Progressive Activists Oral History Project

Dr. Martha Norkunas, Project Director

Lightly Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Elizabeth Barger

Interviewer: Darby Campbell

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Transcriber: Darby Campbell

Darby Campbell: Do I have your permission to record?

Elizabeth Barger: Yes, you do.

DC: Thank you. And this is with Elizabeth Barger on November 16, 2017 in her home on the Farm in Summertown, Tennessee.

So the last time we spoke, I think that we ended right around the time you guys had just gotten here and established. Can you tell me about the logistics of early life? Some of the things, like you told me about showering- how you guys set up showers, you mentioned it to me today, but not while we were recording. Like what you guys did for electricity, for clean water, that kind of thing.

EB: Okay. Did I tell you that there was the big idea that we were going to wash all of our clothes in the creek?

DC: No. (laughs)

EB: Well we were. I don’t know who came up with that wonderful idea, (DC laughs) but we got here and the women said, “You have got to be kidding. We are not going to wash all of the clothes in the creek, plus it’s very polluting.” So that was the end of that one. I don’t think that lasted a day (laughs) after we got here. People were looking and saying, “What was the idea of that?” (laughs) Must have been the guys that figured that one out. (laughs) Because you know who is just going to end up doing the laundry.

Although, I have to say, all my family does their own laundry. I’m not one of those mothers that does everybody’s laundry. I do if it’s there, but they don’t want me to do their laundry- I don’t do it right.

DC: Kathy mentioned earlier today that when you guys were first established that the labor was very gendered.

EB: It was pretty gendered. It was sort of out of necessity, actually. Because women couldn’t get the kind of jobs that made money and the guys did bad housework. Although my husband is very good at it and actually does most of it now, does most of the cooking and cleaning and dishwashing, although I do the laundry, but he does his own laundry and then I do a lot of the family general laundry, towels and stuff like that. None of my sons like how I would do their laundry and I don’t mind.

I think it’s terrible when I hear sons bringing their laundry home after they’ve left the house and mama’s doing the laundry. I said, “You guys!” I’ve told women, I said, “I can not believe you’re doing their laundry.” Because they’re complaining, “Oh I hate it, I had to do his laundry.” You didn’t have to do his laundry, tell him to do it himself. He can use your washing machine if it is okay with you, although he shouldn’t, but I mean if he’s poor and he needs help- have him wash his own laundry and dry it and put it away. You know? You do not have to do that. What kind of training you’re doing- wives now have to work and- and if you’re working- I mean when I use to work off the farm and I worked long hours. I’d come home and have a hot meal and a back rub. You know? It was lovely and I would do that for him when he was working out. I’m skipping around.

DC: You’re fine.

EB: When we first got on the farm, we had to work off the farm to maintain even spending a dollar a day for everybody or ten dollars a day. We got by pretty cheap because we were raising a lot of our food. And we were not using a lot of store-bought fertilizers and things like that. We composted. After we built the soy dairy, you know, we composted a lot of that soy pulp. Although, sometimes people came and got it for their pigs. And we also used quite a bit of it for soy sage and other kinds of things that we made, which I really like.

DC: So, earlier you said that women couldn’t get work, and I assume that-

EB: Off the farm.

DC: -you’re meaning in general-

EB: Yeah.

DC: -just because of the climate of, culture-

EB: We had women that did a lot of the farming and did work with some of the building crews that wanted to do that. There weren’t a lot of women that wanted to, but there were some who were very good and did it. Nobody said you shouldn’t be working like that. It was just that I preferred to do my own childcare. Although I didn’t mind other people taking care of my babies and I didn’t mind taking care of other people’s babies. I didn’t want to do that all of the time. I wanted to have a pretty good handle on my kids, especially when they were little.

I enjoyed that kind of work too. I liked changing diapers, because I think if you do it right, you just get so much back from the kids. They’re so grateful to get out of all that ucky stuff and that you don’t uck it. That you don’t care what their shit is. You know? Like I think a lot of people get so icky about a kid’s shitty diapers, that it makes them feel bad. You know, because it’s something they’ve produced.

It’s like cats. Very often will shit on you because they like you. (DC laughs) We had a cat that had some kittens and I went and got the kittens and brought them here. She gave me this look! Of absolute gratitude and then went up and shit under my bed. (DC laughs) You know. And we had to talk to her about that for some time, to keep her from doing that, because that was- she thought that was cool. (laughs) Because cats are a different- you know- they have a whole different thing. (laughs) That they believe in.

People are like that too. That’s the thing that I think that a lot of people don’t understand. Like somebody may say things that are inappropriate, but you don’t get mad at them about it. You just tell them that it was inappropriate, then it is over. And if it isn’t over then you have to say it stronger, but you know, there’s some things that sometimes I think that we have a conservative- I think it must be human nature, that’s very picky about stuff that I think shouldn’t be any problem at all. But you know, that’s just me.

I’ve been called a liberal social psyche. (DC laughs) I think, “What the fuck does that mean?” You know? That that’s not cool? You know? I thought, “Well, I can get along with most anybody.” There are some things that I don’t get along with at all. There’s some people that will do stuff that I do not put up with. I guess, it takes a lot.

Like Carol, is absolutely right of me, politically. And I could care less. Because she needs help and she’s a nice lady. But she likes- you know, when she heard about tofu. She goes, “Ugh tofu no.” You know, like that. I said, “Have you ever eaten it?” “No.” “How can you dislike it so much when you don’t even know what you’re talking about?” You know? And then the girl who is with her son put tofu in spaghetti and she could just not believe it. She thought it was the worst thing she’d ever heard. “No Italian puts tofu in their spaghetti!” I said, “Well, if they’re vegetarian they might.” (both laugh) You know, so I made tofu salad for her yesterday and she loved it. She said, “What is this?” I said, “It’s tofu.” She says, “Oh, it’s good.” (laughs) And that’s the other thing that is nice about her. You know, I don’t hold it over her that she didn’t like it before. Because I’ve seen people not like it, but you know when she had a chance and she knew what she was eating, she would cop she liked it. And that’s really important I think. That people don’t take position. And I think that is one of the teachings that I think is very important. I know that it doesn’t always not happen, because we’re human.

And humans are into hierarchy. I’ve studied animals a lot. I’m- very serious study of the interactions of horse herds, because I’m a horseman. And you know, horses are very [hierarchic]. They have- they have a way that who’s the boss and who runs it. And usually it’s a mare, who runs the herd and the stallions the protector of the herd. And the stallion always pays attention to where the mare is going to go and who she likes and everything. She is the boss of the herd. She keeps it together, makes sure that they’re fed and watered. And that the babies are taken care of. And he makes sure that no other horses come up and mess with them, which is part of that thing. You know, bears and cougars and dangerous animals they stay away from. And he can- he’ll put his body in the way to protect them. And that’s how their hierarchy works.

And if you watch even the horse herds in a regular herd you can always tell who is- if you’re going to take them out in a bunch and go someplace- you go get the lead mare and then they’ll just stay with you. And like one time I came with a herd and had about 20 horses and we were going up through a snowstorm. And I rode one mare who was nobody. She was definitely low on the totem pole. And I had the lead mare out in front and I knew that she would go up where I wanted to go, because we were going up to the barn. And the other horses stayed up there and it was snowing so hard that I could hardly see the mare at the lead. And I could see all the horses, everybody was all staying together and we went up there and it was easy. Put everybody in the barn and made sure they had water, did all that stuff. But it was just easy because I wasn’t worried about them running off somewhere. And- which was- somebody was, “How could you keep that herd all together like that?” And I said, “They kept themselves together, you just got to know what they’re going to do. What their psychology is.”

Anyway, and people are like that too. And people choose hierarchies. And there’s people that you like and you think they’re kind of flakey. And there’s people that you don’t like, but you know they make good decisions. There’s all kinds of reasons that you set up how you’re going to behave around somebody. You might be more conscious of it, but I don’t think there’s a lot of- there’s a lot of people that aren’t conscious of it. The farm tends to be fairly conscious that way, but they also are human and they do things that I don’t agree with.

(footsteps on the stairs)

DC: I’m going to pause that.

EB: This is my son Jethro.

DC: Ok. So how do you think- I’m interested in your ideas about hierarchies and how they form. When you guys initially got here- was it Stephen-

EB: Stephen.

DC: What was his last name?

EB: Gaskin.

DC: He kind of was in charge of everything?

EB: Yeah. He was particularly in charge of material- of a spiritual plane. And social interactions at levels that he seemed to be a teacher about. As we developed a community, the community took over a lot of the material plane decisions. And a lot of the material plane decisions that Stephen made were really off the wall. And eventually people said, “Stephen, you shouldn’t be making those decisions.” Because- and then there were a lot of people who got into ego kind of agreements that Stephen was always right about everything. And that did bad things to his head too.

DC: What kind of- you said he made some really off the wall decisions. What kind of things do you mean?

