Interview with Nancy Brigham
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
May 14, 1996

Q: May 14th, and an interview with Nancy Brigham. Could you just tell me what led up to you getting involved with Movement for a New Society?
A: I went in the fall of 1971 to Pendel [?] Hill, which is a Quaker nonacademic study center in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. And that was my first introduction about ideas about nonviolent direct action, ideas about personal growth continuing all your life, and ideas about community living. And there were a number of people there who were interested in ongoing political action work, and ongoing community living. And while we were there, the Movement for New Society Life Center community was being formed in Philadelphia. And there was lot of cross-fertilization and communication going back and forth. And there were a number of people at Pendel Hill with me who wanted to become part of MNS and the Life Center, and decided to go there. So I went from Pendel Hill with a group of people, and actually formed a Life Center household that was mostly people who had been at Pendel Hill together.

Q: And this was in '71 that you formed the household?
A: No, I was at Pendel Hill in '71 to '72, so it was the fall of '72.

Q: So you were at Pendel Hill a whole year then.
A: Right. And the Life Center was formed in 1971, so my house was formed the second year of the Life Center. There were already about 5 households there when I got there.

Q: Did your household have a name?
A: We called it Youngest Daughter.

Q: What did Youngest Daughter mean?
A: Naming group households has always been a struggle, as far as I can tell. And we spent about 2 months having a long list of names on the refrigerator door which somebody would cross off every name, and say, "That's unacceptable." One night we had a house meetings, and one of my house mates announced on no uncertain terms that we were going to name the house that night, and that if we could not agree on a name, we were going to throw the I'Ching. And we could not agree on a name, so she threw the I'Ching, and the image that came up was Youngest Daughter. That was the name of that house until it later evolved into an all men's house, and the name no longer worked very well, and they changed the name to Treebeard [a Tolkien character].

Q: Did they throw the I'Ching too?
A: I have no idea.

Q: How many people lived at Youngest Daughter?
A: Seven.

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Q: And can you tell me a little bit about how the household was arranged in terms of economics and work?
A: One thing that MNS and the Life Center did very little of compared to some other communities is pooling economic resources. So we did not do income sharing for the most part. There were small clusters of people in the Life Center community who at various times would try various experiments with income sharing, most of which didn't work very well. So our idea was not income sharing, it was expense sharing. The idea was that we were a community of political activists. Freeing up time to do political work was a priority. Living communally -- we did it for other reasons too, but one of them was that it was cheap, so it meant that we didn't have to spend our whole time working to earn money to live. So the model was we did part-time political work, part-time what we called "bread labor work" to earn money to live, and then we paid for household expenses equally. So we all contributed toward the mortgage in that instance, the utilities, food, etc. But we did not income share.

Q: So you guys actually bought the house then? Or did the Life Center buy the house? How did that work?
A: I'm trying to think. I we bought the house as some kind of trust. No individual bought it . We bought it as a group somehow, and I think eventually it was turned over to the Life Center Land Trust. I'm not 100% clear about that.

Q: Does it still exist as a group house?
A: Yes. It's now called Ailanthus. Movement for a New Society has dissolved, but it's still a household of activist types.

Q: The Life Center still exists, doesn't it?
A: The Life Center Association exists, and that's a land trust of houses that were actually bought, and eventually became owned by this thing that's kind of a land trust. In fact, we had our 25 anniversary progressive dinner last Sunday night, and got to see some of the people who now live in these houses. It's fewer houses than the Life Center was at its max. At the max, the Life Center was probably close to 20 houses. I think the current group is maybe 6.

Q: Are there any of the same people living in the households that were living there 25 years ago?
A: I don't think so in the Life Center Land Trust houses. There's still -- George Lakey [?] bought a house individually, that was part of the Life Center, was never part of the actual land trust, but it was part of the community. And he still owns his house and lives there. A woman named Nina Housenhaugh [?] bought a house which she still owns, but at the moment rents out.

Q: I called up George Lakey, and there were a bunch of names on the answering machine, so I figured it was some sort of a group house.
A: He's how I got connected to you, he couldn't do it this week and he asked me if I could do it.

