UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: **Arnold Brown**
Interviewed by: **Leigh Cutler**
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[Begin Tape 1, Side A.]

LEIGH CUTLER: This is Tape 1, Side A of an interview by Leigh Cutler with Arnold Brown on Tuesday, January 31st, 2006. This interview will be part of the Oral History of Houston Project at the University of Houston.

[You can] begin by telling me where and when you were born and where you grew up, where you went to school, a little bit about your background.

ARNOLD BROWN: Well, my background. I came from a rural community that was located in Matagorda County, Texas, that was called Live Oak. It was a rural community set about twelve miles southwest of Bay City, Texas. I grew up on a family farm, the seventh of eight children, five boys and three girls. We was farmers. We come from a farm family. The Brown family was a large number of Browns in that area, and all of them associated with farming, so that's basically where I grew up.

I spent twelve years attending Vanderlake [?], Texas, which was O.H. Herman High School where most farm kids gathered for their education, and after graduating from there, I left and went to Houston and lived in Houston a summer to see what big-city life was about, and then migrated to San Marcos, Texas, where I attended Job Corps.

In the Job Corps of my vision, I was to become a brick mason because I had a desire to lay bricks in my life and maybe become a brick contractor.

But lo and behold, my life took a complete 360-degree turn and went into auto parts and got trained in auto parts, and I left San Marcos and went to Dallas. But prior to leaving San Marcos, the Job Corps had given me a four-year scholarship to Southwest Texas State University, and a job on the site to work on the campus with other corpsman at that site. But I refused it because I wanted to kind of venture out, test my skills in the big world.

I did pursue an opportunity. I was working with an auto parts warehouse company for about six months. Then I decided, *Maybe I need to go to college*, so I left Dallas and went to Prairie View [College], and I majored in agriculture. My first degree is in animal science, a B.S. The M.S. is in agricultural education. Because I had a good background in agriculture and that was something I really enjoyed, and something I'd really done all my life, so I felt that discipline would be a good area for me to pursue as a career.

And the thing about it, at that time, I felt like agriculture would always be around so there'd always be an opportunity in that industry at any level, whether it was production, whether it's research, whether it's communication or whatever areas. So I did graduate in 1971 from Prairie View with a B.S. in animal science, and in 1974 graduated with an M.S. in agricultural education.

But in between that time, in 1972, I took a job with the Texas Cooperative Extension Service as a county extension agent. At that time it was called assistant county extension agent—in Austin County, which is Bellville, Texas, a small town that sits east

– or west – of Houston, about I guess maybe sixty miles. I stayed there, working in what they called community development for two years, part of the 4-H program, and then at that time, I decided that I—well, I received an opportunity to be promoted to Fort Bend County.

And in Fort Bend County I was in charge of horticulture and community development, so it was a good match of programs, and I stayed there till 1973.

CUTLER: What year did you go there?

BROWN: Nineteen seventy-two, so I only stayed—no, I stayed in Austin County from 1971 to 1973, Fort Bend County from 1973 to 1976. During my employment in Fort Bend, that's where I really created a major horticulture program in that county, and working in community development, which worked with the rural families in the community in leadership development, community development, community organization, training, designing things for action, identifying new funding aspects as well as providing some new programs for those areas to grow, because Fort Bend County at that time was considered a rural county. It was just reaching its time in terms of business expansion and migration of people from up north, when the oil patch was really booming in this town. So was able to do that, and doing quite well.

But the most outstanding thing I received was a Superior Service Award for increasing the pecan production in Fort Bend County. It went from about $5 million a year up to about $20 million a year, which was quite an accomplishment for the area to increase pecan crop production at that level, so I was sort of recognized for that outstanding economic impact for that area.

But at the same time, I was pursuing and looking for other ways and other opportunities, so that was a federal program that had been created out of the year's Congress by Frederick [W.] Richmond, who was a congressman from New York, and it was to create a community garden program. At this time, they called it backyard gardening, to be directed towards urban populations, and there was six cities at the time that they made the appropriations to: Houston, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, I think Boston, and I think one in Dallas.

I was selected to manage, become the director of the project in Houston. We more or less looked at the inner-city areas that were directed primarily towards minority population. The reason for that [was] because most urban minority families did not understand the basic fundamentals of plant production and plant reproduction, and also teaching families how you grow your own food. We kind of used the term, "growing our groceries."

In that process, we created what we called the backyard gardening program, where I had a staff of twenty-three paraprofessionals who would actually be assigned to various targeted areas through the south, the north, east, and parts of Houston inner city, and they was assigned to create so many gardens in those target areas. Probably they had a workload of maybe thirty families, and they would switch those families sometime every six months. Every time the season changed, they would move them to identifying different kinds of work with them. They worked with them directly, at the home site.

Also in the public schools. The school garden program was connected to the science classes, where they could actually have something they could experiment with [and learn about] time of planting and maturity, seed size, so they learned every aspect of

the history of gardening as well as how a garden can really improve your quality of life, whether it's just exercise or physical well-being to mental alertness, planning. So there's a lot of benefits and tangible things that families can actually learn from, but not only that they're creating a family environment, where people communicated, neighborhoods communicated. You got more people— what I call the "security program" because everybody watched out for everybody's gardens, so they created a chance for people to communicate at another level, and to have a strong bond, because they had something in common.

As we progressed in the program, we served over a twelve-year period, about 10,000 families, a little bit more than that, directly and then many more indirectly through our mass media and other ways in which we promoted the programs which we were doing.

CUTLER: Was this all in Harris County?

BROWN: This was all in Harris County.

CUTLER: Okay, and had you switched to be an agent from Fort Bend to a Harris County agent?

BROWN: Yes. Yes, in 1976 I did assume that position, from Fort Bend to Harris County, and I stayed as director of that program for twelve years. During the program areas here, we decided that there's a lot of vacant land in Houston, there's a lot of abandoned land in Houston in these neighborhoods, and there was really blight, for many things: tires and also they had some issues that affect families. Safety and so forth were some issues, a major concern.

