

KATE VICKERY
Wheatsville Food Co-op - Austin, Texas

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Anne Gessler: My name is Anne Gessler. And today is February 4, 2012. And this is the Foodways Texas Oral History Project. And I'm here with Kate Vickery.

Kate Vickery: So I'm Kate Vickery. I was born October 14, 1982. And I'm affiliated with Wheatsville Co-op, and I'm also the development director for the Texas Land Conservancy.

AG: And I'm so happy that we're talking today. I'm dragging you out of bed--I hope not [laughs] on this gloomy Saturday morning. But thank you very much.

KV: You're welcome.

AG: And maybe we could just get started talking a little bit about you. So you mentioned before we started recording that you're from the Midwest. Could you say where you grew up and your early, early childhood experiences that maybe brought you to, to Texas--like your "long journey," I guess.

KV: My long journey. Yeah, sure. No problem. So I am from--I say that I'm from the Midwest originally. I grew up mostly in Michigan. But my--I was the child of academic gypsies. And so we actually, my parents met and married in Austin in the late '70s, and we then moved to Tucson, Arizona, where I was born. We bopped around all over the country. We went to Vermont, to Wisconsin, to Alabama. And then we lived in College Station, Texas for about three years before we finally moved to Michigan. So we were, we were a tight little family unit because we moved around so much. So when we finally got to Michigan, we were in a very, very small town. A little tiny rural town of--an agricultural community of about 3000 people. And we were always outsiders in that community, just because that was a town where folks had grown up there and been there for generations. Basically, if your grandparents weren't from Ithaca, you were never actually really going to be from Ithaca. And, so I grew up for the most part in Michigan. I went to, you know, middle school, high school. I did my undergraduate work at Kalamazoo College, a small liberal arts school in Michigan. And I thought I wanted to be a biologist. I thought that I really wanted to do environmental science.

And finally found that what I really wanted to do was talk about and learn about people and people's interactions with their environment, and with community development, and rural development. And so I studied sociology and anthropology and did a--I did a senior research project in rural development in Teton County, Idaho. And was looking at what was happening with small rural communities in Idaho when a lot of kind of outsider folks, especially from the East and West Coast, are moving into these small rural communities. And looking at what kind of cultural conflict is happening there with folks who have lived on the land and done agriculture for generations. And how those, those kind of priorities about how to do land use planning really butt up against each other. That project really kind of shaped what I wanted to do next.

I took a couple of years off and worked as an admissions counsellor at Kalamazoo for two years and traveled all over the country for that. And then started a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University

in sociology. So I was in Baltimore for a year. It was an interesting experience, and Baltimore is a very cool place to live. Johns Hopkins is a bizarre, bizarre little university. So, I really disliked it and actually dropped out of the program.

And my now husband and I moved to Austin so he could start his Ph.D. in history here at UT [The University of Texas at Austin]. And when I got here I got lucky enough to stumble into a really great job with the Texas Land Conservancy, which is an organization that does land conservation. And kind of similar to the--there were a lot of parallels from that research project that I mentioned in Teton County, Idaho about what folks can do in terms of land use and conserving land for the future. So that's been a lucky boon for me. And since I've been here, I--one of the first things I did when I got to Austin, actually, was to join Wheatsville. My parents, because they had met here 30 years ago, they had been members of Wheatsville. So my mom sent me a check and said, "I don't care what you do, go become a member of Wheatsville. It's really important." [laughs] So I went and became and became a member of Wheatsville. And Wheatsville has become a pretty important part of my community here. It's definitely been a big, big part of my time in Austin. And so, you know, we're now 4 years later. And I've still been working with Wheatsville, I'm still working with the Texas Land Conservancy, and I'm now also a full-time graduate student at the LBJ School for Public Affairs. And I'm hoping to do work on agricultural policy and environmental policy and co-ops, such as it is. Although not many people in the public policy world are really talking about co-ops. So. That's definitely part of my journey, I guess. Is that "journey" enough for you? [laughs]

AG: That's so interesting. So you're saying that part of your research is going to be about agriculture and environmental policy and co-ops. Can you describe a little bit more?

KV: I--Yes and no. I mean, I'm still trying to kind of figure out what that means. I think that one of the things we talk about at Wheatsville and with the co-op community here in Austin and in Texas is that one of the big barriers for people who want to start co-ops is that there's a real--1) it's complicated because the business code associated with forming a co-op is really complicated. People who do small business consulting don't really know about it. It's hard to even know where to start, you know? And there are also some policies in place that make it difficult. And so, you know, one of the things that we are--the co-op community in Austin is really trying to think about is, how can we help lower the barriers to starting a co-op? And how can we educate more people about why co-ops are important, and what benefit they have to the community?

So I'm still trying to figure this out in terms of what I want to do for my research. And honestly, I mean, I came to the LBJ School thinking about policy in terms of mostly environmental policy. But you realize that when you're actually studying environmental policy it's a lot of rules and regulations. And how many parts per million of pollution are in the water. That's not really what I'm interested in. I'm kind of interested in more the structural questions about, about the broader scope questions in terms of how we think about land use, about how people have access to food. And, and so I think co-ops are a part of that. But I haven't exactly figured out what that's going

to mean professionally, from a policy perspective. But we're working on it [laughs]. We're trying to figure it out. So.

AG: Yeah, well, and since you have kind of a background in policy then, how have you seen--how would you describe Austin's cooperative community? Not just in urban settings, but also their relationship with maybe agricultural co-ops?

