

MIKE CONTI

Avalon Co-op, Wheatsville, University Co-op, Yellow Bike Project - Austin, Texas

* * *

Date: January 18, 2012

Location: The Yellow Bike Project, Austin, Texas

Interviewer: Anne Gessler

Transcription: Anne Gessler

Length: 52 minutes

Project: The Cooperative Oral History Project

Mike Conti: I'm Mike Conti. It's January 25th, 2012, and I'm a produce clerk at Wheatsville Co-op.

Anne Gessler: And thank you so much for being with us today. This is really exciting. This is the Texas Cooperative Oral History Project, and I'm so glad that you could join me to talk about what you do. So, where did you grow up? Did you grow up in Texas?

MC: No, I'm from Watertown, NY, originally. I grew up there, and then I moved to Albany, NY for college, stuck around for a couple of years, and moved to Austin in Spring of 2006.

AG: And, is Wheatsville and are Yellow Bike, are these the first cooperative and collective type organizations that you joined or did you have experience before then?

MC: Actually, the first place I had cooperative experience was at ICC [Intercooperative Council]. When I moved down here, I moved into Avalon, which is a student co-op, but I was a non-student, one of the non-student residents there. So that was actually my first experience with cooperatives.

AG: What made you want to join a cooperative?

MC: Part of it was just the necessity of housing, but coming into a new city, it seemed like a really good place to sort of get an immediate sense of community, meet a lot of interesting people right off the bat, rather than moving into a one-bedroom or two-bedroom with somebody. And the idea of it just sounded really neat to me. There wasn't really--I guess there are probably some co-ops in Albany, but I wasn't--there are some co-ops in Albany--but I wasn't really familiar with or active with them in any particular way. So it seemed like a neat thing to learn more about.

AG: And how did you hear about the Avalon Cooperative?

MC: I had a couple friends who had lived at another ICC house before that. My friend Dylan who's also from Watertown and his now-wife Tracy were living there. And he initially when he moved to Austin lived in an ICC house as well.

AG: And can you describe what it felt like to live in a co-op for the first time?

MC: It was pretty interesting. I think the first summer I was there was really nice in that, I think during the summer it's a little bit more open, people have lots of time to spend. But it was cool--eating a lot of good food right off the bat. And it was also my introduction to--we did, I guess, modified consensus decision making. Which was pretty functional given having 25 pretty different people living in a house like that. Definitely very, very different people. I think a lot of folks, especially like when I was moving down here and telling people I was living in a co-op, it

was like, “oh it’s going to be a bunch of crazy hippies” or whatever. But it was a bunch of very very diverse people living there.

AG: So how would you describe that diversity? What kind of people were in Avalon?

MC: I think it’s mostly meant as a grad student house, so there were a lot of grad students living there. But it was everybody from hyper intelligent Jordanian guy who [laughs] liked to pick weird intellectual fights with people [laughs] to a couple of my future roommates. My roommate Smitha lived there; she’s from India. My roommate Shirene, who’s from Austin but has family in India. Later on, one of my best friends from when I was living there was from Belgium, another was from Manchester. It was this like, really international scope of people with all sorts of different interests.

AG: And you said that you operated on a modified consensus decision-making process. Can you describe what that was like?

MC: I can try to remember exactly how that it works; I’m not sure. I think Yellow Bike spoiled me on “plain old consensus” consensus. It was like a consensus process, but there was, there were additional sort of steps to take if something was blocked that were a little more complicated than plain old consensus. It largely worked pretty well. But it also quickly showed the down side which is that really minor decisions can take a lot of time and discussion, whereas if it was just yes or no votes or if there was someone was charge, those minor decisions would take about five minutes to make.

AG: And can you describe what you did in the co-op? Did you strictly just sleep and eat there or did you have a larger role?

MC: I was--I was, I think it’s called the Education Officer for a while, which was basically the party planner. I did that during the summer and I think the fall semester. That was pretty fun; it was mostly just literally party planning.

AG: What kind of parties did you have?

MC: [Laughs] Debaucherous ones, for sure. But, yeah, we had a big themed party; a couple of other just big, wacky college parties, which is definitely part of the student cooperative culture [laughs].

