

D: You may use the interview and you may record it. Yes. You may use my name,

I will maybe put it up on the website together with the project.

D: I'd love to see it.

Maybe you could just tell me a little about yourself, how you get involved in this.

D: Okay. I lived on mott street, uh, but I was in college, not too far from here. As did liz christy, uh, back then, this area was very, very different. This, you know, there were a lot of drug dealing going on in the area that this was a big vacant lot filled with trash garbage pile, five to six high old, uh, old car parts. And, oh, one day Liz was walking by here and she saw a kid playing in an old refrigerator pretending it was a boat, and she told the child's mother now, why don't you clean it up so your child has at least a place to play. The mother tells you I've got three or four kids. I got one at the time. You and your friends are all college students. Why don't you clean it up? And she said, well, we'll give it a shot. She got a whole bunch of us together and it took about six months, but we cleaned all the garbage. We worked with the local police station, they used to be a police stable at the far end of Houston streets. And they were happy to give us all their manure to.

So they just gave you the plot?

D: They just give us some, uh, yeah.

That is exciting

D: and, uh, after about a year, uh, the city, came in city officials said, no, this is our property. This is not yours. So we called the newspapers, newspapers kept out and the city backed off and said, well, how about if we give you a lease to the land?

And they charged us a dollar a year. ***

Oh, that's pretty, that's pretty good.

D: We've had it ever since.

Yeah. Oh, wow. And. Community gardens...didn't exist.

D: No, it wasn't a thing in NYC. It wasn't a thing in New York. no. We were the very first ones and it got in the papers and the press picked it up and people would come to us and say, you know, show us how to do it. And we'd go to other areas. But first we started around here and other local areas, lower east side, east village. Then we get calls from people in the Bronx, people in parts of Brooklyn that were, uh, people from upper Manhattan and it just sort of took off.

Oh, wow. That's impressive. And what. What did you, what is your goal then? Has it been like, has it changed over your time here?

D: Uh, yes. At the very beginning, uh, we, we did a lot of, you know, development, design work that was gorgeous. Just sitting back and enjoy the garden and watching how things look I'd be back then in the very beginning of it. I don't know if you've seen pictures of it at the beginning. It was just a big, vacant, lot, the garbage. And now we just, we kept barbecues here. We have parties. We, uh, we still do the maintenance of pruning and stuff, but you know, it's pretty much done.

That's nice. And is that so, ooh, who uses this garden?

D: um, pretty much everybody. I mean, we get, we get students from NYU. We get people from Chinatown coming in. We get people from the movie coming in here. I mean, pretty much everybody.

Yeah. Are there a group of volunteers ?

D: There's a group of about 20 of us that did volunteer here. We each have our own plots and we take turns keeping the garden open.

Okay. Who are the people who are volunteering?

D: Uh, a lot of them are people like me that don't know has been here 50 years, but you know, some people that have been here 20 years, like the woman who was sitting here some people, you know, 15 years, 10 years. But once they get it, they don't want to leave. I mean, I'm the prime example about that!*** You know, the only way I leave here is if I die

Ben: And what, I guess you've got involved when you were quite young?

D: I was a college student. Yes. We were all college students back then yes.

Ben: What do you think it has meant for you to be a part of this community?

D: Uh, I think it's great. I mean, I've met a lot of nice people here. I've learned a lot about horticulture, gardening, what can grow in the city, what can't grow in the city, you know?

Ben: What does Horticulture mean?

D: Plants, trees. grubs you know what, what can grow. What can't grow, uh, what people like our pond. When we put the pond in 30 years now, people didn't like it at first. Now everybody loves the pond. We have turtles in there. We have fish. We have the threes. Here are the largest Dawn Redwood in the city is growing here.

Ben: And what do you do? Uh, I dunno if you have a retired, or if you still...

Dawn Redwood I did computer security for the government of all things.

Ben: Okay. Whoa.

D: Very different than this. Yes. So my office was not too far from here, so I would come here after work and sit and get a bite to eat...

We have a barbecue, we had a barbecue and that was great. And it was just a hundred percent different than what I did at work all day.

Ben: And why did you keep on coming here?

