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Use Oral History Project  
Patel Center for Global Solutions  
University of South Florida

Interview with: Mr. Rick Martinez  
Interviewed by: William Mansfield  
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Transcribed by: Wm. Mansfield  
Edited by: Wm. Mansfield  
Audit Edited by: Jessica Merrick  
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**WM:** I always put a label on the disc by saying, “This is Bill Mansfield, from the University of South Florida’s Special Collections and the Patel Center for Global Solutions talking to Mr. Rick Martinez on July 12, 2007. We’re right here in the headquarters of Sweetwater Farms in Tampa Florida.”

Mr. Martinez, we always get people to identify themselves by stating their names and telling us when they were born and where they were born. So let her go.

**RM:** My name is Rick Martinez and I was born in Tampa, Florida on April 8, 1953. I’m a third generation Tampanian, and this is the headquarters of Sweetwater Organic Community Farm.

WM: Okay, well tell me what brought you to organic farming.

RM: Well I was an engineer, back in the mid-seventies and had become aware of healthier foods. Started going to health food stores. Started cooking and leaning towards a vegetarian diet and started gardening.

I think about 1978, they gave me an office with no windows and I was like, (laughs) “I think I’m going to go do something else, outside.” I quit my job and started farming.

WM: What kind of engineer [were you]?

RM: Civil.

WM: Civil, okay.

RM: From USF [University of South Florida]. My degree’s from USF, my alma mater.

WM: So you got fed up with being a civil engineer and went to organic farming?

RM: Yeah, I didn't last long as a civil engineer. I only worked at it a few years at it and decided there was something a little bit more down to earth that I wanted to do.

WM: Okay. So did— Is that when you started Sweetwater Farms?

RM: No I was involved in several different efforts. Uh—I started growing sprouts, which wasn't really farming, that's more like processing. So I had a successful sprouting operation. My farming experience at that time dealt mostly with niche markets, such as basil, culinary herbs, specialty crops, edible flowers, and that sort of thing. That's where I started. Back then there was a real good niche for that sort of thing. It hadn't become part of the normal market place. Basil wasn't something that was so readily available.

WM: Okay, so when did you start Sweetwater Farms, here?

RM: Sweetwater was incorporated in 1994, or '95. Right around there. I think we actually started in '94 and were incorporated in '95.

WM: Okay, well tell me about the process of getting the farm located here and the steps you had to go through to—

RM: I had my sprouting operation out in Lutz and—ah—there was a change in ownership, and that sort of thing and I deemed it a better idea to have that whole operation in town; in Tampa.

So I bought a piece of commercial property across the street from the farm and got to be friends with the lady that owned this property. Then she had informed me [that] she was interested in selling it. So I bought it and I started farming on here. It was twenty years ago. I started a small niche market farm on this property at that time.

So what would that be—'87?

WM: Uh-huh.

RM: Then about 1990 this whole organic certification thing took off and I got involved in that. I eventually became the president of the Independent Organic Inspectors Association, which is an international association, and I started flying all over the world.

My little farm here started becoming abandoned. I thought, "What a shame. All of this hard work and money, you know? Couldn't we do something with this?" This whole idea of a community farm, I had read about it—never been to one. At that time there might have been a hundred of them in the U.S. Now [there're] thousands.

So we were the first CSA [Community Sustainable Agriculture] in Florida. And I think we're still the only non-profit CSA. I think we're the largest in terms of membership numbers—number of members.

So we started with eight people back in '94 and we've grown to approximately two hundred and fifty members for this next season.

WM: Wow.

What was the landscape around here like in ninety—let's see, you were here before you started—

RM: Sweetwater.

WM: Yeah. And that was in?

RM: Twenty years ago, so that [it was] '87.

WM: Okay, so what was the landscape like around here in 1987?

RM: It's not a lot different, as far as this piece of land. In fact [I] think it even has more trees than it had at that time. We really are into taking care of our trees.

WM: What about like out on Hillsborough [Avenue], was it as developed?

RM: No, it was not nearly as developed. There was huge chunks of land that were still undeveloped. That big GTE Center that passed was just woods. A lot of these complexes around here weren't, you know, office and business complexes weren't here yet. Even on these streets there were a lot more empty lots. These lots have all filled in within the last five or six years. There was a lot more empty land on these same streets. Wish I had bought it.

WM: Uh-huh.

RM: And so—you know—there's been a lot of in-fill, [that's] the term they use around here—since we started our operations here. And so things have changed significantly.

You know, I've been here all my life, so I've watched things change drastically. I mean Martin Luther King [Boulevard], which is a major thoroughfare that goes in front of [Raymond James] Stadium it stopped at Havana [Avenue]. It didn't go through all the way to Dale Mabry.

