

Interview with Gerri Frantz

Interviewer: Deborah Altz

July 16, 1996

Q: This is Tuesday, July 16th, and an interview with Gerri. I'd love to hear a little bit about your background and how you ended up at Twin Oaks, and if you had any communal living experience before Twin Oaks, I'd love to hear about that too.

A: I don't think there was a great deal of communal activity, except the Christian communities that had been around for generations, when I came here. I came here in May of 1970, dropped out of college, just like everybody else did. Was going through existential angst, and really not seeing acceptable options in the larger society. In that late adolescent phase, I was disgusted with violence and competition and women's roles, except we didn't call it that, then, but all of -- the ecology movement had just started, and of course the anti-war movement. The Civil Rights movement had come of age, and all of those things shaped my view of society. But I was certainly not in any kind of minority. So just like thousands of other people, I joined a commune, which I thought I was doing for the summer, and stayed for 17 years.

Q: Wow. Now, why Twin Oaks?

A: Well, I was writing a paper about Walden II for several classes in college. The easy way to get through a paper was to coordinate, so you could use one to take care of all your classes. And somebody in my class told me about Twin Oaks, and I thought, "Oh, what a neat footnote to the paper!" So I thought I'd come down and visit during Easter vacation. I can't remember if I called first. I may have, but there was no such thing as making reservations -- you just dropped in. I came down. Over a 4 day period, I just realized that the --this was a place that had a lot of hope. I was in Washington DC, at George Washington University, and this was at the height of the anti-war movement. There were marches erupted around the school all the time. Everything seemed immoral at the time -- if one got a job, it didn't seem that one was doing the right thing. So here was this wonderful place that had just incredible dreams, based on values that I held very dear. So I thought, "Okay, I'll finish the semester, and I'll go there for the summer." And then, I didn't leave.

Q: Well, what was Twin Oaks like in 1970?

A: There were about 25 members, and the summer I came seemed to me -- I don't know what it was like the year or two before that, but I know that it was a time when the alternative movement was just blossoming. So visitors galore. The place was just choked with visitors all the time, and people would just sleep anywhere. Yano [?] was where the kitchen and dining rooms were, and somebody slept up in the attic, although it wasn't finished. Harmony didn't have a second floor, and it was the completed residents and the hammock shop. Oneida had been built, the first floor had been framed in and sheet-rocked -- I don't know if the sheet rock was finished for quite some time, but the rooms were more or less finished, and the upstairs was not finished. And that was it, and barns. And people slept anywhere. We slept in buses. We doubled -- there was no such thing as a single room. And it was an effort to put people together with roommates they were compatible with or same gender, but that didn't always work. So you'd end up rooming with odd characters from time to time. There was one bathroom when I arrived, and two outhouses. We used the river a lot for bathing. We were so poor. We would take bottles of liquid dish detergent down to the river to wash our hair, because we certainly couldn't afford shampoo. We ate a lot of cornflakes, and home-grown whatever happened to be there. The food was really horrendous. God, it was bad. We didn't have a dishwasher. And the really skilled people had not

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yet started arriving. They came within about 6 months of when I arrived. So the mechanically skilled people and the technically skilled people weren't there. I'm sure there had been some before I got there, who had left, but we were really struggling, from what I remember, to maintain our environment. And we were very young, for the most part. There were some people in their, maybe 30's, 40's, but really, we were talking about people in their late 'teens and early 20's. And we supported ourselves with outside work -- everybody had to do, I can't remember if it was 6 weeks, or 2 months, shift of outside work. When I first got here, we didn't have a van. We had a fleet of very unreliable cars. The outside workers would take one to Richmond every day. You get any kind of job you possibly could -- there were no standards, you just got something that would give you money for a couple of months. It was very unpleasant - you were in Richmond for 12, 14 hour days, because people's work shifts -- somebody might have to start at 7 or 8, and somebody else might not start till 10, so it was a very long day. And it was a process that weeded a lot of people out. A lot of people lived at Twin Oaks, made it through part of their outside work shift, and then left with their last week's paycheck. It was a time of very high turnover. So that's what it was like when I first got here -- it was hot and dry and dusty, and the courtyard was like a week lot. It was just not at all what it is now -- there were no trees or flowers, it was just sort of a lumpy, dusty, weedy ground.

Q: Then if you were doing outside work, did you then have to come home to lots of domestic work as well?

A: No. When you went on outside work, you went off the labor credit system, and you earned -- the one positive aspect of doing outside work was that you earned credits for every hour that you were off the farm. And so it was the one time that you would build up fairly significant vacation balances. And back in those days, the labor credit system, I don't know if Cat talked with you about this?

Q: I haven't interviewed her yet.

A: She was the expert in this period, because she was involved in the development of most of the systems of how we did things back then. But the labor credit system was -- labor credits were the internal medium of exchange. There was very little money. But, it wasn't a one labor credit per hour system. It was a system where you bid on work, and the more desirable the work was, the more the value of the labor credits dropped. So if you were doing really desirable work, you'd only earn .8 labor credits an hour. And I suspect, outside work, if it didn't go for 1.0, it might've gone for more, it might've gone for 1.2 per hour. It was a significant time to get rich. And we had very little -- the resources were so limited. We did, for a while, get allowance at the rate of \$1 a week, and then it got cut to 25 cents a week. I think that's possible. People just didn't spend money. You'd save up your allowance for weeks to go to a movie or buy soda or buy a beer or something. And there was a lot of home made culture. And then the other things about the early years -- it was still very much a Skinnerian community, and radical. Not everybody, but. One of the things we did for entertainment was have evenings where we would read to each other. Get a group of people in the Oneida living room reading *Thunder Out of China*, or *Phan Shen* [?], you know, or -- I guess we did some reading out of the traditional utopian literature, but much more of it was about China, radical social experiments. We named our animals. We had a cat named Crotokin [?], and we had a cow named Angie, after Angela Davis. It was just that kind of time. And Huey, we had a dog named Huey, and a dog named Stokely. And then the human potential

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movement hit in, I would say somewhere around '71, it started creeping in. It was a very interesting -- this is a very biased memory, by the way -- very interesting face-off between the traditional Walden II behaviorists, which was sort of, in my mind, linked with left-wing radicalism, and the human potential, "We need to make this a good place for people to be comfortable and happy and reach their own growth potential."