D: I just like, it mean it's a great place to be. It's friendly. I've met lots of nice people here. I've made a lot of friends here and just kind of fun here. Uh, what a interesting story about here at this particular garden. We have a cherry tree, which is sort of right near the path there. Originally we planted, it near the fence.. We dug down about four feet, five feet. We hit some cobblestones. We moved the cobblestones. We saw light. It was a subway platform. People are looking up at us and we're looking down at them. We put the cobblestones back, we put the dirt back, we moved the tree further in ***

But actually you can feel that when you're at the fence when it triggers, but you can actually feel the rumbling.

Ben: Have you any project you're working on now here?

D: Not so much here. Uh, this is the oldest garden in the city. There's a garden by my house in Brooklyn. We started a year ago, which is now the newest garden in the city. So I'm involved with both the oldest and the newest. Yeah.

Ben: Um, and what, what do you think has been the biggest change?... Hmm yeah in this garden, like was there any significant time where you did a big renovation?

D: Well, the garden has matured, uh, over the years. And I said everything was small. I mean, the tree over there, which is now eight stories high was this big when we planted it. (show how small with his hands)...

D: So in the beginning we had, you know, war flowering things down with war streets and shrubs, but we also acquire, acquire the farmer to the garden, uh, recently, which was vacant. And we have apple trees, peach trees, pear trees, fig trees, uh, apricots. Especially a, uh, a fruit orchard and we have bushels of fruit.

Ben: Oh, why do you think is important for you to be part of this garden?

D: I just like to help people, I mean, I give tours in the spring and early fall. The local elementary schools and show them the vegetables and show them the fruits and grapes and everything. And there are kids that are in the city school system that they'll know that grapes come from great barbers and trees, or they can pick an apple off a tree. And, uh, I think we get it at whole foods. So just show getting, you know, getting people interested in gardening now telling people, yes, we have spaces available your community. You can volunteer and you can garden.. In the past, we've had people from Tibet here. They got seeds from Tibet and they were growing vegetables that would end up... They loved it. We get people from Chinatown that will come in here and volunteer and they'll grow stuff that's native to China.

Ben: And what do you think about growing stuff? That is, why is that an important lesson or?

D: The people want to connect with their culture from way back. You know, not everybody wants steak and potatoes. Some people want whatever's growing native to China or whichever growing native to Italy or wherever else. And it makes them feel at home that yes, yes. You can grow something that grows in Tibet here in New York city. Yes, you can grow something that grows in Peking in New York city, or Beijing. People love it.

Benjamin: And what do you hope... Now you've been part of starting the first one. What, uh, what was your initial thought when you started? Like, what did you hope for?

D: Well, we thought we'd just green this one little space. Uh, we thought, yeah, we'll green it here. That'll be, it we'll be done. You know, I would enjoy it for a while. And none of us ever thought that it would last 50 years, none of us ever thought that it was, it would create a whole, uh, movement of community gardens. I mean, since I've been here, we've had people from Germany, come in here, about starting community gardens in Germany. They would ask us how to do it. We've had people from China coming in and asking how to do it. We've had people from France, the ambassador from France came in and gave us a couple of bottles of wine.*** Yeah.

Ben: Why do you think people want to start community gardens?

D: I think people like green space. I mean like in Germany, after the war, a lot of it was bombed out and they have a lot of space. Let's, let's grow some food. In China of all places they grow, because I spoke to people from China that came to here on a tour, wanted to know about it. They were actually, they don't have space at the ground level to do it. They're converting rooftops to community gardens. Now the people living in these buildings are planting vegetables and stuff on their roofs.

B: And what, what do you hope for for the future for community gardens in NYC?

D: Um, more community gardens more green space. I mean, uh, back then we started this area was very desolated. There was a lot of space around here. Now the building behind us is brand new. It was empty space across the street. It's an apartment building. So I'm hoping the city will allow the community gardens to stay, you know, not be developed as real estate. But that's a problem all over the place. Yeah.

B: Is there still a need around here for community gardens?

D: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, there's very little Parkland around here. You know, you've got to NYU further up, uh, and we're losing the community garden on Elizabeth street that developing to make it into housing. Uh, so yes, there's definitely is. It's not just fruits and vegetables so much anymore. It's a place where people can come and sit and relax. I mean, we get people from buying food at whole foods, coming here and sitting having their meals. A couple of years ago, we worked out a deal with whole foods. They would offer a cooking class and we give them some space to grow plants here are tomatoes and stuff. And they use that for their cooking class so that they actually, whatever they grew, they cooked admitted to sandwiches and stuff and they loved it. That's a pretty cool investor. Yeah. So we try to be innovative with stuff, you know, do things that are different.