EB: Oh like I think it was his idea that we were going to wash the laundry in the- in the creek. To say one of the most outrageous, off-the-wall things. And he just wasn’t- he just wasn’t one of those people that understood material plane things, but he was very good at spiritual things. And social interactions and was an excellent teacher. And I learned just amazing things from him that way. But-

DC: How were decisions made, whenever you guys first got here?

EB: Well, it was interesting, because the drivers of buses tended to be people that were on decision making committees. Like I was one of the drivers of buses and I was on one of the committees. But then, when I got pregnant, I wasn’t as interested in being in that-

DC: This was with Shelley?

EB: No, this was with Jethro.

DC: Okay.

EB: I had Liam when we came.

DC: You had Liam and he was like 2 or 3?

EB: He was- he turned 4 on the farm.

DC: Okay. And then?

EB: Then I had Jethro the year after we got here.

DC: Okay.

EB: Then I had Shelley about 4 years after that. And then I had Kelly about 2 years after that. And I had one in the middle between Jethro and Shelley that I lost.

DC: I’m sorry.

EB: And so, that was- that’s an interesting story. (laughs softly)

DC: Would you like to tell that now or later?

EB: Sometime.

DC: Okay.

EB: I’m not sure that now is the time to tell it.

DC: So you said that when you got pregnant with Jethro that you- did you take a backseat? Did you mindfully take a backseat or would they- like, “You’re pregnant” and more of a pushing?

EB: No, it was that I wasn’t as competent physically in some ways and it was easier not to. I think it was more-

DC: You had a lot going on.

EB: Yeah and I didn’t want to do a lot of the things that I had been doing before.

DC: Like what?

EB: I was doing a lot with building the kitchens, the community kitchens. And I went ahead and was working on those and I was also doing the horse crew and people began to worry when I got really pregnant about me riding. But of course it didn’t hurt for me to ride. I could have ridden, but you know about that time I was about to pop- I withdrew to nest. I wanted to make sure everything was clean and ready to go. We were still living in a bus at the time.

DC: Is this the one that you guys had remodeled to be more of a permanent kind of home? Or was it-

EB: No.

DC: Was this the one-

EB: This was- this was the one we came in on. And we took the body off of it. And it became a truck that ran for several years doing really heavy work, because it was really a good old bus. And-

Let’s see, was I living? There were several different other buses during the time that we were- Well, we did the gate a lot. One time we-

DC: What does that mean?

EB: started to build the new gate.

Gatehouse? After we bought the second 700 acres, we set up a new gate in the place where it is now. And that house we hauled in, then we bricked it. It was a little wooden house when we brought it in here, at the great amusement of all the neighbors. (DC laughs) They actually said, “When y’all hippies going to bring anymore of those in?” It really kept people interested and excited about things. (both laugh)

DC: Just moving houses around.

EB: Yeah.

DC: Would you say that you- you were kind of talking about how- work in relation to the early decision making groups. Were the people who made the decisions the people that participated in working and building in the community? Or?

EB: Yeah. Yeah pretty much. I was on the membership committee at the beginning and people said, “we don’t need as many people to be on the membership committee” and they decided that I shouldn’t be on the membership committee along with some other folks. And I didn’t mind.

And then I just go busy. I was really always working hard. I did a lot of different things. I helped develop the community kitchens. And I worked in the fields and I worked with the horses. And I did a lot of facilitating work. I’ve always been a facilitator. I helped get people to doctors visits and job interviews and just running errands. I was excellent at that. That’s when I was driving the- at one time the yellow Cadillac. But I also had- I was a good driver so I got to- when we had things like that- I always got the better cars. (DC laughs) Which was always fun. I didn’t mind.

DC: Can you talk about your relationship- and when I say your- the relationship of community members of the farm to the surrounding area? Earlier today you said that you try not to go off the farm if you can help it, but is that kind of a normal attitude or is that just you? Or?

EB: That’s periodically me. I’ve always- there were times that I’d be gone more than I was here. Particularly when I was very active politically. And when I was working on peace and justice issues. And I’m still doing that, but I do a lot more on the computer. Except my computer now is getting so weird, so I’m going to have to figure out a way to make the money so I can get another computer. Because I’m going to need another computer. I had a hard time getting my paper out this time. And I only got three pages. And I could probably have done five pages this time. But probably a relief for people because there wasn’t all that (DC laughs) much.

DC: What’s the name of the paper?

EB: The Farm Freedom Press. I’m probably going to- I’m not sure what’s happening with my printer, but it did not do well today.

DC: How long have you been putting the paper out?

EB: For about ten years at least. I was trying to think. It’s been almost 20 years come to think about it. I think I’ve been doing it since almost 2000. And that makes it 17 years and I think I was doing it before then.

DC: Wow.

EB: And I think I did another part of it before really before then. So, in the beginning there were a couple of other people that did it too and a woman who use to live here, was a really good writer, did the Farm Net News and she actually produced it off the farm but people would send her things. And that was- she did a really nice paper. And another woman- Gwenelle Desmukes did it for a long time. Then when she gave it up that’s when I took it over full-time, all the time. I did one series of papers that were like- came out once a month. And I ran them like a paper and I went down to a paper printing place in Ardmore, Tennessee- right on the Alabama border. And I would print it there. And it was a regular sized paper with about four sometimes five sheets.

DC: How often do you-

EB: And that was a monthly.

DC: Okay.

EB: And then I decided that monthly, after I took it over for Gwen and we were doing it bi-weekly, twice a week- no, bi-monthly. Every two weeks. Because so much was happening. We should be putting it out every week because we want to stay current and that was after- ok now let’s see- after the change over. So that would have been in the 80’s.

DC: Oh, wow.

EB: Yeah. Because that was probably about 19- Well, 1990 is when I started working for the coalition on domestic violence, so I probably started doing the paper so solid, about ’95, ’96. If I remember right now. Because I had done you know, periodically or some parts of it, you know. But when I really took it over where I was doing it weekly and really paying attention that I got it out on time- it must have been even before 2000. And I had started doing some of it seriously just after the change over and then I had to pull back a little when I started working full-time. Because I started- I helped develop a domestic violence shelter south of here. And then I helped set up, one, two, three, four domestic violence shelters in the area and also developed transition houses in Columbia and Murfreesboro and over in Centerville. We never did a transition house in Lawrenceburg. That’s the first one I did. And then I was also working on the state level with the coalition board, I was on the board.

DC: When was this?

EB: Huh?

DC: What time was this?

EB: This was about ’86 when I started that. And so from about ’86 to ’96 that was periodic- it was not- but after ’96 it was every week.

[00:27:13]

DC: What is it about- things that are happening on the farm or things that are happening-

EB: I try to keep it as much about what’s on the farm and I also feel that it is relevant to talk about things that effect the farm. And I also- let’s see- 9/11 was that 2000?

DC: It was 2001.

EB: 2001, yeah. Well, that’s when I got involved with Code Pink. But I didn’t get involved with Code Pink until 9- ’03? Was that when the Iraqi War started?[[1]](#footnote-1) When was that?

DC: I’m not entirely sure. I apologize. It-

EB: Something around there. And that’s when I got really involved with Code Pink. And you know, I feel like, you know, Peace Roots Alliance we started at 9/11. And then after that I felt that Peace Roots was like one of the co-founders of Code Pink. Me and Judy Meeker, we’re very active. And she started More Than Warmth. Have you heard of More Than Warmth?

DC: I haven’t.

EB: Yeah, that’s a- She was a teacher and after 9/11, you know, the kids talked about, you know, those Afghan people and she said, “Yeah, you know, it’s getting really cold there and there’s a bunch of kids there. You know, we ought to make them quilts.” And they got interested in the human part of it and to reach out. The meme of the More Than Warmth is that it’s not political and it’s not violent. It’s what kids think- friendly things. They got to where they were saying, “Don’t put peace signs on it.” Because peace signs are political. And it’s true, you know. No praying hands, no rainbows with the towers, no bombers, no guns, things like that, just things that make you feel good. Childish things- hearts and kids would- would take little squares like this (holds hands to show about an 8” square) and they would draw a picture.

One of them who I thought was so friendly was this little boy, who hadn’t- who wasn’t going to do it. And he’s sort of around the edges- “I’m not going to do it.” And she said, “Well, you don’t have to do it. Go into the other room and do something else.” And then he came back with this picture of five or six kids, all different heights and colors. Saying, “We can all be friends.” And they were all holding hands. And I just- every time I hear that story and I see that little drawing that he did, I just- it chokes me up, because I really was- the feeling that More Than Warmth has.

You should look it up sometime. Because I could go on and on. It’s still going on. We’ve sent quilts to Bethlehem, quilts to Iran, quilts to South America, quilts to Katrina, quilts to the Pine Ridge reservation, quilts to Standing Rock. You know, we’ve sent quilts all around the world where there’s stress and natural disasters and wars and conflict- where people need. And we- she does a lot with kids that are rescued from slavery. And it’s a good program and it’s still happening. I think we’ve involved almost with 20,000 children.

