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University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

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Interviewer:	Paul Jan
Transcriber:	Michelle Kokes
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Abstract:

Following the destruction of Hurricane Alicia, Trees for Houston was born and focused on planting street trees in modest amounts around the Houston area. Barry Ward, a self-proclaimed naturalist, began his work with Trees for Houston in early 2008 and since then has dramatically increased the number of planted trees to an average of 30,000 a year. In addition to planting trees, Barry discusses the numerous services that Trees for Houston provides, such as a new and upcoming horticultural center in a three-acre facility an impressive amount of public tree donations and numerous community projects at schools and churches. Barry believes the organization can compete against popular urban gardens by educating the community how to maintain their own fruit trees and has been experimenting with South American trees in his own home. Barry also goes into detail about the recent 2011 summer drought that struck the area and how he was able to predict and react in order to sustain the trees in Houston.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Barry Ward

Interviewed by: **Paul Jan**
Date: **October 10, 2013**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **Houston, Texas**

PJ: Trees for Houston has an event.

BW: I would have done it for Parks and Wildlife.

PJ: You were at Parks and Wildlife before?

BW: I worked for San Jacinto or Battleship Texas. That may have been Ken's article, I can't remember which one it was.

PW: Oh you worked for Battleship Texas Before?

BW: I ran it.

PJ: I did not know that. One of my classmates is trying to do an article on it, on Battleship Texas. Of course it's closed down right now.

BW: Tell him to call me. I mean, I've been over every inch of it. I spent ten years of my life there.

PJ: Well I may do that.

BW: Hell, he can plagiarize.

PJ: Of course I know your time is a…I know there's a lot of stuff out there.

BW: I haven't lived in California in 18 years. That is…

PJ: I'll get on that. All I need is your signature. So you've been with the organization about three years?

BW: Six.

PJ: Six.

BW: January of '08 whatever that is, six and a half.

PJ: Wow. What did you do before? Battleship Texas?

BW: Really before I was the, I was the Chair of the Battleship Texas Foundation. I did that for about two years. Prior to that I was seven, eight years I was the curator of the San Jacinto battleground and I was the director-slash-manager-slash-curator of the Battleship Texas for Texas Parks and Wildlife. How it worked was I came here after graduate school and a colleague of mine… Initially I was thinking of starting a doctoral program in history and I started vacillating. I just got finished graduate work at a master's level in California and started thinking, "You know do I really want to do this? Do I want to work in public history? I really don't want to teach." The money, the opportunity cost… and right as I was vacillating on that I got a call from a former college who was the chief of collections for the State of Texas Parks and Wildlife and her husband was the number-two guy at the Bullock museum. We had all worked together in California and she said - I had published a monograph on a book in California - I had acquired some knowledge on some west coast maritime history and she said "You really need to apply for this job. We need you because they need a combination of political acumen fundraising ability and just good old fashion historical knowhow." So I applied, I got it. I loved the site, I loved the job. I hated working for the state. It was not well designed for a large bureaucracy and a site like that there are advantages to a big bureaucracy but there are also huge disadvantages. We got to a point where I thought we had a pretty good plan and then I needed to get the money

for it and I went to the foundation, which is private. Then I spent the next year and a half, two years with well-connected board members and people lobbying and walking the halls in Austin state house. Eventually this effort, which I was one part. By no means did I imply I did all that. I was the one actually beating the bush in Austin. We got a $25 million dollar allotment.

PJ: That's a lot of money.

BW: To fix it and that's where it stands.

PJ: I spent a rainy afternoon there about two weeks ago, which was wonderful because there is nobody else there. And right before the shut down so I was able to do everything.

BW: They have huge management issues. Their infrastructure department takes their budget out of project costs.

PJ: That's typical state costs.