KV: That's a good question. So, I mean, I'm definitely not the most well-versed in the really in-depth history of, like, the--all of the history of co-ops. But I think one of the things that's interesting about Austin is, Texas definitely has a dearth of co-ops. There are not very many in the state. And Wheatsville is the only food co-op in the state of Texas. And so for a long time we at Wheatsville--and I guess I should say this as well; I've been a board member at Wheatsville for about, for 3 years. It was one of the first ways I really got engaged in the co-op after I joined. So we thought of ourselves as kind of the lone co-op in Texas, basically. And we really, you know, kind of struggled with that a little bit in terms of, you know, what was our responsibility? But we kind of--Wheatsville has been around for 35 years. And, you know, it was, let's hunker down and make sure that Wheatsville is a good business, a thriving business, and we're giving people people the products that they want and we're responding to our owners. And now, really in the last, in the last couple of years, we're kind of expanded that worldview.

And there was a pretty, kind of--what's the word that I want?--a fortuitous email sent by a woman named Kelsey Balcaitis from A+ Community--A+ Credit Union [A+ Federal Credit Union]. And she sent an email to Rosemary Klee, our board president, and said, "Hey, our co-op--or our credit union is interested in having a conversation about the co-op principles and values. Would you guys be interested in joining us?" And Rosemary said, "Yes, of course. I'll bring as many members of my board as I can. And let's do that. It sounds really fun." So it really sparked--That was kind of the first time that I'm aware of at least, in Austin, that members of co-ops from across sectors had really started talking to each other. And talking about what, what co-ops have in common, regardless of what kind of product they sell. Or regardless of whether or not they're a worker co-op, or a producer co-op, or a consumer co-op. So that meeting--that original meeting with Wheatsville and a couple members of Black Star Brewery [Black Star Co-op] and A+ Federal Credit Union spawned this new organization called the Austin Co-op Think Tank. And we've now been working on that for about a year now. And the goal of that organization is really to grow the cooperative economy in Austin.

And what's been cool about it, is that it's really educated me, at least, about how robust the co-op community is--kind of getting around to your question [laughs]--how robust the co-op community is in Austin and even in Texas, in some ways, although we're still trying to figure out how to reach out beyond Austin. But we've got members of 5 or 6 housing co-ops, and there are a lot of co-op start ups. There's an amazing organization called--they used to be called Third Coast Workers for Cooperation, and now they're called Cooperation Texas, that's a nonprofit organization that trains especially low-income folks to start small businesses in the form of worker co-ops. So there's a lot of stuff happening in this community.

And I think one of the things that we want to keep doing is, is reaching out to some of those co-ops who are formally co-ops but don't necessarily act like co-ops or market themselves as co-ops. And a lot of the credit unions actually sort of fall into that. As well as, you know, we have a lot of electric co-ops in the rural areas, right? And we haven't been able to pull them into the mix yet, because nobody really knows folks personally. But we'd love to get folks from the Pedernales Electric Co-op and some of those other companies to come in as well. Because I think what co-ops have in common is a really clear and defined set of principles and values. And regardless of how you actually do your work, or what products you are, you are providing to your owners and to your customers, there's a lot more that you have in common than not.

And one of the things that's been cool, too, is that there's so much collaboration among cooperatives in terms of sharing best practices. I mean, even on the national scale there's an amazing listserv for board members of co-ops all over the country, and so someone will say, "Hey, you know, we're talking about confidentiality policies," or, "We're about to open up a second store. How have your co-ops dealt with that?" And there's this really kind of lively and robust cooperation among co-ops all over the country. And that's the same with general managers, as well. And it's, the focus is really about collaboration rather than competition among co-ops and really leveraging kind of collective and community power in that way. So did I answer your question at all? I just went on and on [laughs].

AG: That's, that's really interesting. So could you describe, then, as you've been involved in ACTT, I guess, how have you begun to understand the differences between worker collectives [co-op], consumer co-ops, buyer co-ops, you know, and these, these formally co-ops but not really market themselves as co-ops?

KV: And so I'm still learning about that, to be perfectly honest with you. I mean, you know, my background in the type of co-op that I know best is a kind of traditional consumer co-op, which is what Wheatsville is. And I think, I mean, again, I'll just go back. I think that most, mostly there is stuff in common. And the stuff that's different is really mostly about decision-making structures. And so, for example, you know, Black Star is a really interesting kind of hybrid, where they're technically--Black Star is basically a consumer co-op, but they are, they have a worker collective, and there's no general manager. So there's the decision-making power and the democracy of how they actually make decisions and run the business is really in the hands of--is really dispersed--it's in the hands of more people.

I think in a traditional consumer co-op and like a food co-op, a grocery co-op like Wheatsville, the decision-making structure is a little more hierarchical, although I think Wheatsville is breaking down that boundary a little bit, too. So there's a board of directors, and the board of directors has one single employee; that's the general manager. And the general manager runs all of operations. And so, in a good, in a good consumer co-op, in a food co-op, one that's, that has kind of a robust and mature governance structure, there is a sense that the board and the leadership--because the board really represents the owners. And at Wheatsville we have 12000 members and a board of 9, and so we have a lot of responsibility to represent a diverse

ownership whose opinions we may or may not be aware of. Because 12,000 people is really too many to, you know, really know about. And so, you know, that's, that kind of, I guess, you know, the main difference that I'm really aware of--and again, kind of learning more about the differences between those different kinds of co-ops is one of my, you know, my personal goals in the coming years, is to continue to understand that better. I think that's one of the benefits of ACTT, the Think Tank, is to just help us all kind of understand what's different and why, you know, why worker co-ops work better for some sectors than consumer co-ops. Because I think doesn't--the co-op business model is good for people, it's good--there are better jobs, the produce--the products that you supply to people are of higher quality; they're more responsive to owners' needs, the money stays more--you know, money people spend stays even more local than it would for a local business--there's a lot of really good, beneficial things about co-ops. But different forms of co-ops work better for different kinds of enterprises, basically.

So, Red Rabbit Cooperative Bakery, which was the first business that was launched as a result of Cooperation Texas, their training program. You know, it's a worker co-op of 4, 5 young women who wanted to start a vegan donut bakery. You know, and it wouldn't have made sense--a consumer co-op model didn't make sense for them, so it needed to be a worker co-op. So yeah, I mean, I'm still figuring it out. But my understanding is that it's really mostly about decision making and democracy. I guess.

