

## A TEI Project

# Interview of Andy Lipkis

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## 1. Transcript

### 1.1. Session 1 (October 8, 2006)

Collings

Good morning, Andy. Let me just ID the session here. Jane Collings interviewing Andy Lipkis, October 8th, 2006, at his home in Venice.

Collings

Good morning.

Lipkis

Good morning.

Collings

Why don't we just start off with talking something about your--introducing your early life, and if you could just tell me when and where you were born. Just begin at the beginning.

Lipkis

I'm not quite sure where I was conceived, but I was born and raised in Los Angeles and raised in a home in Baldwin Hills in southwestern L.A. I was born on November 25th, 1954, Thanksgiving Day.

Collings

Oh, my gosh.

Lipkis

Yes, which gives me the proud distinction of either being something that people can give thanks for or that I'm a turkey, and I think usually I fall in the turkey column.

Collings

Oh, come now. Well, let's hear a little bit about your family, your parents and brothers and sisters if you have them.

Lipkis

Yes, I'm the third son, the third of three. My mom was Joyce Lipkis. My dad Dr. Leon Lipkis. Wow, I don't know what ages they were, but she was from Kansas City, Missouri and he from Salt Lake City, Utah. They met some time just before or after the war, but they got married after the war. As I said, I'm the third son.

Lipkis

It was a family really active in community. My mother went back to school when I was in second grade. She went to UCLA to get a degree in the English Department. She had the distinction or an indistinction, I guess, I don't even know what the right word is, but she graduated with high honors with her master's, but at that time the English Department would not let women proceed on to the Ph.D. program if they were over thirty-five.

Collings

Oh, my goodness. Oh, my gosh.

Lipkis

Yes. Would that be a lovely lawsuit now?

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

So she had to leave the UC system and she became an instructor over at Santa Monica College.

Collings

Which is a great place.

Lipkis

Yes, it's fantastic. My wife, Kate, is there now.

Lipkis

Interesting, my mom, I guess finished high school, but her father, who was a newspaper executive, had died and she had to support the family so she didn't go to school, and so she went after me, the youngest, got into school.

Lipkis

And my wife went straight into advertising right after high school, which was a lucrative and successful career, Clio-winning copywriter. We met well into her career and she was an Australian, and we'll probably get to that story some other time. But she's just returned to school to get her degree. So following in my mom's footsteps.

Collings

Yes, that's an interesting parallel there, isn't it?

Lipkis

Yes. So my folks were, as I said, really involved in community, community building. They formed an organization called Crenshaw Neighbors. They built their house in the Baldwin Hills and at some point they--Crenshaw Neighbors was a multi-cultural collaboration to bring together the white and black community and strengthen relations. They worked to elect a police captain to be their city councilman, and that was Tom Bradley, who later we all worked to get elected as mayor.

Lipkis

So I set that context because some of my earliest memories were walking precincts with my mother, me in a stroller for Adlai Stevenson and then other campaigns. I guess John F. Kennedy campaign and then as a teen, early teen, twelve, thirteen-year-old, I worked for [Eugene] McCarthy for president. So that's important because a whole lot of my foundation of skill development, learning, and orientation was that.

Lipkis

My parents helped form a synagogue as part of building community, and they also had me in a cooperative nursery school, fairly progressive nursery school. Again, I think all of those things were interesting strands of foundation for me.

Lipkis

In the for whatever it's worth department, I learned much later in life that I was unplanned. I was kind of--I slipped through in

Collings

How did you learn that?

Lipkis

Well, I learned it in college, actually, that I was a--I slipped through a new birth control device. The reason why the question came up is that at some point in college I was examining my life to that point and I had frequently gotten into things kind of through a side door or back door, but then had to work much, much harder once I was in, in order to justify being there and how the people who let me in feel okay. I'll get to a number of youthful stories or a few of them to explain that in a minute.

Lipkis

So whether I had that sense as an infant or a baby or as my human life, or being born on Thanksgiving Day, I don't know, but I've felt a special obligation to work and to serve. It's also part of the cultural background of the notion of Tikkun olam as our job is to help heal the world.

Collings

The notion of what?

Lipkis

Tikkun olam, T-i-k-k-u-n o-l-a-m. It's the fundamental Jewish principle of what we're here for, which is to heal the world, to complete the world. That really

informs my philosophy and perspective a lot, more than I even recognized all the time.

Lipkis

Anyhow, so I had probably two important events that weren't even on my organizing list when I was growing up. Right after my mom started school, in fact right as finals started in her first year, I got hit in the head by a piece of wood that a friend of mine flung, one-foot square piece of plywood, he threw up in the air to try to hit a paper airplane, and it landed in my forehead.

