

Interview with Marlene Heck

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

April 18, 1995

Q: ...introduce yourself and the day...

A: My name is Marlene Heck. I teach Architectural History and American History at Dartmouth College. Today is April 18, 1985.

Q: '95.

A: What did I say, '85? '95.

Q: That's OK.

A: I'm here to talk about my experiences living communally with the Mulberry Group or the Mulberry Family in Richmond, VA. May of 1969 til September of 1980.

Q: That's a long time.

A: Long time ago.

Q: How did you become affiliated with this group or what started it?

A: I was a graduate student at the University of Virginia, the School of Architecture and one of my good friends was one of the original founders of the Mulberry Group. It had been founded in the early to mid-70s and Albert left Mulberry and he went to the University of Virginia for a Masters degree in Landscape Architecture and on a couple of field trips that we would take when we would come through Richmond, we would stop in and just say hi to people or grab a lunch or whatever, so I knew of it then. I dated Albert and after I left the University of Virginia, I moved back to Texas where I lived for a couple of years and then I moved to Richmond to be with him and he graduated from the University of Virginia. He was living in Richmond working as a landscape architect and living there, so I moved into this group and was sort of absorbed into this group. I moved to Richmond in May of 1970.

Q: What was his premise for starting the group? Did he have some sort of revelation?

A: No, no. It was nothing of the sort of mythical aspect of communal living. This was simply a group of people who had graduated from undergraduate school and were poor and wanted to live, I guess one could say, a little bit better quality of life. They knew if they combined their resources, they could live better than they could if they each rented a small apartment somewhere in Richmond. So they found a house on Mulberry--on the corner of Grace and Mulberry Street--hence the name Mulberry Family. Grace street once had been very fashionable, but in the last 20 years had become very derelict, and so property was pretty cheap. And they sort of combined their forces to rent this place and then bought it. The idea really was for like-minded people to be living together. People who were politically or socially like-minded. And also that they could live in a house rather than an apartment and as a group they could afford to live a little bit better. And I also suspect there was some self-consciousness there about living as a group, living communally in the early '70s which would have been in the year something they were alert to. But it had nothing to do with, had no unifying theme, other than a bunch of people in their young twenties who were pretty poor and wanted to live with other people who were like themselves.

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Q: So they lived in a large house?

A: It was a large, late 19th, early 20th century row house. It's in a part of Richmond known as the fan, and it's known as the fan because these roads--here's downtown Richmond--and the roads branch out from downtown Richmond. Street after street after street or row houses of varying quality. And this was a kind of middle-class street. Two story houses, two story single family houses and as the street sort of fell into disrepair, as places became boarding houses, there were a lot of empty houses, half-way houses. If you said the late '70s that you lived on Grace Street, people were sort of horrified, they looked at you and went "Grace Street?" you know, one of those, but it was because the real estate was so cheap that they could afford this house and then they eventually bought the one next door, too.

Q: Did they combine them then?

A: Yes, they put a fence around both of them, so we had a communal backyard and would just go back and forth and the kitchen and dining room was in one house and the other house was reserved entirely for residential life and upstairs and the back part of the first house was residential as well, but we ate all our meals together and had our family meetings in the front room of that one house.

Q: How communal was the economy?

A: OK, I forget the specifics, but instead of calling it rent, I think there was a monthly fee or something of the sort, and that covered the mortgage. So, we would pay a couple hundred dollars, even in the late '70s it was not a whole lot of money, and that covered taxes, insurance and the mortgage payment and then each of us paid monthly food costs and that would have been \$80 or something of that sort. Then there was the finance committee who took care of the books and made sure all the bills were paid and things like that, but everybody contributed equally to the upkeep and running of the house. And I think we paid a little bit above what it cost to insure and pay the mortgage and that money went into an account so that if the toilet broke, if something needed to be fixed, that was the money that was used to do those repairs on the house.

Q: What kind of occupations **?

A: College professors, landscape architects, I think at the beginning it was mostly students, and then as these people grew a little older, some went back to graduate school, some into professional life, it changed from being a, I think you could adequately describe sort of a hippie group into a young professional group, so that by the time I got there in the late 70's, we had a banker, a college professor, a landscape architect, a couple of school teachers in the public school system, a graphic designer, someone who was a manager for a restaurant, a dancer, so it was a variety of occupations. Men and women, blacks and whites, straights and gays, so it was quite a mixture.

Q: So then, in a sense, there could still be a division between the classes, if you only were to give a certain percentage, you said \$80 for food. The rest of that money you would keep yourself? How would that work?

A: Yeah, you know, your salary was your own and once you paid your monthly maintenance fee and your food, the rest was yours. We were all pretty young and in pretty early stages of our careers, so it wasn't that there was one group who made a tremendous amount of money, and if somebody did, it

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was never apparent. I mean, that was, I think, one of the reasons for living together was that we sort of shared among that mentality about life and material goods and that sort of thing. So there was no one who drove a fancy car, there was no one with an extraordinary wardrobe, there was no one with an outstanding stereo system or something of that sort, I mean we were all paying off college loans and traveling to meet our parents and things of that sort, so there could have been, but it really wasn't apparent if there were any discrepancies.

Q: Speaking of your parents, what did your parents think about it?

