UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

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

LEIGH CUTLER: This is Leigh Cutler interviewing Laurel Smith in her home at 2339 South Boulevard in Houston, Texas. The date is Friday, February 3rd, 2006. This interview will be deposited in the Oral History Project of Houston at the University of Houston.

Let's start with a brief background. I read that you came from California.

LAUREL SMITH: I was born there. I was born in Berkeley.

CUTLER: What brought you to Houston, and when was that?

SMITH: I got married, and my husband, my ex-husband found a job in Galveston, at the National Marine Fisheries, and that's what brought us to the area, and then after divorcing, I found not much opportunity in Galveston to even meet people or get jobs, so I moved to Houston.

CUTLER: Okay, and when was that?

SMITH: That was about fifteen years ago. Moved to Clear Lake area.

CUTLER: How long were you Galveston before that?

SMITH: I'm not good with dates. We went there in late seventies, and I left when I was about [calculates to herself]—I think I left about twelve or fifteen years later.

CUTLER: Okay. And then you have a Ph.D. in marine biology? Is that right?

SMITH: Yes, from Scripps Institution of Oceanography, so it would be marine.

CUTLER: What, in your background and education do you think led to your interest in community gardening, if anything?

SMITH: The botany part of it. The botany part. I've always been interested in botany. Botany and even the marine biology was the algal part of marine biology; it was the botany part, and I've always been interested in the environment. I started doing environmental consulting work, but almost all of that is in air work. Everybody is getting air permits, especially in this area, for their emissions that they're dumping into the air, permits and waivers and all kinds of issues, and there's not much work in water, which is really my specialty. But the interest has always been there, in the environment and in plants, so that's what I—I got laid off twice in a couple of years, and the second time, I said, *You know, I'm just not having fun doing this, especially this laying off part, so I'm not going to do it anymore. I'm going to retire.* I was fifty years old, and I just retired, and my husband supported us. I started doing volunteer work, and I just fell in love with Urban Harvest and the people there.

CUTLER: So did you start doing volunteer work in Galveston?

SMITH: No, here.

CUTLER: In Houston.

SMITH: Yes.

CUTLER: Once you had moved to Houston.

SMITH: Yes.

CUTLER: I guess prior to coming to Texas, were you involved, in the sixties and seventies, in any civil rights or environmental activism? Anything like that?

SMITH: That's an interesting question. Yes, actually, I was. In college I was interested in the Free Speech Movement, which was going right on under my feet. People were blocking the doors, not wanting us to go to classes because they were free speech people. But I paid for my classes. [Laughs.] I wanted to go to my classes. But I liked what they were doing.

In graduate school, I was a little bit of an activist for the abortion rights of women, and got petitions signed. I would occasionally help people get petitions signed to get things on the ballot or whatever. I thought it was a good cause, mainly women's rights, abortion rights or whatever.

There was something else. Once I got married, I didn't really do that; there wasn't time.

CUTLER: Right. And you had children.

SMITH: I have three children. And one big baby. [Laughs.] Yes, I think that's about it.

CUTLER: Okay. Well, so you got involved in Urban Harvest in '98? Is that right?

SMITH: Yes, that's about right.

CUTLER: What kind of involvement—

SMITH: Actually, no, more like 2000.

CUTLER: Oh, okay.

SMITH: Because I just got my five-year appreciation certificate, so it's five or six years.

CUTLER: Before you were actually involved in the organization, what kind of involvement on your own did you have with community gardening before you discovered the organization?

SMITH: None.

CUTLER: And so how did you discover it?

SMITH: Someone recommended them. I don't know. You know, I don't remember who that was. They said, "You know, I know you're looking for volunteer work. There's this nice organization, and you could check it out," and I think it just happened. It was the first one I checked out, and just loved it and stayed there.

CUTLER: So you were looking for volunteer work, and you just—nothing specific—

SMITH: It sucked me in! [Laughs.] It's like a vortex of stuff that needs to be done, and

I love that kind of environment.

CUTLER: Yes. I was just wondering if you had had that vested interest already in gardening or how that was attractive to you in the beginning.

