

Interview with Susan Fisher

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

April 17, 1996

Q: This is an interview with Susan Fisher on April 17th, from the Stelle Community. And I was just asking you about the philosophy, or the history. I'm sorry, if you want to skip it, you can . I hate to take your time.

A: Let's see.

Q: You started by talking about Richard Kinneger [?] and writing a book.

A: Richard Kinneger wrote a book called *The Ultimate Frontier*, under the pen name of Eclau[?] Kuashana [?], it's supposed to be like a spiritual name. In it he outlines a world-view and a philosophy and a vision of building a community to create a better place on earth, and also to withstand coming future earth changes. But the book is incredibly comprehensive and covers not just, uh, philosophy, world-view, values, ethics, but, you know, ancient civilizations, future earth changes -- I mean just everything you can -- seven planes of existence, uh, the nature of reality, purpose of existence, that is all in this book. So it's a very ... very large, all-encompassing kind of treatise. Um, anyway, he published this book, a lot of people read it. Many of them were very struck by it and intrigued and um, drawn to it, and contacted him, and they formed a group up in Rogers Park, uh, Chicago. And um, started pooling money and resources and went about trying to buy the land on which he was supposed to build this community. The community's name was "Stelle," which means "the place" in German. Um, and, ... it uh, was -- the land was bought in a parcel of 240 acres. It had an old farmhouse on it and a few out-buildings, and nothing else. Um, they gradually started doing work on it, putting in many, many, many long hours, volunteer hours, as well as um, you know, hours that were paid at a very minimum wage . And they were able to build the community. Now the community was built in such a way that it was to look extremely middle-class. It has its own water and sewage treatment plants. It has curbs and sidewalks. It has paved streets. It has very ... middle-class America looking homes, ranch and, you know, two-story style houses. I think we've got the only tri-level, but since it was built in the last eight years, you can't count that as an original building. Um, and they just started working on it. It took a long time, but in 1973, they had enough buildings started and one that was near completion that they actually called April 1st, April Fool's Day, the founding day of Stelle. We've always thought that was somehow significant. [laughs] But, ... so anyway, um, people moved in, in April of 1973. Um, after that there was a big building burst, there were um, at least a dozen or more homes that were built within the next three to five years. Probably 20, 25, 30 even, homes that were built, because now that I think about it, the vast majority -- we have 45 homes right now, living units I should say, because some of them are duplexes, 45 living units, separate homes, some of them duplexes, some of them single-family structures -- that were built in a very short period of time. And people started moving down here and inhabiting it. And the rule was that if you were going to live in Stelle, you had to belong to the Stelle Group, this philosophical, educational organization. And you had to um, basically believe in the world-view that they had, and they had, uh, that was outlined in *The Ultimate Frontier*. And you had to follow the rules for the community. And the idea was we were trying to create a better place to live. Actually, we were trying to create the precursor to the kingdom of God. Which is a big order to fill. I mean, who knows what the kingdom of God is supposed to be like? All we knew was that it was supposed to be the best of the best. And um, so everybody was earnestly trying to be the best that they could be. Um, down side of that was that there were some very rigid ideas about what the best of the best was. Men were not allowed to have facial hair, women were not allowed to wear pants. There was always, you had to have

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a very clear delineation of the sexes in appearance in the early days. There was a very strong sense that rearing children was incredibly important, and I would say that is a value that is still held today, that rearing children is one of the most important tasks you can have in a life-time. Um, there's a lot of emphasis on early education and on trying to raise our children to be the finest that they could be. That has its upsides and it has its downsides. You could, you know, there are people who will tell you that it -- there was too much pressure and too much emphasis put on that, and there are others who will tell you that they felt like it was very supportive for them to do the best that they could with their child, and it was a wonderful place to raise a child. So it sort of depends on how you related to that. Um, ... but anyway. Uh, the community existed from 1973 to about ... I have to think now, ... 1980 or '81, as a closed community. And around 1980 or '81, Richard Kinneger, who by now had left the community and moved down to Texas and was visiting the community on a monthly basis, but still had something of a leadership position with the Stelle group and the community, um, came back one time and he announced that he felt like it was appropriate to open the community, that it was no longer working to have the community closed, that it was, it was uh, in the best interest of everyone, and his teachers had told him that this was the thing to do, and that he was to take the best people, his hand-picked few, and move to Texas, and the rest of us would sort of try to come along as we would, and as we advanced we might be able to move to Texas. So, it was a very poorly done change. What was interesting was that about the time that he did this, we were having public meetings and hearings and investigations on our own to try and figure out why we had had over a thousand people move to Stelle, and yet we never had a population of more than 200. You know, it was kind of like, "Eight hundred people can't be wrong. What are we doing? Why aren't we able to grow? Why aren't we able to progress?" And one of the things that was consistently coming up was that it was too repressive of an atmosphere. It was too difficult an economic climate. And it was, uh, there were not enough emotional, social rewards, uh, for people to stick it out. It just wore them out. And they left. It was on that task force . And we were on the verge of making recommendations to basically open up the community, and literally, the next month, that month, Richard came out with this hearing, this, "Oh, the teachers have told me this," and I thought, "Yes, you really saved yourself on that one!" But anyway.

Q: What happened to his group that went to Texas?

A: Well it was interesting, it totally, it was a disaster. He took the trustees, who were all excellent, excellent people. I mean I really have very high regard for them. Very bright, hard-working, devoted people. Um, invited them to go to Texas. They went down to Texas. I mean, sold their businesses, their homes, moved their families. And they got there, and realized that there was nothing going on in Texas. That it was, the whole thing was a waste of their time. And, there was, they were frustrated, and um, there was a lot of bad feelings, because Richard Kinneger was someone who was a very manipulative person. You know, he fell into the, I'm sure it's probably a pretty common trap of a leader being -- when you have someone turning to you all the time saying, "What should I do? What should I do?" it's probably very seductive and very difficult to restrain yourself from telling them what to do. And um, there were people here who did that, who said, "What should I do? What should I do?" and he did definitely tell people what to do. Uh, but sometimes he went too far, and um, he did not practice what he preached. He um, was not a good leader, and he lost the trust of the majority of the community. And that's real thumbnail. I mean, you can get into all details, but it's sort of -- the basic issue is one of

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leadership and trust and practicing what you preach. And he was not able to do that, and the people called him on it and basically expelled him. And he went to Texas. And it was sort of like one of those things, when you're being driven out of town, get out in front and make it into a parade. And he did that real well, and he went down to Texas and said he had better things to do there, and he was building another community. And in fact he is still trying to build that community, and it's been a long time. It's been 15 or 20 years, I think maybe they've got three, four buildings up. And uh, --

Q: Does it have a name?

A: Uh, Adelphe[?]. Yes, Adelphe.

Q: And what part of Texas is that?

