

MIKE GORSE AND MCALLEN HALSEY
Austin Collective Housing - Austin, Texas

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Interviewer: Anne Gessler

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Anne Gessler: My name is Anne Gessler. Today is February 18, 2012. This is the Cooperative Oral History Project, and we're sitting in the meeting room of the Yarborough Public Library. And I'm talking with:

Mike Gorse: I'm Mike Gorse. My birthday is December 6th, 1979, and I'm a software developer and someone who is trying to preserve Austin for the future.

AG: And thank you, Mike. I'm so glad that you're with us today. And I'm also with--

McAllen Halsey: McAllen Halsey. I was born September 14th, 1983. And right now I have two part-time jobs as maintenance assistant at an Econo building and I work at a deli.

AG: OK, and thank you so much for being with me. I'm so glad to get to talk to you. Yeah, so why don't we get started. Mike, why don't you tell me where you're from, and the first experience you with cooperatives or even hearing about the idea of cooperatives.

MG: Well, I'm from Massachusetts originally, and I knew of various co-ops there, although I never actually lived at one. As I was about to come out of college, I was on a mailing list where people announced activities that might be of interest of progressive activists. And anyway, there was a co-op that someone mentioned on that list and that may or may not have been looking for members at that time, and they also had potlucks. So I went to some of their potlucks, which I thought was nice. It was a good way to meet people who might have similar interests. And at various times I thought I wanted to live in a co-op, although I never ended up living in one for various reasons when I was there. Until I came out here.

And then I came out here. Well, so I had been considering trying to relocate here. And back in '05 I visited. And I figured out I could hostel at this co-op called House of Commons. And it's mostly a student co-op, although it also has a good number of non-students. So I came out and I stayed there for a couple of weeks, which was nice. Again, it was a good way to meet people. And then a couple years later I came out again and stayed at that co-op. I met McAllen there, incidentally, because he was living there. So then finally once I'd figured out a way to move here without risking messing up my life, I finally did.

And so, then I just figured if I could live at the co-op that would be good because I liked that it was a community in a lot of ways. There were people that were all into different things and doing different projects. And it was a way for people to support each other. Since you had this space that could be used for different things. For instance, when I was there, there was someone who was involved with an animal rights group on campus. So she'd have fundraisers sometimes for her group where she'd make this vegan dinner and people could come and cook. And at various times the co-op has been involved with Food Not Bombs. And again, it was a nice space for it. There was a good sized kitchen, and there were people there often, who were interested in working on it. So I really liked that. And it allowed people to connect with each other. And so

you had a community of people who often may have shared interests or maybe had different interests. But nevertheless it was still a nice place.

AG: OK, and if I could back up to when you were in Massachusetts. So, you said you were on this listserv or mailing list for progressive activists? So what kind of, what were your political interests and how did you become politically active?

MG: Well, mostly back when I was in college, like my junior year I met someone. And this was around the time that the WTO were happening in Seattle. And so I was in a class with this person. And she wasn't at the protests but she mentioned them to me because she had friends who were. And she was worried about them because there were a lot of arrests and she was wondering if they were OK. So, and then she told me, somethings about what they were protesting. And how with these free trade agreements, like it often--it affects the sovereignty of various countries and states. Like you might want to--like maybe you want to make a rule or a law that your shrimp has to be harvested in a way that is sustainable. But maybe you can't because that violates free trade. And so there were things like that. And at the same time, I knew people who were going to the World Bank and IMF protests that happened a few months later. I wound up going to that. I feel like that was kind of the first political sort of thing that I'd done. But then there was also this group in the city I went to college with that I'd--in the city I went to college at I mean--that worked on various global justice oriented issues that I wound up finding out about and getting somewhat involved with. Although, then, I was about to--I was going into my senior year in college, so that was my last year. And then after that, I needed to figure out what I was going to do, where I was going to live, and all of that.

AG: And why did you pick Austin?

MG: I always feel like I--whenever anyone asks me that I always feel kind of like an impostor or something like that, or a hypocrite or something like that. But anyway, I should just answer your question. Well, part of it's that I like not being cold all the time, or it's a lot of it, anyway. And other than that it seemed like a nice city; there's a lot going on. I like the permaculture scene and there seemed to be--and I liked that there were coops, actually. It seemed positive that there were. It seemed like there were a lot of people doing different things, and a lot of positive energy. And not that there wasn't in Massachusetts. And if I actually liked the weather there and if it was in a place closer to where humans actually evolved--and this felt comfortable, or so it seems to me--then probably I'd like living there. But. So I came here. Although being here is interesting because there--I think there are a lot of challenges in the future that we're going to face. We have a lot of extreme weather. Like, we alternate between having these floods and having droughts, and it's probably going to be one of the places where water is an issue. I guess that's part of why I said earlier that I felt kind of like an impostor and I shouldn't be here. But I think it has implications for how many people can live here, I think. But I think that's part of it--at least that's the conclusion I came to eventually, That if you live here you should be trying to contribute to the city in some way. And I think if you live here and you're working towards

trying to solve the problems that we have, or at least trying to mitigate them for the people who are here in the future, then I think that can work.