AG: Maybe we could back up a little bit, too. Again, I think if we could return to this environmental policy, agricultural policy as it, as it concerns co-ops. So, I feel like, as far as Wheatsville's literature is concerned, that they have a real concern for environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, and ethical responsibility in the, in the market. So could you speak to that a little bit?

KV: Um hm. Sure. So I think one of the things that has been most vital for me to understand and for me to kind of come to understand about Wheatsville is, we have a pretty clear sense of, of the difference that we want to make in the world. So Wheatsville has a set of what we call ends policies, which are really clear and straightforward. And I'm going to screw this up a little bit, but I'll do my best--so basically our ends policy, which is kind of like, effectively our mission statement, like the difference Wheatsville wants to make in the world. So it's, Wheatsville will be at the forefront of a transformed society that has an easy access to sustainable food systems, and a robust cooperative economy, and a store centered on hospitality, generosity, and kindness. So those 3 concepts--them I butchered it a little bit--those 3 concepts are fundamentally what difference we want Wheatsville to make. And so, that, that the piece about sustainable, healthy food solutions is a big part of it.

But one of the things that sets Wheatsville apart from some other food co-ops--and every co-op make this, makes this decision as they want. Wheatsville's had a long history because it's part of what's called the 3rd wave, 3rd wave of food co-ops. So Wheatsville has always had this policy of not being overly doctrinaire in the food that we supply. So, we, we source as much local stuff as we can. But we are at this point, like, we're a pretty big store; we sell \$15 million of stuff a

year. And so there are some limitations on that, in terms of volume and whatnot. I think that some of our owners would say, “Well, you should buy *more* local stuff,” and, “Why do you have *anything* that’s not organic in the store?” and, “Why do you have Coca-Cola in the store?” And there are some food co-ops who have really, really strict rules and regulations about the types of, you know, so you’re not going to sell anything with high fructose corn syrup and you’re not going to sell anything that’s not organic. And that’s just not been our model.

We sell, you know, most--we sell stuff our owners want to buy. We have a pretty engaged and informed ownership to begin with. And I shouldn’t just say that--our customers--right, I mean, it’s not just owners who shop at Wheatsville. And so I think, I think that’s really a lovely model. Because we, we can educate people about what are better food choices, about what sustainability is. We choose product on the shelves that people can trust. And we hear this a lot from our owners, and two of the reasons that I started shopping here, too, as soon as I got here, is that when I walk into Wheatsville, I don’t have to think about what I’m pulling off the shelf. Whatever’s in the shelf, someone has carefully selected for me. And if I want to buy Doritos or Coke, even though [laughs] that’s not healthy for me, and honestly is not terribly environmentally sustainable, that’s OK. Because I think the worst thing that co-ops can do is make people feel unwelcome in their store. And so I think it’s kind of about--if you can bring people--if you can get people into the door, you will inevitably win them over, and teach them about sustainability and good food practices through the majority of the products that you sell. But if we lose out on some people because they needed to run into the store to grab some Coke or whatever, then we’ve lost the opportunity to educate that person if we, if we put up a lot of road barriers to, you know, to people who want to come in--who maybe wouldn’t come into Wheatsville otherwise.

So I do think, you know, you know to be honest with you, that’s the buying--the standards for purchasing and buying is actually not something the board deals with at all. We say to Dan [Gillotte], our general manager, we say, “Dan, it’s really important for us, for Wheatsville to supply the community with sustainable and healthy food solutions. Get after it. Go do it.” And, and then he has to do that, and then he has to prove to us that he’s done it. And I think that one of the things that I love about the way that Wheatsville runs is that we have given Dan so much latitude to be creative and be responsive to customers. And honestly, you know, our customers demand a lot. And they have really high standards of the types of products that they want. And I think what we’re seeing is that as more and more people start to become really attuned to what’s important about our food system, and what’s important about the types of foods that you put into your body, and where it comes from, and whether or not it’s local, and whether or not it’s organic, our customers also start to drive the products that we sell because they’re demanding that.

And I think it’s a little bit--it’s challenging for food co-ops too, because when we were founded in the ‘70s, Wheatsville was started because there was no place to buy bulgur, there was no place to buy whole wheat, there was no place to buy, I don’t know, rolled oats--I don’t know, stuff in bulk, right? There were not places where you could buy good, healthy, organic, sustainable food.

And now, there are *tons* of places to buy that stuff, right? And Whole Foods came in, and Whole Foods has taken over the world, right? And you know, Austin is the community that started Whole Foods as well. And John Mackey, the owner of Whole Foods, you know, knows Wheatsville. And both places were kind of starting, getting their feet underneath them at the same time in Austin in the 70s, and so, there--So co-ops now, it's not just that co-ops and food co-ops supply good, healthy food. There's lots of places where you can go by bulgur, and whole wheat, and organic apples. I think what's more important about Wheatsville now, is the fact that we're a co-op, and it's how we're organized, and it's how we treat our customers, and it's how we interact with our community. It's what we give back, and it's what being a co-op means, almost more than the products we sell, at this point.

AG: If I could just go over some of the things you said. You were talking about some of the barriers that some co-ops might put up to a more general audience or more general clientele coming to the store. Could you describe what those might be?

KV: Sure, so there's a co-op in Traverse City, Michigan, which is where my parents live. Where, man, I wish I had all these rules in front of me, but it's literally that food cannot have any artificial dyes, and artificial sweeteners, any high fructose corn syrup, you know, and it's all the stuff we know is not good for you, right? But it makes it very, very limiting. And actually, I would, I describe Whole Foods as this way, too. I mean, there are times when I go into Whole Foods, and I'm a pretty informed shopper. I buy good, organic, sustainable, good stuff, most of the time. But I went into Whole Foods one day looking for those little Laughing Cow cheese wedges--you know what I'm talking about? They're in those little silver packages? And the person at--the person at Whole Foods kind of looked down her nose at me, and she's just like, "You know, we don't carry that." You know? And I find that very off-putting, and I believe in Whole Food's mission statement. But I just think that you're going to lose more people than win them over if you make people feel bad about the choices that they're making.