So I did organize a program that—we raised some money with the Southwest Trail Riders Association, which was at that time under the leadership of—what's his name? Gray. I can't think of Mr. Gray's first name, but he still is the president of Southwest Trail Riders Association. He was instrumental in helping us getting the down payment for a tractor that cost, and equipment, about $12,000, to acquire the—he financed it under his name, and then, of course, I raised the money to pay that money back. But we really utilized it.

We'd contract mowing lawns for the [unintelligible] Foundation. They had a lot of vacant lots in those areas, so they would pay us to maintain their lots. And then we would utilize contributions, sponsors from different corporations, and we would use it to prepare large garden sites. So it was paid—there was a fee charged for that purpose, but as a result of that, [we] taught young boys how to ride tractors, how to start tractors, how to drive tractors, things of that nature. So we had a couple of benefits that really helped, for people to get more involved and be a part of that process.

So at that time, I think it was—it may have been 1990—I met Dr. [Bob] Randall. Prior to meeting Dr. Randall, the Houston Metropolitan Ministries' director, Ellen—I can't remember Ellen's first [sic; last?] name—she had asked that I work with them in organizing a community garden, to be a part of their food pantry. And as a part of the food pantry, they had some 200 pantries in the Houston area. We actually worked with those pantries in order to set up gardening sites, for families actually were volunteers—didn't necessarily help to build the pantry; it wasn't a requirement of the members—I mean the recipients of food products from the pantry, to be a part of that, but it was an opportunity if they wanted to learn something about gardening, and also give that.

So we set up several gardens attached to the pantries, and they grew some products and then they would donate them back to the pantry and have them distributed to families. At the same time, I met another young lady that was at the End Hunger Network. What was her name? I can't remember her name. But in working with her, I was able to acquire some funding resources, and we formulated a strong relationship between community garden and providing support of the End Hunter Network. So while I was working with Houston Metropolitan Ministries and Dr. Randall had an interest in gardening, because he grew gardens at his house, so I'd visit him many times, and we'd talk about gardening on a consistent basis.

So he became the director, and I worked with him to actually organize the community gardening program through his Houston Metropolitan Ministries, and through his tenure with them, he decided to create Urban Harvest, and then I worked with him throughout that period, in the beginning stages of his project up until I became project director of the Community Development Department, or project leader of the department, with the extension service in Harris County.

Dr. Randall—he'd always say, "You know, you're the father of community gardening in Harris County, and probably the whole state." And I was recognized for that numbers of times by different groups in the community and more specifically, Urban Harvest.

Some of the issues that affected gardening at that time was environmental issues that he was trying to raise the visual appearance in landscape, beautifying landscapes in neighborhoods, and then helping those families to have an appreciation for agriculture, natural resources and the maintenance of them. But also expanding knowledge and

having a knowledge base because there's probably only one thing we haven't experienced since the Depression is a food crisis, and if we experience a food crisis, I think that—I wouldn't think, I'm sure there would be a disaster, because younger families just do not have the experience in food production, the knowledge of basic food production. Not only that that, but actually learning how plants can be an asset to environment.

So through the educational components, we covered that. We covered history, we covered all the different ages, all the different factors that influenced each stage of agriculture development and how they really help the community to be able to survive much more effectively, and how it really created systems where people understood the importance and the significance of even good health. Most people that grew up on vegetables always seem to have better conditions; they live longer, and not only that, they're not stressed, and if they do, they have a way to release their stress.

So we covered all those factors, and encouraged quality of life as affected by food products, particularly growing things yourself, because it creates a sense of pride.

And in doing so, we created a progress report, and I think I still have a copy of that progress report over those years, and the benefits and so forth. And we also shared our training with the National Garden Association, a lot of the research that we acquired and results we shared in various books through…had those results from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

But Houston was always the bigger program. When I say the "bigger program," the most effective program. And I don't say it because I was director of the program, but it always stood out, and they kind of ranked us according to that, and it wasn't ranked to

say whether one director does and the other [sic], it was ranked on the basis of change in knowledge and skills and the impact the program had on communities. I think this is real crucial and just real—it's a great asset for Dr. Randall to keep this Urban Harvest program going. What he's done is directly in the community was to continue the education program, whether it's books and other literature that's being distributed in the community, and certainly the research that you're doing all inspires that to expand, and how we can actually incorporate land planning into having greenspace to set aside for these type of projects.

We did try some of those projects in apartment complexes, to develop greenspace, and they worked. The Housing Authority, all those had community gardens in it. But I think more than that, when you expand that to development in 2006, I believe that greenspace should be a part of a city's plan, where it's an opportunity to not only go to a park to have recreation but also sites to be producers. They may have to be controlled under some conditions, but for the most part, it just gives an outlet for the family. Not only that, but it gives an outlet to people to be aware of what I can do with a small plot, some land, and whether I own my land or what I have to have access to land as a part of the environment in which I live, which I may or may not own.

So I think this project had all of those overtones, and those diverse projects that we was [sic] implementing some twenty-some years ago, and we had a lot of interest. In fact, Gerald Hines, the developer, had worked with us on creating a farmers' market in Old Market Square, where the gardeners—they would sell the excess produce, so we would set up in Market Square on Fridays. That's the day when everybodys get [sic;

everybody gets] off from work and they're heading out of town, so they had a chance to do quick buying and then get on the road.

CUTLER: And when was this?

BROWN: This was in 19—probably 1988 to 1990. We set up downtown. And then, at that time, the agriculture commissioner, John Hightower, set up farmers' markets, so we had a weekly market located off of Scott Street just across from the University of Houston, and Cleveland, that allowed not only home gardeners but producers in the area who grew extra crops and even crops for commercial outlets—it was set up on Saturday morning from seven thirty to about eleven o'clock. Everybody would sell out, so it was a quick sale type program.

