Interview with Ruth Clifford and Dub Blackwood
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 8, 1996
RC = Ruth Clifford, DB = Dub Blackwood

Q: Okay. This is August 8th, and an interview with Ruth. Since I don't know much about your communal living experience, I'd love to hear a little bit about your background and some of the things that led up to you living communally.

RC: Okay. There was a man that I was involved with, who lived in Washington DC. And we had been, not cohabitating, but were definitely in a relationship. He was very interested in group marriage, and he was also very interested in coming out to California. So, he had been writing to Dick Fairfield, who was one of the early Community Magazine persons. He called him at Modern Utopia. Dick Fairfield and Doug Lockwood and his wife had been having meetings about community. We were in Washington DC, but he was in very close communication with Dick Fairfield. He had written articles about group marriage, and he had done all that sort of thing. So, he talked to me about it, and one day he came to me and said, "Would you like to go to California?" This is not a commitment for long-term relationship. He was definitely not into marriage or getting into that sort of thing. And I at that time was very, very young. I was about 25, 26, 27, something like that. Obviously I was an adventurous sort, so I decided to do it, with the understanding that when we got here, we might not even be still together. I knew that that was a possibility. But I had been to California and I liked California. So, anyhow, I ended up coming out with him and his 5,000 books, which he put in a trailer, and we crossed the country, spreading books along the way. Because we did not pack in such a way -- if we had Dub along, no books would've been lost, but Wayne Gorley was not one to know about such things. And so we came across country with all these books, and we got to St. Louis and dropped them off and mailed them, because it was obvious he'd have no books left if he took them. He left them there, on Derby St., where Dub and Claudelle, and Dick Fairfield were all talking about doing a group marriage. Dick Fairfield lived in that house at that time, and was running the Modern Utopia magazine. So we trotted across country and got in touch with people who were having communal meetings. And Wayne and I would go to these communal meetings. At that time, Dub Blackwood and Claudelle were moving into this Derby St. Dick Fairfield at the time was in there, he wanted to form a group marriage and, so, Claudelle and Dub and their three children moved into Derby St. At that time we were meeting with Claudelle and Dub, and we formed, and we spent time with each other and formed a group marriage, which was six adults and three children. There were two older members of the house, I was 31 at the time, and Doug was about 35, so was his wife, and then we had two other members who were interested coming in for years, he was about 50 at that time. And so we had a large range of ages. So anyhow, Wayne and I decided to live in a communal house. The communal house lasted for about 18 months. We wore out two therapists during this process.

Q: Now, what year was this when you moved in?

RC: This was '7 -- Dub, was it '79?

DB: Oh, no, we moved into the house with Dick Fairfield et al. in September 11, 1969, the day after Ruth's birthday, that's why I can peg that day. Our three children moved in on Ruth's birthday, they moved in a day ahead.

RC: So, I have a little dyslexia, and I turn my things around, on dates sometimes. In the conversation sometimes I use the wrong word or turn things around, and that's connected to the dyslexia, that is not real bad, but it does happen often. Anyhow, so '69. Yes, that's true, the day after my birthday he moved in. I think it was about a month later we moved in. Wayne and I, moved into the house, and that's when

it actually started. We were very, -- we ate meals together, we had house meetings. We also had -- because the situation was so different, we knew it would be a good idea for us to get a therapist, and do group therapy. Because it was very new to all of us, and a lot of conflicts came -- who slept with who, and when. And we discovered that with a lot of the people working, that sometimes we didn't know who would be with who, so it go a little complex. They'd come home from work and things -- and they wouldn't know who they would be with that night. And so we did something which was rather structured, which is having a time, we'd set up a structure of who would be with who on what night. This actually worked out a little bit better. The idea was, you were responsible for being with that person that night. You didn't necessarily have to be with them. You didn't actually have to be sleeping with them. You didn't have to do anything you didn't want to. It was just a structure to make it a little easier for people working and nonworking, and life being very complex. We had meetings for people on the outside who came, who were interested. We had quite a few books, we suggested to people to read books: Robert Bloomer's books on community, I'm sure you've heard of them. Proposition 31, and the Herod Experiment, and that's how we got our name.

Q: Did you call yourselves that right off?
RC: Herod West, we called it. The idea was on the grounds that if you read the book that way, it wasn't -- we were all pretty much middle-aged, well, not middle-aged, but we were getting close to that. We were in our 30's, we were not in our 20's, which is what community members have a tendency to be. We were very serious about it. We knew it was an experiment, we also loved the people that we were living with. This is my side of the story -- I feel that the problem with the community was the menfolk -- and this I do not say as something -- they were territorial, just like animals are territorial. And they had their ideas of what a community should be. And they -- I think the end result is that's what broke up the community, the men did not ... they were fond of each other in a funny sort of way, but there wasn't that love that was necessary to do that sort of thing. Their ideals -- see, they had their ideals of what a community should be. I had none. So I had no problem, however the community went, as long as it was something that supported me, I didn't care. In a way, I think Claudelle and Dorothy [?] were the same way. Brother Jones -- there was a man who came over, and he said, "You know, the problem with your relationships is you're not bisexual." And I think he's right. I think if the men were having sex with the men as well as the women, a lot of the problems would've dissipated. Because there was a connection between the men and the women, but there wasn't the same kind of bonding between the men and the men. That is my interpretation of what happened. Claudelle and I were very close, and Dorothy, we were all very close. And so, we had our little conflicts but somehow we handled them. It was usually when Wayne and I were having problems with our relationship, Dub and Claudelle would have problems with their relationships, and Claudelle would be upset about, me having a good relationship with Dub, and she wasn't doing so well with him some time, and that's when we had conflicts. When our primary relations were going well, there wasn't a problem. But we did seem to have the ability to clean it up pretty well. Toward the end it got very intense. And it was like a very bad divorce. And it was a divorce. We were a family, and we were -- it was not what some people think a lewd affair with a lot of sex. It wasn't that at all. It was an amazingly close connection we had with all these people. Even when the group marriage broke up, there was close connections between Hyam [?] and Dub, and the menfolk --

