

Interview with Dik (Rick) Cool

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

June 27, 1996

Q: So, this is an interview with Dik, and your last name?

A: Cool, just like the word, "c-o-o-l."

Q: Oh, cool, okay.

A: First name is "d-i-k."

Q: Oh, alright. Thank you. Now, you're one of the founders?

A: Mm-hmm.

Q: And when did the house start? It was '69?

A: No, '71.

Q: Oh, '71, okay. Jack wasn't quite sure, so '71. And can you tell me a little bit about the early history and what brought people together, and...?

A: Sure, I was living with a woman named Diane Cass [??], who was one of the original founders, a couple blocks from here. My sister had been going through an ugly time with her husband for quite some time. She had two kids, Mark and Derek, and she finally, after about two or three false attempts to leave him, she finally did and moved in with us where we were living, and the place wasn't big enough. It was a two-bedroom, a fairly small two-bedroom apartment. So we started house-hunting and found this house which it so happened was next to Karen. Actually, Karen was the first person in these houses, about a year, I think. She was a student, an SU student, that's why she was living here, a lot of students that live in the neighborhood. So we initially, I'm not sure for how long, for the first year or two, the houses were relatively independent, and then gradually we began to come together more. I think probably the first thing was eating some meals together and, obviously, getting to know each other better. Liz and Karen, Liz is my sister, worked together. They founded the Women's Center. Women's Info, which is still functioning over on Allen Street. It's one of the oldest independent women's centers in the country, and it was operating out of a room in Karen's house. So that was another real link between the houses. That didn't happen immediately, but it happened...actually, they would know better the timing of that.

Q: Now, did you rent the houses to start with?

A: No.

Q: You bought them right away.

A: Well, actually, this house we bought right away. They were renting this house, and then, I think one of the first things they did was to, after the collective came together, was to buy the house. I think they might have been renting with an option to buy. I'm not too clear on David Kuhns [??] and Pat McCarthy were two other people in the collective and they were either living in the house next door when we moved in or moved in shortly thereafter. And David is still in the area, Pat, I think, left the area a while ago.

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Q: Now, did you purchase the houses collectively or did one person buy them? **A:** We bought this house, the three of us. It was an unconventional....

Q: You and Liz and Karen?

A: No, Liz and Diane and myself.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: It was a pretty unconventional thing to do at the time. The bank didn't like it.

Q: Right.

A: I had a wealthy friend who was involved with the Peace Council, which I had begun working at, whose husband was on the board of the bank we got the mortgage from, and I think that was a help in terms of us getting the mortgage, because none of us had that much income, either. So not only was it unconventional, but we didn't have a lot of income. Of course, the house only cost thirteen thousand dollars.

Q: Wow.

A: At that time.

Q: That's incredible! Times have changed.

A: Yeah. But at that time that was more money, of course, even though it was still pretty inexpensive.

Q: Did the people who moved into the houses all help pay the mortgage, collectively?

A: Yeah. There was a certain amount of money that was put in for house expenses and the mortgage was paid out of that, and taxes and basic house expenses. I was making probably fifty dollars a week working at the Peace Council. Liz and Karen, I don't think, weren't making that much working at the Women's Center. They were probably making thirty or forty dollars a week, when we were paid. Diane was a nurse and she had founded the Free Clinic in Syracuse, which went for about four or five years.

Jack Manno: Good-bye.

A: Bye-bye.

Manno: Good luck with your project.

Q: Thanks, it was nice talking to you.

Manno: Will we get a copy of whatever you do?

Q: I don't know. We're interviewing so many people, it might be kind of hard to do that, but we'll certainly let you know what happens.

Manno: Alright.

Q: Okay.

A: Take care, J.

Manno: Yup. See ya later.

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A: See ya. Um....

Q: You were talking about the Free Clinic, I guess?

A: I was just saying that Diane had founded the Free Clinic and so she wasn't making very much money either. Although, I think she had a fairly typical job before too long after that, working at a hospital or something, to augment the Free Clinic. I don't know if you know what Free Clinics were.

Q: A little bit, they were pretty popular during that time.