There was a horse riding stable and a little cattle ranch, right there where the stadium is and where all of those office complexes are. Even where Tampa Bay Mall used to be, before that, that's where I used to go to ride horses.

WM: So that has changed a lot.

RM: Yes.

WM: Well, what kind of challenges did the in-fill, the development around here present to the farming operation?

RM: Well, you know, it removed some of the rare opportunities to have more land. Thinking back, if I had bought a couple of these lots that were together, we could have had another couple of acres, right here convenient [to the farm]. So, it removed that opportunity.

In hindsight I learned that we made a mistake by not taking advantage of those opportunities. Of course we weren't properly funded for that kind of thing. That's the main challenge.

You know, for our farm, really the population density is really an advantage; because we offer the community an opportunity to take part in what we do. Also—a lot of CSA farms have to take their product to their client base. We don't. They come here. And it's really due to the fact that we're right in the middle of all of this all this densely populated area.

It would be nice if some of these pieces [of land] were still available to us, but that's just not [the] reality of where we are any more.

You know, I've got very strong opinions and ideas about what's happening with land in Florida and how it affects agriculture. I mean, the next generation of farmers are not going to be able to afford land; are not going to be able to get themselves started. They are going to have to go to some other place to farm. Unless some government program or some wealthy philanthropist decides they want to let this young person farm on their land.

But they are not going to be able to afford to buy farmland. It's just—you can't pay \$10,000 an acre and make money farming.

WM: People have told me that it is really cheaper to sell out to the developers than it is to continue farming.

RM: Not only cheaper, but much more profitable.

WM: Yeah, a lot more profitable.

So, being here, surrounded by neighborhoods is an advantage to you all?

RM: Yes. We're a rare example but it is an advantage, because it—you know we're an asset to the community.

WM: Tell me about the reaction of your neighbors to having a farm right here.

RM: In general the reaction has been good. There is always going to be that one neighbor that doesn't like the extra traffic you generate, and you know, that one neighbor that's always looking for a fight anyway and we've got one of those.

But in general everyone else—our next door neighbor just loves it. You know, her kids come over and they take part [in the farm]. You know they're not kids any more, but they come over and they are part of our farm family. They come over and have meals with us and are very much involved in what we do. We have a neighbor across the street who actually lets us use part of her land to farm on. You know and there are a few other neighbors who come down to our Sunday market.

There is not a big buy-in from this neighborhood, because, really, frankly, there are not the demographics that have become aware of organic [food] and have made it a priority in their life. So there is some participation, but not large. Most participation comes from other neighborhoods, from Carrollwood, from South Tampa, from Seminole Heights, Pinellas [County].

WM: If you don't mind (clears throat)—Excuse me. Tell me about the contentious neighbor. What kind of issues do they bring up?

RM: I—it could be anything. Really. I mean, we're not the only neighbor he fights with.

WM: Okay. I'm not asking you to name names, but I am curious about—

RM: We're not the only neighbor he fights with. You know, it can be any little thing. Somebody parks out in the street even though he runs his car waxing business in the street. You know, he [thinks he] owns the street. (laughs) It's that sort of thing.

It's not—you know, we've been very conscious of trying to get people to park on the other side of the bridge. Um—even the fact that, that bridge is there, has been a contention because it's brought pedestrian traffic into the neighborhood. It's made it more of a neighborhood, but some people like dead-end street feel. So I would say more traffic than anything [else].

WM: What are some of the other steps you take to accommodate residential neighborhoods around here? You said you try to ameliorate the traffic problem.

RM: Yes, we have—you know we have 98 percent of our traffic come in from Hanley [Road]. So therefore it avoids the neighborhood. They use the pedestrian bridge to access the farm. So that's the big one.

Other than that we're pretty isolated. We don't really affect the neighborhood much, especially since everything is coming in from the commercial side.

WM: Well—um—the farmers I spoke with in eastern Hillsborough County talked about people would complain about the aroma of a farm.

RM: Uh-huh

WM: The real (laughs) smells of a farm.

RM: Composting, animal waste.

WM: Yeah, animal wastes and such.

RM: Yeah, we haven't had any kind of issues brought up on that regard. Of course where we do our composting is pretty isolated. It's surrounded by schools and it's buffered by the rest of our farm from the neighborhoods. It's on the other side of the creek.

So, you know—one time we were doing honey on the other side of the creek and the school over there complained about the beehives. Not that anyone got stung. Just someone saw them there and thought it could be a problem for the kids. (laughs)

WM: The location of the compost area was that—were you all thinking about accommodating the neighbors or did it just happen by a good accident?

RM: I think it is just the best spot for all of those reasons. It's kind of isolated and just works good there.