If you can bring them into the store and if the first time you go to Wheatsville, you look around and you say, "man, I don't recognize any of the labels on these products, but I know I want some whole wheat pasta" and you start with that. And you like your experience at Wheatsville, because Wheatsville's made an effort to be the friendliest store in Austin, which I really believe that we are. Then you may come back. And the next time you're going to say, "Oh, so, let's learn about dinosaur kale," or whatever is. And I just think that you have to give people kind of multiple entry points in to getting into eating better, and to making better choices about the food that you eat. And it can't be by starting by making people feel badly about the choices that they might make otherwise. You have to meet people where they are to begin with.

And we talk at Wheatsville a lot about the type of owner, or the type of, the type of people that shop at Wheatsville. And so you kind of have this center ring, which are the core shoppers. These are hardcore believers--you believe in co-op, you believe in the model, you believe in sustainable and organic and dadadadada. And then you have the next ring, which are people who care about healthy food. And they come in because they love the popcorn tofu and the breakfast

tacos and the organic apples or whatever. And then you've got kind of the next ring of people who shop because it's convenient and it's their, it's their neighborhood grocery store. And you have to have ways for all those people to engage with the store if you hope to bring more people into that center circle. And you can't start by kind of forcing an education down them. Because the choices people make about the food that they eat is so intensely personal. And people get really--there's a lot of kind of emotion wrapped up into that. You know? If you make people feel bad about eating mac 'n' cheese, they're not going to come back to your grocery store [laughs]. But, but you have to start somewhere, you know?

So I think that's--and we hear that--You know, Wheatsville has always been known for a really good place for vegans to shop, for example. And we have a ton of vegan stuff. Our general manager is vegan, a lot of the staff is vegan, we have a ton of gluten free, that kind of stuff. But, and so, a lot of our vegan customers will say, "Why do you--like, you can't sell meat. We shouldn't sell meat, because it's bad for the world, and it's bad for the planet, and blah blah blah." There are a lot of people who eat well and who eat healthily who want to eat meat, you know? So we just, I just think that's really important and just from a personal experience, every time I go into one of those co-ops that are *so*, have *such* strict rules about the products that they sell. I know that it works, but I think that, I think that it excludes a really important population of people, who are the people who, who would benefit most from an education from shopping at the co-op, you know, as opposed to just kind of preaching to the choir. And I feel like that the types of stores that are really doctrinaire about the foods that they sell are preaching to the choir. And I just don't think that's useful.

AG: Yeah, so maybe we could talk about the education aspect a little bit more specifically. So, when I go into Wheatsville, I see labels that say if it's local, organic, how far the farm was from Wheatsville. There's bulletin boards outside with community announcements, and you have Community Action Wednesdays, and you have fliers and newsletters. So can you, [coughs] can you talk about how maybe that--It seems like all the material and information in Wheatsville is again geared toward educating that, each of those rings you were talking about--the outside ring to the inner core. So can you describe how, [laughs] a little bit more about that education process?

KV: Um hm. Yeah for sure. So I think, talking about barriers, actually. Up until 3 years ago, Wheatsville had a 7 percent surcharge on products for non-owners. Which was an insane business model [laughs] but had been our business model for a really long time. So you would go into the store, you would see the prices on things. And if you were a non-owner you'd get to the register and realize that everything was 7 percent higher, more expensive for you than not. So that was one of those kind of major barriers. So I think we lost a lot of people in that way.

Three years ago we decided to get rid of the surcharge and then instead we moved towards a model of giving away patronage rebates to owners. So of the, of all the shopping you do during the year, if Wheatsville does really well financially, then you get a percentage of what you bought, as an owner, back at the end of the year. Non-owners don't get that. But there's not

that--In the store there is no difference between being an owner and non-owner, except for when you go to the register, someone's going to ask you if you're an owner. And [laughs] it's actually kind of funny; I mean, there are a lot of people who get like super chagrined, and kind of like, "no, I'm not an owner," you know, and they're kind of sheepish about it. But. So.

That's kind of my, my prelude into saying that, I think that all of, all of the education that we do in the store about the products, is all about that piece of our ends statements, that I'm saying, that I was talking about. So Wheatsville is going to give people healthy, sustainable food solutions, and local. So what's interesting about this, is--So, the board of directors at Wheatsville has said to Dan Gillotte, "Provide sustainability." Sustainability is a really complicated word, right? It has a--there's, nobody really knows what that means, everybody has a different definition. So Dan has given us, as the board, his definition of sustainability. And it involves, local and organic, and, and, you know, a number of other things I can't think of right now. But he has, he has his own kind of list of what it means to be sustainable. And so that push towards, towards local is a big part of that. In terms of the products that we sell, we could just put all that local, sustainable stuff on the shelves and not tell people about it.

But we have another set of policies that the board has said to Dan, the owners and shoppers of Wheatsville has to be informed about everything; informed about what it means to be an owner, about the products that we sell. You know, keep people educated; educate our owners. And so that then comes out through those signs that you see, and through, you know, through in terms of educating people about the individual products and whatnot and where they come from, and all that.

And I think, in terms of engaging with the community, you know, the Community Action Wednesdays and the bulletin board that has community events, that's all about, that's about Wheatsville's owners. I mean, Wheatsville's owners run the business. And so, Wheatsville has for--I don't know for how long we've been doing Community Action Wednesdays, but it's a really long time. But the owners actually vote every year in an election on which non-profit organizations in town are going to be the beneficiaries of those donations. And so that's a big part of engaging with community and giving owners an opportunity to say, you know, to telling Wheatsville what direction we want our, you know--part of--Because what I think what's interesting too, is like, owners vote on what organizations they want to receive those donations. But those donations, if they didn't go to those organizations, would go in the pockets of owners through patronage dividends. And so, our owners are saying, like, "It's important to us that Wheatsville give back the the community in this way." And it's a really direct line of communication between owners and Wheatsville.