DC: Interesting.

EB: And- so.

DC: I’m really curious about the relationship- where you’ve kind of talked about you guys as a community set apart from what the rest of the world is doing, but then you also seem very engaged in reaching out to engage, to advocate, to assist, to help other parts of the world.

EB: Well the thing is- the part that I always took seriously, was at the front of the caravan was “out to save the world.” And I thought, “Well, what else is there to do? I mean, it needs it.” (laughs)

DC: Is that- was that like the motto? Or?

EB: It was that part of the motto. And some people thought that it was a little arrogant (DC laughs) that we were going to save the world. You know I think that’s a – that’s a useful thing to try to do because the world’s in really bad shape. And it’s getting- I was talking to Stephen once- I said, “Stephen, I’ve been doing this for over 50 years. I’m a really serious about making things better. It’s looking worse.” (laughs) And you know he said, “Well, what if we weren’t doing it?” And I remembered the reason that I do it is because of the twelve avatars. You know, there’s a Jewish story that there’s twelve avatars that are keeping the world together. And they’re righteous people. And I thought, “Well, you never know when you might be one of them, but you better be ready.” And so you never know. I may have been one at one time, or you may have been, but there’s sometimes when you just do the right thing and you know that’s what- or you’ve seen people do just the right thing exactly sort of out of the blue and it seems to click. And so you know, I think, “Well, even if I never am and I never know I am, I’m still going to be ready to do it.” So that’s why I keep doing it, in my imperfect and small way. (laughs) You know, because I figure that you never know. You just never know. And I like that story in the bible about the nine handmaids and there’s some that get their stuff together and they’re ready for when the call comes. And then there’s the others that are goofing off and then they get there and the gates are closed and they can’t get in. Well, I think that’s kind of a bullshit story, because I don’t think anybody should not have the gates open to them (both laugh) when they’re coming to them. Still, I understand what that means. So-

DC: How do you feel your advocacy and your mission to save the world- life on the farm, as a community, how do you think that those things are connected?

EB: Well, it use to be that I felt that there were more people into it than there are now, but I can’t stop. You know? I don’t know if I’m just obsessive, or what. But it would be a lot easier not to care, but I can’t help it, I care. So I think, “Well, there it is. You just have to live with it.” (laughs) And I think, you know, there’s time when I feel like I really should be doing this thing, but I don’t have the time or the money to make it. Like I really wanted to go to Standing Rock, but I was just getting over my injuries and I knew to go out there in the kind of- I understand the kind of stress that goes on with that kind of weather. I’ve been in that kind of weather. And I knew I would just be a problem, I wouldn’t be able to help and I would probably get carried out on a stretcher and cause somebody to have a lot of problems.. So, I’m not going to go into that unless I’m pretty sure that I can slog through the mud and the snow. And the freezing winds and make it. And when I know that I can’t, I don’t go. (both laugh) because that’s ridiculous. Why should someone have to take care of me?

DC: Right.

EB: And there were other things that I could do. Which I did, which I do. You know. I want to go out and ride with Winona LaDuke, you know. I just think- I just think it would be so much fun and it would be useful, you know. And ten years ago, I probably would have done it. And you couldn’t have stopped me. But at this point, I don’t really have access to a horse, I don’t have access to a horse trailer, I don’t have access to the money to carry that kind of thing together, and if I did, I’d be gone. (both laugh) I’d be there.

DC: What do you-

EB: I’d go out this spring. But I probably won’t because I know what I’m capable of. And I’m strong and I’m active and I’m pretty sharp, even though I’ve noticed that I forget things more than I did 10, 20 years ago. And I’ve always been a little flaky so I figure it’s ok, but I’m not going to go and be a burden. So I try to do what I know I can help out doing.

And I use to wash this floor on my hands and knees and scrub it with a scrub brush. I don’t do that at all anymore. I barely do that. I do mop it occasionally. And that kind of thing, but I use to be really picky. (laughs) And now I realize that was silly. (both laugh) but we also had more people here. When we had- and it wasn’t here, but it was in other houses, where there was like you know, 20 kids and a-

DC: How long have you lived in this house?

EB: How long? Since, about 20 years. Yeah, it was since the change over. That was in ’85. Yeah, we were here- we moved here- well I don’t remember.

DC: That’s alright.

EB: Right, but it’s been a while. But it was after ’85.

DC: That’s 30 years.

EB: Yeah, well, I say- I think it was closer to ‘9- let’s see. Yeah. It was probably around ’90 when we moved in here, because Liam was a senior. Jethro was just starting, he was a freshman or maybe the last year in middle school. So it was about like that.

DC: You mentioned a couple of different advocacy groups- Peace Roots, the Coalition for Domestic Violence-

EB: Yeah.

DC: -why- in addition to other ones if you’ve been involved- Why have you chosen the organizations that you did to get involved with? What led to that?

00:40:01

EB: Well, with domestic violence I use to work on the gate a lot, and we would get women calling in, saying, you know, they were afraid of their husbands or lovers and they needed a place to go. And they wondered if I knew where there was a shelter and I didn’t. So, I started to call around and I found that they were starting one down in Lawrenceburg. So, I went and talked to them and found out what they needed and we had a fund in Plenty [International] for women’s issues and I said, “Let’s use this to help start this shelter.” So we did.

DC: Were these women calling from living on the farm or from, like, surrounding communities?

EB: From the surrounding communities, sometimes even from out of state, because they had heard about the farm and wondered if we’d- well, we were too well known. We had guys coming here all the time with their gun racks saying, “Uh, I think my wife ran off to the hippy camp and I wondered if- she took my pickup and my dog-“Or things like that, you know? I’m being facetious, but they came and we had a couple of times there were guns down here- being threatened to find a woman. Somebody waving a gun around so we realized that we were too well known. That we could not be a safe haven for that kind of thing- for violent people will be violent wherever they are- they don’t care how non-violent we are.

So anyway, so I started to look around and see if there were any shelters and I found this one. And then I helped start one in Columbia. And I helped start one in Centerville. And I worked in Murfreesboro to start the transition house that is there and worked with that group. And I also worked- Then I got involved with the state coalition and became a member of the board. And did a lot of the judicial advocacy work with that and help develop legislation. And that kind of thing.

DC: What kind?

EB: And I worked also nationally with police training. I was the law enforcement’s training-

DC: Really?

EB: -coordinator for domestic and liability issues in the state in ‘90-‘92.

DC: What kind of legislation did you work on?

EB: A whole lot of the ins and outs of orders of protection. Really did a lot of the first work on orders or protection for Tennessee women. And worked with the developed police trainings for handling domestic violence. And wrote- helped write the training for the post that is still being used- the time that I was doing that very actively, we trained over 6,000 officers. And it wasn’t just me, but I was with that group. I was also on the state domestic violence- what’s the name of it? It was- it was the state-mandated committee for domestic violence policy and procedure. And then I was also in the state-mandated development of batterers’ programs. Which I got on on-purpose because I did not want them to be considered, cures or social work things. That it had to- I was instrumental in saying that you couldn’t give, for a documented- for a licensed batterers program could not give graduation degrees, because that’s silly. It’s like somebody’s a robber, when you get through, you’re out of prison- then you get a little certificate saying you graduated from prison? No! These women- this is a criminal action and it is conscious. This is not because they’re crazy. It’s because they’re brought up improperly because this society says it’s okay to beat your wife. And so, you know, I never saw too many- I’ve heard of some batterers that changed and kept changing and were cool, but I can- I don’t need all of my fingers on one hand to count those and I can’t verify them either.

DC: Right.

EB: Right. I just heard.

DC: How do you- how did you go about developing the language, the standards,- what you guys taught to police officers- where did that knowledge spring from?

EB: Well, we also looked at all the training programs across the state and the nation. We used a lot of the curriculum from the black training- police training for domestic violence and the national judges police training, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and the Department of Justice. We went through all of those getting- setting, you know, seeing what the standards were, setting up our own standards from our own experience. Wrote out things that are pretty well admitted, are shown to be some of the best trainings in the country. Along with Massachusetts is well known for some of their things and some in California. Actually, Tennessee has some of the best laws on domestic violence and police training and police responsibility in the nation, so I was proud of that.

DC: You should be, that’s wonderful.

EB: Yeah. I actually have a little certificate from the Department of Justice for doing good work. (laughs)

DC: You definitely saved somebody’s world, even if it is not the whole world.

EB: I- I’ve known, personally-

DC: (Unclear)

EB: Hi. (Elizabeth’s husband, Joe, enters room)

This is my husband.

DC: Hello, Joe.

EB: This is Darby.

Joe Barger: Who?

DC: My name is Darby.

JB: Darby.

EB: Yeah, she’s doing an interview with me.

JB: Don’t believe anything she says.