WM: Okay, 'cause the farmers I spoke to [said] that was one of the complaints they had and they took steps to accommodate their neighbors. So I was curious about what you did to accommodate your neighbors.

RM: Well, we haven't had any complaints on aroma.

WM: Well that's good. That's good to know.

What about—tell me about how you talk to your neighbors about the farm so they won't have any fears. What do you tell them?

RM: Well—in general I kind of have a good neighborly relationship with most of the neighbors anyway, so I just invite them to come out on Sundays, to our market—when it is open. And that's about it. The lady next door, she has us come over and pick all of her fruit from her trees, so she doesn't have to mow [over] them, when they fall.

We've always had a real good relationship, her and I. She's a single woman so she has always felt good about having somebody next door she could call in case of an emergency. But really that's the closest relationship I have. The other neighbors, next to her is a church, which is quite large. So there's several lots before even the next neighbor past the church.

On the other side—it's—I have the woman across the street who is actually part of our operations. She's part of our family. She's a Vietnamese lady—and—she's part of our family, you know, pretty much.

And the guy next to her, she fights with him endlessly as well.

WM: (laughs) Is he the guy that fights with everybody?

RM: Yeah. He's kind of looking for a fight.

WM: Well some folks are put together that way.

RM: Right.

And then the house next to him—no one ever stays there long because it's a “flood house.” It floods about every four years and the people who bought it realize that and then they move.

WM: Okay.

RM: (laughs) So, no one ever stays there very long.

The house next to that is one of the new homes that's been built and it hasn't sold. It's very strange. They've got a lot that's probably three or four hundred feet deep and they built the house twenty feet from the road, with no driveway. So it's got a character flaw that makes it hard to sell.

And it's high priced. They priced it for the old market, so its been sitting there a year and hasn't even been sold.

The couple of houses next to that—well there is a house next to that and that fellow I've never really gotten to know. All the houses—those next two houses I never really have never gotten to know those people.

The next house down is kind of the cracker looking house. He's a nice guy. I've gotten to know him. He comes over once in a while and chats.

And the next several houses down, I know the people in there and have good relationships with them. You know, even if the farm wasn't here I'd probably have the same relationship with them.

WM: Well what about working with the county and city planners to have agriculture right here in Tampa.



RM: Well, we've had some—relationship with Hillsborough County. Not so much with the planners but—Hillsborough County actually purchased a three or four acre piece of land [in Carrollwood] for us to farm on. And that land is sitting there.

What happened is they purchased the land. It's going to be part of the County's Parks and Recreations Department. So they purchase the land as part of—a—part of a—

Really the whole drive for buying that piece of land came from the Carrollwood Homeowners Association. 'Cause the county was going to sell it. They didn't want it to get sold to developers to have more traffic and more this and more that.

So they convinced the County—they put together conceptual management plan, to buy this and that we would start a community farm there.

The County said fine and spent half a million bucks, for three (laughs) or four acres.

WM: Wow.

RM: They bought it. So we met with the County Parks and Recreation Department's new director, Mark Thornton. He said, "No problem."—you know? "We can fund this as long as it is under three hundred grand, no problem."

So we put a conceptual management plan together; came in at \$180,000.00. We gave it to him. He said, "Well, you know, things have tightened up. The soonest we can do anything is 2011." (laughs) So it went from "no problem"—

You know it's a onetime cost which for a county park, that's a rare thing. When they start a new park, there is going to be salaries, there's going to be maintenance. Where this would be a onetime cost and from there on out it would be our burden.

WM: Uh-huh.

RM: You know it's just them putting in bathrooms, a building, electric, a well and whatever they call those things—a pre-fab home—modular home—ah—you know—a Katrina Home, for a care taker to stay in. A tractor, just a few basic odds and ends.

So they backed off of the "No problem; we can do this," to, "we can't do this right now; get in line." So that's where that's at. We got a piece of land there. The County's bought it for us to use—But I don't have a hundred-eighty grand to start up a new farm.

So that has been our experience with the county up to now.

You know—the County Extension Service, we've had some experience with them. They held—this was a field trip visit for their last in-service training. The in-service training is a state-wide training [program] for extension agents. So they brought a bunch of them out here, back in January, as part of that in-service training. That was good. They know we're

here and they occasionally refer people here and occasionally refer people here to me for consulting services.

And that's about the extent of it. We haven't really gotten involved with county planners. And—

How do we go off the record?

WM: I can turn this off.

RM: Yeah.

*pause in recording*

WM: But anyhow, I've turned the recorder back on.

So your relationship with county planning has been very comfortable, comfortable and minimal. Like I said we actually have people—members [of Sweetwater Community Farm] that are county planners. We have people that are members who have run for county—government. We had a mayoral candidate that was a member.