BW: I'm fairly cynical now. I had an engineer's stamped designed and estimate for $13 million dollars, we got $25 million dollars. The state infrastructure department, Parks and Wildlife, they assign a guy with a BS in electrical engineering and a project manager with an architecture degree or an art degree from Rice and they quickly come up with about a $65 million dollar solution that will increase the maintenance bill. My idea that I got the donated design for was reducing the maintenance because we couldn't afford it as it is if you increase the maintenance.

PJ: Right.

BW: So…

PJ: It seemed like a losing battle when I was there. I get the historical importance of the battleship.

BW: I'm a maritime historian by profession and I don't think you have any business spending what is now going to be probably $100 million. It's crazy. The bottom line is unless you change who operates it and how they operate it, you can't afford it. And of course I've said that for 10 years. Collectively the United States can't afford one tenth of the historic fleet they have right now.

PJ: So with modern technology you could create a hologram, a virtual battleship of the whole thing.

BW: Sure, there's a lot of things you could do.

PJ: I mean I'm all for preserving artifacts.

BW: As am I.

PJ: But if it quits making sense…

BW: That's right. Those are real dollars you are spending. Giving an example of how it worked, when I showed up there, the old San Jacinto end was a three building structure immediately to the north of the slip. Beautiful old structure but it required some work, it's a renovation. Some asbestos remediation. But three stories, the bottom level was mostly flood through so you wouldn't have to worry about that. Tailor-made for a visitor center. That's where you do your electronic interpretation and your virtual interpretation and all your education built right there. Then you already have your existing little store so you come in one side, you go off the other, they buy their stuff on the way out. "No, no, no, no." So right about the year they spend about a million bucks planning for a new visitor center is about the time they spend six figures tearing the three story building down. Nobody had any problem with that. The emperor has no clothes.

PJ: Yeah.

BW: It's just the way it is.

PJ: So is that what got you here?

BW: Not surprisingly when you do cultural conservation projects with Parks and Wildlife there is a huge overlap with natural conservation. I enjoy more and more of that and am an avocational naturalist and outdoor person, although no formal training. When the Trees for Houston job came open in the fall-winter of 2007 a recruiter contacted me for that job. Somehow I had gotten onto their short list for that. I interviewed and won this job based largely, again on managerial acumen and fundraising ability.

PJ: The political connection probably didn't hurt.

BW: Sure. The ability to, yeah.

PJ: Inter-lobby.

BW: To raise money and just exposure. I've been a generalist, I've worked in art history and all sorts of different topics.

PJ: I had no idea. That's fascinating.

BW: I started my career in an art museum. Being a generalist has always helped.

PJ: I'm a liberal arts kind of a guy.

BW: Yeah and I have a very traditional liberal arts educational. You know, multiple languages but I also had general biology and general chemistry so very traditional liberal arts education. Not liberal arts, not the kind that applies it to a lot of communications educations. The kinds that implies that I had a lot of core classes.

PJ: Sadly that isn't really options anymore but that's exactly what I'm doing it's just taking me an extra couple of years. Fortunately, I have a wife that's willing to support me doing that.

BW: Good for you.

PJ: Yeah.

BW: So… interviewed, got the job and started January 2, of 2008.

PJ: And it seems to be working for you. As I did some research it appears that the budget for Trees for Houston has taken a huge, huge increase in that period of time…

BW: Yeah that's an interesting story in and of itself. When I came in 2008 that's almost exactly half way through our fiscal year. The budget that year was about a million and one. I looked at the number of trees we were planting and it was relatively modest. They were doing very good work and had gotten pretty good at raising money and had gotten pretty good at publicizing themselves, that sort of thing. They were at a point where by their own assessment they needed to be either bigger or smaller. They weren't planting enough trees per dollar if you will for their budget. They needed to either focus down or spread out. Their previous director had left about six months earlier so they were adrift for about six months. That was a rough change for them because she had been with the organization for about a decade I think so I came in after having looked at the nine-nine and it was like, "Well if you give me that million dollars a year and I'll plant ten times as many trees." Said "That's easy!" But it took a while. You had to reestablish the whole philosophy of the organization, the whole culture from one to where everything was contracted out. So in 2007 if you gave me $100 I took 15% off the top, paid my rent and my salary and then I gave that $85 remaining to a nursery who went out and planted a tree and I never got dirty. So now…

PJ: There were no volunteers?

