

# The Origins of MUD

by Rick Stern

*The following is a condensed version of the first of a series of articles we wrote in 2000 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Down Home Project—the parent organization to the Missoula Urban Demonstration Project (MUD). By the time this series is completed, DHP will celebrate its 25th anniversary—15 years as MUD—of serving Missoula by demonstrating sustainable living practices.*

## Part 1: The Early Days

Life in Missoula, Montana has changed a great deal since 1980—the first year of the Reagan administration and the year that the Down Home Project (DHP) set down roots in Missoula.

“That was a period when the economy of Missoula crashed and the town lost almost 20% of its population”, reflected Bill McDorman, one of the founding fathers of DHP. “It was really sad around Missoula for a while.”

In 1976, McDorman purchased the house at 629 Phillips—the current home of the MUD office. He lived there for several years, raising chickens and vegetables with a group of people who called it Wild Willy’s Chicken Farm.

About that time, [McDorman’s] neighbor Vic said, “We’ll just have to garden more, and you’ve got your chickens and we’ll get through this.” McDorman said, “Sure, Vic, we’ll be fine, but there’s a lot of people



**Down Home Project founders and volunteers, photo circa 1982, from left to right: John Schneeberger, Karen Coombs, Pamela Lee, Kiki Deipenbrock (volunteer), Bill Tulp (volunteer and cartoon drawer for DHP publications), Kelly Weston and son Joel, Tom Lapham (volunteer).**

in Missoula who don’t know how to do this. Maybe what we need is to help teach people how to get back down home and take care of themselves.”

That was the start of the Down Home Project. At that time, the properties at 619 and 625 Phillips were for sale, and somebody was looking at tearing down the houses there and putting up a four-plex, said Perry Gliessman, who joined with McDorman and several others to purchase those properties immediately adjacent to the Chicken Farm. I moved in with the understanding that they wanted people to participate in a collective effort. Almost 25 years later, those three properties continue to comprise the MUD Demonstration Site. At that time, it was probably the most blighted piece of properties in the Missoula valley, said John Schneeberger. The houses were unin-

sulated. The foundations were crumbling. Basically, they were mouse-infested fire traps and the backyard was a junkyard. We had maybe 30 or 40 people come over and clean up for two 12-hour days, and we hauled off something like six dump truck loads of trash, said McDorman. That’s when it really started feeling like a project. People really rallied around what we were trying to do.

The Down Home Project incorporated with the state in 1980, with Christa Danielson, John Waugh, and Pamela Lee joining McDorman and Gliessman as the property’s residents. Pamela was really the person who put everything into practice, said McDorman. Together with the other residents, they formed High Mountain Garden Supply to sell seeds and bed-

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## The Origins of MUD: Part I continued

ding plants and to raise funds for DHP.

One day while walking through the Westside, McDorman saw a beautiful garden and noticed Schneeberger tending it. I said, you're into gardening? You've got to come over and see what we've got going on. In 1981, McDorman convinced Schneeberger to move to the Phillips Street site. Schneeberger's wife, Karen Coombs, moved to the site after the couple married in 1982. Soon High Mountain Garden Supply became Garden City Seeds, liberally borrowing clippings from the Johnny's Seed Company catalog to piece together the first Garden City Seeds catalog.

What really helped Down Home make the transition to stability was the establishment of the seed company. Every other commune I know of in Missoula has since folded, said Gliessman, who moved to DHP when the Mountain Life commune on Spruce Street folded in 1980.

In those early days, the Down Home Project also thrived thanks to the enthusiastic participation of a number of supporters, including Missoula Mayor Mike Kadas, his wife Martha Newell, former City Council member Jim McGrath and his wife Julie Hoffman.

In those days, people had lots of available time, because unemployment was really high, said Gliessman, who now lives across the street from the MUD site. DHP did a free lunch every day at 1:00. Anybody who didn't have something to do during the

day could come over to eat and help out in the gardens.

Soon, the crew tore out the fences separating the three properties a dismantled and hauled off several old railroad worker's houses. The process of improving the site accelerated when Kelly Weston arrived at DHP fresh from an apprenticeship at UC Santa Cruz's alternative agriculture program. He and his partner Kiki replaced Gliessman at 619 Phillips in 1982, and soon double-dug at least 20 garden beds in the backyard.

It was soon thereafter that the Down Home Project received a visit from the poet Gary Snyder, who enjoyed a memorable dinner with the residents. He came to Missoula every two or three years as a guest of the Wilderness Institute on campus, said McDorman. I knew some of the people who had invited him, and I said to them while he's here, we'd like to invite him to the Down Home Project for dinner. It was in September and the gardens were bursting with vegetables. We decided we'd prepare nothing ahead of time. We'd go out in the garden and pick everything fresh. We ground up wheat berries and made bread, and made spaghetti from spaghetti squash and tomatoes from the garden. It might have taken a little longer than we'd expected, but as dusk settled over the valley, we all sat down for dinner in the backyard. I saw him 10 years later and he mentioned that dinner to me. Of course, he's the type of person you could pull that off with because he understands that it's all about the process.

Little did McDorman know at the time that the process of refining and improving the gardens, houses, and activities of the Down Home Project would well outlast the Reagan administration.

*Tune in next time to learn about the genesis of the Northside Community Gardens, the migrations of Bill McDorman and of Garden City Seeds, and the Reagan administration's official recognition of DHP's activities.*

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