AG: And would people from outside Avalon come? Was it open to all co-op houses or was it even bigger?

MC: Lots of people from other co-ops would come and then people’s friends from outside of co-ops all together. So, it was pretty big parties, usually, when we threw them.

AG: And do you still--you don't still live at Avalon?

MC: No, I do still live with one of my Avalon-mates. The house I live in, I've lived in almost 5 years, that was, when we moved in, it was all people from Avalon. We went from being in a proper co-op house to just sharing a house with--there was six of us with 5 bedrooms--it made for a smooth transition to living with that many people.

AG: So you lived in a student co-op. And what was your next experience with collectives or cooperatives?

MC: Um, let's see. I think I joined the credit union while I was there, so that was one kind of minor experience. I'm still a credit union member, and that's totally the best way to bank [laughs]. Then the next one was with the "semi-cooperative," The University Co-op. I worked at the bookstore during that fall semester rush. I basically temped there for, I guess about 9 months before I started working at Wheatsville. Which was obviously really interesting if you know much about The University Co-op because it's not really a co-op at all; it's been grandfathered into Texas business laws. But it's just this big monolithic used book and Longhorn apparel corporation. So.

AG: Yeah, could you describe living--excuse me, not living, but working at the University Co-op?

MC: Yeah, it was funny. I worked at a small, independently owned college bookstore in Albany, so I'd had some experience with that. And it was like the total opposite end of the spectrum where that smaller store was just like, a select number of classes, really going out of our way to have the lowest prices possible on books. I think we had one book that a professor demanded be over \$100 and everything else there was \$90 or less. So going from this tiny little hole in the wall to the biggest college bookstore in the nation was a pretty jarring experience. It's funny, all the publishers that we made fun of at Mary Jane's Books were sending us gift baskets during rush to thank us for selling [laughs] more of their books than anyone else.

AG: And what were--you're saying that you had this jarring experience from going to, from a small bookstore to this large bookstore--can you describe a little bit more about what the University--Sorry, let me rephrase that. It's not really a co-op bookstore. It's more of a corporation. So can you describe that difference a little bit?

MC: It was pretty obviously like a top-down organization. I forget the name of the president, but he was very much a CEO sort of figure where he had very obvious control over not only everything at the bookstore but that whole neighborhood is largely landlarded by University Co-op. It was also the largest place I've ever worked, so it was kind of the picture of a giant retailer work environment and "co-op" was kind of tacked on there at the end. Which I think it was probably a really good thing in certain ways, especially given some of the things that I didn't like about living at ICC versus some of the things I did. In that it, you know, it quickly became

apparent that the word cooperative refers to a very specific structure and not actually to a culture or a way of thinking, which is something that I think throws people off a little bit.

AG: Yeah, that's really interesting, can you talk more about that?

MC: Yeah. For instance at ICC, one of the things I actually learned when I was Education Officer was how each house had a a sort of consensus decision making structure and was very democratic, but then there was a word called--"ECC" [Executive Coordinating Committee] is the board of representatives of each house. And then you have the general manager who's really supposed to be staff for the students and residents of the houses. But it ends up that the ECC board and management kind of make a lot of big decisions and push them down to people, rather than the houses really having total control of themselves. And I think that's something found there too a certain extent, and maybe more obviously at Wheatsville since it's a little bit--it's sort of an hourglass structure of management and staff there. But they are cooperatives--lots of people look at that and say like, "Oh, it's not even a real co-op." Or, "It's not a co-op anymore." And it is, it's just not necessarily what you imagine a co-op to be when you hear the word.

AG: Yeah, that's also really interesting. So when people think of a co-op, what do you think they think of?

MC: I think they think of extremely, kind of a--the hippie thing keeps popping back into mind. But I think they think of hippies a lot [laugh]. I think they think of a certain sort of like rag tag culture, as it were. Where in reality it can be a lot of different things. Like the UFCU [University Federal Credit Union] is a co-op and it's a bank, and there's no way you're going to go in there and be greeted by a shoeless, weed-smoking clerk or something like that [laughs]. But it's very much a co-op. Things like large farming co-ops or like the New York City housing co-ops. Like, all definitely really co-ops, but not sort of idealized, romanticized version of what pops into mind. I think that can be a good thing and a bad thing.