Collings

Oh, you're lucky it didn't hit your eye.

Lipkis

Well, a little bit further I would have been dead, because it would have hit my temple, and so it was a compound depressed skull fracture that turned into eight hours of neurosurgery as they put me back together, and a week in the hospital, and wearing a metal plate for six months. It was pretty major. The surgeon they brought in for me was the same one they flew in for Kennedy. Fortunately, the results were better with me. I don't know exactly what all, I mean, it was a pretty--you know, it's a powerful thing when that happens with a little kid and you have a major threat to survival. Whether that caused me to shift priorities or what, I don't know, but that just was there, the fact that I was having to wear a helmet and a metal plate for a portion of a year probably also skewed some of my focus to what I did with my energy. So there's that.

Lipkis

Actually, around that time, and before that, there is one other interesting piece, is that we had an apple tree at our house, and I really liked it, and enjoyed it. I was very into gardening. I would grow vegetables at our house, at both of my grandmother's houses. I was just into planting vegetable gardens and I wanted to be a farmer.

Lipkis

One year the tree flowered and fruited all year long, which was an anomaly. Usually just flower, leaf out, make the fruit, and then go through the season. This was different and I thought it was really special and really important and I wanted to tell people about it. My parents engaged me in a conversation, I think it was my mom, "so how would you do that?" Not why would you do that, or don't be silly why would people want to know that, but how would you do that.

Lipkis

Well, that interaction became a fundamental basis of action in my life as a problem-solver, because I think that many people, most people, when they share something weird they get to a don't be silly or that's crazy, or a judgment, and I recall my parents, and my dad, saying instantly without judgment, "Well, how would you do that?" So every idea went into how to do, and I would

fantasize and think about the answer. That's pretty critical, because it sort of created me as a problem-solving machine. And without any resistance or stuff about how to get from idea to reality, I would just fantasize and think and ultimately would find myself building a bridge from fantasy to reality. So the conversation with the apple tree became, well, how would I share that with people? Well, I could do it in the newspaper, get it in the newspaper somehow, and that caused me to imagine a front page picture in the neighborhood paper with our apple tree. And the conversation proceeded to, "Well, how would you make that happen?"

Lipkis

And it was, "Well, I could call the paper and tell them about it and maybe they'll come and do a story."

Lipkis

Well, I have a picture in my mind of the front page of the paper with the apple tree on it. I believe I actually went all the way through the steps of calling the newspaper. I don't remember what happened. I don't think they came out, I don't think there was a picture, but I picture that as, it's a memory that, I guess, to my brain is as valid as if it happened, even though I can tell the distinction that I think it didn't. But they encouraged me to do the process.

Collings

Well, I'm really fascinated by this idea that you've decided that you wanted to tell people about it, because it's when you have to--it's when you tell people things that they then know and so much of the work that you do has to do with, like, explaining things to people and informing them and actually getting them to behave along the lines of their better nature.

Lipkis

Yes, and calling that forth. I guess that's an integration of this notion of healing, but my propensity to be an expresser.

Collings

Right, right.

Lipkis

But, yet, it's interesting that you point that out, because there is some process from thought to reality and things don't become real until other people get to engage in them for the most part. So I counsel people who are--sometimes I've led projects on manifesting your ideas or workshops, and really encouraged people to write and dream and think, and in fact it's there in the workshop workbook, our book (The Simple Act of Planting a Tree), which is to get it down and just the process of taking it from your head onto paper gives it form.

Collings

Yes, you have a whole section on how you visualize the idea just going in.

Lipkis

Exactly, and it's extraordinarily powerful and it works, and people need to know that skill. So, yes, that's where all that came from.

Collings

Very interesting.

Lipkis

I didn't take any classes in it, it's just life experience.

Collings

But are there other instances that you can think of where it was important that you felt like you needed to tell people about something?

Lipkis

Oh, yes. It's foundational to almost everything we've done and where I'm going from here. It's funny, because throughout school, I look back and see that I had a problem with even art classes and doing art and having ideas. Generally when I first express them to people, aside from my parents, people didn't see it, didn't get it, they dismissed it, "Oh, yes, so what?" "Are you crazy?" Or, "You're just a kid." Or, "What is that?" Which always led to frustration, and irritation, and a greater push to be understood, to seeking to be understood and valued instead of being dismissed. So I had that kind of energy going on, but also I learned that when I finished a project, a school art project or something, then people went, "Oh, my God, I had no idea." So that is a theme that occurs throughout my life of people not getting it and then getting it (once it's complete).

