

RENÉE FUQUA

South Austin Community Gardens - Austin, Texas

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Location: Renée Fuqua's Home, South Fifth Street, Austin, Texas

Interviewer: Anne Gessler

Transcription: Anne Gessler

Length: 01:04:00

Project: Foodways Texas Oral History Project

Anne Gessler: My name is Anne Gessler. Today is April 6, 2012. And this is the Foodways [Texas] Oral History Project. And I am sitting with--

Renée Fuqua: Renée Fuqua. I'm self-employed. I'm a full-time massage therapist the last 22 years. And I've had my own plant business, garden business for over 30.

AG: And thank you so much for talking with me today. It's been really fun, and I hope we have a good conversation right now.

RF: I'm ready.

AG: Me too. So why don't you tell me--we were talking a little bit before we started the recorder, but why don't you tell me a little bit about growing up in Conroe?

RF: I grew up in Houston.

AG: Oh. I'm sorry, yeah, Houston and then how you--

RF: Well, I had a shop.

AG: Right.

RF: I'll tell you--

AG: Yeah.

RF: --a little bit about that.

AG: OK, tell me a little bit about that.

RF: OK, well my dad and I knew we were going to have my own business, but I didn't know. And then I--it's a longer story than this, but September 5, 1979 I found the building that I had Renee's Garden Kingdom that I had in for five years in Conroe, Texas. I was a very successful little hippie, little girl, you know, in a funky building, historic building that's now destroyed and gone. They've rebuilt something else there. And I had it for five years, and then I moved to Austin in '85, determined.

AG: And can you tell me a little bit what it was like to be a woman in business? You were saying a little bit about that before we started recording.

RF: Well, after a few years OK, I was involved in the Downtown Merchants Association, I was involved with the Chamber of Commerce, I was involved in the Montgomery County Horticulture Committee. But after several years you start learning if you weren't born and raised

in Conroe, Texas at the time, you just--When I left I felt Rodney Dangerfield, I just don't get any respect. I mean, I was just like I said, this young 24, 25 year old little hippie girl having this funky little plant shop in a, you know, pretty conservative town at the time.

AG: And can you tell me what Austin was like in the 1985-era?

RF: Well, when I came here in '80 and fell in love with it and was determined to get here, it still had the Armadillo World Headquarters I went to. Liberty Lunch. I slept out by the lake. And it was just a real, simple--you almost had to make, you know, less than \$2 an hour or be a college student to live here then. Five years later when I moved here, it was during the real estate bust. One of the first houses I lived at was right above Auditorium Shores, where I could get up on the roof from the big tree, and there was about six cranes building buildings at the time. And it took them forever to fill the occupancy. Of course, you know, when I moved here, I got into the real Austin clique. Like, Jim Franklin is a friend of mine, Carrie On, Michael Priest, Guy Juke. I got involved in--knew a lot of the musicians in this town.

So, after 27 years, I had my own little notoriety here myself. I helped start the South Austin Community Gardens back in '94, I started the South Austin Gospel Choir in '96. I had the choir for--I was the director. It was 25 old South Austin hippies singing about love, peace, and happiness. We wore different colored robes with tie-dye sashes. And then I had the white gloves. So I did that for six years. We've got a couple of CDs.

The garden was there--it would have been there for 18 years this January. But, we have a developer that we're working with. We are going to move our community gardens to the opposite corner, eventually whenever they get it all organized. They're going to move all of our good soil to the new location. We're real happy about that.

AG: So the developer is going to be building condos on the lot, then.

RF: Um hm.

AG: So can you tell me more about the changes that you've seen in South Austin in the next, past 20 years?

RF: Well, yeah, OK. In 1990, I bought my house for \$55,000. Right now it's worth probably \$450,000. My lot here--the lots were valued at 10 grand. For years and years, I only paid taxes on \$10,000. Luckily before the taxes when they really started going up on the taxes, I had this extra lot that is paid for, my dad helped me out. It's paid for. I had it added to my homestead. And so, this lot, which was valued at \$10,000 in 1990, is now worth about \$250,000. And all the bare lots are going. We're seeing all kinds of condos; some nice ones, some really cheap ones being built. The ones down the street are really cheaply made, and they're going for \$450,000. When the developer met with us, with the 6 acres, he even told us, within 3 years, Austin will have a housing shortage. So he goes, "If you can get--" He goes, "The lots are going for

\$200,000, \$250,000 right now in this 'hood. So if you get a nice little green, rain water harvest, zeroscape, you know, everything, little condominium right in the middle of town, with practically a view of the downtown and the Hill Country, for \$250,000 or \$350,000 it's going to be a bargain. I just recently had a friend that was given a 60 day notice, and her little one-bedroom apartment, it's in the 04 [78704] here, just on this side of Ben White [Blvd]. It's an older apartment. I mean, they're nice. She's been paying, she was paying \$600, she's been spending \$650. She's lived there for over 10 years. They just given her 60 day notice to move out. They're going to fix it up, and rent that little 700 square foot apartment, you know, one bedroom apartment for \$805 a month. From \$650 to \$805. Their taxes have gone way up too.