They were always locating, urban gardeners, identifying opportunities, so I would have specialty products, products they would grow, and those products were vegetables that would produce many, like okra and beans and squash, tomatoes, so they would have a large enough quantity to make a profit on what they sold at the market. So it was a pretty catchy program.

And schools would have bartering programs, where they would sell goods to the instructors at school, and they would have a vegetable day, where they could actually prepare the salads and so forth. But the systems have changed now that the school nutrition program and health reasons won't let you do that. The students consumed the food, but now the instructors are doing that. I do work with a school over in Aldine now that has done a vegetable garden that I helped them set up, and they've gone through three seasons with that vegetable garden working with the cooperative extension program at Prairie View.

So I guess when you look at my background and what I've done over the years, I guess old habits just never go away, just keep compounding each other, and you're reaching out for another opportunity to expand the knowledge at school, because it's certainly an asset. When you take a look at the students and how they really see this little mature seed sprout or germinate into an edible project, and you watch it through every stage, it really brings a lot of pride and confidence.

CUTLER: Now, the farmers' market—for example, the one in Market Square—were those from the neighborhood? Was the food coming from the neighborhoods?

BROWN: Those are coming from neighborhoods. We would have some farmers who could come in, but the majority of it came from the neighborhoods.

CUTLER: Okay, and why did that end?

BROWN: That ended because you would have seasons, and you may have one month of available produce and then you wouldn't have any produce. For example, your spring season, once it matures in May, it's through by June, and you wait until the fall of the year and then do it again, so we didn't have a consistent flow of vegetables throughout the growing season that would be available. So it was sort of like an experimental project that we did to see how the downtown population would accept that type of program, because back in the, say, thirties and forties, and maybe fifties, they had a market downtown on Market Square. It's where families would actually go, like they go to farmers' market here in Houston. So it was an idea that Gerald Hines' corporation wanted to do with the program, and we did it. It was successful, but we just couldn't be persistent with the food product and the broad variety of the crops and the products, which the population is looking for.

CUTLER: Okay.

I'd like to go back to some of the earlier issues that you were talking about. Now, the program that was created out of Agricultural Extension—was it called the Six Cities Program?

BROWN: It was called the Six Cities Program, but here it was called the Houston Special Gardening Program. Each city identified the name which they wanted to carry with the program. I don't say the city but the administration, with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. So we called it the Houston Special Gardening Program.

CUTLER: Okay. And what was the involvement with that by government? I had heard that maybe [Congresswoman] Barbara Jordan or [Congressman George Thomas] "Mickey" Leland was involved in this?

BROWN: Oh, yes, Barbara Jordan, Mickey Leland was involved. Mickey Leland, as you know, was a U.S. congressman.

CUTLER: Right.

BROWN: He was very instrumental in working with the U.S. Congress and ensuring our appropriation was available, because we did run into some issues with the appropriations coming out of the Congress, because some felt like, "Hey, this may be a waste of time, waste of money." They couldn't really see the benefit because most of those congressmen came from urban areas, and that was something that was not really a part of their social and educational vision for that district. So Mickey Leland and Barbara Jordan was very strong advocates of this program, and knew the benefits that it was providing to their constituents. So they played a major role.

CUTLER: Did you work with them?

BROWN: Yes.

CUTLER: What was that like?

BROWN: It was interesting. Mickey Leland—I just described, both individuals... Mickey Leland was a very community-minded individual. Probably as a congress person today, he'd probably be the one that really fit the mold. Much more effective than I see —and not to say that they done a bad job, but I felt that his heart was always with the people, and that these other people—and he never really stepped out of that arena. He stayed focus, and always was a person that, if you had a problem, you called him, you're going to talk to Mickey Leland; you're not going to talk to somebody else. Barbara Jordan had the same philosophies, and them working together was really a strong partnership in serving the major needs of the community, making sure that their presence was known and they received results of what their position was supposed to provide their constituents.

CUTLER: And Dr. Randall mentioned something about a law that was offered by Barbara Jordan, maybe along these lines?

BROWN: What was that? I mean—

CUTLER: I'm not sure. He didn't have any details.

BROWN: I can't remember the details. I can't remember.

CUTLER: Okay, that's fine.

What about the food stamp program that came out? Did that come out of the Six Cities?

BROWN: The food stamp program actually came out of the Department of Human Services, the Department of Health, rather. Department of Human Services is out of the

federal government. And basically what that program did in, like, our program, it made allocations to the state food stamp programs, where they would have access to commodities of various types but also they could buy products from these producers, and they had the ability to utilize the food stamps to purchase their products. Also part of that —that was one of the populations, audience, a target audience that we went after, that we were identifying actually to implement our program, so it served as those individuals or target groups that we identified by zip code to actually go in and work with the Harris County Social Services Department, the State of Texas Social Services Department to actually go out and identify those clients and help them try their own gardens.

CUTLER: Is that how you identified different neighborhoods to specifically go to?

BROWN: One of the methods.

CUTLER: What was another method?

BROWN: The other method was the paraprofessional would actually go out in the community and knock on doors, or go to the community center and multipurpose centers and identify clients from public facilities. Public schools, working with the superintendent's office, identify what schools in that neighborhood would have a need to work with the program.

For example, Berry Road, Berry Elementary School up Berry Road today still has some form of gardening program that they work with in setting up those opportunities to provide research programs in vegetable production. I think John Kennedy—we worked with them in setting up that community garden program. So we recruited through various methods in the community, but we identified those target populations that met the guidelines. They had to be below the eighty percent median income.

CUTLER: Why would you say that Houston was targeted as one of these six cities federally? Was it mostly because of hunger issues, or did it come out of the research that was going on in the sixties about hunger in America? What made Houston one of these places?

