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Abstract: Harry Rhodes was born on October 8th, 1959 in Harvey, Illinois. Harry remembers, as a child of a lawyer father and a stay at home mother, helping in the family garden. Harry believes this experience as well as his work on a kibbutz in Israel has prepared him for his Executive Director's position at Growing Home Inc. Growing Home is a nonprofit organization that help homeless and incarcerated individuals get job training and placement through the use of organic sustainable agriculture. Growing home is also involved in alleviating the food desert caused by a lack of grocery stores in Chicago's south side Englewood neighborhood.

Keywords: Harvey, IL; Garden; Kibbutz; Growing Home; Non-Profit; Job Training; Organic Agriculture; Grocery Store

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Interview with Harry Rhodes
#ISM_31_RhodesHar
September 5, 2008
Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Maniscalco: Today is September 5, 2008. We're sitting here in Chicago with Harry Rhodes. How are you doing today, Harry?

Rhodes: I'm good.

Maniscalco: Great. It's really great that we could sit down here and talk with you and do this interview with you. I'm really excited. Can we do some of the easier questions, the small questions that you're definitely going to get right now problem? Age, date of birth?

Rhodes: I think I can do that (laughter). October 8, 1959. So I'm forty-eight.

Maniscalco: Where were you born?

Rhodes: Chicago, actually—Harvey, Illinois. Right outside,

Maniscalco: Oh wow, really? Is your entire family from Chicago?

Rhodes: More or less. They go back a couple generations. Was born here and then grew up in Wilmette.

Maniscalco: What kind of a childhood did you have growing up?

Rhodes: Family and three siblings. My dad's a lawyer. Mom liked to have gardens all the time so I was always helping out in the garden.

Warren: Will you hold on for one second? Sorry. Let me get this stuff out of your way.

unknown: If I knew you were going to set it there, I would have moved it earlier.

Maniscalco: You were saying about your mom's gardens.

Rhodes: Yeah, I always worked a lot with my mom in the garden in the backyard, grew a lot of tomatoes, green beans…

Maniscalco: Was it a large garden? Small garden?

Rhodes: It was a suburban home, so it was just a backyard garden.

Maniscalco: So there was tomatoes, green beans—anything else?

Rhodes: We had sunflowers. Wilmette used to have a village fair, like a county fair, and they would have prizes for different vegetables and things. One year, we had the tallest sunflower.

Maniscalco: Really?

Rhodes: Yup. Twelve feet.

Maniscalco: Really? That's a pretty good one.

Rhodes: That was exciting. So that kind of stuff put the bug in me for growing stuff.

Maniscalco: Now I know as you grew up, you went off to school and did different things at the university. Can you tell us a little bit about your university careers?

Rhodes: I moved to Israel and lived in Israel a number of years. I went to undergrad school in Jerusalem, studied the Bible and Jewish thought and then came back here and finished in Chicago—University of Illinois, Chicago, got my BA. And then I moved up to Madison, Wisconsin, where I studied public policy administration and concentrated there on social service agencies and urban and [regional] planning. In fact, an interesting note is one of my professors there that I did end up having to sort of work with, Jerry Kaufman, is an urban planner who was since then [has] written a lot about urban farming. He was here recently and there was a field trip—we get a lot of groups come in to see this place [farm]—so he was here recently on a field trip of planners from all over the world. He was really excited to see what we've done.

Maniscalco: That must have been neat for you to have your professor here.

Rhodes: Yeah, very cool.

Maniscalco: You said you studied a little bit of social services and stuff like that. What got you into that sort of field?

Rhodes: I was always interested in non-profit work and working with organizations that worked to bring about change and help people at the same time. Like I said, after graduate school I went to Israel with my family—I have three kids, two boys and a girl—and worked there and started up some organizations that worked in Jewish-Arab coexistence, bringing together diverse populations, people that usually don't have much to do with each other, working on educational programs, leadership programs, community programs. I was executive director there so when I moved back here in 2001, a lot of what I had learned I was able to use to get the program going with Growing Home.

