

**MATT ROBINSON**  
**R.U.B.A.R.B. - New Orleans, Louisiana**

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Location: Flora Gallery and Coffee Shop, New Orleans, Louisiana

Interviewer: Anne Gessler

Transcription: Anne Gessler

Length: 01:28:27

Project: The Cooperative Oral History Project

Anne Gessler: My name is Anne Gessler. This is the Cooperative Oral History Project. Today is June 5, 2012. And we're sitting at Flora's [Flora Gallery and Coffee Shop] on 2602 Royal St. in New Orleans. And I'm speaking with--

Matt Robinson: My name is Matt Robinson. I'm an independent contractor and volunteer at R.U.B.A.R.B. [Rusted Up Beyond All Recognition Bikes].

AG: And thank you so much for talking to me today. I'm really excited, and I'm really excited to get to have a conversation with you. And just to note, we're sitting under a--is it the community radio station? Do you know which--

MR: WWOZ.

AG: WWOZ. OK, so just to get started, maybe you could talk a little bit about what it was like growing up in Pensacola, Florida?

MR: I grew up in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. And it was just a small, kind of military town, close to the beach. Not really, I didn't get into, wasn't involved in any kind of community type project or anything like that when I was, when I was growing up. So yeah, I left there and went to college. And go back to visit from time to time.

AG: And where did you go to college?

MR: Florida State for undergraduate and Duke for graduate. And I was living in North Carolina before I moved to New Orleans.

AG: And can you describe what, what it was like going to school at Duke for--you said you were doing an oral history kind of project?

MR: Um, what it was like at Duke?

AG: Yeah.

MR: It was, it was fine. I mean I wasn't really a traditional student, and I sort of developed my own curriculum. So I didn't really interact with the university all that much, outside of my professors and a couple of advisors. It was mostly my own independent work, which was fine. And I lived in Chapel Hill, did all my research in and around Chapel Hill, so.

AG: And were you involved in any community projects in Chapel Hill?

Yeah. There was a bookstore that I worked at, a sort of radical, you know, bookstore, called Internationalist. And I worked there, I was volunteered--I volunteered there for a long time, and worked there for a little while. As a manager. And while I was involved in the bookstore I found

out about a lot of other things, little projects that I got involved with. Not all of them were, you know, cooperatives or collectives. But there was a cooperative house that came out, sort of out of the bookstore. People involved with the bookstore decided to pool their resources to find some way to make some kind of sustainable cooperative, cooperatively structured house or home. And they were really lucky, they found this place. It's still going, I'm not sure how, how cooperatively organized it is at this point. I think one thing that makes cooperatives work is there's a one, two, three, four, like there's a core of people who sort of oversee it and sort of have shouldered the burden of making sure that it's, you know, that it's staying in line with its ideals, and you know, is seriously run and maintained as a cooperative or collective. I don't know what that word is that you want to use. But I don't think that always is the case, and I think that sometimes, particularly for organizations that have their own legs and have their own sort of like, you know, institutional presence, that it's really easy for those organizations to sort of lose track of their initial impulse of organizing, especially when the core people who organized it are gone.

And I think Chapel Hill, in the instance of the co-op house in Carrboro, it was actually in this little town next door called Carrboro, once the original four or five people who helped organize it, once they were out of the picture, you know, the next generation was sort of in tune with the same kind of goals, but not quite so heartfelt, I guess. And by the second or third generation, you know, of folks coming and going, I think it just kind of, for a while, became just kind of an off-campus dorm for radical or you know, sort of anarchist-minded kids without necessarily understanding, you know, and taking the responsibility for it being a cooperative. It was just a cheap rent, you know? And there was like little things you could put around in the garden, or whatever, but there wasn't this--my understanding, having been gone for a while and talking to people who've, you know, come and gone from there [coughs]. Excuse me. Is that it didn't necessarily maintain consistently what the goal was to begin with.

AG: And so how would you describe that goal, other than being a sustainable community? What else did it aspire to do?

MR: Collective decision making, consensus-based decision making, allowing space for different projects. Like, you know, there was always a strong impulse to have a garden, but then there was also folks who wanted make a big, you know, like a fire pit or make a little, a workshop or convert space into something like a chicken coop. Or just, all these kind of different things. So that was one of the good things about it, when it worked well, is that there was lots of room for people to--you know, there was like physical room, acreage, for people to work on their own things. I'm not sure if that generally, if that made any kind of like, collective impulse. But it definitely had, I mean there were lots of events that were held at the co-op house that were like, what do they call them? Teach-ins, or not teach-ins but, skill-shares. A yearly skill-share thing, which was really cool. And that was sort of cooperatively organized. And all these folks from up and down, you know, the East Coast would come down and do like, glassblowing workshops or herbal workshops, whatever. And that was a pretty good example of what could be done with a space like that, that's set up like that, that accommodates for all these people to come in and do a bunch of different things. And you know, it was sort of like free, voluntary, no money, you

know, everybody really talked about the impulses is to teach and to learn, you know, in the environment of a tolerant kind of place. Without like a minimal hierarchy and like, I guess that's as far as I can go. I would say accountability issues, but that's really a tricky one to get into.

AG: And did you say that you lived there or you just had friends--

MR: Yes.

AG: OK.

MR: I lived there for two years. After the original crew had moved out and other folks moved in. And it still worked pretty well. You know, projects were done kind of cooperatively. Yeah, it worked alright. There was tension, but, we always had house meetings stuff and things would generally end up worked out for the most part. So it worked alright.

AG: And so, you came to New Orleans in 2008?

MR: 2005.

AG: 2005. OK. Can you talk about how you decided to move from Chapel Hill then to New Orleans?

MR: I had wanted to live in new Orleans for a long time. And when Katrina struck, I was definitely aware of it, watching the news. And I decided I wanted to come down and help out as much as I could. And when I got here I wanted to stay. It was an easy decision. I was kind of like, I was kind of slightly disingenuous, you know, when I realized New Orleans had taken a really severe blow, I pretty much decided that I was going to come down here to stay. But I may have like, "Oh, I'm just going to come down for a couple weeks," and I came down for like three or four weeks, and I came back, and I went back, went back and forth two or three times before I finally, like, committed to the people that I knew. Like, "I'm going, I'm leaving." But I kind of knew from the very beginning. I was like, once I knew I was realized I going down there, I didn't have any room in my mind to think about going back to Chapel Hill.

AG: And so what exactly were you doing there, and when exactly did you move, what part 2005?

MR: What was I doing in North Carolina?

AG: Oh, no, sorry. What were you doing in New Orleans? You said you were volunteering; what were you doing?

MR: In middle of October, me and some friends of mine had gotten together enough materials and supplies and stuff. We had done, you know, fundraisers and food drives and all this kind of

stuff, outreach. And we came down in the middle of October, started working with Common Ground on the other side of the River [Mississippi River], in Algiers. And within about a week, started working, started a little distribution point, not terribly far from here, on Louisa and Robertson. We were staying in a guy named Malik Rahim's yard, and he just kept getting deliveries of supplies, and there was so much stuff we kept getting. And people were, you know, telling us they could bring us more, but it was just Malik's backyard. So we tried to find some other places where we could set up distribution. And that was the first one that we did on this side of the river. And I was really involved with that. Like, setting up on the inside, organizing all the stuff that was given to us, like keeping it running, keeping people around from 7am to whenever the sun set. And that was definitely, well, that was collective when it came down to me and the few people who were at the place working all the time. But that introduces Brandon Darby as well, because he was overseeing the whole thing. So it wasn't really a collective when he was around. It was an autocracy when he was around. But when he was gone, we all just pretty much went about our business and did what needed to be done.