A: It's down near Garland, Garland, Texas, outside Dallas. And uh, they have a group there, uh, I don't know how they are now. They might be as big as 30 or something. Last I had been in contact with them was many years ago, probably seven or eight years ago, there was maybe ... there were 20 or less people that were associated with it. So anyway, the people left, and they went to Texas, they'd left the people up here with a very bad taste in their mouth, because of course, we were just the dregs. Um, I was one of those people. I thought it was the healthiest thing that happened to the community, because I thought, "Finally, we're going to just create an identity for ourselves, and stay with it." It was a very tumultuous period, there was a lot of soul-searching, and a lot of, "What are we really about. If we're not really two handshakes away from God, through Richard Kinnegar, who are we and what are we?" And um, and it really kind of made people sift through their values and decided whether or not they were here ... because of someone else's dream or because of their own dream, and what was that dream? And ... I think that what happened as part of that process, we created a home owner's association to help us, because we were too small to be an incorporated village, and we needed to have an interim form of government, a way to structure ourselves and operate our land, our sewage treatment plant, our water treatment plant, take care of our streets, manage our common grounds. Um, and so we formed this home owners association, and we all joined it. And um, ... or most of us joined it, I should say. There, I don't think everybody in Stelle's ever done anything all at once, so we still have a few hold-outs on that. But um, over the next several years, we really did come into our own. The home owners association figured out how to function, we set up books, we had budgets, we elected boards of directors, we went through, uh, just a period of learning how to be on our own. It was kind of like leaving home, you know? There was very much a sense of that we were entering into our older adolescence, and we needed to learn how to deal with things on our own. And it was trying, and it was um, kind of a difficult period where people were trying to figure out how to be a community. And whether or not we had validity out, in our own right, without claiming to have some special spiritual teacher. And in fact, what's come out of it, it's been now, well, what are we, we're in '96, and that was probably around '81, so it's 15 years, right? So it's been 15 years, and where we've come to right now is we really feel very strongly we do have validity. You know, that the community does have a life of its own. That there are many of the original values that are still operative here, specifically, a lot of emphasis on ... on uh, personal responsibility, that you create your world, and that there are no victims. That um, if you're unhappy with the way things are, you better figure out a way to change it. And um, uh, continuing emphasis on education. A lot of people here very interested in learning, sort of womb to

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tomb concept, and a lot of emphasis on families as being the cornerstone of civilization, and the need to support strong families and encourage parents to be there for their children in as focused a capacity as they can. Which has resulted in us having a large, a large proportion of full-time mothers, um, and a lot of community interaction with small children and uh, a lot of cross-age, you know -- the kids feel like their best friends are the adults, and that there's a lot of adult-child interaction, and um, it's just, it's very refreshing. It's a lot of fun.

Q: Can you describe a little bit more about the beliefs of the community, the original beliefs? I think you described that there was sort of two parts to it, or at least this is the way the outsiders would say: there was a religious part and a doomsday part?

A: The doomsday part, and then the sort of philosophical part. Well the philosophical part is like, can be like, rather complex. Um, see ... hmmm. In *The Ultimate Frontier*, there's a philosophy and a world-view outlined, and this world-view involves the acknowledgement of the fact that there is more than one plane of existence. There is more to us than just a physical body. That there are multiple planes of existence, and that the purpose for man's [sic] advancement is to become one with God. And he does that through trial and error and through learning through cause and effect. Um, that reincarnation is real. That we come back life after life to learn lessons, until we have learned and perfected ourselves to a point where we no longer need to incarnate. So that's sort of ... a nutshell approach. That, um, hopefully the purpose of civilization would be to promote that kind of learning. To foster an environment in which people can grow and perfect themselves, and that was part of what was behind Stelle. We really wanted to create a safe, nurturing place for personal growth. "The climate conducive for egoit [?] growth," that's how we phrased it. Which I still, very much believe in. And um, so that's sort of the, I guess that would be a very nutshell approach to the philosophy. Um, the Golden Rule, cause and effect, do unto others, what goes around comes around, that would be the most basic way of looking at the philosophy. There's a lot of esoteric things about how many planes of existence there are, function on the mental plane and the earth plane at the same time? And how does our body manifest its physical illnesses, and -- there's a lot of "how many angels dance on the head of a pin" type part of it, which you can spend hours on, but, to me that doesn't really matter. What really matters is... what you manifest here and now. So, now, the doomsday part of it had to do with the fact that, in the book it outlines the fact that the world-view Richard wrote about involved the fact that there had been ancient civilizations, uh, Lemori [?] and Atlantis in particular. And ancient Egypt -- they were quite advanced, and had fallen into ruin for one reason or another. And at least at Lemori and Atlantis, um, ... were uh, held to have collapsed due in part to earth changes that had happened. And it also said that, uh, that we were coming to a point again, approaching the year 2000, when we're going to be at another crossroads. And that there was an excellent chance that there would be more earth changes. That there were be severe economic and financial collapse in the United States. That, you know, all, a lot of earthquake, and volcanic activity would occur, famines, floods, um, tornados, severe weather patterns that would wipe out a lot of the earth and a lot of people and cause a lot harm and suffering. And it was just sort of a ... way of dealing with the ... karmic imbalance and the, spiritual imbalance that people had gotten to, that it was necessary to do that. Very depressing world-view, in my opinion. Um, but to some people, it was refreshing, because it meant you had a clean slate, and that after that period of time, there would be a new civilization which arose, it would be the kingdom of heaven, on earth, so to speak,

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that it would be a civilization which, once again, focused on personal growth, which had a more unified world-view, -- a kinder, gentler, to use a George Bushism -- to humanity. More unified, less war. And we would actually be able to, once again, advance.

Q: Were there some Christian aspects to it too? 'Cause I know I've seen the cross in that symbol?

A: Well, very much so. I mean, they very much believe that, I would say that it was a Christian-based world-view. I mean, they believe in Jesus Christ as having been, um, a manifestation of God. That God actually came through Jesus while he was on earth -- and this is really weird that you're talking to me about it, because actually, see, I have no church upbringing. I have not read the Bible, I have never gone to church, so this is kind of what I have gotten from the reading I've done there, and discussion groups and things I've been in since I've become an adult, but, so it's real hard for me when people start trying to pin it down to conventional church wisdom, it's like, "Ah, you're talking to a pagan!" you know? But um, yes, Jesus was a spiritual leader, and he was a highly evolved person, and that for a period of his life, he actually did have Christ, who was a very, very highly evolved, not quite God, but Christ was way up there, manifest through his body. That he was crucified, that he did rise again, and that he was there to teach us that love is the most important thing, and that um, that, that we live after life, you know, that you should not fear death. Um, so yes, it is a Christian-based thing. But it also acknowledges that Mohammed was a great spiritual teacher, and it also acknowledges that there were other great spiritual teachers in the world, depending on which culture you're in, and that they all have great, uplifting messages for mankind. Buddha, you know, um, also acknowledges great spiritual teachers, so.

Q: Where did some of the behavioral mandates, or whatever you want to call them, come from? Like, the women wearing skirts, and the men not having facial hair, and then I guess no smoking --

A: No smoking, yeah, yeah. Well the no smoking thing is pretty simple. I mean it was, that to me is pragmatic and based on, we were trying to create a place that was a safe, nurturing, healthy environment. So, of course no smoking. Um, ... we also were, we emphasized whole foods and natural foods, although we loved our chocolate, and um, chocolate-chip cookies were a big hit, and brownies, you know --

Q: Were people primarily vegetarian?

A: No, actually, no. They were quite meaty. I think we're more vegetarian now than we were then. There's a higher percentage of vegetarians, or quasi-vegetarians now. Mainly because of ... um, for health reasons now. I mean there's some people who morally and ethically feel that what they need to do. But then, it was, vegetarianism was not something that was promoted or expected. Um, ... the behavioral stuff, I think, ... I have no idea where it came from. Richard Kinneger would probably lead you to believe that it was his teachers. But you know, I'm at the point where I'm extremely skeptical that this was his teachers. I think if you look at him as a man, and you analyze his background, he basically had a 1950's style of living that he tried to manifest here. It's almost as if Stelle was a time warp. You know, when you stepped into Stelle in the '70's, it was like, almost like being in '50's, you know. The women wore their hair up, uh, they always wore dresses. The men were always clean-cut, clean-shaven. And I think it was just this sort of stodgy, older gentleman that uh, didn't progress. That's where he froze in time, and that's what he manifested, and his word was held very highly, so that's where it came from.

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And there was a lot of debate about it. I mean there were people who did grow beards, "Oooh!" you know? "Oh my God, what a terrible thing!" Women who did wear pants on occasion.