Maniscalco: Are you the founder of this organization here, Growing Home?

Rhodes: I'm not the founder. Les Brown, from the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, was the founder. He had the idea in the early nineties actually to do this in the city and he had the vision. He was someone who grew up on a farm and knew the power of growing food and knew that he'd [he wanted to] take people who had been homeless, people who don't have their roots, who are wandering around. He helped them plant their roots somewhere and grow something that can help transform their lives.

So he had the vision and then he brought me in in 2001 to make it happen. They had the land—some in the city, some out in Marseilles—but there was no program going at the time. Funders—they had a few early funders who were getting restless who said, "If you're not going to do anything, we're going to take away our funding." So I was brought in and had them make some things happen very quickly.

Maniscalco: Can you kind of tell us what growing home does?

Rhodes: Growing Home [is a] social enterprise today [that] operates an organic farming business. We have three farms today. We have one certified organic farm in Marseilles, Illinois. It's ten acres. It used to be the Marseilles Weather Station. It was federal surplus land and the McKinney Act, which deals with a lot of homeless issues, stipulates that federal surplus land should be given to organizations working with people on job training and with homeless people. So Les put in a request to get that land and got that land in the late nineties.

So we started out with that land, turning that into the organic farm. And then our second farm is about a mile from here. It's at the Su Casa Catholic Worker. It's about half this size. Much smaller. More of a market garden than a real farm. But we started working there in 2003. And then we added this farm starting in 2006, we started building the hoop houses that you see right over there and completed them last summer in 2007. So right now, we have two urban farms, one rural farm, and we have plans for several more farms here in Englewood. In fact, part of the plan for turning around Englewood is to have an urban agriculture district that will have farms, farmer's market, produce markets, everything related to food. And then we have this business, but it's just a normal farm and farming business.

Our social mission is to provide job training, job training for people who've been homeless, people who've been incarcerated. Essentially, giving people a second chance. Giving people who've been down and out, people who have been marginalized, a chance to get on their feet, a chance to work and train and learn something new in a safe setting for six months. People come, start working and training with us in early April and the program goes through mid-October. People learn while they're with us. In addition to working, we've developed an entire curriculum around organic agriculture, horticulture, soil science, and other skills related to it but other skills that will help people go back into the work market. So there are people learning about food and health and nutrition. They learn about farmer's market, sales, marketing, how to take what they've grown and sell it at a market. Learning about customer relations, learning about basic math.

People who come to us just need educational skills. There's a lot of help they need, and so we work very intensively with people for six months to give them a chance to go on to the next stage in their life and to empower them, to show them that they have skills. Many of them, after being incarcerated, feel like, you know, they're treated like they come out and serve their time and then they come out no one's willing to give them a job or a second chance, so they end up going back. We're working on changing that cycle and showing them that it's possible by growing food.

Maniscalco: That's really neat. I have lots of questions for you. To start with, how is a person coming to your program? Are they recommended to get here? Are they directed here?

Rhodes: Our first year, we had to go kind of beg people because we told people that we were doing farming and they were like… "Yeah, I don't want to farm!" A lot of them have family back in the South and they think that's what farming's all about and they're in Chicago. So I had to go to some shelters that we worked with and we got some people. Even that first year, one of the case managers told me that he couldn't believe that these people were waking up at five in the morning to go out to Marseilles, Illinois to work. The change that he saw after a couple months of doing that was really incredible.

Since then, we've formed a lot of partnerships with different social service agencies that do either job training, substance abuse counseling, working with people who've been incarcerated, and they've refer[red] people to us. We've also received support from the city of Chicago—the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development. So we're on their website as an organization that works with people that have been incarcerated.

So where the first year, we were kind of begging people and saying, "Really, you should do this!" Today, we do our recruiting in March and, by mid-march, we're full and we have a waiting list.

Maniscalco: How many people are you recruiting?

Rhodes: We're working this year with thirty people. The first year, we had nine. So we've grown a lot, but the demand is certainly greater than what we can take in.

