

**Interviewee: Bush, Madgelean**

**Interview: February 24, 2006**

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON  
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Interview with: Madgelean Bush**

**Interviewed by: Leigh Cutler**

**Date: February 24, 2006**

**Transcribed by: Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft; April 2006**

[Begin Tape 1, Side A.]

LEIGH CUTLER: This is Leigh Cutler interviewing Madgelean [pronounced MAJ-uh-lin] Bush on Friday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006. The interview is taking place at Ms. Bush's home, 3315 Simmons Street in Houston, Texas. This interview will be deposited into the Oral History of Houston Project at the University of Houston.

I talked to Arnold Brown, and he told me that you were a major advocate with the urban garden program that he worked on, and so I wanted to know how you met him.

How did you first meet him and find out about the program?

MADGELEAN BUSH: I first met Mr. Shaw, and through Mr. Shaw I was able to get my pastor, who introduced me to the bishop's cabinet of the United Methodist Church, and through him, I was able to be upon it. Now, what was my title? Financial manager of the monies that they prorated for Urban Garden in their budget.

CUTLER: Who was Mr. Shaw?

BUSH: Ernest Shaw, whom I met first, and when Ernest was working he had Arnold

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Brown working with him. And Arnold was responsible, through Harris County, to take over when Ernest left.

CUTLER: I see. So he was Arnold's predecessor in all of this. Okay. And then what was the connection with the Martin Luther King Center? What kinds of programs did your center do with the community gardens?

BUSH: It really wasn't a part of community garden. The center, itself, was a comprehensive social service agency that did numerous social programs, and Urban Garden was just a part of it. We tried to get persons in the neighborhood to grow gardens—you know, one little seed on a piece of dirt would grow some kind of vegetation. I got maybe twenty or thirty out of 3,000.

CUTLER: In people's yards?

BUSH: Yes. Like, I have a garden out back. I have a garden in the country. I'm from the country, sixty-four years ago. I still have the tendencies to plant stuff. I plant all my vegetables but not because of [Dr. Robert] "Bob" [Randall]. I did that before I ever met Bob or Arnold Brown. It's something that most people need to do. If it's just a little pot of dirt, you can grow seeds from that. It didn't get over in this neighborhood like it did in Fourth Ward and Fifth Ward because they had more of an interest in gardening. Out here, it's a transient neighborhood, and people move sometimes twice a month out of here, so it didn't do to put a garden in. I was hoping that it could have the same effect in reality that I had in my mind of working with them, but being in the cabinet, in church and society, I think that's why I was selected.

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CUTLER: When you tried to get the community to plant their own gardens, did you go around and knock on doors?

BUSH: I had 3,000 people a month coming to the center, so I didn't have to go knock on doors.

CUTLER: Oh, they would come to the center and you would tell about it.

BUSH: And I kept a garden at the center. I had quite a few vegetables growing beside the garage and in the flower bed, and I think one of the plants is still there, although I've been gone almost three years. Some of the people, really—the older people; young folks don't want to do nothing—so I was able to get the older ones involved who had been exposed to gardening.

CUTLER: In the earlier part of their life or something?

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: What about the children? Were there any youth projects?

BUSH: Oh, we had all kind of youth programs, but they didn't want to get their hands dirty.

CUTLER: Oh.

BUSH: And they still don't.

CUTLER: When you were the financial manager with the church garden group, how did the Methodist church help out with the Urban Garden program? Did they give money?

BUSH: Yes. We had a budget.

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CUTLER: And how long did they do that?

BUSH: Oh, four or five years.

CUTLER: So was the money to supplement what the government was giving?

BUSH: It was monies they could use that wasn't government money that had strings attached to it, and they was able to do things that was above and beyond their contract with the government.

CUTLER: What kinds of things did you do in your position?

BUSH: Sign checks. [Laughs.] And I have all the copies of them here somewhere. I can't tell you where it is because I haven't unpacked from my office of thirty-five years, so it would take time. I think I know where they are, and then I think I might not know where they are, but the checkbooks I still have, the cancelled checks I still have, and, say, for instance, Arnold needed a tiller. He was able to buy it. He needed other garden tools. He was able to buy them. And all he had to do was bring me the invoice, and I'd cut the check.

CUTLER: Oh. Things like seeds, too?

BUSH: Yes. If he ran short of seeds, fertilizer, he could come here. I think and Dr. Randall worked together for a while, and they had a turnover with County, and the county moved him from downtown to OST [Old Spanish Trail], from OST I think back downtown, and the last time I saw Arnold, he wasn't working in that position anymore.

