores.

Reed: Raising horses and cattle. We had about 500 acres that we dealt with between the two families in southern Illinois. Cleaning barns, that sort of thing. We raised Quarter horses and Morgan horses and then cross-bred Angus cattle.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow. Wow, so that's a lot of work.

Reed: Quite a bit.

Maniscalco: So what were your good chores?

Reed: (laughs) Just cleaning stalls, exercising horses. It wasn't too bad at all. And then we also did gardening and that sort of thing. My mother would can everything we'd get from the garden, and we had chickens just for the eggs. All of those things that life on the farm is like.

Maniscalco: (laughs) Well, that's great. You know, there has to be one chore out there that you just hated.

Reed: Cleaning stalls was not the most favorite thing in the world, especially, you know, if you have a horse in there for quite a long time, then daily cleaning. Getting up before school, and then after school, cleaning it again. So.

Maniscalco: Living on a farm, what about friends, having friends over to the farm or...?

Reed: You didn't do a whole lot of like sleepovers and stuff like that. You would have friends come—I used to make the joke that I wanted to live in town because those people got to like—we rode the bus for an hour, and living in the Shawnee National Forest, it was forest land all around us, so you were kind of excluded from people at times. But occasionally birthdays, special events, people got to come over.

Maniscalco: What was it like having kids from the town over, or were they mostly farm kids that were your friends?

Reed: Mostly farm kids that were friends. My dad was a Baptist minister, so people from the church would come over and different things like that as well. But a lot of them didn't understand what it takes to—you know, exercising horses or raising cattle, that sort of thing, or where their meat actually came from.

Maniscalco: Do you have any funny stories about showing people the cattle or horses?

Reed: The funniest story I had was we had a lot of deer hunters in the area, and we actually had a calf shot one time because they had mistaken one of the calves that we had raised, because it was red, for a deer.

Maniscalco: (laughs) Oh my gosh.

- Reed: And they had shot it, and then they had to come up and find the people that owned it and different things. But yeah, it was more of the deer hunters and different people in the area not realizing that the cattle and horses were running through as well.
- Maniscalco: (laughs) That's wild. Now as a child, what about organizations? Were you involved in 4-H or FFA?
- Reed: I wasn't as involved in 4-H as a lot of my students are today, and then FFA, when I was in high school, was the main organization I got involved with.
- Maniscalco: So what did you do in FFA? What was your project?
- Reed: My projects in FFA were poultry production; we raised beef, the horses. I worked at a feed store, as well. And then did (inaudible speech) communications and public speaking and stuff like that through the FFA.
- Maniscalco: When you went to school, did you go to a school where most of the kids were rural kids?
- Reed: Yeah. It was a county-wide school, actually, in southern Illinois, so almost everyone there was pretty rural as far as attending the high school.
- Maniscalco: Now, I imagine that had been consolidated at one point from smaller—
- Reed: The first school I went to, kindergarten through third grade, my kindergarten and first grade teacher was the same person in the same room, and then second and third grade was the same person in the same room type thing, and then it consolidated to a county-wide school when I was in fourth grade.
- Maniscalco: So how was that transition between third and fourth grade?
- Reed: It was a little scary as a fourth-grader because we went from this little bitty school to three classes of fourth grade and three classes of fifth grade, which is still small compared to a lot of other places, because there were seventy in my graduating high school class—which is small, but for us, that was huge, because the building was actually K-12 in one huge building. So quite the change from the little bitty school where my grandmother was my kindergarten and first grade teacher.
- Maniscalco: (laughs) That's wild. Wow. So can you kind of explain what your family's farm looked like or does still look like?
- Reed: Well, it's not in existence anymore—my father has passed away, but my uncle still farms part of it. We basically raise cattle—a cow-calf operation—at weaning, the calves were sold to people that would either finish them out or use them for breeding. Cross-bred Angus with Chianina, Hereford, different breeds. And then we raised horses. At our largest point, we had about

