

The Down Home Project History, Part IV: “Teach Your Children Well ...”  
By Jack Rowan

This is the fourth 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 the last issue we recounted how DHP grew from an idea to teach Missoulians the techniques of self-sufficiency common among previous generations into a professionally recognized model for urban horticulture and a dynamic laboratory to “explore projects in self-reliant living”. In 1990 the original DHP site on Phillips Street was renamed the Missoula Urban Demonstration Project and a new group of young activists committed themselves to the sustainability cause. Many passionate and dynamic individuals contributed to the organization during the early 1990s. Mark Waltermire emerged as a leading voice among the early residents and in 1992 Steve Carol joined the project. Mark and Steve served central roles in launching some of MUD’s most ambitious and durable programs.

One of the first major projects at the MUD site was to build a self-contained strawbale greenhouse using volunteer labor and donated/scavenged materials. From 1992 to 1996 construction of the greenhouse started, stopped, and restarted as MUD struggled to gain city building department approval for the structural design and as project leadership changed hands a few times. Judd Landis helped conceive the project and tried to incorporate it into his master’s thesis but was only able to remain peripherally involved during the late stages. The full project was a labor of love shared by many people. The six-foot deep foundation was hand dug by volunteers and staff. The posts and beams required re-grading timber salvaged from the Champion Mill site. Most of the major progress stages were conducted as free workshops. Not surprisingly, a few mishaps and adventures occurred, including a load of molded strawbales, a few accidental shovels of coffee grounds into the foundation mix, and a day spent trailing a truck loaded with concrete rubble (ideal for thermal mass) trying to divert its load from the landfill and into the greenhouse flooring. The list of volunteers and experts who contributed to the project is too long to recount but it is worth noting the diversity of individuals involved. Among the central figures was Steve Nelson, a science teacher at Loyal High School, board member, and initiator of MUD’s exploratory bio-diesel project (to find a more environmentally sound fuel for the MUD truck). Another key contributor was Gary Marbut, a local Republican leader and staunch advocate of self-sufficiency, who donated the photovoltaic coating for the south-face windows. (Author’s note on the Two-Degrees-of-Separation present in Missoula: Gary recently lost a bid to unseat Gail Gutsche, MUD’s fundraising coordinator at the time, from the Montana House of Representatives.) In the spring of 1996 MUD put the finishing touches on Missoula’s first code approved strawbale structure.

Neither Mark nor Steve remembers exactly who proposed a community composting program and an annual ‘natural fertilizer’ (livestock poop) sale. Both programs apparently evolved from a mix of personal projects and group brainstorming sessions. Early on Mark began collecting vegetable scraps from *Freddy’s Feed and Read* for personal composting. At the same time Katie Dean was working at *Bernice’s Bakery* and lamented the volumes of coffee waste the business sent to the landfill. Add “A” with “B” and by 1994 MUD had launched Missoula’s first community composting program, supplying the Northside Community Gardens with a rich, non-commercial nutrient source. After much experimentation with raw materials (to achieve the best end product AND minimize neighborhood complaints about smell and pests) MUD settled upon spent coffee grounds and yard waste from the adjacent St. Mary’s Cemetery. In 2002 Al Gooday constructed a bicycle trailer to replace the original, petroleum-intense, truck hauling system and the program (now dubbed Coffee-to-Compost) has continued to be among MUD’s most visible and volunteer-rich endeavors. About the same time MUD started getting Missoula ‘turned on’ to compost, the organization also began hawking “the finest blend of llama, goat, sheep, and rabbit dookie” to area gardeners. Over the years this annual spring sale evolved in some ways (just llama dookie now) but remained remarkably stable in one key aspect: a wheelbarrow of quality, natural fertilizer still only costs \$8.

1994 included some other key developments in the DHP/MUD story. That summer the Bitterroot Ecological Awareness Resource (BEAR) program, headed by Kerry Wall-Maclane under the auspices of Bitterroot Down Home, received statewide recognition from the Montana Environmental Education Association for excellence in promoting “creative learning and joyful experiences in the natural world.” While the Bitterroot wing of DHP was garnering kudos, John Schneeberger and Karen Coombs were completing details to transform Garden City Seeds, DHP’s first fundraising program, into a separate, for-profit enterprise. When Bill McDorman (a DHP founder) heard about the proposal he wrote a letter to the Board of Directors urging them to retain the seed company. He asserted

that selling Garden City Seeds was “like the Red Cross selling its blood donor program.” Bill was as concerned about DHP losing its identity as much as a significant fundraising source. However, maintaining consistent communication and joint decision-making between DHP’s three distinct entities (MUD, Bitterroot Down Home, and Garden City Seeds) had become problematic and some Seeds staff believed for-profit status was the best means to make their operation truly viable. Steve Carol remembers that most of the contention regarding the proposed sale occurred within the Seeds staff and with a few DHP founders—for the most part the MUD crew took a neutral stance. Despite standing objections, sale of Garden City Seeds and the DHP logo was formalized in November 1994. In the subsequent DHP newsletter Kerry Wall-Maclane wrote, “with a twinge of sorrow, and millions of happy memories, we bid Garden City Seeds good by.”

Shortly after this major structural change for DHP, Mark Waltermire married Katie Dean and they left MUD to pursue opportunities in Boston. Mark’s departure opened a new era as the “MUD women” asserted a more prominent role. Steve Carol remained as a co-director but now shared responsibilities with three new cohorts: Caitlin DeSilvey (co-director), Gail Gutsche (fundraising coordinator), and Bronwyn Troutman (garden program coordinator). Bronwyn already had a long history with DHP/MUD, having worked for Garden City Seeds through the Summer Youth Employment Program when she was a teenager. Caitlin, Bronwyn, and Gail helped launch a number of new programs including the Home Grown Neighborhood Network (a “gardening buddy system” matching experienced Montana horticulturists with novice gardeners), papermaking workshops using alternative fiber sources, and MUD Camp (an extension of MUD’s long-standing Lowell Elementary School program into a weeklong summer exploration of “the wild in our backyards” and co-sponsored by the Montana Natural History Center). The strawbale greenhouse and Kerry Topel’s wonderfully artistic MUD sign (the sunflower and gardening tools facing Phillips Street) were also completed during this period.

The sale of Garden City Seeds led to more changes and contributed to final dissolution of the Down Home Project. In 1997 Kerry Wall-Maclane stepped down as director of BEAR (successor to Bitterroot Down Home) and Steve Carol announced he was leaving Missoula. A decision to dissolve the formal relationship between MUD and BEAR was reached during the final DHP board meeting in October 1998. Steve was hired to compose and submit separate non-profit incorporation documentation for BEAR, formal dissolution to become effective as soon as 501-c-3 tax status was granted. Rick Stern replaced Steve as MUD co-director and, despite all these changes, the spirit of sustainability and new ideas continued to flow through the organization.

Tune in next time to learn about the origins of MUD’s tool lending library, efforts to help launch Garden City Harvest, and role in organizing the Missoula Home Buyers Network.