WM: Uh-huh.

RM: So we've had lots of people out here—You know I've had county commissioners call me and you know, ask my opinion on things.

WM: If you don't mind, could you tell me about when the county commissioners call you and what kind of information they are trying to get.

RM: Well, Kathy Castor called me. At one point, on the other side of Hillsborough Avenue, there's a thirty-five acre tract, right behind those apartments, across from Pipo's [Restaurant]. And next to that is a ten-acre tract and to the south of that is a twenty-acre county park.

On the other side of that of the creek, from the other side of that thirty-five acre tract, there was another ten-acre tract and then to the west of that there was a five-acre county park.

WM: Uh-huh.

RM: So I submitted a proposal to Swiftmud<sup>1</sup> [Southwest Florida Water Management District] and ELAPP [Environmental Land Acquisitions and Protection Program] and everybody that I could get on board with Hillsborough County to create a seventy-five acre county park, right here on the creek. Spent a lot of time at it, and forgot about it.

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<sup>1</sup> Swiftmud is the unofficial nickname of the Southwest Florida Water Management District. The official acronym is SWFWMD.

Then a few years later Kathy Castor called me and said, “Well, I came across this idea that you submitted and I don’t know if you are aware of it, but this grant has [been] approved.” In the meanwhile the land’s been sold. It’s been several years, so it was no longer viable.

But the wheels of government just didn’t move [quickly] enough and it’s a shame, ‘cause it’s a beautiful piece of land. A lot of it is still [undeveloped], but it’s all been sold and got intended purposes.

One [lot] has already been built on. They built a school, which is not bad. The other thirty-five acres have been bought by a school. And that ten-acre piece is just a gorgeous piece [of land]. The County really should buy it and add it to that park. It’s **just gorgeous!**

And—um— but any way, she had called me for that.

And then ten years ago, 1997—when did you arrive in Tampa?

WM: We got here in December of 2004, so we’ve not been here that long.

RM: Well in 1997, something pretty prolific happened. They found three Med Flies [Mediterranean Fruit Flies].

You know what Med Flies are?

WM: The—Mediterranean—

RM: The Mediterranean Fruit Flies.

WM: They infect fruit.

RM: Right. And all hell broke out. They sprayed two hundred square miles of the metropolitan Tampa area [from the air], including playgrounds full of children from the air.

Just a horror story. The farm became the rallying place for all of the people who were against this. And there were so many people who were really upset. Their kids were getting [sprayed].

People who had children who were ill had gone to all of this trouble to remove toxins from their household and they’ve got helicopters flying over spraying their houses and yards and everything.

So, immediately thousands of people started getting involved with this organization called CRAM, Citizens for Responsible Alternatives to Malathion. Within weeks there

was thousands of people stepping up contributing to a legal campaign and we challenged the spray.

We actually got the spraying stopped. It was the first time history that a Med Fly emergency spraying program had ever been stopped. And—uh—

We became a political force. You know, 'cause we were a base of thousands of people. So all of a sudden, politicians were calling and wanting to meet with us, to hear our complaints and things like that. So that was another point in time where I got an opportunity to meet a lot of politicians; Commissioners, state government representatives and all kinds of bureaucrats.

WM: And how did you use that opportunity to influence land use planning?

RM: I don't think we used that opportunity to influence land use planning at all. We were just trying to get that craziness stopped.

WM: Okay. So you were more concerned with the Malathion than—pushing that any further.

You said that the acres were across from Pipo's?

RM: Pipo's Cuban Restaurant

WM: Okay.

RM: It's still there. It's a beautiful piece of land. It's been bought by Berkley Preparatory School that owns the piece to the west, across the creek. They plan to put administrative offices and that sort of thing there.

WM: What about the city and county tax structure? How has that affected the farm?

RM: Well, we have a Green Belt Exemption. So we're not totally under the radar. But one of the things it seems like (laughs)—I almost hate to say it and become a buzzing fly. The Green Belt Exemption Office doesn't talk to the other departments. You know, if you're a legitimate farming operation they give you a Green Belt Exemption and they don't look at whether you're zoned for agriculture or residential or whatever. So we acquired a Green Belt Exemption way back in '96 or something and have had it ever since.

So we're paying—you know—a very small tax on this land.

WM: Well, for the future historian who doesn't know what a Green Belt Exemption is, could you explain that?

RM: A Green Belt Exemption is a very low tax status for land that is used for agricultural purposes. So we pay pennies, compared to what residential land would be taxed at. So the tax on this land that we use for farming, you might be a \$100.00 a year. Where as if it wasn't used for farming it would be thousands, per year.

WM: What about working with zoning ordinances? Is that something you pay attention to?

RM: No.