twenty-six horses, that we'd raise Quarter horses and Morgans and sell the foals to either people that showed or different people that would use them for riding purposes as well. Chickens just for eggs and the FFA project. Raising like potatoes, you know. The women in the family, kind of a southern Illinois, Kentucky type, they would all get together and slaughter the chickens and have a day where the kids would have to help. They canned together, so it was like homemade ketchup growing up, versus—you know, we always were like begging for our birthdays to have like Kraft macaroni and cheese and stuff like that. (Maniscalco laughs) Junk food was nonexistent on the farm because we'd raise cattle, so you had steak, you would have canned vegetables and stuff like that, but having like pizza and junk food and stuff like that was more of a treat versus anything else.

Maniscalco: Well, now you're an ag schoolteacher, so can you tell us, what's the difference between your childhood and what you see in a lot of your students' childhood?

Reed: It's changed quite a bit. I mean, I've taught in the Chicago suburbs before, and a lot of horticulture. I teach now in a rural area about forty-five minutes north of St. Louis. And you see a lot of students that aren't exposed to the farm. I would say less than 40 percent of my students actually are from a farm or a rural area, even. They live in small towns. Some of our parents commute to St. Louis. But as far as farm families go, they're few and far between as far as in the area that I'm at. And the classes I had were more farm management, that kind of classes, and I teach like pre-veterinary studies, floral design, landscaping—a little bit more of a mix between the traditional and the urban agriculture.

Maniscalco: Interesting. How did you get involved in becoming an ag teacher?

Reed: Never planned on it. When I went to college, I went to the—well, in FFA, I served as a state officer for FFA for a year. Ended up going to the University of Illinois with a major in international ag business and marketing, decided to pick my teaching certificate as well, went ahead and student taught my senior year, and totally loved student teaching and everything. I also met a young lady who later became my wife, so thought that was the more stable thing to do, was teaching, so decided to teach agriculture instead of working in the business role.

Maniscalco: So you said you teach a little bit of landscaping, some agribusiness types of things. Can you kind of give us a description of what those classes really are?

Reed: There are several sequences in high school ag programs. The ag business program, we teach farm management—it also counts for a consumer ed credit for graduation from high school. So you teach personal finance, we go over credit, taxes, that sort of thing, so whether they're operating a business or it's just their own personal finances, we go through those. In ag business

management, we use agriculture examples, and so they practice—whether a horticulture business, farm business, whatever they’re doing—and they learn different tax principles, accounting principles, the basics so that they can balance a checkbook at least when they graduate.

I have a semester of just straight floral design. So I have had students go ahead and work through college maybe in a floral shop as an assistant, that sort of thing, as well. We have some veterinary classes. I teach small animal care and management. One of my students that was in my—pre-veterinary is what we call them—went on to college and is now in vet school in Scotland, finishing out her veterinary science degree. We have some natural resources and conservation, and I’ve had students go on to become like conservation officers, that sort of thing. But at the high school level—at my school at least—they try to offer quite a bit of diversity so that kids can figure out where their niche lies in agriculture.

Maniscalco: How does a kid get into the ag classes? I mean, are they a requirement or an elective?

Reed: Not a requirement. They’re an elective they choose to get involved in. I’m also the CT director at the high school, so I manage all the career and technical education. And the agriculture program—we have about 590 students at the high school I work at, 184 in an agriculture class at least for a semester, and about 400 of the 590 are in a career and technical education class as well. So they just sign up for at least a semester as an elective. With a strong FFA chapter, then the students will come in because they want to become involved in different activities that they do.

Maniscalco: So do you have some kids that come in that have just absolutely no agricultural experience at all, and they start really getting into and pretty soon—

Reed: I do. I have had students that will come in and have no idea that beef cattle produce hamburgers—you would think that at least they would learn that at home, and that bacon comes from swine—and learn a lot about it and have gone on to agriculture careers. I had a young lady who actually grew up on a farm but never wanted to be part of the farm area, went through my program, still said, “No, I’m still not going to study agriculture.” After her freshman year in college premed, she now switched to ag business management and switched universities, because she finally realized the importance of agriculture (Maniscalco laughs) versus some of the things. And then I’ve had others that go through the program and go on but at least come out with an appreciation for life on the farm.