AG: Why is that?

MC: It can be a good thing in that a model that's a little bit out of the ordinary is allowed to grow much larger--especially right now, with the green co-ops in Cleveland are a really good example of these huge laundry co-ops that are worker-owned that, it's not--The business that they're doing isn't anything terribly unusual, but they're able to do it in a very progressive way. Where, people who have been used to working minimum wage jobs for large corporations their entire life can be doing similar jobs but have control over the atmosphere and can make positive changes. The negative being, if you go too far in that direction, where co-ops become too similar to what they're supposed to be an alternative to, then you've kind of diluted it to a point where it's not even its own thing anymore.

AG: Yeah, and I think you made a really good point that I want to talk about more, is this idea that, is some cooperatives that *are* cooperatives don't advertise themselves as such. And some

really promote themselves as co-ops, and so all their literature is about being cooperative and having cooperative principles. Where else do you see that distinction being made?

MC: Hmm. Besides those examples, I'm not sure any are springing to mind immediately right now. It seems like the ones that are more, at least rooted in that sort of old school like '60s, '70s idea of what a co-op is supposed to be tend to advertise it more, whereas, it's *really* unusual to see a credit union refer to itself as a cooperative. Or it's unusual to see like a farming cooperative--an American cooperative generally isn't going to discuss how co-op they are. But on the other hand, like a third world farming cooperative, like a coffee farmers' co-op, will kind of emphasize like, "Hey, we're famers making decisions for ourselves." So I guess, the further out of the norm it is, the more people like to advertise it.

AG: OK, and then you said you joined a credit union, you started working at University Co-op, and where did you go next?

MC: Wheatsville was next after that. I started working at Wheatsville at a pretty interesting time, especially given sort of the things we've been discussing. I got hired in March of 2007, and I think the renovation began a year and a half after that. So it was a very transitional time and there was still very much the edifice of what Wheatsville had been up to that point. Even though there were already a lot of internal changes happening--they were kind of making it a more professional place. The culture that I think people had come to expect from it was already starting to change quite a bit, for good and bad.

AG: And for those who don't know what Wheatsville used to be like, even 5 years ago, can you describe what that culture was?

MC: Yeah, the store itself was really kind of ridiculous. Especially when I started, there was a lot of growth at that point. There had been, I think--Until about 2000 or so, Wheatsville was in some pretty dire financial straits. But that had already been turned around. So we were really busy, but we were working out of this space that was totally, ridiculously small for the amount of business we were doing. I started as a dishwasher in the kitchen. It's my favorite example of that because it was literally like a stove, like a four burner stove like you'd have in a house, and a cubby hole that was maybe about the size of the stove and a half. And you know, a cook and a baker working in there, turning out ridiculous amounts of food from this tiny little area. And then the deli itself was this kind of, we called it the "submarine," like, you couldn't walk through it without everybody around you kind of squeezing to the counters. There was a lot of that.

There was a storage space. The actual storage spaces were sheds that were built on the outside of the store, so you had to go out regardless of the weather receiving stuff--it would all happen in the rain outside. And then you'd move it into the store. There was this place called "the loft" where all the paper goods and it was 25 degrees hotter in the loft than it was outside. So lots of like, yeah, janky things in the store [laughs]. And there was a lot of, you know, sort of a ramshackle culture that went along with that. I think especially from the stories I've heard,

before I got there it was kind of a free-for-all. And a lot of that had already been toned down a bit. But there was a while where you could pretty much show up and get away with murder all day and go home with your paycheck [laughs].

AG: For the staff, not for the customers?

MC: Yeah, for the staff. And there was also, there was definitely a reputation among customers and especially people who weren't regular customers at the store, it was kind of like, maybe a little bit surly or arrogant in certain ways because of that sort of, like, free-for-all situation. So I think it's one of those things where for staff it's been, there's been like a lot of growing pains and letting go of that kind of thing. But from a customer or owner perspective, a lot of it's been very positive change.

AG: So describe that transition. What did it feel like to be in the middle of that kind of? It seems confusing [laughs].

