Interviewee: Randall, Robert

Interview: December 7, 2005

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: **Bob Randall**
Interviewed by: **Leigh Cutler**
Date: **December 7, 2005**
Transcribed by: **Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft; February 2006**

[Begin Tape 1, Side A.]

LEIGH CUTLER: This is Leigh Cutler interviewing Dr. Bob Randall, executive director of Urban Harvest. The interview is taking place at his office at 1900 Kane Street in Houston, Texas, and the date is Wednesday, December 7th, 2005.

If you'll just start and tell me your name and when you started working for Urban Harvest. Start from there.

BOB RANDALL: Okay. Well, my true actual name is Robert Randall. Most everybody calls me Bob Randall. I have a Ph.D., so I'm also a Dr. Randall, if people want to do that. I started working for Urban Harvest the day it was created in May of 1994. I was as one of the, whatever it was, seven or eight official founders of the organization. But I had been doing similar work at the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, on staff since February of 1988, and I was a volunteer starting the first of March 1987.

CUTLER: Is that a Houston organization?

RANDALL: When I started volunteering there and starting working there, it was an

organization known as Houston Metropolitan Ministries. The division of Houston Metropolitan Ministries that I was working at was a project created by the Interfaith Hunger Coalition. Houston Metropolitan Ministries had originally been started as Protestant Charities, and when Catholics joined it, it became Houston Metropolitan Ministries, and then Jewish congregations got involved and other religions, Unitarians, Baha'is and Hindus and so on. They eventually changed it to Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston, which is the modern name of the organization. When they did that, since they had appropriated the term "interfaith" from one of their divisions, the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, the Interfaith Hunger Coalition became just the Hunger Coalition. So when I finally left there, it was called the Hunger Coalition, part of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston. We created Urban Harvest out of what was a part of a part of a part of that organization.

CUTLER: So was the component of Urban Harvest that was different was the community gardening aspect? What did you combine from the former organization?

RANDALL: The main mission of the Interfaith Hunger Coalition was to combat hunger in metro Houston. It's a United Way, quote, "agency." And it helped start the Houston food bank, and it helped start the system of food pantries that exist today, and in 1986 I think they had—the Texas and Houston economy was at its certainly or forty- or fifty-year low, and approximately one million emergency food requests were received in—it was either '86 or '87. The efforts to collect cans and boxes and things like that, food drives, was falling way short, so they had people in need, a lot of children, a lot of elderly. There just simply wasn't enough food.

And so they went to essentially a desperate measure, is what I would call it, which they decided they might try to grow food. And they knew that it wouldn't have any real effect in the short run, that this was a longer-run strategy of trying to actually produce food for the hungry. But that's only one of several different influences.

A second one is that there was a whole parallel group of people who were concerned about the use of pesticides in synthetic fertilizers, on our habitat and on our environment. And they decided—they got together and started an organization called TexUS Roots [Texans for Urban Stability], T-e-x-u-s, TexUS Roots. Their goal was to educate landscapers about how to do things organically.

So you had these two different organizations, very different missions. And historically, if you go back into the roots of the community gardening movement, they come out of these two different traditions, very much so. The organic thing came out of the environmental crises of the sixties and seventies—the DDT and the penguins and in breast milk, and the sense that many, I would call educated, somewhat affluent middle classes felt that they weren't getting quality food and they needed to grow organic food because it was the only way they could get it. And what passed for organic food in the stores in 1968 was ridiculous. I mean, one rotten cabbage or something like that.

And so you had to actually grow it if you were going to eat it, and people got very concerned about what they were eating. So a lot of the community gardens in the United States and community gardening organizations, programs—I call it program—got started around efforts to create organic food in cities. The City of Austin's gardening program got created that way, for example. Mostly students from the University of Texas.

And the other side of it is that the other big domestic concern that developed out of the sixties was the hunger issue. There were a lot of high-profile, well-reported famines in various parts of the world, and then Michael Harrington wrote a book [*The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 1962] about hunger in Appalachia that President John [F.] Kennedy talked a lot about.

And then Great Society programs of [President] Lyndon [B.] Johnson essentially started looking at what was the real problem. It was the Black Panthers who basically started having school breakfast programs and school lunch programs for kids. One of the pastors I worked with had been impressed by what the Panthers were doing and said he didn't see why, running a missionary Baptist church in an inner-city ghetto, why he shouldn't be creating food for people there, too, that you didn't have to be a political militant to want to feed children and [the] elderly.

And so there was this whole thrust, but the Congress—and I don't know what role Barbara Jordan and [George Thomas] "Mickey" Leland had in this, but both of them were from Houston; both of them were anti-hunger advocates. Leland was still alive when I was at the Hunger Coalition and was a strong advocate. Mrs. Leland, his mother, was on the board of Interfaith Ministries at that time. Mickey had been involved with garden projects.

Anyway, there was something called the Seventeen Cities Program, or eighteen cities or twenty-two cities or something like that—I think it was seventeen originally. One of the things that came out of the congressional research, funded research [sic: things that came out was congressionally-funded research] on what was the extent of

hunger in the United States. There was a Harvard Med School group that came to Houston and researched it, as I understand it. This was before I was involved, so I don't really know, but.

CUTLER: In the seventies?

