

RANDY JEWART
5-Mile Farms and Resolution Gardens - Austin, Texas

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Interviewer: Anne Gessler

Transcription: Anne Gessler

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Project: Foodways Texas Oral History Project

Anne Gessler: Okay. My name is Anne Gessler. Today is April 5th, 2012. This is the Foodways Texas Oral History Project. And I'm sitting in Resolution Gardens.

Randy Jewart: My name is Randy Jewart. I was born on September 19, 1969. And some people call me an "anarchist-artist-farmer." And that sounds pretty close.

AG: And thank you so much for coming to talk with us. I'm really excited. I hope we have a really good conversation. And why don't we just start off. Why don't you talk about where you grew up?

RJ: So I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Most people don't know, but it's rainier in Pittsburgh than it is in Seattle, Washington. And it's a beautiful, green, fecund place. The year that I was born, the steel industry died. And so I don't really know the Pittsburgh that lives in most people's minds in terms of industry steel production. It's a beautiful green city that has lots of amazing rivers and hills and trees and used to have quite a bit of farmland in the area where I grew up in the suburbs. I'm the oldest of five kids. My mom runs a family business in Pittsburgh that's a gymnastic school that has thousands of students that come every week. But she started the school the year I was born in the basement of our house. I think that both the family business and her entrepreneurial spirit have a lot to do with the things that I've done since I've graduated from [The College of] William and Mary 20 years ago.

AG: So can you talk about those influences, then? How have they shaped what you've done so far?

RJ: Well, I followed an unconventional path into art. As the oldest of 5 kids I didn't ever perceive having a career in art as a particularly responsible thing to do. And participating in art growing up, you know, in high school and in college, I wasn't particularly impressed with my fellow students' discipline. I trained in gymnastics through high school and college. And I think more than anything--until recently--that I've done in my life, it shaped how I, you know, saw the world, and the way that I learned about myself, and what I could do, and what I couldn't do. And I was a very disciplined athlete. And so participating in art classes wasn't a particularly disciplined environment. So I kind of backed my way into it.

You know, I'm a very creative person, and I could draw anything. And I've always taken art for granted. And I was, like, kind of finished my degree in English and Education. And I have an Art Minor, but I was one Art History credit away from having an Art Major also. And I just kind of realized that I wasn't really going to be able to function in a teaching environment--a formal teaching environment--I think because of my sort of independence. And it certainly wasn't entrepreneurial at that time. But I just sort of had a high valuation of--I don't know, to say "my own destiny" sounds a little bit "high falutin"--but I just felt I should try to do something with my life that I felt was important, that was important, that I felt was meaningful. So I gravitated towards trying to make a career in art.

And as I got into that, that's when I realized how much of artistic practice and then, subsequently, the landscaping and farming activities that I've gotten into more recently is about business. You know, that, I don't think our education system, you know, through college, really prepares people to really be entrepreneurial. I think most of it's based on training people who are going to be employed by the corporate infrastructure. And, you know, if you wanted to be a plumber, if you wanted to be tradesperson, if you want to be a farmer, if you want to be an artist, if you want to be a designer, if you were going to be an architect--I mean, all of these sort of professions or trades required that you know how to run a business on top of doing the technical part of whatever you're trying to do. And that was really eye-opening to me as an artist.

But my experience there helped me to understand how much it was also symptomatic of the broader culture and a sort of shortcoming, I feel, that we have in this country, is that we *think* that we're free and that we value our independence. But in fact we're really conservative. The way that we're educating people is really not preparing them to embody that freedom in their professional lives. And I think that, you know, when you talk about sustainability, when you talk about food and having some control over the things that we need some control over, our basic needs, you know, our mobility, our housing, the reason that we don't have maybe the, the lifestyle that we would have in terms of our ability to choose to have solar energy, to choose to have an electric car, or to choose to have some other way to move around, to choose the kind of things we want to eat, is because we live in a culture where people haven't been prepared to provide those things to us. We live in a culture where from a policy standpoint, we support overly simplistic, you know, non-local solutions to transit, to housing, to food. And there's really been no education that prepares people to provide any kind of alternative.

So you have a country where a majority of people are very dissatisfied with the ways that their lives work, from the jobs standpoint, from the food that they eat, from the way they're forced to move around, and pay for gas, and the energy that they use. They don't want to destroy the planet in order to make their livelihood. But we've all been sold down the stream in terms of our ability to actually do anything about that. To manifest it though some type of technical knowledge that we don't have, and also through an ability to organize and run businesses that would be viable alternatives to these things.