AG: So can you describe Common Ground's organizational structure? I know at the beginning it was organized differently than at the end, with so many volunteers coming.

MR: What I remember of it was just a lot of people coming together and wanting to do things, with wildly variable understandings of things like accountability and collective decision-making. And I read Scott Crow's book, I don't know if you've seen it--it's *Black--Windmills and Black Flags*, and he talks about this--

AG: I think it's *Black--*

MR: *Black Flags and Windmills* [laughs]. He talks about the difference between how Malik saw the word "collective" and how he saw the word "collective." So, any discussion of Common Ground is kind of, like, there's always going to be two sides, just from that, just from the very beginning. When like, us "Well, we'll form a collective." And people of the current, like, twenty-something political generation understand a "collective" to mean a group of people acting with equal weight, and equal power, and equal voice. But apparently, the Panthers, the Black Panthers in the '60's, a "collective" meant a group of people that was outside of the social systems, you know, beyond it, with a very sturdy chain of command. You know, everybody works for the collective good, and the collective good is like, organized almost along hierarchical principles. So that was kind of a fundamental misunderstanding, when Malik Rahim said, "We have a collective," and everybody felt empowered to be like, "We are all equal," what he was really saying was, "We have a collective, and I am at the top, and you are collectively, you know, granting me your power--or the power to act on your behalf." So that was never, never understood. I didn't understand it until Scott Crow laid it out in that book.

I always wondered, like, "Why are people saying this is a collective?" You know? There was no dialogue about what exactly that meant. And when there was a dialogue like that among people who were not in the power structure, then the power structure had no reason to take it seriously.

And that, yeah, it was--despite the fact that everybody, almost everybody who was involved in the effort who came to town to volunteer, was trying to work on this, like, lateral line where everybody, you know, no one's more--people have more accountability because they take on more responsibility, but no one is, like, necessarily of any less worth. Which is also kind of a weird situation, and we don't need to get into that right now.

Whereas people would just like materialize, like show up, and you don't know who they are. And they start doing these outrageous things. And you know, are they, are they you know, sent from some law enforcement agency, like, you know? Are they listening in on what we're doing, or are they trying to manipulate us into doing something? So I mean there's pitfalls in the whole free, you know, laterally organized, "we take everybody at their word kind of thing." That's a serious pitfall for an organization like Common Ground is just completely ignored, I felt.

And I thought also the fact there was an authority structure, you know, where it was just a uncomfortably competing paradigms of ideology. You know, like, there were instances of, allegations of sexual assault, or you know, inappropriate sexual behaviors. And the collective was just steamed about it, like, the collective as I saw it, everyone was just pissed off and wanted something done about it. The collective as Malik saw it, was listening to the complaint and talking to the male perpetrator. And kind of, not even a slap on the wrist, but like, you know, deciding, "Well, you need to stay away from her," or something like that. Some tepid, completely inexcusable, you know, dereliction of responsibility for something that happened to a person who came and thought that they were protected by--or at least not going to be assaulted while they're down here trying to help with your organization. It was, it was a very unfortunate thing to watch how people responded to the whole thing. Ugh. Yeah, this whole organization lacked a lot of strength. Because, it was so autocratic in a lot of ways. Like Brandon Darby and Malik and a handful of other people, what they said was the rule. And the fact that they were mostly all male. In fact the real power structure was completely male.

I don't know. The best thing about Common Ground was the direct service that people gave, and that was more of the collective thing, like the people who set up community gardens and just like organized people's labor and got something done. People who organized the distribution points or the gutting teams and all that kind of stuff. The authority aspect sort of had to be there, because if we had 500 people coming in every week, and there's like ten people who have been there for a month or two months or three months and they know what's going on, you have to defer to them. Because they know what's going on. But at the same time, you know, they didn't, they're not getting paid, it's all volunteer, you know? So you're all on the same level at some point. But when you're gutting houses, like, you should listen to this guy, because he's done this before. And if you do, take this out wrong, you're going to get hit in the face with you know, a wall of moldy, you know, dry--or sheet rock, you know? Malike didn't gut houses, though [coughs].

AG: I was reading some materials on Common Ground, and people were saying, with so many different volunteers having a wide variety--a wide spectrum of understanding about what a

collective was, and like you were saying, it was hard to, like, kind of create a culture within the organization. How did people, how did people train volunteers? And how did people understand what the goal of the organization was?

MR: How did people explain what the goal of the organization was. I'm not sure there was much of that. Well, there was--there were attempts to compel volunteers to take, to work for four of the five days they would be in town. And one day they would have a day off and they would go through an anti-racism training. Which I'm sure was beneficial for a lot of people, who might never have seen it before, or had it before. But people didn't necessarily want to come to New Orleans to get indoctrinated, no matter what the underlying cause was. They came because they wanted to help gut houses, or they came down because they heard that they could get three free meals every day and you could just sit around and play guitar and you know, drink 40s on someone's porch, you know, an abandoned house. There was lots of that--lots of those types came along too. And that the paralysis of any collective, like, generally, like, responsible collective, made it so that every kind of person came down here.

It's shameful to think how many--that there were--seeing in my mind's eye right now, there's a number of people who came down and just fed off the organization. Because there was no accountability. Because, you know, Malik's in charge, and if the guy successfully appeals to Malik, then Malik's going to say, "Well, just keep him around. He'll find something to do." Malik doesn't know this person, you know? The guy just came to him and gave him a hard luck story, or whatever. The rest of the collective at the volunteer site want to kick him out because he keeps harassing people. That was really kind of a significant pain in the ass, that made me just want to, like, close my eyes, and "Alright, I'm just going to do this because this has to be done. I'm going to go help this person; try to set this thing up; I'm going to go deliver this. I'm going to do whatever." Just go day to day doing things, not worrying too much about these other things. But it just got so taxing.

There was a time when we were responding to a, to a sexual assault allegation. And, there had been several instances, reported instances of volunteers being sexually assaulted while they were here. And some reported it, some did not. Some reported it after they left, to friends or whatever. So word got back. So everyone, well, everyone in what I called the collective, was very upset about it. And it was getting out on the internet. Someone had posted something on the internet, saying, like, "Common Ground's not a great place. Be careful if you're a woman. Like, it's a great--things are going on in New Orleans. But be careful." Like, this happened at Common Ground, that happened at Common Ground. So we felt we had to formulate a response to that. And so we did. You know, just sort of said, like, "Yes, we know about several incidences that have happened," and, you know, trying to take some kind of accountability for it. And we were going to post it online. Like, "Here is our response. Yeah. We're not going to bullshit you."

And the collective on the other side of the river decided that's not what they wanted to do. And it was a horrible meeting. At one point, one of the guys from across--A guy named Don Paul

stood up and just absolutely forbade anyone from putting that online. Just said, “No. That will not go up. Like, Malik has not approved it. It will not go up. We will not do this.” And everybody, the whole room was--Well the upshot was, within a week, at least half, probably three-quarters of the people who were in that room, were out of New Orleans. They *left*. “Forget this.” You know? “I knew that girl who got attacked by that guy. And you’re telling me I can’t say something about it? You’re telling me I have to be silent about this?” “I’ve been, like--” this is like the peripatetic sort of thought going around--“I’ve been working at this place for months, and I’ve seen you, guy-who-just-stood-up-and-said-we-cannot-do-this, I’ve seen you twice. And I’ve been over here, like, busting ass, gutting houses, making sure the food is cooked, making sure there’s *enough* food for 500 volunteers and another 50 that showed up unexpectedly. And you come over here--Like, we’re taking this kind of shit seriously, because this happened right on our watch. And *you*, from this power structure is going to come over and tell us what’s up.” People *left*.