SMITH: That's what I was going to say. In Massachusetts and in Galveston we always had a garden, with my ex-husband, always had a garden. We had a huge garden in Massachusetts. We actually took over part of an open field behind our house and just helped ourselves to the free land there, which is probably developed into an apartment building now. [Cat meows.] In Galveston we also had a vegetable garden. We hadn't really—I don't think we had a garden here, but that was soon to come.

CUTLER: So you kind of had that knowledge about gardening already.

SMITH: I had the desire, but it's so different every place you go. I can't take the techniques I used in Massachusetts and bring them here; that would not work at all.

CUTLER: Yes, right.

SMITH: Like, the only thing that thrived there was wild asparagus. They just whack it back and eat it. You can't do that here. It gets smaller every year.

CUTLER: That's interesting.

SMITH: Totally different.

CUTLER: So back to the volunteerism interest. Where did that stem from? Did your parents—were they sort of volunteers ever, or did you do that growing up?

SMITH: My mother was. My father is now, but he wasn't when I started. I just knew I

needed to do something. I mean, retiring at age fifty—I mean, I needed something to do. And also with retirement I think comes a certain loneliness. My husband was working. You kind of get cabin fever. There's always plenty to do, but I wanted to talk to other people and, yes, have a social life again, so that's what the volunteering I thought would do, and it has done. More than I ever wanted. [Laughs.]

CUTLER: Okay. Well, then, let's start talking about your actual involvement with Urban Harvest. How did you start off, and what was that commitment like, and how did it change over the past five or six years that you've been involved?

SMITH: I started as a volunteer in the office, and I committed to I think it was eight hours a week, so I went in twice a week for four hours. That was a great way to get to meet the people and kind of have ongoing projects and become part of the organization. Do you know what I mean?

CUTLER: Yes.

SMITH: It wasn't an hour or day, which is kind of in and out. It was a good amount of time. One day, maybe a year or so, maybe less than that, after I started, they asked if I wanted to be secretary to the board! I think what happened is the secretary left or couldn't keep it up or something, and it was kind of shocking to go from office worker—you know, I was doing the wastebaskets, Ph.D. doing the wastebaskets and whatever needed doing; I don't mind doing that stuff; I kind of enjoy it—but to secretary of the board of this organization I wasn't that familiar with.

And it was a little nerve-wracking at first because they talked about these things I

didn't know what they were talking about: the Black Madonna of the Shrine Church and all these—I was supposed to be writing this down and getting it straight. I don't even think I said it straight. But all these names and things, it was difficult, and getting to know all the people on the board so I could say, *Oh, that was Robert that just spoke*.

But that's how that happened, and then another surprise, I guess about three or four years later, they asked me if I would be president, and I thought about it and said, "Okay, I'll do that."

CUTLER: What kind of commitment was initially being secretary—did that change the amount of time you were going there?

SMITH: Yes. Eventually I quit going to the office. It was pretty time consuming, because I would take the minutes and, of course, transcribe them from my notes and then publish them to the board, and they wanted them pretty rapidly, pretty fast. I don't know, it just took some time. Plus attend the meetings, every board meeting and every executive committee meeting and take notes for the executive committee meetings as well, and transcribe those. And I was still doing—I guess gradually I phased out going to the office eight hours a week, and I don't go there regularly anymore. I go just for meetings and—yes, meetings mostly.

CUTLER: This is the Kane Street office?

SMITH: Yes. Have you been there?

CUTLER: Yes.

SMITH: I would hope so. I have a gala invitation I want to give you.

CUTLER: Oh, great. Okay, good.

SMITH: So I phased out the office work and did more the things that I had to do for the board, which was surprisingly time consuming. Oh, plus I was keeping up with the brochures. That's what I did for a long time, was [when] we were getting low on a brochure, I would to update it and get it reprinted or new brochures, help write them—usually not write them, more produce them.

CUTLER: How big was the board?

SMITH: The board is huge. It's, like, twenty-three people, and then there's an advisory board as well, which is even bigger.

CUTLER: All right. Well, what kind of observations have you made throughout this time about community gardening in Houston and also the organization, such as advancements that have happened, or improvements, level of participation in different programs? Has there been much change over the time that you've been there?