And I'm able to articulate a lot of that know, you know, 20 years later into my journey. But I just followed my gut, really, for 20 years. When I graduated from William and Mary, I went back and worked in the family business for 3 years. You know, I could have stayed there and been really happy. I like my family, I like Pittsburgh, I love the business, working with kids and training gymnasts is, I think, a really great opportunity for kids. I thought it was very valuable to me. But I was kind of following my gut in terms of trying to shape an art career. So I moved to Washington, D.C. When my ex-wife started law school, I started a sculpture career. And we were in DC for 4 years. And I started making sculpture, and selling and exhibiting things all over the country, and did an international gig, and served on board of director of an international arts organization. And, you know, was really active and really enjoyed learning all of those things and networking and participating.

And we moved to Austin in 2000 when my oldest daughter was born. And a lot of things changed when I became a parent. And I started learning things about the nuclear family and the shortcomings of that whole construct. And what it takes for families to, you know, have a career--you know, both parents to have a career, to try to take care of your kids, to make ends meet, to feel satisfied both as a parent and a larger family and the work that you do. And, and I fell upon hard times [laughs]. I was doing the stay-at-home-dad thing because my ex-wife was an attorney. And I was trying to keep my art career going, and trying to take care of my new baby daughter, and trying to stay connected to the career that I had started on the East Coast. And the economy collapsed a couple of months after we got here. And it was a rough couple of years, for sure. But again, I kind of followed my gut. And tried to keep my, you know, family together and keep my sanity. And eventually, I got kicked out of my house.

Right about that time, I heard this guy, William McDonough, on a radio program. And he had been the Dean of Architecture at UVA and has written a book called *Cradle to Cradle*. And he's got really, just sort of amazing--it's almost like a culture--he's got his own language, he's got his own principles, he's got his own outlook on sustainability. And I had to pull my car over and arrive an hour late to where I was going, because I just had to stop and listen. Because I was hearing something that I had never heard before. And what struck me, you know, among many things, was his emphasis on the role of design in sustainability. That if we're talking about our existing systems and making them less bad, then we're not really getting anywhere. That we have to talk about designing systems and using principles derived from nature about how we can alter the way we move, the way we house ourselves, the way we feed ourselves. And I made a vow, you know, shortly after hearing him and reading his book, that I would try to find some way to move my career into an area that dealt with, you know, the possibilities around what he was talking about.

Because I had been kind of dissatisfied with my art career. Not just because of the limitations of, you know, having a family and everything. But after 12 years of selling tens or over a hundred thousand dollars of artwork here and there, I realized that even though it was all fun, and I liked to make things, and I liked to share what I am good at, the baseline of an art career is that you decorate rich people's houses. And I felt like I wanted to do more with my life than that. And that I wanted to get back into my role as an educator and a more of a community participant.

And hearing William McDonough gave me an avenue to think about expanding into this hobby and interest I had in green architecture and try to figure out a way that what I knew about the art world could be integrated into some environmental concern. And I felt like Austin was a really, you know, sort of interesting environment to try to put that idea out there, that we have this really strong environmental community, and we have this great arts community, but they really didn't have anything to do with each other. And maybe I could use what I knew about art and the art world, and what I wanted to know about the environmental community, and try to create some interesting programming that would hopefully further some environmental activity and give artists an outlet to do something that was more meaningful than just sitting in their studios scribbling and making things.

And so, 9 years ago I started Austin Green Art, and it was facilitated by a very serendipitous event. After I kind of made my little commitment to do something, a couple weeks or a month later, I got a call from the Public Art Office here in Austin. And they asked me to organize an outdoor sculpture exhibit for the Americans for the Arts organization. And I said, "Yes! I'd love to do that! And it's going to be a green art show. And there's not just going to be one. We're going to make an organization that will keep doing this green art exhibit." So having that national exhibit was a good kind of catalyst to start talking to the local arts community and the environmental community about the potential for what Austin Green Art--which I didn't even know what it would do or what it all meant, but it was just a concept that people started to respond to.

And, you know, from that first time, it's been, everybody loves it. Like today, I picked up some steel from the metal shop. And the guy, the working class guy in the metal shop saw my truck, and was like, "What's Green Art?" And I told him, "Well, we make stuff out of reusable materials and we make stuff that helps environmental campaigns." And he's like, "Yeah, people around here are really into that. I come from Detroit, and people don't give a crap about any of that." And I was like, "Yeah, I know, it's been great. People really like it." So, you know, we started doing exhibits.

And over time, what we gravitated towards, the--I don't spend as much time on it anymore, because I've gotten so into farming, but--We were trying to look at sustainability and say, you know, art as an enterprise, whether it's film or dance or music or the visual arts, it's fundamentally unsustainably the way that it's currently manifesting itself. Because it's consumer-driven. And we're educating people to help them understand that they're not artists. That there's in fact only a small group of people who are artists. And everybody else should sit down and shut up, and pay money to purchase, you know, a ticket, or a seat, or an album, or a painting, or an object. And, there's, you know, there's tremendous cultural, social, economic, and environmental impact to that fundamental structure of how art works in our society.