WM: Just assume that since you all are here that they are not going to try and—

RM: Yeah. And you know we've been at it for twenty years. Uh—we have thousands of supporters of this farm. I think if one day the county came to us and said, you can't do this here, I think they'd be disappointing a lot of taxpayers who really support what we are doing.

We don't just farm here. We have schools that come out here. You know, hundreds of children come to this farm as part of our education program, every year. So we really are an asset to the community in a lot of ways.

I mean, we're very active in education. Over the years thousands of families and children have come out on the school field trips [that] we do. So—you know—I think the county would be shooting themselves in the foot if they raised any kind of questions about what we're doing here, because we're doing such a great thing. [That we're an asset to the county] is undeniable. Whether some bureaucrat sees it that way or not might be another story. But we're clearly one of the nicest things about this area.

WM: So you have a broad base of support within the—

RM: A very broad base of support.

WM: Okay. Well, this would be a good time to for you to tell me about what you do at Sweetwater Farms. You said it's more than just farming, so tell me about the whole operation.

RM: Well, we're a 501-C3. We're a not for profit. We're primarily education based. That's why we exist.

We do elementary school field trips. We have home schoolers that come out here on a regular basis. We have lots of kids; young adults come out here to do their service hours.

We have a Sunday Market that's just off the chart! It's one of the neatest things. Hundreds of people come every Sunday. We have a live music series at that market. We have vendors selling jewelry and selling organic clothing. It's really a cool thing.

We have this little organic fruit stand. We have, like I said, a music series that's really neat. We have a lecture and workshop series for adults. You know, for learning about soap making, for learning about medicinal herbs. Learning about all kinds of topics—you know—raw food preparation. Juicing workshops.

So we have a wide range—traditional Chinese medicine. A woman from China, who is a practitioner of acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine, she's an MD from China. She's planning on coming out and giving a workshop. So we have a really cool thing going on.

So it's much more than just farming. It's really creating community.

WM: And the field trips are to educate kids about farming practices?

RM: It's to show kids that a lot of [stuff] comes from the ground. It doesn't come from a package.

WM: (laughs) Okay.

RM: And they don't know that.

WM: Right. There are a lot of folks that don't know that.

RM: And if you look at the expression on these kids' faces they're like in awe that they just pulled a radish out of the ground.

WM: Tell me about the farming aspect here. I read something about—I recollect you're supplying garden stuff for one of the restaurants in town.

RM: Bern's Steak House owns a farm two miles from here. They own about—I don't know—twelve acres or something? So we manage that farm for them, as well as do some of our production on that land. It's on the corner of Waters [Avenue] and Benjamin [Road].

That farm has been there for thirty years, plus. It's surrounded by shopping centers and everything else.

WM: Wow. I just don't think of farms being in the city like that. That's really great.

RM: So we've been managing that farm for them, in exchange we use part of the land for our production as well.

WM: Okay. Tell me about the crops you raise here.

RM: Oh wow. We have sixty-five varieties of fruits and vegetables. You know fourteen varieties of lettuce; five varieties of kale; tomatoes and peppers and eggplant and basil. There is a whole list on our web site, I think.

WM: If you could, for the record, talk about the members and the subscription and how that works.

RM: Our subscription—we have a hundred and forty-five full memberships available. We sell about seventy of those and full memberships. The other seventy-five get split into two, so then we have a hundred and fifty half memberships.

So if you add seventy and a hundred and fifty, then you get—what? Two hundred and twenty?

WM: I'll do the math.

RM: Something like that, so that's how many families we have to sell memberships to.

Oh—there is something I didn't mention. It looks like we're going to be starting another farm this fall in Clearwater. There is a three-acre piece over there and the family that owns it; they are totally on board. They want to do this there.

So next Tuesday we have a board meeting to ask for final approval to move ahead. If that happens we're going to have a farm in Pinellas [County] next season.

WM: Hmm. That'd be great.

RM: Yes. It's already got irrigation. It's ready to roll. They live on it and they are ready to farm.

WM: Okay, so the people buy a membership, or a half membership. So what comes with that?

RM: It comes with either a weekly or every other week pick-up. They are able to come here and pick up a share of produce. And that share will depend on what's ready that week.

They show up in our barn. Everything is already harvested and there is a black board in there and it will say, "Today's share is..." And it will list how much of each of the different things that they can take. It's all in Rubber Maid containers and they bring their bag, or take a shopping bag that somebody has brought for recycling here and fill up [with] their stuff, check their name off the list and go home.

WM: So they get the produce—the food that's grown from here?

RM: They get what we grow. It's been harvested that day.