CUTLER: Were you involved with the Interfaith Coalition, Hunger Coalition, and when

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did you start?

BUSH: I'm one of the founders of the Interfaith Coalition.

CUTLER: Oh, really?

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: So you worked with the community garden program there.

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: Is that how you met Bob?

BUSH: I don't really know how I met Bob. The Unitarian church was instrumental in the founding of the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center—[Telephone rings.]

[Recording interruption]

[A two-minute conversation about her retirement was, as instructed, not transcribed.]

BUSH: But anyway, the Urban Garden.

CUTLER: Yes, you were talking about Bob and meeting him.

BUSH: And Nancy served on the board at the center for a long time. About six years ago, Bob gave me two little trees, about that tall [demonstrates]. Now they have taken up half of my yard.

CUTLER: Oh, wow.

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BUSH: One is a kumquat tree, and the other one is a grapefruit tree, pink grapefruits, and both of them are loaded with grapefruits.

CUTLER: How neat.

BUSH: Yes. I worked with Bob on—he had another program going, and I worked with him on that. What was it? The Harvest Festival? I can't think of the name of it right now, but I'm sure he mentioned it to you.

CUTLER: Yes, I think he did. So you helped create Interfaith and all that, was that a volunteer activity that you were doing?

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: And how long did you work over there?

BUSH: I didn't work over there. I was one of the resource persons over there. I was working at Martin Luther King Center, which is a complex down here. And I served on just about every board in Houston. Being an original in Houston, everybody wanted *my* expertise to start their own program, so I served on the End Hunger Network. I was one of the founders of that; the Interfaith Cottages on Westheimer, served on that; served with Sheltering Arms; I served with HGAC, Houston-Galveston Area Council; I served on the mayor's Reassurance for Seniors.

CUTLER: Did you ever work with [Congresswoman] Barbara Jordan or [Congressman George Thomas] "Mickey" Leland on the Urban Garden program?

BUSH: Barbara really wasn't around on urban gardening. Mickey wasn't really around.

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They had input into it, but they had a larger spectrum than we had.

CUTLER: What do you mean?

BUSH: Mickey did so much work in Africa, and most of his concerns was feeding the people over there. Urban Garden didn't supply enough food to feed over there, so Mickey always went out and got his food elsewhere. Barbara was in Austin and Washington most of the time we was working Urban Garden here in Houston. Was I familiar with her?

CUTLER: Yes.

BUSH: She ate with me every Saturday.

CUTLER: Really!

BUSH: I was a page for a day when she was governor for a day. We got the Door Busters Award the same year. That's mine hanging up there under that man's picture.

CUTLER: Oh, yes. What is that? Why is it named that?

BUSH: We did things nobody else had done. We opened up many a door in Houston that others—the multi-service centers was built from Martin Luther King Center. The only difference was they was city run and ours was independently run. We didn't have to cut the lights off at nine o'clock like they had to do downtown. Our buildings, our programs and what have you. And I think through the Unitarian church, I met through Nancy. Nancy Edwards and Bob Randall don't sound like husband and wife. So that's how I met Nancy, and Nancy would come to the center and volunteer to work with the

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kids.

CUTLER: The Martin Luther King Center?

BUSH: Yes. And Bob would come to the center to see whether I had anybody else involved in gardening. We just worked it out. It was, like, doing the same thing for the same purpose, and we had no problems working together. You don't do that anymore. Everybody wants their own turf, their own way, and, say, if I could get six people in this neighborhood to work together, it would be a good neighborhood.

CUTLER: Big change.

BUSH: Yes. And it's going like this now. We had brought it way up, and I didn't think I would get old that quick, but I did [chuckles], and I decided it's time for me to take some of my life and use it as I see fit.

CUTLER: What was your involvement in actually getting Urban Harvest started, when they split off from Interfaith?

BUSH: I had problems with it because every program they had ever started in Houston, the board would always have persons who wanted to go that way. As soon as they learned what you was doing, they wanted to organize their own, okay? And it was so many of them that I thought was really sincere about working with a leader, but we don't like leaders in Houston. We soon find a way to alienate them to the extent: "I got my program, you got yours." And it's happening more now than it ever did. And I just think that sometimes you have to get mad with them and just go ahead and do what you got to do.



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CUTLER: When Urban Harvest formed, did your involvement with community gardens...

BUSH: No, my community gardens had discontinued a long time before the split. When the bishop died, the new group of Christians didn't want an urban garden.

CUTLER: Why?

