

Interview with Janeal and Randy Krehbiel

Interviewer: Unknown

October 25, 1995

JK = Janeal Krehbiel, RK = Randy Krehbiel

**Q:** In what communes did you live? Name (was it known by more than one?); location; dates active; purpose or ideology of the group; names of founders, leaders and other notable persons.

**JK:** We moved in July of '71 and we got out fifteen months later.

**RK:** That was called The Bridge, and there were three couples that started the intentional community. We called ourselves a Christian intentional community. David and Joanne Janzen, Steven and Wanda Schmidt, Janeal and myself. Steve and Wanda had two children, David and Joanne had one ...

**JK:** ... one at the time, and we had a baby.

**Q:** What brought people to this particular commune?

**JK:** We were at a conference on war tax, resistance, and we all found that we had a common concern about paying our tax money to support the Viet Nam war, which we were all opposed to. Before that conference was over, there were a number of couples who were interested in forming an intentional community, living on a very small income and donating our time and services to projects that would be seen as peaceful projects instead of those projects to aid the war movement. That was its beginning, right?

**RK:** Yeah. I think as we thought of it, we began to see it was more than an issue of not paying war taxes, but you could always read these ... they're documents from back when we made this decision. We talked about living a life as a peace maker. In other words, we talked about being a Jesus centered community and that this was a total lifestyle endeavor. Then we set up a VS unit because it was tax exempt and kept our consumption low and provided us with an opportunity for community. We were strongly antimaterialistic at that time, that was an important value that brought us together as well ... thinking that we were consuming too much of the world's goods as Americans, and that we needed to pool our resources and live a simple lifestyle and keep our consumption low ...

**JK:** ... share appliances, share a garden, share things that could be shared--not every family had to have one of. Although, that was difficult.

**RK:** We lived in separate residences but on the same block. So we had a freezer that we shared and Wanda and Steve had a washer and dryer ... they were just down the block ... that kind of thing ... shared lawnmower and a garden plot.

**Q:** Were all the people that helped start this group all present at these meetings?

**JK:** ... I think it was a bit informally, between sessions at the conference if I remember correctly . .

**RK:** ... yes, and then we decided ... we took a trip to Newton to discuss it further, right? And then there was another couple at that point that had indicated some interest. George? and Anita? Lehman later decided that they would not join us. We went to Newton and discussed it and decided we'd do it and went back (to Denver) and finished the school year.

**JK:** I resigned from my job and you resigned.

**RK:** ... uh huh, and then we lived in the cellar.

**Q:** You weren't teaching at Hesston at the time?

**JK:** No, I was teaching in Denver at the time.

**RK:** No, we were living in Denver, Colorado, at the time.

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**Q:** OH, you were living in Colorado and made the move back to Southcentral Kansas?

**JK:** I had taught there three years by that time ...

**RK:** ... and I had been in graduate school ...

**JK:** ... and then he had a job at Information Referral Service in downtown Denver.

**Q:** I know you've mentioned a part of it, but did the community have any central religion or ideology? How was it practiced? Were there any rituals or ceremonies that you were involved in like prayer before every meal? Even the most subtle of rituals.

**JK:** It was a pretty non-traditional religious commune ...

**Q:** It wasn't really communal in the sense of the hippy connotation of commune?

**JK:** No, not at all, it was basically a lifestyle, a purpose of making a commitment to a lifestyle, although it was religious ...

**RK:** ... and part of that, yeah, that was the foundation, part of it was based on the belief that we were going to be going against the grain of the middle class morays and society, and we'd need that kind of support and we could garnish it from one another and be able to stick with it. That's one reason the community seemed so important. Thursday nights we'd have supper together (says here) play with the children and after their bedtime try to make decisions about our time and money. We used to have some pretty long discussions about that.

**Q:** Were all decisions made by consensus?

**RK:** Uh huh, I think one of the things we learned was doing this is sort of like being married to six people ...

**JK:** ... that's exactly right ...

**RK:** ... and it's very difficult and consumes alot of time of people to keep relationships current and properly maintained. It just consumed alot of energy. These weren't people--and I don't mean for this to sound disparaging in any way at all--these weren't people that we probably would have chosen to try this. It was an ideology that pulled us together, and there again we thought that having a religious foundation would be important because we knew there would be conflicts in the relationships and we had to have something bigger than ourselves to look to to get us through these difficult times.