except Wayne Gorley went off to Florida. And he disconnected from the group, but that was quite a bit later on. So back to, as I said, we had two therapists. The last therapist was basically helping us to make the decision to break up. It was a very hard thing to do. We were very serious in this, we really, ... were doing it because we wanted to change the way the world was working. We saw all sorts of needs for it. If you look at relationships, people are not monogamous at all. Marriages, lots of times they have mistresses or they have other relationships -- not always, but what we were doing is the same thing, but making it honest. We were not -- we were doing the same thing that society was doing, but we were not being secretive about it. And I feel really good about it, I feel that it was something that actually didn't work, but it was worth the try, and I have no regrets about it. Enormous amount of growth happened in those 18 months, enormous. Dependencies got less. How can you be dependent on a man that you're not with all the time? It really did change dependency, which is something that I think is very very dangerous in a relationship. We couldn't tie strings around, because there wasn't any way we could under the circumstances we were living. So -- and it was good for the children too, in that other people were in their lives to relate to, and they had a family, there was no doubt. Their mother and father were their mother and father, and I think there were some things that they liked about it, and some things that they didn't. They -- none of them are living communally now, of the three children. So, the group marriage ended, and I went off with Wayne, who I had stayed with, and we went and lived in one of these hotel-type things, I forgot the name of them -- they're rooms, and you eat communally, and that sort of thing. But it was not very comfortable for me -- I was used to being open and being in loving relationships with people, and here I was in, in many ways, an impersonal situation with people I didn't know. It was not working. I was missing the children, and I was missing that spirit of community. So I ended up coming back here. At that time, Claudelle and Dub were living together, but there was definite big problems in their relationship. That had been not connected to community. It was not connected to me, that was not the reason the two of them broke up. But they ended up breaking up, and the children decided they wanted to live in the house, with their father. Part of it was because Claudelle went off with Hyam. Hyam had never had any children, and it was difficult for him, and it was difficult for the kids. He loved them, he was very generous with them, and all that, but he wasn't kid oriented, and kids pick that up. And so the end result was that he didn't, they didn't want to live with Hyam. And they liked the space in this big old house we were living in, it was a very large house. So they stayed with Dub. At that time Dub and I were not bonding a partnership yet. We were living together, spending time together. We had another couple who had been in a group marriage, which had also broken up, that came to live with us. It was very nice to have that. We had a different kind of community -- we had a community of people that were monogamous, and ones that weren't. I have never been monogamous, so I don't know what it's like. I have never had a one-person relationship, so I think it would be very hard on me. The -- I feel that living communally had made me a great deal more mature than most people. And my spirit of independence is much greater than a large majority of people. And I would say I'm very, very different from the large majority of people that you'd run into -- community is, it changes a lot within you. And it's not easy -- it's extremely hard. Particularly what we were trying to do. A lot of jealousy came up, a lot of -- it was a very heavy time. You have to be a very strong personality to be able to do it, but if you can do it, and you can live through it, it's amazing how wonderful it is. Basically, because no one person can fill all your needs. At least that is what I have experienced. You cannot get