(Darby and Elizabeth laugh)

EB: Well that’s probably a good thing. You know? Take with a grain of salt. (laughs)

DC: I’m interested in your experiences as you experienced them, so you know.

EB: Yeah.

DC: So you can speak to that.

So that’s- Can you- What was the name of that one again? The Domestic Violence Coalition?

EB: The Domestic- Well, right now they’ve changed it. It was the Tennessee Task Force Against Domestic Violence. And then they changed it to the Tennessee Coalition Against Domestic Violence and then we gathered together with sexual assault programs. So, now we are the Tennessee Coalition to End Domestic and Sexual Violence. (sound of fridge opening) Yeah, so now it’s actually- It’s gotten pretty strong. I’m really proud to see how it has carried on. And one of my best friends is the director of that and we’ve been working together for over thirty years and she is an amazing woman.

DC: Does your connection with Code Pink have anything to do with that affiliation?

EB: Not really.

DC: Okay.

EB: That came out of- out of the wars.

DC: Okay.

EB: And-

DC: Why Code Pink as opposed to any other anti-war advocacy group?

EB: Well, through Peace Roots started with 9/11, when we saw that it was going to be crazy. And we knew that there were a lot of groups and people-

DC: And what does Peace Roots do?

EB: Well, we basically are into gathering together with other non-violent groups to support peaceful action, it has to be non-violent, to end the root causes of war and there’s a whole lot of that because we do a lot of ecological things. We were very active with Standing Rock, along with Plenty [International]. And we work a lot with Plenty. Do you know what Plenty is?

DC: I don’t, but I can write it down and look it up.

EB: Plenty international is an NGO[[2]](#footnote-2) that we’ve developed here. It’s worked around the world where there is wars and natural disasters, has worked at the village level to set up what the people need to survive. When we go into a program, we don’t go in to say, “Here, we’re going to do this for you.” We say, “What do you need?” And then we’ll help you get it, which is, you know, when there was an earthquake in Guatemala, two of our carpenters hitchhiked down there with their tools and a backpack. And they saw the Mennonites had sent down tons of materials and nobody knew what to do with them, but our guys did. So they started to organize it (Shelley coughs in background) and we sent more people down.

And we sent some midwives down and nutritional workers. And farmers, to learn from the farmers down there. And we developed soybeans that would grow in high altitude and developed a soy dairy that’s still in operation by the people. You know, they took it over . We gave them the technology and they took it over and they are making it prosper. And it was a way to get protein into a lot of the kids that were starving. And made the situ- made the kids healthier. And the mothers. And the fathers. And we built- We rebuilt over a thousand houses and several hundred city centers. And helped communities develop water systems. And all kinds of things like that. That was like pretty much instigated by the people saying, “Well, we need water. We need housing. We need a place to gather.” You know? And things like that. We worked on sanitation and nutrition and women’s- We work a lot with women’s issues in a not a real political way. I mean, it’s interesting, because the men who work on it are very feminist, but not in a political manner. You know what I mean? It’s very sweet and nutritional. And friendly kind of thing. Paying attention to what people really need. And what they want and that it is ok to have them want it and to get it. (laughs) And so, we’ve done a lot with the Pine Ridge river- Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, helping them build real vegetable gardens, because, you know, it is really hard country.

DC: Yeah.

EB: And also build some straw bale housing and things like that, but it was- (papers rustling) The situation with the reservations is very, very oppressive. It’s very difficult. Anyway, I won’t- That’s a whole other story.

DC: I’m interested in hearing about any of the groups that you’re involved with. Is Plenty a local or a national- what is the base of that?

EB: Well, it was developed here by farm folks, but we have offices in, and also Peace Roots, has offices in California.

DC: Oh, okay.

EB: And we’ve worked- We have projects in Libya and Haiti and the Dominican Republic and Mexico and Guatemala and Belize and-

DC: in what capacity do you serve?

EB: I’m sort of the grunt. I do whatever we need to have happen. I help with tabling, taking information out. I do as much online as I can. I don’t do as much as I use to. I use to do a lot of the designs for t-shirts and things like that. Just lots of different things. I did a lot of graphics, or I have done. I’m starting to pull back from that. I want to get back into painting directly. And now that my computer is getting weird, it is very hard to do anything. (laughs)

DC: So did Peace Roots or Plenty come first for you?

EB: Plenty did. Plenty we started in ‘74.

DC: Oh! So it’s established.

EB: Also won a- (running faucet) What’s the- It’s sort of like Nobel Prize for poor people?

DC: I’m not sure.

EB: I’ll remember in a minute. You’ll have to excuse me.

DC: You’re fine.

EB: We won national and international awards for the work we’ve done.

DC: That’s awesome.

EB: And Peace Roots, not so much, but like we did- We did hundreds of billboards saying, of a billboard I designed called, “Peace is patriotic” with a simple dove in red, white, and blue and that was it. It was a very simple thing. And we were trying not to be too political and a lot of billboard companies picked it up for us. So we did- We did the first one, was “Peace is patriotic” and we must have did- done several hundred for about $6,000.

DC: Wow.

EB: And then, our most expensive and biggest one- It was about twenty-four feet long and about fourteen feet high and it was- It is actually on the roof of the dome. Because after- And Clear Channel set it up for about ten years in the [San Francisco] Bay area. And put it up almost everywhere. I mean on the bridges going across from Marin to Oakland. They did all over the bay area. That was up from, oh, from the 9/11 to the Iraq War. Maybe ten years ago they finally- The guy who was doing it went to someplace else and the woman that took it over let it run for a couple more years and then said, “Well, we are not going to do this anymore.” (laughs)

So we brought it back home and did another one, “Vote for a change,” which was from an old Flag- What was his name? Ron Flag or somebody like that, did one that was “Wake up America, vote for change” it shows this woman, you know, with her asleep in a bed. (both laugh) So, I adapted that one for our message and changed it and modernized it a little. And we used that. And that got picked up and put up pretty cheap for a long- And we did a bunch of bus signs and shelter signs with that there. And it was pretty popular. And so that was- And we did some more, “Support the troops, bring them home,” but after a while it got more expensive and other- I think other people began to realize that they could do that. But we put out, for- I think we spent maybe over years about $30,000 and that was it.

DC: Wow.

EB: Over about five or six years. You know. Move On did one really bad billboard and it cost them about $100,000 and I said, “Why did you guys do it? For one, it was ugly. For two, it was one fucking billboard. (DC laughs) You’re kidding me!” (EB laughs) They had more money than they knew what to do with, but anyway, we did okay. And we did posters and we did- I did a newsletter with them for a long time. Put it out about every one or two months. A great big- That went nationally.

[01:00:11]

DC: Can you talk more about- You have- You seem to have strong feelings about messaging and words and information, just your beliefs about how that can impact people. Or-

EB: Well, I think it does do some impact. I think that political decisions are irrational. I don’t think it has much to do with what you know. I mean, how could anybody vote for this group that we’ve got in there now. And everybody had heard that this guy is a rapist that we’ve put in the presidency. This guy’s a rapist and doesn’t treat women right. Actually, there are legitimate charges against him for raping minors, all over and over again. And I’m pretty sure it’s true. I have no doubts. I mean anyone that brags about raping women and you know, grabbing women by the crotch and “making them do whatever you want.” Well, shit. That’s not rape? And why anybody would even consider him after that? It just blows my mind. And I think, “Did some people just not hear that?” Or did they think that just grabbing a woman by the crotch wasn’t serious? What if somebody- Do you think you’d like it? If somebody grabbed you seriously? I mean, God. I’ve had that happen to me. And it was something that still. That was sixty years ago. Still bothers me. I ‘ll still wake up sometimes just really upset by it. You know. And I’m embarrassed by it, but it wasn’t my fault and there’s nothing that I could do about it.

DC: Absolutely not.

EB: Yeah. And it still, you know? It’s terrible.

DC: I’m sorry that that happened.

EB: And I think- That was, you know, I’ve had a lot of hassle. I’m a pretty girl, was, out there by myself and I did alright. I didn’t have a whole lot of bad things really happen, but a lot of people wanted to. You know? Almost every week sometimes. It would be something that you never walk out the door without checking your back and making sure where you are and what you’re going to do if you get attacked. You have to. I don’t know too many women that survived that don’t. And that’s ridiculous. This is a rapist society. Boy, have we ever proved it. And this guy, Roy- Judge Moore? This man of power and there’s people still saying that they’re going to vote for him? And “of course he never did anything like that.” And there’s more and more young women, who are not so young anymore, saying, “Yeah, he did. And he did some bad stuff.” “Oh well, it’s just boys will be boys!” Anyway. Don’t get me started. (both laugh)

DC: So you actually don’t think that information has that much of an impact on people?

EB: I think it helps if you’re- I think you have to understand who you’re talking to. You have to start where people are at. And there are some people who are willing to listen, so you may as well talk to them. There’s a lot of people who are not willing and it’s a waste of your time. And like, there’s 30% of the people in this country that you couldn’t change with dynamite. So I know that there is a lot of people- I mean, like Carol. She’s learned. She has changed her mind about stuff. She’s changed her mind about tofu. (DC laughs) That’s heavy!