Q: And you said in the beginning it was more of a cooperative community in that people -- there were a lot of households that --

A: Yes. I mean it was kind of like, the goal was to live on-site, as they put it. Because when you're building the town, you don't have very many places to live, and everybody's moved here to be a part of this endeavor. The goal was, "Oh, I've got a place on-site!" And you know, sometimes you would have, you'd be -- we had houses that would be like three bedroom houses with a den and a family room and a living room, and you'd have people living in every room, I mean, it was just like, we were -- the population was, started out largely young, in their 20's and 30's, a lot of single people, and as we grew older, the ones that hung on got married, had families, and so, while we started out sharing households -- like the first house I moved into in Stelle, I shared, my husband and I shared a house, it was a two-bedroom home, we shared it with a single woman. We each had a bedroom, we shared the common spaces and the refrigerator, the stuff like that. Now, she was not a particularly communal person, so God forbid we should eat the same food, you know? But then, I've lived in two other households with two other families, and we did. We had a communal household food budget, and we shared all of our expenses, and um, we even went so far, in one household, we called ourselves Cooperative Living Systems, and we, you know we really did do things extremely cooperatively. We were not 100% communal in the sense that we shared all income, but we were, we were more that direction than we were separate. There was a considerable amount of that. And it was mainly just trying to make use of what resources you had, you know? When you had these big purges, I mean, there were two periods of time when about 40 left Stelle. One was when Richard invited a whole bunch of people to Texas, and there was another period of time prior to that, um, ... uh, many years, seven to ten years prior to that, uh, where ... maybe five to seven years -- where there was like an uproar. Difference in opinion, and difference in management style, and a whole bunch of people left Stelle. They were all trustees and things like that, and they packed up and they left and they went to Wisconsin. And, so when that would happen, you'd have this void, and we'd have more space, and so, people would kind of spread out to fill the space. We got to a point where we had enough housing here where we could, literally, people could afford to have a whole house -- the other thing was we stopped working at minimum-wage jobs, and when you do that you can afford to live and use more space. You know, you can afford a whole house for yourself. If you got a house that's costing \$500 a month, and you're only, you know, you can only afford \$125 a month, well you rent a bedroom. You don't get a whole house. Part of it was economic. Um, ... you know, part of it was social. Social changes. I don't think there was ever any really strong communal households, but there was a lot more cooperative stuff going on. And I think as we got stronger economically, that people didn't see the need to cooperate as much.

Q: What brought you to Stelle?

A: Um, I was 23 when I moved here, and I had read *The Ultimate Frontier* when I was 17. And I liked very much, what I read in there that had to do with education, early education, and child development and the importance of early education and the importance of being a parent. Because at that time I was convinced that that's what I really wanted to do, was learn how to be an excellent early childhood

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educator. I was studying early childhood education in college. I remember telling people. They'd say, "Well what are you going to do when you graduate?" And I'd say, "Well, I'm going to become a mother." "Oh really? Why are you going to school?" That was the answer. And I thought, "Ooh, aren't we limited? Let's all just be stupid and have children!" But um, I was very attracted to early education, I was very attracted to the idea of building a community. I can remember reading books when I was younger, especially, uh, what did I read? Um, the one about Israel -- Exodus. I remember reading Exodus, and they talked about building the kibbutzes, and I just thought that was the coolest thing ever! You know, I mean, the concept of building something out of nothing, and doing it yourself, and having an impact, and creating an environment, was, and is still to me, what has been attracted me and what holds me here. So. Other people came here because they were trying to avoid the end of the world, or they wanted to be, you know, close to Richard who wrote this book. And I think many of those people have left.

Q: Did you do things to prepare for the end of the world, like ... store food, or create special buildings or anything like that?

A: Yeah, yeah. Well, no, we never got into that special building creation, but we did store food, yeah, they were stockpiling food, and, oh it was really funny. It was kind of like, everybody was so convinced that the end of the world was going to happen, they saved everything. They were like pack rats. And, some of that's okay, but I mean, you know, it would get kind of out of hand. I think what ended up happening is we actually managed to manifest our own economic depression in Stelle. People were so busy just getting by, and just hanging on, and convinced that something was going to happen, it's like, you can really make it manifest. You don't progress, you don't live in the future because you don't think there is a future, you know? You don't get further education, you don't further your skills or you knowledge or your job opportunities, or ... you know? You just sort of sit there, waiting for the boom to come down. And that's pretty much what happened, I mean, it just got to the point where people were, they weren't doing very well, and after a while, um, there was a point where Richard had said that the, the United States would not see its 201st birthday. Well that's 1977, right? So, big crisis when 1977 comes and goes, right? And uh, I think that's partly when people started going, "You know what? I don't know if this stuff is all true." So, to this day, there are still people in Stelle who believe very strongly that there is going to be major earth-changes at the end of the century, and we are still facing that very real possibility. And there are others who have no belief whatsoever in it. And there are others who are in the middle ground. And I would put myself somewhere in the middle ground. Um, the way I look at it is, I look at the world and I watch, um, the hurricanes that hit Florida, and you watch the earthquakes in California, and you think, "Hmm, those people could've been a whole lot better if they were prepared to make it on their own for awhile. At least a month or two." And uh, so, at that level, I really think that's where I'm at. And I know, we have food, we have stockpiled food, we have extra supplies. And it comes in handy, because you get a bad blizzard or something, you don't have to worry about running. When you live this isolated, it is a -- way I've made peace with it, is it a economic and a prudent way to live, not to be living on the edge, but to create a buffer zone for yourself. Because also, for me, I like to feel like I can always have someone come over, and I can always feed them and I can always give to them. So it's more operating from -- I can't relate to it from a contracted space of "Oh my God, I'd better protect everything and hole up in my bunker." But rather, "I want to have so much that I can take care of others who might need it." And in fact, now, in the community, there's a group of people -- we were talking

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about this at dinner -- SNAP: Stelle Neighbors Actively Preparing. And it's based on something we'd read in some magazine that someone else was doing after the earthquakes in California and stuff, they realized that there needed to be more preparedness in their communities. And there's a group of people who thought, "You know, we really need to do that, because we have people moving here who don't particular believe in having anything more than a week supply of groceries, and we want to be able to feel like if something should happen, we can take care of everyone. We don't want to be sitting there going, 'Oh you can't have my Wheaties.'" So, a lot of us have contributed money, and, to this fund, and we are purchasing bulk goods and storing them, and the idea is that they're there for everybody and anybody who needs them. So yeah, a lot of food stockpiling, material stockpiling, um, ... there was a lot of effort put into creating something that we can hopefully maintain on our own. That's why we started our own telephone company, which is kind of silly, because of course, once the lines go down outside, who are we going to talk to? But, but we can talk internally. We will have household ability to communicate within Stelle. Uh, we now have a telephone company that's completely off the grid.

Q: And does that also have to do with your energy generation as well?

A: Um-hmm. Lot of the efforts that we have toward self-sufficiency with energy come from that.

Q: And you have a wind generator, and --?

