Bob Randall

Houston, TX

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Evan Stern: It is Tuesday, April 1st at 11:04 a.m., and we're recording in Houston, Texas. Now, for the record, could you just tell us your name and occupation?

Bob Randall: Well, my name is Bob Randall. I'm a professional anthropologist that became a community organizer in Houston in the mid-80s.

Evan Stern: To begin, could you please describe for us your childhood home and tell us about where you grew up?

Bob Randall: Well, I grew up in central New Jersey, and my childhood home was a mud-brick house that had been in existence there since the mid-18th century, a very old house, positives and negatives.

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My basic background, I have some Indigenous roots, and I was raised appreciating home-grown and locally grown food. My father's father, I remember him talking-- he was raised on a farm in Vermont-- about the qualities of different potatoes, something that had not occurred to me at the time that a potato had any difference in flavor, but he was talking about these things. He had a large farm in Upstate New York, and then when he moved down to central New Jersey later, he had a smaller one. Also, my mother's mother was a dietician, and had taught diet, and had been married to somebody who was a chemist.

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So, it was pretty--she also retired to a blueberry bog in New Jersey. So, I grew up valuing wild berries, and valuing domestic berries, and all sorts of food, and it seemed to be what we found

really wonderful about life, I would say. So, all of which [laughter], you go away to college and you think, well, this stuff's old-timey stuff, and forget it. So, might've happened, I suppose, if I hadn't met Nancy. So, who knows?

Evan Stern: I know you mentioned that your grandparents were farmers. Did you ever get the chance to go to their farm? How did that experience shape you?

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Bob Randall: Yes. Well, the farms in general, I think, in the United States, the people grow up on farms, and the market forces kind of send a lot of 'em away to cities. A lot of people in Houston are refugees from farms, I would say. All major ethnic groups here, that's the case. My father's father was, I think, in eighth grade when his father died on a farm in East Danville, Vermont, and so-- of course, long before I was alive. But he moved to Burlington, which is the biggest city in Vermont, I guess, and ended up wanting to marry what turned out to be his wife, who has the Indigenous ancestry.

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He then moved to Brooklyn, New York, and brought her along when he had an income, which he got from basically becoming a court stenographer. So, he moved off the farm, did not lose his interest in farming, just lost his ability to make any money that way, which he didn't have in the first place. That's where my dad was born. But they spent summers in Vermont, and that's, again, long before I was born. I was born in 1942, so this is-- my dad was born in 1907. He hunted deer in Brooklyn, New York. If you've ever been to Brooklyn, you'll find that amazing.

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But when Grandpa retired, he and my grandmother retired to a farm near Newburgh, New York, and I remember that. It was a pretty good-sized farm, Vails Gate, New York. I got to roam the raspberry and strawberry patches as a kid, and marveled at their ability to eat corn on the cob. I've seen my grandmother eat five ears of corn at a table, and it's just strange. Then they moved down to central New Jersey, and had a small, two-acre garden, whatever you call it-- he wasn't selling anything-- and I got plenty of chance see what he grew and taste what I wanted, but I didn't learn anything about how to grow this stuff.

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But we grew, even in our small yard in the town, we had grapes, and apples, beans, tomatoes, stuff because, basically, until refrigeration and long-distance interstate and all the rest of it, there wasn't really much option except local food. So, it was quite different in the 1940s and 1950s in central New Jersey. It's called the Garden State for a reason, actually. So, anyway, that's where it was, and we all just valued it. I've got two sisters on two diff…other coasts, and we all valued that. We all picked blackberries and all the rest of it.

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Evan Stern: I know you said that they didn't teach you anything about farming, but are there any lessons that they passed or anything that they taught you that remains with you to this day?

Bob Randall: Yeah, and I have paid attention to that as I've tried to encourage people to garden. The most important thing I think a kid needs to get out of a garden is it's fun. They need to enjoy it. It's not pulling weeds. It is whatever is joyful about it. Kids get that, they'll figure out how to do it if they want to. That's the important thing. The other thing is enjoying eating. I've told countless classes here in Houston that there's 15,000 varieties of vegetables, fruits, and edible

herbs that you could conceivably grow here in Houston, 15,000. Do you have any idea how many you're likely to get if you go to a restaurant or a supermarket?

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Not most of 'em. I'm a food systems anthropologist. I could go into what we get in the market and why. But it's hard to make a living farming, and you can't be producing things that are gonna spoil in three days, you can't be producing things that only taste good if they're dead ripe, and you can't be basing it on nutrition and flavor. You have to base it on "Does it ship well?" So, there's all this kind of stuff. Over time, if people don't grow it themselves or buy at a local farmers' market, they're never gonna taste these things at all. They don't even know what they're missing.

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Some of the good chefs do, and they go out of their way to get a hold of it, but they're the exception; they're not your typical fast food joint down there on whatever, serving something called a tomato, what Michael Pollan called food-like substances, you know, beautiful term.

Evan Stern: So, you start college, if I'm not mistaken, in 1960, with the intention of becoming a chemist, and you even worked part-time in pesticides. What can you tell us about that experience?

Bob Randall: [Laughter] Well, in high school, I got interested in Linus Pauling, who won both the Nobel Prize in Chemistry and in Peace, both of which were big deal questions in those days. But what Pauling found was something called vitamin C, and was a big advocate of lots of vitamin C.

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But it struck me as very interesting that you could study the chemistry of food. So, I went into a chemistry major, and enjoyed it. My dad suddenly passed away of a heart attack when I was a sophomore in college, and I struggled to pay for college. One of the things I got was a well-paying summer job in pesticide research. It was the result of a father of a friend of mine. I got literally sick of chemistry, I mean, I could not-- by senior year, I was getting headaches every time I went into a chem lab.

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So, that was a, you know, it wasn't that, but also lost interest in-- they were taking me to alcohol-fueled lunches, talking to clients, and it just wasn't my-- not what I wanted to do with my life. I was an activist, even then, and I wanted to make the world better for people, and this didn't seem like the right course. So, I bailed out with a math degree, I got a BS in math and a minor in chemistry, and then went in the Peace Corps in West Africa, teaching math. I was the head of a math department when I was 22 in a high school, 90 miles from an electric light. I was curious, I'd taken two undergraduate classes in anthropology, and I was curious as to whether anthropology was my cup of tea.

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I didn't know huge amounts about it in those days.

Evan Stern: But, before we get to that, before you joined the Peace Corps, though, if I'm not mistaken, obviously the '60s marked a period of intense change in this nation, and it was around that time you crossed paths with one of our great social activists, Pete Seeger. I'd love if you could tell us the story of that meeting.

Bob Randall: [Laughter] I had already crossed paths with-- you must've been-- somebody's been reading my poems. Where'd you get [laughter] hold of them? Anyway, let's see, so what to say about that? Well, when I was a freshman or sophomore in college, I was in a group called the Bucknell Forum, which brought speakers into campus.

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One of the people they brought in was Pete Seeger. In those days, he was touring college campuses, and singing activist songs, and he was raising money for striking miners in Harlan County, Kentucky, and things like that. He came and he sang all the stuff in the gym. Afterwards, our faculty advisor was a philosophy professor, and invited us over to the house to talk with Pete Seeger. I thought, this is a rather interesting character. He's doing all this stuff, and it can't be lucrative. What's behind this? Broadly, I confronted him with what, at that point in my life, I was rather depressed by.

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I mean, they almost blew up the planet, Kennedy and Khrushchev. What kind of crazy is that? People were being lynched, I mean, this sort of crazy stuff that, you know, totally lacking in intelligence. But not just one person, you know, it was, like, systemic. Seeger-- so I asked him, "Well, what makes you tick? I mean, why do you do this stuff?" He just said, "Look, I like helping people." That's what he said. He said, "So, I do the best I can doing that. It's fun."