So I see, and--Now, recently I have gotten to know a lot of new neighbors. New people that are here that remind me of me when I moved here when I just turned 30 years old in '85. And I didn't know a soul here, and I was determined to make it. And now I'm meeting young people in my neighborhood who are freshly from California, Washington, Vermont, you name it. They're coming from everywhere. Even from South America, I've met some people, legally of course. And they remind me of me when I was 30 years old and moving here. I love the energy of course. I see a lot of non-community more. I know that's what happened with our community gardens. As soon as the e-mails and computer, you lose a lot of the community. But there is a lot of good community. I just had a roommate move out and move to Kansas. And he was a big computer person. And he kept up with all the neighborhood associations. And he goes, "Renée, you live in the best 'hood." And I really, South Austin, I don't have to go anywhere else.

And when I first moved here, we used to joke about "Hey, you go across the river [Colorado River] and even the radio starts sounding funny." We had, when I first moved to Austin, we used to have tug-o-wars across Lady Bird--what's now called Lady Bird Lake. And of course the Southside Bubbas always won. So after three years, the Northside kind of gave up even. So there was about two or three years we used to do tug-o-wars across the river with the Northside. But they just--so South Austin, it's a simple lifestyle I get to lead. A little bit slower than what--When I first moved here and started my business, I used to do business in North Austin. MOPAC was an expressway. At 5 o'clock, no problem heading South. Well, give it up now. So that's some of the changes I've seen, you know, in Austin. I've seen a lot of growth. As you can see, I see a lot of the Hill Country. They just built that huge building three years ago at Bee Caves and 360. I see all these big old homes being built on all these hills. These used to be all clean hills. But you see it, there's all these--There's people that live here a lot of money. That in my opinion they need to be paying more taxes, because in my opinion, I pay way too much [laughs].

AG: And it seems like your community garden, though, tries to foster community in ways that might be antithetical to what's happening now in Austin. Where you were just saying that a lot of community has kind of gone by the wayside, but your garden tries to do the opposite, right?

RF: The gardens do that. I've met with other people with other gardens. When we start our new garden, we're going to be involved at--of course, me, you know why, I've much rather be our

own, not 501(3)c non-profit, but we're just going to become part of the Sustainable Food Center. Which I'm happy with the way they've accomplished a lot with the funding they get. But yeah, especially with the advent of emails, no more personal phone calls or "hello." And, you know, we're hanging in there to want to keep it. But others have already gone off to other community gardens or gardening in their yard, so. We've still got that main core that make it happen.

And last year, he died before the gardens, before we had to get out of the gardens, but we named the co-op garden after David Goodwillie. He was my 84 year-old. I would--he was from Hungaria, so he had an accent [adopts Hungarian accent]. So I'd go, I go, "David, you may have a pace-maker, but you're the heartbeat of this garden." Because it really makes a difference, because he would make personal phone calls. And his two lines were--We dedicated the co-op to him. We started the co-op garden as the Y2K Garden in '99 because we donated so much beautiful, beautiful broccoli to the Salvation Army, but we donated the garden several years ago, it was called the "David Goodwillie Co-op Garden: Bragging Since 1999." Now the reason we said "bragging" was because two of David's main lines were, "I don't mean to brag, but look at my garden." OK, that was one of them, "don't mean to brag, but look at my garden." The other one was [laughs]. This is my favorite one: "I don't mean to tell you what to do, but" [laughs]. And when he died, I sang at his funeral. We were really glad that he did leave the garden before he saw it.

Because he heard, saw it on the paper for our first party that we always had, our annual birthday bash. And he was determined to go. He had just had knee surgery. We have a picture, a group picture with him in it. He looks very frail. And he was on a walker, just had knee surgery. He was determined. His wife goes [adopts German accent], "No, you can't go." She's from Germany. "No you can't go." He goes, "I'm going. I want to get a plot" [laughs]. I can be over here and watch that man garden, and move. He got so healthy. He had a wonderful tan. He wasn't frail. I'd watch that--of course he was 70 or later 60s when he joined the garden. But I'd watch that man go "zoom!" "zoom!" "zoom!" in this garden. And he was the heartbeat. He was the one that would still make personal phone calls. He was the one: "I don't mean to tell you what to do, but." And he was fabulous. We really missed him when he was gone. And he was a big part of the community. Because I always feel like older people and younger people really make it happen. And you do it together. And you learn; you learn as you go. You could learn a lot from that man, about gardening. And that's the community part.

AG: Yeah, can you tell me about some of the other people who maybe had individual plots or worked in the co-op garden? It sounds very diverse.

RF: Um-hm. Um-hm. We had everything. We have a housing project on the other side over here. We had several gardeners from there that supplemented. We have a little Vietnamese guy who lived across the fence. His name is Nguyen-Nguyen. And it always looked like "nuyen," but it's "win." And he had a little crippled arm. Well he didn't use that excuse not to come work on it--because we, you rented the plot for \$4 a month that went to the Salvation Army for water. And then you had to give two hours of volunteer time. Well, he was always there. Boy, he could

dig in that compost, dig weeds. But the way we met Nguyen is, we were over there working the compost piles; we had major community compost piles. We did not to buy compost, we made it ourselves. That was part of the two hours of being involved for your plot. And Nguyen, he didn't speak much English at the time. He goes, he'd point to the compost and had an empty bucket. So anytime we were out there, well eventually he got a plot. He didn't make any money, but he was able to supplement. And then we had people who work for the State and work in an office job all day long. This would be their wonderful way to come relax. They'd come to just hang in the garden.

