

The Down Home Project History, Part III: a MUDdy birth By Jack Rowan

This is the third in a series of articles recounting the history of the Down Home Project (DHP), our parent organization, and MUD. By the time this series is completed we will be celebrating 25 years of DHP's and MUD's contributions to a more sustainable western Montana.

In our previous exciting episodes you learned (Part I) about the evolution of the DHP from its origins in the mid-70s as Wild Willy's Chicken Farm to a well-organized and widely recognized community resource; and (Part II) how the DHP parented Garden City Seeds, built the Northside Community Gardens, initiated an array of horticultural therapy programs, and achieved (ironic) laurels from the Reagan Administration for promoting self-sufficient living. You may also remember that by the late 80s the DHP's founders had relocated to pursue educational seed projects in Idaho and the Bitterroot Valley. The organization sustained another major loss in March 1988 when Pamela Lee died in a skiing accident. Both Bill McDorman and Kerry Wall-Maclane (two of the DHP's seminal figures) describe Pamela as the project's greatest volunteer coordinator to that date, most responsible for creating the sense of a spiritual quest behind the project's gardening programs, and a modern-day Prometheus in the origin of Garden City Seeds. Pamela also moved on before her death but the event was a powerful blow to the DHP spirit and coincided with other events to mark a fundamental departure in the project's history.

1987 through 1989 is often referred to as "the dark years" for the Phillips Street site. DHP programs in Missoula dwindled and the houses were rented to a series of non-members. After two fires significantly damaged the house at 629 Phillips (June 1988 and December 1989), DHP leaders decided the site needed to be reintegrated into the educational non-profit mission. Leslie Wood, at the time a DHP Board member and the organization's bookkeeper, noted, "The Bitterroot DHP folks couldn't let go of the Phillips Street properties. Not only had they lived there and built a non-profit together, some of their children were born there." Kerry Wall-Maclane led the effort to develop an intensive internship program. In collaboration with the University of Montana's Environmental Studies (EVST) Program, the site would become a "Liberal Arts Agriculture Experiment Station" tentatively called the "City Farm." Dismissing the 629 Phillips tenants was an uncontroversial decision; however, the site's other residents (members of the Rainbow Family at 619 Phillips) had generally been good tenants, living the spirit of the Down Home Project. Several community meetings were conducted to establish a workable living arrangement. According to Kerry, the discussions sometimes got ugly and the DHP leaders were accused of classism for trying to "force out" low-income tenants in favor of "Yuppie ideals." Eventually an agreement was reached, but one month later the 619 tenants decided to vacate.

The full site was now available but a major question remained. Who would be willing to undertake these intense, unpaid internships (especially given the general disrepair of the site)? Longtime DHP Board member Chuck Jonkel introduced "five dynamic individuals," most notable among them Mark Waltermire and Jim Menakis. During the summer of 1990 this new generation of Phillips Street activists organized several volunteer work parties to clean, repair, and remodel the site. They also amended the original plan. Instead of short-term internships, the site was opened to all who wanted to "explore projects in self-reliant living"—pending available space and appropriate resources. The once common moniker of Wild Willy's Chicken Farm was officially replaced by a more prestigious title, MUD (the Missoula Urban Demonstration Project).

Steve Nelson, Bill Burnett, and Rick Freeman were among the most active and expert volunteers contributing to site renovations during the early years of MUD. These three also contributed to other long-term building projects and eventually served as MUD Board members. Kerry Wall-Maclane and Karen Coombs visited and called frequently to assure close cooperation between the Bitterroot and Missoula wings. Kerry was particularly committed to consolidating ownership of the properties from the DHP's founding members. The site now had a strong leadership group, a burgeoning garden harvest, and a sense of immense possibilities. Kerry remembers that it was not difficult to convince the property holders to sell their interests (below market value) once they believed the site was in good hands. However, securing a consolidation loan without collateral was an entirely different matter. "Most of the lenders wanted the DHP Board to personally put up collateral for the loan," he noted. "I guess they got tired of me walking into their offices every week and eventually approved the loan so I would leave them alone."

With property matters resolved by the fall of 1991, MUD efforts turned towards improving use of site space. The most significant project was deconstruction of the old seed store/Northside Gallery in favor of a straw bale

greenhouse and a native plant garden. Kerry describes this effort as a highly symbolic event, old and new members working together to bring down the walls while preserving the structure's distinctive peace and Toaist symbols for future use. Mark Waltermire remembers events in much the same fashion but recalls that Kerry was a bit more zealous than everybody else. "Kerry got impatient and took a sledgehammer to some of the walls, so we figured we'd better get a work party together quickly." Though the structure came down rapidly and a new garden took root the following spring, building the green house proved to be a more daunting task. Final construction consumed four years, innumerable beer-fueled planning sessions, a few 'project leaders,' and at least two straw bale loads (improper storage on site caused the first load to mold). Despite its struggles, the greenhouse project generated a politically interesting mix of volunteers and donors. You'll have to read part four of this series to learn more details.

Other major MUD projects started in the early 1990s, including organic gardening and recycling programs at the Head Start (Whittier) School and Lowell Elementary, the "Garden Project" collaboration with the Missoula Food Bank, an annual fundraising Garden Party, joining the Center for Resource Building Technology to create a green builders network, constructing raised bed gardens at the Eagle Watch Estates, and sponsoring theatrical presentations of the "Lorax" in Missoula schools. By 1993 a new group of experimenters had joined Mark Waltermire, the only remaining member of the MUD Five. Among them was Steve Carroll. Mark and Steve proved to be a potent tandem in guiding the organization and hatching several new programs (some wise and others "we didn't really plan out too well").

During this same period Bitterroot Down Home started a few new education and conservation programs such as a collaborative effort with the Teller Wildlife Refuge, the Bitterroot Valley Green Builders Exchange, and an adolescent-oriented program titled Bitterroot Ecological Awareness Resource (BEAR). Throughout these years Garden City Seeds continued to grow and expand its efforts to educate western Montanans about the World's dwindling supply of genetically diverse seed stocks AND sell regionally appropriate supplies. The DHP was blossoming; however, maintaining one Board of Directors, facilitating intra-organizational communication, and reaching timely decisions between all these efforts proved to become more problematic as the 1990s moved forward. Some misunderstandings created a few hard feelings and the DHP slowly began to break apart.

Tune in next time to learn about the genesis of MUD's community composting and manure sale programs, the long-awaited completion of Missoula's first "code approved" strawbale structure, and a difficult series of decisions to formally dissolve the Down Home Project into three distinct organizations.