Q: I'm curious about some of the work you did in the early years, both domestic and off-land sorts of work.

A: Well, when I went to Richmond, I mostly waitressed and got temp/clerical jobs. Here, I was very committed to getting skilled, and strong. You know, I was 20 years old, I wanted to drive tractors, and build buildings, and lay blocks, all that business. But in the early years, I don't remember much work, and I didn't enjoy my work very much the first few years I was here, for the first year or so, because, again, we were just struggling to get by. I did start milking cows fairly early. In those days, we hand-milked. And we -- I don't know whether we knew when we started doing this, that it wasn't traditional, but we always milked with two people on a cow, one on either side. And generally, when real farmers came by, they would be sort of surprised that a cow would tolerate two people under her. But I worked in the garden, and I did construction. There was very little hammock making. I remember back, we had a push and made 9 hammocks in one day. We had a very minuscule hammock market. We didn't have the marketing skills, early-on, or much interest. It wasn't until -- I'm trying to think what year it was -- 1973, '4, something like that. My memory of it was we had a member named Stephen, who had a somewhat more professional gloss than most of us. He was a psychologist. I think he did some marketing -- he tried to get it out there, and happened to make a connection with a woman with a gift shop in Charlottesville, whose son was a manager of a Pier I Imports. And she talked her son into convincing the buyer to try our hammocks. And back in those days, I think Stephen also was able to make connections with -- I don't know if it was department stores, or catalogs -- I remember there being a truckload of hammocks that went to New York, and that was just amazing to us. But everything was very -- we hadn't developed the industry or technology for making hammocks efficiently, so it was definitely a lot of work just to get one out. I don't recall doing much cleaning, I never liked that. I did cook. I wrote an article for Leaves, in the early years, about the challenge of cooking with virtually no ingredients. We would do things like take hard-boiled egg whites and soak them in soy sauce and use them instead of mushrooms, or raw potatoes instead of waterchessnuts. We just -- beans instead of meat in stroganoff. In fact, I remember one dish that salt was the only thing that was the same as the recipe.

Q: Now you mentioned before that there was kind of a face-off between the behaviorists and the human potential people? What happened, what came of that?

A: Well, there are different dimensions to look at it. It was also -- I think of there having been a core group of people whose vision was that we would build community, we would sacrifice in the relative short-term, so that the community would grow and get wealthy. And there were other people that said, "I'm not interested in sacrificing. Standard of living is a fundamental issue." So I sort of -- those are, it's a different set of dimensions, but in my mind there's relationship between the Walden II sacrificers and the standard of living, human-potential -- and that may not be fair. We would have periodic crises, and I don't think Twin Oaks has them the way we used to. They have had one in the recent past. But we

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would have what seemed to me, perhaps it was my youth, a sort of community shattering crisis, where there would be these major splits, and you couldn't be sure whether this would be the end of Twin Oaks -- that might be overly dramatic. At some point, we brought in some outside facilitators, who did a number of things. For one thing, they really pinpointed some lack of skills we had, including meeting behaviors, communication behaviors, role identification, that sort of thing. On the other hand, as more or less a Walden II traditionalist, my perception was that they sort of shattered the myth that we were building Walden II, and said, "Okay, let's pretend that everybody's vision stands on equal footing, here, and let's get the alienated people talking about their feelings, let's deal with the issue of powerlessness in community," and that sort of thing. And that had a significant impact on the power base in the community. It sort of leveled a lot of things and -- I don't know, it just shifted things around. After any crisis, people left, and as new people came, they brought in new culture. Twin Oaks just continued to evolve away from a self-image of being a Walden II community and more inclined to be willing to examine the issues of standard of living versus growth. I've heard that one 200 times a week. It's funny, because Twin Oaks doesn't really need to deal with that in the same way anymore. It's grown and has a much more comfortable standard of living. But back then, I think it really seemed like those were polar opposites, that you had to choose one or the other. So there would be waves of people who left who believed in ideology, and a more limited view of what community was, and then waves of people who left who believed in not just standard of living, -- my sense is community can be all things to all people. What you identified as . . . I can't follow that train of thought very clearly. It's -- the confrontation around issues like the quality, and what the culture of Twin Oaks ought to be, sort of sifted out people. But over the years, the crises came less frequently. My sense is that we had sort of a renaissance period, from about mid-'70's, till -- again, very biased, given that I left in '87 -- but it seemed like it was an 8 year or so period of intense growth at a lot of levels, and a high degree of trying out different ways to organize ourselves socially and culturally and economically. I remember there was a time where we as a community were trying to develop a land-use plan, and a social plan that fit together with the land-use plan. It was a time of -- the years when we built a lot of the buildings, built a lot of the industries, put in the sewage treatment plant. And saw a lot of enormous possibilities. I would think Twin Oaks currently - - I'm sure people feel like they're going through that same kind of period now, and I wouldn't dispute it, but just I don't experience it now, I'm not part of it.