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Q: Well I really appreciate it. Could you tell me something about your political ideology -- the Life Center, I guess, not necessarily yours personally.
A: Let me back up. One of the models, when people thought of the Life Center, the living community, one of the models, loosely, was a Gandhian ashram. So it was a center where people could gather and base for social action. And also base for training in social action would happen. It was explicitly nonviolent, nonviolent direct action, and a lot of what we did training in and learned was the skills of nonviolent direct action. So that was a key piece. One of the ways of explaining this I guess was that early on we developed self-study groups that activists could use. Ecological concerns were really important to people. This is happening not too long after the first Earth Day. Issues about the United State's relationship to the rest of the world, and particularly the Third World, were important political issues to people. And for example, there was an action group that worked on the liberation of Namibia [?] from South Africa. And then a lot of people -- and under the ecological stuff, a lot of people did work around anti-nuclear power issues. There was a lot of that. There was a nuclear power plant built 30 miles from Philadelphia that we did a lot of work on. We did a lot of work when the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident happened, and we were real involved with the Seabrook Plant in New Hampshire. And then people also worked on domestic issues. I would say ... this is always a tough one. There were certainly anarchist and socialist threads in our politics. We weren't traditional Marxists/Leninists, in terms of a Russian model or -- we took more account of ecological issues, more account of personal issues, etc. Am I answering your question?

Q: I was just asking about ideology and the politics of the Life Center.
A: I think one of the things we would've said about MNS is that we were working for fundamental social change through nonviolent means. And we definitely believed that a lot of the things that liberals were trying to fix within the capitalist system couldn't be fixed within it. So we did a lot of thinking about what was inevitably wrong with capitalism that needed to change, and what could the alternatives be. But our model alternatives were much more communal than say a Russian socialist model or something. In some ways I think we were similar politically to people who would describe themselves as democratic socialists, but that's not a label we applied to ourselves a lot.

Q: Would you say, were a lot of the members also Friends?
A: Originally, yes. Movement for New Society evolved out of a group called the Quaker Action Group. And the Quaker Action Group had sailed to Hanoi with medical supplies during the Vietnam War, and had done a lot of work, particularly on an island that's part of Puerto Rico, called Culebra [?], where people lived, but which the U.S. military insisted on using for target practice. And AQUAG, A Quaker Action Group, was a kind of traditional group with a staff of people who did things, most of whom were men. Like most of the people who sailed on these men. And an office full of women who mostly answered the phone and typed. And this was the early 1970's, and the beginning of the women's movement, and that wasn't going down too well. So there was a ferment within AQUAG, that led to laying down AQUAG, Quaker terminology, you lay down an organization, and forming MNS on a much more egalitarian basis. So the other thing that's really important to say that there was early-on a very conscious effort to combat sexism and traditional gender roles. And then through the history of the

community, there was a long history of working on various oppression issues. Gay oppression, homophobia, class oppression, anti-Semitism. And to some extent, and least successfully, I think, racism. Most of the successful efforts came when a group of people within the community who belonged to a certain group, like women, like gay people, like working class people, would raise an issue, and it would become a community issue. And because the community was mostly White, racism wasn't raised in that way from within, so it didn't quite happen. And the other thing that was closely connected to that was a strong commitment that people were supposed to be committed to working on their personal growth. Because another piece of our ideology was that social change and personal change went hand in hand. We weren't like the politicos who just went out there and organized and never attended to the personal things. But we weren't also like the personal growth people who said you had to get your own personal act completely together before you could do anything in the world. We believed they went hand in hand.

Q: So was perhaps one of the reasons of living together an effort to work on personal growth together?
A: Yes, and support that in each other. And sometimes that works, and sometimes it didn't work, and sometimes it led to conflict. It also led to having to develop skills in conflict resolution, which fits nicely with nonviolence, because if we're saying, "Violence shouldn't be the means to resolve conflict," we never believed that some people do that the hope is for a conflict-free situation. We always believed that what we needed was to develop alternative ways of handling conflict. And we did a lot of work on that. It was a lot of emphasis on, if there was conflict between two people in two groups, or two groups of people, getting somebody to mediate.