And I don't--it may be William McDonough who tells this story about if you go to a kindergarten class and say, "Who can draw?" Everybody raises their hand. "Who can sing?" Everybody raises their hand. "Who can dance?" Everybody raises their hand. And then you go into a masters program somewhere, a classroom, and you ask those same questions, and nobody raises their hand [laughs]. And if you're in an art masters program, the visual arts people will say they can draw, but they won't say they can sing and dance. And so, you know, you have this idea of how we're educating people and we're taking away the fundamental, you know, what makes life worth living is to be able to do those things and not because you're an expert, but because you're alive. That should be your fundamental right to do those things.

So we tried to make Austin Green Art and say, "Hey, how do we make the whole process, the whole design and the whole, you know, fabrication, installation of these projects and make it as participatory as we can?" So that we're taking, you know, some environmental ideas like, let's

pay attention to the materials we're using, and are they local, and are they sustainable, and are they reusable? And we're taking some, some conceptual thematic ideas from the environmental community in saying, "What are these environmental groups trying to accomplish? They have a campaign about saving water. They have a campaign, with like the Sustainable Food Center about going to the farmers market, eating local food, learning how to garden." You know, there's 100 environmental groups in town. Probably 600. And they're all trying to do good work. So how can we take what they're doing and use what they're trying to accomplish as an instruction to a creative process? And say, "What can we make that will help people to be attracted to these ideas? And let's not just make something and plop it down somewhere. Let's invite people to think about what we could make and think about how we could make something, and think about where the materials come from." So, that's kind of what our niche has been.

And, you know, the high art community, there was a lot of repercussions for what we were doing, from kind of a funding standpoint, a granting standpoint, that people that fund the arts don't like that sort of inclusivity. They like to worship famous artists. They like to have special openings for only patrons. And what we're doing is very, you know, "low art," trying to make good art, bring in artists from the community, bring in artists from other places. And, but put them in a position to do something that they don't normally do. Instead of telling them, "Go off and make something and bring it back," you say, "Well, come up with some ideas. And then let us tell you, and let us bring in some other people and make a broader decision process about how to make something that might be inspired by those initial ideas. And you can keep coaching people who maybe aren't used to making things, and see where that all goes."

And you know, we're taking those ideas, the same ideas, and trying to incorporate them into our farm practice here. So it was out of that environmental work that I started educating myself about why local food, and why our industrial food system was so problematic. It started out from an environmental standpoint, and I went to a lot of conferences, and started meeting people in the local community, like the Sustainable Food Center group, the Green [Corn] Project, local farmers. And started trying to think about as artists, what do we do about the food? And I felt like, of all of the different areas of sustainability, that food is the most important. Just, I don't know why I thought that, other than just kind of an informal research on my own. But I felt like, you know, you don't really have a whole lot of choice about mobility. You have to have a car if you're going to survive, for the most part. You might be able to have an electric car, but maybe you can't afford one. And, you know, we don't have a whole lot of choice about where the energy comes from that's in our house. You know, solar panels are not, not cheap, you know, for most people. And our water comes from where our water comes from. And maybe you could collect some rainwater. But again, if you're going to do anything significant, it's going to cost you tens of thousands of dollars to do a rainwater system.

So I just felt like food was an area where, you know, you could feel like you were doing something meaningful by just shopping differently, by going to the farmers market, by joining a CSA [Community Supported Agriculture]. And that you could sure as hell could start growing your own food and learning more about how the organisms that we eat, you know, both plants

and animals, you know, how does all that work? And so, we decided that, you know, as artists, food is--it fits in a cultural space as well. It's not just--it's not just fuel that we put into our tank. It's informed by where we come from, our ethnicity. It's part of the way we celebrate our religion. The way we find meaning in our family lives. So I thought, you know, well, that's culture and artists and cultural practitioners. And that's a space that we can function, you know, with some area of expertise and competence compared to, you know, I can't build a solar panel, you know [laughs]. But I can cook up a good bowl of food, you know? And we can think about events and sort of art installations that would involve food.

And then we started thinking about, well, what does it look like visually? And so we came up with this project called Grow Austin Weird. And we were kind of thinking about a platform to look at the suburban/urban landscape and then imagined that food production should and could be a part of that. And that it would be a visually different thing. And as artists, that would be something that we could have some, some impact in, you know, changing the way that the landscape would look. And we thought that would be really impactful.

It was right at the same time that this guy, Fritz Haeg out in California, was kind of making some national and international news with really the same kind of idea. He has a project called Edible Estates, and it's an attack on the front lawn. And, he was doing, you know, front yard gardens in different spots in the country and did a project with the Tate Museum in London. We struck up a correspondence with him. And it didn't have anything to do with us, but he happened to do a project here in Austin, that was partnered with the Arthouse organization. And so we said, "Great, you know we're onto something. This is happening, and it's not just us. And we're excited about that." So we started our own garden.