BROWN: Several things. Number one, you take a look at New York, because usually that is a good example. At that time, eight million people in the city. Small spaces, where families did not have an opportunity to really have an appreciation for back yards. So the same thing with Houston. Houston was a larger area. At that time, it was the fifth-largest city. Houston had land, but just like New York, had lack of knowledge. And then you also had a hunger issue that was facing the famine countries in Africa that could easily be migrated to this country and have the same level of issues that would affect families and health issues that are associated with malnutrition.

And also you looked at California, Los Angeles especially. So all these cities were similar in nature, but it was families that built these cities that migrated from the rural to urban, so there was a connection there, so you had the history of those families who came from family farms, who built these cities, but yet their children did not have the knowledge and it wasn't being passed on.

So you could really take a look at what was happening with all of the crime that was going on in those towns. Educational levels were very low. So you would be only inspired by creating an opportunity for families to develop that relationship again, where everybody shared and cared and was very conscious of their well-being, protecting their property and other personal items, but also building relationships.

So it was a combination of those three or four different needs that inspired Frederick Richmond, who was U.S. congressman from New York, to say, "Look, this is not only needed in New York, it's needed in all major cities of the United States." But after about five years, they expanded to sixteen cities, I believe, at that time, so it didn't hold itself to the first six; it expanded to other cities to implement the same type of programs.

CUTLER: Okay. And what was federal support like? You said that Congressman Richmond kind of started it all, but was there good support from the government?

BROWN: I think the appropriation was $1.5 million, I believe. One or $3.5 million. Houston ended up getting $150,000, and it was level funding. We never got any more. Not an increase. But the largest cities, like New York, I think it got, like, $750,000, Chicago. So they had different appropriations. At that time, it was based upon population. We kind of fought that to some degree, but we didn't win the results, but it was allocated based upon population. So we only received $150,000 over each year until about the tenth year, and about the tenth year, they cut it in half, and by the twelfth year they said that based upon fiscal management and fees and so forth associated with all that cost, then there wasn't a need for us to continue the program.

So we merged the monies into the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program and maintained a community garden representative with that staff for about another five years. They didn't really increase the appropriation because it felt like all the other programs associated with agriculture could actually be a conduit to create that type of education information directed to the citizen through informal education. The other

monies went to state agriculture departments; it went to other education within the Cooperative Extension Service. So at that point, they sort of depleted the programs.

But you also had the Future Farmers of America. We had their projects. They were done, and then you also had special interest, so you had a lot of creation of special —continuing education programs that directed itself to horticulture, gardening, and other facets of the horticulture market.

CUTLER: Would you say that because of Barbara Jordan and Mickey Leland's involvement, that the local support from the government, on a local level, maybe was stronger than federal?

BROWN: I think it was strong at both levels, because the state legislature had a very microscopic interest in what we were doing and how the people in our district was benefiting from the projects. But they didn't have much support in terms of strengthening the appropriations, the increases in appropriations. But Mickey Leland and Barbara Jordan were those representatives who really, in my opinion, strengthened the program early on and made an impact in terms of increasing—you know—

CUTLER: Keeping it going.

BROWN: —over the years. Then after his death, nothing changed in terms of the appropriation and involvement; we just didn't have an advocacy to say, "This is something that we need to continue and needs to be a vital part of our improving quality of life."

CUTLER: Dr. Randall said you were the first black county agent. Is that true?

BROWN: I'm not the first black county extension agent. I was the first black to operate this program.

CUTLER: The Harris County—

BROWN: Harris County community gardening program.

CUTLER: And the only one?

BROWN: I was the only one.

CUTLER: Now, I'm curious about how the black community responded to not only the hunger crisis but also sort of your solicitations. You talked about going door to door. What was the response, and what did the community do, and what were the limitations there?

BROWN: I guess I can start with the managers. I prepared a script. They would make the introduction. Everybody wore a badge, so they knew exactly who they were. Some individuals in the black community, particularly if they was on fixed income, didn't want to acknowledge anything that they were doing because they thought they would get their benefits deleted. Some had an attitude that said, "Farming – I've done it for years and I left my farm tools in the rural, and I'm in a new life now." But once a neighbor would do a garden, then the results of that inspired them to want to do a garden. They wouldn't actually start a large garden; they would start a couple of plants or one row and so forth. Pretty soon, you know, it starts expanding.

It took a lot of examples, and in most of these areas I would do demonstration gardens on a corner, where we kept that garden immaculate, where we would have sort of a research garden, so whatever we planted, they planted. So it kind of created the momentum and the understanding that "this is something I can really do. I don't have to feel embarrassed or feel ashamed that I'm growing my vegetable garden, and it's something that my children need to learn." So early on, to really create an interest, we

had to do a lot of work, through demonstration, to really get them motivated towards growing their own food.

At the same time, we had issues with some of the individuals and some of the agencies, who really didn't understand the benefit of how people really would benefit from what they were doing. So we had some overtones that did not really support totally what we did until we had the full support of the community. So most of the black families—they accepted. Now, as you look at Houston, if you go to north Houston, the philosophy is different; if you go to south Houston, they're different; and if you go out towards the Ship Channel, they're different.

CUTLER: What do you mean in terms of difference?

BROWN: Acceptance, understanding the reasons why I would do a garden, understanding some of the chemical pollutants, which one would affect what I'm producing and consuming and I could really have some health issues. So they was kind of reluctant.

CUTLER: Does that have to do with the different types of land available in those parts of town?

BROWN: It was just the philosophy of the people. But there was no pollutants there that would cause any infectious diseases or any other health issues that affect one's health, but it was the attitude. For an example, in the eastern parts of the city, they migrated from Louisiana. Where Louisiana was a very close-knit family and most of the people you find out to where the Ship Channel came from parts of New Orleans and Baton Rouge and Shreveport and those areas, so they had very strong family ties, so that the mother lives here, the daughter, other kids live around the corner, whereas you came to north

Houston, it's a different breed of people. They don't have the strong family ties to perpetuating what one does, but their priorities in life are a little different than the population there.