Q: Now, you said that one of the things that you were trying to do was to free up time to work on political activities, but you said you also needed bread and butter. So how did you work, for example?
A: I had worked for the welfare department in Philadelphia in my pre-MNS days. So I had a lot of contacts there. So one of the things I did was I was a reader for a blind caseworker at the welfare department for awhile. I was the office manager in the sane [?] office, in the post-Vietnam era, when it was kind of winding down. I maintained the mailing list for the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. These are all in succession. Those are probably three of the main things. An interesting phenomenon was that we had a number of jobs around Philadelphia that were done in succession by a whole bunch of Life Center people. So when someone gave up the job, they would recruit someone else from the Life Center. One of them was being the night time receptionist at Friend's Center. Nights and weekends. MNS people did that for years, a whole succession of them. The most interesting one was a job that one of the early Life Center people got feeding rats and mice in the pharmacy college, which is in the neighborhood. He had to go over there on some kind of schedule, including weekends and whatnot, and feed the rats and mice. And if he was away, he would recruit someone else to do it. So there was this whole thing about, "I'm doing rats and mice this weekend," -- everyone in the entire community knew what it meant to "do rats and mice." And that job I think he passed on to other people.

Q: So did most people have part time jobs so that they could be politically active?
A: Yes.

Q: And was the economic part fairly reasonable, to live in these houses?
A: Yeah, because we were buying houses in this neighborhood for $15,000.

Q: What neighborhood is this?
A: It's in North Philadelphia, just beyond the University of Pennsylvania. And it was a neighborhood that had been a working class Catholic parish, and people were leaving in fair numbers because of "changing neighborhood issues," i.e. African-Americans moving in. So real estate values were dirt cheap. And the neighborhood has since gentrified because it's close enough to the University of Pennsylvania. So those houses are now $80,000 - $90,000.

Q: So they were a good investment for the Life Center.
A: And we ate cheap. We ate vegetarian. The first houses I lived in, I can remember we paid $7 per week per person for food. So it really -- and most people didn't have their own cars. So it really was feasible to work 2 or 3 days a week.

Q: How much was rent?
A: Toward the end of when I was living there, it was $300 a month. I can't remember what it was in the beginning.

Q: But reasonable for Philadelphia?
A: Oh yeah. And it's important to note that Philadelphia's always had cheaper housing than other northeast corridor cities. It's really the cheapest city to live in in the northeast corridor, and that's been true for 30 years. I can't explain all the demographics of that, but it's way cheaper than Boston, New York, or Washington. Another thing that's worth mentioning is that we shared cars. A lot of people didn't have cars. And the best system worked out when -- and most people didn't drive if they went to the city. They drove if they were going outside the city, or a whole crowd of people were going somewhere, or they had to haul something heavy. But otherwise, people used public transportation. So it worked out -- if we had 1 car per household, it worked out well. And nearly everybody loaned out their car. And we also for some number of years had a Life Center Car that somebody's parents gave to the community. And somebody managed that car. And then the Willoughby's, who you talked to, always had a van. So if you needed to move, you borrowed the Willoughby's van. So there was a lot of resource sharing, even though there wasn't income sharing. People who knew how to fix things, like if a car broke down, there were enough people in the community who knew how to fix a car so that you weren't paying -- you might pay them to do it if it was a big job, but you weren't paying as much. And they would go to a used car lot to get the parts, that kind of stuff.

Q: Did you have some sort of chore rotation system in your house?
A: Yes.