MC: Oh man. It was very confusing. The store stayed open all the way through renovation. So it was a very, very bizarre time. Growing pains is a very good word for it. A lot of people left either a little while before or during renovation. Yeah, you just had construction going on around you all the time, kind of doing these impossible improvisations to get everything to continue working through it. And there was definitely--I know for myself there was a while when I was extremely disillusioned with the new store. The new store being kind of, you know, this slick, streamlined image that is very, very different from the old store. I think it's reasonable to say that a lot of the character was lost, or that we were left with an open space that had to have the character built back into it. So that was kind of tough. And that was one of those points when, you know, the kind of like, "Oh, it's not a co-op any more" thing really like, I think especially with staff and with segments of customers who really appreciated that kind of wacky atmosphere, it was a hard thing to let go of. But, but it's been a while, and it's getting easier to see the positive sides of going through all that.

AG: I really like how you said that you had to "build the character back into the place." So how have you seen that occurring?

MC: It's been slow but it's been lots of little things happening. Like in produce, one of the big things is, we had a really hard time figuring out how to keep carrying lots of local stuff. Which is kind of the signature reason for having a food co-op to begin with. Because we'd grown and business had grown really rapidly after the renovation, and it was hard to figure out keep shelves stocked while buying local stuff. So I think when we actually got that figured out, just like having stuff from familiar farms that had maybe had not been there for a while, made a very, very big difference in, like, "Oh yeah, this really is not like Whole Foods or Central Market." It really is an individual, unique store that is hard to mimic.

AG: Can you talk to the customer base of Wheatsville? It seems like with Avalon, you have a pretty defined community of people who live and socialize in one place. In Wheatsville, you have customers who may or may not be co-op members. So how does Wheatsville embrace both, both customers I guess?

MC: I think the approach is pretty--from the staff perspective--is pretty straightforward, which is just like "excellent customer service for everyone." And that's you know, a really obvious thing that turned the business around for its more dire straits. The thing that I find kind of interesting and worrisome but maybe something that could be turned around in the future is that you have customers who are owners and you have customers who aren't. But even among owners there's an extremely low level of participation in the co-op. I think this year 700 out of about 10,000 owners voted in the election for the board members and for community action groups to support. And that was like a banner number, like everybody was super excited. I think the previous year there had been something like 350 people who voted. And in general, it seems like there's, yeah, not--I don't even know if it's necessarily a lack of interest. I think that's it to a certain extent, but there's also--there's 10,000 other owners; you don't necessarily feel as directly tied to the decision making as you do living in a small housing co-op.

AG: I think I joined Wheatsville in maybe 2009, and the newsletters that I would get would discuss how to, like I said before, how to balance the population that was, that were members of the co-op and those weren't members and how to--who to attract more? Should you be more of a regular grocery store or should you retain that core cooperative feeling? Have you seen that too? It sounds like you are kind of alluding to it.

MC: Yeah, it seems like we're definitely, we definitely have a sort of particular like "Wheatsville shopper," I think: a customer base that's not terribly far separated from the other natural food stores in town. But it's definitely expanded in more of a way where people who may not have come to the old store but went to Whole Foods because it's like, "oh this is, everything's neat and nice and tidy in here," are comfortable coming to Wheatsville now. I don't think that's been a negative thing at all. And I think that's one of the interesting things about the sort of stereotyped version of co-op is that co-ops are supposed to be inclusive and inviting to people. So at the same time that you're losing this kind of particular character that they may have had in the past, you're also making it sort of more democratic in a way.

AG: Yeah, that's really interesting. So you were saying that there's kind of a typical Wheatsville shopper, and then there's a more expanded shopping base that may have gone to Whole Foods or Central Market, maybe.

MC: Yeah.

AG: Um, how does Wheatsville attract who wouldn't be able to afford to go to Whole Foods or wouldn't be able to afford to maybe even go to Central Market?