WM: How does it change through out the season, because—

RM: It usually starts with all of your cool sensitive crops. Your eggplant and basil and peppers and squash and all of that stuff starts first. Then your lettuces are following closely behind. Then all of your broccolis and carrots and cauliflowers and, you know cabbages. All of that stuff starts phasing in. and that's the staple all the way though till April.

Meanwhile, come spring, all of this other stuff comes back in. 'Cause all of those cold sensitive [plants] will stop by January. And then in January we're already planting those things in our greenhouse and they'll hit the ground [in] late February and then be available again in March, April, May. And then we phase out.

WM: So when they come [to pick up their food] are they just going to get—

RM: They'll get two grocery bags, sometimes three, just full of stuff.

WM: But it is a variety of things?

RM: It's usually fifteen items.

WM: Okay.

RM: Sometimes twenty, sometimes twelve.

WM: And am I remembering correctly that you all have cooking classes, or classes on how to prepare the food?

RM: Sometimes, sometimes—yeah—occasionally, We're planning to do a lot of other stuff. Like this season we want to start a movie series. So, you know, once a month we're going to have a monthly movie, out in the barn. We'll set up a screen and projector and speakers and have a potluck dinner. You know, we're trying to create community.

Our intern program, at the full height of our season we'll have eleven people here on the farm.

WM: Uh-huh.

RM: So we have a really neat farm family thing going on—you know—were we eat together regularly.

These interns come and go during the season. We require a three-month stay and so we'll have, out of the twelve, some of those are employees and some are interns. Some of those interns will come and go. So every time one leaves, we have a going away party. And the whole gang, will either eat in here or we'll set up on the porch. So that's our farm family.



And some of our farm members become part of that farm family, like two or three or four of them, during the course of the year. So they will come to those going away parties. It's a real rich thing that we do. It's real rewarding.

WM: Well talk to me about building community, because that's something—(phone rings)—If you need to take that I can pause this.

RM: Let me see who it is.

*pause in recording*

WM: Tell me why you think that's important and then how you go about doing that.

RM: Well, that was part of our intention from the beginning. There's three aspects to our intention, from the beginning—was to create an educational experience here from a working farm that gave people access to [freshly grown] organic food and also created a sense of community. And you know being in this big ugly city, I think it is a real important thing that people have a place to go, to feel a part of, to feel some ownership and just add quality to their lives. That's something we've been successful at.

WM: Uh-huh.

RM: When you come on those Sunday markets, you're going to see it's a special thing that we got going here. I mean we have people to walk on here for the first time and go, "This is so neat," and, "I never know this was here." [And so on—]

And so there are people that will move here, from out of town, and they are looking to hook into a group of people. It's really good that way. They hook into a like-minded group of people that they feel at home with.

And it really is the basis to what we do. That community part of our name is really a fundamental part of who we are and what we've intended to be from the beginning.

WM: I just want to make sure I understand you, but bringing people together and nourishing the soul, I guess, is as important to you all as—um—providing food to nourish the body?

RM: Correct. I've always said that I'd much rather just go buy my damn food. It'd be much easier. (laughs) But that's not what we're doing. We're really here to educate kids [and] connect them back to where their food comes from. And we've done a great job at that. And I think we're only just getting started.

The Patel Foundation was here yesterday.

WM: Okay.

RM: I think we're just getting off the ground on that. And—really—you know—giving people a place to be and a place for kids to run around outside and swing on a rope swing and get muddy and see chickens and pull carrots from the ground. All of that.

Kids don't have a place to do that.

WM: That's for sure.

RM: So we're looking for ropes. (laughs) Our rope swing is getting old. (laughs).

WM: You said that there are some people that want to start a similar operation in Clearwater?

RM: Uh-huh.

WM: Could you tell me more about the process for doing that? They've got the land—

RM: They've got the land and they've never farmed.

WM: Okay.

RM: So they've been doing all of their homework and really they are just interested in learning how to farm.

So they've come to us and we've put a proposal together, [a little management proposal] to start out slow this year. And they just want to be part of this operation. They're really not interested in having their own operation. A friend of mine said, "What happens if you get them started and then they go off on their own?"

It's like, "Well so what? Good!" (laughs) You know?

All we care about is that there is more food and there are more people doing this thing and it doesn't matter if they branch off on their own or not.

WM: Well, you've accomplished your mission if they get going on their own.

RM: Right.

You know—we've got more success than we know what to do with. So it's not really an issue for us. We're not going to be financially dependent on that operation. I don't want to make money off of them. I want to break even and to cover our costs and for people in Pinellas not to have to drive to Tampa get their darn organic produce.

WM: You said you put together a proposal. Could you tell me about that?

RM: Yeah, we put together a little budget. We did a conceptual management plan for this Carrollwood project that was quite comprehensive and we just borrowed a few aspects of that that.