RANDALL: Probably seventies, but it was part of the effort to justify or figure out whether school lunch programs or food stamps and—I don't know what the history of this exactly, but that's what I'm saying, is I have a general understanding of it but not a detailed chronology of who the players were. But essentially Congress funded a lot of research and a lot of programs to combat hunger, and this started in the late sixties and went in the late seventies, maybe early eighties.

One of the things they did was the Seventeen Cities program, which said in seventeen cities around the United States, we're going to basically fund an agricultural extension to start a community gardening program for schools, for poor people and for people with disabilities. And so the first school gardens in Houston were developed through that program.

The teacher that started it at Travis Elementary is on our advisory board. She's here in town. Arnold Brown, who was the first African-American extension agent in Harris County—he was a veterinarian working on goats in Fort Bend County. He was brought in here in 1978 to do this. The records from the Interfaith Ministries' Hunger Coalition—they may have them in boxes or something. You might be able to get a hold of them. They very likely have pitched them long ago. But I remember reading through the records on the community garden stuff. And I basically quit Interfaith Ministries

when given six hours to get out of there. They didn't know I was going to start another program, but at the time—we've sort of patched things up since then, but anyway—because I think they realized I was right and they were wrong, for one thing, about disagreements we had.

But I remember reading that in 1980, the then-head of the Hunger Coalition, named Sister Sheila Cesar, I think was her name, C-e-s-a-r—I never met her, but anyhow, she was approached by Agent Brown to help start community gardens, and she did not do that, for whatever reason. And he came back in 1986 and tried it again. And in '86, Pam Duff, who I may not have ever met but who was the then-head of the Hunger Coalition, and Ellen Mitchell, who worked under her, decided that nothing was working; "we might just as well try gardening." And Ellen is still here in town, and we just gave her an award last month. She would know some of that about that period.

CUTLER: What was her last name?

RANDALL: Mitchell, M-i-t-c-h-e-l-l. Ellen then became head of the Hunger Coalition in January of '87 or maybe late '86, and she is the one who recruited a VISTA [Volunteers in Service to America] volunteer named Jean Joslin, who then started the gardening program. Jean knew nothing whatever about gardening, but VISTA has certain requirements, and one of them is that you have to have an advisory council. I didn't actually know this at the time. I found this out many years later, that you have to have an advisory council, and more than half have got to be the clients served.

CUTLER: What does VISTA stand for?

RANDALL: Volunteers in Service for America, or to America. VISTA still exists.

They have offices in Austin, a tiny part. But it's the same—I was in the Peace Corps, and was many years with the domestic Peace Corps basically, and now there's several other programs.

CUTLER: Like AmeriCorps?

RANDALL: Yes, but VISTA is a one-year project, and it's administered state wide, not—somewhat different than AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps is not as much a commitment, I would say. Somebody else would have to explain that difference.

But anyway, Jean was an amazingly good networker. She was looking for any kind of help she could get. I don't know what details to include or exclude, but I came up for tenure in 1986 at University of Houston, in anthropology. If I had gotten tenured, it's a dead certainty that the anthropology department would have gone in a very different direction, and the chair of the department would not have been the person who was the chair. There were four tenured professors. One was a tenured assistant professor, probably still is a tenured assistant professor. And of those four, two of them voted for my voted, and two of them voted against my tenure, and one of them was the chair, and the other one was the tenured assistant professor. And the chair voted twice because he cast the deciding vote.

We don't have to go into details, but part of the reason that I didn't get tenure was because they were giving almost nobody tenure in 1986 because the university had a huge budget problem, because there was no state taxes. The whole state was in financial crisis. So basically I was out of work and was looking—and my wife was working for H.I.S.D. Research, so we were doing all right financially. I was looking around for

another academic job.

One of the things I did while I was busy looking for a good job somewhere else was teach a gardening class, because I'm an ecological anthropologist, and I know a bunch of stuff like this. And Jean—somebody told Jean—Gordon Cross told Jean about having read about my bio, and the Leisure Learning Guide basically said that I had done a lot of research on hunger and I was teaching gardening, and so then went [snaps fingers], "You gotta get this guy."

So I said, *All right, well, I don't have anything else to do. I'll go volunteer at this thing, see what they're doing.* So I helped them build a garden up on the north side. It lasted about nine months and failed. I have a picture right up there on the top [points to photograph on top of filing cabinet], and nobody knew what they were doing in those days. I mean, Jean built—three of the first three gardens she built—they didn't have water. I mean, just—you know. Real basic stuff. I mean, talk about ignorance, you know.

And there was much more naiveté in [sic; of] all sorts. And I was just a volunteer, so I spent a few hours a month maybe on it, something like that. But I gradually started realizing that I was working with, volunteering with a bunch of poor people, and at food pantries they're all missionary Baptist churches mostly. Those are the real activists against hunger: poor churches in low-income neighborhoods.

What I realized was that they didn't have a clue how to grow stuff. And so I began to see this as a kind of education program, and that a lot of people that were hungry also were not very stable in terms of where they lived, so it's kind of hard to get

them gardening, but people who are stable could garden and give them food. So we did a lot of donation gardening. That was probably the most popular thing, and we probably started that nation wide. Nobody was doing that before us, I don't think.