AG: OK, and I want to ask you, you said that while you in Massachusetts, you were aware of cooperatives and you wanted to join one. So how did you learn what it was, what was a housing co-op, or what was a co-op in general?

MG: I think from being on the list and going to the potlucks at Millstone, which is the co-op that I mentioned, and watching what they were trying to do. They were a rental co-op, and actually they still are, but that's kind of a long story. But they were considering buying a property or looking for a property to buy, And eventually that happens. There's this group called Boston Community Cooperatives, which bought a property and started a co-op called Seedpod. So now that co-op is there, but Millstone still exists as a rental co-op. So through that, I think it helped. There was also a mailing list called the Boston Co-op Network there, for people who lived in housing co-ops, to allow them to discuss things and post room openings. And a lot of times people might post asking for rooms, and then they probably don't get replies because it seems like there are a lot more people who want to live in co-ops than there are co-ops, or spaces in co-ops. And I feel like that's true both there and here. Which is part of what's making me want to start a co-op here, because I feel like there's demand for it because most of the co-ops here are pretty full and tend not to have openings that often.

AG: OK, and now I want to turn to McAllen. So, I want to know, did you grow up in Austin or are you from Texas? And what made you aware of co-ops?

McAllen Halsey: I'm originally from a town outside of Dallas, Texas. When I graduated high school, I did several AmeriCorps programs. Each about six months long. Two on the East Coast, the first one in upstate New York, about two miles from the Canadian border, called the Student Conservation Association. It was just in the middle of nowhere in a small town in very rural upstate New York. And then I decided to go to the complete opposite end of the spectrum and go to Philadelphia, to do a program called City Year, where I did tutoring, and helped facilitate after-school programs for at-risk youth in an inner slum in Philly. And I lived in a neighborhood in Philly pretty similar to the neighborhood I live in now.

I lived in West Philly, in an area right next to the U-Penn Neighborhood, the University of Pennsylvania. Very similar kind of young progressive vibe that's in East Austin, where Mike and I want to locate our co-op. I first found out about co-ops there, except it was different. They weren't affiliated with NASCO, they were just a couple of independent co-ops. And I forget how I learned about the co-ops in Austin, or what made me inclined to want to live in one. I forget how it happened, but I just found out about them.

And at some point I just decided to move to Austin because I had been here a couple of times as a kid. I just got a really pleasant, warm vibe--I just, it just made me feel good. There was just something in the air that really appealed to me. And I also just really loved the Texas Hill

Country, to the west of Austin. Just a rugged, just a gorgeous, rugged landscape that I always really liked. So, and then, why I decided to move to Austin, it just seemed like I knew all these hippies--hippies and artist types. And whenever I mentioned I was from Texas, ninety percent of them had been to Austin. And they're like, "oh man, did you say you were from Austin? I passed through Austin and it was great." So it got all these rave reviews. So I thought, "Well, shoot, I kind of like it anyway, I might as well check it out." So I moved into House of Commons Co-op. And then, I didn't really know what to expect from Austin, other than it was just a liberal, happening place. But living in the co-op in Austin, and especially at the co-op really ended up launching me into pursuing my career goals, and my creative goals, and a lot of my interests.

The biggest example is when I was at the House of Commons, you know we all have a few hours of assigned labor per week. And it can change. You know, like the cooks, and people who go grocery shopping, people who clean the kitchen, people who facilitate house meetings, and people who run the affairs of the house and whatnot. And I was the mailman--or I was the mail deliverer. The mailman would drop off a big bundle of mail with a rubber band around it. And it was my job to deliver it. And yeah, you know, I'm just kind of scatterbrained and I just didn't do a very good job of getting people's mail in the slot. The kind of the Labor Officer came up to me and said, "Hey, McAllen, you're really not kind of making it as the mailman. We have a gardener position open for you, if you'd like it." And so I decided to take it.