The main thing is we put together a little budget proposal, how the finances would work, what part of our operation would we expect to be impacted by and the expenses to be covered by from the income of those memberships over at their facility. So—um—

We're real fortunate. We have a very talented board. We actually have a guy who is a financial expert. He works at a company that handles multi-million dollar deals every week. I'm amazed that he takes time to go visit this little tiny farm in Clearwater and help us put a budget together for it.

I went and had a meeting with him yesterday in the Barnett Bank Building on the thirty-third floor, overlooking the entire Tampa Bay. He makes his [office] there available for our meetings. It's real nice to have committed people like that who make some of their resources available to us.

WM: That does help.

RM: Aw, he's a genius. We've been missing that piece and he's come in and cleaned up our books. He's done financial analysis of our organization.

We're financially sound. Amazing (laughs) how we've ended up that way! It's just 'cause we've been frugal and we've been careful and now he's helped us to understand how to take it up to the next step.

We've consolidated all of our loans. You know—I funded the start up of this thing out of pocket. So now we've got a bank loan and we're establishing credit and all of those things.

WM: But you put together this proposal and was this just for the people who were providing the land or did you have to go to the county?

RM: No it's just to the people providing the land. We just put a proposal together so they would understand what finances are involved and how it is all going to work. So we'd be clear [about] how much money is going to come in from their operation and how it is going to be spent and how much they are going to end up with for working hard.

WM: And I ask these questions just so folks will have a clearer understanding of what's involved with something like this.

RM: Uh-huh.

WM: and I think this is going to become more important as time progresses.

RM: Yeah, you got to budget and you got to plan.

It's something I didn't know a whole lot about coming in, although I'd run my own businesses over the years, this is a little different kind of animal.

WM: Well, tell me about the board, if you don't mind. How many people are on it and what kind of—

RM: I'd say we've got about ten people on it. We got a great board. We got an attorney on our board. We got a financial analyst on our board. Which has been just—that's been the cream on the top. We have a strategic planner on the board. We have me on the board.

We've had someone from the Planning Commission for a while, on the board. We've had accounting people, over the years and different things. Great people! We have a surgeon on our board, a retiree from Tampa Electric also.

WM: And what kind of issues does the board deal with?

RM: We're trying to become more strategically oriented. In the past the board was kind of managing all the little operational details of our operation. But we have really been slowly moving away from that model and empowering our staff to—to manage those things and trying to get the board more geared on, you know, strategic planning and governance, more than operational decision making. So we're moving in that direction.

I think we are really poised, right now, to explode. We sell out [our memberships] before the season is even up; we sell next year out.

So I think our next step—you know we've had several foundations come to us and say, "We've heard about you and we know the good work you're doing. How can we collaborate?" I think that's our next step.

We've kind of hit a ceiling on what we can do on the farming end of things. And we've got that really happening. But now we need to grow the next step. We need to expand our education. We need to fund that expansion. I think we really are a great asset to the community that has not been fully utilized.

Right now it's only rich kids that come out here with the schools. It's really none of the kids in need. And I think that is something that's attractive to organizations like the Patel Foundation. They're targeting schools in need and so maybe they can be an impetus for funding and for trying to get the entities that be to see what a nice experience this is for the kids.

I mean there are forty agri-science programs in Hillsborough County and not one of them comes here. There are kids in forty schools and half of them are learning about farming in

books and in classrooms. And not one of them comes to this farm. There's one a thousand feet from here and they've never come to visit the farm.

WM: Have you approached them about—

RM: Not yet. But the teachers know we're here. And how I found out about it is there were kids fishing on the bridge one day and I started talking to them. They said, "Oh yeah, we take ag-science here at Webb [Middle School]." I said, "Oh really, I didn't know Webb had an ag-science program." And they said, "Yeah." And I said, "Does your teacher know about the farm?" And they said, "Yeah we told them."

You'd think he'd contact us, you know? (laughs)

*Side 1 ends; side 2 begins*

But it's odd, you know. There are other ag-science teachers that have contacted me. But they're busy studying for FCAT [Florida Comprehensive Academic Test], you know?

WM: Oh yeah. That's—

RM: They don't have time to go out and learn real lessons in life.

WM: Well, that's another industrial model for education, just like the industrial model for agriculture, I suppose.

RM: Right.

WM: Tell me—you've touched on it—but tell me what you see for the future here.

RM: I see for the future, us really expanding; number one—our education and not just for children—but just for all parts of our community. Through workshops, through wellness kind of workshops and workshops in every way.

Funding that is going to be the challenge. You know we're not professional fundraisers. We don't really know much [about that]. It's one of the shortcomings of our group right now is that we don't have experience in that area.