Q: How did that work?
A: In the early days, we tended to do rotations. We tended to have a list of what needed to be done, which was the usual housework things. And it would rotate sometimes every week. And that didn't work very well, because if it rotated, and somebody hadn't done it the week before, then the person who got it the next time would be pissed, because they hadn't done it the week before, it was uneven responsibility. It got messy. Fairly early-on I moved into another house, where someone said, "Let's each write down all the jobs we'd be willing to do and see if they all get covered." And lo and behold, it did. That's happened in almost every group house I've ever lived in. Once in a while, there'll be one job that nobody wants to do. But different strokes for different folks. So pretty early-on I think most of the houses switched to a system of having relatively stable jobs and if somebody got tired of doing something, they could ask about switching jobs. And that actually worked a lot better. There were less interpersonal conflicts about who cleans the bathroom how well what week. But if somebody wasn't doing it consistently, then it was clear it was that person. And then the usual thing was in a household of 7, everybody would cook one night a week. And there were very strong feelings in different houses. In some houses, the feeling was, if you cook, you don't clean up, other people do, and sometimes it would just be voluntary, and sometimes it would be by a separate sign up. And in some houses, the cook cleaned up, on the grounds that you clean up your own mess. We actually had a fairly hot conflict about that in the house that we first lived in, because we had one woman who, when she got done cooking, the kitchen was a disaster. And no one would sign up to clean up when she cooked. And she would not agree to a system where you cleaned up the night you cooked. So what would happen was the sign up sheet would go up on Sunday night, and everybody would make a bee line to get themselves situated so that they weren't cleaning up after her. That never got resolved.

Q: Would you have regular meetings?
A: Yes. It kind of became a custom that most houses had house meetings on Sunday night. Because there were all these political collectives trying to schedule meetings too. There were millions of meetings going on at this community -- that's some exaggeration, but it's not a lot. And house meetings were mutually exclusive -- you only lived in one house. So if they all happened at one time, then they didn't interfere with other things happening.

Q: And were house meetings run on consensus?
A: Pretty much everything was.

Q: How did that work? Was that a good way of making decisions?
A: House meetings, or consensus in general?

Q: Your housemeetings.
A: I think it worked okay for housemeetings. Sometimes things would take too long, and sometimes it would be hard to resolve some issue because of that. But mostly I think it worked okay.

Q: So you had pretty close interactions with all the other Life Center houses in terms of visiting each other a lot, and in and out --
A: -- In and out because of visiting people personally, and also because there were all these political meetings going on, and every political collective would meet at the house of somebody who belonged to that collective.

Q: And were you all in pretty easy walking distance of each other?
A: Within a 15 minute walk of each other. But yeah, we were in and out of each others houses all the time. Some more than others, depending on who you were connected to.

Q: How were your relations with the neighbors that weren't part of the Life Center?
A: Variable. I think around the time we maybe first formed -- I'm a little shaky about this, this is a little before my time -- but I think two things happened. One was, there was a rash of crime. There was a neighborhood meeting, not just of the Life Center, but a neighborhood meeting, in which people were up in arms and wanted more police protection. Life Center people came and talked about organizing a nonviolent neighborhood patrol kind of thing, and that happened. So there were some people that made a real effort to do stuff around neighborhood safety. We did some nonviolence training about safety issues, etc. I think different houses were different in terms of how much they made an effort to connect with their neighbors. I think we probably don't score real high marks on that. And there were probably people who resented us and thought we were pretty strange. But we weren't keeping people up all night with parties or that kind of thing. I don't remember any hot conflicts with neighbors, but I don't think a lot of people were real close, although some people were. Some individuals really made it their business to do that.

Q: Would you have described yourself or other people in the Life Center as being hippies?
A: Some people would've described us that way. I guess, culturally, we had something in common with that. We saw ourselves as more political than hippies. We saw hippies as being mostly a lifestyle kind of thing. Like we tried very hard not to be a communal crash pad, not to have people move in who weren't serious about political action. But yeah, there were certainly some things in common. George Lakey and I were talking last week about the era of everyone wearing torn jeans. We did our share of torn jeans.

Q: Right. So maybe you looked like hippies, but you were more politically active?
A: Yeah, and I don't think we looked like the most extreme hippies. But there was definitely long hair and torn jeans, that kind of stuff.