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Then he said, "You could try it, and see what you think." I thought, well, I've haven't run into too many good suggestions here, and that was where that went. He was very much of an inspiration that way, and there are conversations like that. But he must've talked with me in that circle,

could've spent half an hour on me. [Laughter] He sang here in Houston, like, 40 years later-- I don't know what it was-- a long time later. He asked for suggestions of songs, come up at the break, and suggestions. I asked him to sing a song called, I think it's called, *I Love You, Arthurine*. Anyway, he said he didn't remember the words.

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He couldn't sing that one anymore. It's about the Little Rock integration (actually Univ. Alabama??). Anyway, I tried to thank him, and he just, totally-- [laughter] he didn't want to hear "thank you" and his idea of thank you is help somebody else; that's what I'm sure it was.

Evan Stern: You've cited that meeting as pretty formative. It was also around that time, too, that you discovered a book called *How to Live a Good Life*. Can you tell us about that book?

Bob Randall: Goodness me, you really did your work here. Scott and Helen Nearing wrote that book. A lot of us in the early '60s were fairly disappointed with suburbia.

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I mean, our parents, all our parents, they grew up in the Depression, went through World War II and Nazis and all this stuff. They were fascinated by the idea of having a decent home, and a clothes washer, and a yard. I mean, this was their goal. Those of us growing up in it said, "This is really boring. Who wants to do this?" So, that was the beat generation and then the '60s generation. There's got to be more to life than making a payment on a mortgage. I've sort of lost my train of thought.

Evan Stern: I was asking about the book.

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Bob Randall: Oh yes, that book. This presented an alternative, that you could actually get something. Yeah, there it is right there. *How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World*, introduction by a man named Paul Goodman.

Evan Stern: So, the book is actually called *Living the Good Life*, is what is--

Bob Randall: *Living the Good Life*.

Evan Stern: *Living the Good Life*, yes.

Bob Randall: They have written-- he wrote other books. There's a blurb from Ashley Montagu, who wrote a book, *The Natural Superiority of Women* in like 1960. We also brought him to Bucknell, and I got to chat with him. There was a bunch of anthropologists that were interacting with American culture.

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You get to see what goes on in the rest of the world, and you say, "There's some things we do wrong here." Margaret Mead was the most famous example of that.

Evan Stern: So, I'd asked about the book, but eventually you do join the, as you were saying, you do eventually join the Peace Corps. I know that your position, you were essentially working as a math teacher, but did any of your experiences in Nigeria further open your eyes to food systems?

Bob Randall: Yes, they certainly did. I lived on the edge of the Sahara in a-- this is the second Muslim high school in the whole of Kano State, which was the most populous state in Nigeria, Nigeria being the most populous country in Africa.

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The British, having been there for-- at that point-- 70 years or so when they left. They had a vibrant market system for local produce. That's where you got your food. They also exported peanuts.

[Unrelated conversation]

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Evan Stern: So, I was asking if your experien…if it informed your view of food systems there.

Bob Randall: Well, two things, a fascinating place.

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Having had six hours at college anthropology, I found the experience fascinating. Plus, there were all sorts of other things going on, and political unrest, and several coup d'etats, and so on. But half the children were dying, that were born live, by the age of 5. One doctor at the hospital had done some crazy amount of major surgeries in one year, like, 500 of them or something. I ran the ambulance and the first aid library. I coached basketball and tennis.

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I taught lit, English as a second language, West African geography, a crazy amount of stuff for a 22 year old to be doing, but somebody had to do it. As you can imagine, I felt like, well, this is [laughter]-- it's rewarding, in a way, when you help somebody, and that's the first thing. But the more broader question was, why is this society so hard up, so many things wrong with the place? It was my first real look at colonialism and what it was, and it led me to a whole lot of questions.

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Even when I was in high school, social studies were the things I enjoyed the most; I just didn't think there was a career in it. At that point, sitting there in West Africa, I realized the only thing I was really interested in is figuring out how these systems work, and what needed to be done to change them. At the time, I certainly didn't understand a lot of the macrodynamics of the whole thing, but that was where it started. I went to State University of New York at what's now called Binghamton University, and studied for my MA. I worked on West African food systems.

Evan Stern: For the uninitiated, before we get much further, how would you define a food system? What is a food system?

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Bob Randall: Well, I'm a permaculture person and an ecology person, and ecology does food chains. So, I think of a food system pretty much as a food chain is where does it start, where does it end, and how does it get there, and what does it cost in terms of energy? Every plant we have is a solar collector, it brings energy and stores it. Then the question is, what do you do with it? Some people waste it, basically. Others conserve it. But basic ecology would say you want to optimize the use of the solar energy you're collecting.

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That does not mean by growing something in Chile, and shipping it here. The biggest problem, from a permaculture perspective, is that there is no-- you don't have any--

[Unrelated conversation]

Evan Stern: What is a simple definition of a food system, for those of us who've never heard that word "food system" before?

Bob Randall: Well, it's basically the whole system that produces and distributes food, right through to the point at which it is disposed of in its long-term disposal.

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So, there's energy tied into growing food. It takes work to do it. If you're selling it, it goes through a series of brokers, for example, to get to a supermarket or a restaurant. There are some high-end restaurants in Houston that routinely ship food in from Oregon. We consume about 16,000 tons of food per day in the Houston area, 16,000 tons. It has to be distributed, most of it, using fossil fuel. So, it's not like, well, let's do something different.

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There were populations as dense as Houston in 1900 in Japan and Korea that did not use fossil fuel. It's possible, actually, to do that without modern energy systems. Anyhow, the main point is that whatever system we use ought to be continuing 1,000 years from now, and what we're doing is not that.

[Unrelated conversation]

Evan Stern: I know you were talking about how you shifted focus to anthropology, which is a broad field, but can you talk about how anthropology and food systems intersect?

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Bob Randall: Well, anthropology broadly is the study of human-like animals over two million years of time, 5,000 or so known societies, and what do you learn from that study? Food systems, you know, for several hundred thousand years, at least, humans did not grow food. They gathered it. They foraged for it. If you've ever seen films, as you would if you were an

anthropology student, of people doing this, it's quite a stunning level of knowledge they had about how they did this. If anybody in this town, including me, if I had to live off of what just grows wild here, it would be a skill set that I don't think any of us have.

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Mind you, most of human experience was that. So, I guess, the point is that when you deviate from that-- and, as I understand it, there are feed, corn farmers just an hour or less from here that are making on an acre of corn maybe $150 net, using every chemical there is, taking all the risk. I figure that's at least 43,000 ears of corn for $150. Now, there's something wrong with that system. Okay, it may not be too obvious to folks out there that it's a very bad idea, what they're doing.

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So, it's one thing to ask yourself what could be done. I mean, I went and did a doctoral study of a food system between Borneo and Mindanao, in the Philippines, and a lot of interesting stuff. But one of the things they did was grow coconut for export, mainly to the United States. What is it used for? Well, it shows up in something called lauryl in shampoo and soaps.

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The teenagers that were drying the coconut, and shipping it out, and collecting it, instead of being in school, were making, as of about 2014, I estimate, less than one half a cent per hour wages to do that. So, that's a food system, except the average person, when they buy their shampoo, doesn't know that that's where it's coming from. Secondly, it's not exactly food, shampoo isn't.

Evan Stern: But I was asking, though, I mean, I know you're describing food systems, but if you could just succinctly perhaps just talk about how anthropology and food systems are intertwined.

Bob Randall: Well, anthropology is the study of what people do. Cultural anthropology studies what people do. There are several things going on.