And 5 years ago I built my first garden, after taking a workshop--a one day workshop with the Green Corn Project folks. And it was a really, really interesting process for me. To build that garden, to prepare to build it, and to build it, and to take care of it. It was a very rich experience on a lot of levels. I was really kind of freaked out about building a garden. And that was odd for me. Because I was an artist. I was used to putting odd things out into the public and have to stand there and say, "This is my work, and take it or leave it, and I hope you like it." And I'm used to spending a lot of time devoting a lot of physical energy to an experiment. And maybe it will work. Maybe it will be a good piece. Or maybe it won't. So, it's not like I'm afraid to fail. And I grew up doing gymnastics, and I know how to fail in front of people, and to train to do something, and try to do it. And so I was like, "Man, I wonder why this is such a kind of anxiety-ridden process?" You know, because it's not about being afraid to put some time into something and fail. It's not about doing something unconventional.

And I think a big part of it is that there's a lot of culturally baggage that we all inherit about having a green thumb. And whether you have one or whether you don't. And it doesn't sound like something that you could actually cultivate for yourself. It's like either you've been granted one by the universe or you haven't. And so maybe that was part of it, I don't know. I think a lot of things were a part of it. But I paid attention to it because we were trying to put together this

platform of Grow Austin Weird that was encouraging people to do this. And I'm like, "Man, if I'm hesitant to do it, what's a normal person going to do [laughs]?" You know, a person who's not used to going out and doing some hard physical work for a few hours is going to be like, "Screw that, I might get a blister." Or, you know, "I don't know what I'm doing, and if I don't know what I'm doing, I won't do it." So that had a lot to do with, you know, the subsequent gardening that we did, and where we did it, and how we were trying to do it. And when we realized that people were reading Michael Pollan's books, and people were going to these Sustainable Food Center workshops, people were shopping [laughs] at the Natural Gardener. And they know their statistics for the past 5 to 7 years that their business has gone through the roof in terms of selling vegetables.

But--and you know, other people that you interview, if they know me, they might not like it [laughs]--they might not like me because I still feel like we live in a region of a million and a half people in a city that is 8,000 acres. And if you count the actual number of people who are gardening, or the actual number of acres or square people that is producing food, it rounds to zero percent. I'm sorry. I'm not, I don't have the data, and I might be off by 1 percent, or 2 or 5, but it still rounds to zero. And, so I, you know, I feel like the whole local food community is trying hard, they're doing good things, they're dedicated. But we're not winning. We're not doing scaled impact. And that shouldn't be OK with us. We shouldn't pat ourselves on the back for accomplishing something that we're not accomplishing. We should own it. And we should go back to the drawing board. And we should meet together and try to figure out how we could work together to do more, instead of just off in our isolated efforts doing whatever we're doing.

So, you know, when we, we thought, "Oh, we're crazy artists, and if we build some cool gardens, this is just going to take off. People are going to want to build gardens. And when it didn't happen, we said, "Well, maybe we should start a company that will help people, because maybe they're not doing it because they don't know what they're doing. Or maybe they don't have time. Or maybe they don't have a pickup truck. Or maybe they don't know how to do some basic carpentry to build a raised bed." So, if you don't know how to do anything, you hire somebody to help you do things. So we were like, "Why shouldn't there be a company that helps people build vegetable gardens, if there are people who would do it, if there was somebody to hire, because they can't do it themselves?"

So we started Resolution Gardens 3 years ago, in March. And since March, we've built around 400, 500 vegetable gardens all over Austin. And I'm sure we've built more vegetable gardens than anybody else in Austin, and I just told you I still think we're a failure [laughs]. Because 400 is what percent of a million and a half [laughs]? It's not 1 percent. It's a very, very small percent. And that's not OK with us. Because, you know, we want to have a successful business, you know, because we want to stay in business. But the main reason we're in business is we're trying to change the world, and we want to have a scaled impact, and we don't. And we keep going back to the drawing board and try to come up with ways to get people's attention.

So, you know, one of my favorite stories recently, is that we've been--we've been working with Groupon to try to reach more people, because we don't have money to advertise, like a lot of small businesses. And so we specifically designed a little Groupon product that we call a "starter garden." And it's 4 feet by 4 feet, a little raised bed. And it's exactly the same size as the very first garden I ever built 5 years ago. So I tell people that, you're not going to grow your own food and not go to the grocery store on a 4 foot by 4 foot garden. But it might change your life [laughs]. Because it changed mine. So watch out, you might have a 2 acre farm in a couple years. And have the bug, the farming bug. So these starter gardens we sell on Groupon cost \$189. And you get a 4 foot by 4 foot wooden box. And you get soil from The Natural Gardener. You get plants. And we come to your house. And we put it all together, and we tell you what you got. And in October, we sold about 125 of them. And this spring we sold about 150 of them. And so, it's fun. We're reaching people. And they love it, you know. They think it's a good deal.