CUTLER: This was during the—

RANDALL: Interfaith years. Yes. And so what happened was that [chuckles] one of the gardens we started—we started one out of school, Garden Oaks Elementary. It's not a really poor neighborhood, but food was being donated to a food pantry from the school garden. And some of the kids were pretty low income, even though the neighborhood was pretty affluent, still is. But the person that started it was a vice president of Texas Commerce Bank, which nowadays is Chase. I mean, Chase bought—you know, they changed laws and so all these out-of-state banks started buying up Texas banks, but Texas Commerce was one of the biggest banks in Texas. He was the vice president. He had an MBA from Harvard.

One day he called me up, and he said, "You know, Bob, I cannot get this peach to grow in my back yard." This guy—he's got a Harvard MBA; he's a vice president of the bank, and *he* doesn't know how to grow peaches either. And it suddenly clicked that, to me, this was like the—I lived four years of my life with really poor people in the Philippines and Nigeria, and they don't have a school system. I was in Nigeria. I was teaching high school in a rural high school. I was in the Peace Corps. And in the school system—if you don't have a school system, you can't learn how to read. And it suddenly struck me that this green thumb-brown thumb stuff is an illiteracy issue, that, yeah, the government doesn't provide all sorts of services and things like this. There's all kinds of

reasons why poor people are poor.

But some of it's just straight ignorance—I mean, lack of literacy basically. And, you know, we've got people in this town who are retired assistant dishwashers. I mean, that's what they did for their life. And guess what: They can't afford to pay some Mexican to grow their food for them and some Teamster to chauffeur it here, using oil they got in Kuwait. And, duh, they can't afford this. They can't afford the food, so they're hungry.

What's wrong here? Why does anybody think they can pay somebody to grow their food in Mexico and bring it here in a big expensive truck? Why should they? Why should any of us think that that's the case? And what I realized was that we are looking at a city that—you know, New Orleans doesn't have real strong levies, we found out. Houston doesn't have any food levy. We don't have any food security here at all. We've just got [snaps fingers] the whim of prices in Mexico and oil prices, and we got four million people got nothing to eat [snaps finger], just like that.

CUTLER: Is that different in Houston? Why is it different in Houston?

RANDALL: No, it's not. The whole country is like that. But the point is that we're charged with Houston; we're not charged with Milwaukee.

CUTLER: Right.

RANDALL: No, the whole country's got this problem. But here's it's particularly egregious because we have lots of land, and we have a twelve-month growing season. I mean, it's one thing in Milwaukee, where they got a long winter.

So that's sort of where some of my thinking was, okay? So when Jean—Jean had brain cancer, and she got a recurrence of it, and she's working on a VISTA salary, which was in those days $450 a month or something like that. She had two teenage daughters and a mortgage. And she just couldn't do it. And so Jean took her year at VISTA and quit.

Ellen thought there was enough progress that it was worth trying to hire somebody to coordinate the program, and we could afford—and we sort of liked Houston, anyhow, and so Nancy said—

CUTLER: That's your wife.

RANDALL: Yes, "Take the job." I said, "It's even less than the dinky amount they're giving me at U of H." I don't know what they paid the first year, $12,000, something like that, but anyway—so I decided to do it. But I had gotten my interest up because I had begun to see this as a school system problem. We needed to build a school system for learning gardening. So in a year's time, my view of what we were doing just totally changed.

That particular—one of the things I had studied at the university—I also taught a lot of linguistics. Anthropologists are strange: they have all sorts of interests. One of the things I studied a lot at was persuasion language. One of the things I found out is that—and problem solving is related to persuasion. One of the things about problem solving is that one of the ways you can persuade people most easily is to make them say that the problem that we're talking about is like a problem they're already familiar with.

And I realized that the school system literacy one was one that everybody knows.

All over the world, they know this. So if you say this basically it's a literacy problem and we're setting up a school system, they say, "Oh, what a good idea." You know, they can fill in all the little details immediately because they already have been to school. There are a lot of other metaphors you could use, but they don't work the same way.

So anyway, that basic thing, to some degree, everything that's happened since is sort of the details.

CUTLER: Just to clarify, when you say "illiteracy," do you mean—and when you were talking about the low-income school or low-income people – do you mean…you were using that as a metaphor, right?

RANDALL: Basically if you don't teach people, you don't inspire them, you don't teach them, you don't give them a place to practice, with some tutors around, they are not likely to do very well at this, and this has been totally neglected. There was at one time a mostly farming, agrarian society where even then, I'm sure they didn't learn what you could know about this stuff; they learned pretty much whatever their close relatives and neighbors knew. But still, those people had made their living doing this, so they knew a lot of stuff.

What's happened is our time—people no longer need to know anything about the land in order to make a living, mostly, and so they don't, and they don't teach anybody; they don't teach their kids or anything like this, so the end result is that all sorts of bad decisions are made about land every day by people who are very ignorant about the whole subject.

So anyway, that's sort of the kind of thing that went on. [Telephone rings.]

Nineteen ninety-four, roughly speaking—well, not roughly speaking. We found that over time—I think I counted at one point that I had somewhere between eleven and fifteen different supervisors at Interfaith Ministries in the seven years I was there, three or four layers of bureaucracy with about 110 employees, and no ability to make any meaningful decisions. We could make all kinds of little decisions but no meaningful ones. Very low salaries, and the best I ever had was two and a half full-time employees working on this, and I was one of the employees.