A: Gosh, my parents were pretty typical of a lot of parents. My mother was really interested in this, and I remember being home one year for Christmas and sitting back and saying, "Gee, I wonder what my roommates at Mulberry are doing today. I wonder if they're having such a lovely Christmas dinner." Something like that. And my mother said something about, "Oh well did they go home to their parents?" da da da and my father did not say a word. And this seemed to be typical of many of the people that mothers would actively come in, they were real interested in seeing who was there and mothers would come and visit and stay. But I knew of several fathers who would wait out in the car, and for my very Catholic father who just, he didn't want to know. He never expressed any interest I know that he was dying to know what the world was going on inside the house and he would've been shocked at how mundane and sort of ordinary life was like inside that house. So, my mom was real curious and she would ask questions and my father, the less he knew about it, the better it was for him.

Q: So, he never got curious, or not openly?

A: Not openly curious. I suspect when I was outside, he would ask my mom. "So, what does she say about that place?" you know, but my very straight-laced, conservative father, the idea of a bunch of unrelated people living together in this, you know, it was just too weird for him to think about, too different.

Q: Part of the image, of course, and I think what feeds into all that is that there was a very widespread popular perception that it's a free-love place, essentially. That everyone's sharing sexual partners, which, I think, was rarely true. Was it the case?

A: Absolutely not. There were couples living together in the house, there were people who were involved with people who lived outside the house, but people never got interested or involved with their roommates essentially. People moved in because their partner lived there, but people didn't pair off and there were no sort of sexual orgies or, you know, as I said, really sort of ordinary day-to-day living and I think that's probably what my father assumed, all the publicity in the '70s of free love and drugs and he assumed that somehow his daughter, his Catholic, educated daughter had gotten involved in this and had fallen off the wagon. He just couldn't bear to think of what was going on.

Q: So in a sense, the Mulberry Community was established, more or less, not because of ideas and beliefs that they shared, more of a way to live in harmony but economically...

A: Yeah, it was more of a social and economical decision rather than one that was predicated on preserving the land or getting back to nature or something that you might have found in the more rural area. Because this was an urban commune, that made it a bit different. So it was all these young people

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who found themselves in the city with a rather moderate income and not wanting to live like students anymore.

Q: Isn't that almost the essence of living like students, though? Get an old house and get together with a bunch of people.

A: Maybe so. When you think of living in a dorm, you think of living in somebody else's house,

Q: That's true.

A: So this was to be your own place and it was much larger than any one person could afford by and large. But you know, again, when you're 22 and 23, it seems normal to live in a large group of people. I think you come out of college, you're accustomed to living in dormitories or fraternities, and this doesn't seem at all unusual, you are willing to give up private space or private time in exchange for having friends around, in exchange for having people who think like you and vote like you and dress like you and have occupations similar to yours. It was an odd house in that we had, you know, some blacks as well as whites living there, men as well as women, and this is Richmond VA, Richmond, which is still rather uneasy over the whole racial issue.

Q: Now, you were there, about what, a year and a half?

A: Yeah, exactly.

Q: What are the overall dates of the group?

A: I want to say that it was founded in about, let's see, I went to school in '77, so maybe '73, '74 through about 1986. And it still exists. There's an annual meeting, there's still a governing board, there are investments made; the two houses were sold, that money is invested. They still get together once a year at an annual meeting to sort of revive friendships. The board or directors meets several times a year to manage the funds. Once a year, there's a contribution made to some charity, that part of that money is set aside for a charitable donation. Often it's something very socially oriented like AIDS research or Haitian refugees or something of that sort. So, while the community itself disbanded in '86, it still exists as an organization, as a legal entity, and very much as a group of people who recognize themselves as former roommates. A lot of people still live in Richmond and they get together. And then there's this annual meeting in September once a year, where they have business as well as fun. They'll rent a beach house something that will attract them, a place to relax. And there's some talk about getting back together as we grow older. I think in many ways what happened is that people hit that time in their life when they wanted their own ways, they were tired of living with other people's furniture and having to put up with somebody tromping through their room late at night or the phone ringing or going to the refrigerator and somebody's eaten the thing that you were thinking about eating or whatever and you just want a place of your own and so, people moved out, they got married, they paired off. But there's the sense that this is the kind of living that makes sense, I mean, people are still compatible, so when we're older and, you know, widowed or single, it would make sense to come back and to live as elderly people together and to help each other out. One of my roommates, Lee, Lee Merkel, was a teacher in the Richmond School District and Lee had a brain tumor, he had a brain tumor that was discovered about 1984 and Lee died in this house. He was taken care of day and night and one of things in the

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archives is the schedule of healthcare for Lee. Instead of putting him in a hospice, instead of putting him in a hospital, he lived at home and it was wonderful for Lee, it was wonderful for his family not to feel the sole burden of having to deal 24 hours a day with somebody who is young and terminally ill, and while it was an enormous strain on the house, it was also something that was enormously generous and beneficial to Lee and his family and to Lee's roommates who learned something close-hand at a young age about death and seeing a friend die. So we thought as we grew older, it would make sense to take care of each other, why, you know, why live individually in our own little houses? Let's come back together, eat, you know. All the studies are showing you live longer if you have companions, if you have something to look forward to, if you are part of a community. So it's a possibility that it will be recreated in a slightly different form, in a ranch house, a one-story.

Q: One-story, yeah, no stairs.

A: No stairs.

Q: It's interesting, just looking at the European view of things as well. They all, not necessary they live communally but, various families, but the parents usually live at home, their children when they're older as well, and the children help out, I mean, so...

A: American culture created a different metal.

Q: Very independent.

A: Yes.

Q: When you're 18, you're out of the house and on your own.