Q: Were there rules in the houses about behavior, like certain behavior that wasn't allowed? Maybe smoking or drinking, things like that?
A: Some houses had rules about marijuana. I don't remember any explicit "no drinking" rules. I can't remember hassles about alcohol issues. I'm not thinking of things, I might be missing something.

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Q: You mentioned before that the Movement for a New Society was interested in working on issues of sexuality and gender issues, racial issues, things like that. So would you say there were pretty open attitudes about sexual behaviors in the houses?
A: Yes. We're talking before the AIDS era of course.

Q: So homosexuality would've been accepted, for example?
A: That's not to say that no one in the Life Center had any homophobia, I wouldn't say that, but yeah. I mean, George Lakey and some other people in the Life Center wrote a book called gay oppression and liberation, so that was really focused on for awhile. There was some tensions about that. I think there was one family that left because they didn't feel comfortable with their children being raised in that atmosphere. There was definitely multiple relationships, everybody was not monogamous. I think the atmosphere was pretty open and permissive, but it wasn't the kind of community where you couldn't be there comfortably if you were into multiple relationships -- it was there, and it was accepted, but it wasn't the ideology.

Q: Was there also a permissive attitude toward experimentation with drugs?
A: Not so much. Not that I would say it was legislated against, but that was not a lot of what was going on. I'm not saying there weren't any drugs. And again, I might be a bad authority on that, because I would've been less in that kind of subculture than some people would've been. And it wasn't like your image of the hippies in that way.

Q: How did someone become a member of a household?
A: Assuming -- let's say they were already in the community, if someone wanted to move to a different house, they would usually talk with people in the house, and if there was interest, they would do a trial period. The person would actually go over and stay for a week or two, and then they would evaluate whether it was working or not. And it would be a consensus decision. Now a lot of people came to the Life Center to be in the training programs. So these would be people coming from all over who were unknowns. So the people coordinating the training program would arrange temporary housing in various Life Center houses for people to stay, and then some of the people would stay there, and some of the people would [unintelligible] through this same process of dialogue. And it was just common knowledge who was looking for people, who had empty space.

Q: Was it awkward at all to have people coming in and out of your houses that you didn't know?
A: Sometimes. And it was very tough on the houses where there were children. That was where it didn't work.

Q: What would somebody do who maybe wasn't already a member of the movement, who maybe wanted to become a member and join a household?
A: This is where there's organizational clarity. Nobody just said, "I want to be a member of the Life Center." You kind of were part of the Life Center by living in a house. And people didn't just join Movement for a New Society, they joined a particular political action collective. The MNS, in terms of

membership, was made up of the collectives, not of individuals. It's like splitting hairs, but I would be more apt to say, "I was part of MNS" than to say "I was an MNS member," even though I was in one collective after another and did all kinds of stuff.

Q: And being a member of a collective would mean just going to meetings? There wasn't anything more formal than that?
A: Right. It would mean going to meetings and being a regular part of it, and doing responsibilities. We didn't have people who just showed up at the meetings and didn't do any work. A collective was really a working group.

Q: But it wasn't like you paid your dues and got your little membership card or something.
A: No.

Q: So usually what would happen is someone would become part of a political collective, and then they would say, "Wow, this is really neat, I want to be a member of one of these households?"
A: Yes. And some people were in collectives for a good while, and never moved into a community. It was a minority, and they always felt on the edge of things. But some people never did. We had a woman in one collective that I was in, and she was in there for a good number of years. She was married and lived with her husband and 2 kids in Swarthmore, and trooped in for the meetings every week.

Q: Did you ever have any run-ins with the police with your political activities or any of the house activities?
A: Me, personally? I certainly didn't as part of a household. We never had run-ins with the police as households, as far as I remember. We had a couple skirmishes with the city licenses and inspection, who wanted to legislate how many unrelated adults can live together. But they never pursued that very seriously, I think they thought they were on fairly shaky ground to make an issue of that in that particular era. But there was a law about that, it was a city ordinance. Every once in a while, there'd be a little flap of activity, and it would die down. Politically, yeah, we definitely confronted law enforcement in a lot of demonstrations, nuclear power stuff. My biggest run-in, which was planned, was after the Three Mile Island accident. Part of nonviolent action is to do civil disobedience. And that often precipitates a confrontation with the police. And I did civil disobedience after the Three Mile Island accident, I was part of a fairly large group of people that blocked the entrances to [unintelligible] Electric Company. Because we'd already been haggling with them for years over this other power plant that they were building.