BUSH: How can I put this? They felt, "Go to the store and buy it." And, see, we was training them—you could take a bucket, you could take a tire and fill it with dirt, you could grow anything you wanted to if you wanted to. But all at once, they wanted to go the other direction. Have you ever been out to Nancy's house?

CUTLER: No, I haven't.

BUSH: Well, anything that grows is in her yard.

CUTLER: That's what I've heard, yes.

BUSH: You name it, it's there. It looks like a vegetable jungle. You know, when you go into a jungle you expect to see everything?

CUTLER: Yes.

BUSH: When you go in Nancy's yard, you see everything. It's beautiful because if she got one kind of berry, she got ten kinds. If she got one kind of fruit tree, she got ten kinds. If she got vegetables, she's got all of them. I'm one of those people that plants everything. I had an aunt, and every little piece of dirt, she had a seed on it, and when it would all come up, she would look around and she says, "Well, this will be ready and this

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will be ready, and I'll start canning this, this, this and this." And she did. She been dead since '97, and I opened up the barn where I stored all her stuff, and there sat two cases of preserves sitting there.

CUTLER: Wow.

BUSH: But I don't preserve mine. I blanch mine and put it in the freezer, okay? So it'll be fresh when I take it out.

CUTLER: Yes. When the church changed, when was that, the mid-eighties?

BUSH: No, early eighties.

CUTLER: Early eighties.

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: Okay, so after that—

BUSH: They haven't had it anymore, that financial support.

CUTLER: Okay, so your position there—that sort of—

BUSH: My position changed from the church, and it changed with them, and being the church and society person and being over Urban Garden, I went a lot of places out of Houston to talk about the Urban Garden.

CUTLER: Where'd you go?

BUSH: Palestine, Lakeview, Galveston, \_\_\_\_\_ area.

CUTLER: What kind of response did you get from people?

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BUSH: They was going to start a garden, yes.

CUTLER: People were enthusiastic?

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: What about men versus women? Were women more likely to be involved in getting community gardens going or planting them?

BUSH: The older women, okay?

CUTLER: Even here in the community?

BUSH: Yes. And you know, it was kind of cute because they would have collards and mustards and onions, garlic, tomatoes, one tomato plant—you'd be surprised how many tomatoes you can get off of one plant if you can keep the bugs from cutting the flowers. And bell pepper. I still have a few of them around that's got a pepper plant, a collard plant, a lettuce plant, you know, but not many because most of them are dead.

CUTLER: And when you were traveling around to other towns, were you still working with Arnold Brown at all?

BUSH: Some with Arnold and some who knew about me and what I was doing. I would get a chance to throw in Urban Garden.

CUTLER: Yes. What made you so passionate about this particular project? Was it going back to your history?

BUSH: Can you believe, I left home in '41, and I don't think two years has passed with me not having a garden of some kind. I still do it. And what I get is, "Why? It's just you.

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Why are you doing a garden?" Last year I had purple peas, black-eyes, snap beans, wax beans, mustard, turnips like this [indicates size] and zucchini and squash and—I planted onions last year. It was so hot, they didn't grow. I went up home in December. My onions are about that tall [indicates height]. Green onions?

CUTLER: Yes.

BUSH: And the collard plants are coming back out.

CUTLER: Where is this?

BUSH: Austin County. My pepper plants, loaded with jalapenos. I got these variegated color peppers in the back. I got a jalapeno tree and collards, and I think my bell pepper stalk is coming up again, coming out. There's about fifteen sisters and brothers be next door. "Ms. Bush, wouldn't it be cheaper to go over to the H-E-B and get a can?" I say, "Yeah, but while you're eatin' the goop they put on those vegetables, mine don't have it on there." And I talk that all the time. I got a granddaughter. I'm trying to get her to get her a pot and grow a tomato plant. If she grow that one tomato plant, next year she'll get two pots, okay?

CUTLER: Yes.

BUSH: But I had a lady two doors from here. I had put a pepper plant, bell pepper. It had about twenty bell peppers on it, and she got mad with me and pulled it up.

CUTLER: Why?

BUSH: Oh, you be surprised, the mind—and I don't buy bell pepper. I put up about ten

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jars of pepper sauce and cucumbers or something, I plant also. I just enjoy it. I come in in the evening, even when I was working, and I'd spend maybe thirty or forty minutes out in the yard before dark, water it down and come on in. I got a plum tree out there full of blooms, and if I leave the house and stay gone long enough, the kids are going to get them.

CUTLER: Oh, yes.