A: And the idea of everyone having a home of their own, that was something that the culture actively sought and created rather than the sense of taking care of our family. You know, we created things like nursing homes we could put them in. I suspect most other cultures don't have nursing homes.

Q: A lot of them don't.

A: But we're prosperous and independent and we don't have that sense of responsibility toward our families as they do.

Q: Not as much as many cultures do. Some people still do it.

A: Sure, sure.

Q: Do you know Alan Ginsberg, among other things took care of his mother for many years?

A: Yes. There's been a recent spade of publicity about him and I read about that. And I have friends who are doing it now.

Q: Yeah, I do, too.

A: So, this makes sense, it would be lovely to share the responsibilities and to have the support.

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Q: Yeah.

A: It would be a relief to our families.

Q: So, during this time, were there any children at all at that...?

A: No, no one had children. When people left, got married or paired off, they had children, but there, I can't remember if that was by design or, you know, if there was some sort of rule, but there were no children around. Except for visitors, people brought their children with them and that was always fun, they were always treasured as special people in the house.

Q: During that time, was there a desire to recruit more?

A: No, there was no active recruitment. People came to the house because, as I said, because they had partners in the house or because they had a friend who lived there, you know, a lot of our friends would come over and eat dinner with us and sort of hang out and they became interested. So it was a kind of natural growth and the house shrank, you know, it was always in motion. People were always coming in, people were always leaving, but there was no active campaigning or recruitment for other people. And you had to go through a process, you just couldn't announce that "I want to move in here," you had to come to several family meetings and they made it clear that they wanted to take a look at you and see if you were a tolerant person, see if you were willing to live under the kinds or restrictions that were in place in terms of public and private space and communal eating. Are you willing to take your turn at being on a committee? At going grocery shopping? At yard work? At maintenance? So there was a process before one was admitted, in some ways, into the house.

Q: ** and all that, could you buy more or less than afford a house with someone responsible...

A: Yes, yes, we had various committees and for a while I was on the grocery committee, which was separate from the produce committee. We had an order in, I guess weekly, to Loving's Produce and it was sort of like the restaurant order where they just deliver, you know, crates of lettuce and crates of tomatoes or whatever fruits and vegetables are in season. It was a vegetarian house, it was all vegetarian. Not that all of us were vegetarians, and we often sneaked out for Kentucky Fried Chicken and things like that. But we only cooked vegetarian at home and I was on the grocery committee and once a week, there were two of us, we would go grocery shopping and we would usually fill up two carts and it was a simple diet and there were also people who signed up to cook. And so when you signed up to cook, you signed up to cook for 14 or 18 or 21 people. And so there was a sign-up sheet in the kitchen, that's how we got the cooking done, and almost always somebody would sign up to cook and usually people would do it together, so it wasn't so daunting. So we would go and we had a pretty standard grocery list, you know, milk and grains and beans and buying in bulk and cereals and things of this sort and then we would prepare a meal and then we would all sit down together to eat this meal and that was a very important part of living there. You were expected to show up for most meals. Of course, you had to be out for a meeting, of course you were out of town, but if you were there, it was expected that generally you would have dinner and this is where people connected. In the morning over breakfast, people are running through, reading the paper, grabbing a cup of coffee, but this is where we sit down and exchange meals. And then there was the clean-up committee, somebody who did all the dishes, and that was really, you know, cleaning up from cooking for 21 people, that was really quite a

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task. And let's see, what else? Oh, and they also made a decision to eat with chopsticks, and the decision to eat with chopsticks was so that it would slow you down. If you came running in at 6:00 and you sat down and you were so hungry, you would just rush through dinner. But the idea was that by using chopsticks it slows you down, you know, you're eating, you're having conversation. Of course you could use a fork if you wanted to, but that was a tradition there, there was a big basket of chopsticks on the table that you would pull a couple from. So, little things like that to maintain the social...

Q: Do you still eat with chopsticks?

A: No, no and I never learned to do that very well. I think perhaps the most important sort of group event, once a week there was a family meeting, Monday nights, and upi were, again, expected to be there. And this is where the business of the community was done, and this is if there were decisions, legal business, if somebody was leaving a committee, something needed to be done, who volunteers to go down and check out to find out how much two windows would cost? Or if there were personal problems; if somebody felt that somebody wasn't carrying their load, if somebody felt there was a problem, this is where it was brought out and the meetings could go anywhere from 30 minutes to four, five, six hours, depending upon the agenda. And we would begin by saying, "OK, what do we need to talk about tonight?" and making a list and then just working through that list. Old business, new business and that was done weekly. And that was very important for keeping the house in order, for making sure things got done, that everyone knew their responsibilities, and also a place where one could seek relief from a real or imagined problem. You can imagine living with 18 people, 21 people, you're going to be angry, somebody's going to do something, use something, break something, not contribute sufficiently, or at least you perceive that, so you need a place that you can bring those to the floor. You can present this problem to the group and the group works it out instead of the two of you just arguing back and forth.

Q: How did other jobs work? You mentioned cooking you signed up for; dishwashing did you sign up for the same way?

A: Well, there was a clean-up committee, so..

Q: There was a committee?

A: Yeah, not a committee, there was a list in the kitchen and I know that it had "Dinner", "Clean-Up", it also had a place if you were bringing guests, "How Many?" So you would sign up and there were no assignments, but it was just expected that once every couple weeks you were cooking and you were also cleaning up, so you would sign up on the nights that you knew you were going to be home or if you were bringing guests or something like that. So that's how that voluntary basis, but...