Q: Did you get arrested?
A: I got arrested. And it was -- one of the things I decided, I've always been a little skittish about direct action and civil disobedience and that kind of stuff, I'm not the most street wise person in the world. And I made a conscious decision that I would hardly ever have a less risky situation to try civil disobedience, so I decided to do it. I was still pretty scared. And that turned out to be absolutely right. Here we were, we got arrested, we got hauled down to the police station, all in the same t-shirt about

nuclear power, as Three Mile Island is leaking all this radiation, and everybody's got the radio on at the police station -- I mean, it was everybody's issue. They were not about to give us a terribly hard time. It was not like we'd done something that was unpopular. There were detectives asking us questions and stuff like that, practically saying, "Well, I can see why you did what you did." I spent a few hours in a holding cell. We got no particularly bad treatment. We got arraigned, told to get back to the trial, got let go, went back to this huge community meeting at a church in West Philly that was happening about Three Mile Island stuff. And after the whole thing died down, the charges were just dropped. So, as civil disobedience goes, my experience was pretty innocuous. But a lot of people did civil disobedience over a lot of different issues at various times.

Q: Would members of the houses hold Quaker Meetings on Sundays ever?
A: Not by household, usually. Although MNS was Quaker early-on, and certainly had a Quaker tone all the way through, a lot of the people who came for the training programs and did political work weren't Quaker. So -- George Willoughby will be able to answer this better than I can, because he is Quaker. And he lived in the house that was originally a part of the community center, he was there from the beginning. I think they might have had Meeting over there. I was not Quaker, and I didn't go to Meeting at that point. Some people just went to Meeting at the [unintelligible] St. I never lived in a household that had any kind of common religious observance, but I never lived in a household where everybody's religious background had much in common either. There was a collective at one point that called itself Church Mouse, which met together for worship and -- I don't know whether to say, action based on their religious faith, or action more specifically on religious issues, because I wasn't part of that. I'm trying to think. They definitely did worship as part of their work meetings. And they were not all Quaker, although they may have worshiped partly in Quaker Meeting style.

Q: Was Church Mouse one of the houses?
A: No, it was a work collective. They didn't live together. George Lakey's ex-wife was part of that, but unfortunately, she's not [unintelligible].

Q: For you, what was the best part of living in community?
A: I guess the best part -- for me it's hard to separate the best part of living in community from the best part of being in MNS, and it just had to do with being part of a larger group that was all working toward social change and working on something that was really important, and that seemed more important to us than earning as much money as you could, or whatever. It was the kind of sense of common -- pursuing a common ambition, I guess. And there were also community activities. Houses would have parties, or there would parties on occasion. There was a lot of singing. In various eras -- at least two, that I'm thinking of, and probably more, depending on how you count -- people were really pretty good musicians. So at a meeting there'd often be singing at the beginning of it, or someone would say, "We're going to have a sing at such and such time," and people who wanted to go sing would go. The music was really important to me, and it was my introduction to music that's grounded in social movements and social action. I didn't know anything about that kind of music before. And that's still really important to me.

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Q: So you used like the Rise Up song book?
A: Well, we predated that. That songbook partly evolved out of MNS. Peter Blood, who put that song book together, lived in the community, and I actually worked on the first edition of it.

Q: I think Peter Blood is someone I'm going to interview. Is he part of Tangy [?] Homestead? Okay, good.
A: See, he's Quaker, and we also had this connection to re-evaluation counseling. So some people think of it as the MNS songbook, some people think of it as a Quaker songbook, some people think of it as an RC songbook, and now it's actually put out by Sing Out magazine. But it wasn't in the beginning. So we have various old versions of that book, and yeah, we used it. I still have what predated that, just mimeographed song sheets. When I first went there, there was the Life Center song sheet, and it was this mimeographed thing, and it was about as many pages as you could get a staple through, it wasn't tiny.