DC: That’s growth.

EB: Yeah. Yeah. And she doesn’t like Trump and she understands that this particular- She is not happy with the way that this administration is going, but I know she voted for some of those assholes. (both laugh) And I know she’s been oppressed. I can tell that she has been put down and I don’t know if she has been physically really terribly beaten or anything really like that. But there’s things that happen to you in this society that can make you lose all of your feeling of worth. And you know, you’re another woman. You know. (laughs)

(to Shelley) So, when you leaving honey?

Shelley Barger: Pretty soon.

EB: Yeah. This is Darby here.

SB: Hi, I’m Shelley.

EB: This is my daughter Shelley.

DC: Hi. It’s nice to meet you.

SB: It’s nice to officially meet you. (Elizabeth laughs)

DC: Did I meet Kelly before, the first time I came?

EB: That was Jethro.

DC: No, at the store.

SB: Oh yeah, that was me.

DC: Back in September.

EB: Oh yeah.

(overlapping speech)

DC: I think it was a different color too. It’s nice to meet you.

SB: Where are you from?

DC: Murfreesboro. I’m at MTSU.

SB: Oh, cool.

EB: She graduated from MTSU.

SB: I studied psychology and I teach fifth graders.

DC: That was one of my minors. My degree is in photography and I’m an editor. So, it’s a different world. (laughs)

SB: Yeah.

EB: Yeah. So, did you get any art done?

SB: Oh, yeah. I’ll show you.

EB: Okay good, I’m- Yeah I guess it might be noisy for a minute.

DC: Okay. I’m going to go ahead and pause this.

EB: Yeah.

[01:06:33 end of first recording of second interview]

DC: Okay.

EB: I hope you don’t have to write this down. (laughs, closes dresser drawer)

(both laugh)

DC: So this is part two of the Elizabeth Barger second interview on 11/16/17. Sorry, I started a new file. I want to make sure I know what listening to whenever I got to start it again.

EB: Yes, I understand.

DC: Okay.

EB: So, I worked quite a bit with domestic violence and peace works. And I’ve also worked- got in when I was doing domestic violence [prevention] I got into working with the American Forum, which is the progressive op-ed group. And got involved in it and helped them get a 501c3 for the Tennessee Editorial Forum Board, which is- They wanted to do the Tennessee Forum but they were all sold. There was already a right-wing one with that name. So now they are the Tennessee Editorial Forum. And I was the chair of that for about six or seven years while I worked in Nashville. Then when I moved out of Nashville, I continued working with it, but it just felt like I shouldn’t be the chair, because we just needed to have people there on the ground all the time. And during that time, I was up in Nashville a lot. So, even though I wasn’t the chair, I was very active. And then I was- I went on the national board. Which I am still on, the national board.

And we are trying to start a media training in this area and right about the time we started to develop it, my computer ate all of my contacts. So that’s sort of- We’re waiting to try to get it and for some reason or other, I’m not getting anything from the national board and they’re not getting any of my stuff. So, somehow or other, I’ve got to get back on my- I think if I can get my laptop working, that I’ll be doing that more. But that’s again, that outreach to make sure that we and what national- What the American Forum does, is get the Progressive issues into the mainstream media. Everything from big papers, to like, we’ve got one transportation picked up by the truckers, several truckers magazines. Things like that, so that it gets out to more people. That’s that one. So, I’m hoping I can get things together so I can have this working, because we’ve missed several months of being able to get this training out and we’ve had a lot of people. And there’s a lot of people interested in it, because it is a very high-level, technical, professional-level media training. So, anyway. I’m hoping that we can get it done by January. We started out in August. (laughs) I’ve been- I’ve had trouble for almost six months.

Anyway. That’s- Oh! When was the- Yeah. Yeah. Anyway.

And we’re also getting funding for doing with students doing backpack, what we call backpack journalism, to get kids really involved in watching our legislators. And getting reporting out on that. And being able to work that through on a national level for the states. What we- Why we are so well picked up is because we focus on what is happening in the state. And people will pick up, even your small papers will pick up what’s happening in the state and talk about it from a more progressive point of view then otherwise. So anyway, that’s one of the things I do, which I think is valuable. And now if I can get my machinery together, (laughs) I’ll be able to be a little more effective.

I’m actually the treasurer. Which is sort of funny, because I never handle the money in a progressive group. I will be the treasurer and I will sign on to what, but I am not going to sign any checks. I never handle the money. I don’t- I’m not good that way. I just don’t keep track of- I can read a financial statement. I’m really good at that and I can do that and I can know what is going on with the boards that I’m on, but I don’t want to be signing papers. I don’t want to be signing checks. Don’t put me in charge of the money, I’ll spend it all. (both laugh)

DC: How do you feel it was different pre- and post-internet? You’ve been talking about your advocacy for decades and when you talk about now, you’re talking about how, you know, recognizing that being on a computer is a huge part of that, but how- How was it different then?

EB: Well, I was more active physically. I was more involved physically. And now because of my- I’m older and poorer, just getting around to places is more difficult. I mean, there were times when I was in Washington D.C. more than when I was here on the farm and things like that. And I was in California, and Missouri-

DC: What were you doing there?

EB: Louisiana- Following- Working on issues. And working on media issues. A lot of issues, like I was in St. Louis for media forum training and conference that was almost a week long and that was very intense. I mean that was- All the big guys were there. And I was in Louisiana at a conference on- Well, one time on media and another time on economic issues and peace. And of course D.C., all of the obvious reasons. And New York (clanging of dishes in the kitchen) all of the farmer’s issues. I’m very active in farmer’s issues. I’ve helped develop Farms Not Arms, which is a Peace Roots organization. I’ve worked with the National Family Farmers. Though, I feel really incompetent. I’m not doing any farming now. I was doing farming earlier and I understand. I understand the issues, but I’m not in the dirt, as it were. I’m not even doing a garden. (laughs) Which, it bothers me. Putting those little pansies in was my big deal. (laughs)

DC: You seem to have a pretty nice little indoor garden going on over here.

EB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I love my- And I’ve brought them all in, I had them outside. And I just brought them in last week. And I’ve actually trimmed my garden inside quite a bit, but I’m really concerned about the ecology. And I’ve done training to stop the KXL[[3]](#footnote-3).

And right now I’m working with Water is Life and the investment of young women that just have blown me away. Wonderful, wonderful. I’m so hopeful. And I missed my last meeting, which I’m really upset about, (laughs) but there’s hope. There’s a bunch of kids. Have you heard about the Water is Life kids here?

DC: Mmhmm. Well, not here, but in general I’ve heard about the Water is Life.

EB: Well, they’re here. Do you know about Columbia pipeline?

DC: Mmhmm.

EB: That TransCanada has bought that pipeline. I just think that is- I can’t imagine how we aren’t just absolutely up in arms, I mean. Yeah, but I mean when they decided to put in the compressor in Joelton a lot of people got so discouraged and sort of, you know, burnt out. And now it is coming back and we really- We got to- And there is one starting in Antioch. And that is going to put pressure on those terrible, old corroded pipes that are already going to blow up and pollute. And then if TransCanada has the right of way from Canada through the Northeast into through Tennessee- That’s where they bought it. Right down to export through Louisiana and Texas. And that’s got to stop. That’s got to be stopped. Absolutely has to be stopped.

DC: What, do you think, are the effective strategies for blocking it?

EB: One of the things, I think, is getting banks to divest from it, because it’s a bad- I think it’s a really bad investment. It’s not- It’s going to pay in the short run, but for the long run it’s going to cost more than it puts out. In fact, it already is in a lot of ways. Like one of the reasons that we haven’t had more development with atomic energy is because it costs more to make atomic energy than it produces.

Plus finding places to put the waste is impossible, because that waste is going to last. It’s toxic for centuries, millennia. You know. Depleted uranium is good for half a billion years. That’s not a million. That’s a billion. That’s a long time. And they’re putting it in containers that are not going to last maybe more than fifty (laughs) and they’ve been dumping it in the ocean. You know, France is dumping their waste in the ocean. (DC sighs) Just anyway, don’t get me started again, but that’s one of the things that I’m really concerned about.

One of the things that I feel- I mean there’s a lot of things that I think that sometimes I spread myself a little too thin, but that one- (chime of phone ringing, electronic voice says “unknown caller”) Stopping- Is that? Hmm. Stopping the fossil fuel people is absolutely essential. Stopping coal and oil and gas is absolutely essential and really hard, because there’s so much money in that right now. But the thing is, I think it is starting to get through to some is that there is more money in solar and some of the other alternative energies.