**Q:** Wow. That was an admirable aspiration. How did the people relate to each other seeing as how all the decisions were made by consensus? Did that cause alot of problems?

**JK:** ... well, whenever you have six adults, especially, these were strong personalities, exceptionally strong I would say, and probably it's not surprising that these personalities would be the kind that would be ... have profound enough convictions that they'd be the kind of people who would speak out, and the kind of people who would stand for something that they believed pretty strongly. Those same people can believe very strongly about the use of a washer or the use of a lawnmower or ... the same strong personalities would be conflictual at times. So, there were some long, long meetings about little things like . .

**RK:** ... maybe a little bit of soap on top of the washer ...

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**JK:** Uh huh, that's one I remember.

**Q:** In powder form or in a box?

**JK:** Yes, and maybe spilling something and not cleaning it up in the laundry room. One of the people was very very very very neat and another one was very sloppy and didn't see any reason to be neat. So it was things like that ...

**RK:** ... that would consume a lot of time and energy negotiating those kinds of differences. That was kind of a disappointment for me, actually.

**JK:** Well, now that we've been married for thirty years, I'm not surprised in some ways that that kind of stuff did creep in--when it did and how it did. Those things manifest themselves in larger problems then. I remember some conflicts that became long discussions. We just had a tiny baby then, but their kids were a little bit older and how they took care of each other's children was a real issue. Leaving the playpen out in the yard where it rained one night was a major conflict. We didn't happen to be involved in it, but the other two couples were and it was hours and hours into the night working through those feelings.

**RK:** Poor stewardship not to take better care of one's property by leaving it out in the rain.

**JK:** The other person said, "well it's not, this is just a thing, this isn't that important."

**Q:** You had the youngest child? Were you the youngest couple in the group?

**JK:** Yeah, we were. Well, I was the youngest person.

**Q:** Were most of the members brought up Mennonite? General Conference? Were they all local people?

**JK:** Yes, five of them. All General Conference. Yes they were all from south central Kansas Mennonite communities. We had all gone to Bethel except for the one non-Mennonite.

**Q:** Thursday evening was the only meal you had together?

**JK:** Yes, and that didn't even last too long because we had very different ideas about the meal. Some were vegetarians and some weren't. Some didn't think it should be necessary to ... it was too much of a hassle to cook vegetarian. Remember those kind of things?

**Q:** But, you shared a common freezer ...

**JK:** Yes, and we had a common treasury, and we would each get doled out a certain amount of money to go buy groceries.

**Q:** Were there any common chores?

**JK:** Gardening. That wasn't a big conflict. Some of us were just a little more natural at doing that than others and that was kind of a natural division of labor that I don't think was particularly conflictual.

**Q:** Did everybody get to share the produce?

**JK:** Yes, uh huh.

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**Q:** What were the economic arrangements? Did the commune have cottage industries? What was the source of money? Was money held in common? Who made spending decisions? Who owned the land?

**JK:** Steve and Wanda owned their own house and the rest of us, the two of us, rented. We were all doled out a certain amount of money like a, we ran like a voluntary service unit--on that model. In fact, we considered ourselves a voluntary service unit. So, we were each given an allowance and we had to make that allowance stretch forever.

**Q:** So you would pool all you're money because it was in fact a tax exempt organization? And if you brought in one-thousand dollars a week and somebody else brought in two-hundred dollars a week, were you given the same amount?

**JK:** The same amount.

**Q:** How was this resolved when you left? Were you reimbursed or remunerated?

**JK:** No.

**RK:** ... it talks in here (attachments) about volunteers receive food, housing, and medical care plus twenty-five dollars per month for personal spending.

**Q:** But, that was the early '70's, too.

**JK:** Yeah, that was the early '70's, but that wasn't very much ...

**RK:** ... and twenty-five dollars was the allotment for ...

**JK:** ... for VS volunteers, and that's how we came to that amount. But, it was difficult.

**RK:** There were some more parts to that question. Steve was teaching at Hesston College, Joanne was working at the library ... .