And up until then I never had any experience in gardening or any inclination to garden. But it occurred to me, or--I asked, I said, "Well is there anything that I can't do? Are there, like any prohibitions on what I can and cannot plant?" And they said, "no." And then it just hit me like a ton of bricks that I had this blank canvas that I could just do, I could just create as I saw fit. So I turned it into a productive, productive, edible, and decorative garden. I took a lot of inspiration from the landscaping in Austin. And up until the time I had moved here I never dreamed--I had never seen or dreamed or imagined just the incredible range of color and types of plants that people used. I never even dreamed--conceived of such a thing. It really made an impression on me. And so I really just developed this creative side.

Now I want to make sure that I'm staying on track here. Were there any other specific types of things--types of questions you wanted me to answer?

AG: Yeah, well, we'll go as you--I mean it's fine--

MH: OK.

AG: --yeah. It's more free-form.

MH: OK. And I ended up living at 3 different co-ops over the next, I don't know, 2, 2 1/2 years. And then I lived at 21st Street Co-op at one point. And yeah, so I saw different co-op models. But basically I just decided--at one point I decided that I was tired of West Campus, and like

living next to a college and being surrounded by all these obnoxious college students. And I kind of wanted my own independence. And so I moved into a house on the other side of town. And slowly but surely I began to miss the co-ops. And I realized the reasons why I missed it were kind of specific and skin-deep. Like I didn't want to live--I'd grown tired of living in *student* co-ops in a certain part of town, but I really liked the co-op experience in general. And then I forget how I came up with the idea to start a co-op of my own, but somehow the thought gelled.

And so, about a year ago, exactly, from this month--about a year ago, I started to put pieces together to start a co-op. And I got in touch with Mike. And then I think I guess the last kind of things that I'll sort of mention is that--Well, we have another friend from The House of Commons named Matt Scheer. And he is really, he's a really social guy and really creative. And he puts together these kind of semi-regular events and gatherings and potlucks at his house, on the Eastside. And one of them is called the Show-and-Tell Potluck. Where he'll have a potluck at his house with all his friends, but everyone will be given like 5 or 10 minutes to just show something or talk about something that they think is cool. And he also has a speech club, where he'll invite his friends to give a 90 minute presentation on something, on some informative subject of some kind. And I took advantage of these two activities, and just these two activities really, really propelled me. Or really, like, fueled more creative energy. And I began to pursue these interests of mine. And, like, natural history. I learned a lot about it and I gave a talk about it. And it was a really great experience. And then, so, at our co-op, when we get it set up, I want it to be a venue for just all kinds of social and educational events. To, among other things, give people, give people a platform to develop their own creativity. And so pretty excited about it.

AG: OK, well I actually have a bunch of questions after that--

MH: OK.

AG: --after you were talking. So I want to go back to that garden you were talking about, at House of Commons?

MH: Yeah.

AG: What was in the garden? What kinds of foods were you growing? Did co-op members eat the food, or what was happening with it?

MH: Yeah, it was food for the house. We had a lot of--most of the time we had a bunch of okra. And we had tomatoes and peppers. Lots of different kinds of basil and other herbs. And that was mainly it.

AG: And had you ever gardened before? Did you have any experience?

MH: None at all.

AG: And how did you learn?

MH: Well its really pretty simple. I just read the backs of the seed packets. And whenever I didn't know something, I would consult--I would call a nursery or something. And I would also, I think if I remember right, I just kind of got to know other gardeners who gave me some tips. It was really just reading and talking to people.

AG: And, I wanted to ask you, what did it feel like to be in House of Commons for the first time? What were those--how did you--when did you start to feel like you were part of a community?

MH: Well, to be honest, I think--well, I think I was there for about a year and a half. And I feel like, well, I don't know, I'd say I'd say for about the first half of that time I didn't really feel particularly included. But kind of like the latter part of that time, I really, I really felt appreciated and included in things. Yeah, so, it took a little while, but eventually I found my place.

AG: Why do think there was that lag time?

MH: It seemed, it seemed like it was just kind of the luck of the draw, as far as like, who I got along with. There's a pretty high turnover because it's a student co-op. People graduate and leave and whatnot. So there's always a new crop of people that came every 6 months. So it was just kind of a numbers game.

AG: And you were saying that you saw different co-op models as you went from co-op to co-op--

MH: Yeah.

AG: --Can you describe what those different models are?