B: And why do you think it is good to be innovative?

D: Uh, you have to grow with how things are changing. As I said, at the very beginning, we grew a lot of fruits and vegetables here, especially the vegetables, eh, not so much any more you've got a whole foods right across the street, so they don't really need to, uh, grow their own vegetables. They don't wanna put the time in, but, uh, other things they'd like to do,

B: and I saw you have a, you have a quite nice website.

D: Yes.

B: Um, eh, I don't know. Have you been part of building that up?

D: I designed the website and put it up. Yes, it's my website.

B: Oh, that's so interesting. Well what was your thoughts behind making it. Or like when you made it?

D: We want more people to know about us. I mean, I, I look at, uh, the traffic on the website. We get about 400-500 hits a day. Uh, and, and some of them, you know, from France, from Italy, other countries, and then I, I track it a little bit. And sometimes when people come into the, I get emails, some people say, you know, we see regarding our website, we'll be in New York, you know, in

August, can we make an appointment to come in and visit the garden? And I say sure

B: and what, how do you have any ideas of how community gardens could become more accessible for more people? Like now you've made a website.

D: I think that's one of the main reasons. I mean, back then, way back when, when we started, there was no internet, there was an email that was 50 years ago, but now, uh, a lot of people hear about us through the internet. That's where we're trying to push it more.

B: And when you build the website, what things did you think about putting in on like, what was important?

D: A little bit of the history of the garden and how it's changed the neighborhood. How way back when this was desolate and, uh, and there was no plans here, and now you know, 50 years later, you've got huge trees. You've got grape arbors, you've got fruit trees. Uh, so we want to let people know we're here. I mean, I had one woman that came into the garden earlier today. She said she's been living here six years around the block, she did not know, there was a garden here and I said, okay, fine. Let me show you the garden. Tell your friends about it.

B: And what makes the history of this garden important to tell?

D: Well A it was the first garden and it was sort of a, a design workshop. It was specifically designed to be a community garden. Like if you'd noticed the paths of curved, Liz Christie, Uh, she decided that way. She said, we know what people going through it. We want people to meander through the garden, uh, wander through, enjoy themselves. We have color sacks on the side over here, where you can sit. Uh, but that was her big thing that she wanted. She didn't want it to be like a sidewalk. We just run through it and you're gone. We have lots of seating here, you know.

B: And what is your most proud off at this garden??

D: Uh, what am I most proud of? That we've been here 50 years and we survived. I mean the city over time has tried to, you know, get rid of us. Well, like the building here, they wanted to add the same building across the streets. They wanted to build a bridge, connecting the two buildings and, uh,

which would have covered half the garden, you know, and they said, but if it's ready, you could hide it under our bridge. And we got so much community support. We got thousands of people writing the city saying: bad idea. Yeah...

B: And as I told you a little bit about we are collecting data like community gardens. So we are researching, like what can you find out on a big scale about community gardens. And, and what, what questions are you curious about, about community gardens? Like what things do you wish you knew more about?

D: Uh, oh, well, how many there are? I mean, we, we know pretty . Much my area here. I give tours for community gardens in the lower east side.. But yeah. How many have there been in other boroughs? Uh, what are they growing, you know, in terms of fruits and vegetables, uh, what plants are they doing well with? What plants aren't they doing well with? That's one of the questions we had in the very beginning that people would ask us, all right, we want to start a community garden, 10 blocks away. What can we grow here in this part of the city? and what can't we grow? And we did by trial and error. We tried a bunch of things. Some things took, some things didn't take.

B: Is this something you still feel like you want to learn more about?

D: Oh, absolutely. Yes.

B: What kind of stuff is that?

D: Uh, medicinal plants, I mean, there's some gardens I know that are very different than us. Some gardens just grow medicinal plants or on the lower east side and here in east village, there are gardens that, uh, they're not so much plants, but they're artwork or music venues. They have a garden that has a big amputee theater, further up, uh, six bc and, uh, things like that, you know, and how well that works, because we're always curious to find out what works well at other places.

B: There is a network between community gardens?.