A: We have a wind generator for our water treatment plant, which is not functioning right now. We're in the process of purchasing a new wind generator head. When we get that installed, we're hoping to have it set up in such a way that we'll have battery -- well, either direct feed or battery back-up. Right now, what we do is we generate enough electricity that it runs it back through the grid and it basically runs our bill down to nothing. So we don't have to pay for it. What we'd like to do is make it so that we can cut the cord on [unintelligible] if we need to, and still have enough electricity generated and stored that we can pump our own water, so that if push comes to shove in bad weather or bad times, we would be able to have basic water, and therefore hygiene, and you know. That public service would be protected. We do have systems in place where we could set up another wind-mill to generate the pumps which circulate our sewage treatment plant as well. So we've thought about that. I mean, that's the kind of thing you think about when you have the possibility of everything falling apart. But at the same time, I've got an 18 year old son that's going off the college and a 23 year old that's going off to college, and I'm not sitting there going, "Oh, don't go to school, don't plan for the future, don't go out there. It's a big bad world, and it's all going to fall down." I mean it might, it might not. I truly hope it doesn't. I hope nothing happens. I hope the world just gets better and better. But at the same time, there's no place I'd rather be if it did fall apart, because here, at least people have thought about it. If something like that were to happen, we'd go, "Well, look at that! It's really happening!" But we wouldn't flip out, we wouldn't panic, we wouldn't be terrified. You know, we would just say, "Okay, we've thought about this. Now we have to deal with this." Which is not to say it wouldn't be extremely stressful, and challenging and difficult. But the people here have a real sense of, "We can do this. You only get what you can handle. We will handle this." Um, so it's a real nice mental flexibility that comes with that.

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Q: Now I think you said before when the tape wasn't working, a little bit about your membership policy back in the early years?

A: Uh-huh, yeah, you had to, in order to be a member of the Stelle group, you had to apply, in writing, fill out a personality questionnaire, a psychological test as you will, have an interview, go through a trial period, during which you took orientation classes which were based on becoming familiar with the philosophy in-depth. Orientation classes at first lasted only about 2 months, and then they got up to 6 months, and then they got up to a year. And, yeah, by that time, that's when everybody was going, "Get real, this is way too long." And then you had interviews during that process. Part of the bad thing that was going on is what they were doing is that they were interviewing people that you lived with and your neighbors, and asking for feedback, negative and positive. And what it did was it effectively made everybody sit in judgment on one another, a real unhealthy situation, very, very unhealthy. I was very glad when we got away from it. And what was really funny is that from my personal perspective, I think we had more lunatic fringe people move to Stelle when we had all these, you know, screening methods. I mean, we had more bizarre personalities, and odd people move to Stelle during that time period, that were, you know, "seal of approval," than we did when we opened up. Once we opened up, there were no longer any membership criteria, there was nobody guarding the door, and one of the big fears for people was, "My God, anybody could move here!" And I can remember one of the people who I thought was more sane than the others, say, "Well let's just see it, and see how weird we get. Let's try it, and see how weird we get." And I thought, "Yeah, let's do!" you know? And the reality was, nobody wanted to be here! I mean it was just -- there wasn't, the people who were actually the strangest were people who wanted to part of a group for basically unbalanced reasons. They were not self-sufficient, they were looking for a support system, or an escape hatch or something. And, we didn't have those people coming anymore, they left and went to Texas. [laughs] So it was kind of neat.

Q: That's really interesting. Now in the early years, what sorts of community type things did you do? Did you have regular meetings, regular classes? Services?

A: We never had services. We've never functioned as a church. That's one thing that was a big misnomer, is people said, "Oh, that's that religious community." I would have to say this has never been a religious community. We have never had an acknowledged priesthood, as much of a "spiritual leader" as Richard was supposed to be, he was more of a ... a guy that was supposed to have spiritual evolved beings whispering in his ear, therefore you should really pay attention to what he said. That was kind of his position. Not that he was a particularly -- I mean, I would personally, never recommend you use him for any kind of spiritual guidance, because he was pretty, um, inadequate in that respect. Um, we did have monthly community meetings, and the attendance was mandatory. I mean, they had someone taking attendance at the door. So, if you didn't show up, you better have a good reason. They were with Richard, they did discuss everything from mundane issues of how the department of building is doing, and the water treatment plant and the streets, to um, are we going to be building airships to survive the cataclysms at the turn of the century, and if so, how are we going to do that, and um, oh we had all sorts of things to discuss. And the meetings went quite late. And interestingly enough, not very much happened. We spent a lot of time discussing things and not much doing things. That's my overall memory of it. We also have first Sunday -- that was a monthly meeting -- and we also had first Sunday of the month open-house question-answer session with Richard, where people who didn't live here could

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come and ask him questions. Mostly kind of "How many angels dance on the head of a pin," and "What kind of karma would I have if I accidentally took a five dollar bill when I thought it was a ten," and things like that, you know? Just sort of like really odd, I don't know. To me they kind of like, "Who cares?"

Q: And would you eat together?

A: We would have, um, what we called "dinner meeting night." Dinner meeting night was the Friday before the meeting. Meetings were always on Friday nights. And uh, Friday night we would have everybody eating the same menu in different households.

Q: Oh, how odd!

A: It was. It was a really interesting thing. And then you had to, you had people seated together, and you tried to mix people up, but then you had to make sure you'd mix them in such a way that they were with their significant other -- which was, not that's an interesting thing. 'Cause you had to know who was sleeping with whom, or who was involved with whom, and what if they had just broken up? Did you know about it as a hostess? It was very odd. But um, we'd all have the same menu, and that was sort of odd. The idea was we were going to try to make it like we were together, but we had no physical place to be together in one room. We did not have any place that was big enough for that. This was before we had a community center. We did not really have a community center until the community opened up and the Stelle group was no longer the sole organization. Now that is interesting. It was kind of like we needed community, and that's when we formed a community center.

Q: So that was after Richard left that you got the community center?

A: Yes, after Richard left, after the community opened, yeah. And now the community center's real important to everybody. It's like a very central part.

Q: So the Stelle group is a non-profit, 501C3 educational organization that owns some of the land and some of the buildings?

A: Exactly. And it runs, at this point it runs a home study program, that's philosophically oriented. It has mailing lists, of people who correspond with it. It lives off of donations and book sales, it sells books, esoteric books, educational books, independent, you know, home alternative energy books, all sorts of books. Um, it used to operate a private school, that was a Montessori school, it used to operate a private elementary through junior high age school that had very good, effective, individualized learning. Um, when the enrollment got down, they had to shut down the school. So it's no longer functioning right now, although the building is still there, and now we're trying to get a Montessori classroom going again.

Q: And the original idea was to have um, some sort of a business that everybody in the community worked in?

A: Yeah, sort of. The founder, Richard Kinneger, had written about Stelle as being "a city that was industrially strong." That was the phrasing I remember. Which I always thought was odd, because I grew up in the '60's and the '70's, and industrially strong was polluting, and generally negative. But, he grew up in the '30's, '40's, '50's, and so he had a different concept of it. You know, industrially strong was a

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good thing. Um, so what he did was he started two industries here, one was Stellewood, it was a woodworking factory, they made cabinets at one time, and then they made other things out of wood. Um, you know, everything from housewares to bumpers for pooltables, rulers, I remember them making that. Anyway, they had that factory for awhile. And, in the factory in Stelle. And they also had a plastics manufacturing plant there, injection [?] molding. And the woodworking plant went bankrupt, it could not compete with third-world manufactures, which it was competing with. We just couldn't pull it off. And so it went bankrupt. And the plastics manufacturing plant also was going downhill very fast, and was bought out by a Chicago-based company, which operated for another three to five years, and then it folded. And for awhile the factory sat vacant, and then more recently in the last two, three years, two years I think it is, maybe three, this spring, a local individual, entrepreneur, Stelle person, bought the factory, and is now rehiving it, and filling it with his picture-frame molding operation. He employs, oh I don't know, 20 to 30 people and produces picture frames, sells them to places like Wal-mart.

Q: Can you say what the relationship is of Stelle to the neighboring communities and farms and things it's been like?