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I mean, the study we did, it'd take me a while to explain what we were trying to do. But the broad question was, what is really going on when these people produce food for a market in Zamboanga, and why are they doing it, and what are the issues that are connected to it? We were studying the difference between two different islands, and what they were doing, which had very different circumstances. One of the things they were doing on the island I was on was blowing up coral reefs with explosives. When you look at why they were doing it, it turned out that, really, the culprit wasn't there on the island.

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There had to be a story there, but I wrote an article that was widely read across the planet at the time in *Natural History* magazine (1983) that, basically, if you make it hard for people to grow, to collect, to fish normal ways, you encourage people to take risks. This is about as risky an occupation as it was, 'cause mortality rates I estimated at 2% per year; not a good occupation, lots of worry. But the food system is very well worth studying, and it's a basic part of the economy in large parts of the world.

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Evan Stern: Building from there, it was also in the '70s that you took an interest in permaculture. For those who've never heard of it, what is permaculture?

Bob Randall: Now you want the, let's see, the three-sentence line, or the one-hour one, or the 100-hour course, or the –?

Evan Stern: We'll take the three-sentence version of the meaning of permaculture.

Bob Randall: Permaculture is an about 50-year-old design, build, algorithm for solving problems sustainably. I think that's the shortest way I would put it. Started by a rare combination of a human ecology professor at University of Tasmania in Australia, and his student, who was an environmental designer.

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So, they combined the insights of ecology, particularly forest ecology but also marine ecology, with the way city planners and architects go about building things. They asked the question, could you create a sustainable farm? Could you create a modern farm that was sustainable? That was where it started, and it quickly morphed into, well, you're not gonna ever have a sustainable farm if you don't have sustainable cities and sustainable nature. That's easy enough to demonstrate. So, basically, they're all one huge system, meaning, they all interact so, decisions that have long term consequences need to take all of it into planning. A designs a plan using principles that have a record of working..

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That's what I mean by design; it's a plan built with principles that you know will work, because we have evidence, scientific evidence that they do work. I've said to people, well, the difference

is between planning to go across town on a bridge, and building a bridge. I would be quite good at planning to get you across Stella Link Bridge. I would be terrible at designing that bridge, and you wouldn't wanna be on it. So, designing sustainability, designing a sustainable house, designing a sustainable neighborhood, that is not something that can be done without using principles that are known to work.

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What permaculture people said was, there are only really two kinds of things that have, say, lasted 10,000 years or so working. One of 'em is that a lot of Indigenous societies managed it, and the second one is undisturbed natural ecosystems. So, what can you learn of the principles that make those two different things work, meld them together, and start teaching people how to do that? So, that was the concept. At this point, permaculture is taught all over the planet. There's almost no place that if you say permaculture plus name it, you won't find some version of that. I mean, they have permaculture in China. They have permaculture in Kenya.

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There's permaculture in Omaha. So, it's there, and I think permaculture is the best system for making important decisions. It's basically taking what I learned at the University of California in ecology, and applying it to real life. Moreover, what's interesting about it is there's lots a person can do individually if they understand permaculture. It gives 'em ideas as to what they could do so that you do not have to wait for the Congress of the United States to do it, which is to say it empowers people to take actions themselves to get something done. Now, that's as close as I can do it in a very short time.

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Give me an hour, and I can do a much better job of it, but that's it.

Evan Stern: We're grateful for that. But it's also in the '70s that you move to Houston. People don't move to Houston the way people move to New York, Los Angeles, or even Austin now, for that matter. What brought you here?

Bob Randall: Well, the short answer to that is that I was offered an anthropology teaching position at the University of Houston.

Evan Stern: What were your impressions of Houston when you first got here?

Bob Randall: Well, I had been here once before, and I gave a talk at the School of Public Health. I also had been here once before for an American Anthropology Convention. So, it wasn't brand new.

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I pretty much knew what I was gonna run into. I was not raised in a society that quite had the problem with race that you find in the South. I mean, I had a Black kindergarten teacher in 1948. The best teacher I ever had was a history teacher who was African American in high school. So, that was a little bit surprising to understand that this was still going on here in 1979.

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There were still people that were fighting the Civil War, which kind of if you're raised-- you know. We moved here from the edge of the Mojave, by the way, so it was a lot wetter and more humid. What I liked about Houston, I mean, Houston's very open to innovation, way more, I mean, compared with the East Coast, it's very hard to convince anybody that, well, any new idea is worth adopting. In the West, you just do your own thing, basically. Here, people are willing to

work together. Strikingly, I found it pretty fascinating the way in which people in Houston would work together to get things done.

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I think, arguably, we've done one of the better jobs you could've imagined. Certainly, when I was contemplating it in the late '80s, I never would've imagined we'd be as successful as we were.

Evan Stern: Speaking of working together, I'm building to a point here, but your arrival coincided with the oil bust in a period of economic collapse for the city. What did that mean for food insecurity in Houston, and how were you made aware of those problems?

Bob Randall: So, broadly, in 1986, I came up for tenure. I think the then chair of the anthropology department wanted to move in a different direction.

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Let's say that as nicely as possible. So, he was interested in hiring some different people than me. But, as well, there was practically no money at the university to give anybody tenure, and so it was much tougher than it might've been five years, one way or the other. So, I was out of work here. Nancy was doing research at HISD at the Independent School District on dropouts. The kid was in middle school, and sort of liked Houston. So, anyway, I was looking around for jobs in other states and so on. My friend talked me into teaching a gardening class, which I resisted.

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I said, "I don't understand Houston gardening." I'd been doing it for six, seven years at that point, and it's very confusing compared with the edge of the Mojave. At that point, I had gardened in a lot of different places. Very interesting place because, theoretically, you could grow almost

anything here. I mean, it's a subtropical Savanna forest. It's right on the edge between four different things. I mean, you do one thing, and you can grow papayas and bananas, and you do another thing, you can grow apples and pears, and you do this and you-- anyway. So, I got a phone call from something called the Interfaith Hunger Coalition. "We have started a group [laughter] that is exploring the idea of building community gardens."

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At that point, I had worked in a couple of community gardens in my life on the West Coast. Also, we had been connected to about five or six different food co-ops, one of which, well, get me off topic on the food co-ops. But a fascinating example was that we bought so much organic food from a wholesaler in Austin that they decided to start a retail establishment in Houston called Whole Foods, and ran us out of business very quickly. They had more capital than we did.

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But, anyway, my point, I guess, is that I started meeting as a volunteer with their advisory group, headed by a VISTA volunteer, Jean Joslin, who was trying to start food gardens in Houston, which had just about become extinct. I think that would be the shortest way of putting it. Very few people were growing any food at all, despite the fact that this place is an absolute paradise of possibility and, pretty strange, given that a million people had sought emergency foods assistance in 1986 and that the Harvard Task Force on Hunger had been here and documented single mothers going without food so they could pay the rent, keep their kids in shoes at the end of every month, in a place where a lot of food will just produce without you doing anything.

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I said, well, I busted my butt on an island in Southeast Asia learning this stuff, and here I am in this place where it's a really easy place to live, and they've got an even worse problem than the Philippines. I mean, it's crazy, there's land everywhere, and people on welfare are paying somebody to mow a lawn, as opposed to growing figs, which grow themselves. We had somebody in a low-income neighborhood in Houston who spit an orange pit and, 10–12 years later, a colleague of mine picked 1,700 oranges off the orange pit in the backyard of this person's house.

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It's just absolutely nuts. So, I got really intrigued, I mean, that was the first thing. How could this be? How could we have this level of-- and in 1989, when I was already working at the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, I was on staff at that point, calculated, I think, that we had 110 miles of hungry people, if you lined them all up on Interstate 45 between Galveston and Huntsville, and half of 'em are children, and another bunch of 'em are vets, people who were assistant dishwashers during their career, and now are on pension.