A: Yeah, just people centered attempts to provide medical care at virtually no cost to people. So that's the early period.

Q: Right. So there wasn't some sort of common ideology that brought you together? It was more a practical...that you needed a larger place to live and so bought the house?

A: That's pretty accurate, yeah. That was true for everybody in this house, it was true for the houses coming together. There certainly was an ideology, but it wasn't a particularly political ideology in a traditional sense. A desire to be close, to support each other, to build community, those were all things that we articulated.

Q: Yeah. But it seems like you all did have pretty similar politics.

A: Mm-hmm.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Yeah. Definitely did. For the most part, people were involved in different kinds of community activities. Other people that lived in the collective, Peter McCarthy lived here for a number of years. He taught in an alternative school. I'm just trying to think of some of the other occupations. And went on to become a teacher in the city system. Pat, next door, had probably the most traditional job, in some ways. I think she worked at Hutchins [??], which was a psychiatric outpatient center. David was a carpenter, still is a carpenter, self-employed carpenter at his own small business. So he was our resident fix-it person.

Q: That'd be nice to have. Come in handy.

A: Yeah, see this dormer up here? That was probably our biggest single project, on the third floor, we put that in together, with David. And Peter actually had quite a bit of carpenter experience, too, and I'm fairly handy, but had never done something of that magnitude. We were also members of the kid co-op, which we helped to found, which was an alternative day-care center. Basically it rose out of the need for ten or fifteen parents to have ongoing day care for their kids. That eventually had two rooms in the Women's Center. It started out in people's homes, and then as it became more formal we rented two rooms in the Women's Center. So it was like this circle widening.

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Q: So the Women's Center had moved from was it Karen's room or Liz's room to...?

A: From Karen's, yeah, next door. Actually, it had moved several times by then, and was....

Q: And they actually got a house eventually.

A: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Q: Did they buy it?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. And does that still exist?

A: Yeah.

Q: Oh, that's great.

A: It still exists.

Q: So two rooms in the Women's Center became the kid's co-op?

A: Mm-hmm. And gradually, as that group of kids got older, Mark and Derek were both in it, then it died out. We've actually been thinking of starting something like that again because Karen and I have a two year old daughter, our mid-life child experiment. It's wonderful. And we're a part of a group of people, most of whom are older parents, who have that need again. So I don't know if something will evolve or not, but the need is there.

Q: I got the impression from Jack that you guys were really actively involved in political issues around the area. Well, you mentioned some of the things, like the Women's Center and the Free Clinic, but also anti-war activities?

A: Yeah, I was the staff person, or one of the staff people for the Peace Council. As I said, Liz and Karen were staff people at the Women's Center. And those two organizations were a couple of the larger political organizations during that time, the Peace Council in 1973 had almost six full-time staff people. We were all being paid the fifty or sixty bucks a week, but still, that was a lot of people for an anti-war organization. It wasn't nationally based.

Q: Did the money just come from donations?

A: Donations and events, fund-raising events. But obviously, work against the war was a very big and important issue and people were willing to support that generously with donations. Jack was involved with early gay liberation issues. Karen was too, to some extent. Another important thing was the natural linkage between the two major organizations. The Women's Center and the Peace Council provided this personal linkage between the feminist women's movement and the peace movement in Syracuse, which really strengthened the overall effectiveness of our activities. In many, if not most communities across the country there wasn't a solidarity across a variety of movements that existed in Syracuse. And Syracuse never experienced a lot of these sort of inter-left, inter-feminist fighting and ideological struggles that occurred in many communities, particularly larger metropolitan areas. I don't think it was just coincidental, I think it was because of a lot of the networking and community building.

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And the collective, Grassroots/Dandelion, was a really integral part of that because we were all very close and we were involved in a large number of activities outside the collective. The food co-op is another I forgot to mention. In Syracuse, we have a food co-op. We were charter members of it, and saved it a couple times in its early days.

Q: And it's still going?

A: Mm-hmm.

Q: Oh, that's wonderful.

A: It's still going. It's actually gone through another crisis, but it's still going.