Lipkis

It's interesting, there's an arc of experience, certainly linked to growing up, that goes with that, which is that frustration of not being understood or trusted or whatever, and my response being, "Well, I'll show you," or "I'll show them." Sometimes it's a "get back" at them, sometimes it's a "let me better explain myself," sometimes, you know, especially younger, filled with expletives and anger.

Collings

Now, you said that you went to a progressive nursery school.

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

But did you go to, like, a regular elementary?

Lipkis

Regular elementary school.

Collings

How did that go?

Lipkis

I think it was fine. I think it would be interesting to talk to teachers, but they'd all be dead, I think. Yes, probably. But I recall that my parents tested me and

they told me later that I came out gifted, but they didn't put me in a gifted program. They kept me with regular kids and I didn't know any different. It was probably that I was borderline or something, and I'm appreciative of that, I think.

Lipkis

I just remember once writing a poem for an assignment and the teacher saying that wasn't creative and pretty well closed down my ability to read poetry or ever appreciate it.

Collings

No, I was just wondering, because my experience has been that people with their own ideas about how to do things don't generally do that well in regular school.

Lipkis

Yes, right. For sure. And as we move into teen, I was literally blessed with a miracle in that department. So we'll get there, and we're pretty close to that. I'm trying to think of--there was something else foundational. I said, the tree, the getting hit in the head.

Lipkis

Oh, I guess I already had this, but my fix on infrastructure and systems, a piece of that came up when the Baldwin Hills Dam broke. So I lived right under it, our house was one of four, five, six on the block that wasn't flooded and filled with mud, and thousands of homes that were inundated. But going through that whole experience of seeing the police and all the operations, somehow peaked my interest. It may have even come from somewhere else, but I don't know. But I just recall that.

Lipkis

Well, that comes back, there's a big through-line in infrastructure and agencies and all of that. I'm trying to mark some of these starting points.

Lipkis

Another fundamental experience was that my first experience with memory going to the library at schools, the first book I ever chose for myself was about Luther Burbank. It was a kids' book and I read it, and I have continued finding Luther Burbank surfacing throughout my life and reading about him and feeling interesting parallels.

Collings

Yes, so your family did garden?

Lipkis

Well, I did, and they let me. They let me sort of take over spaces in the garden. I think my brother once had a vegetable garden, because there's a picture with me and he and a cousin holding a giant squash, that's practically bigger than me.

Collings

Was this, do you think, some sort of holdover from the victory gardens, or was this a particular--

Lipkis

Well, they weren't into it. They just allowed me to do it. There was this thing called the American Greeting Seed Company ("Greeting Seed" was another company--totally different product) and I signed up as a sales kid.

Collings

Oh, I remember that, yes.

Lipkis

I bought all these vegetable seeds and nobody wanted to buy them, people really wanted to buy flower seeds, so I didn't succeed in that path. I have no idea how old I was, certainly preteen. I just remember this old smelly suitcase that I loaded with the seeds. But that I did plant a garden, grew corn, squash, all kinds of things like that.

Collings

But it wasn't a larger family interest?

Lipkis

No. No, we didn't--I wasn't really able to dig up the whole yard, it was just portions of it. So, no, it was this funny--and they could never explain where that came from.

Collings

Now, what do your two brothers do?

Lipkis

One's a doctor, my oldest is a gastroenterologist living in San Diego. That's Don [Donald Lipkis]. My next one is Roger [Lipkis] and he lives in San Fernando Valley. He's always been a business creative, so he was sort of considered an entrepreneur and he has sort of a conglomeration of travel agencies and he also coaches track. He had a couple Olympic gold medalists from the Valley track club. So he lives in the Valley with his family.

Collings

Your father is a medical doctor?

Lipkis

Optometric.

Collings

Optometrist?

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

Yes. Oh, great. That's a great area.

Lipkis



I had an uncle who was a medical doctor, so that was in the family, and another uncle who was a NASA scientist at TRW.

Collings

So sort of medicine, engineering, planning, it's all there.

Lipkis

All professional, yes, and certainly I assume that was the expectation for what I was supposed to do, which that expectation gave me some real trouble.

Collings

You were to be either a doctor or go into business in some way?

Lipkis

Some kind of professional, yes. Doctor, lawyer, you know, definitely go to college, get your degree, and become whatever. It's not that my parents ever said that, it was just that was kind of that's what everybody around me did, and all my cousins and everybody else. So it's like, okay, that's what I'm supposed to do.

Collings

Right.

Lipkis

And later when confronted with what I had to do there was no definition for it, so it was very scary and it was like jumping off into the abyss.

Lipkis

Yes, so anything about--

Collings

No, that's okay. You were going to go on into sort of getting into high school.