We've had a couple of people that we had to ask to leave. Which was very rare. There was two occasions where--one woman, she rented the plot. Within two weeks, she'd called the police on three of our gardeners. We had to ask her to leave. She was just a little, OK. The other one started causing a lot of problems, complaining about my leadership. We eventually changed the locks and asked her to leave, because nobody else had any problem. In fact, in the beginning, it was "Renée, what can I do," "Well, this needs to be done." "Well, you know" So it was always, you know, community, you know, keep it going, having David Goodwillie. So he was retired. We had young people.

We worked with the Salvation Army many years when they would do, like, Vacation Bible School, and we had the children come out, and show them gardening. We did, we had a whole plot set aside for the Salvation Army to grow for them. There again, the community of growing food for the Salvation Army. Having a plot for the children, doing the horticultural therapy with the children. And that was why I started that garden. Because I felt like it could be a very good community volunteer, community effort. And it was until the very end. And we're still trying to keep it together.

AG: Yeah, I mean even as we've been here [in Fuqua's greenhouse], we just saw two people walking into the garden, even though it's kind of on hiatus.

RF: It's beautiful. It's just been gorgeous to watch the transformation of the garden. When we moved out, it was beautiful. No bermuda [grass]. We had to move out last Labor Day. The garden was gorgeous. We had it all clean. The soil--that's why they're going to move all our soil and mulch up to the new site. Because the soil is, you know, 17 and a half years of just this lush, organic, of course. In fact, Cecilia Nasti would interview me every year on the radio, and go, "Well, Renée, why organic?" You know, and I'd go, "If you're going to bother to take the time and all the sweat and all the work to grow your own food, why would you want to put a bunch of chemicals on it? You get enough of that at the store." So, always organic. It's just better for the Earth, better for you, what you eat, everything.

And like I said, we had all kinds of people in that garden. It brought all different kinds of people. And different personalities. And I've already told you--We had one person; he's my neighbor. They caught him pilfering in other people's plots. I probably shouldn't have said neighbor, he'll know who he is. But, anyway, we had to ask him to leave. You don't do that. We've had a little

theft, but luckily we were in a fenced in area and it was in a combination lock. And we always shared, though. I mean, when we'd have our Farmers Market, if someone came up with the WIC, we never said no. Even though we didn't refund them. If people was hungry, "sure, come on in. We've got food. We'd love to share."

The co-op garden was every Sunday morning, you know, 8 to 10 of us would work hard and grow food, and at the end, we'd split everything evenly at the picnic table. So, it was all a real community-joint effort. But David Goodwillie was the heartbeat.

AG: So, I want to back up. And again, before we were recording, you were kind of telling me the journey you went on before you started this garden. So can you give me a version of that?

RF: Well like I said, when I moved here in '85, I didn't know a soul. I called the volunteer center. I got involved with the Advisory Council to the YMCA of the Sunshine Site. And at the time they had a lot of green spots through East Austin. I served on--I was a member, I rented plots there, I learned all about organic and community gardens. I was on the board of directors, well, what became the board of directors. As I was on the Advisory Council, we became our own 501(3)c. I helped write the bylaws for that. Three years into it, I was voted President with a new member who had just become Treasurer, who worked right across the street at the Health Department in the Finance part. And then another gardner. The three of us started looking into things. We didn't like the way it was run, but we were voted off. So, just to make the story short and brief, I decided that a community garden does not have to be run by public funding. And once you get a community gardens healthy and going, just like a good soil, they can run themselves. And then you get another one started. But that wasn't what was going on.

So, to prove to myself, the three of us stayed connected for a long time, talking about--you know, just coming up with our ideas of what a community garden should be. It took me several years, with many attempts, but I was finally involved with this garden [South Austin Community Gardens]. I was the main leader. Anyone who's been involved or knows me, the first two years, that community gardens could not have made it without my leadership and doing everything. After about a couple years, and then, after that, it started, like a good soil, with the microorganisms and everything that help. You feed the soil, it will feed you. And after a couple years, it was the same thing. I had a main, hand core of gardeners who organize and made it happen. You always had the ones that would could in and rent a plot and leave. They would garden or expected someone else to do it for them or something, or they didn't want to give up their plot. Because it is a cool piece of land, but they weren't using it.

So we'd--we always had a waiting list--always. We could have expanded into this whole field. But, to be quite honest, with as hard as I worked, I ran it like a small business. Because I am a small business owner and an entrepreneur. And it would have been really good if I had been paid part-time for the first two years. But, like I said, a community gardens can start running itself just like a good soil. You got that hand core people. They can get it going. And then a bureaucracy or an agency or a non-profit that gets funding for that can basically let it go and go

do something new. They don't have to keep trying to be controlling over it, or you know. So, we did it. We did it. And we expanded. We started out with 20, no 24 and then we added 8 more. Because the demand. We constantly had a waiting list. So we had 8 more. And then Y2K. And we were like, "Ummm."

And so we started this big co-op garden. We had a beautiful ceremony with people hand in hand with a big circle and singing. And the sergeant with the Salvation Army saying a nice prayer. And you see, it was just a very--David Goodwillie ran the co-op garden. And it was always very successful. Because we were very dedicated. There again, you had the main core of five or six people that were there every Sunday. And then you had the other ones that would come when they felt like it. Or you know, or didn't really, weren't much of gardeners. But we let them be a part, to learn. Some of them didn't want to learn. But you know, they'd come and go. But you always had that main core. As long as you had that main core, you could make it happen. Made it happen.