BW: There were some.

PJ: But you were buying every tree.

BW: We were buying very expensive trees at very expensive prices and it worked and there was a time and place for that model but you are very limited in the scope that you can accomplish with that. You are essentially an expensive non-profit middle man. And there's still a time, oftentimes, when that model works for various reasons but you're not going to accomplish anything on a large scale that way. We retained that, we still do that where appropriate but over the intervening six years, six and a half years I guess we've… now we have 25, 30,000 trees growing ourselves. We have three trucks, we have 9 employees but to get there. We went from about 12 employees and a million one. I immediately dropped us down to about 6 and $800,000 with all that money going into the trees and I worked seven days a week planting. I was out planting.

PJ: Wow.

BW: We did not have a development director for… I hired a development director to do all of the office work on that, the leg work that way I could go out and shake hands and kiss babies, raise money outside with what's up here between the ears and it wasn't having to write letters in the office and then I planted on the weekends. I frequently offered our services free to corporations. I said, "You bring your team out, you give me the volunteer labor and I'll provide everything else."

PJ: As a team building kind of exercise?

BW: An expensive way to do it the first year. The second year they were like, "We want to use our public affairs dollars office." So many of our corporate clients now, corporate donors now were just labor donors five years ago and now they are cutting us checks to buy trees and to put them places. We've gone from about fifteen trees a year, schools per year we do about minimum of twenty. We budget for twenty, last year we did forty, thirty-nine. We did 35,000 trees in the

Brown this year. I've got another thirty or so growing in our tree farms. We have a three acre facility we've got donated that we are building out for a horticultural center where we will teach people to graft, to grow.

PJ: Is it an expansion of your educational program?

BW: Exactly. How to harvest fruit trees, how to grow durable edibles.

PJ: Really? When is this going to happen?

BW: It's already, the ground has been leveled, the fence is up. The permit has been issued for the initial construction. I would say in, I don't know, 6 months.

PJ: I think that's huge. My wife and I will definitely be involved in that.

BW: You know so there are these organizations out there like Urban Harvest and Recipe For Success that do some really interesting work on growing food and where food comes from and what's healthy and how to cook and those sorts of things and they are great conceptually. But they buy all that stuff.

PJ: Right.

BW: And their little urban gardens are great at growing kale but trees are a different matter. So what they need and what need and when they try and teach someone how to take care of fruit trees they do it out of pots in their front yards.

PJ: Yeah they aren't really growing any fruit.

BW: So if I can get, whether it's them, chefs, master gardeners, whomever it is to come to our site… Wow! All the tools are here, the shed is here, the trees are here. "Let's graft today. Let's try a new horticultural technique." All of that can be done there.

PJ: That's huge.

BW: And it's right on the north loop. So it's thirty seconds out of the loop. So it's close in, it's three acres. It's paid for. It's a fantastic opportunity to start thinking about edibles in addition to the shade trees that we do. 'Cause I that day I think has finally achieved critical mass where people understand. There are frequently edible fruit trees we plant where people don't even know they are edible fruit trees. American persimmons and wild plums and things like this, mayhaws, mulberries, which some people think are poisonous and they are absolutely delicious.

PJ: They make a nice wine. They make a great meat.

BW: Yep so that's next. That's coming up.

PJ: That's huge.

BW: We are also looking to partner, so all of the space in between our trees is a moat or otherwise tried to be kept low. We're thinking if that's going to be grass or weeds, why can't that be native grasses which we can then let seed out and harvest for native prairie restoration?

PJ: Don't have to be mowed, catch more run off…

BW: Exactly and he revenue stream and so every time these architects design, if you have native nature plays on you, so they want native grasses on you. It already designed on you. That's their revenue.

PJ: Sure.