SMITH: Well, I see more community gardens, and I see more—really, I think one of the biggest things I've seen is more connectivity, that black people from Alabama SHAPE or—really, we're like big buddies, and when I see them and they see me, we all give each other a big hug, and it's—there's more connectivity. They're getting out of their little neighborhoods and doing more Urban Harvest things.

CUTLER: What is that that you refer to? Alabama?

SMITH: Alabama SHAPE Garden, or Alabama Garden. SHAPE is a program they had, but I don't think they call it that anymore. I think it's just called Alabama Garden. A huge, really nice garden, one of the oldest ones around.

CUTLER: It's on West Alabama?

SMITH: No, it's not, it's on Canal or something.

CUTLER: Oh. Do you know why it's called Alabama?

SMITH: I don't. So what was the question again? Oh, changes I've seen.

CUTLER: Yes, sort of improvements, not only in the organization but just in the whole concept of community gardening in this city.

SMITH: I see a lot more acceptance. I used to see a lot of blank looks: Huh? You know, like, "What is a community garden?", "What is Urban Harvest?", "What are you talking about?" I've never heard someone say, "Oh, I'm not interested in it." They always say, "It's a great idea." But lately I hear even more enthusiasm. People are saying, stronger than ever, that they think this is something that the city really needs, that people really need, and I know for myself, I see—I don't know how to say this. Our society is kind of running away with technology. We're kind of overrun with technology and with brainy stuff. Does that make sense?

CUTLER: Yes.

SMITH: We work all in our heads.

CUTLER: Yes.

SMITH: And what I see is the gardens connect us again with the earth, and for me, it completes the circuit. [Laughs.] I think other people wouldn't articulate it that way, but at some level, I think they understand that, and I also think that they're starting to understand the public spaces aspect of community gardens more. It used to be, "Oh, community gardens. Yeah, they feed people. That's important, and they feed poor people. Okay, that's good. And they're in schools and maybe the kids can learn about nature and reinforce their classroom skills." But now I see people actually understanding how valuable these are as safe places, where neighborhood people can get together and talk and deal with issues that are important in their area.

CUTLER: That's an interesting change, since the movement did start based on anti-hunger.

SMITH: Yes.

CUTLER: So it's interesting to hear that, that observation and the change.

SMITH: Did Bob not mention that? I know he's aware of this, but I don't know if he thinks it's a change.

CUTLER: Yes. I don't think I asked him that question, but we have more interviews to come, because he's the all-knowing—so. We've had one so far.

SMITH: He's the guru.

CUTLER: Yes. So that is interesting. Well, how do you, yourself, define a community garden, when asked?

SMITH: I don't know. I was just asked, "Oh, is that a public garden? Do you mean a public garden?" Well, he was thinking flowers and something pretty. When I said, "Food," then he went, "Oh." A community garden is just a garden where people, anyone who wants or pays or whatever fits the bill can garden there. That's all it is for me.

CUTLER: All right. Well, you were talking about going into other communities, like black communities and lower-income neighborhoods. I was wondering if you had done any work like that, yourself, and then how you were accepted by the black community. I'm just interested in the interracial cooperation that goes on with this whole movement.

SMITH: It's phenomenal. I mean, it's perfect cooperation. And it was Urban Harvest that I think helped the Alabama Garden get started. They are forever grateful. I'll never forget, we had a board retreat, and we were going on a tour of some of the gardens, and we went to Alabama Garden. A Warren Christian, black guy, kind of old, a little bit crooked and bent stands up on a table or something. He says, "Now, you listen up." He's talking to the board of directors. "You listen up." All us white guys. "Urban Harvest really made a difference in this garden." And he was telling us how important Urban Harvest was [laughs], which was good for the board members to hear. [Cat meows.] They don't always get to go to a garden and hear what a difference our gardens make.

But what was the question, again?

CUTLER: Sort of a few different questions, but I was just wondering how you were accepted when you went in.

SMITH: Oh, the interracial thing, yes.

CUTLER: Yes.

SMITH: There's no problem. I mean, it's like—there's nothing—I don't know, it doesn't get any better than this. I mean, there's something to be done, and people just do it, and race has no part in it. I've never seen or heard of racial things. I think the only time you might get that is in maybe a school garden. Maybe the immature children might have some bad attitudes. I don't know about that. But in general, the gardens—they smooth the path. There's stuff to be done. Anybody can do it, and there's no reason to look at anybody's skin color. It doesn't matter.