AG: It seems like because cooperative organizing and cooperative is sometimes a very unfamiliar concept for a lot of people, it would seem difficult to inform your new members about the expectations that you have for the community garden. So how, how would you orient--

RF: Well, what we'd call them, we didn't call them rules. When I rented you a plot, I was the person doing that job at the end. When I rented you a plot, we had what we call "guidelines." But they were rules. If you had a pet, you know, you had to keep it leashed. If you had children, you needed to make sure they didn't walk in somebody else's plot. Of course, if you started, if you got to where you didn't use it, you'd get two week notice. After two week notice, we'd contact you again, either saying, "You didn't do anything." Or, maybe if we saw someone, sometimes maybe they were having a personal problem. We'd go clean their plot. I mean, it was a community. But if there was no excuse? Sorry, but we've got a waiting list. So, that was a big part.

I also found that when we started the potluck meetings, the potluck brought in more people. Because look, make one dish. And that's the way I put it to people when I, there again, when I'd rent them a plot. I'd say, "Look, once a month, you show up at 7. We wait until 7:15 to make sure there's no late arrivals. We eat. We have the meeting. We're out of there by 8 o'clock. Where can you go out to eat in this town, for that?" So, that was really good, adding the potluck to the meetings, we started getting a lot more involvement over the food [laughs]. And, what was always wonderful, in the summer every dish was something from the garden. Organic, just delicious. Or, you know, something from the orchard. When we started having peaches, David, his wife, would make peach cobbler. Yeah. So we had a lot of fun. My emphasis was fun.

Like, I told you when I got to the end of the co-op garden, when that one guy and I were screaming at each other, basically. Personality conflicts. He wasn't much of a gardener, and he didn't want to learn. And finally, I stood up, I was only trying to tell him something that the rest of us. And he explodes, and then we exploded. And that's why I quit that day, basically. Was I

just stood up and said, "I'm tired of growing food for you." "What do you mean? I'm not doing my part?" Well, all I would have said was, "Look around. See if you've weeded, if you've planted, if you've, you know." So anyway, personality conflicts. That's what I had with the choir, too. I had 25 people for 6 years. It was a community choir. It was great. Most of the time I would say, "hey we have a very democratic process on how we decide things at this, in this choir." And I would make most of the decisions, being the leader. But if one personality just couldn't leave their ego outside the door, didn't agree with me. And same thing with the gardens. It was personality conflicts. That happens. It happens. It's one of the reasons why I quit the choir, too.

AG: Yeah, so can you tell me more about the decision-making process? So you were saying it was kind of a democratic process.

RF: Yeah.

AG: So at the meetings, like how would people give their input?

RF: Well, when I was running it, I had an agenda for the meeting. The first part was--and just like, you know, like I said, I ran Austin Community Gardens for three years or was secretary. The agenda would be announcements, introductions of guests or new gardens, financial report, David would get a report on the co-op garden. We'd talk about what we were going to--we'd always tell people when I rented the plots, because they had to sign an agreement to the guidelines and everything. That of course was totally organic and blah blah blah. That--what was I leading up to here, let's see. As far as--Oh.

Just you know, then we would, we had the work day following the first Thursday of the month. That's the way it always worked. It wasn't a specific Saturday. It was always the Saturday following the meeting because we'd be fresh about what we decided needed to be done as a group. We'd decide together how--You know, we'd have our little fundraisers with the farmers market. "We would decide, OK, what do we need to buy?" "Oh, we need some shovels, or we need this or that." "OK, so who agrees that we need--" It would be very democratic: "yay" "nay." It was always "yays." We always agreed. It was what was great. We'd decide what we were going to do for the work days. The next thing on the agenda would probably be one of our fundraisers. Because we would have--when I was leader, we would have an anniversary birthday party in February or in the spring for our birthday anniversary. And then in June we would have our farmers market, or eventually we would have a booth at the downtown farmers market. And that's the way we raised our money. And so we'd decide who was going to do what.

And like I said, there wasn't--I kind of--most of the time there weren't personality conflicts. But I've already mentioned a few. That took the fun out of it. For me. You know. I'm sorry, but I don't like arguing. I don't think--in the garden--like I said, the woman who called the police *three times* in the first two weeks. She's out of there! Sorry. You're not blending. You're causing conflict. This garden is about peace, community, "Hey, how you doing? What you got

growing? What do I do about these worms?" It's great. Gardening is one of the simplest most pleasurable things you can do. And then you get to eat it. Some people don't grow their own food to eat. You see I do. And I love it. Especially when you start seeing the prices in the store.

AG: Yeah, can you tell me some of the fruits and vegetables that you grew in the community and in the individual plots, too. You were talking about the peach trees.

RF: Right, right. Well, everybody got to grow whatever they wanted. Now, part of the community--two hour community time did go--eventually we had Tree Folks come and donated the trees. All we had to do was provide the labor. Well, we did it. We put in over 40--we grew--we had everything over there [interrupts herself and looks a cardinal in the garden]. Oh there's my little girl. See her? See my little cardinal? We grew in the orchard we grew pears, pecans, persimmons, peaches, plums. We tried to do grapes. They take a little more care [laughs]. We would mulch. That was part of the community time, to water, and mulch, and fertilize. That last year that our first two peach trees, I've been told by many peach growers, "Oh you can't grow peach trees organically in Central Texas." Well, I went over there two years ago, three years ago, sprayed them with organic dormant oil at the perfect time. We had peaches with no worms that year. You can grow it. You have to be diligent. I had to get up on a ladder and you know, as my time. It was my extra, I always put in more than two hours of course.