BW: I can donate that to the nature reserve, to Armand Bayou Nature Center and if the architects want to buy it. What do you mean? I'll sell it to you and now that money goes right into the next generation of seeds and trees, for the parts and costs. So that's what we're building.

PJ: So you've really changed the way this organization works? This is a whole different thing. This is I believe the 30th year for Trees for Houston…?

BW: Thirty seven.

PJ: I read different things. Some say ’82 some say ’83 some say ’84.

BW: It depends on what you measure it by, the original organization that this grew out of was ’83.

PJ: Okay and that was?

BW: Live Oak Society. Some people refer to it as Trees for Downtown. In ’83 it was primarily two guys a gentleman named Carroll Shaddock and Bill Coats who has since passed away. Carroll is still around. I’ll be happy to give you his contact information if you’d like to interview him. They started this largely I’m told by them as a response to hurricane I think Alicia whatever was in ’83.

PJ: I can look that up.

BW: They wanted to replace trees and they particularly wanted to beautify downtown.

PJ: Were they replacing native trees?

BW: Live oaks.

PJ: Live oaks.

BW: And live oaks the main thing they were doing is they were doing street trees and live oaks is arguably the best street tree in terms of wind durability, tolerates traffic and dirt. So they weren’t thinking about.

PJ: And it’s green year around.

BW: Exactly, evergreen. They were thinking about aesthetics and survivability. But they weren’t planting Acer buergernaums, they weren’t planting parks. They were planting street trees.

PJ: Right.

BW: And they wanted street trees in areas where it should be well organized. They didn't want the memorial look, they wanted them in areas where they were alive.

JP So they weren't these legacy plantings and…

BW: They were doing what you would call an alley. You know a long line of straight trees like _____ (17.02) or something like that.

PJ: Which has its place it's a beautiful thing.

BW: We still do that thirty years later but we also do all of these other things.

PJ: Right, the school plantings, the groves.

BW: We do everything from 10,000 seedlings or saplings a day literally to reforest something to one single tree in somebody's front yard.

PJ: Really?

BW: Yeah we do it all. Scale does not matter to me. If it's a tree I want to do it.

PJ: And especially if it pays for itself.

BW: If it pays for itself. But the model we have now, interestingly enough I raise enough corporate and foundation money to where the trees I grow I can afford to give away. Last weekend I gave away 500 trees at Taylor Lake Village Park and the pines we gave away were 45 gallon pines.

PJ: Those are big.

BW: So I bought those. I found a developer who had over purchased. I bought those for $40 a piece and they are $200 trees. I raised enough money to where I just gave those away for people to take away and plant them in their front yards.

PJ: That raises awareness.

BW: Right and I gave away another 200 natives that I had hand grown myself you know tree owners. We raised enough money to give away trees to anybody that could afford to plant and water them. Then when we have civic projects, municipal projects. There's usually a budget build into that that we usually raise money for or somebody else raises money for it and pays for it and pays us for it.

PJ: It looks like starting about twenty years ago they started budgeting every time they planted trees to start putting money back to maintain those trees.

BW: That's exactly right. They figured that out and we do the same thing. We keep that. Sometimes we do three years even depending on the context. But we don't plant anything that we have not accounted for the watering of it.

PJ: When you have something like last summer with the drought.

BW: Sure.

PJ: That… you can't budget for that.

BW: You can't. But the advantage we had was we saw it coming. Because all I look at is trees all day, you could see the crash coming. We went to all of our major donors and said, "We're going to plant far fewer trees this year and we're going to maintain." We planted something like 10,000 instead of the typical 20,000 or 30,000.

PJ: Your growers weren't producing trees, they get the heads up so they weren't stuck. There was no bad feeling.

BW: Right and we watered and we watered and watered.

PJ: How many watering trucks do you guys have now?

BW: We contract one sole truck and then it's on an as needed bases but I negotiated those contracts months ahead of time, so my prices were fixed. I was spending $10,000 a week the summer of 2011 to water trees.