A: Oh, it was very rocky at first. They were very doubtful, because you see, out here in the country, if you drive down the road and you see somebody, whether you know them or not, you wave at them. Everybody always waves, very chatty, like to talk, "Hi, how are you doing?" Well, the people who built Stelle didn't know this, they moved from Chicago, they didn't wave at anybody. So right away, everybody's going, "What's wrong with them? Why aren't they waving at us?" Then they started building, and when they built they did not tell anyone what they were doing. And of course, local farmers would stop by and say, "Hey, whatcha doing there? Lotta activity!" And they'd like, "Well, nothing really, we're just, -- nothing, really." Which, you know, did not go over well. And um, because they didn't want to arouse suspicion, right? So they didn't say anything. Duh. So anyway, that whole culminated when, at one point, somebody came and shot out a light in Stelle. Somebody drove through and literally shot out a streetlight. And that was a big wake-up call. Everybody went, "Hmm. We really need to fix this." So we started having open houses. And we'd invite everybody who wanted to come to Stelle could come. We'd tour them through the factory, we'd open up three or four houses, they could walk through the houses. We'd put on, you know, barbecue pork sandwiches, and we had, you know, we just had arts and crafts people from Stelle would sell things. It was just a big PR, "Hi, we're not so weird," kind of thing. And um, they were big successes. They helped a lot. Because people, you know people used to come through Stelle and they'd roll their windows up and drive through town very slowly, because they were frightened of us. They were definitely frightened of us. But after um, after we started doing the open houses it got better. It got a lot better. And then we got to the point where we didn't feel like we needed open houses anymore, and so we stopped, and um, ... we also by that time got to know some of the local merchants and everything like that, and our business started interfacing with their businesses. But there was still quite a bit of prejudice against us, we were that weird cult commune, out in the middle of the cornfields, and you know, we were into wife-swapping, and we were into -- which is, you know. You know all the negative things you can think: devil worship, wife-swapping, building airships, survivalists, uh, whatever. We did have a lot of very bad press that went out about us. In fact I just talked to a couple the other night who had been thinking about buying a house out here, and they were telling me that they really, really liked the community, what they saw, they really liked

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the house, they liked all the houses, they liked the feeling of the town, they liked the people they met, but, after they went back and were seriously going to put in an offer on this house, they started having their neighbors and friends tell them how weird Stelle was. And they started really being concerned. So they decided, you know, they had two young boys, they didn't want to move into some weird cult place and find themselves in the middle of Jonestown or something. So they went and they did research, okay? Well the research that they accessed -- this is the thing that I have become totally distrustful of journalists, is public newspapers and everything, and all of that -- I can tell you most of it was incredibly biased, incredibly negative, and very damaging. So they read this stuff, believed it, and that was the last they had anything to do with Stelle, until they met me yesterday, actually, it was three days ago, and were looking at another property and they found out where I was from, they just couldn't stop asking about it. "Are you really like this?" and "Are you really like that?" And I'm going, "No, no, no." It's just a lot of really bad press. So, right now, a lot of our children are now going to the local public school. That has helped a lot. Because we go to the basketball games and we're at the awards banquets, and we're room mothers, and we're -- you know, we do things in community with the other people from the small towns. Um, we have some of our people involved in the local Ford County emergency services program. In fact the head of the emergency services for Ford County is a Stelle member now. And so we have a lot of respect from that particular community. We have donated very, very substantially to the local fire department, to let them know we appreciate them being there. I'm involved in a couple of school, um, ... kind of committees and the high school level. And I've -- it's funny, myself and another Stelle woman were recently asked if we'd like to run for the school board for Tripoint[?], and I thought, that was very flattering, because I thought, "Oh right, really, 'Vote for Sue - the Stelle person.'" That would be quite a change if that happened. I'm almost tempted to do it just to see if it would work. Um, so there's involvement in there. And our children, now that they're going to the schools, I mean I can remember, this year I met one of the, I was talking to one of the teachers, and they were saying, "Oh --[tape ends] ...they don't usually give you problems in classes and they're all pretty smart." And, you know, that's pretty accurate, you know? They're, the children who've grown up here for a great length of time are used to a lot of adult interaction, and they're used to being related to as adults, and so they kind of have that ambience around them. And, they don't have real major, um, behavioral -- which is not to say they're perfect, I mean my son's been suspended from school twice for, what I consider major infractions, but they're just stupid teenage things they did. I mean, they weren't anything horrible. I mean, nothing that involved violence or anything -- things like toilet-papering the principal's house. Bad idea. But you did it anyway, you know? Um, ... you know, passing a note that had lewd drawings in it, even though, as he put it, "I didn't do the drawings, Mother, I was passing it." That sort of thing. It's not going to be the end of the world. But it's like, "Oh good. Here we are again." So, that has helped a lot, the interaction of the parents with the children, and them meeting -- he's got a girlfriend from out of town. You know, that sort of thing. So, you know, it's like, there's a sense, people used to worry that -- we used to have high school classes come and study us for sociology. It was wild. They'd bus in, from Bradley Rivernae [?], these school buses would come in and they'd all troop out, and they'd walk all over Stelle, and then they would come in and sit down in the community center, and they'd interview a bunch of us. And the question they had asked were things like, "Well, how would you feel if your son were to date a Catholic girl?" And, we'd just kind of go, "Huh?" you know? Or, "How do you indoctrinate your children into your believe system?" And you know what's interesting is that there is very little

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indoctrination that happens. I mean, it 's just, they live with us, they live with our values, but we don't tell them, "This is what you have to believe." So none of them have that. I think they, the closest thing I've had to a philosophical discussion about things like world changes with my son was when he was considering college, and he said, I said, "Where are you thinking of going to college?" And he goes, "Oh I thought I'd just try to find some volcanic somewhere where I could go to school." And he said that knowing that, you know, he's heard people discuss about the possibility that there might be all these volcanic eruptions, and you know, like when there's chain of fires going off, and there are more earthquakes happening, and I go, "You're just doing this to give me a hard time, Mike." And he goes, "Right!" So, um, I would say right now, we have a good working relationship with the local towns. The most trouble we're getting is from bored teenagers, not so much from the local, within, ten mile radius of us, but some towns that are like 30 miles away, there's one town called Dwight, and it's a 30 minute drive from here. For some reason we've had carloads of kids come through and vandalize us from Dwight, and be rude and obnoxious. And I'm going, you know, I'm at a point now where I'm thinking, maybe a bunch of us need to go to the Dwight school system and say, "Is there something going here that we need to like talk with them, or maybe have an open forum discussion or something? That they need to like, find out what the reality is?" Because for some reason, kids in Dwight have a real charge about Stelle. But, parents are generally good. And, plus, I think as we've gotten, we've been here longer, it used to be sometimes when we were going through the most rocky period of Stelle, people would not even tell people they were from Stelle. You know, they wouldn't say -- "Well where do yo live?" "Well, I live south of Cabur [?]," they wouldn't say "I'm from Stelle." And I remember when I started in real estate, I made a real point of just saying, "Yeah, I live out in Stelle." And uh, boy, first few times I did that, people would like step back, "Oh, you're from Stelle?" And it was a real negative thing. And then I'd coax them and say, "Yeah, bet you heard some really good stories about us." And then they'd start with the stories and I'd throw in a few, and they'd laugh and they'd throw in a few, and then, pretty soon, everything's fine, and they're going, "You know, you just seem, really fine, for someone from Stelle." "You seem really normal!" So I would say at this point, we have a really good working relationship. But it hasn't been that way always.

Q: Now when we walking around, you talked about how Stelle has really offered you the opportunity to learn a lot of things and grow in a lot of ways. Yeah, could you talk about that a little bit, like maybe your midwifery group?