Maniscalco: What are your plans to try to meet that demand?

Rhodes: We're getting additional farms. The more space we have, the more we can do. Additional staff. Working on placing people so that people—it's a good program for someone who needs it to go through six months, but some people after two months are ready for a job. So if we can get people jobs faster, then we can take in more people to replace them. So we're looking at working with fifty, a hundred people, and getting other micro-enterprises around Englewood dealing with food so that people can start their own mini-farm, their own business.

Maniscalco: When a person comes in a starts this program, you're either talking about a homeless person or someone who's been incarcerated. They're not always going to have a home to live in or all those things. Are those things provided through the program? How does it work?

Rhodes: We don't provide housing. We have partners who do that. One of our demands is that people have to have a roof over their heads. They can't be living on the streets. They can't be living in an emergency shelter and every night somewhere else. I wish we could help them, too, but somebody has to have a stable address so they can come here. As it is, we work with people [who] have the hardest time finding work and there are very few organizations in the city or I think in the country who work with this population.

Maniscalco: What are some of the first things, as you come into this program if you're as a person just entering in—what is the experience for that person?

Rhodes: We start out with two weeks of pretty intensive job-readiness workshop. We work with an organization called the Employment Project, which is part of Inspiration Corporation, again, who's another partner of ours. They have a facilitator who is excellent, who works on communication skills, teamwork, goal setting, trying to get people back into an environment that many of 'em haven't been in for years. Many of them have never been. So just preparing people to go out and work and work together as a team. After that initial two-week period, they start to work. They rotate their time between our three different farms with a group going out two days a week to our farm in Marseilles and they usually spend a morning—three, three and a half hours—doing work and then the afternoon is more curriculum, actual sitting and learning about horticulture, learning about a variety of skills. We have volunteers who come in and work with people on literacy issues, on education. We're starting a program today—there's an organization, Literacy Works, that we're part of and they do a writing workshop—it's an eight-week writing workshop—and help people put their thoughts down on paper and work with them on writing. So that's starting up today.

Maniscalco: That's pretty cool. I'm sure you've seen lots of people start and after those first two weeks and you've seen them get out and start to touch the soil and start to work in the gardens. What is that experience for a lot of them?

Rhodes: It's very different. It's different than things they've done in the past. Some of them get right into it and love it, others… Parris will tell you he was kind of like, "What am I doing here?" Wondered at first, but then eventually he realized how positive it was and how it could help him. It takes awhile. We have professional farmers, we have people like Tyra. who have been trained, who do the supervising and we count on them for most of the farming. It takes a few

months. Today, you see the people towards the end of the program, they're harvesting and they're working pretty independently. But at first, they need much more supervision.

Maniscalco: So, you started this basically on the ground floor, you came in. When and how did you come to the decision of going organic?

Rhodes: That was a decision that from the start, the mission said it was going to be organic, growing food organically. We had some discussions at the beginning with our board about if we wanted to be sustainable, organic, if we want the word organic and we decided that we wanted the word organic, that was a principle of the organization. That all the food we grow will be grown organically in order to improve the environment, to improve the soil, and to end up growing food that's good to eat, that's healthy for people.

Maniscalco: What was the process for you to start an organic garden in this urban area?

Rhodes: Our farm out in Marseilles was certified organic in 2004. It began in 2002 and it was certified in 2004. This farm was just set up—Really this is our first full year of activity and it's not certified organic yet. We use the same practices, but doing something in the city is a little bit different and the whole organic certification is a little different than what it would be out in the rural area.

Maniscalco: What's the difference?

Rhodes: It has to do with compost, it has to do with when you can use the compost, and how much time you have to wait between putting down the compost and harvesting your crops. I think that's the main difference. There just aren't many urban farms that are certified organic. I know in Kansas City, I'm pretty sure there's one. But I'm not sure of any others. One of the most demanding parts of being certified organic is record-keeping. You have to have someone on staff, some farmer, who devotes a lot of time to record keeping. So getting this up going was enough of a challenge without adding the record keeping for the certified organic. But we've started the process and our goal eventually is to have all our farms certified organic.