And you know, that bulletin board and all that, all the education things we do, and all the community engagement that Wheatsville is fundamentally about why Wheatsville is awesome [laughs], basically. And I think there's something, you know, I think about, it feels different. Like when Wheatsville has their annual art festival around Christmastime, it doesn't feel like marketing for Wheatsville. You know like if HEB had an art festival, you'd be like, "That's

weird, HEB. You're just trying to get more people to shop in the store." And it just really doesn't feel that way. Because I think, like, Wheatsville fundamentally exists to benefit the community in which it resides. The way that that benefit happens is the decision of the owners by way of the board of the directors and all that. But fundamentally Wheatsville is organized for a different reason. And so, profit is not the motivating factor; it's the community benefit. That's the motivating factor. That's why we exist, and that's what makes co-ops different. And so, Wheatsville does all those community engagement things and education pieces because, because it's the right thing to do. That's it. I mean; that's why we exist. That's why it matters. That's why we're a co-op. So I feel like, that's just fundamentally, at it's core, what we do. And if the board were to ever hire a general manager that stopped doing that stuff, that would be unacceptable. Like, that's that's not, that's not OK. That's why, that's what Wheatsville is.

AG: OK, so I want to talk a little bit about the specific customers who go to Wheatsville, and then I also want to talk, [laughs] a little bit later on, the kinds of community engagement you're talking about, and who is the--who are the beneficiaries of that community? How would you define "community"? But anyway, so, to back up, so who, who are the customers? Who are the core customers, and who are the more general customers?

KV: Huh, that's interesting. We're getting a little out of my depth, actually. Dan, the general manager of Wheatsville, would really be much, much better suited to talk about this in detail. But my impression, and from what I understand, is that the core customers, that inner circle of customers of Wheatsville are--Really the most core of the core are the old hippies who were around when Wheatsville [laughs] was started in the '70s, you know? Those are the most, those are our most vocal owners. They, you know, they'll, you know, they're the ones who come to our fall owner gatherings and they stay the most engaged. And those are really the most core.

I think that one of the things I think is interesting is that, UT students are *not* Wheatsville's core customers, despite the fact that Wheatsville is one of the closest--it *was the* closest place to buy groceries. Now there's that little store on Guadalupe, which is weird. But Wheatsville has, has--there are college students who shop there, but I don't think college students certainly don't make up a big percentage of the owners of Wheatsville, which I always think is interesting. And also I think cost is a big part of that. Wheatsville's not the cheapest place in town to shop. You really have to have a higher consciousness about why those prices are higher and why it's OK that those prices are higher. Because when you buy your food from HEB you're not actually paying for the whole food; [laughs] things are subsidized and you're not actually paying for the actual price of that food. So that's a complicated thing to communicate with people during a transactional experience, right? The more, I think the more general, the more common customers, you know, I think lots of vegans shop at Wheatsville. Lots of people of my generation--my age folks who are, who just, I don't know, they care about the food that they eat.

And I think, the other things is, for me, I feel like the way that we buy food in the United States is insane. And the types of mainstream grocery stores that we have are totally overwhelming. [Laughs] There's this--My family is Italian, and there's this great phrase that my great-

grandmother used to say all the time. And for all I know, it's not even a real phrase. But it's, the word is "gubanuta," and it literally means, you are overwhelmed by how many choices there are. And I think, there's no word in English for that, but I think it's so perfect [laughs] I have this--I say this all time, like, "Oh, this makes me gubanuta." You know, you stand in the, in the aisle of HEB and there's like, man, there are 45,000 versions of cooking oil that I could buy right now. You don't *need* 45,000 versions of cooking oil. It's just--We've been kind of inundated by too many choices. And it makes me *crazy* to shop in those kind of grocery stores now. So for me, Wheatsville is as much about the product that we sell, and also about the experience of shopping there.

And, and Dan, our general manager said, when he came on board in 1998, Wheatsville was a struggling business, employed with staff members who were surly and kind of rude and unhappy. And, you know, hardcore, core customers still shopped at Wheatsville because they believed in the model and the mission and dadada. But those outer rings that I'm talking about didn't shop at Wheatsville because it was an unpleasant place to be. And people were kind of rude and had chips on their shoulder. And Dan came in and said, this is ridiculous. Our goal, we are, Wheatsville is the friendliest store in town. And he started saying it way before Wheatsville was the friendliest store in town [laughs]. But that's been his main thing. He has fundamentally shifted the, the culture of Wheatsville, and what it means to work there, and how you treat customers. And I think that then has opened the doors and had given more pathways in to a wider variety of people. Not just the more hardcore bulk food buyers, necessarily. So I think, I think it's a nice mix. I love going into Wheatsville. My sense is that there are the hardcore--you have the hippies, you have the hipsters, you have, you know, like, young families [laughs]. You got people swinging by after work. And I think it's a pretty--I'm always impressed by the diversity of folks who shop in the store.

But I also think that there's some prejudice. I was just talking with somebody at school the other day about Wheatsville and about food co-ops. Because I'm organizing a panel presentation over at LBJ about co-ops in a couple weeks. And this guy was saying, "Well, you should really get somebody from McCombs Business School who can really talk about business models and why it's different. Because for me, like, food co-ops, I don't care about food co-ops. Like, I don't have any tattoos, so I'm not going to shop at a co-op." So I do think there's still, there is still a lot of resistance in, you know, a big portion of the population of folks who have this kind of hyper-stereotype about who the customers of Wheatsville are. And I just, I don't see that borne out in the store. Which I think is really encouraging.