But, so, that, we grew, in the co-op garden we grew everything. You know, in Central Texas, you grow all year. Like, right now, I still have carrots, kohlrabi, cabbage, lettuce. Artichokes. What else food? Kale. I have kale. Swiss chard, collards, a lot of your greens. Now, a lot of things are bolting, but I've already planted beans, cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, peppers. I planted potatoes and onions in February. You know, you--I'll plant sweet potatoes in May and June. So here, you can grow your own food. Now, it's a challenge. We had cut worm big time coming up this year. With all the dry, last year was great. We didn't have mosquitoes. OK, but now this year with all the moisture, we've got bugs galore. Worms are want to eat on everything.

To me, I would never be a full-time farmer. It's just too hard a work. I already work, work, work, work. Last year the soil and the compost I was getting. It was dry, dry, it was windy and dry. Froze all--I had over 100 artichokes. I was like, "What?" They're perennials, they'll come back. But the garden, oh, dry and windy. It's been just the opposite. And I love it when the weather forecasters are wrong. All last summer, "It's going to be dry." So a lot of people that come in and buy my vegetables are going, "Well, I didn't put a garden in because they kept saying it was going to be dry." So, there--you can grow food year round here. You've always got something.

Now, it's getting near the end of the carrots. You now, kohlrabi. But I don't know if you saw it; I've got kohlrabi that are just huger than baseballs. Artichokes. It's been a great year for veggies. And I'm hoping we keep getting this nice little rain session we keep getting, you know.

AG: Could you describe the local food community and maybe in Austin and how you've seen it change?

RF: Well I've seen the Sustainable Food Center grow from what I thought was a person that you know to write a grant to provide for their own job to really growing into something. In fact, Susan, the executive director of the Sustainable Food Center, her and her husband gardened over here for a couple of years. So we know each other quite well. And I love that they do the Happy Gardener [The Happy Kitchen]. They've gotten a lot more done since they took over Austin Community Gardens Incorporated. The people that were running that are gone.

I can tell you part of that story, but that was a good uprising. Let me just give you a little idea. OK, like I told you, I felt that that person was incompetent. I didn't trust her. I didn't--I'm not just saying it to you; I said it to her face. OK, well, we would have our fundraisers, Okrafest. And I was co-chair for two years. And I was going to chair that year that they voted me off. But they continued the Okrafest. Well, OK, a year or two went by. She managed to keep her job. Like I said, it was minimal, minimal for what I felt like they were getting paid. But I had started my own garden by now. But anyway, so they had an Okrafest. Well, all the gardeners were real anxious to see how money they had made at the fundraiser. Well the executive director was like, "Uh, uh, uh, well, y'all didn't make any money." So the gardeners, went--and I love this about community here again, Anne--and I heard about this. Because they wanted to blame me for years for all their problems. Anyway, so the gardeners went, "Wait a minute. We worked really hard. There was a lot of people here. We sold a lot of hot dogs and fried okra. Should be some money. We want to see paperwork."

So, they all decided they were going to show up at the next board meeting, all these gardeners that were like, you know, going after Frankenstein, basically. Well, she had her letter of resignation at that meeting. And she bowed out in good terms. I've seen her since. It's OK. I don't, you know. She put me through hell, trying to keep her job. But she knew then, her cake, she'd had it all already. She had, she had her resignation letter at that meeting. So there were no other legal questions involved. I only have speculation. I don't assume anything. And that's past history in my book. Because, you know, there was a lot of negativity from there. I got a lot of negativity.

I attended something 10 years later, thinking I'm going to go to their little party. John [unintelligible] up there, "Well, I always, someone here, uh, that was intentionally trying to destroy this garden. Well, we just wouldn't let them do that." I'm sitting back there going, "John, you weren't even around. You're standing up there, acting like you knew what was going on back then. Believe me, I was there, you weren't. You don't know. But you can keep blaming me for all the problems, whatever. But final satisfaction, I started my own garden. I proved it to myself I could help people grow their own food. Especially ones like Nguyen, or David Goodwillie. I watched them grow and like I said, David Goodwillie, that garden, he was the heart. That garden meant everything to him. He lived to be 84 years old. Because he was eating all those organic peppers he grew, and tomatoes, and onions. We grew a lot of food with

his leadership. And it was a happy time. And that's why, when it got real negative over there, at that community gardens, I was like, "What am I doing here? I'm a happy person. Happy Plants and Flowers. I'm the Happy Plant Lady."

I did it. It took someone like me. Happy, a leader, a entrepreneur. I started a banking account to keep that--I mean, you know. Same with the choir. So, I know what it takes to be an entrepreneur and a leader. It takes guidance. It mainly takes that core group of people, core gardeners, that core group of my choir, even, that were--When I was wanting to bow out a couple years before I did, I finally had other choir members, "Oh no, we'll take over this part. We'll have an ombudsman committee. Uh, yeah, this person can be treasurer." And that made the difference. From one person trying to do everything, to--I learned that, Anne--that you delegate.

Now, I'm a Virgo. They don't do it like me. It's like when I gave up the leadership of the gardens. "This is golden leadership opportunities," I told them. But, then like I said, the meetings went from 22 to 28 people, and I was always hearing David [Goodwillie] gripe about it. Because he's the one that would bring the paper plates and the forks and bring his peach cobbler or whatever in and no one would hardly be there. And it was that main core that would be there. But they lost the involvement. You didn't have a leader like me. It takes that core, but it also takes someone like a leader, like me, get on the phone. OK, it would take me a couple of hours to call 32 or more people. But, 22 to 28 people at a meeting, compared to 8 or 12. Hmm, I can't tell you how good the food was when you had 28. So that was the difference between a good leader delegates over other people, but they still kind of stay there with the whip, you know, to make sure that those people are doing what they say.