Maniscalco: How many years for this farm will it take?

Rhodes: A year, maybe two.

Maniscalco: I noticed the gardens are kind of raised. Did you bring soil in?

Rhodes: Yes. You see the concrete here? This whole site was concrete. So when this was given us—we purchased it for one dollar from the city of Chicago—before we went through that, we had to go through environmental testing and make sure that it wasn't a brown field, that there weren't any major contaminants. And found that it was okay but there wasn't any soil here and most of the soil in Chicago is high in lead and other things that aren't great for growing on. So we brought in tons of fertilizer, of compost, and everything's being grown on compost. Everything has to be eighteen to twenty-four inches deep in order to be able to grow what we're growing.

Maniscalco: So now, you know that compost has a lifespan. What's your plan for after the compost…

Rhodes: Developing soil. We've been working with Michigan State, which does similar work. They have a lot [of experience] with hoop houses. Every time we dig up plants, we leave it [them] on the top of the beds and then a lot of it [them] just gets dug up and put back in. So that's a way to develop soil. We're looking at other ways, also. Doing our own composting.

Maniscalco: What sorts of fruits and vegetables are you growing?

Rhodes: Here we have our summer crops which we're just finishing up now—tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, beets, carrots, a lot of greens. The people in this neighborhood [like greens], one of our goals is to sell not just to high end restaurants and to wealthy people who go in for organic, but to try to bring this food into this community. This community—we're in Englewood—has been described as a "food desert" because of the lack of grocery stores and access to healthy food. There's one grocery store for about 85,000 people in greater Englewood.

Maniscalco: Wow.

Rhodes: So we've been growing a lot of greens, which is something this community likes—collard greens, mustard greens, kale, chard. We can take a walk later if you want to film some of it. We have one whole hoop house where we were harvesting today which is mostly greens.

Maniscalco: You said the community likes greens here, especially. Are you making decisions about what to grow and what not to grow in terms of what the community is asking for?

Rhodes: Partly. Our goal is to have half of what's grown here sold in the community, stay in the community.

Maniscalco: Where's the over half go?

Rhodes: We sell at Green City Market, which is on the North Side. We also sell to Charlie Trotter's restaurant. Those are the main ones. Then we have some wholesale customers.

Maniscalco: Being organic, you can't use any kinds of pesticides or fertilizers, so what are you trying to do to help, you know, grow these plants, exactly?

Rhodes: Well, we don't have too many weed problems because we brought in all the compost and we're growing in a covered setting, so weeds are not a big problem. We've had some problems with bugs with especially eating the greens and arugula, but mostly it's a matter of staying on top of things. Like I said, making the soil healthier in the long run so the plants will be healthy and that's the main theory behind organic. It's not just not using pesticides or herbicides, it's growing healthy soil.

So out at our farm in Marseilles, we've been working a lot on building up the soil. When we started there seven years ago, it was dead. There was nothing. There was no life whatsoever. There weren't any chemicals, which was good, but there was no life in it. So we've been working a lot on that with cover crops, crop rotation, things that build up the soil. That's the key.

Maniscalco: About the farm out in Marseilles – it's a fairly large farm.

Rhodes: It's ten acres.

Maniscalco: What sorts of things are you growing out there, exactly?

Rhodes: There we're growing things that take up more space. We have a lot of root crops there—potatoes, onions, garlic. And then we also run a CSA which is mostly out of there. We have a hundred-member CSA and every week we've been getting somewhere between eight and thirteen different vegetables in the box. The box is beautiful. It just—this year is definitely the best year we've had.

Maniscalco: Can you explain the CSA program?

Rhodes: Sure. It's community supported agriculture. The idea is that people aren't just buying like at a market, but they're becoming part of the farm. They're becoming a member of the farm and getting a share of the farm. They pay a certain amount of money at the beginning of the season and then we have three different seasons. We have a spring, summer, and fall CSA. Summer is our biggest season. That's when we have a hundred members.