A: Yeah. When I came here, I was like 23, and I knew I wanted to have a home birth. And I had been communicating in writing to the Stelle group for about 7 years, and they were very big on natural childbirth, and family-centered childbirth. And they had written an article about the perfect birthing center, and duh, I assumed they were building this thing. So I came here, and got pregnant immediately, and said, "Well, I'm going to have home birth! Where's the birthing center?" And they said, "Well we don't have one. " And I thought, "Oh my God, what am I going to do now?" So, they said, "Well why don't you create a birth program?" And I said, "Well don't you even have prenatal classes?" "No." "Don't you even have a list of midwives?" "No." "Don't you even -- don't you even have anything?" "No." And the attitude was, "Well look, if you want it, why don't you create it?" So, I got with um, a woman who was a nurse practitioner, a certified nurse practitioner, and a woman who was a Lamaze [?] instructor, and myself, and my background was psychology and early childhood development, and we formed the

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birth program. And the three of us attended home births -- we took lay midwifery courses, we studied, we set up our own study group, and we took turns writing exams, and gave each other, learned how to do vaginal exams on each other. Learned how to take blood, on each other. Um, it was fascinating. And, and I thought we did quite well. We found a, a GP, a local GP, a nice old country doctor, who was wonderful and would do backup for us, and even consult with us over the phone, and was supportive of the idea of homebirth. And so, we did that, and I've been able to attend about, at least a dozen home births. I kind of lost count after awhile. And it's been really, really wonderful. And to this day, I mean, I still, I've got a home birth to attend in um, July, we've got a woman who's due. And she's got a midwife. And I would never attempt to do a homebirth on my own, because I don't feel like, you know, you can't - a dozen babies in 18 years doesn't constitute experience. You know, you just, it doesn't -- I mean if I was like locked in a bunker and somebody had a baby, I'd feel competent, but it's not the sort of thing I would go into premeditated. But, I end up, I usually get invited to the home births, and it's real neat. It's kind of like, something I've always wanted, and I've been able to create that.

Q: Do you feel like the home births at Stelle has been something that's brought the community closer together?

A: Yes, it has. It's really been neat. And it's been real, it's kind of a real consciousness-shifting thing too, for people who come to Stelle, who don't have a -- who've here just because it's a nice, quiet place to live, but they haven't come here for philosophical reasons, like, because like I know when Heather, I'm thinking, we recently had, the most recent home birth we had was with a woman who is young -- she's 20 years old, perhaps? Twenty-one, maybe 22 -- she seems young. Younger than that. But she married a young man who grew up here since he was 12, and he left, and he came back to the community and brought Heather with him, and they got married here. And they got pregnant, and they had a baby, and they wanted to have a homebirth. And so it was a very interesting experience for me, because, I knew this boy when he was 12! And I, here I am, and he's becoming a father! And it was just, it was, it was really, really moving to me, to watch him, as this man, you know supporting his wife, and going through this labor with her, and having their little boy, Adric [?], and ... it was just, truly, one of the high points of my life, to watch that, it was really neat. And what happens is that when you have home births, there's a sense of something very special happening, and there's like a communications network that gets set up where people call, and they'll watch. They know that I'm going to go to the home birth, and so when it's time for it, "Sue's down at Heather's house, you know what means, " you know? And then I'll call Caroline, who's like the local, um, clearance, information clearance person, she works at the [unintelligible] offices, so she's around all day. So if you need to know anything, call Caroline. "Do you know if anybody's going to town? Do you know if anybody has this, I need this." "Oh yeah, so and so has it." And so you call Caroline and say, "Okay, she's at two centimeters, and it's a slow labor, so she's going to be walking." "Okay, fine." So then she tells everyone else. But there's this real sense of the community waiting. And when the baby's born, usually there's a big sign goes up on the open forum board, and we used to put signs up on the houses, but sometimes it's too windy out here for that. And then everybody chips in and they all start making meals. Meals used to last for a week, now they last two weeks. I think they went into three weeks for the last baby we had. And then we always make a quilt for the baby, so there's a real sense of preparedness there. We all hand-do squares and then we put them together, and present that at the shower. And uh, and the person, the family that most

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recently had this was from out of Stelle, and they were blown away. The husband was kind of someone who pretty much kept to himself. His wife had integrated, and formed some very close relationships with other women here, but the husband had -- he was gone a lot, he was working a lot, he didn't really get to know people. And he was just so moved by the response to people when they had their baby. The, just the outpouring of care and attention. He said, "This is just the most incredible place I've ever lived. You guys don't have to do this!" And I said, "No, you have to understand, we want to do this. And if you don't let us do this, it feels really ... sad to us, 'cause it's like this is how we get to be, to know this child and know you. And we like it. This is what we like to do." And he was just really, uh, you know like when I saw him he had tears in his eyes, he was like, "This is really neat." It was a real neat experience. So that, yes, birthing really brings the community together. And there's a real sense too that "This is our child. This is a Stelle child!"

Q: Now, I think over dinner you mentioned there had been a few deaths here. Have you had the same sort of practices surrounding death? Do you try and, does a person, you know do you try and allow a person to stay here as long as possible, rather than going off to a hospital? Home death, I guess?

A: Yeah, yeah, I'm trying to think. We have had -- the deaths that we've had, we've had two heart attacks, and they have been hard -- one was very abrupt, and, situation's were are people are doing CPR for an hour and can't bring them around. We had, -- actually three. We had one where the guy was dead long before we knew he was dead, and the other one, same, you know, his son found him. Actually, it was the same son that had the baby. His father died here at Stelle, so that's even more connected. So the heart attacks, no, we haven't done anything with. We had, my mother died, uh, after a very long illness, she died from cirrhosis of the liver, she was an alcoholic. Went in and got treatment, but by the time she decided to turn around her behavior, her liver was shot. She just couldn't do it. So we kept her at home as long as we could, and there was a real, people were very supportive of it. But mainly it was me. I had to do all her nursing and take care of her, and do her injections and hook up her permanent IV catheters, and she would slip in and out of hepatic comas, and you know, I would be calling people, and we'd have to carry -- we rigged a body board so we could carry her, because several times we had to transport her to the hospital, unconsciously, and we had to do that. And there were times -- she died in a hospital, but the nurses were real good, and they knew that we had strong feelings about wanting to be with her, and so they called us, they were real good about calling me, they remembered, they called me, it was a snowstorm, and I went in and saw her, and was able to be with her when she died. And we had another woman who died from cancer, and she also died in the hospital, and she had Stelle people with her when she died. So there's a lot of ... personal, you know, contact, as much as we can, but I would say that we haven't been able to have people die peacefully in their own beds, as yet. Um, ... there is a lot -- it's interesting that most of the people I know who've died in Stelle, have been cremated. There's not a believe in -- for most, again I say "most" because there are some people who have church backgrounds who believe in burying the body and all that -- but for most people, what we do with a death, it's become sort of a custom here, because we went through a period where we had like four people die in three years, and it was really painful. People die in car accidents and heart aneurysms, and cancer, and it was like, "My God, what's happening!" And you have a hundred people, and you have that many people die, it's like... so. But what we do is, after a person dies, um, we have a memorial event, and at the memorial -- it has varied. I did the first one when my mother died, and what I did was I had a

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slide show, because I felt that no one really got to know her when she was younger. And she was one of the most amazing, beautiful people I had ever know. And I really wanted to share that. So on her birthday, she died in December, and between December and March -- her birthday's in March 12th, and I put together a slide show of her life, with music . And then I invited everyone to come to that. And ... so the next person that died, he had a heart attack, and we had a memorial service, and people just shared things about his life. And he had a normal church service. And then after that, the next person who died, we had a memorial service, and what we did there was we met in their home, and people, again, sat and just remembered and told stories about Wink. And then he had this thing where he liked to take a walk in the evening and the entire group go up and we took a walk. And we walked with Wink's family, and we went down to the orchard, and we went down to the pond, and we -- and it was like 100 people, on a walk. It was really really neat. And then, since then, the memorials have been largely people gathering, and people will bring photos and snapshots, and they tell stories, and it's like a wake, kind of, I guess. I guess if that's what a normal wake is . And they're really neat . They're more up-tone. I mean, people get weepy, and, 'cause you miss them, and there's no point in not acknowledging that you do miss them, it's a loss, but the attitude is more like they're in a really neat space. I mean, you know that they're happy. This is a much better situation for them. So it's more that we miss them, not that, "Oh my God, he's dead!" It's more like, "Well, good for him. He made the transition." So, uh, I really like death in Stelle, I like it very much, it's real meaningful.