PJ: How many do you think you saved?

BW: Thousands and thousands.

PJ: But you lost ten million maybe?

BW: Well you probably… well you lost a million and a half just in the Bastrop fire.

PJ: Wow.

BW: So. A few million…

PJ: I mean those are huge numbers.

BW: Right, It's hard to get your… it was a billion dollar event in Harris County.

PJ: I look at the trees in our neighborhood and not the street trees but the trees that I guess our neighborhood's named for and I think they are still dying.

BW: That's exactly right. In Taylor Lake Village there's an interesting confluence of factors. You have the age of the trees combined with the species, largely water and willow oak which are relatively short lived, particularly in the way and where they are planted. They are all the same age. They are all relatively drought intolerant and then the hurricane stressed them out. Hurricane…

PJ: Plus salinity.

BW: Salinity closer to the water.

BW: The physical damage and then the immediate subsequent drought. So that die off which was already starting due to age, it was rapidly precipitated by drought and wind.

PJ: And now they are full of bugs that couldn't defend themselves.

BW: Exactly. That die off will continue. The next ten years, within ten years there might be 1% of the original watering willows oaks left. There might be a handful left in the neighborhood.

PJ: And those will be replaced, should be replaced with live oaks and?

BW: In my opinion they should be replaced with a mixture. That way you have different species who have different tolerances, different ages. You have different expectations.

PJ: It will create a buffet for the bugs.

BW: Exactly. What you want is that if something bad happens sure it will effect that species but this species and the next… So you want, so the last thing I did at Taylor Lake Village giveaway I did a lot of fast growing trees. This time I did more slow growing trees because that immediate need for replacement isn't as there as much and I wanted to differ that species balance.

PJ: Okay so I've notices on the street trees on our street you had some pines that looked to be about five, six years old.

BW: Yeah no I didn't do those. They made that…

PJ: They did that before you? And you didn't replace them.

BW: They made that decision to do pines. I didn't do that because they didn't want to water them. I said, "If you're not going to water them. I don't want my name on it because I don't know how they are going to do."

PJ: They are going to die.

BW: That was not me. But on our actual, on Lakegrove when those pines started dying off I said, "I can do pines back on there and I'll water them or I can do live oaks. Do you want it to

look like Timber Cove or do you want it to look like Kirby?" They said, "Do live oaks there." So I replaced…

PJ: So speaking of Kirby. I guess I read the newsletter from the year you started where the chairman then was welcoming you but also wrote in there about like 250 trees had been lost.

BW: That's Kirby up here.

PJ: Yeah I'm sorry.

BW: Yeah that's Kirby downtown.

PJ: Inside the loop.

BW: In the Kirby district yeah. I inherited that.

PJ: Yeah what a nightmare.

BW: I would have never fought that battle. Not because it wasn't worthwhile but there were two… one strategic and one tactical mistake. The strategic mistake was they were never going to win that battle. The TURS was lined up against them, the mayor was lined up against them, everything. They just weren't going to win it. Then number two their effort was eleventh hour. They got into the fight way too late. So their… they were arguing, rightfully so, that you could easily design around them and save those trees and therefore save a lot of money and fifteen years' worth of growth – all accurate. The problem is they pointed that out so late in the game that you would have to then redesign and a couple of hundred thousand dollars you saved on trees is now gone back into redesigning. Does that mean the city was foolish for doing that? Sure they were but if you know that you are going to lose that battle there just is no sense.

PJ: That seems like a political battle that's been around since the beginning though. There seems to be from the early readings that I've done there seems to be no right of way policy in the city.

BW: There is.

PJ: And that was one of the first struggles for Trees for Houston was to try to figure out what they could do that would be safe.

BW: Yeah and now enforcement is the struggle. So there is one enforcement forester for the entire city of Houston.

PJ: That's kind of a big city to have one.

BW: That means that I can go out and cut my tree down and nothing's going to happen.

PJ: Right.