There’s a lot of interest in Tesla’s investigations and research, which I always thought, even though I am not a physicist, but since I was little I’ve always been interested in how come we haven’t done more with Tesla. And I never could understand, how come, because I had been studying the weather- My father was a dispatcher with the airlines and I was very interested and when the first big computers came out, the ones that were huge? They ran these projections about the weather and the pollution- That said what was happening now was going to happen and this was in 1950. And everything that I saw in all that research- I thought, “It is happening. People know it. How come they aren’t stopping it? Why they don’t listen?” (laughs) And they don’t seem to care. I think they all think they’re going to be dead and they don’t care what happens to their kids or grandkids obviously. Or they think that they’ve got so much money that they can fix it so that it will be okay. I mean, you read a lot of science fiction and it is like, “Well, the Earth is got rid of all the people, so it’s all green and beautiful now and there’s just a few folks who have everything they need.” You know. And I think, “You know, that’s not how that’s going to work. (laughs) Who’s going to clean their toilets? (laughs) Not them.”

So, anyway. Anyway. That’s-

[01:21:49]

DC: Speaking of things as basic as cleaning toilets and electricity- I think I’d like to circle back and talk about some of the things when you guys were first establishing-

EB: Oh, yeah.

DC: -order and how, I mean, you didn’t wash things in the creek. What did you do for laundry? What did you do for power? Those kinds of things.

EB: We did build a laundromat. And built a field to handle the excess water and waste and actually worked it so that we could put it into like a compost situation. And that was interesting. But then we got individual, like we have a washer but I don’t have a dryer. I really prefer stringing it along. We hang it up inside or outside out in the sunshine. Which strikes me as using solar energy. (DC laughs) And that- and then we have gray water fields that we manage, so it doesn’t all run down to the creek. And then we have septic tanks, which I think is not the first, but I really think the compost toilets- there’s got to be a better way. And I think it is wasteful to lose all of that good shit. (DC laughs) It really is valuable.

DC: It’s good fertilizer.

EB: You know. We should be putting it into compost and into our fields, because it is very rich. We just have to make sure it is hot enough that it is killing the bugs that happen in human waste, but that’s fixable. You know, we’ve done it for centuries. I mean, flush toilets are so nice. I really appreciate that, but I think there’s a better way to do that. And I think that if we can figure out how to go to the moon, we certainly can figure out how to keep our shit together, but we haven’t. (laughs) You know, we use to talk about keeping the toilet paper dry? You know. It’s that simple.

DC: Can you tell me about the laundry barn? And all of the things people were talking about earlier.

EB: Yeah.

DC: They described the men hauling the laundry, but the women doing the laundry.

EB: Not necessarily. I think there was some guys hauling it, but the kids- I mean, there was a group. I mostly hauled mine in a wagon, but when we first started, when we didn’t even have the laundromat, we put it in a great big truck and drove it down to Mount P[[4]](#footnote-4). And made that guy really rich, because we washed our whole laundry in that little laundromat.

DC: Oh good-

EB: And then there was one in Columbia where we went some. And there never was a good one in Lawrenceburg and there really still isn’t. But the one in Mount P is still a very nice little laundry. Now it is probably nicer because they don’t have the dirty farmers coming in and washing- I mean we would fill up all of the big machines. All the big machines. And all the little machines and a few of the even littler ones. And then all the dryers, because it was really hard to carry all of the wet, clean laundry in the truck that we had carried all of that wet dirty laundry in the truck. It was just- It was- it depended. Now, in the summer, sometimes we would haul it back and hang it out. But mostly, we dried it.

DC: When did you guys build the laundromat that was-

EB: That was barely fast. We went to the laundromat. I think it took us about five or six years.

DC: Okay.

EB: And then it was a trip, because we would buy all these old ones, washing machines out of old Laundromats and fix them. And fix them. And fix them. And fix them. (laughs) And we had the Brontos. We had three Brontos at one time.

DC: Which are-

EB: They’re huge machines, you can’t believe how big these machines are. They are really big. You think those big ones in the in the laundry are big? These were big, professional- The kind they use in hospitals and you know, places where they’re doing laundry in hotels and stuff. I mean a Bronto was as big as a, about as tall as up to the top of of the bricks there. And down to the bottom around. A huge round machine.

DC: So, about seven feet?

EB: Yeah, and about ten feet long.

DC: Oh, wow.

EB: When you filled that baby up with dirty diapers, oh my god.

DC: (blows out air)

EB: I did that for about three months and that was about two and a half months too long. (both laugh) But I didn’t mind it at a level, because you know, they came out clean. I didn’t mind, you know. The thing was, that they were always contained when you threw them in. And the- I still have my bronto bag. I kept it. You could even put your diapers in those. You know? And you’d put it in a diaper pail, and you’d put it into the Bronto. And you’d just toss it and the people would, that brought the diaper pails had to wash out their own diaper pails. Which I was very firm about.(both laugh) I don’t know what anybody else did, but I always washed out my own diaper pails, but I wasn’t into washing other people’s.

DC: Seems reasonable.

EB: Yeah, right. And it was stinky. Oh my god. And I got giardia, I’m pretty sure it was pretty sure it was during that time. And the giardia is a fairly important little bug that you get from shit, from human shit. And I think that, you know, we had a lot of people coming back from, you know, other countries, like Belize and South America. Where there were a lot of parasites. And very often when people came back their whole household would be quarantined so that it wouldn’t spread through the whole farm. So you might have fifty people in a house fighting giardia. (laughs) Yeah, it was interesting. And of course, during that time also, we were- We had latrines. We had shitters we called them. And there were two holes and three holes. And you know, you’d go down at 3 o’clock in the morning in a sleet storm. And it was not fun.

DC: No.

EB: It really, really wasn’t, but we did it and we are not doing it now. (laughs) This little building up on the hill? That’s an old shitter that was for this house.

DC: Oh, wow. Okay.

EB: So you can imagine. You’ve got diarrhea and you need to get up there.

DC: Middle of the night in January when it’s five degrees out?! (laughs) Whoa!

EB: Well, we had pee jars. Nasty things. And sometimes if people had diarrhea they’d have a thunder jug. And then they’d have to clean it out. I did a lot of it in those pickle buckets, the big white buckets. Anyway!

DC: So-

EB: We were very basic. (laughs)

DC: Yeah, it seems like it. You were originally- Didn’t have electricity, right?

EB: Like can you imagine? This was all a living room- dining room and a bathroom. One bathroom for forty people.

DC: And you were saying that most of the houses averaged like fifty people to a house?

EB: Thirty to fifty people. We lived in a tent that had twenty-five people and twelve were kids in diapers. An old army tent.

DC: Oh, wow.

EB: And one time we had one of those November winter rains and the rain was raining so hard that it was blowing through the tent.

DC: How did you guys stay warm?

EB: We had big barrel stoves and we wore a lot of clothes. And one time woke up and there was water pouring in. There was water all over the floor, up to your ankles. And it was funny, because it didn’t rain over the kids’ beds or over the sofas. And so we put up plastic over the kitchen and the water was running like we were working under a waterfall (laughs) in the kitchen. And actually, there was a place in there- I didn’t mind it. We just dealt with it. And we stayed dry and we kept the kids healthy and we were warm enough. And it was hard to keep the toilet paper dry. And it was hard to keep the clothes dry and we did. The thing about a wood stove is that it does dry out things. I mean, the stuff I put up today, in there is already dry because we’ve got a stove on. So that’s about it. So we managed. And we would tend to make sure that big families had a place to stay. We were not one of the bigger families until later, but we had already learned how to deal with it, so it wasn’t that big of a problem.

DC: There were six of you, right?

EB: Right. And there were a lot of families that were bigger. And there- When you were in a household, that was the family. You know? And-

[01:26:50]

DC: How much space would your family have in a household? If there was fifty other people, or-

EB: You just all had the same space. You know? The kids were in rooms. The older kids would have bunk beds and it wouldn’t be like my kids were in my kids bunk beds, but they’d be in the kids’ kids bunk beds. You know? And then when we moved into Dogwood, we had the upstairs and we had four kids. And so we had a room and Jethro had a room, Liam had a room. And they were very small, closet sized. And then Shelley and Kelly were together. And Kelly was a very difficult baby, because he would wake up and he would not go to sleep afterwards.

DC: Kelly?

EB: Kelly is my youngest.

DC: I thought Kelly was a she.

EB: No, it’s a he.

DC: Oh, okay. So you have three boys and one girl.

EB: Three boys and one girl.

DC: Oh, okay. I’m sorry. I had thought Kelly was a girl.

EB: Shelley was the girl.

DC: Okay.

EB: But here we are in the South, where Kelly is a girl’s name and we name our

DC: No, I just-

EB: I mean we thought about it and why did we do this, but we liked the name and it was right for him. And he’s- He wears it very well, but he never grew his hair long. He had what I call duck feather hair. It was always- he had this little blond duck feather. (DC laughs) It was fine. Never grew very long, not until he got to be a teenager and then he would cut it and shave it. He shaved his head once and after that it grew in thicker. And he’s still got all his hair. He’s not a baldy or anything and his hair’s pretty normal. But there until he was into his teens, he hardly had anything but this little fine fuzz. (laughs) And-

DC: How did they feel about that? Have your kids ever talked about, you know, growing up in a communal space? Or having their own rooms or kind of thing? How that felt?