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People got rear-ended on freeways. Nuts, totally nuts. Why? So, there are many, many stories about this. But that's where I got-- so, I was really intrigued. I mean, a research question is, why are people this crazy?

Evan Stern: As I understand, through the Inter…at the beginning of your involvement with the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, you joined forces with the faith leaders, Jean Cameron and Malcolm McLemore, to build a community garden. What can you tell us about them and that? Is there a story you can tell us about that project, specifically?

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Bob Randall: Well, there are many, many stories. The first, we tried to start four community gardens that first year when I was still volunteering and, of those, the first three failed. Mind you, our whole group had very little knowledge about how to do this right. Growing community gardens is a lot like growing a plant, the more you know about it, the better your chance of getting it right. We didn't know anything about what we were doing in those days. That garden lasted.

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It was headed by two iconic deacons, Mr. Malcolm McLemore and Mr. Jean Cameron, who we call Pawpaw. They both were retired. Mr. Cameron is a retired road worker, and he lived in a shotgun shack. He drove no car, he had no telephone, and I don't think he was literate. Nicest man you ever want to meet. They were moved to try to provide some food for the Fourth Ward food pantry. I once loaded groceries there on a hot July day, with no air conditioning, at their pantry.

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There was a line of people, maybe, who knows, 90 people long, 110. They started the whole thing by everybody getting in a circle and singing *Amazing Grace*. Then they got in line, and about-- it could've been 60–70 people in, I got a blind grandmother with her kid, seeking food. Anyway, those two gentlemen carried water to the Fourth Ward garden, community garden on a pickup truck using a 50-gallon tank, and carried it from the pantry to the garden, and hand-watered the garden, for a couple years, till we raised what took $2,800 to connect water to this thing.

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'Cause it had no water on that street, at all. This was a street with houses on it. Did not have a water line in Houston. Who would have thought? So, anyway, they showed you could do it. It was their grit. What I found was that people who had-- knew people who were hungry were way more interested in working on this than other people, including all the churches.

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It's very hard to get somebody who doesn't know anybody personally that is struggling for food to get them involved in it. I'm not saying everybody, but it's just, you know, people care about things that they run into, and they care about people that they know about. But if they don't know about 'em, they kind of develop this stuff. Things I ran into in that line of work were just appalling. One church where we had a garden, they fed 750 people for Thanksgiving meal, I mean, in a line, you know, come get your groceries for Thanksgiving. I've asked people, well, how long the line would you stand in for Thanksgiving dinner?

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In one case, we had a garden where we engineered the mayor of Houston to dedicate it, and the United Way supported and all, and so we were able to get some political clout to get her out there. They brought the TV cameras with them and all. So, this reporter, he takes one of the gardeners, who was about my age at this point, 83 years or something, Brother Stephen, they got him out there in the garden, and this is like a June day, and it's like 93 in the shade. They're out there in the sun, and a reporter says to him, "Mr. Stephen, why are you out here in this horribly hot sun?" or something like this.

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He sort of stutters, and he has a kind of an accent, and he said to the reporter-- and we had a tape of this for a while, but I don't have it anymore. Anyway, he says-- oh yes, what the reporter said was, "Doesn't it bother you being out here in this hot sun?" He says, "Well, you know what bothers me is there's families in this neighborhood that are eating out of dumpsters, and if I can do something about this degradation, I will." There.

Evan Stern: Did these gardens make a difference? What can you tell us about the impact that the gardens had on the Fourth Ward?

Bob Randall: Well, they kept doing it, which indicates that it was worth doing.

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But if you know what you're doing, most of this food does not cost hardly anything. At one point, they grew orange honeydews, and would distribute them to hungry people. Now, orange honeydews, even in like 1980, were selling for $5 a piece at the supermarket, I mean, a costly melon. It's patently obvious that you can grow food way cheaper than you can buy it, if you look at the economics of the grocery system. So, anyway, it sort of made a difference, and we did a lot of measurements of this stuff.

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I mean, I don't remember any of it. Tons and tons and tons of food went to food pantries, and lots of poor people basically grew food themselves. They learned how to grow food, and gradually realized that it was an education system we needed as well. That's not the easiest thing in the world, because a lot of people have had really bad experiences with school and classes. People don't just show up and take a class if their experience of school has been that classes are about

the worst thing they've ever had to endure. There's a lot of people like that, especially poor people. So, anyway, that was what we did.

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So, in the early days, people would call us up and say, "I have a piece of land if somebody would like to grow something on it." Guess what? Land is not the problem in Houston. The problem is people don't know what they can do with it. That's partly why we eventually moved toward Urban Harvest, which we wanted more control over what we were doing, and figured we knew more about what would work than an abstract board would.

Evan Stern: What can you tell me about Urban Harvest? I know that with the Interfaith Coalition, I believe, you helped establish something like 42 gardens across Houston.

Bob Randall: Yeah.

Evan Stern: But you still wanted to do more. So, in 1994, you call a meeting to discuss an idea. What was that idea, and what can you tell us about that first meeting?

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Bob Randall: Well, first of all, it was at a restaurant in West U, West University. People there were, let's see, I and my one other staff person at that point; the former president of the board of Interfaith Ministries, who was former head of Catholic Charities; and the former head of Immigration and Naturalization in the United States; and the first Latino to ever be elected in Southeast Texas-- and some other things-- the first person with an electric car; and the first person…anyway, it goes on. But Leonel Castillo was there, and he was one of my mentors.

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Terry Hershey, who has a park named after her in Houston. Leonel now has a community center named after him. Terry was there, and Wendy Kelsey, who was an advocate, and became one of our first staff people as well at Urban Harvest. Mark Cotham, who was an attorney, and an activist, and former president of the board of the Houston Zoo. The last person was Suzy Fischer, who's a landscaper, and had been an HIV/AIDS community garden advocate. Her business partner had passed away from HIV. We decided to start a nonprofit.

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We didn't have a name for it. But mainly what I realized was that the bureaucracy that we were dealing with at Interfaith did not understand the possibilities or what we wanted to do. There were a lot of issues like that but, broadly speaking, it just wasn't working well, and it was unlikely to succeed the way we were going. So, it wasn't so much that we saw a possibility, it was more like, this isn't working and we have to do something different. Let's try this. I started it on $500 in the bank, which I think was donated by Mark Cotham.

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We had Wendy and I and George McAfee Jr., who is an outstanding fruit tree grafter, and knowledgeable, and resident of Third Ward, and really had his pulse on what it takes to get people gardening all over the place.

Evan Stern: What was the initial mission of Urban Harvest? You said things weren't working, and so what was the original mission?

Bob Randall: Well, we wanted to do a bunch of different things, and we were not being allowed to do that. I might say that, two years or so-- well, that's a long story.

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But Leonel Castillo led a group, an informal group that we had, where we talked about the Houston food system and what could be done about it. We had a list, and part of it's like permaculture suggestions. We needed to have farmers markets. We needed to have classes for adults and for children. We needed to work in schools. We needed to teach children the value of nature. We needed to make quality fruit trees that would actually work, available across the area. In 1990, I went up to Austin, and visited one or two community gardens that actually existed in the United States, I mean, in Texas at the time. They had been going for like 12 years and had like 12 gardens or something like that, and I knew that model. They were mowing lawns in community gardens.

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I knew that wouldn't work because we had 2,400 subdivisions and, I don't know, 35 school districts, I mean, some crazy number like this. We can't possibly be maintaining all these things. It's gonna have to be communities that do it. So, what was the mission? Well, we had board retreats on this, and some people wanted to work, build gardens in parks. Others wanted to do it in schools. Others wanted to work on farmers markets. Others wanted to continue fighting hunger. I don't know what else it was. It was a list, all with organics in mind.