Q: Yeah, that's unusual. I keep on hearing about a lot of food co-ops that have died off, yeah.

A: Yeah, as the large commercial stores have moved in to take over a lot of the services.

Q: Right, the Whole Foods and Wild Oats and stuff like that, yeah. How did Grassroots and Dandelion get their names?

A: We consciously went through a selection process, each house did, with, I'm sure, kibitzing from people in the other house. As you can tell from the names, we're looking for something that was grassroots.

Q: Mm-hmm. Sure.

A: Well, you can see the sign still is up on Grassroots.

Q: I saw that, yeah.

A: There was a sign on Dandelion, too, actually we're thinking of doing one again, but it got stolen quite a number of years ago.

Q: So you don't really identify yourselves by those names anymore?

A: Not to the same extent, although I've been pushing to start doing that more. Particularly since I moved next door, the house was still kind of known as Karen's house when she was there by herself for quite some time. Trying to change that in people's minds. I mean, that was one of the reasons to name the houses to begin with, so that people didn't call them Dik's house or Cindy's house or Karen's house or whatever, which I think is a very positive thing.

Q: One thing that Jack mentioned that we didn't get to talk about was that the group kind of split up in the early eighties. Can you tell me what happened?

A: People just, essentially, decided to go their separate ways, I think. Certainly one factor was there was relationship in the collective between David in this house and Liz in this house which was pretty important, and they split up. And people, I think, Jack and Cindy decided to have kids, and they, for one reason or another, did not want to do that in the collective. So eventually Liz decided to move out and buy her own house over on Basset street, which is about four or five blocks away. I think she wanted to, at least for a period of time in her life, have a more intense relationship with her kids, and she wasn't doing the kind of

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work that would prevent her from doing that at that point. Diane had since moved out quite some time before that. We actually hadn't had a lot of transition in the collective. There was some, obviously, but not a great deal. For the most part it was amicable, which was not the case, I know, with a lot of collectives.

Q: Did you have to split up the assets? Did people moving out feel some sort of ownership?

A: The biggest asset were the houses, and we never set up anything where we...this house continued to be owned by the three original people. So new people who had come in didn't really legally own a piece of the house. Because we had never spelled out what that was going to be and it had actually never come up. People were so unconcerned about material wealth at that time. I think it did create some hard feelings on the part of some people who had been in the collective for a period of time, but didn't have a part of that. But that's about as far as it went. This house, Dandelion, they divided up the assets there, too. I think David and Karen and Pat had actually owned the house and eventually Karen bought David out, his remaining when he moved out, so it was divided up. But the concept of everyone that lived here taking a piece was not the....

Q: Yeah. So even though you guys had this kind of split, it seems like there still are collective houses going.

A: Mm-hmm.

Q: So, it's not like the collective ended or anything, really.

A: Well, we kind of formally came back together again after a period of time, in 1992. Very consciously. Karen has been in this house right along, and I was living here with my partner, a woman named Linda, and her son, and then we decided to move out in 1990. Primarily because of the student encroachment in the neighborhood, it had just become dominantly a student neighborhood, and with all that entails -- noise, disinterest in the neighborhood, and transition, just a general kind of mistreatment of the neighborhood. Not on the part of all students, but enough that it had become pretty intolerable. So after two years Linda and I decided to split up and I had been talking to Jack and Cindy, who were living over on the west side, and they were feeling kind of isolated over there, they really didn't have any kind of community around them, some friends, but nothing like existed in this area. I now owned Grassroots by myself and I had been renting it for those couple of years, so we decided to do it. They decided to sell their house over there and move back in. We didn't exactly know what that would mean in terms of the two houses, but we knew there would be a relationship.

Q: Do you still own this house?