We made a number of interesting accomplishments, and we built the program to something over forty gardens in those seven years, but they were very weak, most of those gardens. There were all kinds of problems with them. But most particularly, key things that we wanted to do that we thought would make them stronger were not allowed. Yes, I can tell you that, but often, if you wanted to make any big change, you would ask the head of the Hunger Coalition, who would ask the programs person, who would then ask the executive director, who would then go to the board, and it would take you, like, six months, and then they'd come back with: "No." And not an explanation because nobody knows why it said no. Or whatever you got, there isn't—you know, people who actually wanted to do this never got a chance to talk to anybody who was making a decision.

We came to the conclusion eventually that there was no likelihood that we were going to have a meaningful impact on hunger in this town, working as part of that organization. Some of the things is they wouldn't let us work with schools, because schools don't directly affect hunger.

CUTLER: So what was their reason for rejecting it?

RANDALL: They don't affect hunger. School kids aren't going to grow any significant amount of food, and hunger is—you know, they're thinking about hunger now, not hunger twenty years from now. They wouldn't let us do any kind of market gardening, yet every food pantry coordinator in these inner-city places—they all tell you that if you can put money in people's pockets, they can pay a light bill and buy shoes for their kids, that's going to do wonders for hunger, is putting money in people's pockets.

And there's tons of land around. The city of Houston, even today probably has 75,000 tax delinquent lots, yet they wouldn't let us do anything with that. And they wouldn't let us do a newsletter. I don't know if you've seen our newsletter.

CUTLER: I have the new one.

RANDALL: Yes. Okay. So wouldn't let us do a newsletter, so we couldn't communicate. So they let us write a letter to the gardeners, but we couldn't do a newsletter. Then we had an offer for a full-time development person. Somebody would pay for a full-time development person, and that person today—that person they were going to hire—is today the chair of our development committee at Urban Harvest, and was one of our founders.

And we even had an offer to pay for it, and they wouldn't let us do that. In other words, we couldn't raise money for the program, either. And the argument for that was other programs, eleven other programs—they would get jealous, which is—it hardly sounds like somebody was actually trying to do something about hunger. It sounds more like they're trying to keep everyone in the agency happy; that's their goal.

And so we finally came to the conclusion that by getting out of Interfaith would—I mean, some of this, by the way—I mean, I'm being more candid with you than probably almost anybody other than a very select inner group. Essentially what we said publicly about this was that we found that we needed to start an independent organization in order to grow and develop, by making the key decisions ourselves, rather than burden Interfaith Ministries with the problems of administering a complex program, which is also true. It's another version of the same stuff.

They basically showed that they really were unable to administer it. They're very good people, very well intentioned, and they had Meals on Wheels; they had a program for abused children and all sorts of things they were doing. So I don't in any sense doubt their motives or anything like this, but they were just not doing what they needed to do to make our program flourish.

And so we took a risk, which was start a program from scratch, which made us the first time a community gardening organization in Houston area had ever been independent. The Ag Extension—this was a little tiny program at Ag Extension. Arnold Brown one time, when he was helping us at the Hunger Coalition—he was, like, two hours late for a meeting with us, and he spent an hour giving us advice and mentoring us and stuff, and then he said, "Well, I have to give a goat seminar tonight, and it's in Kerrville, so I've got to get going." You know, he's not doing just community gardening; he's got to be in Kerrville to do a seminar on goats tonight.

But we took a big risk. It could have failed, in which case there just wouldn't have been anything here, but we finally decided that we had to do this because what we

were doing wasn't to work.

CUTLER: Who is "we"? Were the other founders involved with Interfaith Ministries?

RANDALL: The person that does the layout on this thing, Suzie Fisher—she's still on our board. She was the head of the Community Gardening Advisory Council at Interfaith for two years. She was an AIDS activist. Basically her business partner died of AIDS, and she got involved with community gardening as a way of creating food for… So she was the elected chair of our advisory council for the last two years at Interfaith, from '93 and '94.

We had an advisory council of people, some of whom had been past-president, plus a couple of newcomers to the group, and I'll tell you about them in a bit, but—what did you ask me?

CUTLER: I just wanted to know if they were all involved with Interfaith?

RANDALL: Oh, the people that started this? No, some of them weren't. Some of them were only peripherally. But the people that started it—myself and George McAfee—we were the two remaining staff at Interfaith. One of them had been fired, Jacqueline Batisse. She has an American Indian show on KPFT, even now.

CUTLER: I think I've heard that name before.

RANDALL: Jack Batisse, yes. She was fired without consulting me and simply for not showing up for work, and she was being paid $7,500 a year half time, as was George. The deal she had made with us was that if she could get work—she was working as a domestic, and if she could get work cleaning houses, that as long as she did her hours for

the month, she could go do them when she had a chance, so she could keep her car running. So that was the deal, but she didn't show up, so they fired her, and they didn't even ask me. So that was one of the things we didn't like. But, I mean, it's hard to get people at $7,500 half time, especially people, not to mention people like her, which have a kind of universal respect among anybody that's ever run into her.

Anyhow, but George and I were the staff, and Suzie was the president of the advisory board. And Ellen Mitchell, who had hired me, but had since been fired [unintelligible]. And Mark Cotham, who became our first—Ellen was our first secretary; George and I were staff; and Mark Cotham, who's an attorney, was the first treasurer. He had been a volunteer. He started a garden at Chapelwood United Methodist in Piney Point, which is the wealthiest Methodist church in the world. Yes. And so he was our treasurer.