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Permaculture tells you that getting lots of yields out of something you put work into is what you should always be aiming at. You put energy, materials, labor, money into something, get a lot of yields out of it. Design it so that you get a lot of yields. That's what trees do in forests. Some of the corporate strategic planners will tell you, you need to cut your goals down to one thing, so

you can tell somebody in an elevator on the way down. "We're trying to have the most widgets in all of Texas, or the [laughter] highest revenue of any whatever."

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But farmers that are permaculture farmers do not say, "Well, what do you do?" "I grow tomatoes." They actually believe in diversity, and diversity is where you get, connected diversity where you get yield. You get way more out of valuing diversity than you get out of trying to destroy it. That's been shown over and over and over again, wherever you've actually looked at it. See diversity as a strength. So, I sit there and I say, "Look, let's do all of it." They look at you like – the ones with some business background, they say, "That'll never work." I said, "Well, the thing that's different about us is that we're a nonprofit, and we work with supporters. Supporters will give you labor. They'll give you money.

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"So, if they give you labor, we'll just have a committee. We'll have a market gardening committee and we'll have a school gardening committee. If they get it done, why are we opposed to it? If their enthusiasm is for school gardens and outdoor classrooms at schools, what's wrong with that?" Nobody could say anything about it. "Well, won't you be overextended?" The background, we wanted to start something for green businesses, education for green businesses, garden centers, landscapers, you name it. The basic idea was make it useful for everybody: rich, poor, every ethnic group, every language, every education level.

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Why not? Nobody came up with an argument against it. That's how that happened.

Evan Stern: So, you start off with $500, though. If you remember, what is the first project that you focused on doing?

Bob Randall: Early, that would've been-- okay. We started in May of '94. Summer of '94, we developed a name for the organization [laughter]. '95, courtesy of The Park People, which was another 501(c)(3), we got a small office.

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I think maybe Terry Hershey found us a grant from the National Parks Association or something; could be. She was really strongly a parks person. That probably was around the first money. I don't really remember. We got a donation from, I remember, a $20 donation, I think, from the secretary at Interfaith Ministries. We got some money from an organization I had been in earlier called TexUS Roots, T-E-X-U-S Roots, which was about organic education, so we had an organic education committee.

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I had started a booklet for my gardening class that I had been teaching here at the house, starting in 1986. It had gradually gotten bigger. Sometime, about three or four years later, one of the local nurseries said they wanted to sell the handout without the class. I put a title on it, and stapled something together, I think, and that's where the books started. It's been 14 gardening books later, and I just got another order today.

Evan Stern: You mentioned you chose the name. Do you remember how you chose the name Urban Harvest--

Bob Randall: Yes.

Evan Stern: --and what it symbolizes?

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Bob Randall: [Laughter] Millie Barnes, one of the associates from Interfaith Ministries, she came up with an alphabetical list, A through Z, of possible names, and we went down, one after another. I was an advocate of Greater Houston Community Gardening Association. I think that was what I wanted to call it. The reason was, when I picked up the phone, I didn't wanna have to explain who we were or what we did. I was outvoted on this. When we got to U, Urban Harvest is what stuck. I said, "Nobody's gonna know what the heck that is." But that's what they wanted to do, so that's what we got, and it's worked fine.

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My hesitations were ill-founded. But I opposed it. I didn't wanna be…whoever heard of this thing, you know?

Evan Stern: But, if I'm not mistaken, one of your first projects was helping out at the Alabama Gardens. What are the Alabama Gardens and what can you tell us about your involvement there?

Bob Randall: Well, Alabama Gardens is on Alabama Street in Houston. It's on a large piece of land that was overgrown with bushes and weeds and lots of heavy trash, before Houston started picking up heavy trash on a regular basis, old refrigerators, mattresses, and-- I'd probably leave it at that, but some things worse.

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Sometime in about 1985, three gentlemen living close by in houses got permission from the landowner to garden there, and they started some country-rows style gardens in one corner. A

man named Verious Smith, and Voydell Smith, and Warren Christian, those were the three people. They were there.

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George McAfee, who basically grew up around the corner from that, told me about this garden. We were in the process of trying to help community gardens develop and flourish, and here was a naturally forming community garden. So, George and I went over there, and visited them, and asked 'em what sort of help they needed, and see if we could get them some help. They had just finished the summer, and they had been borrowing water from across the back fence of the garden to a woman's house. The water bill had been gigantic, which they attributed to her kids coming back from college, and spending all their time washing their cars. But it was obviously a bad situation, so could we somehow figure out how to get them city water, where they would be paying the bill for their water, and she wouldn't be so upset with them?

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Well, we worked on that and did it, and that was where that started. Then we realized that this was exactly what we wanted to work on, that it was a place of large need, and a bunch of people who showed substantial leadership ability and were amenable to improvements. So, over time, we got them a bunch of different resources, one of which was that we got a huge donation of workers and money to redo the garden.

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So, the whole thing was developed, and I have pictures of that stuff when they were doing it. When we were doing it, Nancy and I were both out there, moving dirt. It's been a real pleasure

working with them over the years. They've had two major changes in leadership since then, because people passed away, but are just very, very neat people.

Evan Stern: Then, eventually, you launched the fruit tree sale. What is it and what has it become?

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Bob Randall: Well, since the pandemic, it hasn't come back, because we've had a series of climate disasters that have made the suppliers of the trees lose a lot of their stock. The most popular thing we were selling was citrus trees. Uri was the coldest temperature after the middle of February since 1898. All the trees were not dormant, and they just succumbed. Things that would've easily made it through then if it happened in January, in mid-February, it doesn't work. So, the fruit tree sale, though, up until then, started about, well, there was one wholesale nursery in Treesearch Farms, which is out in Inwood Forest area.

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They specialize in fruit trees that were appropriate for this area. They specialize actually in plants that are appropriate for this area, and lots and lots of native plants and things. They popularized an awful lot of stuff. So, in the early days, they were the one pushing fruit tree sales in regional places. They started just doing it at their large property there. Then they moved it out to the different agriculture extensions in surrounding counties. But there was nothing in central Houston, and so they talked to Urban Harvest about sponsoring one in central Houston.

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We did, and I think we made about-- I have the statistics on this, but we made maybe $4,000 or $5,000 the first time, and it just kept getting bigger. The last few years we were doing it, we think sold about $160,000 worth of fruit trees in four hours.

Evan Stern: That's amazing.

Bob Randall: All the best things that would actually grow here.

Evan Stern: But then, in 2004, 10 years after starting the organization, is when you have the first market. What was the idea behind the farmers market?

Bob Randall: Well, the idea was that if you didn't have to ship stuff a long distance, the food quality would be much better.

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That there were many things that were not being offered in supermarkets that could be offered here, and should be. That there were lots of rural people who were struggling for income that conceivably could be farmers, and sell at a farmers market. That corn person that I was talking about, I told him, "You could probably sell three ears for a dollar in a farmers market, doing sweet corn instead of field corn." He said he'd never grown sweet corn. I could tell you many stories about farmers that are not getting good education access, and it was perfectly obvious that they weren't. I'll give you one other story, if you like.

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So, it was maybe 1986–87, a Saturday morning. We were teaching a class here. Maybe the same room, maybe 25 people, parking lot style, in here, called *Essentials of Gardening*. Six hours with an hour break for lunch. Crawling on and on, six hours about gardening. So, people would start

showing up around nine o'clock in the morning. I ask 'em, "Well, what brought you here on this lovely spring day?" 'Cause nobody ever wants to take a gardening class in the middle of summer. They always wanna do it on the best weather day of the year, for some reason. This one guy says, "Well, I'm a farmer in East Texas. I live about 100 miles north of Beaumont.