**JK:** ... and Dave was working, he was teaching at Bethel College (Newton), wasn't he, history? Randy was working at Prairie View ...

**RK:** ...well, I wasn't, no ... not at first, but we discovered it cost more to live safely than we had anticipated so, we were running consistently ... we were running deficits month after month so we decided that another one of us would have to seek employment. I think my initial overtures at Prairie View were to be a volunteer there. Then I proposed being a half-time employee, and ended up working full time. Initially saying that I would work full time for a very small salary. I was surprised when I got my first paycheck and it wasn't what I'd asked for. I got much more.

**Q:** The group as a whole made all the spending decisions? Did your monthly meetings resolve all the spending questions?

**RK:** We had our weekly meetings, too. Here's an interesting little note, "the happiest moment of our last meeting was when we decided to give away the money Randy and Janeal had refused to pay on their 1970 income tax ... to give it to the Bengali refugee relief, and a youth center and other local causes."

**JK:** I gave all my retirement money from Denver public schools for three years to the group, too.

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**Q:** You didn't even have a twinge in your tummy?

**JK:** I did later. When we were trying to buy a house, later, and get started.

**Q:** Was there a formal governing structure? How did it work? Was there a single leader or group of leaders? How did they achieve power? What were his/her rules and teachings.

**JK:** We avoided having a leader. That was a part of our organizational purpose--not to have an administrator, not to have a person in charge, but to have a division of, an equal division of responsibilities and rights in decision making.

**RK:** Here, I finally found what I was looking for (in attachments). It says, "Steve teaches biology and environmental courses at Hesston College, Joanne is a part-time literature teacher at Bethel College, and by limiting our expenses, their salaries can support the other four adults and three children. This frees at least two adults at any time, besides those doing housework and childcare, to be involved in community service. Randy is doing a needs study of poor people and prisoners in Newton as well as middle-class attitudes towards these problems. David is doing war-tax counseling, working on prison reform, and aiding the local college peace club. Janeal will teach music in the local public school ...

**JK:** ... I just volunteered ...

**RK:** ... and Wanda will do occasional nursing--Wanda was a nurse--for those who need and can't afford a special nurse. By passing around the necessary time and work, and living as simply as we can, we find we have more time for self-education and thus are able to travel to church conferences, give programs to local peace groups, and follow national developments." I had forgotten some of that.

**Q:** Did you seek energy self-sufficiency? Did you consider any alternate gas or electric power? Anything along those lines?

**RK:** Not really. I mean, we were very conscious of environmental issues and peace concerns ... of course, we lived in town and we may have been restricted by building codes or whatever.

**Q:** Why did you live in town?

**RK:** Steve and Wanda already lived on that block and there were two houses that came available for rent nearby.

**JK:** We lived just down the street ... the same block ... or, just a block over.

**Q:** Did your group have an open door membership? Wwere you willing to accept people of different denominations into your group?

**RK:** Yes.

**JK:** Once in a while we had some kind of inquire about us, but never had anyone really indicate that they wanted to become members. Actually, the couple--initially--was interested, still came by once in a while and expressed interest, but they always withdrew before they actually had to make a commitment. And they must have done that several times. Three or four times.

**RK:** Yes, and they attended some of our meetings. We must have been struggling then, at some point along there, not too far from the time that we left, because we had a consultant come down from Reba Place. What was his name?

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**JK:** Vogt.

**RK:** He spent some time with us and decided that part of the problem in that particular group was the two of us.

**Q:** Ha ha ha ha ha.

**RK:** ... isn't that right? Something to do with our lack of strong religious convictions. You don't remember it that way?

**JK:** I DO NOT remember this at all! I remember him coming.

**RK:** He was saying that our vision as a group wasn't quite where it should be.

**JK:** Did we decide shortly after that to leave?

**RK:** I'm thinking that that was the sequence.

**JK:** Oh, I don't remember any of that. I remember the guy coming and I remember him being very judgmental and critical and warning our commune, whatever it was, our intentional community, to be very much like the one he came from and his model wasn't appealing to me. But, I don't remember him being critical of me or us, and I don't remember our leaving as a natural consequence.

**RK:** Yeah, I was thinking that he was advocating something that was more conservative, more, what's the word ... and when we left, it moved in that direction. I can't think of the word that I want.