Q: Oh, that maybe they're still going through a sort of renaissance, or a new one?

A: Yeah. The growth, the pond, the buildings, the industries. And the new directions that the culture's developed. I think we had faulty but -- we were building towards -- no, I can't say that, because there was never an agreement as to what the utopia was going to be. I wouldn't be surprised if the role of children in families was one of the most, not overtly contentious, but confusing issues, in terms of defining what the community was. In the early years, Twin Oaks was going to raise the children, and the kids were community kids. Once we had kids, then we were a community with a fuller age range. We built -- Deganya [?] was such a labor of love, and was so perfectly engineered for how we were going to raise our children. We had that little utopian vision for a year or two. But even then, it was a real struggle. Curiously enough, it was the metas [?], the people who were raising the kids who were experiencing a lot of internal conflict, as a group, and not a meta, was that it was the metas who were the people who were saying, "I'm not sure that we ought to be raising our kids in this radical way, where

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parents don't really play a role as parents." So, when metas started having kids -- well, the first mom was also a meta, but she tried really hard to be a community child person first rather than a mother first. The second wave of kids was people who were metas, who decided they really wanted more involvement in their own kids' lives. That was sort of the germinal phase of the conflicts around family at Twin Oaks. I don't think it's ever really been resolved to anyone's satisfaction, finding that balance between community and nuclear family is -- I don't think we found the philosophical balance, they may have found the practical balance, but it's not something we can come to with pride and say, "This is our child program, and it's very intentional, and we do it this way because this is the results, and this is how it fits into the larger community." It's more, "Well, this is what parents wanted to do, so this is how we do it." I'm not at all dissatisfied. In a lot of ways, it stood my kids in very good stead, and I'm very pleased with how they've grown up.

Q: Did they pretty much grow up here?

A: Yeah. My daughter was 14 and my son was 10 when we left. And my daughter is now a chemist, and it buying a house next door to me, and it just a wonderful person. She really is great. I know Twin Oaks had an enormous impact on her. She remembers some things fondly. There are things she remembers not so fondly. She told my husband one night at dinner, both the kids, he asked them what they look back on at Twin Oaks that they would've changed, and they said, "Sharing. We really wish we didn't have to share everything." Because when she was little, they didn't have private toys, they had nothing of their own. After several years, that started changing, but the pressure on the kids for a long time was absolute egalitarianism, and communalism.

Q: Were you there during the air crib phase?

A: Yes, I was on one of the air cribs.

Q: What did you think of the air cribs?

A: They were very neat. The problem with them is that they were difficult to clean. And people cleaned them, regularly, but over time, they just got more and more dirty. You couldn't clean them as thoroughly as they needed to be cleaned. The kids only slept in them, it wasn't like they were there all day. And Sarin [?] had a little -- Stephen had made this little clown face out of wood, and it had lights and little switches and things. She was just a little kid -- she couldn't stand up, yet when she woke up in the morning, she wouldn't cry, she would just play with the clown face, and the lights would flash, and people would see it and come and get her out of the crib. I always appreciated that. They were nice because they had fans for air circulation. So when you close the door and turn the fan on, there was a white noise so the kids didn't have to disturb each other. They didn't get cold or hot, particularly. Air cribs are fine, and they're not necessary, it was more a thing, it was a Walden II thing, rather than a significant shaping force in a child's life.

Q: Were you married when you lived at Twin Oaks?

A: We got married just a few years before we left. I came here alone. My kids have different fathers. My son's father, I married him when my kids were something like 6 and 10, I guess. Maybe older than that. My husband suggested that maybe my father would appreciate if my children were, if I were legally

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married. And my father did appreciate it. Especially because my husband was a plumber, so that just made everything perfect. Here I was married, and we could come home and fix the plumbing.

Q: The reason I asked is that I've had some people tell me that being married in community can be difficult sometimes, because the community isn't necessarily supportive of that, and I was just wondering what your experience was like.

A: Community is not awfully supportive of -- people who join in relationships in a community like this, struggle mightily. Usually I think, because they don't -- people don't usually join a place like this when they're in a couple if they're looking for a way to tighten, define the relationship and make it more secure for eternity. I think it's more when people are looking for change, not necessarily in the relationship, but just in their lives, they're at a time when all sorts of opportunities open themselves up, and that ends up, usually, threatening relationships. I'm trying to think if I've seen any that have survived all the way through. Relationships have formed in community, although a lot of them don't last. Marriage becomes less of an issue. It's really the relationship itself that you struggle with, and it either survives or it doesn't, and getting married is just sort of a technicality when you're in community. But the one thing I found is that after leaving Twin Oaks, we learned so much about relationships and working things out, and communicating, that it was real easy to do it on the outside. There was just nothing to it. Because then it became, it really was -- the relationship, the couple-dom became the unit that struggled, we had to work out all of our problems together, whether it was paying taxes or painting the house or buying a house, or getting the kids through adolescents, it didn't matter, there wasn't a whole community to cushion it. And we'd already learned how to work through the problems, already been through several phases of relationship problems. We were tired of struggling with each other.

Q: Now once Twin Oaks got the Pier I contract, did that mean that you didn't have to work on the outside anymore?