MC: Um, that's a good question. I don't think--that's actually something that came up in a store meeting recently because we are about to open a second Wheatsville. And we were talking about some things that are coming down the pike. And one question that was asked by an employee was, "Are we going to look at ways we can be more inviting or more affordable or do whatever to reach out to underserved communities?" And it's something that they're still kind of haven't quite figured out how to do yet. And it's a tough thing to do because you know, we're obviously selling higher quality food than say HEB on 7th St. Like their produce is just not as good and it's just a bulk machine-style produce. But at the same time, you want to be able to extend that to people who can't get to it yet. So I think it's still something that's floating in the ether. But I have noticed--I don't know if it necessarily has to do with Wheatsville or if it has to do with a great awareness of food issues, but it does seem like to *some* extent we're attracting more of those customers--and maybe just for specific things--like, I guess produce is a good example again. Where it's not really--in some cases it's much more expensive, but in a lot of cases it's only marginally more expensive to buy organic stuff or local stuff, so people will come just for that. Or they'll come just for non-homogenized milk. Or if they're trying to cut back on meat, they'll start buying really nice meat and eating a lot less of it. But as far, as you know, sort of packaged goods and things like that go, maybe still it's like the fancy expensive stores.

AG: You were also saying that Wheatsville allies with other organizations and chooses who to give money to. Right?

MC: Yeah.

AG: Can you describe that a little bit?

MC: That's called Community Action Wednesdays. So one thing, along with board members and proposed boycotts, owners get to vote on Community Action Wednesdays recipients. So 1% of all sales on Wednesdays throughout any given month go to a specific group. Yellow Bike has really been a consistent recipient. Other ones--OutYouth has been on there for a number of years, Sustainable Food Center. So a lot of really awesome community organizations. And I always like it--you know, obviously I'm partial to Yellow Bike--but I like it when smaller groups end up receiving that. Because, you know, 1% sales on a Wednesdays from a small grocery store isn't a huge amount of money for some organizations, but to others it's just a windfall, so.

AG: What else does Wheatsville do to engage with community?

MC: Um, one of the other things I've been noticing a lot--I haven't really been involved with it directly as either staff or Wheatsville owner, but they've been doing a lot of sort of co-op conferencing. There's been these co-op incubator kind of groups going on, where folks are coming to Wheatsville from KOOP Radio, from Black Star, from Red Rabbit Bakery, and ICC, and kind of having roundtable discussions of, like, "how do we," you know, "what is the goal of these organizations, how do we work together to meet that?" In the case of Black Star, Wheatsville is actually the largest investor in Black Star, so, that was a pretty neat thing. And,

yeah, there's been, like lots of little things, like after the fires in Bastrop, we raised a lot of money for relief. So yeah, there's pretty--it seems like some of the larger organizations can sponsor lots of things and get their name on t-shirts, but yeah, for the size of the store it seems like a lot of effort and money goes towards community things.

AG: OK, so we talked a little bit about Wheatsville and your involvement in Wheatsville. I had a final question about working there, though. So we've been talking a little bit about community outside of Wheatsville, but how does Wheatsville enforce a sense of community and belonging--or does it--in the store itself?

MC: Um, I think it's just there to an extent, and it kind of ebbs and flows. Like, I've met some really awesome people working there. I think everyone who's ever worked there will say that. That, you know, like, however they felt about their job there were lots of great people working there. You know, I think everybody's met at least a couple of their best friends during their tenure. So, it just kind of draws a certain, certain group of people. And again, not necessarily the people that you stereotypically would think of as co-op employees, but just the people who end up working there just definitely build a certain level of bond between them. And it's a pretty open workplace in terms of communication, you know, whether it's with management or just communicating amongst yourselves. It's definitely a friendly place to be. So, kind of internal groups come along with that.

AG: And what kind of people work, tend to work at Wheatsville?

MC: Um, you have to be friendly and open-minded to a certain extent. Obviously with customer service being like a big selling point. You know, they're not to hire people who are consistently surly or pissed off. Or if they do, they're good at hiding it [laughs]. But yeah, it seems to, yeah, just draw people who--and people are always, you know, when they start working there are pretty universally excited about it. You get free boxes full of food, which is a pretty major fringe benefit. So yeah, people--we get a ton of applicants, but it seems like most of the people who get hired are people who specifically were very much like to work there versus, you know, University Co-op where there were lots of temps who just needed a job really badly and couldn't get a job anywhere else. So.