AG: How does Wheatsville reach out people who, who really need healthy foods? So you're talking about food access,

KV: Yeah.

AG: How does Wheatsville reach out to people who don't have access to healthy food or who can't afford Whole Foods or Central Foods kind of price, prices?

KV: So you've hit on--this is something that I have been really struggling with. I think we have a real barrier to that. Because of the products that we sell, because of the relatively small volume that we deal with, our prices are--We will never win on price. When competing with Central Market and Whole Foods, we do win on price. But we will never win on price against Fiesta and HEB. So we, like, helping with the food access issue I think is really difficult. And it's--we've been talking about this quite a bit. Because Wheatsville, by the end of this year we're hoping to have a second location. And I kept saying--At the beginning of this conversation I kept saying, "It's really important to open a store in East Austin. This is crazy. East Austin is a food desert. No one needs Wheatsville's services, Wheatsville's business model, Wheatsville's products more than people who do not have access to healthy, sustainable food in East Austin." And we can't like, I've been convinced of this, but I'm still struggling this a little bit. Like, we can't do that yet. We, as, that's a risky business proposition for us. And if our goal as Wheatsville is to educate more people about why co-ops are better, have more co-op shoppers, have more co-op jobs, which are better, we are not prepared organizationally to be able to take a risk. And plop a grocery store in a food desert in East Austin when we will never be able to win on price. Right? So that's going to require a lot more education, and outreach, and, I don't know. I don't know what it's going to take. So I struggle with that a little bit.

So I think right now the way Wheatsville deals with that primarily, is we do a ton of in-kind donations. The Capital Area Food Bank is one of our primary beneficiaries for Community Action Wednesdays. We, we supply through, through our various channels, thorough kind of our community engagement channels, more efforts to help with food access issues. But I do think--and I think it's not just us, I think it's every food co-op in the country. Customers--the people who shop at food co-ops, are educated, white, and not poor. And I think that that's a huge barrier. We talk about that a lot, kind of on a national level. We have these kind of national conferences about food co-ops all over. You look around the room, I mean, it's *not* diverse, and we're not--co-ops are *not* meeting food access needs, except for a very few exceptions. And I think it's going to require kind of a--I think we need to do it; I think we can do it.

I think that it will require education into some of those neighborhoods--like when I imagine what it would take to open a store in East Austin, for example. You would have to start by really educating people and kind of mobilizing a community to say, "We want Wheatsville. We will be your customers. We will be your owners." Because opening up a food co-op and opening up a consumer co-op is really, it's a labor of the owners, you know? And so, I don't know, honestly, I don't know what it's going to take to make that happen. But I know that it's something that the entire co-op community is thinking about. And I don't think that anyone is really doing super well yet. But, I don't know, I don't know. I think it's the most challenging question that we face, to be perfectly honest with you. I don't know.

AG: Well, I was also thinking about ACTT's--so, Austin Cooperative Think Tank's efforts to incubate worker collectives, excuse me, worker collectives or other cooperative or provide resources. And I know there are some small worker collectives [co-ops] trying to start food, food

stores and grocery stores. So, maybe, does Wheatsville see that as also a possibility for working with disadvantaged or other communities--communities that haven't been reached?

KV: I think so. I mean, I think Dan, Dan Gillotte, you know, when he and I had this conversation before--It's actually really, really hard to start a grocery store, and to run a grocery store, and to manage a grocery store. You can't just have a building, throw up some shelves, and put some products on the shelves. It's really a complicated enterprise. And so I think, you know, we want to lend support, and ACTT lends support, and Dan lends support to folks who are talking about wanting to start a food co-op. People have been talking about starting food co-ops for a very long time, though. I mean, there was a South Austin Food Co-op that existed in name only for I don't know, 10 years or something, I mean it's a really long time. And they finally had to say, just, "We can't do it; this is too hard." I mean, I think, you really have to have a hardcore group of people who are really dedicated and willing to put in the time and effort in order to make it work. I know that there are a number of groups of folks on the Eastside who, you know, The Foodshed Project, and there are a number of different groups that are trying to--that are talking about starting food co-ops, I mean I hope that, I hope that they can do it. And ACTT will lend as much support as we can. Dan has met with all those folks because--I'm sorry I mean I keep talking about Dan, Dan Gillotte. But he really is like the Grand Poobah of co-ops in this town and honestly on a national scale as well. He's one of the most respected G.M.'s [general managers] in the country. And so you know, he will give as much support as we can. And this kind of goes back to this thing about kind of non-competition among co-ops. Like it's good for all of us to have--it's good for the world to have more and more co-ops. So we're going to support however we can.

But I think that Wheatsville is also very realistic about the fact that it's really, really hard. And so, you know, yeah. Yes. ACTT and Wheatsville definitely supports the efforts of those whole bunch of folks who do want to start a food co-op in some, in areas that are underserved right now. My, the way that I kind of see Wheatsville's future going, you know. So if Wheatsville can open maybe 2 more years; we build up our capital; we have enough money to be able to invest in some experiments. And, you know, a pipe dream would be, so maybe Wheatsville owns the land on which people farm. Those products then get our--sold as Wheatsville's products. Maybe Wheatsville owns the distribution center, owns the trucking company. So it's, you know, we can lower the cost of food to be more accessible to a wider variety of income levels. If we can keep local--you know, on kind of--We talk about kind of vertical integration rights of--So if there's Wheatsville and there's the farm, and Wheatsville also owns the truck that goes from the farm to the store, that dramatically cuts down on the cost of the stuff that you sell, right?