MH: Yeah. Well, well yeah, and even ones that I didn't live in, I saw. And there's a wide range. They were all student co-ops. But yeah, just the ones that I lived in. I lived in New Guild Co-op, which is, which is a little bit bigger. It's about 30 people instead of 25--about 25 or so. And they just, they liked to party. They're kind of messy, and whatnot. But they had really good concerts and DJs and whatnot. But it was basically the same kind of crowd. And then I really took it a step further in that vein when I went to 21st Street Co-op. Which is just, they just made it part of themselves and made it their mission to be as decadent and just far-out and--as they could, and just party as much as is legally possible. And I lived there for 6 months, and I got to say, that was absolutely the most surreal, crazy 6 months of my life. But, I think 21st St was probably the most organized. And consistent with their projects. Like they, they brewed beer for a time. They have an ongoing bicycle shop. And that really, that specifically really inspired me because--as just an ongoing public service. And that idea of an ongoing public service became a major component of our goal to incorporate into our co-op.

AG: Yeah, can you talk about that public service? Especially since you were doing AmeriCorps and you were working with inner city youth. Is that going to be an element, too, in public outreach and community outreach in your co-op?

MH: Well, we haven't discussed that at length. Possibly. We did discuss the possibility of setting up some kind of community garden. And also, another, another major source of inspiration for me was a group called Skillshare Austin. They have an annual 3 day--free 3 day skills workshop, where they just have people knowledgeable about all kinds of skills, from bike maintenance to public speaking, to childcare to how to make your own sauerkraut. And just a really high quality free community resource. And so, I definitely--we definitely want to pursue something along that, those lines.

AG: OK, and I'm turning to Mike. Mike, can you describe your first couple of experiences at House of Commons when you moved there?

MG: Ah, my first--I'm trying to think. It was a real change of pace for me. Because before that I lived in a house with one other person. And now I'm living in this big house with 25 or so other people. So. It was a change. And, so all of the sudden there were a lot of people around I could talk to. And that was part of it--I think I--there were a lot of different people who I'd want to try to get to know. And of course that would kind of come and go as time went on. Because as McAllen said, there's a lot of turnover there. But anyway, I had my labor. Sometimes I'd do dinner clean after dinner. And a lot of times I would do that with one other person. It could kind of be an opportunity to talk with that person. And I needed to learn my way around the kitchen. So I had that. And sometimes I was also secretary and took minutes, which was kind of--well, every other meeting we'd have a meeting that would go for 2 hours or so. So the secretary would take the minutes for that and send them out. And I usually maintained the website, which I got labor for. And that also met that if the house computer or printer was out of toner, then it would be my job to replace it.

And it was fun, too. I remember near the beginning of the time I was there, someone proposed going on a speedboat. So, I went on this speedboat with maybe 5 or 6 of my other housemates, which was a lot of fun. I'm not sure if I'd ever done anything like that before. So, you know, it was a mixture. There were a lot of fun things that people did at the house. And there were a lot of projects of different kinds. Like there were social justice-oriented projects like I was saying earlier.

AG: Sorry, go ahead.

MG: And people who were--and it might be a way--and the co-op that McAllen and I are starting is not going to be a student co-op particularly. Although since this one was, it might also mean that students might be able to help each other with what they're studying. Like I remember talking to one person and she was taking--I think she was taking a computer science

course and hadn't really taken one before. And there was another person in the house who had majored in computer science so he was able to help her with her program, which she appreciated.

AG: Can you talk about the social justice efforts a little more? So, what did Food Not Bombs do at the Co-op?

MG: They'd cook, and for anybody who doesn't know, Food Not Bombs is a group that will cook a meal and will usually serve it some place like a public park, so often people who were homeless would be able to get a meal from it. And often the food is surplussed, that they can get, perhaps it's food that Wheatsville is throwing away and needs to get rid of, or whatever. And sometimes it's civil disobedience because, at least--I don't know if this has happened in Austin, but in some places, people have gotten arrested because they were serving food at a public park without a permit. So there was that. It is kind of an off-and-on whether that happens there, but it kind of goes that way there, because there's a lot of turnover and people move in and out, so it depends what the people who are living there at the time are interested in doing, and if there's someone who's interested in Food Not Bombs and will do the work to ensure that it stays together, probably the house will support them. And, that will happen. And sometimes that's goes on anyway because--And it's a good space for it because there's a large commercial kitchen. And so, it's suitable for cooking. Sometimes that's happened there. Sometimes 21st St. Has done it as well. Has hosted them, so they'll cook the meal there. So there was that.

And then, some time--I remember one time, there was a student who was involved with a--with some sort of Palestine solidarity organization on campus. And at least one time, I think, she had a meeting at the Co-op. So to do that, you would probably bring it up at a house meeting and propose doing it on a particular date. And if everyone was OK with it, then you can do it. But there--there's a lot of common space so it was kind of a good place for things like that.

And at one point I was thinking of trying to get a presenter in. There was this group in Austin for a while, I believe it was called--I believe it was called Austin Program for a Participatory Society, but it was people studying participatory economics. And I was considering getting them to do a presentation there. But at the time they were kind of imploding so that didn't end up happening. But I think it's an example of something that could happen at a co-op.