And that was probably the point at which Common Ground’s frail backbone *snapped*. It’s still around. In some way relevant, I’m sure. I don’t know how. They’re paired up with some construction company. They do some work in yards, I guess. Maybe some political organizing, maybe. Sort of a cautionary tale.

AG: Yeah, it seems like a lot of people had this utopian ideal of coming to New Orleans and changing--like, transforming the society because there’s an opportunity.

MR: Um-hm.

AG: Did you get that sense that a lot of people felt like that, and I guess kind contrasting with the reality of the situation?

MR: Yeah, a lot of people came down here because it was an opportunity to do something, I mean, to help New Orleans, because it’s a great city. But to further some kind of agenda. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, you know? If your agenda is coming down here and you know, starting a recycling program or something. I mean, sure there’s some corrupt downside you can find. And *promise* you someone in City Hall has already got a file cabinet full of ways to screw some money out of any recycling program. I’m sure the corruption runs so deep that they’re ready for any like--You know, it’s like the White House is ready for war against whatever country. Because they have staffs of people who are like, “OK, what if we had to go to war against, I don’t know, say, Kenya?” Well, “OK, we have this folder right here. This was drawn up two years ago in case we have to go to war with Kenya, and this is a strategic whatever, blah blah blah.” I can just imagine that they have the same sort of thing at City Hall. Like, preemptively, like, “How do we--Alright, if there’s a streetcar that runs down St. Claude Avenue, how can I make money off of this, and how can my friends make money off of this?” “Well, we figured that out a few years ago; let me tell you what to do.” You know? So that being said, I don’t know where I was going with that.



AG: You were talking about recycling [laughs].

MR: Oh. Oh yeah, if people were to come down and just be single-minded about doing recycling--that's an agenda. And that's good, it works out OK. Even with the old guy with his, you know, in his office with a file cabinet full of corruption and stuff. It works out OK. If people came down strictly becoming and gut houses--once they found out people were gutting houses, and that all these thousands of houses had been destroyed by flood waters. And it would take thousands of dollars each house to gut them out. And all these people showed up, and started clearing out these houses, cleaning up these houses. You know, it's, I don't know what kind of agenda that could be, other than to save people's homes.

But some people were less neutral in their ideologies when they got here. And there were definitely people who wanted to transform a lot of things about New Orleans. Understandably. It was kind of, not a clean slate, but the chessboard was empty, you know? Or so it seemed. So it seemed like anything was possible. You just take a piece of land, start growing stuff on it, and boom! You have a community garden. Irrespective of who owns the property, where they are, what are they going to do with it, what the condition of the property is, and all that. There was sort of this impulse to sort of like roguishly come in and solve things, like a super hero.

And it's funny that that comes to mind, because there was a crew of folks who came around December, superheroes. They all had on, like, you know, capes and costumes. They rode down from some place, probably Seattle or something. They rode bikes across country, dressed as superheroes. And they came down, and they were the superheroes. And they fixed things, and they built things, and they worked on things. And then they all took off, in a superhero caravan. It was, it was kind of ridiculous and amazing [laughs]. I see this guy, in a red suit, and he's, like, nobly holding up a pillow while someone's tacking something on in the top. And he's like a superhero in the wind [laughs].

AG: So, what other organizations did you encounter? What other organizations were around trying to rebuild? And did you have close affiliations with any?

MR: Yeah there were tons of groups. There were a lot of religious groups. The influx of people from all over the country, and really from all over the world, was kind of amazing. People would show up in caravans of like 20 or 50 people from, you know, Stanford, "This is our Spring Break." You know? Or, "We're in business school," or "We're in law school." Or "This is our break; we're coming down here, and we're going to, like, in 90 degree heat, put on a Tyvek suit and, like, rip out the insides of a house." [hammering] There was tons of people organized through churches doing that, through Common Ground doing that, through other organizations. Lots of organizations hosted volunteers when they came down here. People worked in St. Bernard Parish only, you know? Or wherever. Who knows how many thousands of people came down. Just for Common Ground, just within the six months, probably like 5,000 people had come down. For a few days at a time. And, we were just one of a bunch--we were probably one

of the more effective organizations in the first six months, Common Ground was. Because there was nothing going on.

People were like actively--different agencies were actively intervening against getting distribution of supplies and food and whatnot. Like the Red Cross was just impotent. And FEMA was an armed camp. So, and then there was just fear everywhere, like just so afraid of violence, of whatever in the city. But we weren't afraid. We weren't afraid at all. But then we weren't here with some official mandate. We came down because we wanted to come down. So there were all these Baptists who came down; so there were all these Methodists, all these Lutherans. All these people from all over the place. Things like, you know, sorority girls decided to come down, like 100 of them come down and do what they can do. Yeah, there were tons of organizations that just sort of appeared in the first few months, bringing people and supplies and relief down here. I didn't work--I only worked for Common Ground until R.U.B.A.R.B. started up.

AG: And then when did you first hear about R.U.B.A.R.B.? And how--how did you hear about it?

MR: Well, it came--it evolved from a bike shop that was behind St. Mary's, this volunteer site, the biggest one that we had in the Ninth Ward. The church--there was a church and a school next door to it and this shed in the back parking lot. And the shed hadn't been used, so we got permission from the church to store some bikes in there or whatever. And then it sort of grew into the volunteers would go over there and fix their bikes. And then it sort of started becoming its own thing, where folks were there, and if you needed to fix a bike, it was like an open shop kind of thing. And then kids started coming around. And I didn't go there too often when it first started up, because I was doing other things, mostly at the school--like volunteer-oriented stuff. But then Common Ground fell into unfavorable status with the pastor, the priest of the church. Because they had been there for over a year, yeah? Yeah, I think at the first year anniversary they were officially kicked out. They were going to have some big event in August of 2006, and the priest just decided that he didn't want them there. So he evicted them. But he didn't evict the bike shop. Because by that time a bunch of neighborhood kids had been coming around, and it sort of had its own separate type entity from Common Ground, although it was under Common Ground's watch that it started happening.

And then, I guess that's when Liz Lichtman really took over. And she was pretty much the, like I mentioned before, like a collective or any type of effort needs one person to take sort of the reigns of it. And Liz was that person. A bunch of people helped her out, like, countless numbers of people helped. But mostly Liz and Lani, Lani Bemak helped out a lot. She was, like, very involved in it. But a lot of people kept it going. Because Liz is very personable, and everybody liked the idea of working on bikes--well not everybody [laughs]. Some people were like, "I like working on bikes, but I can't stand kids." You know, so some folks didn't come around that much anymore.

But a lot of folks kept coming--I started coming around regularly more or less on Saturdays. And probably, in 2007 for a bit, I would go there pretty regular to help out, work on my bike, but mostly to help out. And then I left town for a few months, and when I came back in 2008, they needed someone who could work on Wednesdays, so I just started being like the Wednesday person, along with some other folks who would show up and help out. And 2008, yeah. We were there for two or three more years, and then the church asked us politely to leave. So we found a new place. We were closed for a year. And we found this new place. And we've been open--this July will be the first year, the first full year in the new place.

AG: And that used to be a bar, right?

MR: The Jewel Box [laughs]. We're told it used to be called the Jewel Box. Most people fondly remember it, but a couple people I talked to say they don't ever want to see a bar there again.

AG: Why is that?