[01:36:03]

EB: When they got old enough we were actually moving into- They would have their own space, like I said when we were in Dogwood. The older kids had their own space. It was small, but it was theirs. And they’ve said some stuff. You know, they would have- They would have liked to have had this or that different, but I think anywhere you’re brought up, you’re going to have this or that different.

My oldest boy had the most problems, because he’s not Joseph’s. I had him before I met Joe. And there was a competition for my energy between the two of them, which is normal. Sometimes I didn’t handle it too well. I don’t know if- I don’t know how- I think if I’d been a little more together, I probably would have handled it better. But, you know, it is what it is. (laughs)

DC: I think most of just do the best we can and that’s what happens.

EB: That’s right. I’ve always thought, you know, our kids survive in spite of us sometimes.

DC: Did you want to have a lot of kids?

EB: Yeah, I would have loved to had more if I’d been healthier and richer. I liked having kids. I loved babies and I liked them when they got a little older, and I really love them now. I mean, I’m so- They were all here about a year ago. All four of them, my four big kids. And I thought, “Those were my babies! And they’re so nice. And I’m so proud of them. And they’re such nice people.” I mean, they’re not world famous or anything, but I don’t care. They’re successful and happy in their own ways. I mean, there’s always unhappiness and there’s always things that you would have done better and you know, they’re good people. These are good people. I’m just- Amazing I got such good people. (laughs)

DC: It usually has a little something to do with the way that they’re raised, so.

EB: Yeah, and Joe is an excellent father. Just so responsible and a nice man. And he and Liam didn’t do too well, like I said, but now they’re fine. And I helped Liam find his genetic father and it taught him a lot about where he was at and who he was. But-

DC: When did you do that?

EB: When he was about eighteen, nineteen, twenty and he wanted to find him. So I-

DC: Was that the guy you were with on the bus before Joe or?

EB: Oh, no. I never got pregnant with him and I’m really glad. (laughs) He wanted to get married and I just kept thinking, “No, I’m not sure I want to marry this guy.” I mean, the sex was great, but that- You know? That’s not what I’m into marrying.

DC: It’s not lifetime material.

EB: I mean, I can always have sex. (both laugh) There’s just something about Joe. I just- I really just almost immediately felt drawn to him. And eventually I kicked the guy off the bus and kept Joe. And I’m so glad. I hope he’s just as happy as I am about it. (laughs) But he’s still here.

DC: He seemed pretty good-humored when he came in, so-

EB: Oh yeah, he’s a good guy. He’s a genius. His name is on an “L” at the science building where he went to college. (laughs) For research he did in enzymes.

DC: (laughs) You have an interesting group of people come through here. You guys were talking about it earlier- Some very well-educated people.

EB: Oh, yeah. When I did some- I was doing some research and was looking at the population on- You know, and I was looking at the towns and the percentage of college graduates in the town. And Nashville had maybe 10%, Knoxville 8-10%, that was- Then here we come to Lewis County and we’ve got 11% and I said, “Oh, that’s us.” (both laugh) Because there’s only 10,000 people in Lewis County. And when we had 1,000 people here most of us were college graduates or had, had high levels of education.

DC: Do you think that there’s a connection between people that are highly educated and people that choose to live apart from the rest of society?

EB: I’m not sure. I have no idea. I really don’t. I look at the Amish and they’re not highly educated, but they’re very smart and very competent. They do very well. And I don’t think that education- I think that people are smarter than we give them credit for. In domestic violence, I’ve met a lot of women that only graduated from third grade or sixth grade, you know, especially in the south, kids had to stop school to help support the family. And I didn’t notice that much difference, except I met a lot of educated fools.

DC: That’s true.

EB: And I’ve met people that didn’t have the education that really should have, you know, that they’re brighter than that and they do stupid things, because they just don’t know any better. And- but I know people who are educated and they do stupid things and they know better. (DC laughs) So what do you do? (laughs)

DC: What do you think it is that kind of draws- Do you think there is a common denominator that people kind of, like you know, protest society by living somewhere that sets itself apart or do you think that that’s?

EB: I don’t know. I really don’t know. I really really don’t know. I look at the Amish and they set themselves apart-

DC: But they’re born into it.

EB: Well, not necessarily.

DC: I’m curious about people that leave society after they’ve-

EB: Their kids leave society, but a lot of them stay. And they have the opportunity not to stay in their society. I mean, they’re living in the middle of modern society and they choose not to be there. And they have reasons, some of which seem logical to me. And others for the same reasons don’t feel- I tend to be wary of people that have logical reasons for illogical behavior, myself included.

I think about why did I do a lot of the things that I’ve done? I’ve known since I was a little girl that I did not want to live in a society that was get up in the morning and go to work and go home and have kids and follow a certain pattern and then die. It just struck me as really wrong. I don’t know if that was because I’m smarter than your average bear, well I don’t think so. I know I’m intelligent and I know I- And I know that I have a higher IQ than some people, but I’m not too much of a- I’m not too much of a believer in IQ making that much difference. I know people that have lower IQs than I do that are doing a lot better than I am, financially for sure and they seem to be happy. And well, well-balanced. So I don’t think IQ has a lot to do with it. It’s just sort of- If you’ve got over 100 and under 200, then you probably okay. You know, and what are you measuring anyway in that? But then I’ve seen some people who do really stupid. And I mean they had low IQs. And they were not together. And I’ve seen people with the same IQs be the sweetest, most easy to see why they are doing well in their own manner and a lot of that, I think, that has a lot to do with how you’re raised. I think that has a lot to do with it. I was one of those kids, I was really lucky. I had good parents, I had a good education. I was never mistreated as a child. Not ever, I thought I was sometimes, but when I look at it I was never cruelly treated. My parents were never cruel to me or to anybody or to themselves. They were always very sweet. And I think that is a lot and I see a lot of people that are like that. And I see a lot of people that are just, just absolutely terrible to their kids and say the most awful things. I couldn’t believe anybody- Why would you say that about your own kid?

DC: Right.

[01:47:37]

EB: You know? Why would you vote for some of these people? That just stay out there in power. And I think, “That’s just insane.” And then I look at a lot of the people that want to have political power are psychopathic. And I wonder if that is part of it, because it is power and control. And it is a lack of confidence in your own ability to survive. Just, but it seems to me- I mean, this person that I know that voted for Trump? I thought he was really intelligent and hip. I couldn’t believe when I heard that. I thought, “I always knew there was something weird about that guy.” (both laugh) But that’s a lie. I never- I never became close friends with him, but I always thought well of him. And I think, “How could he vote for a man he knows is a rapist?”

DC: I don’t understand how anyone can, but-

EB: Women voted for this man. And what kind- What kind of thing goes on in the mind that would accept someone to represent them? Do they understand that representing them? Well, I don’t think they know. I don’t think they understand that. I just can’t imagine that they would. I know some people that, who are off the farm, that voted for Trump. And they are good simple people, really sweet people. And I think, “How could they do that?” But I understand a little better, because the system was failing them anyway. And the system is going to continue to fail them as long as this keeps up. So how do we stop them? I’m working on it, but I really don’t know. I guess that’s why I haven’t died yet, because I have to figure it out before I die. (laughs) There’s got to be an answer. There’s more to it than Adam and Eve and the snake and the apple and all of that shit. You know, understanding that myths like that carry real truth. But I still don’t understand it. I’m sorry.

DC: No, you’re fine.

EB: I just don’t. Do we have anything else more?

DC: No, you’re fine. I’m (unclear) turn it off.

EB: Yeah. It’s getting late.

DC: It is.

EB: Well, it’s only 5:40 and here it looks like midnight.

DC: It does.

EB: It just bugs me. I hate it when it is this dark.

DC: I wanted to ask you two more questions about infrastructure things-

EB: I don’t mind.

DC: And then- We should- We could wrap it up after that. If you wouldn’t mind, talking about how you guys dealt with early communications and electrical things- You actually talked about it earlier today, but we weren’t recording. So, we are in your living room right now and there are places where there used to be car batteries?

EB: Oh, car battery lights. The car batteries were over there in that room we came in (motions to a small mud room that functions as a laundry room and storage space now, perhaps 6’x8’) through.

DC: The mudroom?

EB: It was full of car batteries.

DC: The exterior- little mudroom now?

EB: Uh-huh.

DC: That was full of car batteries to power the house?

EB: Yeah.

DC: Before you guys had-

EB: Regular electricity. And we just got regular electricity- Is still happening. You know, we got regular electricity about ten years ago. Well, actually this house always had a little bit down here, but now we are going to get it upstairs, which will be wonderful. (laughs)

DC: That is nice. So have you guys rigged up-

EB: Well in Shelley’s room there’s earlier electricity-

DC: -headlights? When you say car lights, do you mean like headlights?