So I think we can start thinking about some, some of those kinds of experimental things, you know, in a couple of years once we've kind of gotten our feet underneath us on what it means to expand and to, to be bigger. But time will tell. I mean, I hope that's the direction we go. I really, I really and truly do. Because it really took me a while to come to grips with the fact that, you know, like, we have a social obligation--We have an obligation. And it's the right thing to do. To have co-ops be the answer to a lot of the food access issues that are happening

everywhere. And, it's just, you know, it's not happening now, or yet. But you know, we're supporting as much as we can, those efforts. Another one of the organizations that Wheatsville has been really supportive of is Urban Roots. Which is fundamentally about educating youth and folks who live in food deserts about sustainable agriculture, and about hard work, and youth development. So Wheatsville has been really supportive of those kinds of organizations. So.

AG: OK. So, I'm going to shift a little bit, but still related to access and sustainability [laughs]. So I was also thinking about the physical structure of Wheatsville and also the infrastructure that's around it. So for example, there's a bus stop right there, there's bike racks. Can you describe the actual physical location and how Wheatsville tries to foster sustainable transportation?

KV: Sure. So Wheatsville has been in the location of 3101 Guadalupe which is right on Guad, which is a big main thoroughfare. It's less than a mile north of UT's campus. It's kind of a bizarre location for a grocery store, in some ways. I think if Wheatsville was choosing a location now, that wouldn't necessarily be the best location for a grocery store. There's not that much parking, it's on a really busy street, and there's not that much room for the building to get bigger, because we're surrounded by houses on all sides. But because it does have so much access to-- there is a bus stop right across the street. The owners of Wheatsville actually, and the neighborhood association and Wheatsville supported this effort. There's now a flashing crosswalk right in front of Wheatsville, so you can press a button and it will actually stop traffic. Right in front of the store. It was the neighborhood association that came to Wheatsville and said, "Hey, can you support us in this effort? This is a safety issue, but it's also about providing walkability and access to Wheatsville." And we were like, "Yes, of course, of course we want to do that. That's part of what we care about."

So I think our owners tell us over and over and over that those--The fact that Wheatsville is so walkable and bikeable and busable, that does improve our--that's all about sustainability and access for sure. But the, you know, but there also a reality that the way that Americans do grocery shopping is often in their car, right? I mean, we don't shop like Europeans where you go 4 times a week to the market and you buy 1 bag, or whatever. When I go to Wheatsville, usually I'm on my way home from work. And I buy 6 bags of groceries, [laughs] and then I go home, you know? So, so, but I think that the location of Wheatsville has been--It's managed to kind of bridge the gap between being a neighborhood grocery store and actually a place that people are willing to drive to get to. You know, our customers are not just folks in a 2 mile radius from Wheatsville itself. Which has been pretty--which has been really encouraging.

And I think when we were talking about opening up a new store at the end of the year, this is also big part of the conversation, right? I mean, one of the things that Dan is looking at when he's looking at new locations, is you know, how can people access it? Is it bikeable? Is it walkable? Does it have enough parking? Because it's just kind of the reality of the world that we live in and the reality of Austin. Is there a bus stop nearby? So all those considerations,

definitely, are a part of what Wheatsville's been talking about in terms of its physical location, for sure.

AG: And has Wheatsville--I'm not sure if you can tell me this or not--but has Wheatsville found a second location yet?

KV: That's--I mean, it's all in process. I don't know [laughs]. To be honest with you, it's all in the works. We don't know where our new location will be, but the goal is to--we're working on a timeline that we're hoping to be able to have a second location by the end of the year.

AG: OK. And then I wanted to ask you--I thought it was so interesting that your parents had been Wheatsville members 30 years previously [laughs]. Have they visited Austin since you've moved here?

KV: They have. They, so my mom's from Wisconsin, my dad's from Alabama. And they both came to UT to study communication. My mom was working on her masters degree, my dad was getting a Ph.D. And this was, I guess they moved here in 1974, 1975, 1975-ish, which was literally *right* at the beginning of Wheatsville. But they were huge hippies. And they were here. I mean, my parents get misty eyed and kind of gaga about, when they talk about their time in Austin. You know, this was, I think they both think of this as one the happiest times of their lives. They were falling in love with each other, and you know, everything was wonderful in the 70s in Austin. And it was this wonderful hippie small town. And you know, Whole Foods was brand new, and they always tell this funny story about, there was some, there was some cashier at Whole Foods that my dad had this big crush on. This, like, hippie woman who never wore a bra [laughs]. You know, I mean it's like their memories of Austin were, are so fond and so tender when they talk about it. And whenever they come back, you know, I always take them to Wheatsville when they come back. It's obviously very different than when they were here. Because when they were here, I think Wheatsville was--where was Wheatsville when they were here? Oh I should totally know this. Whole Foods was at 12th and Lamar, where Whole Earth Co. is now. And Wheatsville was--I can't remember. Sorry. So, I mean, it's obviously very different. But I think for them, that whole, their history in Austin is this kind of mystical past that they have [laughs]. And they love that Kyle and I--my husband Kyle and I live in Austin now. And you know, every time they come we drive around town, my dad will be like, "Oh, is, is whatever bar is still here? I think is was on San Jacinto or maybe Nueces." And you know that he doesn't actually really know what road it was on, right, but he's just kind of like cataloging the names of things that he can remember [laughs]. It's very tender and cute. But, they love, I mean, my dad, my mom beams every time we talk about Wheatsville. She thinks it's very cool. So yeah.

AG: I also wanted to ask you, recently Wheatsville hosted a reunion of cooperative members. Was that just for Wheatsville co-op members or was that more broadly co-op?

KV: That was more broadly--you're talking about the one over New Years?

AG: December, yeah.

KV: So I wasn't actually able to be there for that. So that was, Wheatsville hosted but it was part of this documentary film being produced by a man named Jim Jones, who is from Austin and a big food co-op guy. So he's working on a documentary film about co-ops all over the country. And so this was a reunion, and a party, and a celebration basically about, I don't know, "yay, co-op." So I wasn't able to be there, so I don't, I can't tell you much more than that. But that wasn't specifically a Wheatsville thing.