MR: I guess because bars aren't the best place to have a nice homelike residential neighborhood. But I don't know, that's just an assumption.

AG: So yeah, can you describe the neighborhood that the bike shop is located in?

MR: It's in the Ninth Ward, up near Florida Avenue. So it's kind of deep in the neighborhood. It is at least 99% African American in that section. Lots of kids, lots of families. Probably about a fourth of the houses in like probably a five square block radius around R.U.B.A.R.B., probably a fourth of the houses are unoccupied or derelict.

AG: Because of the hurricane [Hurricane Katrina]?

MR: Yeah, mostly because of the hurricane. And because I mean, there have been properties that have been neglected for a long time. And so there's lots of properties, like, obviously, like lots of houses that Katrina probably knocked around a bit, but they've been falling apart for a long time. Sort of lower economic status kind of neighborhood. Very, like, working class. Lot of kids. Historically underserved. The roads are in bad condition like there are in a lot of places. But there's been some investment in the neighborhood, too--[Matt Robinson's friend greets him: "How are you doing, Matt?" "Alright, how are you, Q.? That's alright."] There's been some revitalization, sort of, in the area, lately. They've repaved some streets. And there are some things going on. It's a pretty good neighborhood. And, yeah it's alright.

AG: And you said a lot of kids go to the open shop and community programs? Who else goes?

MR: Lot of adults from the neighborhood. Because a lot of people rely on their bikes. So they'll come by and they'll work on their bike, fill up their tire. Just fix things, you know. We're

sort of--the volunteers who are there are definitely called upon to help in a lot of different circumstances. And we're definitely willing to help, you know. But kind of the organizing thing, we want to help you learn how to work on your bike. So people will sometimes come in and say, "Hey, how much would you charge to do this for me." And I'm like, "Well, I'm not going to charge you anything, but I'm not going to do it for you. I'm going to like, I'll do it with you, you know, I'll show you blah blah bah." And that usually works OK.

Yeah. Kids. Mostly on Wednesday, actually, lately it's been a lot of sort of older folks, like 15 and up. And they just kind of work on their bikes, you know, it's just totally chill. I like younger kids coming around, but it's so hard to keep them focused on anything, you know? But even they can come and you know, work on their bike, and they know what to do. They've been there, there's just a roster of kids who have just been coming for years. And you, they've learned how to work on their bikes. They don't always--they come in--sometimes it's more like play around and you know, see what's going on. They don't necessarily want to work on any bikes or anything, but they know what they're doing.

AG: So can you describe a typical shift for you?

MR: Uh, come in at 3, open the door. Turn on the radio; turn on the lights. Someone will come in, looking to fill a flat tire. Someone else will come in, and they're wanting to swap a seat. Or something like that. And then, probably about an hour and a half later is when the school buses start riding by. And then the kids come in with their little backpacks. And you know, try to shoo them on home because you know they're going to be in trouble if they come to the shop first without going home first and check in with their mom. It's kind of sad to see someone's mom come in and be like, "Get out of this damn bike shop! I told you to go right home," you know? It's kind of sad. It's funny. But, yeah, so kids start coming in. They either play some games in part of the shop or work on their bikes, or generally need attention, somehow.

Some older kids will come in, probably, and they'll set up, like sprawl out. But they--there's this group of kids who come in every Wednesday. And it's just, it's a joy to see them come in, you know? They're like 15, 17, somewhere in there. And they're *serious* about working on their bikes, man. They are taking some pride in their bikes. They'll set them up and they're working on them. And like, you know, we taught them how to true wheels. So they're always truing their wheels, they're always making their bikes better and better. That's super cool. I used to think that working with the youngest kids was the most fun, but it's hard to explain certain things to kids and have them, like, catch on. But, these guys are just right at that point. Where if they need to know something and you can teach them that, they will figure it out quick. They just need you to push them in the right direction. So that's pretty cool.

And then comes 6:30, and I'm like, "Oh, we're going to close in a half an hour," you know? "Put your stuff away," blah blah blah. And maybe if there's like one of the little kids there, they'll be like, "I'm going to help you sweep," you know? And they'll, like, sweep the dirt around in like various places and push it all over the place. And then close up shop. Wave

goodbye to everybody. And then someone comes in the last 5 minutes, “Hey I need to do da-da-da-da-da.” “Oh, come up on Saturday, man, we’re going to be opening up on Saturday; we’re closed now.” Never fails; someone always tries to come in at the very end. “I just need to do this.” And I just say no. Unless it’s to pump up the tire, I say no. Because you know, they’ll say, “Oh, all I need to do is tighten this,” and they’ll get in there and tighten this. “OK, I need to get a new pedal.” No no no. And, “Come on man, I need a new pedal, look this pedal is all janky, blah blah blah blah.” No, man. Come back on Saturday. We’ll be open then.

AG: And so, what’s the training process like for someone, if someone wants to actually be a volunteer in the shop? How do they, how do they start that process?

MR: It’s really informal. All you really have to do is just show up and start working. There’s no real training to it. If you know how to work on bikes, then you’re, you know, you’re better off. You’re really an asset. If you like working with kids, that’s good too. If you like working with, you know, playing games or doing art projects or whatever with kids, that’s cool. Because there’s lots of kids that come in, and their older brother’s working on something. But they’re too young to do anything.

[Pause: Matt Robinson sees one of his friends. “Hey man.” “Alright.” “Good to see you.” “Alright.” “You’re doing an interview?” “Yeah.” “Alright.” “I’ll just be inside.” Alright.]

What was I saying? I don’t know.

AG: You’re just talking about the volunteer process.

MR: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah, like I said, it’s informal. And it’s kind of just, the real process is if you’re able and willing to show up at the same time week after week, the training comes before you come to R.U.B.A.R.B. Like, if you’re serious about it, we’re not going to--we can’t train you, because we’re not here to train anybody, except kids, you know, teach how to work on their bikes or something like that. But the real thing is that you just have to commit to it. That’s the only criterion. You know? Train you like, “this is the key,” and you know, “open these windows.” And “this is the toilet.” And, I don’t know what other training there could be, you know?

AG: I know for some bike co-ops and community bike shops there’s, you have to volunteer so many hours before you’re considered like a member of the collective. Is there any kind of similar process in R.U.B.A.R.B.?

MR: Not really. It’s really loosely structured. We’ll have meetings once in a while. And it’s basically me, Callie, Milissa, Caleb when he’s around, John Bird when he’s around. He’s not been around. Liz is out of town. It’s like, a half a dozen people at most. We sort of sit around and everybody--the first thing is, like, what do we need to talk about? Everybody goes through: and like, OK, we need to talk about tools; we need to talk about, you know, Shaquille and

Richard were fighting in the shop the other day. We need to talk about so-and-so. We need to talk about this and that. And just go through and discuss it, talk about it, come to some decision if we have to. And that's it. The notes are emailed out.

AG: And is it pure consensus? Or, how do you decide to do something? Do you vote, or what do you do?

MR: I'm not sure we've had to--well, we sort of just come to an agreement through discussion. And someone, like, we had this Earn-A-Bike Program. And kids could come in and sign up to do this program. And the way we first had it structured, was like, a four step process. You fix a flat tire, you rebuild a wheel, and then you pick your bike frame, and you know, fix up your own bike--we have all these bike frames. So, you get it for free, but you have to work on it, you know, go through these steps to learn how to work on a bike. And that sort of worked for a while, and then we discontinued it because it was increasingly obvious that it was just too chaotic. For people to come in on, you know, Saturday they would start their Earn A Bike thing. And they'd come in on Wednesday and ask to work on their bike. And they go back to try to get their bike, but they'd actually pull up someone else's bike and start working on it instead, because they wanted it and whatever. Just too many little problems like that.