So for eighteen weeks, people get a box it's about the size of a grocery bag filled with vegetables. Like I said, the stuff looks terrific. Everybody really enjoys it. It's delivered not to your house, but it's delivered to a place nearby, so a couple of churches [congregations] we work with. This is a delivery place, so we have, I think, about eight people pick up here. We have reduced price for people who pick up at one of our farms—so here or Marseilles—where we don't have to transport it. You got a box here? Thanks, Tyra.

Maniscalco: That's great.

Rhodes: This is what's in one of our CSA boxes this week. So we've got some nice lettuce, a variety of tomatoes. They grow a lot—right now of course, it's peak season for tomatoes, so a lot of tomatoes are growing out there. We've got a lot of different herbs, some basil, some yellow squash, there's a red pepper, zucchini, some beans, there's some onions in here, some beets, garlic—like I said we grow a lot of garlic—and people get that every week.

Maniscalco: And every week it changes?

Rhodes: Yeah, it's seasonal. So at the beginning of the season, it was a lot of lettuce, spinach, things that were doing well then. In the fall, it will be more root crops and going back to spinach again.

Maniscalco: How many months do you run that program?

Rhodes: The spring one is in May. Summer goes from June to October and then the fall one goes until the end of November. One of the things we look at as we extend our season and grow more out of here is being able even to extend that. I think some of them have about thirty-three weeks, we're up to about twenty-seven weeks. At Michigan State, where they're doing a lot of growing in hoop houses, they have a forty-eight week CSA.

It's great because it makes really a direct connection between the farmer and the customer. Tomorrow we have our harvest festival celebration out in Marseilles, so we're hoping a lot of our members will come out and see. We also have raspberries we're growing out there you pick, so people can go out there and pick their own raspberries.

Maniscalco: There are a couple places you've mentioned that are partners with you, like in Michigan. When they come out here and see this—I mean you think about Chicago and a garden, it's like, You've got to be kidding me. What do they think?

Rhodes: People are amazed. People can't believe that you can do this in Chicago. This year, which is our first year of really growing a lot… Every week, we've had people coming and doing a tour here. We've had people from around Chicago, from Wisconsin, Iowa, and all over the country, actually. Some people are out here from Arizona the other day who are interested in doing something similar. It's got a lot of attention and people are really excited, I think, about the possibilities of what you can do in the city. Detroit is very interested. Gary, Indiana had some people here and they actually invited some of our staff to go there and talk about helping them get started because they have many, many acres of just vacant land that they'd like to do something positive with.

Maniscalco: Now, that gets me to my next point. Here we are in Englewood. This is the only garden that's here right now and you said there's "a" grocery store to feed quite a few people. So what are your plans for this community here, exactly?

Rhodes: Like I said, we're doing this urban agriculture district is something that they've—Englewood went through a whole quality of life, community development planning process where they came up with a quality of life plan that includes an urban agriculture district and a plan for healthy living, exercise, eating healthy foods—everything related to food and trying to change that food desert. So it's not just going to be changed by urban farms, but that's certainly a core. This has served as, I think, the catalyst to get things going. People come here, they say, "Wow, this is possible." There's also a farmer's market that we helped get started this year. One of our staff is especially involved in the work with Englewood looking at produce carts. Kind of like where people have—especially Hispanic people—you see selling things out of carts. You see people selling watermelons out of carts. We could have vegetable carts going around selling vegetables on the streets. The produce markets, getting a bakery, getting a restaurant. Trying to use food as a way to change the community and develop economically and create jobs is really what we're looking at.

As far as our work, we received two lots about three blocks from here. People donated them to us after they saw us on TV one day. We're going to take those lots and use them kind of as incubator farms, incubator gardens. So we'll take them. It's two city lots. We'll divide them up into maybe four sections and give people who graduate a chance to do their own farm, to do their own thing. And then they can take whatever they grow, take it to the farmer's market and sell it.