Q: And it worked out where it was fairly well-shared?

A: Yeah.

Q: And no sex-role distinctions?

A: No, not at all. Nope.

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Q: Washing clothes?

A: In the basement we had a washer and dryer and you were on your own, you had to do your own laundry. But that was right there, and again that was something that you could do as a household, but as a single person on a limited income, you know, a lot of people couldn't afford a washer/dryer or something, so that was another reason to live together, because you could enjoy amenities like that. A backyard, a house, a living room, dining room, a washer/dryer.

Q: Were there other shared things, like was there a common library?

A: Upstairs we did have bookcases with, you know, books that were available to be read. It wasn't sort of active, it just sort of evolved that way. Of course, all furniture in the public areas were public and to be shared and you could move things around. We would decide as, did we buy a--something about a television, there was great debate on whether or not to buy a television. There were committees, as I said, that handled the finances, and they would meet regularly to pay bills, to talk about, were we bringing in enough money to cover the mortgage, repairs, and things of that sort. The public spaces were held in common, the private spaces were really private. That's where you would go to retreat. And everybody had their own, no matter if you were in a couple, you had your own room at least.

Q: Is that right? Every individual had a room.

A: Yeah. And it was up to you how you wanted to furnish and all rooms were not equal and people moved. As you moved out and you had a nicer room, I might move into it, there was a lot of that. The woman who was the graphic artist had her studio in one of the rooms so that she could work at home.

Q: Was there any rent distinction if you had a bigger room or?

A: No, no, same fee, all grounds, yeah. And you paid the same money into the food account, whether or not you were going to be eating out twice that week with your friends or something of that sort, it was just...

Q: Which would help keep people coming in for the meals, then, sure.

A: Yes, surely, and it just, otherwise it would chaotic. "Well, I wasn't here three nights." "Oh, I wasn't here four nights." And you would never be sure of how much money you were going to have coming in, so I suspect at some point a decision was made to regularize it regardless. I don't ever remember it being an issue.

Q: Were there ever any problems with stealing at all or theft?

A: No, none at all. Not in the house. I mean, somebody did break into the house and stole some things, but that was from the outside, but not at all. These really were your family members, you didn't think anything of it.

Q: So you didn't feel the need to lock your doors?

A: No, and in fact, you know, the houses, because there were so many people and in and out and different routines, that the house was often open, you know, pretty much day and night. And that for

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some of us was little worrisome, because, as I said, it was in a tricky neighborhood. It has since become gentrified, but in the mid- to late '70s, it was a rather derelict community, part of the town.

Q: What about just day-to-day house cleaning? Was that a committee that...

A: Oh, that was often what we talked about at family meetings, because standards of cleanliness differed among people.

Q: Yup.

A: I think generally, this may be a rosy picture looking back, I think in general that public areas were kept fairly clean. They weren't kept as nice and neat and clean as if one person lived there, but with 20 people passing through, things were amazingly clean and people would sign up to do things like vacuuming also. There was no committee to do house cleaning, but somebody would volunteer to vacuum or take the rugs out to be cleaned, somebody would just pick up the newspapers that ended up lying on the dining room table from the morning and throw them out or whatever. So there were some conflicts, but in general, it wasn't a big issue in the house. And, again, it was something that you could bring to the family meeting, so it would work out. "I am really unhappy with how dirty the kitchen is." You know, and so that would be discussed and reasons why it was dirty, varying philosophies over how it could be made cleaner, who was responsible, how would we do it? So all of that hashed out in a family meeting.

Q: I'm curious during different holidays, how you celebrated those.

A: Let's see, we had people of all faiths, so everyone sort of celebrated their own holiday, either go off to their family's homes or with others. At Christmas, we had a Christmas tree, there were always people who were there over the Christmas holiday who didn't have any place to go, and there was always something special done. We would have a party before people left and went off, and the people who stayed would often make a special dinner if they couldn't go anywhere for Thanksgiving or Christmas, they could make a tofu turkey or something. I don't know.

Q: Wow.

A: So holidays were definitely celebrated. Birthdays were big occasions. And birthdays, people often made a big fuss. There would be a special meal, somebody would bring a cake and ice cream or something like that.

Q: Were the presents? Was it a communal-type present?

A: No, typically not, no. "It's your birthday today, so we're going to have a special meal tonight, we're going to bring in a cake and ice cream, but if you had particularly close friends in the group, they might give you something, but there was no sort of communal gift-giving. But we would acknowledge it as a special day, celebrate it. Again, very sort of hum-drum.

Q: Well, day-to-day living is hum-drum to some extent as we all know.

A: Right, exactly, right, yeah.

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Q: Were there any really memorable characters? Any people that were flamboyant, that somehow stand out as great cultural archetypes or something?