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"I grow soybeans and peanuts and peas, and I do pretty well with that. But I'd sure like to know how to grow vegetables for my family." Now, mind you, I'm the kid from central New Jersey, who has just found a farmer who is nowhere near this house where he lives. This is not around the corner from where he's coming from. He must've gotten up several hours ago to get here. He can't figure out how to learn how to grow vegetables any easier way than coming here to Houston to find out. Something wrong, right? I mean, there's something really, really wrong, I mean, that was the first place.

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Another example of that same thing, when I was at the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, I had a volunteer who was a vice president of a bank, a major bank. He was trying to fight hunger. But one day he calls me up, and he says, "I really have a lot of trouble growing my peach tree." I'm thinking, this guy has an MA from Harvard Business School, and he needs-- he's calling up the Interfaith Hunger Coalition to find out how to grow peaches. There's something really crazy here. What it was is, just broadly, ag education in the population was just-- it happened to almost everybody up until about 1930.

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Then, as people became urban-- and not just urban,-- farmers-- the whole thing has changed, the food system, so nobody learns how to do any of this stuff. They have no idea. That was an epiphany, I mean, it was just, holy mackerel, you know? So, anyway, with the farmer situation, about every-- so, we identified that there needed to be farmers markets. There had been farmers markets up to about 1937 in Houston, and it gradually collapsed because, once they got into interstate commerce with food, you could buy food wholesale, and palm it off on people as something you grew, in a farm stand.

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The farmers market situation got so that lots and lots of stuff that wasn't really being locally grown was being sold as-- they didn't even have to say it was; they just put the thing out, and give some hay bale or two. You can give people the sense that this is the local production without even claiming that. In reality, it was grown in Florida or Salvador or somewhere. But about every six weeks, two months, somebody or other would call up Urban Harvest and say, "Can you help me start a farmer's market?" Somebody called me up once and said, "We have about $1 million to start a farmers market." I thought, well, we could really use $1 million at Urban Harvest, because we're certainly a long way from there.

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I said, "Well, the problem is we don't have any farmers." But, anyhow, I spent about 11 years trying to strategize, from about 1987 to about whenever we started this thing, about 11 years before we finally actually started a farmers market. I know exactly how we figured it out, I mean, first step was developing-- authorizing a committee and a board to do it. But the committee, they

tried a volunteer kind of thing, where a farmer would show up in a parking lot at A Moveable Feast-- I think was the restaurant name-- on Saturdays.

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What would happen is that farmers would show up, and no customers. Customers would show up, and there were no farmers, or nothing to eat, or what they were selling wasn't what they wanted. So, early efforts didn't work. But then Bill Adams, a county extension agent at the time, he brought in Richard McCarthy IV from New Orleans. Now, mind you, I'm an anthropologist. I'm an interview specialist, myself. My ears pricked up. He started the Crescent City Farmers Market in New Orleans. It's a lot like Houston. Not the same, but a lot. So, when he came to town, he had some kind of relative in town, and I pigeonholed him for about four hours, and interviewed him how this happened.

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Instead of the one-hour talk, he gave at Extension, and we got four hours talking about this. He said, well, what he told me was basically a recipe for how to do this that worked perfectly. What he said was that you need to hire somebody half-time for at least three years, if not more, a farmers' market manager. You will not be able to do this with volunteers to start it. Maybe you could do it once the idea spreads, but not first. He said that Loyola University in New Orleans hired him, a human justice committee or something or other hired him for half-time for four years, to get that started in New Orleans.

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Now, mind you, I'm repeating what I remember from this, so if you should ever get into talking to somebody from New Orleans, there may be a better version of this story. But, for my

purposes, it's sufficient to explain how we got this started. He said, "You need the same place, once a week, every week for 52 weeks in a year. It needs to have good parking for both customers and vendors, and you need to find initially six farmers who will show up every week, even if they're losing money, and sell.

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"You need 20 customers, who will show up every week and buy, even if they don't like much what they're getting." [Laughter] That's not hard to do. We had a lot of volunteers once they understood the concept. It wasn't hard to do at all. He said that if you do that for six months, you won't be able to count the customers, and you won't be able to house all the people who wanna sell there. It was exactly right. All I did was ask the right questions. So, it took another couple of years to raise the money and hire somebody, Jim Bundscho.

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He'd run a local printing establishment and he was a master gardener. I knew that he would understand what the problems were of farmers, and he'd understand how business works. He was really good at setting things up. But it worked exactly as he said, we couldn't count the customers. Within five years, I think, there were 26 farmers markets in the Houston area, none of which I helped establish. But we, Nancy and I sold at the first farmers market. There's some really bizarre stories connected with that, and I could tell you many more about some things that just floored me.

Evan Stern: What do you remember about the very first market day that you had?

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Bob Randall: [Laughter] Well, first of all, you're getting up early in the morning, and we were selling my book, selling, I don't know, whatever we had in stock then. But we're just a backyard grower. But we had something called the Gardener's Corner, which they probably still do. If you've got extra food that you grew, and you talk to Tyler, you may be able to sell it there. So, somebody comes up to me, and she was, I'd say, could've been 80 years old, something like this. She says, "Somebody told me that I needed to talk to you." I said, "Well, what's it about?"

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She says, "Well, I wanna sell this in the Gardener's Corner." I'm looking at this, it looks like a ligustrum, and maybe red tip photinia, which are ornamentals that nobody I've ever heard of eats. So, I asked her, "Where did you get these?" She said, "Well, I have an apartment, and these are growing in the backyard around the apartment." I said, "Have you ever eaten any of these?" She said, "No." I said, "Well, why do you think people would buy them?" She didn't know [laughter]. It was like, who even thinks about selling plants that they have no idea whether they're edible, at a farmers market, unless they're clearly decorative or something, you know?

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It was like, that was the first one. I remember our tax attorney was the first person to buy anything there. But all I remember is it seemed to work. As we went further into this, there were some fascinating things that happened, but that was the first day.

Evan Stern: Speaking of that corner, too, if I'm not mistaken, you used to station yourself at a booth, where you'd let people come up and ask you any questions they might have about gardening. Are there any stories you can share with us about any interactions that you remember from that experience that are particularly memorable?

Bob Randall: Well, the most memorable thing is this very elderly man, I think he was probably 99 or 98, in a wheelchair, came up to me when I was Dr. Tomato, which is basically a focus on tomato questions.

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I used to do Dr. Citrus in the fall, and Dr. Tomato in the spring. This guy comes up, and he's got an attendant pushing him or something or other. He starts out by saying, "I'm DeBakey, Dr. DeBakey." Yes, it was the famous heart surgeon. Dr. DeBakey is about to consult me about tomatoes. He has grown a bunch of tomatoes that are supposed to be this, and some of them turn out not to be that. He said, "Well, I wanted to know what you think. Do you think that it's possible that this is some kind of genetic anomaly, or do you think they just gave me the wrong seeds?"

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I said, "They gave you the wrong seeds." He said, "That's what I thought." But that's memorable 'cause I can now say that the famous heart surgeon Dr. DeBakey once consulted me about my opinion [laughter].

Evan Stern: But the market has grown into something amazing now, from over the last 21 years. Can you talk about how has it helped the farmers grow?

Bob Randall: Oh yeah, well, it certainly has done that. Once upon a time, the then Urban Harvest Executive Director, Mark Bowen, and I went out to Wharton County, one of the doughnut counties around Houston, southwest of here, and spoke at their town hall or something or other to a bunch of potential gardeners, farmers, who wanted income.

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I told 'em what different vegetables would get in the market. I gave a talk. Some years later, I mean, you never really know what the impact of things you do is-- that's a famous Pete Seeger saying. But some years later, this guy comes up to me after, I mean, I've been up there talking about vegetables and stuff, and he'd been up there selling food. He comes to me as I'm cleaning up and getting ready to leave the market at the end of the day. He says, "You probably don't know me, but I attended a talk you gave in Wharton some years back, and I took into account what you did, and I wanted to thank you for getting me started on this.