BUSH: But I don't know, I've always had a garden, and I've always fished. I've always had cows. I don't have no horse, but farming is what I like to do. So I took about a space as big as from that wall in there to the front door and about this wide and a half, of this room, and tilled it up and plants it.

CUTLER: I think that's great.

Why do you think that the Urban Garden program did well, and then why do you think that it failed in the end?

BUSH: I don't think it really failed in the end.

CUTLER: Okay.

BUSH: When you start getting old, you don't feel like doing what you want to do. Bob still carries it on.

CUTLER: Right, but the one that the county was funding. Did the funding run out?

BUSH: No, Judge Lindsay left.

CUTLER: Who was that?

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BUSH: The county judge.

CUTLER: Oh, Judge Lindsay?

BUSH: Yes. When he left, the new man didn't have no priorities on it.

CUTLER: Oh. When was that, in the late eighties?

BUSH: No. Lindsay hasn't been gone too long. He went the last of the eighties.

CUTLER: Okay.

BUSH: And when new people come in, they don't have the same priorities. If you have something going good and new people come in, if they can't compete with it they get rid of it, okay? Wasn't nothing wrong with it. And those people that Bob touched down on Alabama, it's about forty old men, and I call them old men because they're older than me. They have their little spaces, and they have the most beautiful garden during Easter, all through the summer, you ever wanted to see.

CUTLER: Is that the Alabama Garden?

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: That's a success right there. Is that what you mean?

BUSH: I used to go over there and feed the community.

CUTLER: At a food pantry, or what do you mean?

BUSH: I used to take food over to Alabama Garden, put it on a board or something—oh, heck, what is his name, from TSU? Was working with me. He would always have a trailer or something I could get in, and we served two or three hundred people over

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there once a month.

CUTLER: Right out of the garden.

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: Wow. Kind of like a farmers' market like they're doing, except it was free?

BUSH: Cooked food.

CUTLER: Oh, cooked food. Oh.

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: And you ran that?

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: Sort of in charge?

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: That's really cool.

BUSH: I did it downtown Houston, under the bridge. I did it on McGowen and Nagle, on the parking lot. I did it from King Center, and I did it from over there.

CUTLER: You did all the cooking there, on site?

BUSH: [Nods head].

CUTLER: Oh, wow. Once a week?

BUSH: Once a month. One week there, one week over the other place. We did more on

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McGowen than we did anywhere else.

CUTLER: And who was helping you?

BUSH: Some of my staff.

CUTLER: Oh, and your staff.

BUSH: Yes. And it worked out real good until I got tired. I couldn't get the ministers in this neighborhood to understand, if each church gave me fifty cents I could feed 200 people. We got eighty-five churches in here. And it doesn't take a lot to feed a group of people if you do it in bulk.

CUTLER: Yes. That's one thing I was wondering, if the churches were supportive of the gardening.

BUSH: They're not supportive of nothing but the collection plate. You can quote me on that, okay?

CUTLER: Okay.

BUSH: It's all about money. It's no more churches, it's all businesses now.

Competitive buildings, competitive businesses. This church right here was about the size of this room when I moved here. All those was homeowners, and when they died, the church got bigger. Dr. Allen, Debbie Allen's daddy?

CUTLER: Oh, yes.

BUSH: She and her sister and brother was born right here on this corner. You know which one I'm talking about?



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CUTLER: Yes, I think so.

BUSH: The one on Cosby show. It was all professionals. This house was the Clayton Johnson Music School, the only one in Third Ward. And we had the Callaways over there, the McGowens over there, the Madens[?], the Smiths, the Newts[?], the Allens, in that little church. And all at once, that church grew, and every church out here grew. There's no more churches. My church was a little church, the only one that had a swimming pool to it. They got greedy and wanted to move, so we moved into a new church in '60, and the church wasn't that big, and we put \$80,000 worth of repairs in it. And my pastor—who thank God she's gone—set up a budget for \$344,000 for 350 members to pay a year. I'm talking about my church, okay? And if you take that money from those old folks and they're going to pay the church dues, they ain't got nothing left. Urban Garden would give them something to do plus the benefits of eating fresh vegetables, plus the fact they can grow some stuff they don't have to cook. It's a lot of benefits they could get out of it.

CUTLER: Oh, yes.

BUSH: But nobody thinks about that. Even on television, if they ain't talking about pills they're talking about prescriptions. If they ain't talking about prescriptions, they're talking about doctors or some kind of disease. And most of those diseases is brought on by—I don't know what they spray on the vegetables to keep them fresh, but they don't taste the same as those you pull up yourself.

CUTLER: That's true.