And then the other project we're looking at right now is across from a school six blocks from here. Straight, also next to a railroad viaduct. There's no train that comes through here anymore. And so, in addition to having our job training and hoop houses and growing a lot of food, we're going to have a school garden, an edible school garden. So we'll work with the school, develop a curriculum and have kids who are studying biology—instead of just studying about plants, they can go out and grow their own.

Maniscalco: Wow.

Rhodes: So those are our immediate plans. Like I said, Gary, Indiana is talking to us. A lot of places are really getting excited and interested in doing urban farming.

Maniscalco: You know it's not, you think of a social program to help people get on their feet and help people get going, you don't exactly think of farming right away. What was your first take on it when the founder of this program kind of came to you and said, "This is what I want to do." What was your idea?

Rhodes: I remember I met with Les and he was telling me about it, and I wasn't quite sure how you could put the pieces together and how you could have homeless people come and grow food and learn to work. It seemed kind of crazy, but it seemed interesting and the way he presented it was pretty convincing. He understood, like I said, the power of farming. How it can help transform people's lives. It's not just about getting a job. It's really about life transformation.

Maniscalco: What do you see kind of for the future, future of this community? You've kind of laid out some ideas of what you want Growing Home to do within the near future, but way in the future, beyond even you, what do you see?

Rhodes: I think from what I've seen and the people that are working on this—We can't do it ourselves, but there's a lot of people involved in this community development planning. I think it, again, can become a vibrant community like it was fifty years ago. Englewood was "the" place to live in Chicago a hundred years ago. People wanted to come to Englewood. But for various reasons, especially in the sixties, things started going downhill.

There are people committed to revitalizing Englewood. It's going to take a lot of work. There's still a lot of crime, a lot of drugs, a lot of gang violence that goes on here. I grew up in Wilmette so I had no idea. I heard "South Side of Chicago" and I thought that's a dangerous place. But you can look around. It's a community. People aren't being shot in the streets. That's just what you hear, you read in the press. There's a lot more going on here and there's people who live here who want to strengthen that community. So I'm optimistic that, coming together, we can really do a lot to bring about that change.

Maniscalco: What do you think about the future of agriculture in this community?

Rhodes: I think it can be a kind of highlight, an example of growing food in a city. Like I said, there's a lot of communities, Pilsen is looking at doing a farm, Bronzeville, people are coming to us and asking us how to get started. The city has a plan, Eat Local, Live Healthy, that we helped develop, that came out of the department of planning and development that calls for more of these. Whenever they go somewhere, they say Growing Home was our first project, now we're looking at our second one over on 10th [Bontemps school]. Once you get it going, it can really take off. Once you have two farms, you can grow for a hundred people. If you have ten farms, you'll grow for a thousand people. If we have a hundred farms in Englewood, and there's plenty of vacant land that you could have a hundred farms here—you're growing for the whole community.

Maniscalco: That's pretty cool. Could you envision that as a possibility, having hundreds of farms here?

Rhodes: Yeah, I don't see why not. People just need to see what's possible and then people get excited and figure out how to do it.

Maniscalco: You mentioned one other place that they're starting to put up farms in Chicago. Are there other areas locally here that are—

Rhodes: There's a few. We're just at the beginning. There's a lot of people interested. We're part of an organization or a network of organizations that we helped get started called Advocates for Urban Agriculture, which has two big meetings a year. At the last one, about sixty people came. It includes organizations, it includes individuals who want to farm in the city where we do educational programs and also a lot of networking, figuring out how people can be more involved.

There's other related spin-offs or related projects. There's a Chicago honey co-op, which is a co-op, it's not-for-profit, but I think they have a hundred honey hives that are doing honey, and they're also interested in growing food. There's a program called "Sweet Beginnings," which also does honey and more than honey, they do honey products—value-added products from honey. That's also working with people who have been incarcerated. The Ken Dunn Resource Center has a farm called City Farm, it's a division in Clybourn which looks pretty similar to what we have here. I don't think they have the hoop houses, but they do a lot, and he's [Ken Dunn] been talking about urban farming for thirty years. That's a farm. The difference is, that's

on CHA land, so as soon as they take that land, they'll have to move someplace else. There's a few organizations, a few people who are generally working to make this happen.