A: Well, there was Stephan, whose partner was the one who was accused of killing this fellow. Stephan was kind of the unacknowledged leader. No one would have ever called him a leader, but in many ways the person that we looked to. He was a bit older than we were and Stephan had a degree in psychology; he was a counselor, so if I thought about it, I suspect that he was very good at organizing and sort of focusing in and identifying problems. And he was personally very charismatic, a really fun person, lovely person, kind, welcoming person. So, without plan or designation, in many ways, Stephan was the person that we deferred to or we looked to. And he was one of the founders of it and he had the institutional memory for those of us who came and went. He would say, "Well, you know, that's just like when John was living here" or "We had the same problem five years ago" and that was also an important role. There were other people who had been there at the founding, but this combination of charisma and skill at being a leader, at organizing people and drawing them out made him a natural. He stood out among the others, but everyone else sort of contributed equally. I don't remember any flamboyant figures. Eccentric figures, you know, and in many ways, these people were not following the traditional paths of you go to college, you get a job, you start a career. People would drop out of jobs. They would try different things, they were dancers, they would decide to be barbers, they would decide to, you know, take off a couple months and go up to Sufi Camp up in Vermont and pick apples and things of this sort. So, very interesting group of people and if I could elaborate on that, I'd certainly be happy to. But you know a non-conforming kind of group. These were not, sort of, people following traditional career paths. A friend of mine went from job to job to job and some of these, you know, dishwasher, cook, things of that sort and then she decided she wanted to be a landscape architect, so she, when she was about 40, she went back to graduate school at the University of Georgia at Athens and got a degree in landscape architecture after going through all these sort of small, you know, working little business and doing thises and thats. And it was a house full of people like that who were tolerant of that kind of thing. Not settling down, not making a decision, perhaps and eventually making a career decision. But then others of us were more traditional, you know, I worked for the State of Virginia and I had a friend who was a banker for a big bank in Richmond. My friend who was a landscape architect, there were those of us who had 9 to 5 jobs, but then another part of the house certainly didn't.

Q: Was there an emphasis on remaining with the community or how was dating and what-not?

A: Oh, fine. That was not a problem at all. You had certain responsibilities, I think, to the group. To participate, to be there. You weren't to use it as a boarding house. If you were going to be, if you wanted to live there, you had to contribute. Not only financially, but you had to contribute in time, in talents, you had to be part of the meetings, you had to contribute to the operation of the house. But certainly go out, date, travel, see the world. But I think the trick was not using the place like a boarding house, like a hotel room, where you drop your bags and then run out and meet and all you have to do is throw a check at somebody at the first of the month. They would call you on that very quickly. But again, people who wanted to be there, by and large, wanted to participate in the activities of the house, or to be with these people, they were a wonderful group and an interesting provocative group. So that generally wasn't a problem. We went out and worked, we had dates, we went on vacation, it was a normal sort of routine that way.

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Q: What were the relations with the neighbors like?

A: Well, because it was in such a derelict part of town, we were sort of the outstanding people on the block, you know. There was a half-way house across the street where there were all sorts of characters and it was situation where somebody ran the house privately and these people were placed there, but they often were not well taken care of and they were often sitting on the porch hollering because they hadn't had their medication and things were sort of out of control. There were quite a few homeless up and down in that part of the area, so we were not part of that community in that way, there wasn't a neighborliness in that neighborhood, we weren't part of the neighborhood. And I think in some ways, we helped to re-establish that neighborhood by making it a more stable place, by fixing up the houses, by painting them, by keeping them in good repair, by building the fence, by mowing the lawn, planting flowers, and by participating in city life. They wanted to turn the street into a one-way street and we thought that that would just turn it into a speedway, so there was a lot of action of various members of the house to go to city council meetings and to, you know, get signatures and to campaign actively. This is one of those sort of "throw away" areas where they think they can run a freeway through it or, "Sure, let's improve traffic by making this a one-way street." "Well, we have to live on it and it's busy enough and it turns into a speedway when you don't have other traffic coming at you or turning in front of you" so, things of that sort. So we were active, we were very much a part of that community, but it was such an odd, poor, little community that there was no stability up and down the street among us. Lots of boarding houses, so lots of people coming and going.

Q: So you weren't regarded as bringing the whole neighborhood down?

A: Not at all, no.

Q: That puts you in an exceptional place, compared to a lot of groups.

A: Yes, exactly, yes. By comparison we were the outstanding neighbors on the block and, again, known as, you know, active in the community and politically active and aware so, yeah, we were the exception in many ways.

Q: Did you have any trouble with the city, like zoning? I'll bet there's a law saying you couldn't live there like that.

A: I vaguely remember something. The houses in that area were zoned for, you know, multiple people.

Q: Were they?

A: Because there were so many boarding houses and things like that at some point. But then, I think, in order to reverse that, the city began to refuse that kind of zoning to these houses. If you bought a house and you wanted to continue to operate it as a boarding house, you couldn't because of this new ordinance. A building that had been in operation prior to that because they wanted to return it more to a residential area than this kind of past-due neighborhood. So at some point it became an issue, but I think that they were in there early enough that multiple, unrelated--I think that was the thing--unrelated people living in the same house, we were kind of grandfathered into that.

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Q: I see, OK.

A: But at some point, it did become an issue when the city was trying to reverse the sort of gentrified neighborhood.

Q: How many bathrooms did you have with 20 people?

A: Oh gosh, let's see. We never had enough bathrooms, but, again, you gave up certain things like privacy. So while you were in the shower, somebody may come in and use the bathroom or brush their teeth and they respected your privacy, but again it wasn't thought to be a big deal if I'm taking a shower and you are running late and you need to come in and brush your teeth, you come in and brush your teeth. In one house we had just one bathroom upstairs and of course it's always tricky because in houses like that you have to go through someone's room to get to the bathroom, so you kind of have to be alert. Is that person sleeping? Do they have company? What's going on before you go knock at the door or just walk in. And then there were two bathrooms downstairs, and then across the way there were one, two, three, four bathrooms. And of course with six people using bathrooms, you can imagine the sort of issues around if you leave your shampoo open or if you don't clean your hair out of the tub when you take a shower, but generally, again, it worked out.