So we said, we'll just rethink the whole thing. So, a few months ago we talked about it, you know, what's a better way to do it. I didn't really have any ideas but someone had the idea of having a small, like, 8 people--you know, 8 kids at a time, this like, clinic thing, Like you come in at certain hours and you work on, do these things and learn how to work on a bike. And that didn't really work all that well. For the kids that started off, I'm not sure how many actually finished. I think a few. But it didn't go as well as we hoped it might. So now we're sort of rethinking how to do it. Because we still have all these bikes [tape paused].

Yeah, so decision making is just sort of, we don't really vote on anything, we just sort of talk about until everybody's like, "OK yeah, we'll try this, whatever." Different people have different ways of doing things, though. Sometimes it is like, you know, we have to talk about something, and there's a disagreement. But it's so low key, I mean, there's nothing really shattering about it. So, if a mistake is made, whatever, it's not fatal. Luckily enough. We've been very lucky.

Like, we have a lot of community support. So, like, when we got kicked out of St. Mary's, when they asked us to leave from behind the church, we tried to find--We took months trying to find another place. We thought we found one place, and before we got, like, legally signed on and like documents signed and everything, we put some work into it. And the people decided, "Well, we're actually going to do something with it. So thank you very much for all your work." Like, "thank you for cleaning up the Hurricane Katrina debris that's been sitting there for 4 1/2 years. Thanks for repainting the walls and removing all the--making a clean structure. And yeah, we didn't really sign anything, so we're going to take this back. And you know, thank you very much for your efforts, but goodbye." And that sucked.

But the next place we got was the one we're in now. And that was signed, and, like, the guy who owns the place genuinely supports what we're doing. And so we had this sort of, there were some moments of decision taken along that whole change of events where some people felt a certain way about proceeding and other people did not. But, Liz, again, sort of undertook the burden of figuring this thing out, and she found the place. And she had connections in the neighborhood and eventually those payed off. So, and then--I mean, you couldn't have voted. That would have, that whole process when we found a place, would not have been all that well served if you have a bunch of people gathered in a room and saying, "Well, yes, do we do this or not?" Liz had the standing to do that, as far as I was concerned. You know? And no one else felt like it was a bad idea. And it turned out to be a really good idea. But I'm not--I wasn't involved in any kind of consensus process regarding that place. A decision had to be made. And, she made a responsible decision. It was good.

AG: So what's your relationship like with the City? Do you have one?

MR: I really like living here. And I think the City has responded well to me. I've been very fortunate in a lot of ways since I came here. And I just, I really love it here. I can tolerate the heat much better than I could tolerate the cold. People are awesome. There's no lack of interesting things to do. If anything, it's, the trouble comes from you really don't want to go out and do Mardi Gras every year. You're like, you want to sit one out. And it's fine, it's not a problem. You're not going to miss anything. It's like the City has a party going year round, but sometimes people go home to change clothes and take a nap or something. You know? I love it here.

AG: What is R.U.B.A.R.B.'s relationship with the City government? Like, how, does the City has, does the City know that it's around, or?

MR: I think they suspect so (laughs). I hope that the Council person knows about R.U.B.A.R.B. There's a--I don't even know her name--the council person who represents our part of the Ninth Ward. I would hope that she knows who we are. But, we've been in the paper a few times. Every time we've been in the paper, we get this nice burst of good will and donations and stuff. We definitely have a presence, I think. People, you know, the bike community, I think, knows that we're here. But--

AG: Oh, sorry--

MR: Other places get a lot more attention, I think. Like Plan B--there was something in the newspaper in *The Gambit* a few days ago, that was--No, it was *Where Y'At*, a little fluffy monthly thing on an article about bikes. And mentioned Plan B, which is a community bike shop on Esplanade, or I'm sorry Elysian Fields. But didn't mention R.U.B.A.R.B. Plan B has been around for decades--a decade and a half, I think; oh maybe 10 or 11 years. So, some people obviously don't know about R.U.B.A.R.B. But as far as the government goes, we approached them once trying to find a piece of property we could use. And that really didn't go anywhere.

We have 501(c)3 status, so the federal government knows about us. But, yeah, we haven't really made any connection with the government.

And it was weird [laughs]. Actually, to go back to the collective organization thing and Liz being the person in charge, there's this really strong undercurrent among folks who are like anarchist-minded to not engage with the government in any way. They don't want to get permits. "We're a free people, we can go wherever we damn well please, and as much, number as we want, we don't need to get a permit for da da da da da." Alright, fine, that's a very valid way of looking at things. If your end goal is to be arrested before you can be effective, go ahead. But the 501(c)3 we had needed, people had argued that we needed to register for 501(c)3 for a long time so that we could get, like, actual donations and have some legal standing. But we had to incorporate first, and that was just pulling teeth, because folks would be like, "I don't know, we don't need to do that, that's not, we're not here to be part of the government, we're just here to work with kids and fix bikes." And, "OK, yeah, great point." But eventually it got to the point where we were actually, I believe we were actually feeling a deprivation. Like, "I would love to give you some money, but I can't because I need to donate it. And, you know, you guys are just sort of a group of kids working in a bike shop."

So, incorporating was kind of an important step to establish R.U.B.A.R.B. as beyond just a group of like Liz and some friends volunteering. It gave it an institutional presence, sort of. But that was a long time to get to happen. Because, you know, you couldn't argue through it. If someone did not want to incorporate, then, they would declare, I mean, as far as consensus goes, like, "No, I'm not going to allow this to happen." Great. So you have to wait around until they come around and realize the benefits of it. When something, they see that something is about to happen, and they're like, "Oh my God, what can we do?" "Oh, well, if we incorporated and we got 501(c)3, then this would be OK." You have to let people come to their own wisdom, I guess, sometimes. You can't lead them there, necessarily.

We got 501(c)3, finally. And the next step will be, like, getting insurance and getting, you know, more like that, if that's the direction we want to go in. I don't know what the future is. But it seems like, I mean, it's sustainable in so far as that there's volunteer energy coming not from that community. People in the community are not, you know--the volunteers come from this part of the neighborhood [The Marigny] or Mid-City. They're not folks who grew up in that community.

AG: And why do you think that is?

MR: I don't know. Other than to speculate that the impulse to come down and do good things is still sort of there. And me and the rest of the folks volunteering there are comfortable going into that neighborhood. Whereas I think before Katrina, maybe, it was--like, the pastor of the church, the priest at the church we were at was white. And there are some whites living in that neighborhood, but very, very few. So it was a predominantly black neighborhood, and we're just these white kids who didn't grow up New Orleans, didn't grow up in the Ninth Ward at all. And



wouldn't have been welcome there before Katrina. Like, very different neighborhood, or so I'm told, and I readily believe. But now there's a space from the Common Ground thing and there's people who recognize us going down the street, and they're like, "Hey is the bike shop open?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I'm on my way there right now." You know?

It would be--there was a guy who worked with us, Lewis Keller, who grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward and was a really great guy. He came to Common Ground, he was really sick, back in 2006. And we sort of helped him get well, and he stuck around. And like, was volunteering and working and like doing a *lot* of work to help Common Ground. And he started working with R.U.B.A.R.B. And he became sort of the father figure at R.U.B.A.R.B. Because he knew a lot of the kids; he might know them specifically, but he knew their mom and dad and aunts and uncles and stuff from being around so long. So, it was really good to have him around. He's the only person from the Ninth Ward who has ever volunteered there. And in any way committed to it.