One of the coolest things, though, is that every fall Wheatsville does an owner gathering, fall owner gathering. And it's where we present--we present owners with what's happened over the past year, we talk about our financial statements, we present the new candidates for the board of directors, it's a party, it's all this stuff. And 2 years ago, we had this kind of old guard of Austin, of Wheatsville, founders reunion, basically. Oh my gosh, I'm totally going to embarrass myself if I forget his name. Walden Swanson. So Walden Swanson was the keynote speaker. He was one of Wheatsville's first general managers. And he's now a consultant for co-ops all over the country. He's a member of, he's a consultant with CDS Consulting Co-ops, it's a worker co-op of consultants that consult for co-ops [laughs]. And he's this amazing guy.

So we brought him in. And he talked about kind of the history of Wheatsville, and how we were founded, all the way back to the days nobody knew how to run a grocery store and nobody knew how to balance the books. And at one point there was a general manager who balanced the books and made the budgets based on like the lunar cycle and astrology. I mean there these amazing ridiculous stories. There's a story about a bucket being thrown on someone's head. That was a really, really fun event because the old guard of Wheatsville came out to see Walden. Because they were all friends. It was all, it was the founders of Wheatsville, and it was, it was an amazing event. Because you do kind of forget when Wheatsville's just your grocery and you're just going in all the time. I feel very connected to Wheatsville. But there are people who've been connected to this grocery store for 30 years, and who were part of getting this thing off the ground. This crazy idea to have a business that people owned and that was run by volunteers, and you know, were, they sold some crazy kind of sandals [laughs]. I don't know, but there are all these funny kind of things. So, yeah. That's it. I went off track there, sorry.

AG: No, I guess my broader point is it seems to me that Wheatsville is pretty in touch with its '60s and '70s past. Would you say that that's a fair statement?

KV: Yes, yeah, I do think that's a fair statement. I think we try very deliberately to be so, you know? I think especially because--so I think what's interesting, one of the things--When Wheatsville said to its owners, "we want to open a second store." So people had been talking about having a second Wheatsville. Starting 20 years people were already talking about having a second Wheatsville. Which is crazy because 3101 Guadalupe was in like financial dire straits, you know [laughs]. And there was no way that it made sense for us to have a second store, but people wanted a second Wheatsville someplace. And so that's always been part of the

conversation. So we finally said, “OK, we’re going to get serious. We want to open up a second store.” In 2003, 2004, the owners actually said, “OK, yes, we want to have a second store. But you can’t lose 3101. That’s our home base, that’s the heartbeat of Wheatsville. That’s really important, you know?” So instead of opening up a second store right away in 2004, instead Wheatsville underwent this huge renovation project to really strengthen our home base. Because this is, this is what people think of when they think of Wheatsville. And we’ve struggled a lot and talked a lot about what happens when you open a second Wheatsville. What happens to that sense of history and that connection to our roots when the second store is a place that people haven’t been shopping for 25 years, you know? And I think each new Wheatsville and each new store will have its own, its own personality and its own sense of self. But 3101 is really, like, that’s Wheatsville, you know? And it is, it’s definitely, it’s tied to the history of the people who founded that place. So.

AG: OK, well I think that I’m about finished with my questions. But before we end today, do you want to speak to something you don’t feel like we fully addressed, or you want to tell a story [laughs] about some aspect of Wheatsville that you want to sneak in there?

KV: Let’s see, do I want to tell a story about, something about Wheatsville? Um. You know, no, I just think. Well, yeah, here’s one of the thing I just wanted to touch on, because one of the things that I think makes Wheatsville super super unique, is that--So every year the owners have--not the owners--There’s a staff appreciation party for all the staff at Wheatsville. And there’s 130 staff. And they are *adorable*, and they love each other. They are so cute [laughs]. And they have these parties at Black Star. And they all get dressed up to the nines. And they dance their asses off and love each other completely. And the last owner [staff] appreciation party was just a couple of weeks ago. And they have these amazing, this, this thing called “Caught in the Act,” where staff members write down, like, awesome things that another staff member did. And they write it on these little pieces of paper, and they put them up in the back building, in the operations office of the store. And during this party, all of the different managers are reading off kind of their favorite “Caught in the Acts.” And they are just these really sweet and tender things that people do for each other. And there’s an amazing sense of community among the people who work at that store. And I think it didn’t exist 10 years ago. And I think it really is testament to, to the type of community that Wheatsville fosters, because they foster it first among themselves.

And Dan has also implemented this really cool thing called “open book finance,” where every member of the Wheatsville staff, regardless of where you are in the, on the “food chain,” if you will--those are air quotes [laughs]--They, they get to be a part of the financial planning of the department they are affiliated with. And so when you walk into our board meeting room, which is also kind of the main meeting room for the staff, there all of these big white boards on the, on the walls, with all of the numbers. I mean, it’s like so open and out there. It’s not--you know, all financial planning isn’t happening in closed doors where people are, like really, like scribbling in the books. It’s all out there. And everyone on the staff, and the board is always welcome to be a part of this as well. It’s just kind of, it’s like this, it’s educating the staff to kind of take

ownership and to understand like what it means to run a grocery store and what's complicated about it.

And it. I think that it's--and all of the staff, including our general manager, is all part of this cool game to earn bonuses at the end of every financial quarter. So everybody is working toward the same goal, including Dan. I don't know, it just, it fosters the sense of, kind of, we're all in this together, we're all creating this community benefit for the owners. And as a staff and as a community, we all have equal ownership in this place and in this store. People think of, people's careers are with Wheatsville. It's not just this transitory, minimum wage crap job that you get for a little while. People really love to work at Wheatsville. And I think that makes a *huge* difference in the type of difference that Wheatsville can make in Austin.

AG: Well, thank you very much, this was great.

KV: Sure.

AG: This is Foodways Texas Oral History Project.