CUTLER: That's great. What about being a woman in these community gardening efforts? Have you noticed more men or more women involved, and what were you say were the advantages and disadvantages, if any, of being a woman?

SMITH: Well, the disadvantage to being a woman is the [lack of] strength. Hauling dirt around is *big* stuff, but it needs to be moved and trucked and all this stuff the guys do. But I think more women are interested in gardening and also—we have a preponderance of women, I think, on the board. Yes, I think that's true. I think more women are active in the gardens. Partly that may be because some of them are stay-at-home moms, and they have the time. But I think—I don't know why it seems more women are interested in gardening.

We do have a stay-at-home dad that started a garden, and he really got his feelings hurt when the women in his neighborhood had a birthday party or a shower or

something and they didn't invite him. He was really hurt by that.

[Louis Smith enters the room and greetings are exchanged.] This is Louis, my husband.

So there's sexism, but it's not in our gardens. I will occasionally hear, "Oh, can I carry that for you?" or "Can I help you with that?"—because you're a woman, I'm a guy; I'm supposed to say that. But it hasn't been—I've never heard a problem.

CUTLER: It just seems that, and part of what I'm trying to figure out is that women have been predominant both as volunteers and leaders.

SMITH: In the community gardening effort?

CUTLER: Right, and even with Urban Harvest; for example, you being on the board and president. And so I guess I'm just wondering if that's been—it seems like it has been, but if that's been challenging or if it's just been comfortable.

SMITH: There are things that are challenging. I tend to not be totally confident like I think a man might be in some of my business decisions. The leadership role is a little difficult, I think, for women sometimes. It is sometimes for me. But this is all internal arguing. [Laughs.] It's nothing—or I've never heard or can't recall any sexist remarks.

CUTLER: So this organization seems very open to that.

SMITH: Oh, they're more than open, they're very embracing. I mean, they want to be sure that everybody is comfortable. They bend over backwards to make sure that black people are represented, that we address the Latinos, that we addressed the white people.

In fact, the white people may get ignored because it's so important that we have our minorities and representation of all the races. The important race is the Latinos and the blacks. [Laughs.] They're maybe the ones that need our services more.

CUTLER: Right.

SMITH: If there's any prejudice at Urban Harvest—I hesitate to say this. If there is any at all, it's a prejudice against wealthy people. Poor gardens get help because it's perceived that they need them [sic; it], and they're frequently minority gardens. We have had gardens in The Woodlands, and they have a harder time getting our help. We wanted them to pay for our help. And partly that's because the board decided to prioritize gardens to their neediness. Does that make sense?

CUTLER: Yes. That's interesting. Okay.

Have you been aware, through your involvement, what other cities nation wide have been doing in community gardening? Like, do you have any communication with them?

SMITH: I do.

CUTLER: Can you talk a little about that?

SMITH: Oh, yes, I love this. It's one of the aspects I'm really interested in. Bob has some information, too. I've been to Seattle and spoke with the chairman of the board there of Pea Patch, which is the community gardens program, and my daughter is working at Boston Area Naturals, BANA, it's called. So I've got some inside

information about that. I went to SLUG, San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners, and interviewed the people there. Two of these, I've written articles about, SLUG and P-Patch. I've written articles in the *Urban Harvest Guide* about my findings and what they—

And Austin. We've gone to Austin and looked at the community gardens there. What I learned in Austin is that they have a very active community garden program, but they have five or six gardens. They started long before we did.

Here comes the mailman. He's going to shove it through the mail slot. It's very noisy.

CUTLER: Okay.

SMITH: Yes, they have five or six gardens. [Mail is noisily pushed through the mail slot.] Bob went up to Austin and looked at that, and he came away saying, "You know, if Urban Harvest is going to try to maintain gardens like they do in Austin, we'd never really grow the way we might like to," because we have 150 gardens that we support, and one reason we're able to do that is we don't weed and water and maintain them. So I think that was a really smart decision, to be the educational and support organization, not the maintenance organization, not hands on in every single garden in the city. So that was something you learn from visiting other gardens.