So I see education being the big—the big place for us to move; and also for our internships. Our internships are just a little bit, sort of non-structured. I'd really like to see them become more structured. See, [if] that became funded—

I've [graduated] six farmers out of this farm that are actually in other places of the country, farming now. In a few years that will be twelve. So we're having a really good impact through that program.

You know we got that guy that you just met, here from Turkey. He's spending a year here. He has a master's in agricultural engineering. He's incredible. He really loves what we are doing here. He's really part of our family. So that is the other part of it.

And then I could see us expanding to other farms, or helping other farms get started in Hillsborough County. I mean there is so much land that's just mowed that's owned by the county, that's owned by schools, owned by churches.

Eventually, we need to just quit mowing that land and start growing local food on that land. And I see us poised to be the technical entity that can assist in transforming some of these lands that are just planted in fringing Bahia grass, or Bermuda grass, getting converted to local community farming operations, you know?

WM: Well what kind of interaction do you have with mainstream agriculture? It seems like organic farming is still relatively new.

RM: Yeah, we don't have a lot of interaction and it is only recently that the Extension Service has really started showing interest. There has been kind of a changing of the guard. The Extension Service is heavily tied to the industrial model and they've been really resistant. In fact, they only recently forgotten how mad they were at me about the whole Malathion thing because, we really got into an adversarial relationship with them over that whole deal.

You know, I was on just about every television show you can imagine; CNN [Cable News Network] Dan Rather, Good Morning America. And [at] every point along the way I was saying [the] Extension [Service] is putting out false and misleading information.

I would pull out their own environmental assessment and show where they had given false information on television to people about the dangers related to this material they were spraying on people's pools. When it mixes with chlorine it's ninety times more potent. And they were telling people they could swim in their pools.

WM: (laughs) Well, they could swim in their pools, it's just that the side effects might be pretty bad.

RM: (laughs) Right. So we went head to head on [that] and I've been excommunicated for a while. And it's only recently that organic has become such a big economic animal, that [the] Extension [Service] has been courting us, because we're the "go to" organization in this area.

And I was real active internationally for a long time in my role. So I was known around the world. I was on NPR [National Public Radio] last week and I got phone calls from all over the country. "I heard you on NPR!" My friends in California and Seattle and Minnesota all heard me on NPR.

So I've been active internationally. I have a real good reputation. So, it's only recently that the Extension [Service] has started courting me, even though I've been working with Procter and Gamble. I've been working with Annie's Home Grown Naturals. I've been working with Dean's Foods, all of these conventional food operations.

They've been seeing the benefits of my expertise, but Hillsborough County has excommunicated me for a while. But now, and I think it's mainly cause there is a new group of young kids who are coming in over there and are more oriented [to sustainable agriculture] and have had exposure to the boom that's going on with organics and see the potential for small farmers.

WM: You've been kind of a prophet without honor in your own land.

M: Well, that's what moves. That's what moves these entities, it's money. And now that there's money in organic [farming], now there is interest. It wasn't a real commitment.

WM: You said you were on NPR, when was that?

RM: It might have been Monday or Tuesday. I can probably send you the link.

WM: So last Monday, or Tuesday?

RM: And I was just a person on someone else's show. It was a show about a singer that I'm friends with. She supports sustainable agriculture, so she will often invite farmers wherever she performs.

WM: Is that Adriane Young?? ?

RM: Adriane Young??.

WM: We heard her at—

RM: Skipper's [Smokehouse]?

WM: Yeah.

RM: I was there that night.

WM: Yeah, that was a good show.

RM: Yeah, I spoke that night. I don't know if you remember? If you were there at the very beginning of her show.

WM: I was there at beginning, but I can't say that I [remember]. I might have been going to the restroom or getting beer at that point.

RM: Yeah, she invited me up to speak. And they did a thing on NPR about her on Monday or Tuesday. So I had a little ten second blurb in the middle of the [program] they did on her.

WM: Ten seconds of your fifteen minutes [of fame]?

RM: Yeah, I've had my fifteen minutes.

WM: Okay great.

Well I've been talking to you here for about the past hour or so. Is there anything you want to comment on that I haven't asked about?

RM: No. I think [I] kind of covered the gamut. I hope I didn't gab too much.

WM: No, I think it's been a worthwhile conversation and I appreciate that. And I always remind people that the information you've shared with me will be deposited in the Special Collections of the University of South Florida's Library and available to scholars for research, so we need your permission for them to have access to it.

RM: You have my permission.

WM: Okay great. And it being government work, there is a release form I have to ask you to sign.

RM: That's fine.

WM: Okay—

RM: I sign my tax form every year.

WM: Okay great. Let me again thank you for talking to me and I'll shut [this thing off].

*end of interview*