taken for granted when you're not monogamous, you just can't, because your primary relationship is with somebody else part of the time, and you're with somebody else part of the time. And I feel the differences that always come up in relationships are alleviated by that aspect. And it's very hard. I probably could have gone into a monogamous relationship with Dub very easily. I couldn't now, but I could in the beginning, and I probably would've if I had the choice. But I didn't have the choice, because Dub was definitely not monogamous. And I looked, and I had a lot of therapy, and I decided I either had to shit, or get off the pot, and I wasn't willing to get off the pot. So I had to either preserve my sanity by adjusting to it, or leave Dub. And I wasn't willing to do that. So, that was in the beginning when we, after the group marriage had broken up. Dub and I ended up forming a much closer relationship, where there was the opportunity -- I had never had any children, and I wanted to have a child. And Dub was willing to have a child with me, so in my estimation we formed a primary relationship. Our son is 22 years old, and we're still together. So we made the decision to have Devon. Devon has never lived any way except communally. He grew up in a commune. Again, there's as difference in him from other people, because he grew up in a community. He never had a great deal of fear of adults, because he had lived with so many adults so long that -- and what I have noticed, and most people who have children in community, they mature quicker. Devon, I would say, in many ways, is more mature than his peers, just in living with so many adults. He is very good at communication, he is very good at that sort of thing. Community and children, makes them very communicative in most cases. Gives them an intelligence that I think a lot of people don't have when their kids grow up in a nuclear family. They can make a choice of how they go, because they've been around so many adults they don't have to just count on, like Devon eats very, very hot food, -- this is just a simple example -- we had a person in the house when he was quite young, who liked really hot food. We had a terrible time getting him to cool it down a little when he cooked dinner so we could eat it. I can't believe how hot food Devon can eat, and I think it is connected with the fact that he got into it when Barry was in the house. Reading -- he's an avid reader. Other people in the house were avid readers, he picked up on that. So, the community continued on a different level when we moved over here onto Vine St. We moved when Devon was two years old, and he was born in '73. And so, we moved in the house in about '75. This house. And we've been here ever since. So, in this house, we again started a new kind of community. The two group marriage people went on to another group marriage, and we did not. But we definitely were not monogamous, we never went back to that kind of relationship. We had people who lived in the house. At first it ended up not being very much of a community here. This house has gone back and forth on being very communal and not being communal. We quite a few years where we had man and woman with one child, when Devon was young. Then we had a woman with four children. And when there were children, usually it was more communal than when it was not. More family-oriented. We've had people that have been very wanting community and it's gone more in that direction. For the last couple years, it's been kind of, I'd say cooperative housing, but not community. We're, we've had a lot of young people in the house. Young people are usually the ones who are communally oriented. And we're just crazy enough to have continued. Dub is extremely community-oriented. I don't think he'd be happy without a whole bunch of people around. I like it too, but I need more alone time and space, at times. Community is an enormous amount of work. It is not cheaper, it really isn't, and it's more ecological, in that you all own one washing machine and dryer, rather than buying a whole lot, like your neighbors have. It's very satisfying at times. You have to really

like people. You have to be into people! And the other thing is, it's a mirror for you. You've got all these mirrors around you, you can't help to grow. Nobody who has lived in this house don't grow by leaps and bounds. The problems is, they grow by leaps and bounds, and then they leave to go somewhere else. So we get, a lot of times, the brunt of the growth period of people, particularly younger people. That's a little bit discouraging at times. We have felt like a halfway house at times. And the other thing is the difficulty of being owners and communal members at the same time, that is very difficult.

Q: Because you own the house?
RC: We own the house, yes, Dub and I. To keep it a home for other people, which is what we want, there's always stuff that people have around, and [phone rings] ...

Q: Now, do you call this house Goodlife?
RC: Goodlife, yes. And the other one was Herod West.

Q: Now can I ask you a few questions about Herod West? Would you say at Herod West, did you have a common ideology or vision?
RC: Group marriage. I'd say that was the main thing, and wanting us all to be wives and husbands. In that sense, that's what it was, it was a commitment, as deep a commitment as husbands and wives have. It was on that same level. None of us were promiscuous. One of us was, went to the Sexual Freedom League, which was going strong at that time. It was a sexual revolution time, and that was going very strong, and one of our members was involved with that. I had been involved in it, but wasn't very interested in it. Basically, none of the people in the house were promiscuous -- they weren't monogamous, but they did not have sex just for sex. They didn't like sex unless it was in a high quality relationship, a lot of love.

Q: Were you supposed to be faithful to the group marriage?
RC: We ... no, we didn't do that, but you know, you didn't have time for outside relationships, really. We did have some, but there wasn't time to have one. They happened a little bit, but not much. After the group marriage, Dub had a relationship for about five, three years at least, with a woman. She lived right across there, so it was a close area. And she -- he was with her for a long time. That kind of relationship, as far as I'm concerned, doesn't work -- she was monogamous, basically, and she was very competitive, and so there was incredible competitiveness and jealousy when he was with her. It was very bad news all the way around. When she got competitive, I got competitive, though I'm not of a competitive nature, but you have someone -- she demanded equal time in every way. And in a sense, Dub had two wives. And neither one of them very happy with the situation. So it was very hard on him, because he had the two people who he loved fighting all the time. Not fighting with each other, but totally upset all the time. So that does not work. You have to be close to the other person that your partner is with, you have to have a close friendship with them. Martha Coyote, dear friend of mine, I knew her for at least ten years before he ever had a sexual relationship with her. I pushed her and him both into getting together, because I really loved her and I trust her totally. That's another thing -- trust. The trust in the other person that you're in a relationship with, that you know that that person is not going to try to