BW: You have to do major damage before you get the attention of the city. And even then if you don't whine it's... With that being said, election time they will file two lawsuit in the next three months against people chopping down trees. That is what it is. It can be disappointing and frustrating but you know I'm not in the habit of fighting battles I know I'm going to lose.

PJ: Yeah it seems like a waste of resources.

BW: Right. But I inherited that.

PJ: It's got to be heartbreaking.

BW: Well and you know those people who planted those and raised that money, it was heartbreaking. All that work and all that effort and those people just came in and they had a perfectly good resource. If you needed to move those trees for a structural reason where you couldn't replace, I get that. Sometimes you need to do that.

PJ: Sure.

BW: But all you did was remove them and put in new trees and that all cost money.

PJ: Yeah.

BW: You just flushed a couple hundred thousand dollars' worth of money down the toilet.

PJ: That's a terrible.

BW: All you had to do was design around the existing trees, instead they just cut them out and designed for new trees to go in, in virtually the same place. They moved a few feet.

PJ: Has that happened a lot or did I just happen to stumble across it?

BW: They are a lot better right now.

PJ: Yeah.

BW: I guess there is a silver lining to that battle is that people come to us now and say, "Hey!"

PJ: It's awareness. They are going to come to you and say, "Hey, are you in the eleventh hour are you guys going to squeak?"

BW: Right exactly. That's exactly right..

PJ: That's kind of good. That kind of wakes things up.

BW: Well in fact my meeting a half an hour before you got here, my last meeting ended and that was people representing Texas DOT and Harris County Toll Road Authority because they are going to do an expansion of 288 and so they are coming to us four years early saying, "What do we need to do to avoid tree problems?"

PJ: Oh that's wonderful!

BW: Yeah.

PJ: That's wonderful!

BW: Absolutely.

PJ: So they can write their plans in the first place.

BW: And so because they are doing that I can tell them, "Design a way for trees. With four years notice I can grow you every tree you want and can cut your cost in half."

PJ: Win-win.

BW: Right, exactly.

PJ: And all us free writers get trees out of it.

BW: Right, exactly.

PJ: I have asked the questions that I had. What have I not asked?

BW: So well I'll just give kind of a brief overview of what we do, how we do it and if that spurs anything fire away. We are a 501c3 non-profit. We don't accept government dollars, we don't solicit government dollars although we work with them because we plant in public spaces. About 40% of our income is corporate, maybe another 30% is philanthropic, foundations, that sort of thing and the rest is from individuals or from a couple of fund raising events a year. We will plant any tree for public benefit. It can be on private property as long as it is a clear public benefit. I could plant right down our street in the front yards even if it is out of the city right of way because everybody drives down that street and the entire neighborhood is getting the benefit. Getting the backyard, all the sudden that's where you get into trouble. We do that all for public benefit. We will do churches, schools, trails, neighborhoods, you name it. If it needs a tree we are interested in it. We prefer natives but we will plant what makes most sense. For instance when you are planting your little square dirt tucked away next to a building there may not be a good native alternative for that. But we try and grow the native varieties that the nurseries can't make money on. Nurseries unless it's a boutique nursery they will tend to grow three or four varieties fast growing and larger volume. I imagine it's a lot like any other product. You know, if you are a restaurant you can sell a billion Big Macs for a buck because you make them exactly the same all the time with modest components or you can be a boutique eatery or somebody who is really good at what they are doing is making you a beautiful dish. Same with trees. I can grow a million live oaks or I can grow a hundred American French trees which take a lot of time or

grafted fruit trees or something like that. We tend to grow things that are slow growing, native, hard to find because people can't find them in the nurseries but they are valuable trees. Paw paws, beauty berries, mayhaws, things like that. That's kind of where we are going. The educational component is huge to us, we mentioned the horticultural center. Budget is back up from 2009 we were $800,000 we are back up to $1.5 million but our tree numbers have gone from about 5,000 to over 30,000 last year per year.

PJ: That's phenomenal!