And the reason I started telling this story is because my favorite of the stories that I've heard about it so far is that a woman came over to one of our events. And she said, "You know, you guys, my friend saw your Groupon special. And she was going to buy it. But I'm sorry, you know, that she didn't." I was like, "Well, whatever, it's not a big deal." And she's like, "She showed it to her dad and told her dad that she was going to buy it. And her dad was like, 'That's too expensive. I could do that cheaper for you.'" And I was like, "Great! [laughs] That's the best story I ever heard about this particular project." Is that somebody saw it, and it inspired them to do it on their own. And that's what we want. I hope there's more people out there and decided to basically do it on their own. That would be awesome.

AG: If I could just interrupt you for a second. That kind of leads me to a question that I had about the role civic engagement and participation. So you were saying that you would like everyone to start a garden. So, what would that look like, and how would people participate in that?

RJ: Well I tell people, you know, there's no excuse--there's no barrier to people trying to grow their own food. And you know, I'm pretty sympathetic to economics and you know, social injustice. But, you know, a pack of seeds cost a dollar [laughs]. And the dirt doesn't cost anything. And water doesn't cost anything. And even if you don't have some dirt, you could get a pot. And you could find a sunny place. And so there's really no excuse.

And, there are so many reasons that this should be happening. People should be growing their own food because they're concerned about their own health and eating healthy food that's not poisoned. They should care about the environment. They should care about the fact that the industrial food system is the biggest carbon, you know, engine in the whole sector, in all of our industry, it uses the most petroleum. And people should care. And they should say, "Well, could we grow these things here, instead of shipping them all over the world." And people should care about local farms and their community and try to do something that starts to create a real job sector for local food in our communities. And people should care about learning about biology,

you know, the biology about how these organisms grow. And I always tell people that the reason I'm so into gardening and farming is that it's good for your mental health. You know, it's cheaper than therapy. So there are all these reasons. And there's not a barrier that is really acceptable. And so you ask yourself, why aren't a million and a half people doing this?

You know, so civic engagement, you know, it looks like community gardens, it looks like school gardens, it looks like front yard vegetable gardens, instead of backyard gardens. It looks like gardens on apartment patios. It looks like gardens in windows like they're doing in New York City, where they've got some racks, you know, that hang in the window so that you can grow food inside, with the available light that you have coming in the window. It looks like people going out and volunteering on farms. It looks like people joining CSAs. It looks like people taking classes to learn how to garden. So, and more, you know? Those are just a very brief listing of things. And I think that the people that are part of the local food community should try to be coming up with even more reasons and more programs. And the more diversity the better.

I feel like the food movement right now is really stuck in the economic niche that makes it sustainable for small local farmers to grow organic produce. And that niche is built around creating a, a luxury item. You know? A high-priced, luxury item for people of means to buy at local farmers markets and to buy at the grocery stores that sell that premium product, and to buy it at the restaurants that are serving that food. And it's my biggest fear that that's where the local food movement is going to get stuck, in this elitist--it's a racially segmented market. And the local food community is responsible for trying to figure out how to diversify access and participation.

And, you know, what we're doing in our small way but I feel like is appropriate for the broader food community to start putting out there, is the research and a vision for the job creation for economically and socially marginalized people to participate in the food sector. As growers, as distributors, as cooks, as just, people who drive around delivering produce. And that I think that sounds like a vision that could be really attractive to people that are going to get jobs in the food sector. But they're going to work at McDonald's, and they're going to work at Church's Chicken. And they're going to poison themselves by eating that food. And they're going to be poisoning their community by participating in selling it. They're going to be in dead-end jobs that they're going to hate.

And it's a disaster. It's environmentally a disaster--these companies. It's socially a disaster. It's economically a disaster. And if you counter that vision with the vision for a vibrant local system to provide jobs to people that wouldn't be dead-end jobs, that wouldn't be destructive to their own health and the economic and social health of their communities, then I think you've got a starting place for really building access and building participating. And I think that you know, if you look at--now, I'm not an expert in how these businesses do what they do--but, if you pay attention, any company, no matter how destructive they are, or no matter how poorly they run their internal pay and economics and corporate conduct and responsibility--if they go into Community X and say that they're going to provide jobs, everybody bends over backwards and

saying, “Awesome, we want those jobs.” Even if they’re crap jobs [laughs]. Even if those jobs are going to destroy the environment. Even if people are going to hate those jobs. Everybody responds when a company comes in and says, “We are going to create jobs.” Tax incentives start happening. All kinds of shady dealing start happening, because communities want jobs.

So if the local food sector could get its shit together and do the diligence to come up with a proposal and say, “We have a million and a half eaters in this region. If we provided 10 percent of the local food production for these people, we’re talking about a billion dollar sector. And we could create a lot of jobs for people, all the way through the value chain. From production to distribution. And we want X from the community to start building that infrastructure and making that happen.”