Q: What were some of the harder parts, or the challenging parts about living in community?
A: Lack of stability. Constant coming and going, and moving, and living with different people. Because you have all these people who are all changing where they are in their lives at any given moment. That was very tough on the kids. And sometimes there would be conflicts that would engulf the whole community, and the whole community would be riled up for awhile about something or other. And a lot of those -- I mean, I tend to think positive change can come out of conflict, depending on how you manage conflict. So I don't think that was all bad, that's the kind of stuff that produced a lot of the consciousness about sexism and homophobia and classism and other kind of stuff. But in the middle of it, it wasn't always fun. It was hard, but I don't necessarily think it was bad.

Q: How long did you end up staying?
A: I came in the fall of '72, and I left in June of '83.

Q: Long time then!
A: I came the second year. MNS was starting to unravel by the time I left. Although, I had another round of being part of MNS in a slightly different form in Boston, not living in Life Center houses. But yeah, I was there 11 years.

Q: And why did you decide to leave?
A: Things were definitely unraveling, and I wasn't dealing with that very well, emotionally. I felt like I needed a break. And I didn't intend to leave when I left. I intended to leave for the summer, try to regroup, and I went to live with some friends who were in Compton [?], Massachusetts, because I'm originally from New England. And at that point, a whole group of people associated with MNS had moved to Boston. And I decided to stay there with those people, because a lot of them were people that I knew well, and because I wanted to be in New England. So I left not intending it to be permanent, but [unintelligible] .

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May 14, 1996

Q: When you say MNS was unraveling, what was going on?
A: I think one of the things that didn't stick real well in the long-run was this lack of career thing, that people's focus shifted from one political action to another with no real career, didn't wear well on people long-term. There is enough stuff in this culture about work and career and self-image that a lot of people didn't do well with that. So there was a lot of dissatisfaction, people feeling like they needed to grow up and do something else with their lives. I think the MNS collectives worked well, but MNS -- keeping in mind there were MNS groups in other parts of the country, trying to figure out how to work as an organization -- it was a traditional top-down organization. We had some good ideas about what not to do, but we never really worked out anything that worked really well. We were trying to be a decentralized network that still had some ties, and it was really clear what we needed to do and have in common, and what could be different among different groups. That was hard. And the last -- I had three main focuses. [tape ends] ... I loved getting materials out for political self-education. Then the second period, for me, was focused on training. I coordinated a lot of training programs, and I loved that. Then the third era, I got focused on trying to deal with MNS as an organization, organizational issues, some in the Philadelphia level, but actually more on the national level. And that never worked very well in the end. Lessons learned -- I wasn't very good at it. I would not again go into an organization thinking that my main role was to deal with organizational development issues. I'd be a responsible member. But I was like on the national coordinating committee of MNS for awhile, which we formed later. That kind of didn't work well for me at all. And, we weren't having any great success at figuring out how to do it either. So it wasn't successful, nor was I getting a clear sense of lessons learned, and what to try next. I just felt like we were floundering around, I was floundering around. And I didn't do well with it emotionally. I was really kind of an emotional basket case by the time we were in Philadelphia in 1983. I don't know if I want that in print someplace. But I do feel like -- I wouldn't put it in that phrasing, but I think that's honest. And I don't feel like it has to be hidden either.