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"We now are in six different farmers markets, and it's totally changed my family and life prospects around. So, I just wanna thank you." There's so much more possibility out there that isn't being tapped. You know things like that are the case because you go to the market any Saturday, and there's a ton of people there, and there are typically people that I've never met before. There's a reason why they're willing to get up at the crack of dawn. Fridays, there are a bunch of work for people selling vegetables. They're harvesting and cleaning.

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My colleague Ray Sher has actually sold a lot in the farmers market, and he has taught market farming to lots of people. It's a bunch of work. It's not simple. People who buy produce, I don't think they fully appreciate what it takes to actually get it there. A shout out would be to-- there's a man named Kevin Topek, who back in the early '90s did an experiment for me, which was to try to figure out if you could actually make a living growing food. What kind of income could you get if you grew food, and sold it, say, to a chef?

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What he proved was, is it was certainly not lucrative, but it was a long way from minimum wage, and so the fact that somebody who has access to a piece of land with relatively little capital could actually be making two or three times minimum wage growing food and selling it, compared with, say, working tables in a restaurant or McDonald's. It's a major fact that there are a lot of people in Houston who would love to get two or three times minimum wage, and they'd be working for themselves. They could hire their nephew or their neighbor. If they didn't sell, have food to sell, they could give it to a food pantry, extra. A whole city would prosper.

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At one point, they had over a million problem lots in Houston. The city planning, I once saw a map in the city planning office, it looked like the Milky Way of problem lots. A problem lot is either in tax arrears or it required city funds to maintain it, you know, drugs, whoring, trash, tangle. I said, "A million bucks a year you're spending on this? Half that amount, I could teach people to use the land productively." There's a lot of possibility out there.

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Evan Stern: I know in this kind of polarized, divided moment, there are a lot of people out there who view farmers' markets customer base as being among well-heeled, latte-sipping, urban professionals. What would you answer and say to that stereotype, or what are your views on that idea?

Bob Randall: Well, first of all, I think everybody ought to have a chance to eat well. It doesn't matter whether they're wealthy. I'm not big on latte, but so what? If you want to argue, some of

these people would just as soon get their food picked by people seven hours south of here, working for $2 a day.

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I can go to a supermarket, Fiesta, somewhere like that, and I can buy food much cheaper than at the farmers market because they don't pay their farm labor anything. They ship it here with fossil fuel, which is gonna kill our children and grandchildren. What they will not confront, I mean, I tell them, A, you can grow it yourself for practically nothing. I could easily show you. Nancy and I, with not very much time, grow 90% of the food right here at this house. We don't grow grains and we don't grow vegetable oils. We don't grow coffee. But we grow a vast percentage of what we eat, and it's good exercise. So, okay, if you think the farmers market's too expensive, why don't you grow it yourself?

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If you don't mind the pesticides in the food, go ahead, eat the stuff. But I don't think farm labor in the United States or Mexico is that different from slavery. So, the same people that are saying, "Well, it's too expensive in a farmers market," I wonder what they would've said about slavery, because it would've been even cheaper to have slaves. What do you think somebody should be making? Are you saying that the people in the farmers market are getting wealthy out of this? Is that what you're saying? They aren't. I can tell you, if they're clearing 40K a year, I'd be surprised if any of them are.

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They are paying for their own medical and their own vacations and their own holidays, and they're risking-- and you're complaining. Have you ever tried growing food yourself? It's a real

thing because if you are struggling to pay your mortgage and pay kids' expenses and all the rest of this, I get it. I've had plenty of that myself. Yes, some of this food is expensive. But if you don't like that, the market would say, "Well, that means there's opportunity for you to get into it and sell cheaper." I'll bet if you get into it, you won't sell cheaper. People that say that basically don't understand the food system.

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When you say this to people, "What do you think the people made? Have you ever talked to somebody who was farm labor?"

Evan Stern: How do we make the farmers market more accessible?

Bob Randall: Well, there's no particular reason why there wouldn't be farmers markets in every part of Houston, every part, everywhere, pretty much. As far as money-wise, it would help if people had higher incomes.

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Money is not distributed well in the United States, it's no secret, but half of the wealth is in the top 10% of the population. So, that's part of it. Personally, I don't know any simple way to make food cheaper than it is in terms of somebody growing it, and selling it to you or anybody else, not without subsidies of some sort, because it's a lot of labor.

Evan Stern: I feel like when you go to Europe, and you go to a town there, it is affordable and accessible.

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Why do they have it there, and we don't have that here?

Bob Randall: Perhaps. I don't know the answer to that, to be brief. But the cost, I don't really know why it would be more accessible to people in the bottom half of the income bracket. Actually, myself, I don't think-- we're median income maybe at best. If I go to the farmers market, I don't particularly see a problem with the cost, myself, so I'm not-- I think it's more that people are comparing it with what shows up in the supermarket. That's a problem because they're not paying attention to the conditions under which this stuff is done.

1:51:01

If I'm buying organic food, at least I expect them to be taking care of the environment and their labor force.

Evan Stern: Is there anything that you can share about how you've seen the farmers market impact the local food restaurant scene, perhaps?

Bob Randall: Well, I've been retired from Urban Harvest since 2008. But, before that time, we worked with a lot of chefs, and Urban Harvest still is working with a lot of chefs. They know perfectly well that the quality of the food is better when it's fresh and there's more variety. So, they have more choices as to what they offer. At one time, I mean, I had all kinds of stories about that.

1:52:00

We used to do galas at various places, and probably they still do. One year, I was taking a truckload of food to the Omni, to the chef there. It was a lot of food, 'cause they were gonna do a dinner for us at night, and did. So, I said to 'em, I said, "Well, it's an awful lot of food to get working on for"-- I don't know what we had, 200 guests or something. I don't know if you've ever cooked for a group of people, but it's kind of hard to imagine how you serve dinner to 200

people. He said, "Oh, well, we've got a lunch for 350 in an hour and a half." [Laughter] He's using food at this, like, amazing quantities.

1:53:00

But they really value it. I had one case where there's something called the Texas wild tomato, and it grows-- it's about the size of a pinto bean, this tomato. Unlike most tomatoes, it continues to produce here even in very hot weather. It's actually an heirloom-- not an heirloom-- a native tomato. I mean, it goes back centuries. Camille was one of the market gardeners, the early market gardeners, and she grew this thing, and created a possibility for a chef to buy a quart of these things. They're extremely tasty, but they're sort of like blueberries. She wanted 14 bucks a quart.

1:54:00

The chef there, he said, "There's no way I can buy this for $14 a quart, because I only have this budget for lunch." So, the whole idea failed. I thought it was a great idea, you know, we're gonna market Texas wild tomato. I thought the restaurant would really seize on it. If it had been $6 a quart, he could've done it. But you're picking these little-- it's like picking blueberries.

Evan Stern: Reflecting on your long involvement and history with Urban Harvest, if you can name it, what is your proudest accomplishment?

Bob Randall: Oh man.

1:55:00

I have no idea what the answer to that question is. I was asked to do this. I was given a big award at one point. I was given a $50,000 award for Urban Harvest by St. Luke's Episcopal Health

Charities, for health leadership. They asked me to talk about what I thought I had done. What I basically think the biggest contribution I made to this, because there are lots and lots of other people, lots of them that made huge contributions-- it's not just me.

1:56:07

I think I was pretty good at creating a cooperative group that worked together to change conditions across a very wide part of Houston. It's an ambitious goal, but I think we did a fair amount of that, and there's some scientific evidence of that. I was able to find some scientific evidence of that, that we had actually changed what-- nobody was paying any attention to organics when I started. Nobody believed. The Houston, Greater Houston Partnership told me it had been proved you couldn't grow food here. I said, "I hate to tell you, but they're wrong."