Maniscalco: Now, out of all the farms that Growing Home owns, have you figured out or estimated how many people you're actually feeding, that you're able to feed with all these farms?

Rhodes: It's really hard to say. We have a hundred-member CSA, so that's a hundred families that are being fed from the CSA. We have, between our farmer's markets, probably three or four hundred customers. All of the interns here also take food home for themselves and their families. That's one of the perks. They get some stipend—they don't get paid a lot, but they get to take food home. So you heard Tremain earlier telling you that he takes all this home and that's what he eats tonight. That's really crucial. When people come to us, usually they're eating a lot of junk food, which is what's available—a lot of fast food, what's available around here. So the fact that they can take this home is… They're eating what they grow.

Maniscalco: Do you see a very drastic change in people's attitudes towards food when they start taking this food home?

Rhodes: Definitely. We do a lot of readings, a lot of education about it. We try to, we don't have the facilities yet, but we're building a building over there which will have a larger processing area and we can do more cooking demonstrations so we show people not just tell them how important it is but show them how to cook what they eat.

Maniscalco: Now, have you run into the person that you hand them a tomato or a green or something and they say, "I don't know what to do with this?"

Rhodes: Yeah, that was Ronaldo. He'll tell you. A good friend of mine, I think in 2004 he was in the program. He said, "I don't like vegetables. I'll do the farming but I won't eat this stuff." And now he's married and his wife prepares stuff for him and he loves it. He'll eat all this stuff.

Maniscalco: Now have you recognized the program and once they're done, they're kind of hooked on getting the fresh fruits and vegetables and everything and they come back and….

Rhodes: Sure they keep coming back because they want to get their vegetables.

Maniscalco: Do you sell the vegetables straight out of this farm right on the street here?

Rhodes: Yeah, we have a little farm stand that we do once a week so people come here and they buy directly from us.

Maniscalco: Do you see a lot of your past people that have come through the program coming back?

Rhodes: They come back every once in awhile. Some people of course more so than others.

Maniscalco: What sorts of success stories do you have from people that have come through your program?

Rhodes: We have Parris and Tyra who are working with us full-time. We have about seventy percent of the people who have gone through the program have either gone on to working or education of some sort. Mario Brownlow, who was in the program last year, he spoke at our benefit. He went on to work at a high-end grocery—Fox and Obel, it's called—in downtown Chicago, and then is doing a landscape program with the city, learning about landscaping. He wants to eventually have his own landscaping business. A young man who's doing terrific.

Margaret Martinez worked with us and really liked cooking food and she's been working at Crust, which is an organic restaurant in Chicago. A lot of people stay in touch with us and tell

us what they're doing. We try our best to stay in touch with people. People tend to move around a lot so it's a challenge.

There was one guy, Michael Skinner, who was struggling, but kept coming back to the office to talk to me to ask for where else he could go look for jobs and he said, "I want to go to my farm! I still got to go out to my farm!" He was in our first year, in 2002. That's what keeps me going, is to see the change in people and to see what it does for them.

Maniscalco: Is that the reason why you're coming back here every day to work?

Rhodes: Yeah, it's a challenge to come up with funding and staffing and to make everything happen is not easy. We're doing two of the hardest things in the world, I think. One of them is farming—not that farming is the hardest profession, but I have the utmost respect for the people who are actually getting their hands dirty and right now working sixty, seventy-hour weeks, working from when they basically get up to when they go to bed, to make it happen. And then trying to make a living from that is difficult. We have an organization behind us, but we're also a social enterprise. About sixteen percent of our budget comes from earned income and we'd like to increase that as business grows so we can hire more people and strengthen the organization. And then working with people who've been shut out by society, who just basically have been thrown in the streets and who were told, "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." But who's going to help them get there?