Q: Yeah, I can imagine that as one of the biggest problems.

A: You worked it out. You knew that you had to get up at 7:00 in order to get hot water in the shower or not to interfere with Barbara, who has to be at her office by 9:00 and needs to take a shower, too.

Q: So you really had a bunch of people using a bathroom and going through someone else's bedroom to get to it? Isn't that pretty flagrantly imposing kind of?

A: Well, you understood, that was one of the, you know, the things that you give up is a certain amount of privacy. The original house was originally a two-family house, upstairs and downstairs, and when they bought the house, they took out the partition that divided up and down, and they also took out the kitchen that was upstairs, but other than that, they didn't reconfigure it to accommodate this new way of living. It was still a single family house that was being used by multiple people. So, yes, you knew that if you moved into that room, people were going to have to go through it to get to the bathroom. You knew it was close to the phone. You knew that you were probably going to be the one to answer the phone. But, again, those were things people were willing to do to live there. You just assumed that was part of it. And you were alert, people tried to be alert to those things. Like if they say your door closed, if they knew you were sick, if they knew somebody was spending the night, they would try to, as much as they could, leave you in peace, not go through your room, to take a shower when you're not sleeping, that sort of thing. But sometimes it couldn't be helped in the middle of the night when you have to go to the bathroom, you have to go through someone's room. But, that was OK, it was understood that's what you have to do, just be thoughtful as much as you can.

Q: And probably, that person eventually is going to try to a different room.

A: Often they did, but often not. A woman that I know whose room was a pass-through room just learned to live with it. I wasn't a big deal. And again after living with so many people, somebody walking through your bedroom isn't as shocking as it is if you live in sort of a single-family house and this room is

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yours, or this side of the room is yours and you suddenly find somebody sitting your chair. The whole house is full of people all the time, so in that context it didn't seem as intrusive or an interruption as it would otherwise.

Q: What led you to move out?

A: I decided to go back to graduate school and I went to graduate school in Philadelphia, so I moved to Philly.

Q: So, not out of unhappiness.

A: No, and I would go back to Richmond as often as I could out of Philadelphia because that felt like home. That's where I could go and be with friends and sit around and relax, so I went back a long time. And then, after I left Philadelphia, I moved to Charlottesville in 1982 and I resumed my affiliation or visits to the house. I'd go to Richmond a lot and see people or take part in special events or parties and that was about the time Lee got sick and was dying, so to be there for him or to go to his funeral, that sort of thing. So I maintained my relationship with my old roommates in that place until the house disbanded.

Q: You said your first affiliation with the house was through a friend?

A: A boyfriend.

Q: A boyfriend. Is that who you are married to right now?

A: No, no, Albert and I broke up while I was living in Philadelphia, but it was sort of an amicable break-up and then his new partner moved into the house and we were all friends. Again, either by nature or by circumstance, things often worked out like that. And I still keep in touch with Albert and keep in touch with several of them actually. And then, this was begun, there's a newsletter; after the house was sold and people moved away, there was a desire to be sure that you stayed in touch, that you knew what other people were doing, so they began to publish a newsletter that comes out irregularly, but about four times a year. You send in news, tell us what you're doing, where you're working, where you're travelling, send photographs, as you can see. So there is still an eagerness to keep the group together somehow. To know what each other is doing. Certainly some people moved out and we never heard from them, so commitment to the group varies widely. People like Stephan would fight to the end for their group and its ideals. Other people didn't buy into it as much. But among a core group of people who get together every year, who come to the annual meetings, who stay in touch, who celebrate each others' birthdays, there's still

Q: ...feel that you will return, you made mention that you would like to reconvene.

A: If I were widowed, I would certainly think about it. I think in my current relationship and the way my life is structured right now, probably not, but who knows what is ahead? And I know that if I were alone in the world this would be a very attractive alternative, this would be an attractive way for me to spend my retirement years. So I might, depending upon what the future holds and I suspect that some of my former roommates who never married or who are gay and some of whom have permanent partners, some who don't, some of them who want to come back because, you know, they will find themselves

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single in the world. So I would not be at all surprised to see that the group reforms. Or not reforms, it never disbanded in that way, but that they'll buy a piece of property with this money that's sitting in the bank drawing interest and have an elder hostel or something.

Q: Yeah, my totally seat-of-the-pants prediction is that we're going to see some of that. I just think for people that kind of have that collective memory, that's going to be suddenly an attractive option.

A: I think it makes sense, and also co-housing. We're beginning to see a little bit more interest in that in America. There is a group outside of Charlottesville that lives in the country, they're more of, I think, what people think of as a traditional commune, but it's a form of co-housing also, and they have one central building where they gather for meetings and events, but everybody has their own little cottage or building.

Q: What is that?

A: I want to say something like the Shamrock?

Q: Shannon?

A: Shannon Farms. Yeah.

Q: OK, that's, that's where you're in contact with.

A: A woman I know who worked at a bookstore in downtown Charlottesville lived out there and I always wanted to go out and visit, it sounded very interesting. It was much different than Mulberry, you know, again, because we lived together and on top of each other in the middle of the city rather than way out in the county in a house of our own where we sort of went into another building to gather, but it has been a successful and long-running operation I think as well.

Q: Yeah, it's been there a long time. '74 or '75.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: What finally did bring it all down? I mean it sounds like the problems were not huge by and large, did people just gradually move away and no new people come?