Then you get to south Houston. It was more faith-based groups from the church had a better relationship, so whatever the minister said, then the church parishioners, they would say, "Let's do that. It's part of our quality of life and he's emphasizing it, and it's a part of spiritual growth and development."

CUTLER: So support from the black churches was very strong in general?

BROWN: Very strong, very strong. So you had to learn the character of those neighborhoods and the philosophy of the people.

CUTLER: On the north side, where do you think most of those people had migrated into Houston from?

BROWN: East Texas, parts of south Texas.

CUTLER: Were those some of the people who had said, "I tried farming."

BROWN: "I'm done."

CUTLER: "I'm finished with that."

BROWN: Correct.

CUTLER: Okay. That makes sense. Were black women more likely to get involved than black men, from planting to volunteering to getting involved in organizing?

BROWN: Yes. You found that women was always the priority, because they was more or less the cook and they understood the needs, and most of them had experience gardening before. If they wasn't a part of it, they watched their parents and their grandparents perform. The man in most cases may help prepare, but the wife was the one

that always sustained the garden. And then the staff was a female staff, so the women was more affable to work with another woman as opposed to working with a man, so my staff was one man and about twenty women.

CUTLER: Okay.

BROWN: [Laughs.]

CUTLER: What was response from the men like?

BROWN: The men—most of them worked during the day, and they didn't have the time to spend in the garden. They could do the preparation, and the women would take it from the preparation stage, so we had they paraprofessionals that would call them at least once a week and actually go by and work with them to actually assist them in recommendations on how you managed the garden. We wouldn't actually do the garden for them, because we kind of had a philosophy: you teach a man to fish—you know, we had that philosophy. And it worked.

I think the other part is the social interaction, the social exchange. I could tell you about my children. I could tell you about my life. So it was a part of something they looked forward to. So this was a chance for me to talk to someone who would really listen to what I'm saying, and it was that type of drawing card, so we always captured the things that really helped to motivate people to be a part of what we were doing. And you had to really look at the habits. And once you understand the habits of the community and what their priorities were, they was much easier to work with.

So you might talk about the garden the first two minutes, and the rest of the time you're talking about everything that's happening in the community, so it had—hat overtone and that philosophy had an impact. And they would tell you everything. You

never had to worry about anybody bringing harm to you or talking to you out of tone because they said, "That's the garden person. That's the representative." And they had high levels of respect.

But it was just inspiring to see people, how they respond to people when they get to know your purpose and how you can help me be able to help myself. It's like a multiplying thing. "I have a colleague. Won't you come and work with them?" And they'll follow you to that person's house, so it was just a real big family effect.

CUTLER: You've mentioned outlying areas in Houston. What about some of the inner city? I know that you had done a lot of work in the Fourth Ward?

[End Tape 1, Side A. Begin Tape 1, Side B.]

BROWN: The Fourth Ward area was one which was work encouraged by the housing director. We worked with the – they called it the…Housing Council. I think the Housing Council. And the Housing Council was a group that would meet on a consistent basis. I'm sure they still do that now. And they're the one that actually endorse your program. Once they endorse your program, you can actually go out and visit with the tenants and whoever wanted a garden, they normally have the garden right there at the kitchen door or if they had a space outside of that that everybody could work in a community garden. So we set up a larger space, and we would design where everybody would have their own plot in the garden area.

But it wasn't a bad situation. The one thing about this program – nobody would actually steal anybody's vegetables. They never would. I think it's just a sense of pride,

and you always felt like somebody was a watchman over that site. You never had an opportunity to go and destroy. Nobody destroyed anything. So it created a whole new perception of the people's attitude in that community.

And also at that time, the Vietnamese had moved into the complex, and they really understood gardening through their own cultural background, so they become much more aggressive, and every unit they lived in, there was a garden in their unit, so we would have to speak to somebody else who could do the language transfer. But the concept and the implementation, the program for the ward at that time was outstanding. We had nobody to really get, I guess, disrespected or any issues that affected harm or anything to anyone.

Now, there's another lady out there – Gladys House.

CUTLER: Oh, yes.

BROWN: Gladys House was a strong advocate of gardening, and I worked with her a long time.

CUTLER: Did she just kind of volunteer herself, and did she kind of go around with you and get other people—

BROWN: She volunteered herself. She went around, and she was an advocate that said, "Hey, we got to have gardens," so when Gladys spoke, everybody listened, so she was a real strong—and still is—very strong individual support, of Freedmen's Town. So it was a sense of pride that was a growing transformation for the people in the area to be exposed to that opportunity.

CUTLER: Was Madgelean Bush also involved that way?

BROWN: Yes, Madgelean Bush was a very strong advocate through the center that she has, but not only that, she had a connection with the Methodist church, with. Dr. Van Story. In fact, the Methodist church appropriated about $3,000 a year for us to provide the seed and fertilizers and other gardening materials throughout these neighborhoods, so we got their funding support for about seven years, which was a line item budgetary item in their appropriations, so Madgelean was another advocate that helped promote what we did in working with her center, with her after-school children and daycare and so forth, to help promote what we did.

CUTLER: Is that the Martin Luther King Center?

BROWN: Martin Luther King Center, on Sampson [Street].

CUTLER: Why do you think, in general, the churches were so supportive? I mean, was it because of the community togetherness that it brought?

BROWN: I think it was the educational need, I guess the requirement of the church to have biblical concerns, and they allowed them the opportunity to be a part of, provide an impact in the community, from a faith-based involvement.

The other aspect was their parishioners that attended the churches understood the meaning of vegetable production because they worked on family farms, so it was part of that quality of life. And the church being an advocate for symbolizing the welfare of the community, then it was an opportunity for everybody to be a part of it. It didn't matter what faith you was. It was a chance for me to participate and support what they do.

CUTLER: Okay. Well, that kind of brings me to what was first called Houston Metropolitan Ministries. Is that right?

BROWN: Yes.

CUTLER: And did you originally approach them, I think Dr. Randall told me, in the early eighties?

BROWN: It was early eighties.