BW: Yep! We are obviously are running pretty lean when you look at the numbers and this time a year I work six, frequently seven days a week. I'm doing this kind of stuff Monday through Friday and then I fundraise in the evening usually. Last night we were at two different events and then Saturday/Sunday I plant. I'm either at the tree farm or I'm actually out putting holes.

PJ: How's your family tolerate that?

BW: It's good, I'm out of the house! You know pretty good.

PJ: I worked that when I was a chef. You know I got to tell you that was a biggest reason to quit being a chef.

BW: I believe that. The good news is that summer time is really slow because we don't plant much. I have a lot of time of flexible schedule in the summer and the weekends a lot of what we do is fun.

PJ: Right.

BW: Planting 20, 15 gallon trees with a bunch of kids or with the church or with… clubs will do it. A bunch of buddies. One time a poker group came out, said "We want to plant some trees" instead of their normal Wednesday night poker game they got together on a weekend and we

planted trees at a local school. So it's a lot, that's why you do it. And I'm sure after you quit being a professional chef because of the hours it doesn't mean you don't enjoy getting in the kitchen and creating right?

PJ: Right.

BW: All of this stuff during the week is what makes me able to get out and get my hands dirty and make something live.

PJ: That's great.

BW: So it's a labor of love.

PJ: Yeah.

BW: You know, I get time. We are a very flexible organization, nobody is on a time clock here. Everybody is professional and you just do what you've got to do. If you can do that one week in four days that's great. But a lot of days during plant season that means six. We hire people who work that way, people who are rigid don't do well here because it's too a dynamic an environment.

PJ: Well and you are dealing with an organic product so you kind of need.

BW: That's exactly right.

PJ: An organic....

BW: But we are really excited about the edible stuff.

PJ: That's new to us so we are all learning brand new stuff. What we know about horticulture in terms of this kind of stuff is this much and there's a lot more to learn. My back yard now looks like a tropical tree nursery because I've got about eight trees in the ground I'm experimenting with.

PJ: What are you playing with?

BW: A bunch of them I can't even pronounce the names, they are South American varieties. I've got a sapote. Are you familiar with that?

PJ: I've heard of that.

BW: Ours is a Mexican sapote apparently and I've just learned all this. Apparently sapote is a very common term for a very soft fruit from about the Yucatan south. A star fruit, I've got a star fruit, I've got a Brazilian Cherry. A couple of other things I've got back there. I've got an avocado of course and some other things.

PJ: I've got a papaya that's doing really, really well.

BW: Yeah?

PJ: I heard that they are not cold hard. But at school I noticed one growing right next to the buildings. And they are loaded.

BW: Right next to the building is key because it gets the ambient heat.

PJ: See that's what I've done.

BW: Plant it close to structure.

PJ: It's right next to my pool heater it seems to just love it.

BW: There you go and if it gets really cold just put a blanket even over on the base. You might get some die back. I had a mango that did really well until one of the hurricanes and that stress and then we had the drought afterwards and I was on the emergency management committee for Taylor Lake Village. I didn't water them, I was busy and I lost it. But my avocado is growing like a weed. My backyard tends to be an experimental station for lack of a better word.

PJ: That's exciting.

BW: Yeah it's fun.

PJ: I think that's a really exciting program and I can't wait to get personally involved in it in some of that.

BW: Yeah we'd love to have the expertise come out.

PJ: I'm not an expert on growing it but I'm an expert on eating it.

BW: There you go. Well if it's not palatable than you won't eat it. Not when you can go out and buy a Big Mac, you've got to teach people. We will we be out. There are numerous anecdotes about it. But people are seeing me eat beautyberries and they are convinced that I'm going to kill over. I went on my backpacking trip last year and we went over an extra there had been a forest fire. It was extra hot, extra dry and people were starting it was about a mile away from our camp site I ran out of water. So I'm eating blueberries on the trail just walking along and about half of the guys wouldn't eat them. It is no longer, there are far more people who do not have an innate sense of where food comes from.