A: I sold half of it to Jack and Cindy, so I own half and they own half. I also own the house on the corner, I bought that, so our property acquisitions have been going up. I bought it so that we would have this whole stretch of land and also to keep a student landlord from owning it and doing what he was continuing to do with it. Before we moved in I actually had quite a bit of work done on the place. The backyard was landscaped. During the collective it had all been forever wild, this back portion, there were scrub maple trees and we never had either the money or the inclination to do anything with it, and I decided I wanted to change that, and built a deck. A lot of the impetus was to have a place for my

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father to live, who was fairly ill with cancer at that time. So I created a, I guess it's called a "mother-in-law apartment," the back of the house here. Our longer range thought at that time was to have a place where any of our parents could come and live if they needed to, for a period of time, in their waning days. That, in fact, has continued to happen with Jack's parents living here because of the illness of his mother.

Q: Was it helpful to have a collective setting to help take care of your dad?

A: Very much so, yeah.

Q: So you got support and help from the other adults that were here.

A: Yeah, absolutely. Liz and I were the primary people but everybody was very much involved to some extent, as we are with Pete and Jenny, although Jenny has Pete. My mother had died about six years before that, so she was not here to be a caretaker for my father.

Q: Pete and Jenny are Jack's folks?

A: Jack's mother and father, right. So that vision has...most of our visions have worked out wonderfully. The neighborhood has gradually returned to families. When we moved in Jack and Cindy's kids, Deanna and Danny, were the only kids in this immediate area, and now there's over eighteen kids just in this quarter-block area.

Q: Oh, that's great.

A: Yeah. It's wonderful. We have five more moving in right across the street. And that's not just coincidence. It's because we were willing to take the gamble and say that the neighborhood could be changed and provide that example to people. The people across the street we know directly, the Torres' [??], who we've become quite close with. We watch their kids, they watch our kids kind of thing. They very consciously moved in over there because we were here.

Q: That must feel really good.

A: Yeah, well, particularly, having a two-year-old. And we didn't even know about her when we moved back and wanted to do that. You know, Karen and I got together and decided to have a baby so it became more important, all those concerns.

Q: In the early years did you guys income-share? Were you fully communal in that way?

A: There was always a question. We did not do total income sharing. We did what I would call a graduated-income sharing, in which people who made more money put more money into the house kitty and they frequently put more money into the food kitty. The house kitty was separate from the food kitty. That was an ongoing discussion, although as I said, there were usually only a couple people who had much more money than anybody else, so it wasn't an ongoing question.

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Q: You were working at the Peace Council and then some work you were doing there evolved into the Syracuse Cultural Workers?

A: Right. I left the staff there in 1981. I began this calendar in '72 while at the Peace Council and had just kept it going the whole time I was on staff, obviously with help from a lot of different people. Then, in '81 the calendar lost money for the first time, some money, and the Peace Council steering committee decided to not publish it again because money was very tight and they didn't want to take the chance. So a group of us, Jack of which was one, he's one of the founding mothers and fathers of the Cultural Workers, there were five people, decided to put it out as a separate entity, and that was the beginning of the Cultural Workers. At the same time I had decided to leave staff at the Peace Council, decided I wanted to be doing more cultural work. I had also overseen the publishing and distribution of about twelve posters while I was at the Peace Council and I also coordinated a weekly film series up on the SU campus. I had almost intuitively moved towards a lot of my staff time being cultural work, so the founding of a new organization was kind of a natural extension of that. In the early years of the Cultural Workers, we did more local work, film work, more design work, and then in the mid- to late-'80s, we almost went bankrupt. We should've gone bankrupt, actually, on paper. Our accountant said that there was no question we should've just closed our doors, but I was determined to not let that happen. So we cut loose most of our local stuff because we weren't making any money on it and focused on our national and international publishing work for which there was very little...almost nobody else was doing this kind of work and still isn't. Gradually the organization turned around.

Q: So, is it a publishing house for peace and justice type stuff, is that how you'd describe it? I'm not sure....

A: Well, we have a mission statement in here. It's not just peace and justice, although that's certainly a big part of it. Peace, justice, cultural liberation, environmental, I'll give you our catalog.

Q: Oh, I think they brought one out. Maybe they took it back inside. Oh no wait, here it is.