D: There is, but it's at the beginning, it was more transferring data back and forth. But right now it's more. You know, uh, protecting gardens, the network, you know, like if the city committee wants to tear down a garden, we all joined together, uh, you know, to right contact our politicians.

B: How do you join together?

D: We have like the Elisabeth garden. They have rallies, they have parades does a group. Uh, I don't know. Do you know Felicia, you know she's been doing it for years. She does lower east side garden parades where people dress up as plants or squirrels, or they march around all the community gardens around here. Uh, tried to get people involved to let them know that there are gardens. There's nature here.

B: Have you encountered people who, uh, saying against community, like not happy about community gardens?,

D: uh, you, you get, uh, some people that don't like community gardens. Yes. They say, yeah. Build high rise, luxury houses. The rich people need more housing. I don't, I don't agree with them, but...

B: It's very interesting to hear about how it started and how it's going. If you could tell people something about community gardens, what would you like to tell them?

D: The community gardens are not just benefit for the neighborhood, but for everybody, I mean, garden gardens are designed, not just for people that want to grow plants, but, uh, we get parents coming in here with their children, just sitting and reading a book for a couple of hours. Or we get the elderly people coming in and sitting by the pond all day long. Uh we're are a resource, uh, like when 9/11 happened, you know, and people looking for a place to stay. Uh, we opened the garden all night long for weeks and people would just sit here and a place to cool off, but we've had blackouts in the city we've kept the garden open through the night so people can keep cool if their apartments, you know roasting. So, I mean, we have artists coming in here that paint that will sit with it, come up with an easel and just sit here all day painting. I mean, it's not just gardening, it's all, all sorts of recreational things. People come in here and play chess. We've had weddings here. We've had birthday parties, uh, during the summer. We have barbecues here. Uh, and we invite people, come in and say, we have you have, you want a hot dog or, you know, a lemonade or something have one.

B: I noticed it said, no photo-shoots on outside. Do you know why? is this something you have agreed on?

D: Well, what happened was we did a lot of photo shoots in the past, but then we would get these companies coming in, doing a major film and tripling over everything. So we decided to stop it. Yeah.

B: What do you think is the most important in this garden?

D: I love the pond. The pond and the turtles. There's not too many community gardens that have ponds.

B: Is this is your favorite spot to sit at? (points to pond close by)

D: I love sitting here or I love sitting at the bench over there, right on, right in front of the pond.....

D: We have aggressive turtles at the pond. One time we were having a barbecue and we barbecued fish. We took the grill off because it was a little hot, but we grilled the fish on there. We put it on the ground. All of a sudden all the four turtles come out and make a run for it. And they're in there eating all the fish remains that were on the grill.***

B: Are you on Facebook? You know Facebook?

D: I'm on Facebook. Yes.

B: Is the community garden on Facebook?

D: Yes.

B: Okay, cool. I will look it up. Yeah.

D: But if you want any old photographs, I have thousands of old photographs of the garden, way back and the old video also.

B: Oh, wow. Yeah. Well, what have you recorded?

D: Um, well, I have video from the early days when, uh, we had like a chain.. It was like a fence here and there was the homeless outside. They would get these big oil drums and use it for heat and they put a furniture or the outside of the garden to sleep on. So I video interviewing some of those people.

B: Oh, okay. Did you do the interviews that somebody just?

D: Uh, so, uh, I was in the interviews, but someone else was actually doing the filming way back when yeah... and then I did a whole bunch of interviews of Liz Christie, way back when

B: she passed away?

D: She passed away in 85, 86. Yeah.

B: How was she?

D: She was very, very dedicated. I mean, she would work from, uh, you know, the beginning of the spring all the way until like October helping community gardens out.

B: Oh, that was her main project?

D: Uh, well, she, she was responsible for maybe starting 50 or 60 community gardens in the city.

B: If you should describe to somebody, who haven't seen your garden because now we're recording this. How would you describe that?

D: It's very lush and very green. Uh, a lot of trees, a lot of shade, a lot of, a lot of places to sit down. Uh, it's just relaxing. You don't even realize you were in the city here sometimes.

B: And if you could just describe the feeling of sitting here now, how would you describe it?.