Maniscalco: I’m sure you’ve got to have tons of stories from your classes.

Reed: We've made jokes, you know, different students, telling them that grits come from the grits plant and stuff like that, (Maniscalco laughs) and they'll believe it. Freshmen are somewhat gullible when they're uninformed about agriculture. But for the most part, things go well in the agriculture.

Maniscalco: That's great. Very good. So I talked to a couple of the FFA officers, and they've mentioned that they want to go into agricultural education—the education field. And one of them actually mentioned that it's very difficult. Can you tell us some of the difficult parts of it?

Reed: Well, a lot of times people think education in general, you work nine months out of the year. The big thing in agricultural education is that it's a year-round job, whether or not—I'm lucky enough that the school I work for pays me during the summer, but some schools don't necessarily offer them a contract that will cover all the things that they do. Because of the nature of agriculture, you're working through the summer as well.

The other thing that you face that I see is you're not only teaching the college-bound students and the honors kids, but you're also teaching the students involved in special education as well. And you may have, as an elective, both of those students in your classroom. So reaching all of those students at their level and having them understand the concepts that you're teaching is very difficult because a lot of times in the academic programs, they will divide those students out, and it's a lot easier. But I've had the valedictorian sitting next to a student who could barely read before, wanting to learn about agriculture. So just the classroom management itself is difficult.

There's a lot of job openings because I think a lot of times, sometimes teachers choose to go elsewhere just because there's less headaches. You know, the FFA schedule, the contest schedule, and all the things that FFA offer, is wonderful for students, but sometimes it can be a little hard on the ag teacher and their families. I'm lucky enough my wife is the daughter of an agriculture teacher, so she understands the time commitment that it takes.

Maniscalco: That's good. So what do you do in your classroom to deal with the fact that you have such a big gap between the valedictorian and the kid that can't barely read?

Reed: Repetition every once in a while. (laughter) I use multiple intelligences. I got my Master's degree from Rockford University in teaching, and a lot of different teaching strategies. My philosophy is that kids all learn, and they're intelligent maybe in just different ways. And so I actually test all my students to see what intelligence—whether they're a visual learner or verbal learner, bodily/kinesthetic learner. My kids—we'll go through and test them, and then I gear activities more toward how they learn so that no matter what content I'm covering, they have an ability to grasp it. And then I do extra activities, so like the valedictorian may finish the assignment, and I give them

more enrichment activities, and then they also do peer tutoring for the students as they get it as well. So they all work together by the time the year's over.

Maniscalco: That's great. Now, you've mentioned that you have to be very involved with the FFA and 4-H type stuff. What sorts of things are you doing as the teacher?

Reed: As a teacher, I have a lot of kids involved in FFA and 4-H. FFA is really interesting because it's intra-curricular. We teach about FFA history in the classroom, and it's one third—you have FFA, you teach about agriculture, and then we have our SAE program, which is the record book program that students do. And all three of those things work together for a quality program. And so the neat thing about it is I'll teach about dairy products in class and how they process milk, and then my students will actually go to a contest—and we call them 'career development events'—and it's preparing them for a career. And what we've learned in the classroom, the FFA will sponsor a contest that they'll go and test their knowledge, so they can be able to see defects, different things like that. So we have a meats career development event, an agronomy career development event. So it's all based on careers that they could do in agriculture, and it's what we're learning in the classroom as well. So it's just an extension for them to compete in to see how much they know, compared to kids from other schools.

Maniscalco: It seems like there's a lot of hands-on reality learning that goes on.