Leonel Castillo, who had been the—I don't know if you know who he is, but Leonel was president of Interfaith Ministries the year after he had been the chief fund raiser for the diocese. He was the head of Immigration and Naturalization [Service] under [President James Earl] "Jimmy" Carter, and he ran for both mayor—he was comptroller of the City of Houston, and he ran for mayor at one point. He's now an assistant to [Mayor] Bill White, and he's near retirement. He's been very ill.

But Leonel was one of the founders of Urban Harvest. The two other people—so those people had all been associated with the previous organization. The two newcomers were Terry Hershey and Wendy Kelsey. Terry got involved—we had been trying to get her involved in Urban Harvest for a number of years, and she had, unbeknownst to us,

collected a file on us, but she was on the national Trust for Public Land board. And they had decided to work on community gardens in Houston. That had been one of their—in parks. And so she had on her agenda to track down this Bob Randall and so on.

Probably your advisor was at a couple of Terry's parties or something, where I talked with her or something. Maybe that's where you heard about it, or maybe not?

CUTLER: Actually, a fellow student – she's worked with Terry on her dissertation.

RANDALL: Maybe that's what it is. Okay. All right. Anyway. Yes. So somebody was telling somebody out there that they should do oral history on Urban Harvest next, so I wasn't too surprised when I got contacted, but I think it's probably really a good thing to collect this kind of information.

So anyway, Terry started looking at what we were doing and what we needed, and she said, "You know, what you need is somebody to raise money, and Wendy Kelsey is"—she just finished being president of Planned Parenthood, and she was a really good worker. She knew a lot of people, and she could raise money for us, and she wanted a real job, as opposed to just a volunteer job, and so "maybe she could come work for Interfaith Ministries for you and raise money." And I would find the money to pay her.

CUTLER: You mean Urban Harvest?

RANDALL: No, we didn't have an Urban Harvest. This was a sort of a hunger coalition. We were still in the Hunger Coalition. This was, like, the winter—just about the same month that Jack Batisse was summonly [sic; summarily] fired, like February of 1994. We were at the CEC annual meeting, and we went around. Everybody explained

who they were, and I mentioned who I were [sic; was], and I heard this voice behind me say, "So you're Bob Randall," and it was Terry Hershey. And so within the next month or so, she was trying to get a fund raiser for us. She had identified Wendy, and I took Wendy around and showed her some gardens and talked to her and stuff like this.

Then Interfaith Ministries said we couldn't hire her. So now I had somebody who was surely the most connected, well-known, respected environmentalist in Houston. I had—Leonel Castillo was one of the most well-known people in the city, both of them strongly behind our program. And no real support at all. So I just said, you know, "We're going to have to do something else." It was all the people. We had the advisory council and, like, forty gardens in it. Met every month. Not all of them every month, but we had a good, strong organization, so there's really no reason why we need to be here considering my salary and George's salary. That's it. Which is pitiful. I was making eighteen [$18,000]; he was making seven and a half [$7,500]. That's $25,000 a year. Why did we need to be here? What are we getting out of this? So we might just as well be our own organization, where we can actually decide what we want to do.

And so I met with these folks in a restaurant, and I said, "I'm thinking basically that I should resign from Interfaith Ministries." They gave me a very bad job review. I had gotten high job reviews every year. The same year we had a huge centerfold in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* or whatever it is, a nationwide thing—we had a huge centerfold about our gardens. Published a book on how to grow tomatoes—you know, for programs where they're putting that little money into it, to do that kind of thing. And they gave me this horrible job review, mainly because I didn't want to take our personnel

and do polling of food pantry workers, which has nothing to do with the gardening program. But we had no staff to speak of, and they would take us off gardening entirely, right in the middle of spring planting season.

So maybe I got a bad job review because I don't want to do what they want me to do, and what they want me to do is stupid. So anyway, what I did was get into this. We started this new program. Terry had helped start just about every environmental organization in Houston. I mean, I don't know if you've made a count of all the ones she's started, but—well, it started with Ima Hogg basically telling her to do the Memorial Park Conservancy and keep that thing from being built on and concreted and all the rest. And I think she did the Citizens Who Care, which became the Citizens Environmental Coalition. Then she did Audubon, the parks people, and Biopreservation Association. And then we were next. Then she did Katie Prairie Conservancy after us. I don't think she's done one recently. She's getting up in years now.

But I remember her saying, "You're going to need a fax machine." [Laughs.] It was, like, what's the first thing you do? You need a fax machine. [Laughs.] I still remember that. I told her that the other day. I said, "I still remember you"—she said she remembered me going into the restaurant and saying, "I've quit."

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

RANDALL: What happened is we started this, and what Interfaith didn't realize was that

George was going to resign. He waited two days, and then he resigned, so they suddenly had no personnel, so they had no idea what was going on. And they did what they always do, which is they took several months to replace me, because they were really just trying to save money. And so we had about six months or eight months to consolidate all the gardens in the program under Urban Harvest. I knew they wouldn't get anywhere, and I also knew that their rules said that they weren't supposed to compete with other nonprofits, that Interfaith was supposed to put its resources into things that weren't getting done by other people. So I knew they would fold their hand also down the road pretty fast, which they did.