1:57:01

I don't know what to say, but I think it was getting people to work together. I have some permaculture perspectives on-- designing an organization is a lot like designing a landscape. You don't grow a rosebush because you wanna eat good food. You don't grow figs because they're beautiful trees. People have positive and negative aspects of their abilities. Some are dysfunctional. Some are functional. Pay attention to the functional parts, and see if you can't get them thriving doing that.

1:58:01

Try to neutralize them in such a way as whatever's dysfunctional about them doesn't cause a problem. Can you work with somebody who isn't honest? Yes. How about if they aren't reliable or competent? What are they competent in? Maybe we can get 'em doing that. There are always some-- you know. So, it's basically seeing possibility in what you've got, and getting that to

happen. It's so rewarding to see all these different community gardens. I worked in almost every neighborhood in Metro Houston, I would say. Many of 'em, dug ditches.

1:58:59

People, when they get a chance to do something good and succeed at doing it, that's the most-- so, perhaps I think I was pretty good at strategic planning. We were able to create a strategic plan that everybody bought into, and execute it. I'd say that people who don't get what they want done often haven't designed it well. So, maybe that's the best contribution I made to it. I don't know.

Evan Stern: We're moving to the end here. You have said that if every neighborhood has a library where people can learn to read and write, they should also have a community garden where people can learn about the land. Why is that important to you?

1:59:56

Bob Randall: Well, somebody once asked Einstein why it was important that we prevented the human race from destroying itself. He said, "Imagine somebody even asking that question." It disturbed him. He didn't really have an answer to that question. But the way I would put it, you know, biology is what gives us our oxygen, and the whole water cycle goes through plants, through transpiration. Inland, there's very little rain that comes from oceans; it's mostly all plants. Our food supply is entirely dependent on plants.

2:01:00

Carbon sequestration happens through plants, so that's our hot temperatures and cold temperatures and storms and water supply, that way. So, we cannot be casual about the way we treat our planet home. There are at least four different ways that the Houston food supply for

seven million people could get interrupted quickly with no backup; four different ways at least that I can think of. They're not remote possibilities. They're not high possibilities either. But they're not-- they're somewhere around 10%.

2:01:59

They're not small, and there's nothing we would be able to do at that point. People, there's nobody actually paying attention to the problem, I mean, not. What government agency pays attention to the food supply? Well, the Department of Agriculture. Now, to think about it during the last election, what were the main issues that they debated about the Department of Agriculture?

Evan Stern: Eggs?

Bob Randall: Nobody knows. I've not found a single person that can tell me anything about the subject. It's astonishing. So, we have a lot of problems.

2:03:00

I once interviewed James Hansen on the radio. If you understand the body of his work, it is hard to believe that we aren't-- at 1.5 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial, which we are on the verge of, you start running into food shortages. At 2, they're widespread, according to the international climate specialists. Most food plants do not grow above 85 degrees. They don't die-- they usually die in the 100 to 120 range-- but they don't grow.

2:03:57

So, we aren't-- they're not focusing there, the decision-makers, and so it's important [laughter] that people have some possibility here of alternatives, very important. Hopefully, it never really

gets that bad. But I once told one of the past city mayors, I said, I told her to her face, I said, "I hope your plan for dealing with a food shortage in Houston"-- because there is a food shortage. Even now, it's 62 miles of people that are hungry, but it could be almost everybody. It's not certain where we're going with this.

2:05:00

I said, "I hope your plan isn't to call me up and ask for 100 gardening teachers," because I got the feeling that she thought, "Well, yikes, I'm a mayor, but what am I gonna do about this?" So, there we are.

Evan Stern: Speaking of Houston, I mean, you're now retired. It's a big world out there. I know you have family in Colorado and points beyond, and there are many places admittedly that are a little prettier than Houston. What keeps or has kept you here?

Bob Randall: Well, we have an amazing garden. I am still teaching classes for Urban Harvest. I teach growing organic vegetables class. This year, we're at Houston Botanic Garden.

2:06:00

I teach permaculture classes. I taught one on ecology and deeper ecology just Sunday. I'm on two boards, the Organic Horticulture Benefits Alliance, OHBA, and I'm on the Permaculture Institute of North America board, and I'm officers of both of those places, so that keeps me busy. Now, as for why I'm in Houston, I have lived in lots of places, lots of places. I've lived in three places in California. I've lived in British Columbia. I have lived in Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, New York City, Massachusetts, West Africa, and the Philippines.

2:07:00

I don't know a place I'd rather be than here, to be honest. Every place I've ever been had a lot of positives and a lot of negatives. It's not one thing or another. But I can actually enjoy the gardening close to 12 months a year here. There's something interesting going on there every part of the year. If you design things well, this time of year right now is about one of the most difficult times to maintain, 'cause everything's beginning to grow, and you run behind on lots of things. But, most of the year, it's quite manageable to do what we do, with fruits 12 months a year and vegetables 12 months a year.

2:08:00

So, it's a great-- and we have an average of 50 inches of rain a year. You don't get that in Southern California. You get no rain for like six straight months. Everything dies if you don't water it. Not to mention blizzards in Upstate New York. Anyway, I like the place. It's got plenty of problems, certainly, but--

Evan Stern: What are your hopes for the future?

Bob Randall: Well, I certainly would be encouraging if there were more political leadership that understood what humanity is actually facing.

2:08:59

That would be really valuable. I mean, having, I think, participated in transforming the awareness of large numbers of people in Houston of what is possible here, I mean, mind you, when I started doing this, almost nobody was trying to use raised beds. Almost nobody was understanding that they could eat fruit most of the year here. There was no concept of year-round gardening at all. I brought that to Houston, really, from Southern California. I asked 'em for

planting schedules for winter when I came here in '79, '80, and theExtension couldn't provide winter gardening. It's astonishing.

2:10:00

They had nothing. The reason was, oh, their extension agent Bill Adams was from Oklahoma, I think, and it had never occurred to him that growing something in January was a possibility. I don't know. I don't know why. But I was mystified because in Southern California, it's common practice. Anyway,

Evan Stern: Is there anything, you know, thank you so much for speaking with us. Before we leave, do you have any just final thoughts that you'd care to share?

Bob Randall: Well, the best thing that I think anybody can do if they want to understand better how to get the most out of the possibilities they face is to do a 72- to 100-hour permaculture class. Some of them are virtual.

2:11:00

Oregon State has them virtually, and they offer a good class virtually. There are in-person classes taught all over the country. That would be my main thing to say, that you can-- permaculture has a way of looking at things that are quite different than anybody anyplace else I've ever seen. A lot of people assume that whatever it is, they must've heard of it by now, but they probably haven't. One thing you were talking about farmers' market, I would just say that one of the things that permaculture does is try to get yields out of connections.

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So, you might use the farmers market to tell people about classes we're teaching, or to bring in school children from a part of town that is not latte-sipping, and have them present art projects at the farmers market. Or you might bring in live music, and support local musicians. In other words, you can make connections that strengthen community and teach people. I grow half a dozen heirloom seeds that are not-- they're part of Houston heritage, they're part of East Texas heritage, and people wouldn't know about them if we didn't.

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Some of 'em, what I planted yesterday was Southeast United's-- Southwest United States Indigenous heritage, the tatume squash, which is the only squash of its species that's resistant to vine borers. You can grow summer squash here but without the problems that everybody gets with zucchini. That's our heritage. It is a heritage that farmers of countless centuries ago perfected that we can benefit from if somebody bothers to tell modern gardeners and farmers.

Evan Stern: Well, I thank you for doing all that you have to tell people over the years, and I thank you so much for speaking with us today, Mr. Randall. It's been a great pleasure.

Bob Randall: Thank you.

[End]