jeopardize your relationship. Martha was absolutely perfect. I never in my whole life was jealous of her, nor of their relationship, always knew she was on my side, knew that she's never do anything -- she'd go more in the other direction. She also was very independent. That's another very important thing. One is that you like the person that your partner is going to be with, that you like them, and you trust them. If there isn't that like and trust, it's wholly hell. I knew and liked Claudelle, so it was never hell when she had a relationship with my primary relationship at that time. So it's absolutely essential. I would not recommend anybody doing it in any other way. It is the kiss of death, to all three people. To the man that's doing it, or the woman that's doing it, and to the people he's lovers with. So that I really got out of it, that that's important. I can't say how important it is, it's absolutely hell when it's not there. And when it's there, it can be just wonderful. So in our second community, neither one of us monogamous, he had a long term relationship with Martha, and a long term relationship with Melinda, and the difference between the two was unbelievable. Martha lived in the house, he spent three days a week with her at evening, and three days a week with me. She's flexible -- another thing, flexibility. "Hey, I really want to do this with Dub. Martha, is it possible for us to change the time you're with him?" "Sure." Or, "Martha, I really would like to be with Dub tonight, it would be more convenient." Martha would say, "Well, I'm going to be out of town tomorrow. I can't, I'd rather not change." And there's no question in my mind that I would dream of pushing the issue on her. And she was always very cooperative. Dub and Martha worked together. They were partners in work. So it wasn't as essential for them to be together, because they were together all day long. The difference in jealousy was amazing. In community, some of the problems I see is no matter how hard we try, we're mom and dad. There's no way Dub and I can get away from that. Absolutely no way, even when the people would never dream of thinking of us like mom and dad. Half of the time it's unconscious, but it's very clear, that we're the owners and that we're mom and pop. Martha was wonderful, because she was my age, she was older than I am. So it was a mother-daughter relationship, her being the mother and me being the daughter, much more that way than the other way around. It's exhausting sometimes being mother to a bunch of adults. And being a mother myself, it's very easy for me to fall into that role, even when I don't want to.

Q: Did you guys share your income at Herod West?
RC: Never. No. That was never a part of our community.

Q: How did you work out economics? Did you each put in a certain amount into the common pool?
RC: The way we did it is we put in $28 a week into the food pot. Once a month we do this.

Q: Oh, this is right now.
RC: This is right now, and this has been for quite a long time. We tried it the other way with the food, and the poor folks didn't have, and Dub and I lost a lot of money. Because people would not pay us back. That's another thing, we lose a lot of money. See, this is PG&E, this is washer and dryer, to rent it, since Dub and I bought it; we belong to KPFA and KALW, which are the public radio. So we all give each year to that. Chronicle, and cable. And Dub figures it out, and this is what each of us has to pay. It varies, because see I pay the paper, so here I am, I pay $25.89. Each of us pay -- Dub and I have two rooms each. I have a massage room back there, and I have my room upstairs. Dub had his office [tape ends] ...

it's very important that each person have their own room, even if they're in partnership. And we have practiced that, Dub and I, ever since. So this is the way we handle the money thing. Everybody pays rent to Dub and I. We have even had it so that, because people who live with us know that we're cream puffs, and will -- you know, somebody doesn't have money for the rent on the first, we kind of let it slough by a little longer. When Devon was a teenager, nobody would live with him but young people, that's the way he was, he was just impossible. And no adult who didn't have kids, would live with them. And so we had a bunch of 20, 21 year olds who were away from home. He also brought in a lot of strays. As impossible as he was, on some level he knew we were okay. And he was very, very generous. He'd bring these stray lambs home, and they just kind of broke your heart, their parents would have nothing to do with them -- but that's another story. So a lot of his friends lived here. He usually had older friends. And we still see them. But they grew up here. And when you're growing up, one of the biggest problems you have after you leave home, is how to deal with finances. They don't know how to do it. So we were supporting young people right and left. And we almost went under. They meant well. They were sweet, good people, but they, somehow, couldn't hang onto their money. So we'd have to mother and father them through those hard times, and inevitably we lost money on them. And they all come back, off and on, and visit. So, we've gotten pretty brutaled in our old age, but at one time during our commune time, one of the things we did community-wise, is, if a room was empty -- and this was when it was a real community -- people would flip the bill for the empty room until we found somebody that we all agreed on. If we can't get people that we all agree on soon enough, it means Dub and I don't get rent. So it gets really complex. So at one time, two things happened. The people in the house insisted on us raising rent. This is our tenants. Insisted that we raise rent, because it was much too low. And the other thing that happened was the people in the house -- and this is the lovely thing about community -- took that out of our hands. People could not, not pay the rent. If they had a problem paying the rent, they came to the house as a whole. Dub and I did not have in the rules of the house, have the ability to tell somebody "Okay, you can wait and not pay the bill." They, in the house, set up a structure so that there would be interest if rent was not paid and if food was not paid, and there was interest if utilities were not paid. We have not done very well with that one. That still seems to happen. But that is one way, in a communal situation, if it's, the tenants and the owners living together, of a way to handle the problem, if they're cream puffs like us. And cream puff means, we care for people more than money, and it gets us in trouble.

Q: Now, when did you start calling the community Good Life, and where did that name come from?
RC: Oh, from the very beginning. I don't know who actually ... Dub. Dub dreamed up this name for us. I think it's been called that since we moved over here. Maybe a little later. Some time in the early part of the --

Q: So it was '76 or so you moved here?
RC: No. It was called Good Life when we moved over here, in well, '76, yeah. About then it got the name Good Life.
DB: We did it because we didn't have a group marriage anymore.
RC: Right. And so, uh, that's the way we handled the finances. And it did work. For instance, there were

a couple of times we didn't have people and we didn't have people, and the house as a whole put in the money for the rent of that room. That was when we were really a commune, when people were willing to do that.