And that's I guess something to think about, you know? Plenty of people have bike skills there, but they're not chomping at the bit to come down and spend four hours to work with kids. But, I mean, we also have time. Other people have jobs, and they're raising their children, and whatever. So we have the luxury of being able to do that. You know? And maybe there's something larger to it as well. Like, it's kind of healthy to see people of different ethnicities interacting, you know? I think there's something good about that, but I don't want to strain too far into being idealistic at all. This town is *not* a place for wide-eyed optimism, you know? But I love working with kids and bikes. And these kids are not privileged in ways that I was to have ready access to a bike. I needed a bike, my dad just kind of buy me a bike. They don't necessarily have that ability.

When we got to the neighborhood, you know, it wasn't just Katrina that had brought their neighborhood to its knees. They've been given short shrift for decades, for generations, that whole neighborhood, and larger parts of town. If anything, there should be a R.U.B.A.R.B. in every community, where people from, you know, places of resource can bring those resources and skills and teach kids simple things, you know, how to fix a bike. This kind of thing, for the rest of their life, this 9 year old kid who just fixed a flat tire is going to know how to do that. And these 15, 16, 17 year-old kids are always going to understand how this machine works and how they put it all together. There's no mystery to it. That's not a racial thing, you know?

And it's not something I think about too much because I just sort of, you know, the same thing with Common Ground, I'm not going to think about the bigger picture, I'm just going to pay attention to what I'm going to do right here and now. And what I'm doing here and now is helping this kid change out a chain on his bike. I'm not thinking about the racial dynamic that is developing. Although it's in the background. Like, yeah, I'm some white guy you don't know, and I'm helping you out. And it doesn't cost you anything, and all I'm asking you to do is pay attention.

And for me, it's a good way to be a teacher without having to be a teacher. You know? [laughs] These kids, they'll come in, and they'll sort of, like, show off and be all, like, smartypants or whatever. And they're looking at me like they expect me to respond in a certain way. I'm just like, "I'm not your teacher. I don't care. Like, no, I'm not--whatever. You're going to harass me? I'm not going to pay attention to you. This kid over here is doing something, and I'm going to pay attention to him. I'm not paid to, like, take flack from you. And if you don't want me to work with you--" Like, I'm working with this one girl, and she's just, criticizing everything I'm doing. And I'm like, "You know what? Actually, I'm going to let you do this. You obviously know what you're doing. I'm going to go over here." And she was, like, nonplussed. Like, "You have to help me." I'm like, "I don't have to help you. I don't have to do anything I don't want to." You know? Ah, I love those teachable moments, when you're just like, "Oh, you've crossed a boundary there," you know? This is not something that I have to be like, "*You have to do this now!*" Like, nope, this is aikido: "I see that you are looking to goad me. I am not going to be goaded. I am going to work on a bike."

AG: How would you describe the bike community in New Orleans?

MR: It's pretty good. It's pretty healthy. Lots of people ride bikes. All over town there's bikes everywhere. There's not enough bike racks or bike facilities. Like everybody's locking up to street poles and sign posts and whatnot. The roads are abysmal. But, the town is so small that it makes no sense to drive a lot of the time. If you're going to work, especially if you work in the [French] Quarter, and you're going to drive? I mean, your first--depending on your job is, the first hour to two hours that you work that day is to store your vehicle while you work. Which is senseless. And streetcars and buses are not optimal, but you can definitely take them. But bikes, I mean you can get from one end of the parish to the other in less than an hour and a half at a leisurely pace. So we're just really blessed with that. It's not like we're sprawling out or anything. There's very strict limits on how big Orleans Parish is. And the area where most people live is so small that it just makes a lot of sense to have bikes.

And I work on a pedicab, too. I have one of those pedicabs. And hopefully that will maintain--because it's a pretty good line of work and it's a great service. One fewer car, one fewer taxi driving through the French Quarter at midnight on a Saturday night when it's wall to wall crazy. You can maneuver through that on a pedicab really easily. Bike deliveries, there's lots of bike deliveries. Bicycles just make a lot of sense in this city. More so every passing year I think. [A man passes the cafe on his bike. Matt Robinson says, "There's my friend Evan, fellow pedicab driver."]

AG: And does R.U.B.A.R.B. align with any bike advocacy organizations?

MR: Yeah, there's, what is it called? There's some bike advocacy group that I'm not aware of the name of, but they do a lot of stuff like for advocating for bike lanes and facilities and I guess pushing for new development to have bike-friendly accommodations. What is, I can't remember the name--

AG: Is it Bike Easy, or?

MR: I don't know. I'm sure you could find it. Metropolitan Bike Coalition, does that sound right? The Metropolitan Bike Coalition. Maybe I'm just making that up. I don't know.

AG: It sounds good [laughs].

MR: We've been invited to participate in some of those things for awards like that. And I think we've sent some members for that. We've been asked to table for Earth Fair or Earth Fest, whatever that thing is on April 28<sup>th</sup> [Earth Day]. And some other places like that, like farmers' markets, you know, do a little workshops. We did a couple workshops at the Iberville public housing project. That was really cool. That went over really well.

Yeah, I'd say, the level of our involvement in the bike community is a function of the individual volunteer's involvement, and not R.U.B.A.R.B. as an entity sending a representative. Although we have gone to Bike! Bike!, which is an event that you might know about. We've off and off sent people to Bike Bike. Me and Liz went last time in 2010 to Louisville, Kentucky and it was fantastic. It was really fun to see all these different groups, you know, bike shop sort of organized people in one place. That was really cool. So we'll do that at R.U.B.A.R.B.

AG: So yeah, do you get to talk to people who are in similar bike community shops in other cities?

MR: Um-hm. It's kind of interesting and I think on a cooler note that for the folks that we've been working with, or the folks that we have met at these events, they all sort of look to us as role models. Because we've been doing it for a little while and we're pretty committed to it, and it's just successful. We've seen some other places and they're nice bike shops, you know, sort of--there will be like a large building that is like a community space. Like, this space is for whatever storage of this and whatever--it's all separated up. And then there's like a little place for the bike shop. The bike shop will open up and have the floor, but then they close up again. And R.U.B.A.R.B. was more like its own space. We sort of say we are a community center, sort of in broad strokes. But we're really a community bike shop with sort of an asterisk that we do other things, a few other things than bikes. Like, we take kids on field trips, and we do these little, like art things. That when volunteers come in and there's a bunch of kids not wanting to work on bikes, then someone will pull down some paints and they'll do like, whatever, make a big mess all over the table. But it's mostly, like, a bike shop. And yeah, the other places that we met, are kind of very interested in what we've been doing. But they're all similarly organized. Basically serving a small, small amount of a community, and the people who come are kind of regulars. There's a good number of little community bike shops that are coming up out there which is nice, really nice to know.

AG: And how would you describe the cooperative scene in New Orleans?

MR: I'm probably the wrong person to ask. I know that there are some cooperatively structured kinds of things that people do. But I'm not really in the middle of it. Iron Rail might be a good place for you to check out as far as that goes, because I think they'll probably be a lot more plugged in with like Books to Prisoners and different groups that are doing things cooperatively. That's my recommendation.

AG: And. Oh yeah, OK. So you've here since 2005, then. So how have you seen New Orleans change since then?