The one in Seattle I find very interesting. It's called P-Patch. They actually have two things. They have a Seattle Neighborhood something or other organization that is under the city; it's part of the city, and the city donates land, and then sometimes they

rescind the land, and that doesn't make the gardeners very happy. They go around and collect fees for the plots, and then the community gardening organization helps the people learn how to garden and helps them when there's [sic; there are] problems, so that they fee collector from the city will say, "You know, So-and-so's plot isn't looking very good," and he'll pass that on to the community gardeners, and then they try to work together to—well, mostly the community gardeners try to help this person figure out if they need to give up their plot or take more classes and what needs to be done.

I think that's a great program, and frankly I would love to see that in Houston. That inspired me to think—with all these vacant lots in Houston, I get so fired up thinking about that. That's my passion, is to get some of these lots converted to community gardens, wildscapes or pocket parks or something more useful than a weedy vacant lot that the city spends a million dollars a year mowing.

CUTLER: Right.

SMITH: Now, in San Francisco, there's another message we learned.

Oh, the lesson that we learned from Seattle is that one of their largest gardens got moved twice, which is a lot of work, and they're not happy about it. They work the land, and they get is all nice and rich and beautiful, and then the city moves them to some rock patch, and you've got to start all over again. So one of the lessons the president told me was that if you deal with the city, have a good attorney. And they wrote into their contract with the city that they will perform their duties and educate the gardeners and everything, but if they have to move, the city will replace the garden with as good or

better, so they're happy now. They think they've got their you-know-what's covered—

CUTLER: Yes.

SMITH: —With [sic; For] any eventuality.

The other really interesting one is in San Francisco, which has a beautiful program. They were taking parolees and people on welfare and teaching them how to maintain landscaping around the city and started some community gardens, and maintaining flower gardens and all this sort of stuff. People were learning how to work; they were getting a little bit of money. They got paid a little bit, which kept them on the rolls. It was a great program. They had a budget of about $2 million.

They had a very charismatic, wonderful guy. I've forgotten his name; Bob will remember. Mohammed Nazam, or something. He was from Nigeria. Last time I called to get updated, the phone—there was nothing. Their Web site was gone. All I had was a page with a phone number on it or something. I guess people volunteering their time to answer the phone—their budget is zero. Apparently the new mayor—this is politics, now. The new mayor had it out for this guy who was on whatever his name's was, Mohammed Nazam. I can't remember his name. They came to the office and arrested him and deported him back to Nigeria because he didn't have the right kind of card.

And it's totally gone.

CUTLER: The whole program.

SMITH: The whole program is gone. Their budget is zero. I don't know where they are

now but that was, yes, about a year ago, from $2 million to zero. There's something to be learned there.

CUTLER: Yes, for sure.

SMITH: Don't get political. [Laughs.] Or get a really good attorney, something like that.

CUTLER: What do you see as the challenges? You were talking about the success that Seattle has in partnering the cities and lots. What is that challenge here, and is that a next step for the future of Urban Harvest?

SMITH: I'd like to think it is. I'd like to think it is. We have the OHBA [pronounced OH-buh] program. Did Bob talk about that?

CUTLER: No, not yet.

SMITH: I never can remember what it [stands for]. Organic Horticultural [sic; Horticulture] Business Practices? Business Association, O-H-B-A. They're teaching people how to do organic grounds maintenance. Duh! I think it's way past its time. It's like a subsidiary. We're kind of housing him and giving him the support and umbrella name that he needs to get started, and then I think he'll branch off on his own. This is [Michael] "Mike" Serant, who's been talking about this for years. So that's something I think that needed to be done that's happening.

Another thing that I've always dreamt of, and it was one of our proposals that didn't get funded, was a green careers high school or trade school, for maintenance and—

I guess mostly maintenance and maybe design and I don't know what all, but yes.

CUTLER: Do those exist I other places or no?