AG: And could you describe what participatory economics is?

MG: I'm really not an expert on it, but from what I understand, it looks for ways to get people more directly involved in decisions that are made. Like participatory budgeting might be part of it, and I believe it's done in Puerto Alegre and some places in Brazil. So they have --again, I'm not really an expert--but they have groups of people who will work together to decide what the budget should be. And these are just ordinary citizens who will work together. And it can be a way of facilitating democracy in that people are more directly involved in the political process and the decisions that affect them.

AG: And I was wondering if you could describe House of Common's decision-making plans, or consensus decision-making?

MG: It's generally modified consensus, so typically someone would make a proposal, and it would be discussed for a while, and perhaps debated. And then at the end, eventually someone will make a motion that may or may not be exactly the same as the original proposal, and if someone seconds it, and then they call for dissent. And, so for passes without anyone dissenting, you have consensus and it passes. If people aren't entirely happy with it, one of--there are a bunch of things that could happen. They might just stand aside, where if they--which is not dissenting, and it can still pass that way. But if as long as a majority of people are in favor of it. You might do that if you sense that it is the general will of the house and you're not altogether agreeing with it, but you don't want really want to stand in the way of it either. So people might stand aside. Or you might also dissent. And if people dissent, again, a bunch of things can happen, and it might depend how many people dissent. But if, if I remember right, well, at first they try to figure out what the person's reason is for dissenting. So they'll discuss it and determine if there's some way to modify the proposal to address the concerns of the person dissenting. And if that doesn't happen then I believe it's supposed to be tabled and brought up again at the next meeting. But anyway, someone, it can call for a vote, and if that happens then I believe it needs to pass by a 2/3's majority. Although in reality that happens very little when I was there. Like typically proposals would pass by consensus or maybe several people would dissent and that point nothing would be done, and the proposal would just die and people would move on.

One time I can remember people voting was when there was this discussion as to how much to charge people who weren't members for coming over for dinner. And there are different ways that that can be handled. You could have--people sometimes board, which means, which you would do if you were going to come over regularly and have your meals there. So it's--you would have dinner with the house, typically, on most days, even though you weren't living there, and you do a little bit of labor. So people would do that. And people can also be someone's guest. And each member gets 5 guest meals per month, so they can invite their friends over for dinner. But if someone wasn't really anyone's guest and just wanted to come for dinner, then we were--we also wanted to sort of allow that, perhaps for people who maybe just wanted to come some times. But people couldn't agree as to how exactly what to charge them. So, there was one price that most people agreed on, or most people didn't dissent to, but 2 people dissented to. So that ended up getting put up for a vote. Which I thought was interesting because in one sense it didn't seem like a major--it didn't seem to me like an issue that was really that large, and thus that I'd expect a major controversy around. But nevertheless it's the one thing that I can think of that actually went to a vote rather than passing by consensus or just not passing.

AG: OK, and this is a question for both of you, and I know you're still in the planning stages, but do you think your housing co-op will also use modified collective process, or modified decision-making, or have you even gotten that far. Mike?

MG: We haven't discussed it really, so I can't say for sure. Although, I think on balance that it was a good process. And I think that there are different things that need to be kept in balance. Like if you have a pure consensus system, I think then, I mean, I think that can potentially cause problems. Like, basically because having a consensus decision making process is not necessarily the same as reaching consensus, and so what if most people wanted to do--What if most people wanted something to happen, and 1 or 2 people didn't? Then you don't have consensus, but at the same time, you don't have a consensus for it not to pass, either. You just don't have a consensus either way. And so if you have a system like that, it potentially, I mean it has the potential to favor a small minority of people who want the status quo, whatever that is, rather than people who want something changed. So I don't think that system is perfect. And, but in theory I like the idea of trying to work toward consensus, so towards working towards doing things that everyone in the house is OK with. So I think that having something like that is good, rather than just having a majority vote, which is--

I also lived in another co-op called Laurel House for a while because was a fire at House of Commons. So I lived at Laurel for about 6 months. That's how things were done there. That votes were just taken by majority, which I thought was interesting, because I was used to living at House of Commons, where things are done by consensus. So, in summary, it seems like a good system to me. And that perhaps we want to do something similar, although we haven't really discussed it so far.

AG: McAllen, do you have thoughts about that?

MH: Well, I pretty much agree with Mike. It's--we're fortunate to be able to draw from many different co-op models. And they encourage people to do so, and they've published all their bylaws and their meeting procedures and whatnot. So I think we plan to just cobble something together based on what others have done. And there's a lot of good, good sources to choose from on that.