Q: Well now, at Herod West, though, you put in money every week or month for food, you said?
RC: Week. Let's see, that was a long time ago. Yes, we put in money -- what we did at that time, I believe, is we saved our receipts, when we bought groceries, and at the end of the month we added them up. Kids paid less. Kids did not pay utilities. We did not have to pay their utilities -- they got their utilities free, and it was added up between the adults. So the six adults paid for the utilities, and the kids did not pay anything. Food, the kids paid half for food. And Dub and Claudelle paid that half. Utilities were divided up between the adults. So that was how that worked in the group marriage part.

Q: I'm curious about your meetings. Did you have weekly meetings?
RC: We found that in community -- actually we've experimented doing just once a month in this house, in the last couple of months, and the house has just gone downhill as far as community goes, as far as I'm concerned. We have two members who do not want to do house meetings, they would rather die than be here at a house meeting. Even though one of them realizes she needs to be here, and it's important, it's no fun having her in here. So we happen to now have two members, Alexandra and Jeff, who believe in house meetings and believe in community and want to get it going again. So we're starting to build up again.

Q: How about at Herod West, though? Did you have weekly meetings?
RC: Weekly meetings, and one therapy session a week.

Q: And how did you make decisions? Was it by consensus?
RC: Everybody had to agree - consensus, yes.
DB: Whether you like it or not! Consensus!

Q: Did you have rules about behavior or ways you were going to run the house?
RC: No violence, very strong rule. No violence. We had a, we used for quite a while the ... Walden II technique of work. Working for points. It was great for the kids, they loved it, because they got money. We did at one time have people that just did not like house work and did not want to do house work, and they paid for somebody else doing it. We were a unique community where we had a maid who came in once a week for a little while there. And there were a lot of discussion about that, that that wasn't appropriate for a community situation. There was a lot of strong discussion about "Communities should do their own work, they should not hire somebody to do it." We worked a lot, back in '67, men and women doing the same amount and the same kind of work. It was definitely -- particularly men doing dishes and cooking and all that sort of thing. There was great discussions and stuff around that, which today is not a problem, not as much, with men and women doing the housework. At that time it was a big discussion.

Q: So would you have ever considered yourselves a Walden II community?
RC: No.

Q: But you just followed their work-sharing system?
RC: Yes. And we did it quite a bit. And we've done it here, in a way. We have now a system, it's getting a little better, where people have jobs to do, and it's amazing how, how the house is going is how the house gets cleaned. If the house is not doing well and people are not relating to each other and we're not eating dinner together and we're not having house meetings, the house becomes an unholy mess, because people just don't do their job. Another interesting little factor that happened is that when someone is leaving, the agreement is, they continue working and relating in the same way that they did when they were going to be here, and that doesn't happen -- they withdraw. You see somebody really withdrawing, you know they're thinking of leaving or they are leaving.
DB: One of my kid's teachers called that "senioritis." The seniors in high school had a tendency to let it go, because they're going to be out of there pretty soon.
RC: It happens here too.

Q: Well I'm curious particularly about Herod West, I guess. When I asked you about rules, you said there was a rule about no violence. Where there any other rules about conduct or how you ran the house? Things about drugs, or quiet times, or --?
RC: Drugs -- coffee was considered a drug -- we paid for ourselves. We bought drugs on our own. Alcohol, grass. Grass was smoked quite a bit, and alcohol was used. But you bought your own, and you smoked it in your own room. Invite somebody in and smoke with you, but the common spaces were not -- it was too dangerous at that time to do that. Any other drug did not seem to be used, until my son came along, and he got to be 16, and he -- that's a whole other horrible story.

Q: Well what were your relationships like with your neighbors? What did they think of the experiment you were doing?
RC: Well, they didn't know that it was a group marriage, but they knew it was a community, and there was no problem.

Q: So you didn't get any publicity for your group marriage then? It wasn't common knowledge?
RC: No. The only publicity came from people coming to hear about -- there were ... Dub? How did we advertise for people coming to visit with us?
DB: We did various things. Sometimes we just placed little classified ads in publications like the Berkeley Barb. There was also a really strong word-of-mouth network.

Q: Did you want to increase your size, attract more people to the marriage?
RC: Some of them did, and some of them didn't.
DB: Poor Wayne is in Florida and can't defend himself, so I have to be careful what I say. I think Wayne would have liked to see a community of, we discussed this, 50-100 people. And so at one time, you guys lived in the Lake Merrit Lodge down here, which is a residence. And I think Wayne saw that as an ideal

kind of a situation where you could have 50 people. And he has a precedent, the Oneida community existed with almost 300 people in a group marriage, with high success. It was one of the most successful communal organizations in the United States, and it had a very profound influence on labor relations, and was 100 years ahead of its time in women's rights and things like that. So his large group has precedent, and that idea is viable. My idea was more a family, and I was always much happier with a half dozen people.