What Wendy did is she did a survey of what were the problems of starting a nonprofit, and it was concluded that the big problem was that funders would be very wary of giving us money. We're an unproved, new nonprofit. So Terry and Wendy had been on the board of the Park People, and Terry, the founder, asked the Park People if they wouldn't take us on for three years or to whenever we could get on our feet and that after we're on our feet, we'd decide how we wanted to proceed, whether to stay part of the park people or become independent.

So the deal was we would do our own thing, make our own decisions, and they would handle our finances. The president of the board was finishing up his term. His name was [William] "Bill" Bradshaw. He was becoming president of the Bayou Preservation Association – environmental organization – so Bill offered us free offices in his landscaping business over in Bellaire. They weren't opulent, but—so we got free offices for fifteen months. We started out with $500 in the bank, and we paid everybody

at the rate of $6,000 a year for the first six months, and then we got it up to $12,000 a year, so it was not as good as what we were doing at Interfaith and even George's now full time instead of half time, so he's getting $12,000 for full time instead of $7,500 half time. But $12,000 is better than $7,500, so he actually had more money.

And then we got it up to $18,000 within two years, and then we actually got it up to mid-range nonprofit wage level within seven years, so we were paying better than most nonprofits do of the same size. It took us seven years to get there. We now have something like—I've lost track. I don't know how many employees we have, but it could be around twenty or twenty-one, and we're up to nine and a half full-time equivalents at this point, which makes us bigger than the anthropology department at University of Houston, and it's bigger than the Hunger Coalition was that hired me. [Telephone rings.] And we're probably the fourth biggest community garden program in North America in terms of numbers of gardens, and we're probably the largest school gardening program in the world.

CUTLER: That's based on the number of schools involved?

RANDALL: Number of schools and depth of what we're doing. There's nobody else even close to it, I don't think, in the schools thing. And so I think most of us feel... We started a farmers' market, and we're about to start OHBA within the next couple of weeks.

There's much more to it than that in terms of what we've…

CUTLER: Is that the latest initiative – the Bayou City Farmers' Market?

RANDALL: Well, we're in a new one, so that initiative started in September of 2004. I mean, we started the initiative in 2002, and we had a strategic plan in 2002 to implement that, and several other things in that plan. We basically implemented everything in that strategic plan. We're just about doing a new one now, but we really got almost everything done that was there, and gradually, I think, got a really good idea of how a nonprofit should operate. I think we probably do better at it than most organizations I know of.

But personally I think that if the boards and the committees are empowered to make capacity-building changes and you get together and agree on what those changes, those goals are and you go about trying to build them, that you have a better chance that's going to happen than if you don't do that, which most organizations don't actually do that. But I've been quite impressed with our ability to make changes when we get together and work on things. It involves a lot of attention to getting common goals and figuring out where you want to be in five years and things like that. It's not magic, but it can be successful.

You asked me something. I didn't—

CUTLER: I was wondering—

RANDALL: Oh, the initiatives, yes. That was the question you had. We're about to start OHA, Organic Horticulture Business Association, which going back—I didn't ever get back to telling you about TexUS Roots. The TexUS Roots merged with Urban Harvest about roughly one and a half years after we started, maybe January of '96. We moved into M.E.C.A. in January of '96, and I would say it was January or February when

we decided we were going to start offering classes here. And TexUS Roots—I was on the board of TexUS Roots, as was [Richard C.] "Rick" Bost, who—and Georgia Bost, the Bosts. Rick is still on our board. He's been a treasurer a couple of times, and he's still a major player in our board. I first started working with Rick in 1990, I think, in TexUS Roots. And Georgia—Georgia was on our board, and then Rick took over from Georgia. They brought TexUS Roots into Urban Harvest, and it became my classes committee. And so we started offering organic education classes.

One of the people that was on that committee—these were the people that were doing organics in Houston in the early nineties and late eighties, and one of the people on that was a man named [Michael] "Mike" Serant, who's the owner of San Jacinto Environmental Supplies, which is the largest wholesaler for organic products in Houston, organic gardening products. And Mike has recently rejoined—has joined the Urban Harvest board in the last year to get OHBA started. This is to be essentially a business organization for people involved in horticultural businesses, like landscaping, that are trying to be organic and environmentally less damaging to the environment.

They're going to collect money, $200 a year or something like this, and their market survey basically says sixty businesses the first year. And they're going to have meetings and banquets, and they're going to hear people talk on things, and they're going to bring in half-day seminars and all-day seminars, and there's going to be an ongoing education process of people, which will have an impact all over metro Houston, which is what the schools thing is, so we're gradually getting to the point where we'll be getting to really have an impact in every neighborhood, in several ways.

We have a membership program and classes, and we have this big fruit tree sale, so we're gradually developing more and more abilities, but that's…

CUTLER: Now, did you come to Houston for the job at U of H? That's what brought you here?

RANDALL: Yes.

CUTLER: Okay, and then it's basically—I think you said before that what was attractive about Houston was the ability to use skills that you had and what was needed here in terms of the community?