AG: Yeah, I've seen the same people for years still working at Wheatsville, whereas again, like you said, at University Co-op, it varies so much.

MC: There's periods of lots of turnover--the renovation being one of those. But right now it seems like we're in a fairly stable state as far as that goes. And yeah, there's, even when we go through periods of lots of turnover, there's always a certain percentage of people who stay. There's definitely like a sort of, generations of people where you don't feel like, all of the sudden you're working in a totally different place one day.

AG: OK, so, after Wheatsville--or while you were working at Wheatsville, how did you hear about Yellow Bike?

MC: Um, I can't remember how I initially heard about Yellow Bike. I think just being in Austin you hear about Yellow Bike somehow. But I started cycling right after I moved here. I hadn't ridden since I was a teenager, and I decided that would be the best and easiest way to get around town. So then, let's see, when did the old shop close? I guess it was in 2008? And a couple months before the 51st St Yellow Bike closed, I went in. I bought this crummy road bike that I wanted to fix up and learn how to work on bikes with. And I went in once or twice to work on that bike, and just totally fell in love with it and started going for, you know, like, once a week for a whole shop, for, you know, the last couple of months running up to when the shop closed up and moved to the trailers out back [on 1216 Webberville Road] [laughs]. And then for a while I could't really--like the schedule didn't work out in a way that I could keep volunteering at all. And then shortly after this location opened up, time just worked out really well and I could jump into it. And now I'm here all the time [laughs].

AG: And what do you do here; what is your role?

MC: I'm a coordinator. So basically I open up the shop and run the shop. And while I run shops, I try very, very hard not to put a wrench in my hands at all. So the really awesome thing about Yellow Bike is that we're trying to empower shop users. Very actively trying to empower shop users by, like, just putting wrenches in people's hands, giving them all the help they need, but making sure they are the ones actually fixing things themselves, which is--that was huge for me when I started coming to Yellow Bike. Because I've never really been great at that kind of thing. I never worked with tools very much growing up. So the idea that I could pick up a wrench and fix something was pretty phenomenal and made a big difference to me, I think.

AG: And how would you describe volunteering and working here, versus Wheatsville, where there's a very different structure?

MC: The fact that it's all volunteer here makes it, like obviously, that's different. I like Wheatsville a lot, but it's my job [laughs]. And probably most days if I didn't have to go to survive, I would just stay home or come here instead [laughs]. But, yeah, it's something you're doing just because you want to do it. And I think every coordinator has slightly differences for being a coordinator--but everybody's--and every volunteer has slightly different reasons for volunteering. But the voluntariness of it and the fact that something that is completely volunteer can function on as high a level as this place does, is really, really unique and inspiring.

AG: And the concept that the patrons of, or the visitors to Yellow Bike are going to be empowered and learn for themselves to fix bikes, and use bikes as a mode of transportation is so different from Wheatsville--whereas no one is going to you as the customer and saying "OK, you, I'm empowering you to do x."

MC: Yeah, yeah. It's very different. At the end of the day, for everything that's different about it and for everything that it does, Wheatsville is a store. And it's a nice store, but it's very much just like, this is a retail business and this is how it works. Where here, it's just a totally different model of community, and how you can accomplish things, and what you can put into, and get out of things. And working at Wheatsville I'm having very customer-employee interactions with everyone. Whereas here, you know, it's all over the map. Like, one minute I could be a teacher, one minute I'm a cashier, or I'm haggling with somebody about prices, which is probably my least favorite thing to do here [laughs]. And in one minute I'm learning something totally new. So the rules are constantly, constantly shifting and very amorphous. I had a conversation with Pete Wall a little while back. He was saying, "Years ago I stopped being very interested in bicycle mechanics compared to what an, just an interesting social experiment this place is." And I think lots of people come here and, you know, are kind of half-interested in the mechanics or the cycling part of it, but are really just interested in being in this space that we have, with such a range of people to come through and really different interactions than we necessarily see elsewhere.

AG: So how would you see a model like Yellow Bike being implemented in other areas of society?