CUTLER: About a gardening program?

BROWN: Yes.

CUTLER: And they weren't able to do it at that time?

BROWN: They wasn't—Ellen—I forget Ellen's name.

CUTLER: Ellen Mitchell?

BROWN: Ellen Mitchell. That was her name. Things changed when Ellen became director. Ellen had come over and visited with me on a number of times to see what they could do and how they could support our program, and the reason why—I don't think there was reluctance to the extent they didn't want to do it, it was trying to figure out the best methods to actually implement this program through the Houston Metropolitan Ministries, because the ministries that not only supplied spiritual support, but they provided clothes and other things to the resale shops and so forth.

But the food pantry—they dealt with non-perishable goods, canned goods for the most part, so it was trying to see how could we actually involve pastors and priests and all these other spiritual representatives into engaging in this project. Houston was a city that crime was rampant at the time. Monies for fencing and so forth was one of the factors that they was conscious about, because budget restrictions was pretty tight.

CUTLER: This is early eighties?

BROWN: It was early eighties. That was right after the oil boom.

CUTLER: Right.

BROWN: The oil bust, rather.

CUTLER: Yes.

BROWN: So everything in Houston was a disaster financially and economically. So after they understood and we sat down and discussed how we could best do this, come up with a method of delivering, then it was more receptive. It was organized through the food pantry. Well, actually, they set up a council, and the council was representative of various groups, a combination of business, faith-based, community leaders and so forth, and then we set up policies of operation: what the requirements would be and set up the chain of command. And then they hired a director, and that's when they hired Bob to become the director of that program. I think he was serving on the committee at that time, once it was organized, and then he became the director, along with I think one or two staff members, and then they began to implement, through the food pantries.

CUTLER: What was it that turned them around? Was it a change in the economy?

BROWN: I think it was a change of the economy, but also it was a change of trying to provide individuals more fresh nutrition vegetables. Like I say, they didn't have a requirement that if you received a food product from the pantry, you had to spend time in a garden, but that was an opportunity. But that was a volunteer group who actually spent time actually producing the vegetables in that garden. Some of it was surplus. Would actually go out and work for an hour, maybe two hours a weekend or whatever, to support and feel like they're giving back something to what they had received. So it wasn't mandatory that they provide it.

And the other side, I think it became a priority of the different faith-based objectives and goals, and that is to provide more support for education and providing natural resources to the participants, clientele in their program.

CUTLER: Okay.

Let's go back to when you were talking about getting the tractor and the other equipment for plowing lots and things like that. Can you talk some of the obstacles or advantages, problems that you faced in those issues?

BROWN: Well, first of all, the first problem was when you say, "Why do you want to get a tractor? What are you going to do with it?" Well, we're going to prepare gardens and take the sweat equity out of it as much as we could. But the other advantage – you had to have a vehicle, a trailer to pull it, so finally had to raise the money to get a $600 trailer. Then I had to have the insurance, so it was a slow process to create the wealth in those projects because the state wasn't going to do it, and the federal government certainly wasn't going to do it. So it kind of led me and my staff and clients to actually ask for contributions from different groups to support what we were doing. So we had to be fee structured because nobody really had a lot of money to actually say, "Here's $100 or $200 to do this."

The other was ensuring that it was secure, so I worked with the school district, and we started at their lot, and we ended up getting the trailer stolen and some of the equipment stolen by doing that, but I quickly got that replaced. I think this project, if you really didn't look at those obstacles as something that deterred, you seen a need and you had to be very creative and creative in the systems to ensure that the results was

successful. And once they seen a success and we have all this, well, gee – I think you'll be supporting us.

It was a challenge, but when you really look back and you actually perform, it really wasn't a challenge. It was a need, and we wanted to fulfill the need, so you took the steps to make sure it happened.

CUTLER: What was your support in your role like from the Agricultural Extension during these years?

BROWN: The Agricultural Extension—you had a group of specialists from the system who actually came out and done special programs or events for you. We would have what we called garden fairs, so the system would make available all the professionals that we needed to actually come in and do demonstrations on preserving food products to different methods of crop production to actually understanding how you organize, and I did write a book on how you organize a community garden.

CUTLER: What's that called?

BROWN: *Community Gardening in Houston*. The system—it pretty much gave me the opportunity for me to develop this project, and whatever support levels that I needed from headquarters, they made sure it was available.

CUTLER: So you would say they were supportive.

BROWN: Very supportive.

CUTLER: Okay, in terms of resources and moral support and all those things?

BROWN: Right.

CUTLER: Okay.

Why did the program do well, why didn't it do any better than it did, and why did it eventually end? It's kind of a board question.

BROWN: It's a good question. The program did well because I think people related to the importance and significance of home production, and also it done well because it was an opportunity for their children to be exposed to growing your own food products. It was like a rebirth, a rebirth of farm relationships and identity.

The reason why I think it failed is because as the economy changed, people changed and their priorities changed, so I'm able to go back to the grocery and purchase my food, but also there was a depletion in staff visibility, so therefore they didn't actually see that component there to more or less visit me on a day-to-day basis or week-to-week basis to support what I'm doing.

CUTLER: Staff in terms of volunteer staff?

BROWN: Paid staff and volunteers, but in some of the areas of south Houston, gardens kept going, even though you didn't have a staff. They still would call the Extension office and say, "I have a question. I'm looking for Mr. Brown" or whatever, "somebody who can answer a question about my garden." So they knew where the resources were to provide assistance for whatever issues they faced. But I think, like most programs, once the people have been exposed and they got the most out of what they need, then they'd create another opportunity for themselves. So what we tried to do at that time is—because I was still of the view—if you're dealing with the family, you have to work with the whole family. If you do gardening, you teach them that they need to remove some debris. You take this away, because it creates rodents and it creates other thing. So we

talk about how you control rodents; we talk about how you control pests, home pests, particularly roaches and other any pest that would be a menace to a family.