**JK:** You know, it came ... well, there were just two couples for a long time after we left, the original two couples, and then gradually they started getting more interest. It's had a tremendous turnover. I don't know when you were there what years ...

**Q:** When I went to a Sunday service, it was at Sister Frieda Chapel and there were probably 30-40 people.

**JK:** You went when it was already ... some lived as residents and some lived just as members of the church. We did not keep up with it, but we had them over once or twice and felt that we'd kind of keep up relationships because we didn't want to leave upset, but there wasn't much there. We started becoming involved with Bethel College Church almost right after that.

**Q:** Were there rules or agreements about dress or other matters of style?

**JK:** No.

**Q:** Did you entertain the more idealistic Bethel College students? Did you have a steady traffic of students coming by?

**JK:** No. We'd speak once in a while to an organization or some Sunday schools or churches or something like that, but it wasn't...

**RK:** ... we lead a Bethel congregation one time ...

**Q:** How was child rearing handled? How were the children educated?

**JK:** No one was school age. Child rearing ... we pretty much did our own thing. I don't remember being criticized.

**RK:** We discussed Thomas? Gordon's book [      ]

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**Q:** What kinds of artistic expressions were present. Did your group promote the arts--painting, writing, film, sculpture?

**RK:** Just your music.

**Q:** You sang as a group?

**JK:** Some. I was the only musician, trained musician in the group. The early seventies were kind of a folk song era and I wasn't crazy about that. I was classically trained and I don't think that any one was particularly opposed, but I didn't have a lot of comradery in my interest in classical music or participation in choirs or whatever. I didn't ever feel terribly unaffirmed, but I certainly didn't feel very affirmed in my own profession as being a worthy profession. It seems if you weren't in the social work--theological interest profession--that you weren't doing anything that was really going to help the world. Am I making sense?

**RK:** Uh huh. And that may have had something to do with your wanting to move out of that situation earlier than I did.

**JK:** Yeah, well, it wasn't that much earlier.

**Q:** What were the relationships with the surrounding community? Other Mennonite groups, other non-Mennonite groups, the community as a whole?

**RK:** Yeah, I think we were viewed with suspicion ...

**JK:** ... it will never work ...

**RK:** ... skepticism ...

**JK:** ... and intrigue ...

**RK:** ... there were some people who were kind of intrigued by us, but I remember some pretty harsh criticism from some people. I heard some really weird rumors that were floating around. Some people thought it was a one house commune and we were doing weird things.

**JK:** They were not ... they were not happy years of my life. they were not ... I wasn't miserable, but I just ... had always had a lot of fun before, and I was not having any fun.

**Q:** How old were you? If you don't mind my asking.

**JK:** No, huh uh. We were twenty-five and twenty-seven when we moved. Is that right, yeah.

**RK:** ... not quite that old ...

**JK:** ... well, I had Missy shortly after we moved and I was twenty-five when I had her, so.

**Q:** Do you consider the commune, and your participation in it, a success or a failure? Are you glad you did it? What are the best and worst things you remember about your experience?

**RK:** It was a real effort to be consistent in word and deed. In that sense, I think it was a success, trying to live our convictions. In some of these documents I describe some of the struggles to get there. So, I think that that was positive. The worst part about it? I think it was all the energy it took to keep relationships in good shape. Those are my thoughts. What is your perspective.

**JK:** Well, I believe I've already said it. I just ... the worst part was just as Randy said, the energy it took to keep things going and the idea that if you really wanted to make things work, you sort of had to look at

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every one as if ... well, you know how marriage is, it just takes a tremendous amount of effort ... with just little problems that you wouldn't think would be ... and ... multiply that times six and that's the situation you have. It was too regimented for me. I think even if we had been with our four best friends it would have still taken some effort. It's just hard to live that closely to that many people. The Bridge has gone through many, many, many changes over the years, and I don't think it's ...that was the problem just when we were there.

**RK:** I'm not sorry. It was kind of an interesting adventure and very much a function of the cause for which we were living. The thing that sort of pulverized things for me, I guess, was the Democratic Convention back in '68 ... was it ... Chicago, when they had a ... that sort of, quote, radicalized me ... and then ... war taxes and so forth. Are you sorry we lived there?