MC: That's a good question. Um, one of the big strengths and, like of I kind of mentioned before, one of the big weakness that we have, and it depends on the situation, is: being a collective and making consensus decisions. Yellow Bike is at a point where it seems like we are really, really good at it. I think a lot of it's because there's a lot of people who've volunteered for a very long time and have a real idea of how to make it work. And coupling that with people who are newer to it and just have enthusiasm and have fresh blood to give, it just ends up being very functional. Whereas it could just as easily be a total mess. Like, every idea that comes on the table could be blocked by somebody and nothing would ever get done. But I think we're proof that isn't necessarily what happens when you have collectives and consensus decision-making. I think, I think one of the things with us is that we're still pretty small. And that for this kind of organization to really work, it has to have some kind of cap on size. Like, it can't sprawl out, it can't be this enormous thing. You couldn't necessarily have the United States making consensus decisions on House bills [laughs]. It's just not really feasible, but when you're broken down into these kind of smaller organizations, you really can work that way. And it's so much more democratic than voting or something like that. I was listening to some interviews from Occupy Wall Street and they were talking about introducing people to the General Assembly and consensus decision-making. And I thought it was amazing. It was like, if nothing else comes out of that, having thousands of people realize that you know, "Hey this is another approach you can take" is pretty awesome.

AG: Yeah, I mean we're talking about how to sustain a group of collective members over the long term, how do you think Yellow Bike would define sustainability, not only in transportation but in other large scale changes?

MC: Um, I think we try, we try to emphasize avoiding burn out. That's kind of a big thing, because you can really throw yourself into stuff here. But if you throw yourself in too far, or if you take on too many projects, any number of things can happen as a volunteer that will leave you with no energy left to volunteer. It may even be just that you just don't have time, you know, that you're working too much, and the time to devote isn't there. So yeah, I think that's a big sticking point, is not doing more than you're capable of doing, and letting people know that it's OK not to be the one who's doing stuff all the time, and sort of doing everything you can but being willing to take your hands off it, is a big thing. Jennifer who's been coordinating things here for way, since way way back, I don't even know how many years it's been. But she's like a very--she's very ordered, and she wants things to be a very specific way. And to a certain extent it's just like very chaotic here most of the time. And we've talked some about that. Because she's like, "This is the place where I've learned that sometimes you just have to step back and let things be." So that's part of it. I think you either have to adjust your personality to that or have a personality that's kind of laissez faire to an extent. Because if you come into a collective situation or a workers co-op or something like that, and you're really, sort of, tunnel-visioned about things, you're not going to do well. Because there's all those different opinions count just as much as yours do. And even if it's consensus, at the end of the day you may have to consent to some things with, sort of half-heartedly just to make sure that something happens.

AG: Well, I think I got all the questions that I want to ask, but do you want to talk to something you think we haven't completely addressed?

MC: Um, hmm. [laughs.]

AG: Or you want to tell a story or anything that comes to mind?

MC: Sure. Um. I think, I think one of the best things I've gotten out of these experiences is this, like, a bigger understanding of how people work and groups of people work. And especially, at this point in history, there's a certain level of nihilism, like, "We're never going to fix these problems that are facing us as a people, and the people in power are always going to have all the power, and there's nothing we can do about it. So, let's just sit back and watch TV [laughs]." But these other ways of doing things really do work, and they can work. And it takes it takes a lot of effort, but there is an alternative to just being defeated, or just letting the system be what the system is going to be.

I think, looking at Yellow Bike, if somebody heard about Yellow Bike 15 years ago, like, it's really hard for me imagine them thinking, "Oh yeah, I bet 15 years from now they're going to have spatial security for the next 50 years, and be serving like 150 people a week," and all these amazing things. I feel like at Wheatsville, I don't think anybody was like, "Oh this little place where you can pick up all these sacks of flour from someone's garage is going to be a really successful, fairly, relatively large grocery store years from now." So, yeah, you know, this stuff really does work, and it's just going to keep pushing farther. And I think for people who are involved in cooperatives and collectives right now, I think it's kind of a great time to be involved

with them, and it's a really good time to try to keep pushing them, and try to make sure that the original reasons for their existence keep being the reasons they're around and creating positive change with them.

AG: Well thank you, this was great. Thanks a lot.