Q: Did you see yourselves similar to Carista at all?
DB: Absolutely not. I think it's personality. Some of us saw Judd Presmont as being domineering in his conversation, and so where Carista itself might be, as an organization, be really okay, there was such a strong feeling about Judd that tainted our view of the organization. I can remember going to visit Judd -- this is 30 years ago -- and seeing the house there, and seeing great value in how that could operate, and also remember in their history seeing extremely creative and talented people involved over there. So while we might have a problem with him, around him was created a very strong organization.
RC: I think Judd got a lot of people who were in there, creative though they may be, they were very -- they needed a charismatic leader, they needed a daddy.

Q: Did you guys ever have someone who was a leader?
RC: I don't know. I think in a way, if you'd say leadership, I'd say Dub in many ways was, though he doesn't like to admit it. No, not in the way that Carista was. It really was, very much, as much as we could being the older of the group, but at that time we were not --
DB: I remember one time an Italian TV crew came, and they were doing a documentary on communes in the United States. They were filming this and blowing fuses right and left, and they immediately picked me out as the father-figure. Hyam was 21 years older than me, and Dorothy was 12 years older than me, and I wasn't the oldest man in the house. And I wondered at that. I think part of it was I was verbal and articulate, and the other part of it, I think this was the key for these people and maybe has been the key for other people, I was the father of the three kids that were running around the house. I think people tended to see -- and I think there's truth to that. Children tend to do things: one, they stick you. I mean, you're stuck with the duty. Now, I love being stuck with that duty, but I remember thinking about it -- in the house, people could come and go, they could move out tomorrow, but those of us who had children -- and I wasn't always the only parent in the house -- but those of us who had children couldn't do that. We had to be there for the long run. And people recognize that and respond to it. And I think they do it to this day.
RC: Yeah, I think it's a lot that we have Devon, and we are the parents. I think a combination of parents and owners, it just goes in that direction.
DB: Before I go into the other room, I do want to point out to you that to visit this room successfully before one leaves, they have to look at the pictures of my children and grandchildren, and make appropriate comments.

Interview with Ruth Clifford and Dub Blackwood
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 8, 1996
RC = Ruth Clifford, DB = Dub Blackwood

Q: Well, I already petted the dog. I'm wondering, at Herod West, did you guys attempt to do any group child-rearing, or were the parents responsible for the kids?
DB: The parents were responsible. I can say that because Claudelle, my former wife, and I discussed that. And part of that was that the children were, oh, let's see, they were 8, 10, and 11, so they were half-grown. And then Ruth had Devon, I'm the father of Devon. We then were responsible for Devon. The fringe benefit, the perk or whatever, is that there's a really great amount of love and interaction between the kids and other adults, and that played out in some very positive ways, and I'm very happy about that.
RC: Devon used to go from room to room in the morning when he was three, and his favorite occupation was going into one man's room and taking all the books off the shelf. That was his trick in there, and he smiled sweetly at him and would walk out. That was his thing. He did that to Tom Schmitlock.
DB: Yeah, one of our old housemates, he lives a couple of blocks away, and he has a 12 year old son.
RC: Tom Schmitlock, he moved from Derby St. to here. We did have some of the people that weren't in the group marriage but people who came with us over here and lived with us, which was very nice.

Q: Now at Herod West, you said you shared your meals. Did you have any special diet? Were you vegetarian?
RC: Vegetarian. But people in this community too, there are meat-eaters, and we can bring meat into the house and cook it, but the house does not pay for that. We eat vegetarian, but if we want to go get a hamburger and bring it in a cook it, we can. Dub would rather it not, but he puts up with it, he's very accepting of people. He just makes nasty cracks about dead birds and stuff like that.

Q: So at Herod West were people environmentally conscious?
RC: Yes. That has always been a part -- we recycle everything. Dub and I are the ones into that most, Dub is into it even more than I am.
DB: But there have been other people who have been very much into the environment.
RC: Some of the members are not into it at all, and some are, so it's definitely pushed pretty hard. We hung up clothes most of the time, for a long time. We had clothes lines and we encouraged people to do it. But Dub and I and sometimes Mark were the only ones who really were into it and willing to do it.

Q: I'm curious what you thought the best part of living at Herod West was, what did you like most about it?
RC: I liked the comfort of being close to a whole bunch of people. The menfolk and the womenfolk. I liked the fact that there were children. I think the children, having the children here, made it -- children just kind of make it into a family. That's just my opinion. That's not the opinion of a large majority of communal folks. Most of the people who are in community do not have children. We did, and the people in our little group were very accepting of children. And when we had other children, it was also very much accepted by many. Two little boys pulled out each other's hair, my son and this other one, had this thing, and suddenly we heard this shrieking and they were pulling each other's hair out. It was really strange.

DB: But at the same time they had a lot of fun playing with each other. I think it was a fairly typical --
RC: It's great if you have one kid, to have other kids around, baby-sitting and such things as that. So the children thing, and the variety of people to communicate and be with, in a very intimate level. That's very nice.