PJ: People think food comes from a factory.

BW: That's right.

PJ: That's something that I struggle with and I despise especially in America. But I think it's happening everywhere.

BW: Well it's been over a hundred years.

PJ: You're right organization is it. We are so remote from our food.

BW: It's either 1900 or the 1910 census when America became more urban than rural. So it's roughly a hundred years. But I remember taking my daughter's first grade class I was one of the chaperones from the elementary school down the road and I helped them at Armand Bayou Nature Center. Lo and behold the mulberries are blooming and so we all trot on over and we're

eating mulberries and the teacher's like, "God what's going to happen?" I said, "We're going to get red all over and we're going to have fun."

PJ: Yeah you're going to have stained fingers.

BW: When they left she said it was fun and the kids had the grandest time picking fruits. It was the first time in their life every one of those kids with the exception of my daughter who goes to the nursery, had ever picked a fruit and eaten it. Not a single one had ever picked a fruit. Which is horrible, it's horrible. Now I fortunately I had grew up in farm country in California where you always went out and picked your own fruit because you could, it was close, it was cheap, it was better.

PJ: I grew up in Appalachia in my childhood in Appalachia, so picking huckleberries and blueberries.

BW: Sure yeah.

PJ: And even going to farms and picking strawberries.

BW: Exactly you picking.

PJ: And cherries and apples and you know, there's nothing like.

BW: That's right.

PJ: You can make the connection with meat. You understand that fresh meat is better but people don't understand intellectually that fresh...

BW: People there are very few people that in a climate like this that really like apricots because they've never had a fresh apricot because they don't transport.

PJ: Right.

BW: But boy, you pick an apricot off a tree and it is unbelievable. You get one out of a can…

PJ: It's different. The texture's different.

BW: The texture is hugely different because you cannot transport it right.

PJ: Right.

BW: Same as a tomato.

PJ: Yeah.

BW: You've never had a homegrown tomato.

PJ: Yeah.

BW: They gas tomatoes or at least they used to.

PJ: They still do.

BW: To turn them red.

PJ: They pick them green. Now it's actually the oldest that was the first genetically engineered fruit.

BW: When you see red tomatoes when I grew up you know they are going for sauce.

PJ: Really?

BW: You pick them red, you know they are going for sauce. They are going to the sauce plant.

PJ: Because that's where flavor is going to matter?

BW: Exactly, yeah. And it doesn't matter if they get squished. Because it's all going to come out as mush through the bottom. But when you see them green that's going straight into, I can't remember what they use. Carbon dioxide, they gassed them? I can't remember anymore.

PJ: I think its carbon monoxide.

BW: Was it? They treat them with something that turns them red.

PJ: It's "extratenethylene."

BW: Yeah, it's been so long since I thought about that. It's fascinating how all that works.

PJ: It's an ethylene because rotting fruit signals, sends a chemical signal to go ahead and make your seeds and drop them.

BW: That's an interesting process botanically sometimes old and dying trees produce a bunch of fruit and what happens chemically with those. In fact we saw that today with a bodark tree. It's old and scraggly and half dead and these nasty hedge apples everywhere because it's rapidly trying to reproduce because it knows its dying.

PJ: It's last chance. Wow, that's kind of neat.

BW: That's kind of it, organizationally.

PJ: Are there other organizations that you all work with?

BW: Loads of them. So for instance this morning we were at the grand opening of a new park where we provided $50,000 worth of trees and irrigation for a brand new park and that was us and the Houston Parks Corps. We work with Keep Houston Beautiful, Scenic Houston. Any non-profit entity that has a building should never buy a tree, they should come to us. My only mission is trees. If you are a cancer hospital your money should be in patients and research and doctors right? Not trees. Let me buy your trees. If you are a counseling center or a school let me do the trees because that's what I raise money for.

PJ: Wonderful, do you have time tomorrow or next week to show me?

BW: Yeah let's go look at the calendar. I have one in LaPorte, one right near here and one in Humble.

End of interview.