A: I'm trying to remember how this worked. We had stopped outside work once before. I left with Cat, and Sarin's [?] father, and another woman, to start another community that turned into East Wind. Twin Oaks had made a lot of money that -- I don't remember when it was. It seemed like there was a lot of money in the bank, and that was at sort of the height of the human potential movement. It was the height of reaction against sacrifice, I'll say that much. We were gone, and heard that Twin Oaks had decided that they didn't need to do outside work anymore, because they were just fine, and they were starting a new industry, construction, and the whole philosophy, the labor program, had changed to, if people do what they really liked to do -- it was sort of an Adam Smith view of labor credits. "If everybody does what they like to do, and really enjoys themselves, life is a carnival, then Twin Oaks will be better off." Well, nobody really liked to do income-producing work, but there was a big cushion of money in the bank. So they stopped doing outside work, and did what they enjoyed doing, and I came back in the late summer, and by a few months later it became apparent -- I mean it had nothing to do with me coming back, but just I missed most of that time -- a few months later it became apparent that we were running out of money, fast. We actually got to the worst financial crises we ever had. And that was right before the big Pier I order. So that spring, that's when Stephen was motivated to get out and sell hammocks, and everybody was motivated to get out and make money however we could. So much for the death of sacrifice. And that was the birth of economic planning, that was when we started

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saying, "Wait a minute, we can't not know that this sort of thing is happening. We've got to get better control of our resources." So we went back on outside work, briefly, and then the industry sort of kicked in, and the hammocks picked up, and we went off outside work again, and I don't think that we ever seriously went back on again. We still lived very frugally. We didn't spend much, we had very limited allowances, and very constrained budgeting processes, but then we started trying to predict what our cash flow would be. We were very conservative. We hated to borrow money. We finally -- it didn't take too long before we figured out that we could borrow money for hammock materials if we knew that we were going to make it back. But we didn't, and we of course had loans for the land, but otherwise, we didn't believe in going into debt. Which just built the capital here incredibly, it made Twin Oaks phenomenally well-off, because people worked hard, and invested enormous amounts of labor in the capital development of the place.

Q: Can you tell me about why you and Cat decided to leave and start East Wind?

A: Cat, in my memory, was a significant adherent to the growth philosophy -- the faster Twin Oaks grew to a, I don't know what size it would've been, but past a survival size, the quicker we would get the kind of financial security and cultural and social security, everything, that would make it a wonderful place to live in. She really, her first experiment in growth was ... Marion bought some land down the road and started a branch of Twin Oaks. But all the people who moved there, people who I loved dearly, but they moved there because they really wanted an intense interpersonal experience and control over their environment, and they didn't like the big-city feeling of this place, which was then called Juniper. It basically, while they added -- their leaving added space for that many more people -- they obviously were not going to grow very quickly, they didn't have a pro-growth philosophy at all. So it looked like, because of limits in terms of the facilities, because you reach a certain size and then you have to build all different kinds of facilities before you can add more bedrooms and have more people space, and the philosophy at the time, of not being willing to sacrifice to add more people, made her look for other options. There was a man who came down to visit from Vermont, with a maple sugar farm. He had been trying to do community up there, and it wasn't working, and he wanted help. And she was very interested in it. The man who was to become my daughter's father was very interested in it. And they just wanted to go build community, and it seemed like the thing to do. So we went up there, and we didn't last a week and a half. We had conflicts, it was a lot of male ego stuff between the man who owned the maple sugar farm and Jesse [?]. It just looked like, from our point of view, maybe he wanted free labor on his farm, but he really wasn't about to give up control, it wasn't clear. We thought, "Okay, we're going home." We got a call from Twin Oaks, a member named Gabriel, who said Herman Patt [?], who owns a dairy farm in Massachusetts, who's been trying to do community, just called and said if we don't do something to help him do community, he was just going to bail on the whole idea, and sell the dairy farm or something.

Q: Perfect timing.

A: Well, it was, because we were heading south anyways, so we thought, "We'll just go from Vermont to Massachusetts." So we moved onto the dairy farm. Several people left the farm in Vermont with us. People started coming there who had gone to Twin Oaks, and Twin Oaks was full at the time, or wasn't as pioneering, I don't remember why, but people started joining us. That was East Wind. It started

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growing. It's very hard to move onto somebody else's property, and to have them give up control, especially Herman, who had grown kids, who really were not thrilled at the thought of giving up their farm. They didn't live on the farm, but they stood to inherit their parents' assets, and here were a bunch of what appeared to be very unreliable hippies, there was a good reason why we appeared that way, who were negotiating to get the family assets. And his wife was not nearly as enthusiastic about community as he was. They didn't live with us, they had a separate house. But it became obvious that he would never really be willing to compromise to the extent that the community felt was necessary. So, by this time I had left, because I was actually pregnant when I went up there, but I didn't realize it. So, I had decided I wouldn't have my baby there. Twin Oaks was having kids, and East Wind was not, and I wanted to be part of the child program, so I came back here. East Wind stayed, I guess another 4 or 5 months, and then moved to Boston, rented a house, and started outside work, earning money, saving up to buy land of their own. Which they did, in Missouri.

Q: Just out of curiosity, the maple sugar farm that you went to in Vermont, that wasn't Robert Herrieh [?], was it?

A: No.

Q: Okay, I was just curious.

A: I forgot about him. I vaguely remember him -- I remember the book, but I can't quite picture him.

Q: Yeah, I went up and interviewed him, he still has a farm up in Northern Vermont.

A: . . . everywhere.

Q: Do you remember some, or did you visit some that were memorable?

A: Not many. I really stayed pretty close to home.

Q: When you came back to Twin Oaks to have your baby, did you have a home birth?