AG: And I was also wondering why you both decided that East Austin is the place where you want to have your co-op. So what were the decisions that went into that?

MH: Well I thought of it originally. Just because the vast majority of people that I knew from the co-ops in West Campus just ended up on the East Austin. So it was just a logical place to have an independent non-student co-op. And as I mentioned before, that's exactly what was going on in West Philly, which is so similar to East Austin. I just, I was really surprised that they weren't here already. So I saw that there was a need and a vacuum that needed to be filled.

AG: OK. And Mike, what attracts you to East Austin?

MG: Well I think it makes sense from the perspective of starting a new co-op, because there aren't any co-ops there right now. Or, actually, I'm not totally sure that's sure, and there are

some small houses that might not be semi-cooperative. But it generally wasn't well served by that sort of thing.

And then, well, after I moved here, I was trying to decide what exactly I wanted to do. For a while I was trying to decide whether I wanted to buy a house or buy a condo or live in a co-op. And I liked the idea of living in a co-op because I think it is a good way to be in a community. And I think that for the future that it will be important for people to learn skills. And I think that a co-op can be a good way of doing that. Like, perhaps, maybe there will be a garden, and then different people will learn about gardening from it and will be able to take that knowledge wherever they go. But anyway, I'm digressing.

So I was trying to decide what to do. And I decided that I wanted to try to live in a co-op. And I tried--I applied at several co-ops and didn't work out. Which probably led me to the conclusion that we need more co-ops. And basically I found out that McAllen was trying to start a co-op. And I thought it made sense to work with someone who was trying to start a co-op, because I really liked the idea of doing it. Because in part because it won't just meet my own needs, as well, it will meet a need in the community. I think, like I said, I think it's it is a logical place to start a co-op, partly because there really aren't any there, and it may also be more affordable than other places in Austin, which can be good when you're trying to create affordable housing for people.

AG: So, yeah, why do you think there aren't any co-ops in East Austin, Mike?

MG: I think part of it is that just that--I think part of it is that just no one has started one so far, and most of the co-ops are--in Austin anyway, are student co-ops in West Campus. There it, kind of, in some ways it's easy to start a co-op in West Campus. And those co-ops have been around for a while, and they have the zoning regulations that will allow it. So a lot of the co-ops are there. So the ones--there are just a few that aren't that were started. And, like there is Sasona, for instance, that's in South Austin. And that was started originally by people who were living in 21st St and were graduating. And College Houses requires that you be a student to live there during the school year, so even if they wanted to stay at 21st St, they wouldn't have been able to. But they wanted to still live in a co-op, so they were trying to decide what to do. So they ended up starting a co-op in that was in South Austin.

But I think it--I mean it's challenging because there aren't a lot of large houses that we might ideally want to get for a co-op. And I think that's true no matter where you are, unless perhaps you're in West Campus, but either way they tend to be accounted for. But I think it comes down to that no one thus far has really taken the initiative to try to get something going like what we're trying to start.

MH: You know, I was talking--I forget who told me this, but somebody who's been in the co-op community in Austin a while, and is in the know about its history. And they told me that there actually did use to be a co-op, an independent co-op on the Eastside. And also, an architect, a

really creative architect built this just phenomenal house, really unusual house on the Eastside. And it's an interesting setup, in that, like, it's essentially a co-op, even though it's not an official one. And it's just made up of about 20 renters or so. And they call it Treehouse. And it, and like they actually have wanted to turn it into a co-op for a while. But there's a roadblock because the owner of the property at one point was amenable to the idea of selling these people the property and letting them turn it into a co-op. But then, but then she kind of backed off and changed her mind. And do if it weren't for this kind of fickle landlord, they would have beaten us to it and they would have started a co-op. But right now, as far as we now, Mike and I are the ones most likely to set up one.

AG: Mike, you were saying that affordable housing is really important. So my question is, do you think that your--when you get your housing co-op started, do you think community members from East Austin will also live there or are you looking for a different--is it open to all, I guess?

MG: Yeah, that's actually something we wanted to talk about. But yeah. Well, we would like to have a diverse group of people living there, ideally. So that, I think, then becomes a question of who we reach out to and how to make that happen. I was talking with a--I was up in Massachusetts back in December because my family lives there and to visit friends. And there's other co-op there that just got started called Lucy Stone. And I was talking with some of them a bit when I was up there. And one of the things--and one of the things that they would do would be to reach out to different organizations. Like, there was--like, there might be groups that they volunteer with, or they might reach out to a homeless shelter, for instance, to see if they have any people who might be in a position to transition into housing, and so if they have a room open, then that might be one of the places to reach out.