Q: What about the flip side: what was the worse part?
RC: The flip side I think is many times, the menfolk not getting along. It's my opinion, not necessarily Dub's, but the feeling of almost, which is a natural tendency, a territorial thing, and not letting go of their idealism and letting the house just flow the way it needed to flow. It needed assistance, but it felt to me that particularly the menfolk had their points of view about the way the community should go, and it caused a lot of conflict.
DB: I agree with you, by the way. I think the three men in the group marriage each came with a view, and they weren't the same. And it actually turned out fairly different, each view was quite different. And the thing that we didn't come together with, except perhaps Hyam and myself, because we had been involved with each other and did have a closeness, and also Hyam loved Claudelle, my former wife, very much, and that love continued until he died. He died last year. So we didn't come together as people who loved each other. I'll go back to old-fashioned, people getting married, whether it's a group marriage or a menage a trois, which is a form of group marriage, or whatever, must come together in love. A couple getting married or a gay couple form a lasting relationship, or lesbian couple, they really must come together in love, and if they do not do that, I don't think it can be sustained.
RC: And it might be that a group marriage can't work unless the men and women are bisexual.
DB: Well that's another boat. That's a radical idea.
RC: It's amazing what you'll put up with when you have a sexual relationship with somebody.
DB: That's true.
RC: Or, if you don't have a sexual relationship -- same with kids. The things I put up with Devon I would not tolerate in anybody else.

Q: So do you guys, have you come to any conclusions about group marriage, like do you think it doesn't work based on your Herod West experience?
DB: I'll let Ruth answer that question. I'd say we're both very opinionated about that, lovingly so, and need to honor each other's opinions.
RC: I don't. I don't know. I feel differently about it than I did when I was in the middle of it. I -- yes, it could work. Under the circumstances: very strong, very independent people, and I think I really do believe the men have to have sexual relationships with the men. I think under those circumstances it could work. And the other is that the commitment to group marriage and that they're both in the same wavelength. That they are interested in having a community the same way, with little variations, because you have different people.

Q: So it could work, but only under very selective circumstances?
RC: I think so. Maybe you should get Dub's opinion.
DB: I'm going to preface by pointing out that, in a monogamous relationship, either marriage, or even a

monogamous relationship between two men and two women, there's a lot of societal support. When I got married, my mom and dad and aunts and uncles and everybody supported me in that. An enormous amount of support. And throughout that marriage, there was still support. A group marriage of any form does not have that support. You must create your own support, and it's extremely difficult to do that. And I've been a Unitarian Universalist for 35, almost 40 years, and it was interesting, always in these groups, a high percentage would be Unitarian Universalist people. But the Unitarian Universalist movement itself, I swear, has always been embarrassed by those of us who are doing this. They wouldn't accept our advertising in the UU World and things like that. And they would accept advertising for gay groups and lesbian groups and women's groups and men's groups and things like that, but when we tried advertising for nationwide discussion groups and things like that, the UU World would not accept that advertising. And yet, Wayne Gorely, with whom Ruth came, was a graduate of Needville. Dick Fairfield is a graduate of Starking -- those are the two Unitarian Universalist seminaries in the United States. We all had UU backgrounds, and yet that's not why we came together. Yet we'd get together and we'd find, "Oh yeah," we'd find this out. So even in an organization that should've given us support -- our religious organization should have given us support, we certainly over the years have given it support, I've been president of damn near everything, and am now of the congregation -- so we have no support.
RC: I think he's right.
DB: Now having said that, comes the heroic part. It does work, and we've proven. It doesn't work in the form that we intended to do it in the beginning. How it did work is exactly how Larry and Joan Constantine observed that it was working when they were researching and writing their book. That is, as a ménage a trios. Ruth and Martha and I had, what, six years of a very real group marriage.
RC: He's right on that. And it ended not in conflict or freak outs or anything.
DB: Martha just went to take care of her mother, who needs her care.

Q: So she had to move.
DB: Yeah.
RC: And he's right on that, but it's not easy to do it, and you have to have an awful lot of very special situations to make it work. So in a way I guess I would say that Martha and Dub and I had a group marriage. We didn't call it that. One of the things is having ideals, I think, fucks it up. Dub and Martha and I did not get into this as a "group marriage." We didn't advertise, we didn't do all this stuff. It just happened. So I agree with Dub, but I think it really has to be between folk who really care for each other very deeply. And I think it's not a bad idea for the women to know each other a long time before the men have a sexual relationship.

Q: To build up the trust you were talking about earlier?
RC: Yeah, the trust. There was never any question in my mind that Martha wouldn't hurt me.

Q: Because you knew her so well and felt so comfortable with her?
RC: I knew her so long and so well.

Interview with Ruth Clifford and Dub Blackwood
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 8, 1996
RC = Ruth Clifford, DB = Dub Blackwood

Q: Would you describe Herod West as a success or a failure?
RC: I'd describe it as a success.
DB: We had 18 months, that's as long as a whole lot of monogamous marriages last! As a part of a movement --
RC: Yeah, it was very successful. Yeah, probably, if we had the time and the energy, we might have made it work. The people, Claudelle, who left, not because of me, it was their relationship that was having the problem, and at no time was I the cause of it, and ...