Because I would get on to Connie; she would let people go weeks without tagging their plot. They weren't using it. We've got a waiting list. "Connie, you want me to call them for you?" I came back from Mexico after giving up the leadership [of the South Austin Community Gardens]. "You want me to write a pump you up letter?" I spent hours wording this letter to everybody. "Come on, it's community." Well, the girl that was president at the time didn't realize that the core group had given me permission to write this letter. And she wrote me a nasty letter. Well she wanted everybody to sign it. Well that's where I got the name of lifetime, honorary, founding gardener of the South Austin Community Gardens. Because these people that knew me, and had worked with me, and was that main core went, "Wait a minute. You're wanting us to write, sign our name to this letter to Renée, and she's only trying to make it better for everybody? She has the garden at heart? You've got your ego going?" And that's when they let her know, and of course she eventually apologized to me. But that's when lifetime, honorary, founding member. And I don't let anybody forget that.

Because I have been through other personality conflicts, and you know, I had to remind them in the co-op garden one time, that this garden wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for me. And I'm tired of the criticism from you guys. Not trying to tell you what to do. But, I'm experienced. I know what needs to be done. If you're inexperienced, you can question me. But don't stand there and go, "I'm going to do it my way." And you're like, "OK. This is getting to be not no

fun no more.” Because I’m experienced. I know how to do it right. “I don’t want to tell you what to do, but.” That’s a real leader. “I don’t mean to tell you what to do.” But like I say, in the beginning, “Renée, what can I do?” “Well, OK, that compost pile needs to be watered and turned.” “Well, what can I do?” “OK, that plot, we need to clean it up for the next gardener.” Nobody minded. But you get one personality in there, that ego, but it’s OK. Cynthia and I are great friends no [laughs].

AG: So could you--going back to the development of kind of the local food movement in Austin, could you say what the Sustainable Food Center does now? And maybe describe some of the community gardens that have sprung up in it?

RF: Yeah, well, they’ve opened a lot more farmers market, which is wonderful. Because that gives your local farmer to make a little more money. And believe you me, I had a friend try to start a community--I mean a farmers market on Manchaca last year. And I was showing up every week to help do it. Well, then, here comes the Health Department. “Well she can’t sell her duck eggs. And we know this guy has a whole folder of permits, but he can’t be letting--He needs another permit to let people taste this barbecue sauce. Oh, and this girl has natural creams that, I’m sorry they don’t have any preservative in it. There’s a non-natural preservative that you’re going to have to put in it if you’re going to sell that. And we couldn’t call it a farmers market. Farmers market are registered trademarks.” Well, we were calling it the Urban--it was Robin that was running it. But they basically shut us down. I mean, here with the girl with the duck eggs and all her vegetables, well, you know, we just--And then there wasn’t a--Unfortunately, it was a good location, but I think that neighborhood just doesn’t buy a whole lot of fresh produce. And we weren’t getting a draw. And so we, it just got to be, we just weren’t getting--I told Robin, “I’m not making enough money.”

Because look, let me tell you something. I was taking my produce and my plants every week. It takes hours of prep. Getting it together, loading up your vehicle, unloading it, setting it up, standing there for four or five hours, selling it. Talking with people. Trying to make a little money. Then when it’s over, you’ve got to load it back up and unload it again. It’s hours and hours of work for not very much pay. So, when you see more farmers markets, OK, and you are seeing--East Austin does not have a huge HEB. They have a nice Fiesta. It’s not in walking distance. So we all know, people go the closest little convenience store, and pay outrageous prices, and don’t buy fresh bananas. They buy some kind of Cheetos or beer. They’re not buying *food* at the convenience store, and they’re paying too much for any banana, or lemon, or orange, or whatever they buy there anyway.

So having community gardens--Now, I have to admit, when we first started this garden and I would have people come in from the, from the project--I’m not saying I’m prejudiced or anything, we’d get the whole plot ready for them. We practically planned it almost. We didn’t plant it. That’s their job. But some of them in the beginning would stand around, “What else are you going to do for me?” I don’t like that. I’ve seen that in East Austin when I was part of Austin Community Gardens Incorporated. You don’t keep “eh eh eh” catering to people who

don't want to help themselves. Now, when people want to help themselves, they'll have a vibrant community gardens. If they're expecting the Sustainable Food Center to provide the seeds and the compost and all the plants and come over and dig it for them, that's a waste of public funding, in my opinion. If you don't have that core group of people wanting to make it happen, give it up. They don't want to grow their own food. They want someone to come in and do it for them. I experienced that when I was on the board for three years with Austin Community Gardens with the East sites. That's why, in the end, when they voted us off, and Kim goes and takes pictures of these sites, you can see there was a garden there. But they're still claiming it for funding. Uh uh. That doesn't work.

But they've [Sustainable Food Center] done a real good job of starting more farmers market. Helping the local farmer have a local venue to make more money. Letting the WIC people come in and be able to buy fresh food. We need more of it. The Happy Garden, Alegre or whatever, Alegre Cocina [The Happy Kitchen/La Cocina Alegre] they have there--it's fabulous, fabulous. I love what I know--I know they have a lot of staff. I'm not a part of that board. If I got involved, what do you think I would do, Anne? I would read the minutes, I would see what they've been doing, how they've been spending that money. Is it really sustainable? Are you sustaining them? Period.