But, I mean yeah, I think ideally we're not really planning on restricting ourselves to any particular demographic, and I think we're like to avoid doing that. Except that we want to find people who would be a good fit for the co-op, and who really want to live in the co-op. Although it's, again, something that we really haven't discussed in detail so far.

AG: Do you have anything to add to that?

MH: No.

AG: [laughs] Yeah, sorry, I know that this is in the planning stages, but that's why I think it's so interesting. So I guess that leads me to my next point, which is how are you guys finding--how are you starting, what are the process for starting to look for a co-op--like siting the house, and picking the house, getting all the permits and all that stuff.

MH: Well, I'll tell you what I can remember, and that is. Well, first of all, we need to find a source of funding to find a property. Because we want to lease, we want to buy a building. So we have to find a lender, or come up with the money ourselves. Now, do you want to know what we've actually done, or just the general steps?

AG: Whichever.

MH: Well, we found one lender along with a couple of additional prospective lenders. The cost of the kind of property that we want is a little bit higher than we anticipated so that's why we're seeking additional lenders. We're also thinking--we also want to--well we. Let's see. The one lender we have right now, has been in the co-op community now, and he required that we start a nonprofit corporation. Like as a condition for him lending to us. And then another option is for NASCO--North American Students for Cooperation--for them to finance us, or partially finance us. Because they're actually coming--they're likely to be in a position to buy a new property--or I'm sorry--there's NASCO, which is an umbrella organization, as well as an educational resource for co-ops, which within them, specifically an entity called NASCO Properties. We've been talking to them because they are likely to be in a position to want buy new property for co-ops, which is what they do. But one of their conditions is that we would join--that we merge with an existing nonprofit called Community Housing Expansion of Austin, which was started by Sasoma Co-op, which is the co-op that 21st St members started in South Austin 10 years ago.

So really right now we're shopping for property, trying to, trying to tie up all the loose ends with our funding. And yeah, there are a few different ways that we've been looking for funding. And we haven't gone too much in-depth about the real process of how we're going to operate once we get set up because the process of just finding a place and just getting established is kind of a handful. So that's where we are right now.

AG: And how, how has it been--have you even started working with the City yet, or are there--is there good resources with the City to set up a housing co-op?

MH: Not that I know of. But as far as working with the City--well, as far as I know, the only work we're going to do with the City is meeting their various housing codes.

AG: OK. And I'm almost finished with my questions--

MH: OK.

AG: --thank you so much. But I wanted to go back, way back to what you were talking about, Mike. You were saying that you really liked permaculture. I was wondering if you could define that and say how it will apply--if it will apply--to your housing co-op?

MG: It's essentially looking at patterns that exist in nature and applying them when designing human systems. Like it might--and it might apply to a garden or to a house to a community as a whole. Like you want to try to work with what--you want to try to work with what nature has and with the site that you have. And it was started by people in Australia were concerned about the effects that mining and civilization in general were having on their land. So they looked at what kinds of patterns were present in nature. For instance, if you have a garden, you probably not--like in a permaculture garden, for instance, you probably wouldn't just have rows of crops

one after the other. You would have a diversity of things, and they would be close together because that tends to happen in nature--that it doesn't leave any bare space. It packs things in close to each other. And you have things that are redundant. And if a function is needed it can be provided by more than one thing. There isn't just one type of food that people or animals can eat--that they can eat a lot of different things, so that provides you with some resiliency. So that if a blight takes out one species, then there will be other species it can rely on.

And that can also apply when people are looking at their lives in a similar way. Like if you just have one source of income, then you're really reliant on it. So if you lose your job, then that can negatively affect you. But if you have multiple small sources of income, then maybe you wouldn't be as affected in the same way if something like that happens.

And it's again something we haven't really discussed in detail, the extent to which it will apply, if we start a co-op, although we've both taken a course--a permaculture design course, I mean. It's something I'm interested in trying to incorporate anyway. And if we end up remodeling a building, then I think we'd want to take into account the orientation of the building and try to minimize the amount of energy it would be required to heat and cool it.

And maybe if we have an herb spiral--well, that's kind of a cliché in permaculture, but if we have something like that, we might have it right near the building. So that if people are cooking they can just reach out and pick something out from it. Since that's another principle of it, that you have different zones. And you put things that you'll access frequently so that they are close to you, so you don't have to spend a lot of time moving around and getting from one place to the other. And the places that you access less frequently, you might, maybe you can have them further away. And I think that it's a discussion that we need to have anyway, or that would be worth having once we find--especially once we find a property and since we start making decisions to what extent we might be able to apply it to what we're doing.