RANDALL: In terms of the community gardening thing, yes, yes. I've lived in cold climates, and I've lived in warm ones, and I would rather be able to grow things twelve months a year, and I really don't like cold climates. There's a lot of things about Houston, but one of the things is that—the East Coast and the West Coast are both places I've lived, and people tend to—you make a suggestion or a new idea, and they tend to say, "Oh, we tried this in 1937. Doesn't work." Houston is one of these places where people are—they're supposed to be very conservative here, but in reality, I don't really find them conservative in the same way. They may be conservative in terms of some of their beliefs and values, but they're not conservative in terms of their willingness to change. They're pretty open to that. I don't find them resistant to new experiences or new things. People here like what we do, and they like the idea.

CUTLER: You said Urban Harvest is the first organization specifically in Houston for community gardening. Do you have any sense of the history of community gardening in Houston in terms of—you know, was it going on early in the century? Were there

women's groups doing that? Do you know anything about that?

RANDALL: I do not. What I know is—you say "community gardening" as opposed to organic education or you say "farming." Community gardening… Depelchin supposedly had a garden in 1880 at its orphanage. There were Liberty Gardens connected with World War I all over the United States. There were Victory Gardens in World War II. I met people who worked in Victory Gardens in Houston. Yes. And lots of lots of truck farms. I've seen a pamphlet that was created by the Department of Agriculture that shows a school garden in Washington, D.C., circa 1915, a bunch of kids growing food, and you can see the Capitol of the United States in the background. I mean, they had a plot on what is now the Washington Mall or who knows what it is, but you would never guess there had ever been anything that looked like that. [Telephone rings.]

So I wouldn't be a bit surprised if there have been plenty of community gardens throughout the history of Houston. What is different, though, historically, and you might be able to actually find out if this is actually true—my sense is, is that community garden programs are something new on the planet since about the early seventies, that a program of a nonprofit or an agency that helps community gardens with whatever problems they have, including starting, consults, educates, supports. My suspicion is there's never been anything like that until some of these started developing in Philadelphia and other places in the early seventies.

CUTLER: Where is the oldest program?

RANDALL: I think the Philadelphia Green may be the oldest one. It's one of the largest, certainly. They're all somewhat different in every town you go to, what their

history is and how they got started and when they got started. It tends to be the dense, urban, northern cities that—I mean, Detroit's mayor in the 1880s was a community gardener, I believe. You know, if you don't have hardly any land and you're in a city and access to vegetables in 1880 Detroit probably [was] not too good, people want to grow a little food, you know, and they live in an apartment or a tenement. You know, community garden. And that's the kind of model—the allotments have been in England and Germany and France and stuff like that forever, and allotment gardening here is maybe 10 percent of our gardens, meaning a plot that you rent or that your family owns in a community setting. Portland, Oregon—almost all their gardens are allotment gardens.

I mean, we have donation gardens, we have school gardens, we have therapy gardens and stuff like that. There's an education garden here – in the old Sixth Ward..

CUTLER: And you said Urban Harvest is one of the four largest programs in the U.S., so the other large ones—were they around before Urban Harvest, and were they models for your organization?

RANDALL: Well, they're not models, but they were around a lot earlier.

CUTLER: Did you look at the way they were doing things or structuring their programs?

RANDALL: Certainly tried to, but to be honest, we're so far away from all those places, and we have so many problems that are different.

CUTLER: Climate wise?

RANDALL: Climate wise. We have a twelve-month growing season, which means our

weeds have a twelve-month growing season. And these people—Denver or somewhere, New York... You know, close this thing down in October and open it back up in May. Take a holiday all winter. And here, if you go away from your garden for a month and a half, you are liable to not be able to deal with the weeds. You're not going to plow this stuff up and start over again. You're dealing with perennial weeds that do not die. We've got stuff that grows twelve months a year here. And so we had to develop a whole set of different approaches. Raised beds. We were using plow agriculture when I first started doing this stuff, waiting every…. for Extension Services to bring a plow around, and I said to myself, *You know, their demonstration garden out of Bear Creek doesn't use a plow; they have raised beds*. The best organic farmer in this whole area at that time was using raised beds; he wasn't using a plow. Plows don't really work in semitropical soils, at all. So I said, *Why do we have our community gardens doing this? I don't do this myself in my back yard*.

So we went to raised beds. We had to basically create the technology on how to do this stuff. Nobody has really distributed any information. The idea of centralizing the information and spreading it back out again—you know, everybody sort of thought extension was doing that, but I read an article by a professor, an extension professor in maybe Iowa or Iowa State at some point, and they [sic; he] said that the Ag Extension Act, maybe in Congress, said that the extension had to do three things: research, support for the farmer and public education, maybe something—I don't know what the three things were. But it doesn't say what percentage of these three things you have to do.

And what he said was that over time—it started out as being largely advice to

farmers and that nowadays it's largely research, and research is defined as whatever somebody with a lot of money at a company will pay you. So essentially they have stopped—you know, so that you get the ridiculousness of—and, again, I'll just as soon not be quoted on some of this stuff—that, you know, we have an Extension in Harris County that has maybe two staff horticulturalists, and one of them right now is not there. I mean, he resigned. But at the best they have two horticulturalists for—how many people in Harris County?

CUTLER: Four million?

RANDALL: That's a pretty bad student-teacher ratio. I mean, could you seriously say you were providing people with advice about how to garden or something with a ratio like that? So it's not surprising that nothing's happening.