So that’s my biggest vision for the local food system. And what we’re trying to do, in our own small way, is provide some of those jobs. So, you know, we have a homeless person who works here. That helps us do our gardening projects [laughs]. And it’s an example that, you know, these jobs can work for people. You don’t have to have training; you don’t have to have a degree. You just have to want to do some good work. And we’ve had people who work here who’ve been in the juvenile justice system and the adult justice system. And they’re not going to get jobs anywhere. But we can provide those jobs. And we can give them good work to do, and start them to put them on a path of putting their lives together and feeling good about themselves. And we can put them on a path to, you know, open their eyes about what is food? And how does it work? And start to have them empowered to take that information back to their communities. So it’s not a bunch of white people who were at the Sustainable Food Center coming and saying, “Here’s you garden in your Eastside community. Are you glad we built this thing for you?” It’s like, let’s train these people and let them figure out how they’re going to take that information back to their communities. So that’s a participation vision that we have in a broad sense.

And then on the farming side, what we’re trying to do, very specifically, with 5-Mile Farms, is to make larger scaled home gardening a cooperative, collaborative experience. To start to break down the whole notion of, you know, what is the “American Dream” home and yard? And how can we change it to make it more sustainable environmentally, economically, and socially. So, we don’t really like--I mean we would love it if a million and a half people had a garden in their yard, no question. But, that wouldn’t be enough for us. Because it’s still part of the social construct that says “Here’s my yard. Here’s my fence. Here’s *my* garden. And, it’s private.” And that whole attitude--more than any other thing that drives unsustainability, that drives the destruction of our planet, is the notion of the “American Dream” home in the suburbs with its little gate and its little cars.

So we feel that food and gardening is an area that can help to start to re-envision what that thing is and what its role can be to be a positive element in the community and the ecosystem. So we’re trying to say, you could have something in your yard that looks like a private garden but isn’t. It’s networked in with other people who are doing something similar in their yard. And it’s not just a bunch of loosely affiliated gardeners. It’s a business. It’s a farm. And there is rules,

and a structure, and a methodology, and a quality of production, and a training program and a distribution vision so that it doesn't just doesn't fall apart if 5 people quit because they got busy and couldn't do it anymore. And it's trustworthy so people can buy the produce and know that Homeowner X isn't running around with a bunch of Sevin dust on his tomatoes or whatever.

So, you know, this project is a very--it's amazing. It's so simple to say, "We should be able to take this available land, and grow food on it, and distribute it." Period. But it's so complicated [laughs]. It's so complicated because there's so much baggage, you know, culturally. It's very complex economically to make the numbers work. There's cultural baggage around, you know, what it looks like, the fact that it's in my yard, who's coming into my yard, when are they coming, what are they doing? And it's, it's complicated because farming is complicated no matter where you're doing it. There's bugs, there's pests, there's problems, there's costs. So when you take that complexity and you say, "Well, instead of having 2 acres right here in this one place where we can just sit here and work on it everyday," you're saying, "Well, divide that up into 16 pieces and put them in different neighborhoods all over town." And each one has a different personal dynamic because of the person who's the owner. Each one is in a little, slightly different bioregion, a slightly different soil conditions. And, I *love* it [laughs] because I like a good challenge.

And so, we've been, we were making baby steps, you know. Our goal was to have this thing be scalable. To have a very clear value proposition for people who want to have this happen in their yard. To have a clear value proposition to community members who want to buy the produce. To have a clear value proposition to people who want to be workers of this farm. And you know, we're learning that information. It is not, it is not clear yet [laughs]. With the value proposition is not clear, you know. The costs are not clear. The sort of rules of engagement are not clear. But, we're practicing it, and we're figuring it out as we go. And, we are successful, you know, in practicing it. It's underwritten the whole experiment--and that's what I call it, is an experiment or a conceptual art project in a way, is underwritten by the Resolution Gardens Project. By the profitable work we are able to do when we build somebody a private garden. And we use the profits from that to underwrite the farm project to help it to sort of get to a point of being a break-even proposition.

And so one of the things that we've learned and that we think is significant and valuable, is that we know that running a 2 acre farm in 16 different locations is ludicrously inefficient. There are costs that are insurmountable with that structure. That selling tomatoes is not going to make that money back. So, we're taking that challenge--not a problem, it's a challenge. We're taking that challenge and we're trying to say, "Well, farming--you know, strictly farming is not our business model." It's not going to work until the price of gas goes to \$10 a gallon and the price of food goes up. And then we could change our pricing and the infrastructure that we've built will be extremely valuable. So, we *are* hoping for that kind of cataclysm [laughs]. Not because of our own self-interest, but because we know that that would be something that would get more of these million and a half people to do this thing, that reading Michael Pollan and seeing *Food Inc.* is not going to do. It's just not. It's going to take more than that.