AG: Yeah, I'm wondering when you were talking about the difficulty of getting people to actually work on their own plots. I mean, it seems like you need a lot of education. I mean, you need to educate and train people to know how to garden. So how do, how do community gardens--

RF: OK, well you showed up at the potluck meetings, "Hey, what do I do about these worms?" You show up for the organized work meetings. Look, when I gave up the leadership, on work days, I'd have 15 or 20 people there, almost everybody. When it started going to emails, "Oh, there's a work day, uh." People wouldn't show up. Just that hand core of people kept that garden alive. Some people would rather pay \$15 an hour. We gave them an option, \$15 an hour, or two hours a month. "Oh," I'd rent them a plot, "Oh, yeah, no problem." People wouldn't make time. They loved the concept of growing all their own food. But. It's like my garden last year. I kept mine alive. What do you think it took? Two hours, the first thing every morning. All I would do was water. Water. I had a fabulous garden last year. But it took two hours of first thing in the morning. So you knew I was spending time out there. It takes time. Some people think they have time. I can't tell you how many plots I've rented out over the year where people just didn't make the time. They didn't do their volunteer time, and they wasted our time renting them the plot. I would rather rent it to someone on the waiting list who's going to--I could tell you a good gardener from a gardener who wasn't going to be worth a darn right away. If one got in there right away, they were doing it. And if they didn't, they didn't. It takes time. It takes time to grow your own food [whispering]. And sweat. And it's the old adage. The best thing in a garden is the gardener's shadow. It's all there is to it.

AG: So maybe we could talk a little bit about challenges broadly to community gardening. And one of those seems to be ownership of the property.

RF: Yeah.

AG: Right.

RF: Yeah.

AG: Could you talk a little bit about that?

RF: OK, we're very fortunate. The developer worked with the neighborhood. The neighborhood was adamant, adamant about keeping the orchards and the gardens. So that developer, like I said, Terry Mitchell, he's great. He just built the Austonian. We really liked him. We met with him, his PR person. The builder that's going to be building and the landscaper, now, like I told you, even the guy that works for the City said work with a private developer instead of the bureaucracy to get your community gardens going. Luckily we have a developer that wants--that worked with the neighborhood very well. I know the president of the neighborhood association, he's great. Everything we stipulated or wanted or da da da, even to making it smaller than originally 200 condos. It's only going to be 100 plus. You know? He was great. We're very blessed. We might, we're probably going to be able to continue the South Austin Community Gardens.

Now, just like the Sunshine site up there. It used to be a lot bigger, but it's owned by the School for the Blind. So they've taken parcels of it, parcels of it. It's just like I told you, the first community garden I tried to start over in Dove Springs, "Oh yeah," YMCA, "that's our piece of land. Yeah, Renée, go start a garden." I told you the effort I had already put into it. Taking to the principals, going to the teachers meetings, wanting to get the children involved, make a big Earth Day thing out of it. The owner comes out with the paperwork under his arm. "I don't want a community garden here." Just like the other one I told you about, the other one I tried to start. I tried to put the shovel in the ground. "Boop!" [Makes thumbs down motion] Forget that, it was asphalt. Tried to work with the City of Austin. Bureaucracy! I was warned. There's been a community garden back there behind the South Austin Rec Center. It's a *perfect* place for a community garden. "Eh!" [Makes buzzer noise] Bureaucracy! Even though it's city land. Now, I'm sure now that they've hired someone for no telling how much money that tells us it's better to work with the developer than working with me with the city. We could have tried to approach them about putting in a community garden back there.

It's a lot of work, Anne. I did it. It's a lot of work. You have to have one main leader to make it happen. And then you build the core. And when you got that core, it doesn't matter how many people come and go. They love having that little piece of land. It's like owning it. They don't want to give it up, but they don't have time. They're not growing anything. They're letting weeds; they're not doing their volunteer time. We don't like being "Meh meh" [imitates nagging

person], but. So, even if you can find--even if that guy had let us use that land that we thought was the YWCA's. It, the YWCA could have sold it, probably already out of that guy's hands.

You know, we were very blessed to be here for almost 18 years. And it was beautiful. It was a very wonderful. I have--OK, Anne and Bill met in the garden. They're sweethearts. They're together. There's another couple that I know real well; Joe and Catherine had just moved from up North. Got involved in the gardens. They'll even tell you, "We learned everything we learned about gardening, we learned from Renée." They were wonderful. They have, there was another couple that got involved. They're still all friends. They've all started families. They live in Connecticut, but Joe and Catherine stay in touch with them. I was best friends with David Goodwillie. You know? He was my elderly friend that I loved. And I'm really close to his son and his wife and his family. I sang at his funeral last year. You create bonds with these people that you've gardened with--Margaret was my secretary. Did the whole plat. We had a beautiful plat of the garden, numbered, a list of the gardeners, how to get in touch with them. She did that for--she had just got out of the garden and moved, she was retired, moved north of San Antonio or something. She was fabulous. She was with me the whole 17 years. David was with me 16 years. He helped me run that garden. He was the heartbeat.