AG: OK. And I just have one last question. I was--I'm really interested in the Austin Cooperative Think Tank, and it's beginning last year. Have you--You attended those meetings, right, at least the retreat?

MG: I've been to a few meetings, mostly more recently.

AG: Can you describe what the Think Tank is?

MG: It's a group of people who are trying to promote the cooperative economy in Austin. And they're--it's cross-sector, so there are people from housing co-ops, there are people from worker-owned co-ops, there are people from member-owned co-ops. And we look for ways to help each other and promote each other. And there are different projects that we're doing. There's a co-op directory that some people are working on to help making it easier for people to find co-ops that might do different things. And there's one project that I've been somewhat involved in to help people to find mentors. Basically to match people who are in the process of starting a co-op with

a mentor who has a bit more experience and might be able to give them some advice. But that's a project that came out of it, anyway.

And sometimes we might just have informal social gatherings. Like there was one a few weeks ago that allowed people to informally network with each other. And it actually affected us in a way. Like, there's a co-op that I found out through by going to that, called Gaia Host, which is this worker-owned co-op that hosts websites. So, we have a website called austincollectivehousing.org for our co-op. And I decided why not use Gaia Host, since we're a co-op, and it would be good to support another co-op. So. Because I met them, now they're hosting our website.

AG: And McAllen, have you been to any of those meetings?

MH: Yeah, I've been to two. The first two that they had last summer. And I don't attend the meetings currently because I've already got a lot on my plate. But I am participating in one of the projects that, that we created. Like, during the first meeting, we broke up into groups that were assigned to collaborate. They were asked to collaborate amongst themselves to create different projects that help the Austin co-op community in a variety of ways. One is to publicize information nationally about the co-op scene. Another that I remember is kind of strengthen ties and network among existing Austin co-ops. And many of the projects were designed to help with the creation of new co-ops in various ways. Mike and I were involved in one or more of those projects as I remember.

And my friend Matt Scheer, who I mentioned earlier, who's been in the co-op community, who we used to live with at House of Commons. He spearheaded a co-op mentorship project, which was designed to partner the members of the group with 2 different people: a co-op mentor, someone who's been around the block and has been active in the co-op community, to teach someone like Mike and I who are new and trying to start a new co-op--teach us skills to do that. And another person we were assigned to was a peer mentor. Someone who's also start something. And so I've been involved with that. I haven't met with my mentor very often lately, but I have met with me--or, yeah my mentor. But I have met with my peer mentor a lot. His name is Pablo. I don't remember his last name. But he, he works for KOOP Radio--I can't remember the specific radio address or whatever. But he works for them, and he's trying to turn that company into a more--he's trying to to help them run more equally and cooperatively, if that makes sense. And yeah, generally speaking, the Austin Cooperative Think Tank exists to kind of galvanize and organize the co-op communities in Austin.

AG: Great, OK, well that's all *my* questions that I have. But do either of you want to speak to something you feel that we haven't covered sufficiently, or you want to say something we haven't talked about at all. Mike, do you want to say anything?

MG: Let's see. I can't remember, I can't remember if I said this before. But in part, I mean, I feel like in the future there are going to be a lot of changes that are--that will affect our society as

things like fossil fuels and other resources become scarce. And so I think it's--I think it will require us to live differently. And part of that would be to, that there will likely be skills that we'll need to learn. That's part of what attracts me to starting a co-op, anyway. That I feel like it can be a good way for people to potentially learn things and for knowledge to be passed on. And in some way, it's. Sorry, I was about to just ramble away incoherently.

AG: [laughs] Oh, no, not at all. Did you want to finish your sentence?

MG: Uh. If I was going to say something I can't remember it.

AG: OK, well thank you very much, Mike. Did you want to say anything, McAllen?

MH: Yeah, being involved in the co-op community in Austin and also starting our own co-op is really exciting to me. Because it's really what I see as an extraordinary opportunity to really be innovative and create something really new. And you know, be a part of people who are creating something new. And that the need that these new things address is just kind of a slow and steady decline of American--of American community life. And I just know that people used to be civically engaged, and just more socially engaged. People generally spent more time together and weren't as lonely, weren't as isolated. And that while, while independence, personal independence is really a good thing, I think people can become too independent. And you lose out on really key resources. Socially, economically, and just a variety of different resources become lost when a community becomes too isolated--when members of a community become too isolated. And so helping to start a co-op is really, like I said, a new and innovative way to help, to kind of reknit that social fabric.

AG: Well great, thank you so much! This was a real pleasure.

[END]