A: There you go. All of the issues you see in there are...lesbian and gay rights, African American cultural movements, Native American support, sovereignty, we try to develop cultural materials around all of those things. What we're finding is that people are really hungry for that kind of work that supports their values, and they can't find it anyplace else. Obviously you can't find it in malls and commercial stores for the most part. So we sell directly to people and we also sell through a network of smaller independent stores around the country and Canada. A little bit in Europe, but primarily North America. Actually, the last two or three years we've moved more towards...the majority of posters you see in here we distribute for other publishers. An artist in Kansas decides to print a poster and they send us a copy, and we say, "Well, we think we can sell this," and so we put it in the catalog, that's how it has worked a lot.

Q: Like Elizabeth Leighton's [??] one.

A: That's right.

Q: Yeah, I saw that in there, that's very cool. She lived right near me.

A: Did she?

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Q: Yeah.

A: As a matter of fact, we're going to be doing a lot more with her work. The man, Don Lambert, I don't know if that's a name that's familiar to you, he's the man who kind of manages her art work and her estate, is coming to Syracuse to meet with me in a couple of weeks. We're hoping to get an exhibit of her work into the major museum here in Syracuse. There are two exhibits of her work that tour. Yeah, that's a nice connection. And he did a book on her work, I think we're gonna carry that in the fall. It's that kind of connection. We're actually one of the two or three publishers that she allowed to do her work, because she would never accept any payment for it, and didn't want it being used by commercial publishers to make money. Most of our artists are progressive artists who need the money. What little money we can pay them, they're grateful for.

Q: It sounds like these two houses have been kind of like the hotbed of alternative activity around here.

A: In some ways that's true, yeah. Karen is the director of the community choir, which is a really important cultural entity. We just had the solstice concert last night. Did you...oh, you didn't get up for it, did you?

Q: No, I didn't. I'm sorry I missed that.

A: Wonderful, wonderful event. There's a couple of events a year -- the choir concerts, they're symbolic community building events. Another one is the Plowshare [??] crafts fair that happens in December that the Peace Council does every year. That's been going for twenty-five years. It's an opportunity for people to come together. And in the case of the choir concerts, it's an event for music, to listen to music, to sing along, but it's also an opportunity to see people, to....

Q: Network.

A: To network, to rub elbows, to renew acquaintances, to build community.

Q: What do you see as the benefits of collective living?

A: An ongoing sense of community, different levels of support, there's sustenance that helps us to do political work, which is very very difficult to do without support. People burn out. At a practical level, just sharing tasks. We each cook a night a week, so it allows us to have a really nice meal each evening without one person feeling like they've got to do all the cooking, which is the case in a lot of traditional households. Just that is a big...I know Janet, across the street, said, "God, I would love to have that kind of thing." She does most of the cooking. So we [unintelligible] that, well, let's see, is there some way that we could include them? That's six more people. We haven't done anything yet. We were gonna talk about it, but it's a little daunting. And caring for kids. Cora feels incredibly loved by a very wide group of people. She has all these layers, there's her immediate family, there's her collective family, then there's sort of our extended family in the community, then there's the wider community. It really typifies the whole village concept. "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

Q: How about the flip side? What are some of the drawbacks?

A: Having to work on relationships with...actually, I would say that's both a plus and a minus. I think most things probably are, in that category. You know, you have to work on relationships with people,

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which can sometimes be draining and time consuming. There's sometimes an issue over privacy or, wow, it's getting late, I wonder if they're still sleeping. See, Liz and Cora and I go out to breakfast on Thursday mornings.

Q: Oh, that's neat.

A: Yeah, we usually leave by now, but Karen got in late, so they're sleeping....

Q: Oh, because of the choir last night, yeah.

A: Right. They were out partying after the concert. Privacy is an issue. Individual privacy and individual time certainly are issues. They were more so in the prior collective. We tried to set up systems to accommodate those needs, sometimes successfully, sometimes not very successfully, I think. Setting up a time for each person to be able to go off, like a week at a time. We even had the idea of having an apartment someplace else so that people could go there for three months or something when they needed that kind of time.

Q: Yeah. Jack said that you even have tried to maybe have a place in the country as well?

A: Mm-hmm. I think we will have that within a couple of years. We now have the financial means to be able to do that kind of thing, whereas our financial options were pretty limited in the prior collective.
[side 2 ends]

Q: Any traditions or rituals? Celebrations?