A: Yeah, I think basically Lee's death had a lot to do with it. The last year of his life, he needed a lot of care, he needed 24 hour care, and it took a big physical and emotional toll on the house. And I think people were worn out, they felt committed to the house, to Lee, but when he died, they needed a release, they needed a break. And that also coincided with many of them, you know, in their thirties wanting a place of their own, forming of the relationships. So I think it was this combination of Lee's death wearing the house down and also just a time of life where they wanted to try something else or to live in a different way or with somebody else who didn't want to live at Mulberry, that they decided, "It's time for us to disband, sell the houses, but yet to maintain a community." And there were lots of debates, I'm sure if you go through the alcoves, you'll find, you know, "What are we gonna do? Are we gonna sell the houses and then take the money and split it eighteen different ways?" I wasn't there when the house was actually going through all that, but my memory was that they decided, "Let's not just, you know, divide the money up among whoever was there at the time, but they formed some sort

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of stock company, you had to buy stock in the company depending upon how much you invested, that's how much you would get back, you know, if they dispersed the funds, because the houses were worth quite a bit of money by that time. We just didn't want to walk away from that. But they made a decision to put it in an account, an interest-bearing account, and they invested in Calbert ** funds, of course. And so that that money is, you know, being actively managed so that they can do something; and every once in a while, somebody gets finds a house and makes a suggestion, "This is what we ought to do." But people aren't quite ready yet to do that. Also, part of that money is given to charity. Again, it's part of the social activism of the house, "We have this pile of money, let's use the interest for a good deed." So, I think this year there were only one or two suggestions and here's the board meeting and the charitable contributions update: "...based on the treasurer's report, \$1,053 is being sent to the Richmond Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association and \$526 is being sent to the Red Hill School Migrant Education Program." So, I'm pleased that the house remains active and committed to many of the values, and many of the people have adopted children. You see that same sort of social activism that drew people together initially still present in their lives.

Q: The one who wrote the newsletter, do you know her?

A: Margaret Buchanan?

Q: OK, Margaret Buchanan.

A: Margaret's a graphic designer, so she's the one who designed the layout of this and it became her turn to become the editor. And they're now collecting e-mail addresses and fax numbers.

Q: Yeah, sure.

A: Trying to stay in touch with each other.

Q: For all the social consciousness, was there any interest in energy self-sufficiency or alternative energy, anything like that?

A: Oh, it was talked about, but never pursued.

Q: Never done?

A: Yeah, we never put solar panels on, but I think, you know, my memory, again, a little faulty, but it seems it did come up now and then. We bought storm windows, things like that. I think we invested in a new furnace so that it would be more efficient, but more traditional, conventional kinds of energy conservation rather than water collection or solar energy.

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Q: I want to ask a question which, if you think it's more discreet not to answer, feel free, but I'm curious. Most communities in that era had drug struggles of various kinds or another. My general sense was that most of them were fairly tolerant of use of mild substances, but there almost inevitably would become problems when someone was dealing or, you know, getting flagrant, or, you know, just there were problems lurking around the edges, and as a result, some got rigidly into outlawing everything, or, you know, I'm just curious if there's anything you want to say about general attitudes toward that.

A: Sure. Certainly most of the people in the house used recreational drugs, but it was mostly done in the privacy of their room. There was no one ever dealing, and I think that, again, the sense of responsibility is that what you do reflects on this place. And if you, you know, get hauled in to jail, you get everybody else into trouble, so there was sort of minor recreational use of drugs. One thing I remember, is occasionally seeing a note on the refrigerator door, "If somebody is interested in some Vitamin L, please see...", you know, "Lee" and this somebody has located a source of LSD and you could, if you were interested, you know, go talk to Lee or something. But it was never flagrant, it was never a problem, again, if you didn't want to smoke dope, you didn't. And there were no hard drugs, no heroin, there was no cocaine. Just old dope-smokin' hippies, every once in a while somebody would find a source.

Q: So, never a bust, never a problem.

A: Never a bust, no. Some people have been busted, I think, in college or, you know, there was this sense that, "They can get to you, and they can mess up your life pretty bad, so be discreet." But no problems like that, no public problems.

Q: Sometimes that becomes an issue with the outside world. You know, someone is out to get you and that's your Achilles' heel, they can get you. So, it sounds like it wasn't a big deal.

A: Yup, not at all, no.

Q: Of course, it sounds like you didn't have neighbor problems, either.

A: If people were smoking dope, they were quiet, you know. They weren't outside on the front porch yelling or drunk, roaming the streets, or so. So again, it made us look like the genteel neighbors by comparison.

Q: What about alcohol. I presume that was tolerated. Did the community buy it?

A: Not part of our grocery run, but certainly if there was a special dinner, if it was your birthday, we'd buy some big bottles of wine, or if somebody came, you know, if you had a friend over on a Friday night to cook, they might bring some, a six-pack of beer, something like that. So, again, it was tolerated, it was there, but that was something that was an expensive item for a house on a limited budget and it was, how do you parcel it out? If there are 20 people living there, do we buy two for everyone and then assume everyone's going to be honest or what? So we just didn't do it. It just wasn't, wasn't a family purchase except on a special occasion or a party. We would give parties, big parties, and on those occasions we would buy alcohol for the party, but not on a sort of day-to-day basis. Big pitchers of water on the table, lots of milk, lots of juice. Pretty tame stuff. Lots of tofu, lots of salads, lots of pastas, lots of beans, lots of bean casseroles.

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Q: Rice.

A: Rice, oh, vats of rice.