**JK:** No. I'm not sorry, but I don't look back on it with disdain or fondness. It's just another little chapter in life's events, you know ... that you don't forget.

**RK:** It's really interesting re-reading some of these documents that I wrote at the time ... I mourn the loss of my youthful idealism.

**Q:** Did the good and bad times meld enough so that you could consider your experience tedious?

**JK:** Well, I look on it as ... this is the way I acted out a little bit of my rebellion or my 60's time in my life. You know, I know what some of my other friends did during this time and I hear and read about all the lifestyles that were lived out during this time and mine looks pretty mild in some ways--comparatively speaking. It's kind of interesting, I don't talk about it much, I have very friends who know that I lived in an intentional community. I have no pride in it and I have no embarrassment by it, really. It just sort of happened. I guess some of the days leading up to it, in Denver, when we lived ... and he was in graduate school and I was teaching and we were very involved in the Mennonite Church there ... I probably had more ... I think more about those times and sort of those feelings ... well, as formative years in some ways. I guess when I, when I start thinking about what happened to those people I don't have any yearning to go back to that either. I guess there's not alot of nostalgia with them ... it's kind of hard to explain. Didn't have much fun, that's mainly how I describe it. I just wasn't enjoying life like I had hoped I would. Maybe I became a little self-centered, maybe my ego said you know, you've got to do something for yourself, too.

**RK:** I think there was probably a part of me that was searching for some sort of Utopia. It didn't take long to figure out that that wasn't it.

**JK:** Well, we were sort of probably scared to face the world and afraid we would succumb to the old middle-class business we had avoided and talked so ...

**RK:** ... so we postponed it for fifteen months.

**JK:** Yeah, uh huh.

**Q:** What about the structure of worship? I'm assuming that you all worshipped together, had your own little congregation ...

**RK:** Again, did we meet Sundays? ... did we do something.

**JK:** No, not usually. Joanne always like to go to the Bethel College Church because she like to take Natasha to the nursery and have an hour of quiet. So that's what she usually did. We didn't do much of



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anything with that. Once in a while we got together for a service or something like that. I have no real memory ... of course, this has been twenty-three years ago, but I don't have memories of anything ... any real church services, do you, dear?

**RK:** Yeah, I have a vague memory of getting together ...

**JK:** Where?

**RK:** In our living room.

**JK:** I don't.

**Q:** Was Steve (present pastor at New Creation) an ordained minister at that time?

**JK:** No. He was teaching biology at Hesston College.

**Q:** You two were not around when he was chosen to be the pastor for the church.

**RK:** Right.

**JK:** It's a totally different organization. I can't even tell you about that because I don't know.

**Q:** Is there anything that you would like to add? Anything you would like to tell the world?

**JK:** I do have tremendous admiration for the way my parents handled this because you know, I think if my children, who are now the same age, just about, when we made this decision, I think I would be a little more alarmed than they were. They seemed, of course ... we were moving from Denver back to the area so that might have been ... sort of appeased the situation because they were sort of welcoming to that idea. I think they handled it pretty calmly and accepting.

**RK:** They were supportive, even. Of course, you know, it would have been a little difficult for them not to be supportive because we were basing this on Christian principles. But, it was not mainstream. I think that piece was difficult.

**JK:** And, you have to remember that I ... what was happening with the Viet Nam war. It wasn't, it was not necessarily popular, but it wasn't as unpopular to do something like this because there were a lot of people who were not anti-war, but who were anti-Viet Nam. That probably made it just a little bit easier. It took guts and in some ways I have a little admiration for us having guts, but I'm not ... it's nothing that I'm proud enough of to write a book on it, or write a paper on it, or tell my friends, "guess what I did."

**Q:** That's being taken care of for you.

**RK:** I think that it's an interesting chapter in our lives. It would be interesting to have our daughters read some of this (attachments). See what their reaction would be. We haven't talked with them much about it, either.

**JK:** Our daughter got married this summer and I think we mentioned it to our son-in-law one time. Didn't we? Briefly. He didn't seem real alarmed by it. We didn't have a lot of discussion about it. But it was mentioned.