SMITH: I think so, yes. And with our minority makeup, I think that would be so good. You know, one of the serious problems in Houston, as I understand it, is that a lot of people don't go to high school and don't go to college. In fact, Louis just read in the newspaper a week or two ago that Houston is one of the lowest cities in the nation for percentage of high school kids that go on to college. And I think what's happening is in the Latino community, the kids drop out to support the family, and the parents, not speaking English, I don't think understand how much better—that they'll never get out of their poverty doing that and that if they could just send one to college or break out of the mold and go to college that they would be so much better off. But I think English is part of the problem there. But anyway, back to the trade school. I think the Latinos could really benefit from a trade school like that.

Another program we wanted to start, another dream that hasn't been realized, is a mentoring program for troubled kids, to get them into an after-school garden program or something. What we hear is the kids that are the most troubled say they have no one to talk to. The gardens are great places to talk. Nobody's listening. It's kind of private. Anything goes. It's just a good place to talk, and that's I think one of their real values in any neighborhood but especially for troubled youth. And to have a program of mentors and—just a program to help those kids, I think would be great. It's another one of our unrealized dreams.

And then this vacant lot thing.

CUTLER: Right. And what are some of the challenges that you're already seeing with that?

SMITH: I can't find out who's doing it. [Laughs.] One of our former board members told me—he works for the city in the Parks Department. He said that he believes someone is working on converting those lots to community gardens, and he hasn't responded to my e-mail yet. "Who *is* that? Who's working on it? I want to get on that committee."

CUTLER: So it is happening, then, already.

SMITH: That's what he thinks, yes. And I need to ask Bob also.

CUTLER: And then as far as the student mentoring, is that sort of the same idea of what M.E.C.A. does with arts education? You know, M.E.C.A., the organization?

SMITH: Yes, I know M.E.C.A.

CUTLER: Because I know they have after-school programs that teach kids the arts, and so is it kind of that same idea?

SMITH: Do they mentor them one on one?

CUTLER: I know they have classes…

SMITH: They have activities.

CUTLER: Yes.

SMITH: So this would be more—you're in the garden…

CUTLER: In your neighborhood?

SMITH: In your neighborhood or after school. Maybe in a poor Latino neighborhood there would be an after-school program, and then board members or people in the community could sign up to individually—more like a Big Sister, Big Brother program, and they could even have career information. We could go to get counseling for the kids on clothes to wear to a job interview and probably get some donated clothes, appropriate clothing if you take your body piercings out when you go for the [interview], those kind of thing [sic; kinds of things], how to do a résumé.

And another thing is that I think is so important [and that] I'm sure a lot of kids don't have access to is computers. I mean, you can't survive today without a computer. I don't think a lot of poor Latinos have computers. I don't know the statistics.

CUTLER: Okay. That's interesting.

Okay, what have you personally learned from your experiences with Urban Harvest and community gardening since community gardening, you said, was something new to you when you went into the organization?

SMITH: Well, I guess one of the things that kind of took me aback was the community building aspect. I mean, you can pretty well see that it's going to feed poor people and feed the needy, and you can kind of see that it might bind a neighborhood together, but to actually see that in action is pretty amazing. I didn't fully appreciate the community building aspects of it. I think that's one of the most important parts of it. So that was

kind of a revelation.

I guess maybe you've reminded me that the race thing just isn't an issue in a garden. I mean, it doesn't matter what language you speak or color you are or—I guess even if you're high on drugs, it doesn't really matter. You can still hold a hoe and do something. I mean, it's pretty forgiving of just about anybody. It's accepting. And I think it levels the ground for everyone. It provides a safe place for people to talk, which we certainly don't have many of.

CUTLER: Right. Okay.

Well, I guess I don't have any more specific questions, but if there's anything that maybe I've left out about your history with the organization or just changes over time, anything that you want to talk about that we've touched upon?

SMITH: Over time. This is the theme, isn't it?

CUTLER: It is.

SMITH: Changes over time.

CUTLER: That's history.

SMITH: You know—okay, here's another change. When I started, Urban Harvest really wasn't very well known, and I say "Urban Harvest" and I read and say "community gardens and orchards," and I still get the, "Huh?" There's a lot more recognition now, and that's [due to] a lot of reasons, one of which is we got an outreach and visibility committee, which kind of publicity. It's what they do. And that has made a tremendous

difference.