A: Yeah, a lot of our rituals have revolved around the more traditional times in the society, Christmas is always a big time for us. Not to read from the bible, but just to really feel a lot of strong family ties and do a lot of activities together. One of the things we always did in the collective was we had an adult stocking time, which was we'd draw names and everybody would do a stocking for that person, which was a surprise. We still did stockings for the kids, which everybody contributed to that, but we felt like we wanted to have something special just for the adults. We would do various rituals, many of which evolved from various spiritual readings, or things that evolved from the women's movement, particularly around times like the solstice or special times like that -- people's anniversaries or Mother's and Father's Day. I can remember some ritual circles around Jack and Cindy's...they actually got married, I think, while they were in the collective. They were together, but they hadn't gotten married, and we had a ritual and a ceremony and an event out at the park, around the water, and created our own service.

Q: And I think Jack said you had some home births as well?

A: Mm-hmm. Deanna was born next door.

Q: So you've had births, marriage, and a death, I guess.

A: Mm-hmm.

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Q: Yeah. Has that brought people together?

A: Sure. Going through those things always brings people together. We were planning on Cora being a home birth. We had done everything, all the preparation, then Karen ended up having an emergency C-section.

Q: Oh, that's too bad.

A: She had placenta previa [??], which we didn't know until the last minute, so that was scary, but it came out alright. Everything went alright, finally. But sure, intense times in people's lives build connectedness.

Q: Grassroots and Dandelion have been going on for a long time, even though you went through that decade where you were kind of split up, from what, '82 to '92? But still, you've certainly kept things going much longer than a lot of collectives from your era. Why do you think that is?

A: I don't know. I haven't really studied it in other areas, which you're doing. You should be able to answer that better than myself, but I would say a group of people who really understood and appreciated the deep connections that we all had. And not all of us, but a large portion of us stayed in close touch, even when we weren't living collectively, and that certainly was an important part of it. It would've been much more difficult to pull something back together if those links still hadn't been there. Starting from scratch, I don't think any of us really would've done. It was kind of like coming back together with a lot of shared values already made it a lot easier. I think that there not being a lot of mobility amongst all of us was certainly a key, a lot of us still being in the same area. A lot of people our age or younger certainly were very mobile, moving from one community to another. None of us, Jack now does, but none of us having formal ties to an academic institution, I think a lot of people involved in collectives did have those kinds of ties, either from income, that was their source of income, so you're more apt to be moving to another position at another university. None of us had that. Those would be the things that come to my mind immediately.

Q: Yeah. Well, as a final question, this is something we ask everybody and it's kind of a silly question, but I'll ask it anyway, but that's, would you describe Grassroots and Dandelion as a success or a failure?

A: A big success. For all the reasons I've said. It was a more typical way to live back in the '60s and '70s, or at least, one that was more visible. I think there's been a maturation process. Some of the things that we did that really caused problems before, we are not doing again. One small example I can think of is the phones. We were so concerned about...actually, I think the main impetus was to try to cheat the phone company, you know, try to pay the phone company as little money as possible, probably the second one was just that we didn't have a lot of money. We had one phone between the two houses and we ran a line, see that line right there, running right there? It's still there. That was the phone line between the houses. We put up our own phone line. It was also an intercom system, but it was crazy, because at least half of us were organizers, who used the phone constantly when we were home, and it just caused all kinds of hassles. So in my mind, that was an example of over-communizing.

Q: Right.

A: We now have at least three or four phones in the houses.

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Q: Right.

A: But, as I look back, I certainly wouldn't have wanted to do it any differently. It's been an incredibly rich part of my life. She [the cat] doesn't usually come out of the basement, this is a special occasion.

Q: That's what Jack said, yeah. They said she kind of hides in there. Well, I'm glad you came to visit.

A: She's afraid of Pepper and [unintelligible].

Q: Oh, I guess Pepper's off on a walk now.

A: Right, the coast is clear. Okay. Are we set?

Q: Yeah, that's great. Thank you very much for your time.