A: Almost. It took a few more babies before anyone really had one here. I think I was the first of the three of us -- well, Josie [?] couldn't, because she wasn't positioned right. Freddie had decided that she was going to go to the hospital. I thought I was going to have the baby at home. It was a seventh hour decision, or 11th hour decision, whatever that's called, to go to the hospital. I was well into labor, and I said, "I can't deal with this."

Q: That must've been kind of scary. Where's the nearest hospital? Charlottesville?

A: Well, we didn't go to Charlottesville, we went to Richmond. It wasn't scary for me, I think it was scary for the people in the van. I was just so absorbed in what I was doing that I wasn't worried at all. It was great. There must've been 6 of us, suddenly coming pouring into the hospital in the middle of the night, "She's having a baby! She's having a baby!" And I had Sarin very shortly after I got there. That was a long time ago, back before there was nearly a degree of participation by non-physicians, but two of my people were in the delivery room, and the next day, I said, "I'm leaving." And the doctor said, "You can't go!" And I said, "Of course I can go!" Of course, because I had Twin Oaks to come back to. Now, we send people out of the hospital within 24 hours, but back then, it was considered a medical -- it was just,

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from their point of view, a ridiculous thing to do. But with the kind of support system I had there, and it was amazing, I have to say, the way the child program was set up. It was pretty well over-staffed with adults, and very few kids, and they were all infants. Sarin, from the beginning slept in an air crib. Deganya wasn't built, wasn't completed, so the child program was housed in Harmony, and I slept in Oneida, and there was a buzzer system. In the middle of the night, the night meta would buzz me, and I'd go up to -- I think at first they would bring her to me, but after a few weeks, I'd go up to harmony, and the night meta would've gotten her up, changed her diaper, and prepared something for me to drink. The degree of care and comfort, and we didn't require women to work for months and months and months after the baby was born, even though they didn't necessarily care for the kids, because the meta program did that, it was a long recovery period.

Q: That must've been nice.

A: It was pretty restful.

Q: Were the kids home schooled, or did you send them out to school?

A: Early-on they were home schooled. We started a Montessori program when they were quite young. We had a member who had been a Montessori teacher. He built a lot of Montessori materials. We had a woodshop, and we had a machine shop which we were able to use to make Montessori, even with wooden, I remember, I guess it was allayed with different sized bits on it, making those different, I forget what they were called. And that program lasted for several years, and then we did a sort of modified Montessori home schooling for awhile. And then the proposal came up -- people who had left Twin Oaks with kids had developed a school of their own for their kids, and I guess the proposal was that we merge their school, the Oakley [?] school, with our home schooling program, and take in other children and like-minded adults. So it wasn't until my daughter was about to enter 7th grade, or 6th grade, that -- yeah, my son I guess was in 2nd grade -- that we had the kids go off to school. My daughter went immediately from the Oakley school to Tandem [?], the private school in Charlottesville. So she didn't really go to public school till we left Twin Oaks, and she was in high school.

Q: So Twin Oaks actually paid for private school?

A: Yes. We didn't have all that much money, but it seemed like the best -- I guess Twin Oaks still does that sort of thing -- it seemed like the best educational option for the kids, the most fitting with their cultural -- Tandem is not that dissimilar to Twin Oaks. It was a comfortable place for hippie kids to go.

Q: Yeah, I was wondering if it was shock for the kids to go to school after not having been in a traditional school.

A: The public school was tougher. Especially the rural public schools that they went into. Adjustment -- I don't think it was hard for my daughter to adjust to going to the private school in Charlottesville while we still lived here, but I didn't realize it at the time, that adjustment to public school after we left, when she was a teenager, was hard. She was very lonely, and felt very out of place. Took a long time for her to get over it. She said she was pretty depressed the first year. And my son, oh especially difficult for a boy at that age, I think, to make those kind of adjustments and fit in with a much different culture than he was raised with here. He had a lot of compensating to do.

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Q: Do the kids here pretty much socialize amongst themselves, or do they develop friendships off the land?

A: When my kids were growing up, it was very, it was a social group that developed here. There seemed to be these generations of kids -- my daughter was one of 4 or 5 kids who were about the same age, and my son was one of 4 kids who were about the same age. And there wasn't that big a difference between the two groups, so they didn't seek friendships elsewhere. They still stay very connected, in different ways, to the kids they grew up with.

Q: Are kids expected to take part in the labor credit system?

A: I can't speak for what happens now. When we were raising kids, I think we hoped that some day they would. They didn't have to earn labor credits. They did have to participate in the activities. They were part of the child program, and what happened in the child program was what they did. We tried to get them involved in work situations in a sort of ad hoc way. Somebody would take a kid off to the garden for the morning, or food processing, that sort of thing, but it wasn't, it was more just to expose them to different work environments. I think my daughter had a labor credit for a little while, I can't remember. I think she did have work shifts just beginning, before we left.

Q: So maybe they phase something in for the teenagers?

A: I don't know what it's like anymore. It's so different, because the kids are much more involved in their own families. The child program is more of a child care program than a comprehensive, "This is how we raise our kids," program.

Q: How do you feel about that?

A: I can't judge. If I project myself into it, it would've been a lot more difficult. It was a lot easier to become the person I was, here, with the child program that existed and my confidence in it. On the other hand, perhaps I could've provided some things to my kids that I didn't provide, because of my lack of involvement. So it's hard to speculate what it would be like. I'm not in the position, really, to judge on a philosophical and theoretical level.

Q: Did you get involved in leadership roles?

A: Yeah.