So our business model--and it goes back to your question about how participatory we want to be. Our business model is moving toward something that's more like a gym membership. Or more like, you know, a church membership. Or more like a club that you join, of some kind. It involves selling some produce. It involves eating together, some. And it involves learning things about a local food system. So those are our three tenets of our program. And so what we're trying to do is build participation in the buying of produce, the attendance at workshops, and the value of eating together. And, so, in my mind, we will do those things every day, in multiple locations all over town. And people would learn about farming, and learn about gardening, and learn about landscaping, and permaculture, and native ecosystems. And they'll learn about pickling. And they'll learn about cooking greens. And what is a turnip? And how do you eat it? And they'll learn about, you know, a chicken, and where its eggs come from, and where they go? And what does their coop look like? And how do you kill one? And how do you make it ready to eat?

And we'll eat together, and we'll cook together. And we'll have, you know, maybe a sort of restaurant-ish or catering-ish kind of thing that's more formal. And we'll have potlucks and community meals where we'll just sit around people's yards. All of that activity will be open to the public for people to, to pay to be apart of. And all of that will be open to people who are members, who are saying, you know, "I'm going to be there every time. Because I want to learn these things and taste these things, and be apart of this community that is on this journey together to build our own competence as eaters, and as producers, and as a community that is aware of how difficult it is. And is committed to keep trying, to figure it out. And we believe that that process, if we are successful, will benefit other growers and other cooks and other distributors. Because we don't really imagine that we are going to exclusively provide for all these million--

[tape pause]

AG: OK. Alright. You were just recapping where you are in 5-Mile Farms and Resolution Gardens.

RJ: Sure. You know, so from that vision of where we're trying to go, where we are right now is that we have 16 yards of 2 acres under production. We have a staff of 3 full-time people. One person is focused on the distribution side of what we're doing, you know, managing the CSA marketing, and the sort of shopper retail side of the CSA. And then we have two people who are full-time farmers, that plan all of the farming at all the locations and physically go and do most of it. And then our staff of other landscapers chips in, you know, a certain amount of time on the farm.

Some of the homeowners help out with some of the farming. Surprisingly, to us, not as much as you might think. Our existing crew of farm owners are people who, the majority of them are motivated to participate because they don't really give a crap about having a nice, conventional lawn. And they kind of feel guilty having this yard that they don't really care about that much

from a traditional approach. And so they feel like, “Wow, this is great. I will even put some money into creating this thing in my yard that is a positive thing. As opposed to just this yard that doesn’t do much for me.” And that was a surprise. And it’s great, you know, to have this space and to have their support. And it creates a challenge in terms of what *we* thought was going to be, you know, a lot of participation on the actual farming side. But, you know, it’s another problem to kind of work around through recruiting volunteers from the community who would be happy to have that experience of working on a farm that’s located near them in a neighborhood. And give them a chance--because maybe they don’t have a yard, or maybe they *do* have a yard, and this is a good way for them to learn some things that they could then take back to their place.

And then, we have currently more than 80 CSA members. And it’s a relatively new structure for us. For the 2 years up to now, up to the first of the year that we’ve been working on this project, we’ve been wholesaling everything that we grew. Because we felt that it was a more simple way to deal with the complexity if we just grow a bunch of stuff and take it to Wheatsville or take it to Daily Juice or Casa de Luz. It would be easier than dealing with a lot of individual buyers. The market--you know, we don’t really want to compete with traditional farmers, because that’s not where we want to go longterm. So, we don’t really like the idea of going to the farmers’ market and being another choice for people there. We also don’t like the unreliability of having good days and bad days at the market, from a business standpoint. So if you’re wholesaling, you have a little more control over the revenue that you’re going to make, even if it may not be much as if you’re retailing.

So we just started the CSA program the first of the year [January 2012]. What members commit to, is to buy \$20 worth of produce every week. And we’re trying to take some of the criticism of the traditional CSA model, where a farm outside of town has piles of produce and they box it up and deliver it to people. Which makes perfect sense if your produce is outside of town and you’re trying to get it to people; it’s a great way to do it. So we’re trying to say, “Well, we’re *not* outside of town. The pile of produce is very close to a lot of people. So it would be wasteful of us to box everything up. If people could just come and take it themselves, it would save us time.” And it would give people the opportunity to come and shop. To choose what they wanted in their box, instead of us saying, “Oh here’s your percentage of all the stuff that we’re growing.”