Q: Brown rice, probably, right?

A: Yes, yes. So, as I said, there were several of us who would sneak...

Q: ..fairly slim, though? Or...

A: Oh, yeah. Slim because we were in our twenties and slim because we were always running or exercising or doing something like that. You know, there weren't a lot of temptations, you know, if it was 11:00 and you had the munchies, you were pretty much out of luck unless you had a collection of cookies stuck in your dresser drawer or something.

Q: Oh, OK. So you had to eat at assigned the times or you were pretty much on your own?

A: There wasn't a sign, but you would come in after work and you would look and you would say, "Oh, well, Lee is cooking tonight. Lee, what time do you think dinner will be ready?" "Oh, probably about 7:00." So, and then we had a dinner bell that we would ring to summon people and so there was no set dinner.

Q: But could you, if you were hungry, eat?

A: Oh yeah, yeah. Go in, get some crackers, cheese, that sort of thing. Oh definitely. You couldn't just eat at breakfast or, no, not like that at all. There was, and there was always a whole grain breads and things like that around if you wanted to make a sandwich.

Q: So there was, yeah, so no shortage.

A: Right, right, yeah. But no potato chips, no pretzels, no cookies, no junk foods. Those were entirely, you were on your own.

Q: That sounds much better. Yeah, sounds like a sensible system.

A: Well, the thing that I remember about this is, with 21 people living in the house, you know, Lee would cook, but who knows how much you want to eat that night or who, in fact, is going to show up. You were supposed to sign out if you weren't going to be there for dinner. Some people would forget. And if you were number 19 in line, you know, people would sort of hear the bell and, you know, come in; you might get next to nothing at the bottom of the bowl. People, again, were kind and alert to that sort of thing, but it's just that 18 people taking a little serving of rice or pasta or whatever, exhausted**. So, what I remember, toward the end of my stay, I began to get sort of anxious that I wouldn't be left out or I could get enough...

Q: I'm surprised they wouldn't make more and then save it.

A: Well, sometimes you do and then it, you know, goes to the bad and nobody eats it, so it's a very tricky thing, cooking for so many people night after night and trying to figure out who's going to be there? And do we have company? And how much salad does seven heads of lettuce make? You know, most of the time we got it right, but sometimes you just ran out and something was good and you

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couldn't have a second serving or something like that. So, I began to have sort of food anxiety toward the end of my stay there. But that, again, was a pretty minor thing.

Q: Well, I don't know, anything else? Seems like you've covered it. I enjoyed talking with you. So, you're, I mean, you're upbeat, though. This, you look back on this as a good thing to have done.

A: Oh, it was, yeah. I learned a lot about living with people and also, I think that sounds so trivial, so trite, but living with a lot of different people, I learned about tolerance and you saw people in their complexity. You didn't see them thinking, "Oh gosh, there he goes again, trying to piss me off," you thought, "Something's happening, I can explain this." You learn to deal with other people more, conditions of their life and what they were going through and the complexities. The resolution of problems was a very important less for me. I learned to be able to confront people who were doing things I didn't like in a nice way and not to feel that I had to yell at them or that I had to burst into tears to catch their attention, but I learned to formulate in a very forward, non-judgmental, non-accusing sort of way what my complaint was. And that has been enormously helpful. I don't always do it, but I know how to do it, and that has been...

Q: ** very **

A: ...yeah, that has been great. Again, when you live in a group, you find out things don't always run to your satisfaction, so how do you, how do you resolve those problems, those differences, those conflicts. And it was a great forum for doing that. It was a fun place, these were wonderful people, they were exceptional people. And they were doing, they were doing great things, you know, working with homeless people, they were big brothers and big sisters, and you know, going to South America on political trips, and politically active members of the Democratic Party, so it was a fun, stimulating place to live. The down side is that I often would crave privacy. Again, you just, you felt you could never get away. You could go to your room, but, you know, somebody would come through or the people above you or next door. A couple of times, I just went off for the weekend. There's a ski resort called Winter Green and I would rent a condominium out there and just take books and magazines and go by myself and sit, you know, and just hear silence, just be alone. And you needed those kinds of rejuvenating periods. At least I did.

Q: Yeah, Twin Oaks in Virginia, you know,

A: Yeah, Twin Oaks, yes.

Q: They have a retreat cabin, that's one of the deals. As long as no one else is using it that day, you can go out there. It's completely off a way.

A: Uh huh. That's a smart. It seems to me we had some group meeting with Twin Oaks. Again, my memory now is 15 years old of these things, but it's all in the archives to see the interaction, because there was curiosity and the Richmond Newspaper did an article on Mulberry Family that I remember was framed and hung in the living room. They sent a reporter to one of our family meetings, so there was interest at the time in us and Twin Oaks and whatever. So I do look back on it as a very positive experience. It was complex, it was rich.

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Q: Well...

A: If I can answer any other questions, if anything comes up, please, I'd be more than willing to answer. Would you like to look at this, or did you have a chance to look at it?

Q: Yeah, could I copy it?

A: Oh yeah. And, again, I have a run of them, so, if those would be helpful to you, I thought maybe I brought one in, but I just wanted you to know what it looked like.

Q: Could I just take it and give it back to Kelly**.

A: Absolutely, sure. That'd be fine. And have a good time this weekend. That'll be nice.

Q: Thank you, thank you very much.

A: That's really great.

Q: It'll be nice to go home as well, for a night.

A: Oh, that's true. Are you taking Pero**