Q: And since people have been cremated, then you don't have your own cemetery?

A: No, we don't. The services have been mainly to, a lot of people will take the ashes and bury them with a tree, or something like that, and there'll be a ceremony like that. Or some people will sprinkle their ashes around Stelle, or some of the have them in an urn. We have a potter, a guy who's an excellent racu [?] artist, so he's made several, um cremation urns. So.

Q: What would you say is the best part of living in Stelle? What has been the best part for you?

A: Um, I would say the sense of emotional connectedness and support. I have never lived in a place where I felt that I could truly count on people to be there when I need them, and also count on them to give me the space when I need it. I would say, it's especially true with the women. For some reason the women, I guess it's because they're more emotional creatures on their own, but there's a very, very strong network among the women here. Very strong. Even women who've just moved here and rented for a few months, uh, form very close bonds. We have a women's group that meets every month, and we take turns being hostesses for it, and sharing topics. There's just a real sense of, you know, "We're here, we're here together, and we want to support each other, and we want to connect." And so there's a realness to the relating. You don't waste a lot of time on trivialities. So that would be the most important for me, is the sense of connection, and the real enjoyment of just meeting people and watching them live their lives and go through challenges, and ... you know? Watching them change and grow, it's really, really wonderful. And then secondly, it would be the empowerment, the fact that you can really do a tremendous amount in a small community that you can't do in a big city, because of red tape. We don't have red tape here. Well, we have pink tape. We have, you know, very minor red tape. We have red tape, but it's extremely minor, and if you have any kind of sense of perseverance or capability, you can get through it, with not much difficulty. So I really love it, I feel like, God, if you want

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to do anything practically, if you can be -- I mean, if you're responsible, and level-headed, you can probably do it. And that's kind of neat.

Q: Well you've been mayor, I think you said.

A: I've been mayor, I've run a greenhouse, I've been on a mart board of directors, I've been on a --

Q: A what board of directors?

A: Mart -- we had a small mart here, at one time, a small store. It was a 24 hour um, self-service, honor system store. And that was really neat. And I actually managed the mart for a little bit, and I ran the greenhouse, and I taught in the school, and I delivered babies, and learned how to run the heavy equipment, and built my own house, and learned how to roof and side, and you know, things I always wanted to do. I had a real fear of house and I got to get up on my own house and roof. And actually another women got up there, so it was like two of us roofing, and -- um, ... I've learned a lot about practical skills, you know, gardening, and carpentry, and ... you know. Just management things, a lot about management, a lot about communication. And uh, and sometimes when I'm in my office where I work, I watch people, and I think, "My God, they are so inept." I mean, especially in communication skills, and working through conflict resolution and that sort of thing. It's like ... it's a wonder that businesses stay afloat, with these kind of skills at work.

Q: What would you say is the hardest part, or the most challenging part?

A: Oh, putting up with each other. Being in community is hard work. I mean, I think. I've got this quote that Utney Reader had -- I should get it for you, 'cause it's really, I keep it right on my [unintelligible] ... got a whole thing on community. And uh, I stuck this up on the [unintelligible] board, because I just really resonated to it. It says, "Community grows out of discovering and nurturing the things you share with your neighbors. People often refer to it as 'the soul of a place', but it takes time to get to know your neighbors. Communities, by definition, happen in public. Their beauty and importance comes from small, seemingly insignificant things, like conversations with strangers, neighborhood groups that lobby local politicians, and flowerboxes hanging from windows. Their pleasure comes from things that happen slowly, over periods of months or years, to people who are involved every day. You can't merely observe a community -- you have to be in it. Of course there is another reason why people might resist putting down roots by participating in the life of their community. The fact is that commitment to community is often a pain in the ass." And it is! I mean, you have to commit to working through things. And frankly, I think in this day and age, people don't even have a sense of what that means, to really work through things. There are people you don't like, attitudes you don't embrace, um, you know, values you do not hold, world-views you don't agree with, and you have to learn how to live with it, you have to work it out. And it's just, ... and you have to, you have to be accepting. You have to choose to engage, stay engaged, and um, be respectful. And that's a real challenge, it's really, really difficult. And so, ... I would say that's probably the hardest thing.

Q: Would you regard Stelle as a success?

A: Boy that's a hard one! It all depends on your expectations. I would say yes, I would say it is a success, yes. Um, ... I would think we could do a lot more, we can be a lot more, but yes, I do feel it is a success. It

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is, um, it is a success for what it is, you know, and I think it's very unique, it is not the city of 144,000 that was originally predicted in the book, *The Ultimate Frontier*. But what it is, is very valuable. To me, I look at Stelle as like, if we can make Stelle work, then there is a chance for world peace. I mean, when you can make community work on a small level, then you can truly make world peace work. Because if you just keep expanding that, and working from that base, then that's what, that's what world peace is about, it's about getting along with your neighbors, and it's about resolving conflicts without bearing grudges, or arms, and uh, and I think, to me, that's where I, I believe, my commitment is, is working within your reach. And this is my reach. And I feel it is successful. It's like, my father, when he died, he had this big vision of what he wanted to do with his life, and he was very into large world views. He was very close friends, actually, with Margaret Mead. And when I grew up, she used to come and hang out at our house and talk. Yeah. I didn't even know she was actually an important person until I was much older. She was like this crazy old lady that would just be swearing, "God dammit -- Johnny!" you know, throwing her staff around and stuff. So, but anyway, I can remember him telling me once I got older that he thought I should, you know, keep my maiden name, and go out and publish, and I had to -- you know, he had this vision that I was going to be a Margaret Mead type person. And I realized, that's not me, that's not what I was about. I don't believe in saving the world. I believe in saving parts, small parts, and working from the small to the larger picture. And that if you, if you have a very cohesive set of values, and you live those, and you manifest those, that that is how you impact the world. And Margaret Mead was someone who was very effective impacting from the large scale down, she was someone who can impact a lot of people. And I think that's what he always wanted me to be, but, ... I just, I couldn't relate to that. And to this day, because I've lost friends who've died at an early age, and stuff, I've felt like, it's real important for me to feel like, if I were to die, right now, that I could say, "Boy, that was really worth it. That was worth the price of admission, that was a good life, I've had a wonderful life, it was really good." And I truly believe that. And Stelle was a big part of it.

Q: Well I want to wrap this up because I know it's getting late and I've taken up a big chunk of your evening, but I do have one other question, and that has more to do with the focus of our project, 'cause we're real interested in the '60's and '70's period, when there was a lot sort of hippie and counter-culture activity going on, and I was wondering if Stelle had any contact with that culture? Did you attract any what you might call hippies?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah, we had a whole lot of that, and that was difficult, because in the early days, um, and I did not move here until '77. Okay, so by the time I got here, that was like, really over, you know, Vietnam War was over, Nixon had resigned, but there were still people who came from a counter-culture background, I came from a counter-culture background. And um, unfortunately Stelle was a place where that was totally not welcome, it was not okay to be flower child and live in Stelle. Um, there was uh, people, I can remember knowing people who for instance, uh, still liked to smoke dope, and uh, do marijuana and stuff like that, and it was very unacceptable to do that in Stelle. Um, so you never let anybody know if you did it except someone else who might be a freak like you on some level. Um, the whole thing of long hair was totally unacceptable. I mean, it was just -- the enforcements about behavioral and um, appearance guidelines were so anti-counter-culture, you know? They pretty much squelched that. But at heart, there was a lot of, you know, values, that were counter-culture oriented. So, it was sort of interesting. What happened is you ended up sort of divesting yourself of the external

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appearances while maintaining the internal value systems. And I would say that there was quite a bit of that. I think a lot of the idealism, you know, wanting to make a better place and doing that was part of what drew people so much to Stelle. But it came down instead of in a matriarchical way, it came down in a very patriarchal way, kind of authoritarian, uh ... that's how it manifested. Does that answer it?