Q: What sorts of roles did you play?

A: I was a planner a number of times. I seemed to -- my biased memory -- I seemed to get involved in being a planner at times of high crisis. I had a certain martyrdom there. My husband once made me a birthday cake with a Barbie doll carrying a popsicle-stick cross on her back. But, yeah, that time we ran out of money, we started economic planning, I was a planner for that. I was a planner for the next major social crisis we had. I was involved in a lot of the, during that period, mid-'70's to the mid-'80's, major reorganization, initiative, strategic, sort of major goal setting, rearranging initiatives. And then in '83, I became -- I sort of took over the hammock business. I had been working in it, and it became apparent to me that too many things were falling beneath the cracks, and there was no centralized coordination of the entire enterprise. It was all these little kingdoms. Production kingdom, and the purchasing kingdom,

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the chairs kingdom, and hammock kingdom, and marketing. And these things weren't coordinated, and it just didn't seem to work. So I said, "I think the citizen's a general manager, and I'll do it." So I became general manager for both Twin Oaks and East Wind, and did that for the last several years I lived here.

Q: That sounds like a demanding job.

A: It was wonderful. It was hard, but it was just the sort of thing I loved to do. And I had learned so much in the early years. I had learned a lot about, you can start with vision, you can build this conceptual castle of how things ought to work, based on how you believe people are, and you know, if you're not real reality-based, and testing reality all the time, you make some really big mistakes. So I had gotten a lot more operational and practical. Business was just the perfect outlet for that sort of thing. Because it didn't have a lot of the messiness that being a planner has, where what you're dealing with is people's feelings, and philosophical issues, and ethical issues, and trade-offs -- you know, business is business. The bottom line is money, you want to do it ethically, but really, the bottom line is money. You've got all these pieces. And all you have to do is you have to really understand it very well, and know how the pieces work together, and know what the drivers are, and you can make it, just sail. And it was much fun.

Q: Could you get all of your labor credits for being the manager, or did you have to do other chores as well?

A: Well, I don't remember what the budget was, but I never would've gotten all my labor credits from being manager anyway. Because I don't think that I felt that there was 40 hours of work in doing it. In fact, I did it, I spent a lot of the time during those years doing production work. In fact, I started working up in the woodshop, because I felt, "I can't manage this business if I don't understand all these processes," and nobody wanted to work up there anyway. There was this big exodus of wood workers, not from the community, but just from the woodshop, at about the time I took over the business, so I thought, "I'd better step in. If I'm going to sell these things, I'd better make sure they're going to get made." And it was good, because I could figure things out, like we had a certain set of standards for how we classified firsts and seconds, and we were building an ever-growing inventory of seconds, and I thought, "This doesn't work. We can't fill our orders for firsts when we've got 200 seconds. Why don't we take them out of the box and look at them and make sure it wasn't somebody's bad mood one day that did it." It's just those sort of management things I could do, because I was the boss. I could say, "Well, do it."

Q: So the planner-manager system then, really does give individuals some autonomy or control?

A: A great deal. Until you start making serious mistakes, you really have a lot of freedom to run that area the way you think is best. Constrained, of course, by the labor budget and the money budget. Now I'll lapse into one of my theories -- this is something I think I developed over decades of living here. The kind of culture that we have in society, economy, reward system, all of those pieces work very well together to fit a particular philosophy. But what it didn't do was --how can I say this? -- it didn't reward individual initiative with external rewards. You had to really develop your own internal set of rewards, to be driven to accomplish things. Because the community, in its egalitarian wisdom, wouldn't do that. I saw a number of people go through personal crises where they felt unappreciated, they felt their work

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wasn't valued, because, for example, the labor budget would get cut because it was a year of some kind of financial crisis, and we had to do more hammocks, and of course raising our own food was more important, but we had to get the hammocks done before we could allocate all the resources. These people were feeling like they were pouring their hearts and souls into raising food, but their labor budget was cut for it. And I think we are not well-prepared coming out of the society that we come from, with a few exceptions, we're not well-prepared to weather that sort of thing, and create our own value for it. Not that I advocate the kind of reward system the outside provides, but it just -- I would've thought that, it seemed so utopian and so perfect to take competition out, to take the external reward systems out, and to take the achievement ladder out. It just seemed like this was the way people would come into their own. And some people did. But other people simply couldn't do it in that kind of environment.

Q: So it kind of weeded people out, in a way?

A: I guess. It's hard to say. There's so few people who really last over 20 years here. It didn't weed people out quickly, it would weed them out over, between 5 and 10 years. After 5 or 10 years, they would just feel like they weren't getting what they wanted out of community.

Q: Is this a drawback, that the system doesn't provide rewards for --?

A: No, I don't think it's a drawback, it's not like I think that's the way it ought to work, I just think this is an example of, theoretically, philosophically, that shouldn't happen, but I saw it happen a bunch of times, with people who really had a lot to contribute. They weren't lazy people, they weren't deeply troubled people. They were people who came here for very good reasons, but didn't get out of it what they could. So, it's not -- I think any time you try to find different balances in systems, you trade things off, and you lose some of the value that it had. So I'm not saying Twin Oaks should do that.

Q: On a different line of questioning, what were your relationships like with your neighbors in the early years?