I think something that has happened lately to Urban Harvest—I heard this at a talk, and I said, *Oh, man, that's*—he pinpointed what's happening with Urban Harvest. He was talking about the levels, the cultural levels of—they're, like, developmental levels, like humans have developmental levels. We start out as babies; we're pretty self-centered; we just want to be taken care of; we don't give much back. That's kind of survival. We start out—well, that's how organizations are. They have to survive. That's the first level. And then they start relating internally, and then they relate externally, and you move on up.

The speaker said that a lot of nonprofit organizations are very heavy at the top levels, which are reaching out to the world and trying to serve and help, and we at the bottom—we just—getting the money in to support the functions and the things they want to do. And I think Urban Harvest was at that point, and we actually took out a loan so that we could hire a full-time fundraiser and a full-time office manager, and we're on such better footing now. We've taken care of the base of our operations to support the rest, and I can really tell the difference. So that's a change I've seen in Urban Harvest.

Another change is people like you. When I started, nobody knew what it was. It was kind of peripheral I don't know what, weird stuff that somebody else was doing. A lot of people want to get involved. Even this guy today that said, "Are those public gardens?" He says, "You keep me informed, Dr. Smith. I want to do this. I want to do something." I mean, a lot of people say that. They hear about it, and they're enthused.

They want to do something. Within the last two, two and a half years, we've had Mac—I think his name is Simmons doing not a thesis but a project on Urban Harvest.

CUTLER: Oh, is he in the sociology department?

SMITH: I think he was.

CUTLER: Yes, I think I saw his thesis.

SMITH: I have a friend, a photographer, a friend of Louis's, who wants to do a book on pictures of Houston community gardens, and yourself. This is a whole new trend of people looking at community gardens and having an interest and really knowing that they exist. I mean, what is that about?

CUTLER: It's interesting. I think it's just how cycles happen, people being interested, or the need for green spaces or places for people, like you said, to come together in communities. I mean, I was even talking to someone about comparing Victory Gardens during World War II, after the Depression, with the start of community gardens in Houston in the late seventies and early eighties, when it was kind of crisis time, the oil bust and the economy was—

SMITH: It was very hard on Houston.

CUTLER: Right, and so because of the rising crime and a lot of hunger problems, the need was there for this to happen, and so it's an interesting comparison within a history.

SMITH: Yes. I have heard that in Houston—you should talk to Dr. Steven Klineberg.

CUTLER: Yes.

SMITH: He's done—what do you call them? Questionnaires about Houston.

CUTLER: I've heard about these.

SMITH: Yes. What were we talking about?

CUTLER: Statistics about people wanting to get involved? I'm not sure. You were talking about the different scholarship being done, such as the photographs.

SMITH: Yes, different groups studying things. But there was some statistic he had that was amazing.

MR. SMITH: The Kleberg stuff?

SMITH: Yes. Kleberg? There was something in particular I thought was relevant of his studies, about—I can't remember now. Lost it. Sorry.

CUTLER: That's okay. Well, that's all I really have.

SMITH: This was fun.

CUTLER: If there's anyone else—maybe you can suggest anyone else that you think would be good to talk to. Might have different perspectives or—just more to add or anything.

SMITH: One that's been with Urban Harvest a long time is Wendy Kelsey.

CUTLER: I'm going to speak with her. I've been in touch with her. Bob's given me a list of some people.

SMITH: Are you going for a master's degree?

CUTLER: Right. Public history.

SMITH: There is some particular statistic about—

MR. SMITH: Are you concerned about crime going down?

SMITH: Yes, that was it! Thank you. Fine. He said that—I've forgotten when. I think in the seventies he looked at the crime rate, and there was a lot more crime and I think a lot more fear, and he—well, he's asking people if they think crime is an issue, and in the seventies a lot of people did. Nowadays they really don't, and I think it's—he said people are more comfortable. They don't look at a black person and say, "Oh, I'm going to get mugged now." [Laughs.]

CUTLER: Right.

SMITH: There isn't the concern that there used to be. I think I noticed that. I think that's a difference. It's not an Urban Harvest difference; it's a difference in our society, in Houston in particular. I think we're all coexisting pretty darn well.

CUTLER: That's true. Okay. I'll stop the tape.

[End of interview.]