Q: Could you tell me something about the demographics of the people, like age, race, class, backgrounds?
A: White -- not completely, but overwhelmingly. Tending toward young, but not completely. Not bad on the age thing. I mean, given that we were coming out of an era when everybody over 30 was suspect, we were not bad on the age front. Class is very interesting, because the image was that MNS was middle class. And MNS definitely had a middle-class Quaker tone, no question. But when class issues broke open, which they really kind of did, lo and behold, we discovered that virtually, a substantial number of the founders and leaders of MNS were working class. George Lakey was working class. Bill Moyer, who was a very typical person, was raised poor. George Willoughby, I bet you anything, would describe himself as working class, although he doesn't talk class in quite the same language. So there were a lot of working class people in MNS, but the tone was middle class, and Quaker-ism [unintelligible] ... even though we did better on conflict than a lot of Quaker things do, there's still this Quaker thing that went on. I would guess a few more women than men most of the time. We always thought the best balance in a house was 4 women and 3 men. One more woman than men, given that most of the houses had 7 spaces. There were women's houses. There was one men's house that I can remember, there were at least 2 women's houses, probably more. I kind of want to say a significant number of gay and lesbian

people, but I have this uneasy feeling that gay and lesbian people might not feel like it was significant number, I don't know.

Q: But there was a presence.
A: There was definitely a presence, and it was a vocal presence. And the fact that they wrote this book, really, that laid it right out there. And there was one national MNS meeting where it was the pivotal, hot issue, at least one.

Q: What do you think is the glue that's held the Life Center together? I mean, it's rare for an intentional community to last so long.
A: The theory was, particularly in intentional communities that didn't have an authority figure wouldn't last. We got that rammed down our throats all the time, and we were like, "We're going to be different." And of course, in one sense -- I mean, the Life Center Association as it is now with the houses is not the same community. I don't look at it that way. I don't consider that the Life Center community has continued since 1971.

Q: Because of all the turnover?
A: Yeah. There are these houses, and they get together every so often and have a progressive dinner, and some of them know each other. But it's not the kind of community bonding of people in and out in the sense of being part of the same community that we had. I don't see it as community. And it's hard for me to name a time when it ended. I left in '83, and it was still there then, but it was getting shaky. But other people might disagree with that. I'm in and out of George Lakey's house all the time, because I work with him, and I know a few other people, but I don't know the people in those other houses as a result of that. I lived at George's for a year and a half, I didn't know the people in the other houses. I feel like this common organization called the Life Center Land Trust owns these houses so that there's something in common, but not community, between us. I think that's accurate.

Q: Is this something you're glad that you've done, looking back on these 11 years of your life?
A: Oh, absolutely. I think it was the best part of my life. I would be -- if it came along again now, I would do it again.

Q: And are there things from that part of your life that you bring forward to the present day?
A: Oh, yeah, ecological consciousness, commitment to nonviolence. A whole different view of personal growth than I had before that. I might have picked it up somewhere else, given the kind of new age stuff hanging around. I might've absorbed that some other way. My political analysis [?] ... I don't feel like my politics have changed all that much. And in a certain way, commitment to social action. And I'm not heavily involved in social activism right now. I volunteer a lot of time with George Lakey on his training center project. And there's one political action project that kind of interests me. It's kind of a product of the times, there's not a lot out there. I guess one of the things that I felt personally, when I left, I said I was a basket case. And I spent a lot of the '80's in Boston much more focused on my own personal issues and personal growth. Spending a lot of time in therapy, that kind of stuff. And I also feel like I

have a slightly different kind of personal issue that I need to be dealing with right now, which is I'm 55, I need to get my career and work life a little more in order. I need to think about how much social security I'm going to have left in 10 years if the system is still functioning. So I actually went to graduate school in gerontology and made this decision to work in elder services. And I would love to do something that's more activist-oriented around elder issues. But I don't -- there's not a lot out there that compels me right now that I feel like is going to be real effective. I feel like the times are bad, and I feel like I'm in political hibernation. Like I would much rather be living in community, doing political action, doing what I was in the '70's in MNS, but I don't see trying to go out and start a community like that at this point, I don't think the time is right. So I feel like I'm regrouping, and I can imagine, depending on how things develop with me politically, having another era in my life where I do a whole lot more. If Maggie Coon [?] were alive, I would probably go follow her. She was amazing. She died four days after she was at an elders conference in Philadelphia. She was very frail, but she was going right up to the end.

Q: I got a chance to interview her for an article I wrote for communities magazine, talking about home sharing, and she was wonderful. I really enjoyed talking to her.