Reed: Oh, definitely. You get in there—I think—even with my students, when I teach genetics, we raise rabbits at the school, so that instead of just doing a Punnett square like they do in science class, we actually do the Punnett square, but we breed the rabbits at the school—the pre-veterinary students take care of them—and then we can set out the animals and show, well, here's a live Punnett square on the floor, you know, with the squares drawn so the rabbits are in their spots, depending upon the genetics they expressed. And it gives the kids a lot more understanding of the world around them versus something on paper. And a lot of students, especially those ones who may need a little bit extra boost—you know, the honors kid can handle the paper very well, but sometimes those other students need a visual representation of what they're doing.

Maniscalco: Now, with the 4-H and FFA, you have kids that are choosing their own projects.

Reed: Right.

Maniscalco: Do you have kids that choose these huge projects that actually make you learn?

Reed: Of course. I am not that knowledgeable, growing up in the Shawnee National Forest, about agronomy, so I'm always learning about—and now being in

central Illinois—corn, soybeans, wheat. I didn't grow up on a grain production area. So I have students that actually help me manage—we have a thirty-two acre farm at the school that they manage as well. So I'm learning all the time about planting ratios and populations and everything because I was strictly horses, cattle—animals and a little bit of forestry. But it's quite interesting. When I taught up by Chicago, I didn't know hardly anything about floral design, and then teaching up there in the suburbs, and floral design and landscaping was our big areas, I learned from other teachers as well so I could bring that into the program in southern Illinois as well.

Maniscalco: Being in Illinois and having you teach at multiple different schools in agriculture, what makes Illinois agriculture special?

Reed: I think Illinois agriculture is really special as far as education goes because Illinois is probably one of the leading ones nationally for curriculum that we use. The FCAE—Facilitating Coordination in Ag Education—working with the state have developed curriculum that other states model afterwards. So when I said the five sequences, there's a program for agriscience, there's a program for horticulture, there's a program for ag business—you know, all of these areas—ag mechanization and conservation. And there's actually curriculum developed, so any new teacher coming into agriculture can take that curriculum—and I use it about 60 percent, and then I add my own taste to it and flavor to it. But you can come in and that curriculum is developed, and other states use that curriculum as well. So if they're a freshman in my school and if they're a freshman in the Chicago suburbs, they actually get a similar curriculum for that.

Maniscalco: So what do you think the future of agriculture education in Illinois is going to be?

Reed: Definitely becoming more urban. As a student, I'd never really heard of floral design being offered at like small schools. It's definitely more urban. My students, we also look at going green and the ecological impact that farming has as well. But the traditional is still there. Less people do it, but it's still the basic point that we use—we also look at marketing and how those products are marketed, and communications as well. I think it's a bright future. I really think that Illinois agriculture is going to continue. I think we set an example. And my students are always like—and of course, we are number one in horseradish and pumpkin production, so if all else fails, Illinois' claim to fame is pumpkins and horseradish.

Maniscalco: (laughs) There you go. So you know, this is going to be an oral history interview, and it's going to be archived in the Illinois State Museum. One day down the road, maybe one of your kids or great-great-grandkids could walk into the museum and see your interview. They could say, "Hey, look, there's Great-Grandpa Tim's interview on the shelf there. I want to see that." Is there something that you would like to put in here?

Reed: I would just say that I think my life was definitely different being involved in FFA. I never really thought that I would—I got to meet the original George Bush as president, and travel with FFA and do so much, and that's probably the reason that I teach so much, is that I want my students to get the same opportunities that I had. And I'm excited because by the end of the week, I'm going to be showing rabbits with my five-year-old daughter. She's coming for the first time to the fair. I really think that it's important for them to understand the value of agriculture. And that's the one thing I want to impart upon, whether my students or not, is that they understand how important agriculture is, not just for the food on the table and their clothes on their back, but just in the economy in Illinois deals with agriculture.

Maniscalco: Well, great. Well, thank you very much.

Reed: Thank you very much.

Maniscalco: It was really nice to sit here and talk with you.

(end of interview)