Q: Well yeah. And also, would you say that some, like hippies would sort of show up, and say, and then look around, and then leave? Did that happen?

A: Yeah, we did have people, we did have people who would come here and kind of like, "Wow," you know. We um, you know we had a little bit of that. But we also -- the people who tended to come to Stelle came because of largely philosophical leanings, and it didn't matter how you looked. When you got to talk philosophy, man, you talk philosophy. And so that usually cut right through it. You know, we could sit up all night and ... yeah, you know, discuss East versus West with philosophy, and uh, you know, that was attractive to everyone. So I would say that the appearances didn't matter so much -- there were a lot of people who just thought it was just like me, I came, and I thought, "Oh my God, this is just gross, it's so middle-class looking!" you know. I wanted to live in a dome home, or a earth home, you know, something!

Q: Did you have a dome at one time?

A: That dome that's down there? Okay, that was built by Wink Donovan [?] who actually worked with Buckminster Fuller. Yeah, and he, actually, um, I don't want to say "translated", but he, what's the word? Transcribed a lot of Buckminster Fuller's papers for him. And so he moved to Stelle, he was the -- Wink Donovan was the man who died from the heart attack, who's son grew up here, who later had a baby that I attended the birth of. But he and his son built that geodesic dome down there, as just a thing you do. Have a tribute to Bucky, and because he really liked geodesic domes. And that is one thing that was recently vandalized, and so it was very sad when that happened. So one of the goals now is to try to find a way to dismantle it, bring it into the community, cut the pieces down, reassemble it in a smaller form, as a part of playground equipment for the children. So we're going to save it somehow. So I don't know, I mean, ... yes and no. When I moved here there was a lot of, uh, there were definitely some old, hippie, counter-culture-head types that lived here. And they were all with their short haircuts, but the things they would say, I mean, they would do the whole trip with like free love. There was a whole period of time when I was here, you'd get a lot of single guys who were laying trips on you about, uh, "Oh, you know, we're all, contractual agreements in Lemoria were kind of loose," you know, they'd give all sorts of interesting spins, you know, through philosophy, and this. And that was basically a free love thing, "Well you can be sexual with whomever you want, it doesn't really matter, and we're all adults, and we've probably all been together many lifetimes, and I probably knew you --" you know, that sort of stuff! Which to me was just more of the same, you know? "Yeah, um-hmm. I don't think so." But that was there. And there were people who were interested in it, but that's all, I think that's probably there in any group of 20-year-olds, you know? It's just--

Q: So it was okay to sleep around some, I mean that --

A: Well I don't know that it was okay, it was never really okay, but people would find the most bizarre ways of justifying it, you know? Which you'll do. I mean if you're going to do that, you'll find ways of

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justifying it, and the ways it justified it were they'd try to make it philosophically correct, which is a little bit of a stretch, but, you know.

Q: What do you think is going to happen to Stelle? Do you have any feelings for its future?

A: It's future? I think we will continue to grow, however slowly. I think that there has been something of a resurgence of people who live here into trying to get very clear and very much in touch with their root values of why they're here. And we've had, uh, we actually just recently had a meeting of the Stelle group in which we invited non-Stelle group members to come and just talk with us, and it was very successful, I thought. There was a lot of engagement, and a, and a real openness. You know it's kind of like after being this totally philosophical community who was closed and everybody had to be that way, then you open up and it's kind of like, "Well, are we philosophical or aren't we? I don't know? I don't want to be that way anymore, I'm tired of being that way," so that you're not really, like, out there with your values, you're kind of afraid of being out there because you're tired of being pigeon-holed as a cult. So you kind of like put that on the back burner and pretend like, "Well, I'm just a normal person," you know? Well now, the attitude is, "You know, we are different, and we're really glad we're different, and this is what we're about. And we're different in these respects, and we're not making any bones about it. " And I think that that is going to be more the way, that people are going to get stronger in their image of themselves as a community with a difference. You know, a community with an outlook and a perspective that they're just not willing to relinquish or have go. We want it to be a safe place, we want it to be nurturing, and it only is going to be that to the degree that we maintain that environment, and that takes care.

Q: Now let me just make sure I have it clear about the Stelle group is. Is the Stelle group the one that still holds on to the philosophy?

A: Yes, the Stelle group was the founding organization, it's the philosophical organization. The Stelle Community Association is like the --

Q: Homeowners association?

A: Right, it's a homeowners association that takes care of the water, the sewer, the streets, the common grounds.

Q: So when the founder left, the Stelle group still continued.

A: Yes.

Q: Even though he took, supposedly, the cream of the crop?

A: Right, exactly. What happened is that he took them down to Texas, and they had a big uproar, and they separated, and everybody hated it, and they eventually sent the shambles of the Stelle group organization back to Stelle, deeply in debt, with no money and a mess, and we've been trying to make ends meet and putting back the pieces. And you know it's come back together into what I think is a pretty viable organization.

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Q: So it's the people that kind of hold the vision, is that a good way of putting it?

A: Yeah, that's right. The dream keepers. Yeah, I would say so.

Q: But that it's also an economic entity as well, or a corporation.

A: Yes it is, it's a corporation, it's a not-for-profit corporation. And the community association is a separate corporation, Stelle Telephone is a separate corporation. So it's hard, around here we get a lot of confusion happening. People think , well you "Stelle people" are all the same, but --

Q: Can anybody join the Stelle group that wants to?

A: Yeah, basically. There's membership criteria right now that includes, you have to be 18 years of age or older, you have to, um, there is a pledge that they set, and it's more of a verbal commitment to ideals. And that's more just to know that the members can state openly they are on alignment on a very basic value. And I think the basic value is that ... um, you want to try to keep and create and maintain a certain way of life that we have here that is manifesting the values of personal responsibility, and a love of education, harmony, wanting to live in a kind way with the earth, and with each other. And . . the pledge is just a very short statement about ... that I feel in alignment with those things and I try to manifest them on a day to day basis . And then you can say whatever else you want. And then it's expected that if you are a member, you do participate and stay involved in the process by attending as many meetings as you are capable of attending. And actually, this is the only organization I've ever belonged to where we have 100% turnout at meetings. I mean, and consistent 100% . The only time people are not there is if they are out of town or on their deathbed. But they are there,--

Q: Do you have monthly meetings?

A: We have a meeting every other week.

Q: Oh wow, and you still get 100%?

A: Yeah and we still get 100% turnout, so it is unusual. And then there is an expectation that you would donate also. You donate on some level. Because once you're a member of the Stelle group you have voting rights as to how to use the assets, and we have some very substantial assets in here with land and buildings, so it's expected that you would donate at least \$300 a year, which is not much, it's like \$25 a month. But even in the case of someone who -- we have for instance right now a woman who's a single mother with little or no income, she very much wants to be a Stelle group member. We've already said that we can waive the economic criteria, you know, on a case by case basis. It's more important, I think, that people are ... you know, committed, and in alignment with the division of trying to create a place for personal growth, so.