

The DHP/MUD History, Part V: “The Tools of Change”  
By Jack Rowan

This is the last in a series of articles recounting the history of this organization we know as MUD. Twenty-five years ago a group of visionaries gathered on Missoula’s northside, dedicated to transforming a patch of rocky soil, railroad shacks, and industrial discards into a model for self-sufficient urban living. One year later the Down Home Project (DHP) received official non-profit recognition and new programs proliferated. Early visions for the project were amended during the intervening years—some never materialized; others blossomed beyond expectation; and some sprouted, withered, then reemerged when the time was right—but the roots and spirit of MUD remain nourished by the ideas and energy tilled into the earth by those first volunteers. An incredible procession of staff, interns, and volunteers followed their lead, each adding to the cause and growing from the experience.

Previous installments of this series described the events leading to the Down Home Project’s dissolution and the emergence of MUD as an incubator for sustainable living initiatives. From 1994 to 1999 MUD initiated the coffee-to-compost program, llama manure sales, and sustainability education programs with Missoula schools, among other activities. It also served a key role in launching Garden City Harvest and worked with neighborhood partners to create Missoula’s first tool lending library. The energy emanating from MUD was frenetic and the organization’s annual budgets grew from approximately \$7,000 to more than \$75,000. With all this energy and growth came the difficulties of keeping it all under control and maintaining staff stability.

The emergence of Garden City Harvest was both an opportunity and a challenge for MUD. The “Welfare-to-Work” legislation advocated by President Clinton and passed by Congress in the mid 1990s had dramatic impacts upon the working poor across America. In Missoula a series of community discussions led to the formation of an umbrella group for organizations seeking to secure healthy, sustainable, and affordable food sources. Caitlin DeSilvey, then a MUD co-Director, volunteered her own time to serve a central role in writing grant applications for this new project. Under Caitlin and Steve Carroll’s leadership MUD became a charter member of the umbrella group by offering to develop and supervise a community garden network modeled upon the northside community garden. Rather quickly a new organization created under the umbrella, Garden City Harvest (GCH), became the focal point for the group’s efforts and many partner roles were transferred under its stewardship, among them was the community garden network. Some MUD members worried GCH would compete with MUD for funding, volunteers, and community recognition. To some extent this proved true; however, most everybody involved supported the innovative programs GCH implemented, appreciated the successes they achieved, and eventually accepted that the two organizations are not competitors.

During this same period the City of Missoula initiated programs encouraging each of the city’s neighborhoods to formulate a long-term vision for land-use, community character, and economic development within their boundaries. One suggestion that arose from the Northside-Westside neighborhood discussions was creation of a tool lending library to assist low- to moderate-income residents in renovating the area’s older homes, making ownership more viable. Caitlin worked with Bob Oaks in successfully writing a Title I grant to initiate the program. Habitat for Humanity, the North Missoula Housing Partnership, and both the Northside and Westside Neighborhood Associations all contributed to securing the grant. The library began lending tools and offering workshops for projects ranging from basic carpentry to full-scale re-landscaping in the fall of 1997. For the first five years the program operated out of Bob’s garage and many of his own possessions accidentally got into circulation. Over the years the Tool Library has assisted hundreds of Missoulians in completing improvement projects, enjoyed tremendous support, survived equipment disappearances, and allowed MUD to share resources with numerous other Missoula organizations. In Bob Oaks’ opinion, “the Tool Library helped MUD become better neighbors,” by deepening its roots beyond the gardens and providing direct help to the community rather than just demonstrating possibilities.

In 1997 Steve Carroll departed and Rick Stern joined Caitlin as co-Director. During this transition MUD completed a series of strategic planning sessions to set a coherent, long-term direction for its diverse

programs. One primary goal was to develop a comprehensive site renovation plan intended to make MUD a national resource. Caitlin decided to leave one year later and shortly thereafter MUD dramatically reorganized to create the organization's first Executive Director. Rick was given this new title and specifically charged with implementing the site renovation, among the other Director responsibilities. The first big renovation project, delegated to Matt Hisel, was to deconstruct a shed and summer greenhouse in the back area, reusing materials as much as possible to build a model solar home. Much like MUD's strawbale greenhouse, the model home (named the Sustainable Home Energy Demonstration or SHED project) spanned several years, survived a few leadership changes, and endured both practical and theoretical turmoil. Though actually referring to another site project, Matt crystallized the essence of the SHED project (and the larger MUD experience) in stating, "It's never easy for nuclear engineers to work with hippie carpenters."

When Rick decided to leave MUD in the summer of 2000 the organization faced several serious challenges. For the first time in eleven years there was not a clear heir to the organization's consensus-driven leadership and the SHED project was literally a gaping hole needing funds to complete. The Board of Directors decided to move MUD in a significantly new direction. They believed MUD needed to become less grassroots and more professional in order to achieve long-term financial and staff stability. Following a national search, Rachel Goen was hired as the new Director and two big breaks with MUD's past were implemented. The new Director would not live on site (the emphasis became providing a sustainable wage rather trading compensation for free rent) and the organization's target audience expanded to all of Missoula rather than just the northside. To accomplish all these commitments, the Board secured an equity loan intending to use part of the funds to complete the SHED project and the rest for staff salaries—as seed money until new fundraising streams could be realized. These changes stirred controversy among MUD members and the next year was marked by community tension and internal struggles. However, 2000 and 2001 also included many successes. Rachel raised more funds within a year than any previous MUD Director, a consistent and reliable membership tracking program was finally established, MUD participated in launching Missoula's Sustainability Alliance, and Rachel and Karin Schalm revived the Horticultural Therapy program for developmentally disabled adults.

When Rachel announced her decision to leave MUD, the Board decided to shut down operations for two weeks and evaluate the viability of keeping the organization going. After Karin presented a proposal for how to move MUD forward, the Board decided to reopen and hire her as the new Director. MUD faced new funding challenges in the wake of the September 11 tragedies and the need to begin paying a mortgage. In the MUD tradition, Karin learned by doing. She worked hard to get long-term MUD members reinvigorated and secured some new grant sources. In July 2003 Karin stepped down and Rebecca Richter became the new Director. New challenges arose and new opportunities were seized. Rebecca has led a tremendous revitalization of the demonstration site, the internship program is reinvigorated, and the MUD crew is laying the groundwork for several exciting new programs (some entirely new and some expanding upon ideas from the organization's past).

There is much more that should be written about DHP and MUD. These articles have presented a minimal list of all the amazing people and stories that have made the organization real and vibrant. However, as Karin Schalm states, "History is interesting because we can learn from it but MUD is about the present and pursuing your passions, not being trapped by the past." I would add one more bit of wisdom, "Besides, it's easier to build a monument than it is to build a movement." (unknown, recited by Rev. Joseph E. Lowery) Despite difficulties, MUD continues to facilitate passions and sustain the movement.