A: Actually, very good. Twin Oaks was very careful in how we interacted with the surrounding community. We tried very hard not to be blatant about our differences. We did have one neighbor who had been a school teacher, and had read Walden II, and she knew what we were. She called the police, called the sheriff, "There are communists out there, you got to look into it." When she heard about the air cribs, she said, "They're gassing their children!" Poor sheriff come, all embarrassed. But a lot of local farmers were very, very kind and helpful, because we were very ignorant of farming practices, you know. And we went through a fairly long period, especially when Marion existed, of putting a lot of effort and contribution into the surrounding community, especially at the level of helping people who needed help. There were Marion people who would drive elderly people around, and do errands for them. We just got involved in community groups. So I think that added to our capital. I'm sure -- we always went to town in clothes that would just shock and horrify people -- so I'm sure there were all sorts of things said about us. We didn't -- it was a rule from the very beginning, that local teenagers couldn't hang out here. We were not going to take local people's kids as members. Just . . . I think people understood early-on, there are some levels of threat that are just not worth any cost. And not that any local kids ever wanted to be here.

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Q: Did they ever harass you or anything?

A: In the very early years, I remember local people would come by drunk, men would come by drunk and try to solicit the women. It wasn't -- 25 years ago, almost 30 years ago, so it wasn't horribly threatening. It was a different era. But I remember we had one visitor/manager named Sharon, who was just a very tough woman. And she would run these guys off in no uncertain terms. It seemed like then they stopped coming around.

Q: What were gender roles like in early Twin Oaks?

A: Gender roles?

Q: Did you try and break down traditional roles?

A: Well, the labor credit system certainly tried to do that. And in fact, one of the aspects of the early labor-credit system was, there was no such thing as being a "specialist." You bid for work every week. And that meant that anybody who wanted to do something, the system was blind, to all sorts of things, not just gender or age or competence or skill or anything. It was a stock market kind of thing. Cat was a significant leader from the beginning. When I came here, aside from Cat, there were no other women that I can remember who were really, really had very significant leadership roles. That developed over time. Early on, the feminist movement developed here, from within the first year that I got here. And we were philosophically committed to battling the kinds of ways that gender bias can crop up, as well as having such a strong anti-violence, anti-aggression, anti-competition orientation in our culture, really shifted things away from a traditional, sort of male-dominated type culture. As the years went by, women took on more and more significant leadership roles. And it was, it wasn't like people were competing for power here. I think virtually everybody who lived here would just as soon not have any responsibility. You took on managementships and plannerships and all that business because it needed to be done. So it was the people who sort of felt social responsibility, because there were no benefits. You didn't get paid more for it. You didn't accrue any short-term benefits. Over long periods of time, even though it wasn't really egalitarian, you could gain additional respect, debate, or that sort of thing, if you'd been a really committed, hard-working manager for a decade. But women who were driven to build community, rose in the power ranks.

Q: What was the best part of living at Twin Oaks for you?

A: I suppose, for a good portion of the time, it was the degree of meaning that was just implicit in everything about my life. Everything I did had a larger purpose and a sense. And, certainly, that was something that I had come here needing. It sort of fills a void that I guess religion also fills, or family fills for some people, but I had very deliberately opted not to pursue those sorts of things. Great parties, after the first few years.

Q: After the first few years?

A: Yeah, the first few years, we were pretty serious, we didn't party very well. Like I said, we read books about China. But about the time of what I consider as sort of a renaissance, is when our ability to party well, really developed to an art. For me, it was absolutely wonderful too, the degree of personal development in my life, the skills that I've gained, the insights into organization, my ability to do so

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many things, and to learn so many things. It's still very satisfying, that I did that. I love the fact that I did construction for a long time, and milked cows, and I know where water comes from and sewage goes to, that sort of thing. I know how the systems work that support our lives, at least, here. But it allows me to speak a language and understand it.

Q: What about the flip side: what were the main drawbacks?

A: Of living here? Conflict. That sort of total involvement, 24 hours a day. It really is the flip side of purpose. Now, I have a job that really can be exceedingly stressful, and at the end of the day, I lock my office door, and I go home. I've left it, and I don't have to worry. One of the wonderful things I learned here is that a job is just a job -- no matter how difficult it can be, I can go home at night. That was a good lesson to learn. I can go home at night, and my job's not waiting for me. Whereas here, you never left it. There were crises, and you went into the dining room, and there they were. You'd be in one dining room, and you knew in the smokers' dining room, or the music room, or whatever it was called, wherever it was, were the disaffected, and that you were going to have to confront incredibly painful and threatening things. And they were things that threatened not just your work, but your entire life. "Maybe they'll change Twin Oaks so much that I'll have to leave," or "Maybe Twin Oaks will fall apart from all of this." Just agonizing things. Or, "Maybe the community won't take care of me in this way that I really need to be taken care of." That's a hard thing, that's the hard trade-off. It makes life on the outside much simpler.

Q: Yeah, I'll bet. Why did you end up leaving Twin Oaks?

A: Cat, I think, described it pretty well. I haven't read it carefully, but I've read a few parts of the new book. Will designed Juncoya [?]. That process was an alienating process. By the time the building was built, and the community moved in, the writing was on the wall that we weren't going to be able to stay, there was just too many bridges burned. It was a good time to leave, too. I think raising adolescents -- I don't regret raising my adolescents out there, where they were more under our control, in some ways. It's hard to control kids in this environment, as a parent. It's so big and so diffuse, and they could be anywhere. On the other hand, you can make all kinds of decisions that a community wouldn't make. My kids have gone through so many cars. They've totalled cars right and left, and we just keep buying more. Twin Oaks wouldn't have done that for them. They would never have loaned a car to begin with, much less three or four. So it's nice to be able to make those choices, when you think, "This would be good for my kid. This is what I want. I want my kid to gain independence through the open road."