MR: It's, for the most part, it's really hard to see where the storm damage was, unless you go to certain parts of town. It's, it looks not like it did. It's much, I mean it's cleaned up. These houses, I could just point down the street--like that beautiful blue and yellow house? Two years ago it did *not* look like that. The house on the corner, the sort of green way down there at the end. That house did *not* look like that. These places were like falling apart. That place I was seriously thinking it would just collapse. And somebody got hold of it and fixed it up, and that's been happening all over the place. Houses that you're accustomed to seeing just dilapidated either get torn down and something new gets built there, or they get rebuilt. That's, especially for this neighborhood, this is a super gentrifying neighborhood, to put a fine point on it. Which is, like, I'm saying that knowing like I bought a house on that side of St. Claude, not far away. And I'm going to fix it up sort of as much as I can in a similar way. And, I don't know, I've seen, I've seen things that pre-existed the storm being fixed up now with like this surge of energy. There's new stores and all kinds of new buildings and stuff. It's really interesting to watch.

What else has changed. I'm not sure, because I didn't live here before. I know that it changed from when I visited here before. Like, the feelings that I got from the place before Katrina versus now are in a lot of ways different. It felt a little more ominous before. I'm not really all that sensitive. But when I got here I've not felt scared or anything since I moved here, really. I feel pretty comfortable.

AG: Yeah, can you talk about that ominous feeling, just can you describe it a little bit more?

MR: I don't know, just like the lore of the city, in some ways. You know, the sort of urban legend that someone comes down and someone slips something in their drink and they're never seen again. And you know, those kind of salacious stories of wicked events that happen down here. And the town is not--it just felt when I was visiting, that I should be a little mindful of what's going on behind me, to some degree. But when I came here after Katrina, there was no one here. I didn't have to keep watching around my back. And maybe I just got used to it being that way. Just not being, you know, being in a place like, "Oh my God, I can't believe you're going there. There's no power, there's no water. There's like this terrible thing, there's that terrible thing. There's guns, there's people with guns, doing terrible things." And I just, you know, that never made a whole lot of sense to me, because when I got here it was just absolutely deserted. So there was nothing to fear, really. Except for the National Guard and the police, for

a little while. We were sort of sketched out by them. I'm like super comfortable now, and have been for a while.

And I've been mugged here; I was, like, strong-armed mugged. And, you know, went unconscious for like 30 seconds. The guy got like \$5 out of my pocket. That's the only one. He saw me buying some beer at the store, and I'm walking down the street, eating a bag of chips. The guy comes up to me and puts me in a headlock, and rifles through my pockets while I'm unconscious. Didn't take the beer, didn't take my cell phone, didn't take my wallet. Just took that \$5 because he saw that \$5. I hope I can be excused, please New Orleans, excuse me for thinking that, like, that was the nicest way for New Orleans to introduce me to the world of being mugged [laughs]. Thank you, New Orleans. I didn't have to see a gun, didn't have to see a knife, didn't have to see the eye of my attacker. "Alright, dude, you got me."

AG: How, how would you describe gentrification in New Orleans, then? Because it seems kind of different than in other cities, gentrification in other cities.

MR: Hm. The way I excuse it to myself, knowing that it's a concept that tends to uproot people who need not necessarily be uprooted, there is--I'm sorry, I just watched a lizard chase a cockroach which was really awesome to watch. Um. Sorry [laughs]. The neighborhood that I bought my house in, I was very fortunate to be able to buy my house. It has not been lived in, had not been lived in since probably 2003, and the houses adjacent to it are not in the best of shape. A few of them being worked on also have not been lived in in a long time. But it's a tight, compact neighborhood. This whole city is a compact, little neighborhood, so, if someone comes in and buys a house and starts working on it. And they're of a different socioeconomic class or race than the people who have lived there. I mean, obviously, like, I have a masters degree and other resources that I've been able to avail myself of due to privilege and hard work and everything else. So yeah, my demographic does not completely square with the demographic of everyone else in the neighborhood. So I see that, and you know, I also see the fact that all these neighborhoods have fallen into disrepair. And if anyone, of any status, is going to go in--and it's not like, you know, when I bought the place, the guy who was selling it was also entertaining an offer from someone who was just going to rent it out. Like, fix it up, rent it out. And he knew that I was going to live there. I don't know if that's better or worse for gentrification. If he had rented it out then, if someone had bought it and fixed it up and rented it out, then the demographic of the neighborhood, it might still be someone like me renting there. Who knows. Sort of, all these neighborhoods are evolving.

I don't know. I mean I have to think that any time or resource or investment that I spend on my house is going to have a beneficial effect on the rest of the neighborhood. But there's also, OK I fixed my house up and it's worth like 10 times what I bought it for. All the rest of the houses sort of like, you know, these people have been on fixed incomes, and they're, like, renting and whatever. And suddenly my house is really great, and then the house across the street gets built in the same way. And slowly over time the old lady on the corner on a fixed income can't afford

to live there anymore because someone is going to come along and buy the house out from under her. That's not an unlikely outcome.

And I don't know how it could be made better. There's, when they were tearing down the projects in town, there were all, the government that wanted to tear them down was saying, "Well we'll replace them. We're going to replace them. It's not going to be 1 to 1. Like, there won't be the same number of units in the new one, the new development as there were in the old development. But there's going to be some mixed aspect to it. So there will still be a place for people who lived in the St. Bernard projects in the new place. But it's going to be more expensive, it's going to be higher quality. It's not going to be the same neighborhood that you were accustomed to." I don't know is that's a good thing or a bad thing? That's change, you know? And I'm sort of, I'm sort of sitting on the fence when it came to that kind of thing. Because I did talk to people who grew up in public housing who are like, "Yeah, tear them down. Like yesterday. Tear them down. I never want to see them again." And there are folks who are like, "Yeah, I raised three children here. You know, it was, like, close-knit, it was kind of a violent place, it wasn't the best place in the world. But I grew up, my kids grew up, and they're all fine. They went to college and etcetera, etcetera." So, I don't know.

And I understood the impulse of people from out of town coming down and being like, "Oh my God, these African Americans are under attack and their very housing is going to be destroyed." So they just leapt into the struggle, this sort of sense of entitlement, that they could just throw their goodwill around. Which is not necessarily a bad thing, I suppose. But, I don't know. It led to a polarization, I think, of that whole episode. People were at City Hall getting gassed and tazed, and stuff at the gates of City Hall because they were just livid about it. It was kind of sad to watch. But lots of people were *very* upset about that. And now they've rebuilt St. Bernard. It's this all new complex. It looks completely different. It's got mixed income housing. Is that a good thing? I don't know. Can everybody who was in the St. Bernard housing project afford or will be--will the be allowed? Do they have any drug convictions? Sorry. Do you have any felony convictions, have you served time in prison? Sorry, you can't live here. I can easily see them weeding out lots of people and giving them no place to go. And then as people like me move into these neighborhoods, they have fewer and fewer places to go.

So. It would be nice to think there would be a clean resolution to that. And there's not. You know? It's just change. Change is going to adversely affect certain people kind of predictably unfortunately sometimes. But I don't know what can be done, like, as people, or as governments or as collectives. Like, I don't know what can be done to address those kinds of things. You can't overcome 60 years of inferior education and inferior opportunities, you know, in one fell swoop. And you certainly can't do that while you're squeezing them out of the neighborhoods that they've sought refuge from the world in, you know?

AG: Yeah, some people see collectives and cooperatives as a model for total transformation of the economy and political structures, but it seems like with so many other institutionalized

racism and classicism, it's very difficult. So how do you see change happening in an ideal world, I guess?