So once those—and most of the products that we utilized, we taught them that this is a dual product: you can use it for both; this is how you utilize it. So it was an opportunity for those families to really reach a broader base for the needs, but after those needs have been met, it's not like—I took care of that, so it's time for me to look at something else.

And that was a good thing. It really was a good observation and need for them to say, "I've conquered this. I've been successful with it, so now I can look at ways"—in fact, one of the real interesting—one of the staff that worked—and others, I had three ladies to go to college to get a B.S. degree. That was the [unintelligible] program.

CUTLER: What program?

BROWN: As a result of their involvement—

CUTLER: Oh, as a result.

BROWN: —in this program and for me to push them to get an education, because they had the ability and the knowledge and skill to do it, so I let them go to college full time. They got their degrees. And one that became the director of the horticultural program in the horticulture department with Hilton Hotels, so they flew her around to every Hilton hotel in the state of Texas, and she managed all their indoor plants, because I taught the staff on indoor plants, outdoor plants, everything to do with horticulture and opportunities in that industry. So it is very inspiring to see that some went to work for, at that time, Wolfe Nurseries. It was an opportunity for them to migrate and move to another level,

then I would refer them to—I had some go to work for Precinct One and still works for Precinct One today, as employees, in Franco Lee's district.

CUTLER: That's great.

BROWN: I think the results of any individual who felt like they have a family who have conquered what they pursued, then they look for a new beginning with something else, how to impact on what they learned.

CUTLER: Right, or transfer it to some other aspect of their development.

BROWN: Correct.

CUTLER: And so the depletion in staff—was that a result of the economy coming back and more jobs being available?

BROWN: It was a depletion of staff because of level of funding. The cost of managing the funds was increasing on an annual basis. Benefits—so that mainly the depletion was going down—certainly down about 15 percent per year. So we got down to about half as much money, about $75[,000], $72,000. It wasn't cost effective to actually operate that program.

CUTLER: Okay. Now, I've heard a lot about all of your dedication and long hours that you put into this, so I want to know what kind of sacrifices that you personally made for the effort, and maybe take me through a given week during the core of the time. What was it like?

BROWN: Sometime it was six days a week, and could easily get into seven, for the activities and the desire of the people to be exposed to all aspects of events and activities in the community. We would have programs in the public schools, we had light

gardening sketches for the kids to actually... It was a lot of different things for families to be more involved.

I had a training every week for my staff, to make sure they was abreast of all the changes to improve the product and services that they need in order to correctly educate the clientele. But also it was a ten-step person. You have to be a p.r. person, you have to be a funding identifier, you have to be provider, you have to be all these, kind of like an octopus. You had all these different hands. And you had to be a manager. So you kind of had a lot of responsibility that you're responsible for in order to make the program work.

The day-to-day was a continuous day, and sometime it was up in the late evenings, eight, nine o'clock at night. So you have a lot of sacrifice from your family. On weekends I worked, and I had my children with me, so they would at least some of myself, and I tried to not have any Sundays when I would anything. So I spent that time home with them.

But you had your own vehicle, so I kind of wore out a lot of vehicles [laughter] in doing this program, but as a result of that stage of my life and experience that I had, it was enjoyable; it was rewarding. And I still see some of those people today, and they say, "Oh, it's Mr. Brown."

CUTLER: So it's rewarding.

BROWN: So it's still rewarding. And they have children, and some of them say, "This is my child. You can come and teach something about gardening." They remember that. I worked this area when I was an extension agent, and a lot of the families know me in

this area, and they still say, "Boy, this man knows everything. He's like a walking encyclopedia."

CUTLER: Oh, that's great.

BROWN: So you still get those overtones of the impact you've made on them about their life, and you can see the results because their lives have changed. Their children's lives have changed. They're at another level. They keep that desire. In fact, during the week I'll give probably—sometime as many as six or seven families will come just for my advice: "What do I need to do?" "How do I need to do it?" "What can I tell my children?" So they kind of hold you as a high icon in that area, and it continues to be perpetuated.

So I think the fruits of even my children; they love to work outside. And I have grandchildren now. They love the outdoors. They tell their children about what they did and how they did it and so forth, so it's really rewarding to see the impact. What you thought, [that] you were just doing a job, is actually changing the quality of life and it's carrying through generations, and that's a good thing.

It's one thing about—as an Extension agent, working in the A&M system, providing informal education in communities, it's probably one of the most rewarding jobs that anyone can have, kind of like what you're doing. It's one in which you start at one level, and you help that person grow to another level, and it's something they never forget because it makes a significant impact on not only the education component, but I've developed a relationship with someone that I can trust, and that I feel a level of dignity that I've been able to be a part of that.

CUTLER: And that was sort of driving you all along.

BROWN: All along. You have a bad week, and the next week, it's *Oh, man, this is alright.*

CUTLER: Yes, yes. That makes for a good job.

BROWN: You bet.

CUTLER: Why did Ag Extension choose you to go to Harris County from Fort Bend, and to begin this program?

BROWN: They chose me because, in my opinion, I had worked in a county that they had some projects that they could not really create and be successful, and I was able to do that. I was able to organize. I used to work with the Texas Power & Lighting program that was a part of the improvement of communities in rural Texas. I was able to organize those communities and motivate the people to improve their communities and their overall quality of life.

And I could take children and do the same thing. I had children that had championships; they won championships. They won championship products at the county fair, and I could tell them how to grow the animal and I could curl them and always came out with a champion. And I was very good in poultry, so I was looking for another opportunity because I wanted to move up in the system, and they decided, "Gee, he's the best organizer that we have, so I think he could take this project and carry it through to really make it a successful program." So they selected me on my abilities to be able to work with people, to motivate them, but also understood how to develop the project and made it a successful program.

And the other side of it was I was doing horticulture, and I was very good at what I had executed in that county to change the production outlook of commodity, which was

a state commodity, the pecan tree. So in changing the economic impact, "We feel like you was the best person to implement this program."