EB: Yeah. Like little, little- Sometimes we used to have still, little, little round-

DC: I saw one while we we driving down. There was like one sitting on a stump. I think that might have actually been an old headlight interior piece.

EB: No, it wasn’t even that fancy. It was just one of those little bulbs that just-

DC: Oh, okay.

EB: -this big. (motions to show an inch or so with her fingers) They put out a lot of light. Amazing.

DC: Right.

EB: And sometimes we’d make little things with reflection around it to make it a little bit more.

DC: Did you use any sort of, you know- Like, I see an oil lamp. Did you use any-

EB: Oh yeah, that’s what you used. That was our light, a kerosene lanterns and we keep them for when the lights go out and actually I need to go through and check all the wicks and make sure we have oil in them. You know, I don’t do it like I use to. (DC laughs) I use to, that was at least a weekly thing.

DC: Part of your routine.

EB: And when you were using it every night, it was daily. In the morning, you’d get up and wash all the lamps and trim all the wicks and make sure you had oil and make sure you had wicks.

DC: Are there any other things, like that, that use to be a part of daily life routine, that you don’t do now because of the changes of like plumbing or electricity or that kind of thing?

EB: Yeah. Well, keeping the outhouse clean. And maintaining, like, the pee-jar situation. And-

DC: Did you guys have running water?

EB: For a while we didn’t. We delivered it by horse and wagon in five gallon buckets. And so you’d get water for drinking and water for hand washing and dish washing. A lot of the time we’d get like five or six gallons, buckets, five gallon buckets. And we’d have a big thing that we would pour them all into for hand washing, like washing dishes. And, like, put a pail of water like that on the stove to keep it hot. And we did that when we were going to run out of electricity. We wanted to make sure we had water. And sometimes, if we check- if we need to turn off the water to do repairs, we always do that. (phone rings) And it’s like it’s not as hard I think. (phone rings again, Elizabeth moves to answer)

I don’t know who this is.

[01:55:17]

(To the caller) Hello?

Oh! Oh yeah, I’m in the middle of an interview. Can you call me back in about twenty minutes?

Hello?! (both laugh)

She hung up.

DC: That’s a good segue to my next question. (phone rings again) Ohhp! (laughs)

(phone rings second time)

EB: This is a different person.

(To the caller) Hello? Hello-

No, no.

(To Darby) He’ll have to call me back.

DC: Do you mind telling me about when before you guys had phones, you had the party line and the morse code system? Do you mind talking about that again?

EB: Oh, no. Uh-uh. When we first- When we first came in we wired up a morse code thing and it was like one phone. And it wasn’t actually an out line. When we wanted to make a call, we went up- There was a little bar up here. When you first- Before you turn in there’s this one little building. There’s nothing there. It use to be a bar and that’s where we went to to phone out. (pipe/hinge noise) And then we got one phone up at the house and that’s where everything came in. What everything was plugged into-

DC: When you say the house, do you mean the gatehouse?

EB: No. The house up there. There’s a ranch-style house it looks like and then there’s things built off into a three-story house. The original house was that ranch style house. That’s where the phones and actually the school was for a while. And where we just hung out and then when we bought the other 700 acres then we put the gate out there, but the gate was where the gate is right there you can see by the little post office. Yeah, that’s where the original gate was. And so then there was a phone there in the house when they bought the ranch here. So they had access to a phone, so there was one phone. But we put in, it was completely unrelated to anything. And like I said, it was- It was- It was amazing that it was to see it- That it was as good- Because you could hear people really good. It was just that you’d have maybe twenty people on a line wanting to talk to you. (DC laughs) And then when we did a bunch of work for Mrs. Brown in Loretto who has a phone company. And she was getting rid of her old phone system and putting in a more modern one. So we did a whole bunch of work on- I think we were doing landscaping and land clearing, like for the new phones lines.

So she gave us this whole thing. Where the brewers, there’s a building down there where you turn in, where we turned in. That was the old phone building. We made this phone building and we had regular operators. You know, I was one at one time, with the, yeah. I knew everybody’s phone number. Had about 500 phone numbers all memorized. Knew which everyone was doing. And one of the things we had was really neat. We had an all-points bulletin instead of the dial tone you got an all-points bulletin. Which said what was going on, there’s going to be oil at the store, there’s a, three new machines are good in the, are fixed in the laundromat.

DC: Oh, that’s fascinating.

EB: Every kind of that, you know everybody that’s coming in to do some work at so-and-so’s place, you know, the roads going to be, the water is going to be shut-off for a while on first road because they’re putting in a line, all of those things are on the all-points. It’s very convenient.

DC: And was this just, like, looped?

EB: Missed it sometimes.

DC: Or?

EB: Yeah. It would be in a loop but it could be changed, regularly, because it was changed at the phone building. If there was something else that needed putting in, we just put it in.

DC: That’s amazing.

EB: So, yeah. That was pretty cool. I thought that was cool. I missed it. I still miss it. What we have now, is we have a list online. That’s just for the farm, but it is not as effective because not everybody looks at it. I mean, I miss stuff on it. I go and look at it, sort of, but it is not- It’s not something that I watch that closely. I watch it close enough because I’m looking for things for the farm paper, but that’s basically what I’m looking for is news to put in the paper. And my personal news, I don’t pay that much attention to. Which is interesting, because Joel was talking to me today about something I’d missed. And I thought, “Oh that’s weird. I’m going to have to pay better attention. Then we also have several facebook pages. None of which, I really look at that much, but I do check them out every once in awhile. And sometimes it just all it is bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch. And they get all hung up on these people worrying about little things like that. And one of the things that made it difficult to work in, to live in our houses was that we kept, that we talked about whatever we were thinking about each other and what we saw them folks doing that annoyed us or didn’t look right. There was a lot too much about what annoyed us that we didn’t need to talk about. And sometimes there were things that we needed to talk about more, that we didn’t because we didn’t want to get into that place. And you know, it’s interesting because some of the things that we talked about were absolutely nobody else’s business. And there were things that we did talk about that was our business. Like there was a guy that lived in our house that had his daughter with him. She was about six years old. And I didn’t feel good with him. I told him once, I said, “You know, you kind of make me feel creepy.” And then he left that night. So something was going on. I felt really bad about that. Cause I should have watched better. And I should have maybe- And maybe there was nothing, because I felt- I figure that he must have kidnapped his daughter. You know? That he’d got a divorce and you know how those things go. And sometimes that’s cool and sometimes she’s being sexually mistreated, but I never got that feeling particularly. She didn’t act precocious. Very often, those kids that are getting sexually mistreated are very precocious and she was not, so- He might have just figured I might have tried to find out who he was running away from. I don’t know.

I’ve had a lot of women come through looking for a safe haven. That I’ve had to tell, “You can’t stay here, because they will come look for you here.” Because they know I’m in domestic violence. And they know the farm- They suspect the farm is doing that all the time when we are not. And it has always bothered me to have to do that, because I know some women have got- And I have even tried to tell them where to go and what to do, but they always do the wrong thing and they always get caught and it is always tragic, because they’re running from guys that are really abusive and are going to hurt their kids and do when they get caught. And it is just you know, I don’t know what to do about that and I still don’t. But I wish, I know a few things that I would have done differently about some of the women that I saw and some of the women that ran got away and I was glad to hear that, but the ones that didn’t get away- I hear about that, I hear from them all the time. Which, because they just need somebody who understands their pain. But, anyway. (footsteps on stairs)

That’s that.

DC: Well, that’s that. I think-

EB: Where were we going?

DC: Oh, I was asking you about the logistics, the electricity, the party line phone, that kind of thing.

EB: Yeah, yeah.

DC: But I think you answered my question.

EB: The first- The first people that lived in this house, it was one of the first houses. That got electrified because the guy that lived here had asthma so this is still the same.

DC: So they needed the air-conditioning, right?

EB: Or something like that. I don’t know. (To Joe) What was- What was the electrified for the boss?

JB: Huh?

EB: Why did- why did- Why was this house, the electricity put in this house?

JB: I don’t know.

EB: Yeah, been a long time ago, but there was a reason and so there was some electricity in here to take care of him to make sure he could survive.

DC: That’s good enough for me.

EB: Wilbur, was his name.

DC: Well, we’re at the two hour mark, so I think this is probably a good place to wrap up.

EB: Okay.

DC: I’m going to go ahead and-

[End]

1. The Iraq War began March 20, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NGO is a Non-Governmental Organization with a non-profit designation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Keystone XL pipeline runs from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. There have been several ecological disasters tied to its construction and use. Earlier when referring to Standing Rock, this a group of Native Americans who were trying to block the pipeline in 2016 and were pushed back with violent force. In 2017, the pipeline had another major spill. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Likely Mount Pleasant, roughly 13 miles northeast of Summertown. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)