D: Tranquil. You're enjoying the sun, your are enjoying a nice breeze. Uh, if you look this way, you see nothing but green, you just tune out the car and the cars and enjoy yourself.... I mean, it's, it's great. We have, we've had barbecues here. We have picnics here. Uh, we'll set up a, we used to set up a couple of grills. Yeah. Just, I mean, even you look right now, you see people coming in and relaxing and enjoying themselves,

B: you know, everybody who comes by?

D: I know a lot of the people. Yes. Yeah. A lot of people just, you know, they may not know my name, but they've seen me here for last 50 years.

B: How has the collaboration with greenthumb been? Or like New York parks?

D: They leave us alone and we leave them alone. It's perfect.

B: You got a lifetime achievement award? (pointing)

D: We've got a lifetime achievement award. Yes. We're also the only community garden in the country that's recognized as a national historic site.

B: Wow. Okay. So that probably also mean they can take it down... Well, thank you so much for taking your time.

D: If you have any other questions I can be viewed on a zoom or face time whatever you'd like

We're open Saturdays. Yes. On Saturdays, on Saturdays. But there, just to make sure if you want to double check. Yeah. Just let me know and I'll make sure I'm here.

B: Yeah. I live up around union square, so

D: I have been to Union square today. I brought a whole bunch of, uh, I think it's a plan today. Uh, chocolate mint. Ooh, that's cool.

B: What are you going to use for?

D: We'll put it around here somewhere. Yeah. I love mint.

B: That is a good idea. I just bought some mushrooms.

D: Yeah. Although the mushroom pipe on the side there, that it was a giant mushroom. Those are good. You put them on a burger roll and they're delicious.

B: Oh, that's a good idea. That's a good thing. Oh, I also got some eggs. Have you ever thought about having animals here?

Uh, well, the two gutters over, they were scared of the, we used to have a rooster here and it use to chase them. Sorry, I won't say anything.

Oh, do you actually do, do you meet all of your, how do you have him? How do you keep in contact with the volunteers? Like the people who are involved?

well, uh, we have a meeting quarterly, uh, every, every three months. Uh, we have a meeting of all of us here.

Oh who arranges that?,

we, we, we just know. Yeah, well, the first Tuesday or whatever, first Sunday, you know, and we sent out notices to everybody. Everybody has email.

How and how do you become a part of the community this community garden? You just come in an offer to volunteer, have you put in 20 hours of volunteer work to make sure that you know, you're going to be around? Uh, we give you a plot.

Okay. That's cool. .

Have you walked around the garden? Have you seen it?

Yeah, I started walking around because of just wanted to get a sense of. Is there anything as specific as you go and check out,

uh, I can show you with the fruit trees already. We'll take a walk down that way.

This is a pop hot tree, it grows fruit and throw this big. And they're delicious.

(Walking) this is a Dawn Redwood. It's the tallest one in Manhattan. It started out this big, whoa. And it's the second generation the seeds from this came from china .After world war II, Liz worked at the Botanic New York Botanic garden and managed to get some seedlings planted in here. And, uh, this is what happens.

(another person passing) Perfect. This garden is perfect, thank you.,

we do our own composting here.

Let's see. Here we go. A little bit here. We've had for about five years now. Uh, we took this over

we have a swollen

When will that be food? Some of the food trees, uh, temporary. If you're willing to let you get a bushel of stuff. Oh,

we officially this. Oh, they're all coy. Senator Cory grow this big. Yeah. Not another thing now there's small babies. Yes.

I remember we wanted everything the curve. So when you got the hill, a little Hills that we didn't want people to rush through here. We want people to just sit back and enjoy themselves. Yeah.

Did you know about gardens back in the days when you start? I do about horticulture, not so much community gardens.

That's more of what about other Carters? Just be a very long time. This was designed for people that were handicapped. It was a raised bed. So say someone has a wheelchair. They can come in here, just roll it right up against here and do some gardening.

all the way over the four seasons. We have 2000 varieties of plants and shrubs in the garden.

Well, thank you so much for the tour. I provide you. If I'm come up with something I'm curious about or something again. And, um, I always, I think I'll put this on the, on the little website we do with the visuals of like different data. How many community gardens on the right? What? Wow. Other than New York, like in where, why wasn't missing community gardens and stuff like that.

Yeah. But you should look at renovations. They, they about salsa. You might have a garden there. Yeah, that's a good idea. Yeah, it was a good meter here. Yeah. Fingers so much. You too. Have a good day. The sun.