Q: Was it hard for you to leave?

A: By the time we left, it wasn't. I think the hardest thing for me to leave was the hammock business. I had really grown to love doing that.

Q: Now, when you leave Twin Oaks, you don't get any equity out of it, right?

A: No.

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Q: So you guys must've been awfully poor when you left. Was that hard?

A: We had a \$50 fund. Actually, because I had been there for so long, had kids, and just because I was Gerri, I guess, and I had an enormous vacation balance, we lived here for about 6 months under special circumstances, where we both got jobs, we bought a car, [unintelligible], a bed. They gave us enough money to buy the first car. So we lived here rent-free, and saved up enough money to get the second car so that we could both drive up to work, and build up just enough money to be able to move out. We were poor for a pretty long time, but that wasn't that difficult. You get used to being very poor, in the old days, especially, you got used to being poor living here. My kids' expectations weren't very high, that was for sure.

Q: Are there things from your time in community that you bring forward into your life today?

A: Especially things I bring to work situations. A lot of them have to do with strategy and organization, and systems thinking, that kind of thing. I think that, much more than what I would've expected, which would've been communication skills, and interpersonal skills, not nearly as much as I've been able to make systems work together.

Q: What kind of work do you do now?

A: I work at UVA, in the hospital, and I sort of am responsible for quality there.

Q: So that's a systems job then, right?

A: It's a very systems job, very amorphous. It's not as much fun as running a manufacturing business. It's not as concrete. But I certainly bring my experiences with me in ways that are very obvious to me all the time. It's a good job, it's a good place to work. I like being affiliated with the University of Virginia. I'm proud of it, I'm proud of the medical center.

Q: Are there things about community that you miss?

A: The parties. I come back to them, but they've changed. I've grown up or something. At times, not anymore, but I think early on, I missed the casual socializing. You could walk outside your bedroom, and there would be utter strangers in the living room that you could strike up a conversation with. There were always friends right there, always things happening. But I don't miss that anymore. I've reached the age where I really like to sort of settle down and go to sleep early. I miss walking. Just to get to breakfast is a walk.

Q: Do you no longer live in a rural setting?

A: No. I live in a very small town.

Q: Would you ever live communally again?

A: No. In fact, I don't think I'm ever going to do anything cooperatively again. I have no desire to affiliate with groups.

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Q: Why do you say that?

A: I don't want to work things out with people. I don't even want to be there to watch people have stand-offs with each other about things they believe. I mean, I still have to deal with that at work, and get involved in it at work, but again, that's just work, and I'm not working for philosophical reasons, I'm working to support a family. That's sort of the cost of it, but it's just not worth the trade-off.

Q: Now the next question I have is sort of a terrible question, but it's on our list, so I'll ask it anyway, and that's, do you consider Twin Oaks a success or a failure?

A: I consider it a success.

Q: And why do you say that?

A: It's survived, for almost 30 years. And it's grown, and it's financially, economically viable, and I don't judge it by a single vision that would deem it a success or a failure. It didn't turn out to be what I thought it was going to be in 1974, or what we talked about it being in 1972, and 1977. But just because it isn't that, doesn't -- the fact that it survived, and is robust, it's not surviving made up of just one little extended family that calls itself a community, that satisfies my definition of success.

Q: Do you have any idea what the glue is that kind of keeps people here and keeps Twin Oaks going? This place has certainly survived much longer than most intentional communities of its era.

A: I speak out of a particular set of biases, and I really believe that the community, based on -- that community has an existence and life of its own that's based on very structured organization. Again, it's got all these systems and structure. There's something we learned in school called the 7-S method or approach, developed by, I don't know if he was Harvard business, or McKinsey [?] consulting or something like that, but, Peterman Consulting. But the 7-S has "shared goals" in the middle, and includes "structure, style, staff, systems . . ." I forget what the S's are -- "strategy" -- and basically, Peterman's point was, in order to be a successful company, those 7 S's all need to be working in the same direction. You can't have a system that reinforces one set of values, and a strategy that would demand a different system. Things sort of blow apart. I've never really thought of communes in those terms, but I think its S's have fit together and work together well enough to allow for a long-term survival, as people come and go and fight and change. Some of that goes back to, Lisbeth Moss Cantor [?] wrote a book early on, called Commitment and Community, and she outlines things. Maybe you've read it?

Q: I have.

A: And I think the points she made were pretty valid about a basis for commitment, and some of them are real far from Twin Oaks, but others, I think, laid a foundation for what has kept people here long enough to build things, to attract more people, and just make it survive. And beneath it all is the hammock, the humble hammock. Where would we be without the hammock and Pier I Imports? Not that it couldn't survive now without it, but the economic base was fundamental to the long-term survival of the place. We couldn't have made it 30 years on outside work, I know that.

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Q: Well, as a final sort of wrap-up question, do you feel like you've learned any over-arching lessons about what makes communal living work, or maybe not work?

A: Besides hammocks?

Q: Do you feel disillusioned about community?

A: No.

Q: So you think it can work?

A: In what sense? You mean as a viable alternative option for a significant portion of society? No, I don't think so. Do I think it can work around the edges? It always has. Communal living has been here as long as there have been Europeans on the soil. I can't talk about Native populations and communal living, I mean it's a whole separate issue, but communalism came over, early, was it Germans? I forget what the groups were. But early religious groups. And there has never been a time in American history where there has not been a communal movement. Sometimes it swells, and sometimes it shrinks, but it will always be with us. Well, it was a pleasure.

Q: I'm glad. Thank you.