Q: Obviously you guys must like communal living, because you've continued to live in some sort of community ever since Herod West.
RC: We're absolutely crazy. It's in our blood. I can't imagine living otherwise, and one of these days we might -- you do get a little worn thin. So many people come into the house who have never done community before, and don't understand. There's certain things, consideration and time, that's so important, and doing things that aren't your job, just doing them, because it makes other people feel good. You just do them. There's a man upstairs that never could understand what community was about. He's leaving. We agree as a household that he needed to leave. You've got to spend time with people if you're going to live in community. Got to hang out with them sometime. Don't have to do it all the time. You have to eat meals together. It's kind of a ritual.
DB: Yeah, you do need to honor your various rituals.

Q: I was going to ask you that -- did you guys have any rituals as Herod West?
RC: Eating together and house meetings.

Q: Did you have any celebrations, any holidays that you particularly focused on?
DB: Yes -- the sink! Remember when the kids would have a birthday, Hyam would love doing that. There was an ice cream store over here that would have various dishes, and one was called "the sink." That was everything, including the kitchen sink, and it was this enormous bowl. In today's money it would be about $50, I think. And they would serve this great big bowl -- think of the biggest sundae you could imagine.
RC: And it was always Hyam and the three kids.
DB: That was definitely a ceremony, that on the kid's birthday, they would go over to, whatever, and get the sink. We would tank up on ice cream. We tended to be a little work-related.
RC: We never went.
DB: I went.
RC: I was never invited!
DB: Sorry about that. I'll make it up to you somehow.

Q: So you guys didn't have any more spiritual sort of rituals, like group meditation or yoga or anything like that?
RC: No. I think it would've been an excellent idea.
DB: Individuals in the house did those various things.

Q: What about the Getting Together book by Robert Herrieh [?].
RC: I'd like to see Robert again. He came and stayed with us for about a week. And he [tape ends] ... know the book and will be reading about it. I wasn't going to say anything about it, but since you're going to be reading it I might as well --

Q: Well I've actually already read it, but I need to go back and re-read it because I don't remember what he said about you guys.
RC: One of the things is that the time that he came, Dub was very close to a nervous breakdown. He was -- this had been, he had been working and doing this, and he was in real bad shape. One of the aspects of these communities, which is really sad, is somebody becomes the scapegoat. Dub was it . He was the one. It was a horrible, heavy time, and that's when he came. And we were just in the process of breaking up. We were having -- it's a free clinic, here, and the man who was leading our groups was one of the starters of a rap group doing the late 60's. He was the head of the rap group, ... this is a story that is just amusing. When we were having sessions -- actually this was a larger community, if I remember correctly, but we were having a group, with him being the leader. And he went out in his little red old Porche, and he scooted down the road. I mean, it had been intense. And his profession had gone out the window, because he got a ticket from driving too fast, and we paid his ticket. We figured we were the culprits, in a way, of him getting a ticket. I wish I could think of his name. And so, at the time that book was written, we were in the last throes of the group, and it was extremely heavy and scary and violent and awful. If you think divorces between two people between two people get pretty heavy, imagine six people. It is as intense as you can imagine.

Q: So he captured that negative energy?
RC: Yeah, he didn't capture much of the good stuff, because at that time, -- and he was a very good writer, and he was doing his best, but what he saw was Dub being close to a nervous breakdown. I had some wonderful conversations with him. He was a very sweet man, and I think very highly of him. In fact, if I could track him down --

Q: I have his address! Would you like me to send it to you?
RC: Yes!

Q: I interviewed him last fall. He lives in Vermont. Way up in what they call the North West Kingdom. One thing I was curious about, did Dick Fairfield live with you guys in the group marriage?
RC: Dick Fairfield was married to a woman, and he was really gung-ho about being in a group marriage and everything, except the only problem is, his wife was elsewhere, was going to be moving to Berkeley, and he never clued her in that it was a group marriage. So she got here, she had a little daughter. And she blew her cool. She was furious at him, because he never said a thing about it being a group marriage. He thought, "Well, I'll tell her about it, and she'll get used to it," you know. A very male thing to do.

Q: So they never moved in?
RC: Yeah, he had to move out, and lose his relationship I gather. Actually, he was around for awhile. He was definitely involved with us. I don't remember how long he lasted, but I do remember him being at the house when we moved in, and working on the magazine. This is the archive, this is way, way back.

Q: That's wonderful. Tim, the guy I'm working for, I think interviewed Dick Fairfield. Doesn't he live down in Florida?
RC: I don't know where he is.

Q: I could be wrong, but I think he did. Do you want his address and phone too, if I could get it for you.
RC: That would be wonderful. But anyhow, this is it, the incredible magazine [Modern Utopia]. The sad part is is that I've never taken the time to um -- this was the Herod Letters: "Exploration and Interpersonal Relationships."

Q: Now, this wasn't you guys, this was something else?
RC: This was something else. I think actually it takes place in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Q: So these were some people also that were doing a Herod experiment?
RC: Yes.

Q: Were there a number of groups like you guys around the country that were based on the book?
RC: Yes. There were quite a few.

Q: Were you in touch with --?
RC: Some of them. The trouble is group marriage takes so much time and energy, you don't have time to even breathe or talk to anyone else. It's just totally all-encompassing. Actually, I need to read sometime. When these were being put out I never got a chance to read them.