So, yeah, it's hard to--we were very blessed to be on Salvation Army land. But then I've even told you the struggles we had with making sure we kept that. We donated a lot of food to the Salvation Army and the Food Bank. We loved doing that. That's part of the community. I would love to see the City not have someone saying, "Better to work with a developer than with the bureaucracy of the City." That disappointed me. It disappointed me to hear that. Now, because, wait a minute. You can have these community garden leadership workshops. I'd be curious to see how many community gardens have started since they've hired this guy a year ago. Maybe that's something you could look into, Anne. Because when you hear someone that's getting paid, getting holidays, getting sick days, getting all the benefits of working for the city, saying, "Hey, better work for a developer," I'm like, even he knows working a bureaucracy. I knew 18 years ago when I tried to work with the City. They weren't going to be helpful at all. So. But having the land, even if it's private land, it's you know, not always the easiest. But it's the best if you've got someone that you know is going to let you do it and not sell it and turn it into something else. Which, we've seen community gardens come and go. Like I said, we were very blessed. And we're blessed to have the developer.

I'm just hoping we can at least keep a little part of that core. Because you know, we've had people go, "Oh, well people that, rent, you know, buy a condo, they should have first choice with the community gardens. And they should, even if they have a plot, if they don't want to use it, they can rent it out." And we're like, "Wait a minute. Who's going to start this thing?" It has to be your core. "Oh, maybe the condo development once they rent enough of them maybe enough of them would." But if you're moving into a condo, you're not moving into a garden. You're wanting just an air conditioned place, like the cheap ones they built down the street, 450 grand. There's no gardening space. The person that moves in there is, lives in air conditioning, he gets in his air conditioned car, he goes into his air conditioned office, he gets back into his air

conditioned or heated car, and gets back into his cubicle. You got to really want to sweat and work to have any kind of garden, much less to be part of a community garden.

When I was first involved with the Austin Community Gardens at the Sunshine site, it took about 15 minutes to get up Lamar and back, in '86, '88. Now, you think you can make that same trip in 15 minutes? There's that difference again, the first question you asked me. What's the difference? Well, it's better to have it in your own backyard, it's better to have it in your 'hood. But if you have to drive to it, forget it. I did it because I was dedicated. I told you how my dedication of being on that board of directors and being a gardener there and being involved with the Sunshine site, too. It took me 15 minutes to drive there, back and forth. There was no community gardens in South Austin. And at the time, I was renting and didn't have a place. That's always good for people, that their yard is too shady. There's always, you know, a reason. I stayed with the gardens because I loved it. And I loved growing food. I loved helping people learn how to grow their own food. I loved everything about community part of the garden. But I couldn't--you might be able to make that trip in 25 minutes, 20 minutes if the traffic is good. There's the one big difference.

AG: Well I think that's about all my questions that I have. But do you want to finish with anything you don't think we addressed fully?

RF: Well, I definitely think there's a demand for people to grow their own food. People--I work out of GO Growers. I can't tell you how many people come in there. I'm start--last year, which was a real rough year--I'm starting my garden, I'm starting my first garden. The sale of seeds skyrocketed. There's getting to be more demand than supply. That's why organics--but if you look at the difference between the way the monoculture of the Big Ags [agriculture] that want to genetically engineer our food, if you keep up with any of that, why do you think other countries have labeled? Why do you think those Big Ag corporations don't want it labeled? They think the American people are ignorant as far as what they want in their food. They don't need to know. We need to know. People are wanting to grow their own food because it's healthier. Look, they try to do comparisons, "Well, conventional food is no more or less nutritious than organic." They say, "We've done studies, blah blah."

I'm sorry, Anne. You cannot convince me that people who grow with artificial--they deplete every microorganism that's in that soil. And my adage has always been, "You feed the soil; you feed yourself." You feed the worms. You feed yourself. You put those microorganisms in there, and that beautiful organic soil, it's feeding you the vitamins, the minerals. Everything that comes out of putting granite sand and compost, all the old ways we used to do it. When you say that conventional soil is just as healthy, the soil is depleted. It's depending on that NPK, nitrogen, phosphorous, potash. Food needs more than those three ingredients. It soaks up minerals, and other nutrients, and vitamins, and fiber. And a soil that's depleted, compared to someone who grows their own and organic and able to go out and pick it fresh. It's just like these artichokes I grow. You can't get one that fresh. It has to be grown in California. It's shipped 2,000--it's spent one day in a basket after it's picked, maybe gets shipped. It's taken 24 hours minimally,

OK, gets to the store, there's another time. It's maybe a week old, five days, maybe three or four days fresh at the earliest. People that can grow their own food or go to the farmers market, get it fresh. It's more nutritious.

And when more people accept and pay a little more and support that organic farmer. Well, it's like Robert goes, "Well, we don't have to buy organic for our coffee. We can spend a dollar less." I know, but I'm like, support the organic farmer. Any chance I get, I buy organic. I'm blessed to be able to do that. Some people don't have that option. They can't pay more. But if we would all try to support those farmers. Support the organic industry. Before you know it, there's more supply than demand. The price goes down. It's like anything: solar, green energy. As soon as there gets to be more demand, and you know, for the supply, prices go down. That's the same way it can be with community food. It would be, not bureaucratically run, but it should be, the City should be not just saying, "Oh, we've hired someone. Y'all can call him and get some advice." The City should be--and that's why I'm hoping we get somebody new in there that really will promote green, organic, Austin, Barton Springs. Everything organic that--I've never liked the connotation, but I'm part of the reason it is--"Keep Austin Weird." We are all, the ones of us that want to have community gardens that do little community things, it's what "keeps Austin weird." It's why people move here for that energy. But they have to be part of it or it won't--they have to be part of that core or it won't happen.

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