MR: Hmm. I have an impression that something is going to come along and change in the near future, the not-to-distant future, that will put all these considerations in the back seat. I guess it's safest to expect something unexpected to come along and shift the debate. You know? Like, Hurricane Katrina shifted a lot of the debate on everything from collective organizing to how a government responds--how a federal government responds and fails to respond, you know? Like, cataclysmic events like that. Or like just like watershed events, you know? I can see, it's not difficult to see that in the near future there might be something that fails us in such a way that we are suddenly dependent on those around us. And if we have a leg up on knowing how to organize without someone in the mayor's office or the president or wherever, some autocrat or bureaucrat or government agent telling us what to do, you know, we'll be better off as people.

Like when we came in for Common Ground, the government was absolutely impotent. Here we were giving out tons of water, gallons of bleach, cleaning supplies, and food, and diapers, and tampons, and you name it. And the Red Cross announces the big delivery of the Red Cross one day. And they open up the first--there are three trailers. They open the first trailer--boxes upon boxes of paper plates. They're starving. They go to the next one. Boxes upon boxes of napkins. And the third one is boxes upon boxes of knife, fork, and spoon, wrapped in plastic. That is the Red Cross. They were lined up. They were needing food and water and what they got was utensils.

So it was kind of ridiculously easy. It was kind of child's play to call someone and say, "Hey, I know you work for this company. Can you donate a truck load of this?" No Red Cross, no FEMA, no red tape. I personally called a few places and said, "Hey, there's this really awesome book about New Orleans that you guys are publishing. And I'm working for this group, and we've got volunteers. Would you mind sending us some copies?" And they sent us like a dozen copies of this book, this really awesome book, it just went out to everybody. That's all you really had to do, just the organizational power of people acting empowered for themselves and like, determining what they're going to do. That's going to reshape the next hundred years of the political life, I think it's going to have to. The currency is already falling apart. Economics is not serving our needs as we define them. But even in the wasteland of winter 2005 New Orleans, there were so many people doing so much without any hint of government sanction. When the shit hit the fan, people stepped up.

And if and when the next huge event that calls upon FEMA to come and save the day and they fail to do so, that's going to be one more instance where people are just going to spontaneously come together. If there's a big earthquake in San Francisco, can you imagine the millions of people that will be drawn there? Like, just going to take shit to San Francisco, like, going to take blankets and whatever they can think, whatever people need. That's just going to happen. It's reassuring to think that that's impulse is as strong as it is. So that gives me some optimism, actually, and it's good that we're talking about it. Because it kind of goes back and forth with me

being optimistic and pessimistic. But yeah, to have an organizational model in your mind that succeeds, that does something, that works, like Common Ground did work, it wasn't perfect, but it succeeded in getting a lot of help to a lot of people. When the next big shock comes, more people who are acquainted with that and who are conversant with that language are going to make sure that more people are going to be able to survive and be OK and come out better on the other side.

Your project is great, and I hope there's like a million of them, you know? It's good to document this. Because I'll tell you, 100 years from now, people are going to be looking back and be like, "Wow, where did this amazing cooperative urge in America come from, to where they could survive *this*?" Hopefully, that's going to be the way [laughs]. I'm going keep hoping that's what the deal is, and not, "Wow, where did America go wrong? Let's look at all these theses and doctoral dissertations about their responses to catastrophe and find out how they could have gone so wrong." [laughs]

AG: Well, I think that's almost all my questions. I just wanted to know one, I just have one last question, and that is, you were talking a lot about the impact that R.U.B.A.R.B. can make on kid's lives and give them a sense of empowerment. So how do you think that that might carry forth, through their lives? Besides just being able to make, to build your own bike or to maintain that bike, but how do you think that will affect them? Obviously you're not a mindreader, but.

MR: I would hope that, well, for one thing, they'll know how to fix bikes. Which, it's a simple technology that's not going to go away. You could destroy every computer circuit and you can still ride a bike anywhere you want to. That's very, very useful and important. And beyond that, just the generalizability of kids realizing that, that when something is not working right in their world, they can figure it out. Or at least for a bike, which hopefully is generalizable, like, "OK, this thing isn't working right; let me go back and check everything that I did to put it together." You know, just framing how they can view the world. When you--people who work a lot with computers have told me that, sometimes their mind gets so involved in these little windows and stuff, that they'll be working on their college project or whatever, and they'll leave the computer lab, and they're still seeing in their mind--they're organizing their thoughts as if it were a computer screen. It just sort of affects how you look at the world, for some short period of time. And I hope that wears off.

But for bikes, it's that same kind of thing. It's like, "OK, I'm confronted with this situation that I'm going to resolve. And I have the right tools to do it, or need these tools to do it. Just like organizing their thoughts, and realizing--I mean, these kids are enthusiastic about working on things, but they'll use a hammer and a vise grip as soon as they'll use, like, a 10 millimeter wrench and an Allen key. So one of the things is just teaching them, you know, letting them learn the hard way, that, "Yeah, if you keep hitting that with a hammer, it's going to break. And then your bike is going to be useless." And then they hit it with a hammer and it breaks, and now their bike is useless. We're not teachers, we're not going to forbid you from doing that. But we're definitely going to be sort of frustrated if you doing learn to use the tools properly.



So that's another thing, just teaching kids the proper way to approach a problem, instead of just seeing it like, "This thing is not doing what I want it to do, so what can I do to try and--You know, what's the easiest thing I can do to get it to work?" Hit it with a hammer, instead of loosen this, and work with this, and be patient with this, and soak this in WD-40 or something like that. So that's also a useful hopefully lifeskill, is patiently assessing what needs to be done and figuring out how to do it, correctly. It's really good when you can see someone realize, like, "This seat post is all messed up. Yeah, it fits perfectly, but it's all messed up. Because look, someone before came in and hit it with a hammer. So now you'll never get your seat on this, because it's like it's damaged. See? And they're like, "Oh, yeah, OK."

AG: OK, well, I think I have all my questions. But before we end, do you have anything you want to say, a story or anything that you want to sneak in before we end the conversation?

MR: On collectives. It's important--yeah, the only thing I want to say, just to reiterate, because that scott crow book kind of hit me. It's important if you're organizing any kind of cooperative or collectively structured anything, to understand, like, everybody understands what is meant by that terminology. Maybe it's not such a big deal among folks in their 20s or early 30s or whatever who have done that kind of, done organizing like that. But it's kind of important that people understand where everyone's coming from. If you're going to work together cooperatively and collectively, like, it's important to maybe overstate it, and get to a point where everybody sort of knows, "Alright this is what's up. This is how we're going to be doing things." You know? Because it's really easy down the road to be trying to solve a problem, but you never, you never fully agreed on how a problem-solving solution would go. So when you start trying to solve problems, it's just everybody's flying at it from different directions, because people are working from different understandings. You know? So that would be the most important thing.

I like how collectives have sort of like coming up, like, I think you know, off the grid agriculture came up in the '70s, like organic agriculture starting coming out of the '70s because the '60s were such a horrible decade for environmental degradation and food. Just like an organic thing came out from that. And I think as poisoned as the economic system and other systems of control and governance in this country are right now, I think it's the organic people that are coming together and are like, "Alright, let's just take the money out of it. We're just going to work together. We're going to do this project. We're going to set up this thing, and it's going to be run without anybody's benefit, for the betterment of the larger society." I think that's an organic and healthy thing, and I think that's going to survive no matter what. You can't kill it, because the idea is too powerful and too widespread. Everybody has an understanding that--well, lots of people have an understanding that there's a better way to go about solving problems. And working in accord with other folks who are similarly minded is a really, it's a healthy thing. It's natural, I think.

AG: Well, thank you so much, this was great.

MR: Thank you.