CUTLER: I'm not familiar with Extension. I'm kind of getting it from what you're talking about. What exactly—

RANDALL: Well, each county has an Agricultural Extension. They have a Home Economic Extension. They have different kind of Extensions. But the Extension is supposed to provide services to the citizens in certain areas of knowledge. Ag Extension has classically been, first of all, ranchers and farmers. I think as recently as 1990, Harris County had the largest Grange in the state of Texas, which is to say the most farmers, or at least the most farmers who were part of the Grange. It's not any more. So if you're asking—I'm not sure how to put this.

Some of that money—the comptroller is at Texas A&M, the land-grant colleges—and so they pretty much tell Extension what it's doing, and Harris County has to pay for a

certain amount of it. And some of it comes through federal, which goes through A&M, I think, here in this state, or Prairie View A&M, one or the other or both. [Telephone rings.] So I'm not entirely sure exactly how that works, but— And Cornell [University] is the land-grant college in New York State, and Iowa State [University] probably is in Iowa, and so on. Rutgers [University] is New Jersey, where I grew up. So essentially some of us assumed that Ag Extension was out there providing agricultural knowledge, and so we didn't start out to do what Ag Extension is supposed to do. But what we gradually realized is that anything Ag Extension can and is willing to do, we're more than happy that they do it. There's plenty of work here. And generally this is true of anybody who wants to pitch in, whether they're part of Urban Harvest or Interfaith Ministries who want to have a community garden. It's fine with me. We don't care about competition. There isn't any, really.

It's just broadly you need a public education system in how to use land. I have said a number of times because where I was in Nigeria, where my wife was in India and where we both were in the Philippines, they all need this kind of knowledge there, too; that it's a human right. You should be able to get educated about what you can do with land so that you can be productive, creative and sustainable. And so it may not be as important as learning to read a book, but it's darn close to as important. And it should be on the U.N. list somewhere in human rights. That would be the strongest way I could put this. The longer I've been doing this, the more I have come to believe this, that the reason we have polluted rivers and a lot of this other stuff Is because we aren't doing basic education.

Basically it's one of the reasons why I think all the environment groups in this town are essentially—we're part of the same organization, even if we don't have the same funding and leadership. We're trying to plant trees…others are trying to plant trees. We also plant other trees with our school gardening program. But I do a class on forestry and permaculture sequence. Forests, I think—everybody knows that forests produce our oxygen supply for the planet, but what they don't realize [is] they also provide our fresh water supply. Forests are what give us fresh water. We would not have fresh water on this planet mostly if we didn't have forests.

If you say [sic; ask] the question, "Well, where does water come from for the City of Houston?" If you follow where it comes from, you'll end up seeing it comes out of coastal forests. That's where it comes from. It would be an interesting question at the university to try to ask that question. You know, "Where does the water come from on the University of Houston campus?"

"Well, it comes from the water company, and it comes from there from the Trinity River, and from there it comes from—which rises from Dallas."

"So how does the water get to Dallas?"

"Well, it's rainfall."

"And where does the rainfall come from?"

More than a hundred miles inland, the rain doesn't come from the ocean mostly. It mostly comes from vegetation transpiration. And trees transpire—you know, they're three dimensional; they're not... Lawns don't transpire water; forests do. But cutting

down forests is cutting down the water supply. Yes.

CUTLER: I didn't know that.

RANDALL: Yes, I know, and nor does anybody else... That's permaculture. That's in permaculture. But most of the tree people don't mention it. They don't even think about it. It isn't on the list of things you mention about the value of trees. And trees themselves are really not that beneficial; it's forests that are beneficial. Forests do a lot more than trees do. I mean, a single tree on the street here is not going to do the same thing as a single tree in a forest. Forests actually change the nature of the particles up in the air that water can adhere to, and wind patterns going against the forest are forced upward. Against a tree, they just go around it, but against a forest, they go upward and they compress the air and create stuff. And the leaves of trees act just like the fins on a radiator. They're full of water, and their temperature is different than the air, so they condense water on them, so the laminate surface of the tree, if you added up all the square inches in the leaves, it turns out to be this gigantic condenser.

And then the shade reduces heat. The cooler temperatures on the ground don't evaporate water as fast, so tend to last longer in the dry periods. It's damper in forests than, say, on a lawn. So that means that water does this: it modulates the speed, and then mulch will slow the speed of water from leaving on a slope.

CUTLER: At the Houston Arboretum they have that map—I forget what it's called—it shows all the heat islands. Like in Memorial Park, it's significantly cooler.

RANDALL: Yes. Yes. I didn't know they had that up, but that's—yes, that's it. And there are other reasons for that. Concrete and asphalt absorb heat, and buildings release

heat and are essentially heaters… But the point I'm sort of making here is that part of the reason plants are getting trashed and food supply is in jeopardy, and a lot of other problems are going on is because we don't educate people in their neighborhoods and at their schools, and it has to start there. It can't just be a Sierra Club meeting once a month or something. I don't mean to suggest that that's all they do or anything like that. What I mean is it has to be in the neighborhoods. It's got to be where people are. And whoever it is, whether it's Sierra Club or whatever – they need to have programs in the schools.

CUTLER: I think that's all, unless you have anything else…

RANDALL: I'm getting tired.

[End of interview.]