So, it’s working well. The people that are coming, they love having the choice to get their own stuff. It is more of a burden for them to have to come pick it up every week. And there is a bit of an issue with people coming consistently. Because it’s an extra stop. They’re still going to have to go to the grocery store, because there’s a majority of things [laughs] that you buy in a kitchen, is not just produce, and is not just eggs. So we have the members come and pick things up. And they get to choose what they get. And our members get to attend our monthly workshops, and our monthly “farm feasts,” we call them. The members don’t have to pay to come to those. And then again, those workshops and farm feasts are open to the public. So we do have people who are paying a one-time fee to come because they want to learn how to cook greens or how to build an herb spiral--are a couple of the workshops that we’ve done during this year. And they also

pay to come to eat on the farm. We have a little farm-to-table evening here at the farm. And it's still not making our numbers work as well as we would like. But it's an improvement on the wholesaling that we were doing. And we are, you know, learning how to host these events, promote these events, learning how to bring people to the farm to pick the produce. So we're trying to take the experience that we're getting, the feedback that we're getting, to tweak the offerings to bring in more people.

AG: And then, finally, if you could just talk a little bit--so before the recording started we were talking a little bit about cooperative culture and cooperative community. Can you describe how that maybe intersects with 5-Mile Farms?

RJ: So the cooperative movement is, it's an amazingly powerful potential innovation that deals with a lot of the challenges that I was talking about in the broader culture. In terms of responsibility for, you know, community of responsibility, for all the different types of businesses and services that we have, a cooperative model really builds on that capacity for people to actively participate. We're excited about the potential for it, for what we're doing. We're not experts in that business model, and we're not sure how it's going to manifest with what we're doing. But we feel like, if we can figure out a basic balanced budget to do the kind of things that we're doing, that we may be able to create that clarity of the value proposition through a cooperative offering. And that will be part of what we hope Wheatsville and the Black Star Brewery and you know, Third Coast Workers Co-op group [now Cooperation Texas], that they can help us to learn more about the legalities of how that structure works. And I think it will be *potentially* the way things go. But I thought it would be a lot of things that would work [laughs] that you know, haven't worked. So, we'll just keep trying to figure it out.

AG: OK, well I think that's kind of all the questions that I had. Kirsten do you want to have any follow-ups?

Kirsten Ronald: Ah, no, I think I'm good.

AG: OK, well, thank you so much. And did you feel like you wanted to add anything that you didn't feel like you addressed?

RJ: Um, I guess, you know, the last thing that's really a big part of what is motivating us to do what we're doing and that we feel like is what we're contributing to the local food movement, is we're trying to bridge the gap between the information that's out there. You know, we know the information is out there. We know that people are reading Michael Pollan's books and you know, seeing these food documentaries. And that they are aware. People are aware of the problems of the industrial food system. They are aware of the problems of eating things that haven't been produced organically. But we also know that that obviously isn't--it's not enough. It's not making the local food movement manifest that scaled reality. And so, I feel like a big part of what we're doing is, is bringing that into neighborhoods. You know, bringing the actual thing to neighborhoods.

We're not expecting people to go and find where all the local farms to go and see it and taste it and participate. And we're not expecting people to go and find where the market is. To go and shop only on Saturdays or Wednesday evenings. We're trying to put this thing under people's noses, where they can't help but be exposed. And I think the success we're having--because we're not advertising, we don't have the money to advertise--the fact that we're accomplishing the baby steps we're accomplishing is because people are attracted to farming. And to, to learning more about these plants and more about their food and how to prepare it. And specifically to this site, again, another little story.

Like, our funny little street here--it's this dead-end street that has some apartment buildings on it, and it has some car mechanic shops across the street. And a lot of the residents that live in the apartments and that work here and come to have their cars fixed here--they're participants. You know? They might not shop here, but some of them do. But we had people from the very beginning--neighbors living in the apartment complex that would bring their salad bowls filled with their compostable stuff, and come walking up the driveway, kind of shy, and say, you know, "I have this stuff, can we put it on your compost pile?" And we're like, [laughing] "Yes, please, you know? Here it is. Walk back and put it on there." You know, we--the mechanics that work across the street; they're our biggest fans. They come over everyday. And a couple of them are gardeners. And they talk about what they're growing. And they have questions about what we're doing and how we're doing it.

And it's, it's kind of proof of what Wendell Berry talks about in his writing about how important agricultural practice is to community. And, people are coming here of their own accord. They're not coming because we took fliers all around. And because we had some fancy open house where they could come and get free tea and cookies. You know, they're coming because they're attracted to the thing itself. And that is, it's incontrovertible proof that if this activity is made available to people that they will engage with it. They'll support it. They'll seek more participation with it. And so we feel like the local food movement is not going to succeed if we don't succeed. Because people need more than just the information. They need to see it. They need to taste it. They need to talk about their grandmother's garden. You know, they need that release. And it's really amazing to me, you know--it's continually amazing and heartening to find the sort of neighborliness, which is, you know, kind of a lost art in our culture, is people's willingness to just talk to strangers openly. And to come here and explore and see what's happening. And we're really excited to make that available to people.

AG: Well thank you so much. This was really great. And thank you again.

RJ: At 5-Mile Farms, our motto is, "farm forth." And we encourage everybody in their own way to farm forth.

AG: Farm forth [laughs].