CUTLER: Good. That's great.

Okay, I guess I've kind of covered everything, unless there's something that you want to talk about or can think of that I haven't really touched upon.

BROWN: What I would like to say is, first of all, to commend you—

CUTLER: Thanks.

BROWN: —to take a look at this area, because you observe a lot of different literature that talks about production and certain histories, but never cover the real basic fundamentals of what I call fundamental programs that affect the quality of life of people, particularly in an urban area, and I think it's outstanding that you would connect us with history and being able to maybe go all the way back to the Victory Gardening program and see how they were different…

CUTLER: Yes, how would you compare that? I've been curious about that.

BROWN: I think the Victory Gardens came out of the Depression, so people was motivated, and it was going towards the agricultural and—well, manufacturing age. So there was a need for us to migrate back to what we were doing for survival, and then we would slowly migrate to other areas to improve our economic quality of life. But it was something we took with us, and we knew we had to have that to make it work, and the government was supporting the Victory Garden program. But after we got into the manufacturing age, it was defeated because everybody got a job.

So when you take a look at that, and then we went into the eighties, where we had the oil bust and we had a crime wave and we had unstable conditions, we had the Shah of

Iran, we had all the different issues that was affecting foreign and domestic relationships, so there was a need. So it was kind of like with the Depression, but it was like history repeating itself. People have to really create an opportunity for themselves, and particularly urban populations. They would be lost. So they have similar nature and overtones that there's a need for informal education and creating a nucleus for people to understand that I can take a little and produce a lot.

CUTLER: And do you think also in that interim, from Victory Gardens to the early eighties, that some of the environmental movement[s] of the sixties and seventies—do you think that had an effect, too, on growing food and growing your own food?

BROWN: I think so, because in the environmental movement—we kind of call it the hippie period—

CUTLER: Right.

BROWN: Everybody was back to nature.

CUTLER: Yes.

BROWN: Well, a direct relation to nature. Everybody understood – probably most people that was looking at the space age didn't understand their philosophy at the time, so it was more or less a critical aspect, but when you take a look at that era in history, it sent a lot of signals for the future. So when we assess individuals under age thirty, we kind of see that they've migrated back into society with the hair, with the jewelry and with the baggy pants and with the loud music and all these other things, which probably we size it up with the sixties. You say, "Gee, this is another sign that history is repeating itself." And the aggressiveness of the people is the same. So the philosophies of that era and this era is more aggressive in this era because technology have brought everything so close

together, and the resource is much more aggressive financially…I'm either on my computer, or I'm going to spend some money. And nothing in between.

So when I take a look at a young person and what you're becoming a professional in, it's very unusual for you to really take a look at something that minute, and then want to understand how can I create this nucleus of opportunity in the future…to what I want to achieve in my lifetime.

I was looking at—you may have heard of this—in California, just outside of Los Angeles there's a group that want to go back in time, and they developed this community where nobody actually – they may have a car, but they have a very economical car. Nobody drives a Maserati. Everybody wear common clothes. Everybody doesn't actually go to the salon to get their hair—you know, prepared. So they're living a very common life that's going back to nature, to drive—that people would understand that I can really live a very common, comfortable life and not really migrate to the very extreme levels of economic impact.

So you create a different philosophy of wealth. Is wealth really money? Is wealth really good health or quality of life, happiness, things of that nature? And I think as we move into the next cycle, this is going to revert again. We're going to see a greater need for it, and particularly if foreign relationships doesn't get any better, prices of one commodity in this country is going to drive everything, and it's starting to do that. Food is going to be a real precious commodity, and it's getting to be that. The lowest food product, chicken, used to be very expensive, but now it's cut up so many different ways, it's just driving the price, so really a deboned chicken is—it's a lot more than it used to

be. Not to say that's going to remain the same, but I think you're going to see more of a drastic return in terms of food products, food distribution, food costs.

CUTLER: And therefore a need to learn about growing your own.

BROWN: Yes.

CUTLER: It makes sense.

BROWN: So as we take a look at changes in society, the need for education in the next era is going to be detrimental. We have so much laying off until people don't refer to it. Very aggressive in terms of, "You grow it, and we'll take it because I need it," and we don't want to get to that. And that's why it's so crucial that what you're doing is important, and if there could be more periodicals written on what we're facing in this country as it relates to agriculture, because back in, let's say, in 1980, there was 16,000 square feet was utilized to feed a family of four, and by the year 2010 it'll be something like 1,600 square feet. You'll have to grow all your produce on that much of land.

The other issue in this country is that most farms are now owned by corporations. California, Florida, even in South America, in the central—across the United States. They're owned by corporations: Cargill, all those major farm feed producers, the Mormon Church, strawberry factories… You've got just a multitude of corporations bought up family farms, and you know what happens when corporations get involved: they drive the prices up. So we're going to see that happening more and more in this country, and we lose control of the market when that happens.

And then with international trade being open—I mean, you're going to pay me a container at this price? I want to ship it over there and I'm going to leave less here. So I drive the price up with supply and demand. So we're reaching that level, and it's going

to continue to be an issue in this country unless we start creating educational opportunities for people to be exposed and be a part… and that's got to start in elementary school. And also having what we call production programs in high school. It becomes a part of life. You have to take this class. Not only about managing money, but managing resources. I need to learn how to grow my own food. I need to learn how to manage the environment where I live. I have to learn how to but the water off when I'm washing dishes and all those different kinds of things.

CUTLER: Right.

BROWN: So it's becoming much more of a concern because natural resources that are limiting—limited resources today than they were twenty years ago, so we got to be much more manageable and aware. Can you imagine getting up one morning to take a shower and there's no water? That's scary. So I can only applaud you for what you're doing.

CUTLER: Thank you.

BROWN: I just think it's outstanding.

CUTLER: Thanks.

Well, that covers it for me.

BROWN: Thank you.

CUTLER: Okay, thanks.

[End of interview.]