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BUSH: And there's so many things people could grow year round if they would. Okra, tomatoes, corn. A meal by itself. And I bet you don't have a garden at your house. "I ain't got no room."

CUTLER: I have plants.

BUSH: What kind of plants?

CUTLER: I have an aloe vera plant and I have—I don't even know all of their names.

BUSH: Have you ever thought of putting....

CUTLER: I have an apartment, so I have them on—

BUSH: A ledge?

CUTLER: —on a little ledge.

BUSH: No yard.

CUTLER: No.

BUSH: But do you realize you could get you a bucket this size [demonstrates].

CUTLER: It's true.

BUSH: You can grow squash, zucchini, onions or whatever you want. You got enough room, if you got room for a pot of dirt.

CUTLER: Yes.

BUSH: Now don't go home and get put out by planting all that stuff. [Laughs.]

CUTLER: Okay, I won't.

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BUSH: [Coughs.] But I enjoy the outside.

CUTLER: So I guess what it takes—I mean, since you said the churches haven't been very supportive and the government program kind of dwindled out, I guess what it takes is something like Urban Harvest to keep this going?

BUSH: Yes. And if you do gardens, you can always benefit. Those greens can be sold anywhere. There's a guy in Sunnyside. He uses—you know, like they want to use electric poles and things that take up a lot of space between areas?

CUTLER: Yes.

BUSH: He works his garden underneath there, and on Saturdays he got potatoes, he got collard greens, mustard greens, onions, bell peppers, tomatoes and all that stuff, and he gets out and sells it. And it's easy. It's no reason for anybody to be hungry when you can grow your own, okay?

CUTLER: Yes.

BUSH: My house is like a grocery store.

CUTLER: Oh, people come to your garden?

BUSH: No, people come to my door, "Miss Bush, can I have a piece of bread?" They still come here. And if I've cooked, they get a dinner. And I'm one of those people who cooks every day, and I don't like opening cans. When I open a can, it's normally tomato paste or sometimes I open corn, Vienna sausage or sardines, but my food is cooked from scratch, and I don't like to eat out.

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CUTLER: It's healthier.

BUSH: I guess it is.

CUTLER: It's cheaper.

BUSH: I guess I'm the only old woman I know that don't go out and eat hamburgers, fried chicken. When I find chicken twenty-nine cents a pound, the leg quarters, I put them in the freezer, and as I need them, take them out, cook from scratch. The Sunday before last, I had seven people to show up here for dinner, unannounced. But on Sundays I cook enough to last two or three days. There's nobody but me. And I hear them say, "I can't eat the same thing two days in a row." I can eat the same thing seven days a week and don't worry about it. But being—I'm not a vegetarian. I don't eat a lot of meat. I don't eat a lot of fish. And I want some pork chops so bad! [Laughs.] But I know I ain't supposed to have them. And I think when the doctor told me I had diabetes, he wanted to cut me off everything, and the things he cut off of was the things I crave for.

CUTLER: Of course.

BUSH: Yes. But as it is, I enjoy it.

CUTLER: Yes. It's good work.

BUSH: Well, you know, soap and water clean anything, so I don't worry about dirt getting on my hands.

CUTLER: Yes.

BUSH: But I wish I could get others interested. I've been talking to the lady two doors

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from here. I told her, “As soon as my plants come up,”—her son has a mental problem, and if he stays busy he’s all right, so I asked him did he know about a garden. He says, “I’m an old man. I don’t know nothing about it.” I said, “Well, I’m going to give you a pick and a hoe so you can dig you up a little bed in the back, and then I’m going to give you some plants to put in there, and then it’ll be your job to take care of it.” And he said he would do it. But I noticed he hasn’t been over here after the hoe and pick yet.

[Laughs.] But he needs something to do, and I told his mother—I said, “He walks, and sometimes he gets lost,” but if he had a garden back there, she wouldn’t have to look for him.

CUTLER: Yes, stay busy.

BUSH: Yes.

CUTLER: It’s a good idea.

BUSH: So I think he’s going to swallow the bait. I got till next month to convince him he needs a garden, because by Good Friday all you haven’t planted ain’t gonna do no good.

CUTLER: Well, I don’t have any more questions unless you have anything else to say about—

BUSH: I just think it’s something that’s needed, and whether you rent or you own, there’s still pots to use—and they got ten packages of seeds for a dollar. And if you plant those seeds and water them like they should be, they’ll come up, and you’ll be surprised how much money you save on vegetables, because vegetables are ridiculous right

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now.

[End of interview.]