Maniscalco: For you, what was the hardest part about getting all of this going?

Rhodes: There was a lot. The first year, I was helping doing a lot of the farming. I was the only full-time staff, so I've seen it go from just me to now we have eleven full-time staff. Putting all the pieces together, I guess, which is the funding the farms, the people. Our first year, we contracted with another organization that provided us with a farm manager, which was fine. They did a good job, but we realized we needed our own farm manager. So our second year, we hired Larry O'Toole, who's been with us since. That's one of the key pieces, getting people from the community who are part of our staff. Orrin Williams, who just walked by, he's our employment training coordinator. He has a lot of community connections—that's so important to working here instead of just being outsiders telling people what they should be doing.

And then, hiring people who have been through the program and having them part of the staff so, like I said, as the business grows our goal is to create more jobs for people we train.

Maniscalco: Of course doing this, you've had to have learned some things along the way. What are some of the larger things you've learned?

Rhodes: I've learned a lot about people. A lot of people. Homeless people. We often say we're trying to help people become more self-sufficient, but if you're living on the streets, if you're figuring out how to get by day to day, how to survive, you're self-sufficient. They go through things I've never gone through and figure out how to make it. So, talking to people about their past, about what they've been through and talking to Parris, who was in prison for thirteen years or in and out of prison and his decision to change his life and to just go a different path—I just have a lot of respect for him. So, learning, talking to people, learning about people, has been a real learning experience for me.

Learning how to farm. Like I said, I like a garden. In Israel, I worked on kibbutz a little and so I've got a feel for it. I like farming but, I've learned a whole lot since I started with

Growing Home. I now have a nice garden at home. My son is going off to work on an organic farm now. He's caught the bug, which is neat.

Maniscalco: That's really neat. So being involved in this has also involved your family, as well.

Rhodes: Our family has, we've definitely changed the way that we eat. We eat almost only organic food now, a lot of it that we grow ourselves or that we get from Growing Home. And we're realizing the importance of eating healthy foods and eating organic foods. Our food system needs a lot of work and I think needs a lot to change so that we can as a society eat healthier foods. Talk about obesity and other things like that. There's a lot of education involved that I've learned and I hope other people are learning too.

Maniscalco: You've also had the experience in Israel of what people eat, what people grow. Comparing Israel to here, what are your comparisons, what are some of your findings?

Rhodes: People there eat a lot more vegetables. The climate is better. It's better than Chicago, certainly, for growing a lot of different things. But in every town, there's an outdoor market where you can just go and buy your vegetables. They're much more, it's more accessible and it's much more part of people's diet that every meal, people have kibbutz – a kibbutz breakfast just consists of a salad. That was a shocker for me but you get used to it. There's certainly less obesity there than there is here.

Maniscalco: I'll ask you my last question that everybody gets asked. This is going to be an oral history interview and it's going to be archived for a long, long time and one day maybe one of your kids or some future Growing Home person that's gone through the program might see, "Hey here's the first executive director of Growing Home," or "There's my dad," in the Illinois State Museum. What would you like to put in this interview for them?

Rhodes: I hope through my work that I've managed to change something and to help people change their lives, make their lives better. Help to change a community and improve a community and that some of what I learned gets transferred and rubbed off onto others.

Maniscalco: That's great. Thank you very much, Harry.

Warren: Can I ask one more question?

Maniscalco: Yeah.

Warren: Can you tell us about the award from Senator Bobby Rush?

Rhodes: Sure. The Congressional Center for Hunger has an award every year, I think they call it their "Hunger Award" or something like that, and they were interested in projects that work with farms and schools, that do the link between farms and schools. And since we're starting a farm right over next to a school in Englewood, Congressman Bobby Rush was looking for organizations in Englewood that might fit that category. So he contacted us through our partners at Teamwork Englewood and we wrote something up, he put in a recommendation, and I was informed last week that we'll be winning that award. It's very exciting.

Maniscalco: Congratulations. Thank you very much.

Rhodes: Thanks.

Warren: Super job.

(end of interview)