Lipkis

Yes, in high school I--well, in my late junior high I started--I got really involved in the McCarthy for president campaign, and then Tom Bradley for mayor. And both failed, of course, but there was a lot of skill development there with the ability to express and share, especially. It's interesting that you asked that question.

Lipkis

Also to your earlier question, I was rarely motivated by teachers. Some things I enjoyed, but a lot I didn't. But I was attracted to working in the media department of these campaigns and I learned how to write press releases. I was really willing to write and work hard and correct and self-correct and take feedback in those settings. I had harder time in school. In fact, also my mother was an English teacher, and I resisted her correction for a long time, until I finally, when I melted and let that in I learned a lot, and it was the same process. But mostly it was being able to work with adults who I respected who weren't my parents, and a real need to express effectively, because otherwise it wasn't going to be heard. So that's where I got some of my greatest writing

skill. And I also learned again a lot about community organizing and just fundamentals of taking ideas to reality and working with people.

Now, how did you happen to get involved in these campaigns? Was this through the synagogue or through school or--

Lipkis

No, no. Initially, as I said, it was my mom volunteering and I would tag along. Then my brother, Roger, was really active in politics and I would tag along with him, go to campaign headquarters.

Collings

Because it seems like you were sort of young, unless there was something drawing you into that.

Lipkis

No, it was a family portal, so transferred from my mom to being with my cool brother who was four years older than me and tagging along, but making my own way and being valued in my own right, even as a little kid in the campaign. So I did youth fundraisers for McCarthy and things like that, car washes.

Collings

Oh, that's great. What junior high did you go to?

Lipkis

I started at Audubon Junior High, which is in the Crenshaw area. It was a rough time. There were very few whites left there and the anger in the black community focused on whites was pretty strong. I would get punched pretty much every day.

Collings

Really?

Lipkis

Yes, and I really wanted to go there. My parents thought it wasn't necessarily a good idea, but--

Collings

You wanted to go because it was nearby?

Lipkis

It wasn't about proximity as much as my family was really active in the Civil Rights Movement, I thought, you know, I can do this. I should, and so I did, but it was not very comfortable. Martin Luther King was killed just, I think, while I was there. So it was tense times. At that point my father moved his office to Westwood, or some time a couple of years before that, and my mom was going to UCLA. I wasn't getting to learn much because all the time and energy was focused on discipline in the school and so I went, okay, let's look for someplace for me to go, and I transferred over to Emerson Junior High.

Collings

Oh, my son goes there. Yes.

Lipkis

They taught Russian, so I thought, "Oh, Russian would be interesting," and I could get a language transfer and start a language. It's just a few blocks from where my dad's office was where he could drop me, and so that's--and I went from there to the McCarthy headquarters and then the eighteen-year-old vote campaign headquarters up in Westwood.

Collings

Where were the headquarters?

Lipkis

They were in Westwood, in the Village, in various places, buildings that aren't there anymore. But I think McCarthy was once an old abandoned supermarket. It was big, big. It was fun days.

Lipkis

Anyhow, yes, that's all really fundamental soup. So I moved on to Uni [University Senior High School] for high school, had one normal semester. During that time I hooked up with a friend who, I should strip out "hooked up," can't use that word anymore.

Collings

Why's that?

Lipkis

Okay, because now it means intercourse.

Collings

Oh, yes, of course. Okay. That's true.

Lipkis

But I connected with some people there, somebody was setting up a recycling center and I started participating in that and I actually helped create a bit of a media event for its opening. So back to expressive, and again, before even the tree stuff started we opened the recycling center, I called a reporter and got them to come out as we were going door to door collecting glass and bottles and stuff like that.

Collings

How did you get them to come out?

Lipkis

Just called them and invited them, and they said, "Oh, yes, that's a story we'd like to cover."

Collings

Where does Earth Day fit into all of this?

Lipkis

It comes in another couple months. So this is in 1969. Then came Earth Day and I went to summer camp. Now, so back up. Conditions in Los Angeles, the

environment growing up, no smog alerts, bad smog. Nobody knew what it was doing to us, except my personal experience was on typical days it hurt to breathe and I'd come home from school, couldn't take a deep breath. I'd ask my mom to turn on the kettle and boil or make steam so I could breathe some steam and get some relief. That's what I remember.

Lipkis

My brothers, they were sent to summer camp, and at some point I wanted to do that, and they sent me, as well. Probably in the fifth grade or sixth grade and I started going to camp every summer and loved it. So summer camp was Camp JCA, Jewish Community Association, Jewish Centers Association, but in the San Bernardino Mountains, a hundred miles away from here.

Collings

Yes, and for like a week or was it the whole summer?

Lipkis

It was usually two to three weeks. There we could play, it didn't hurt our lungs. I really grew to love the forest. I always chose nature studies as my hobby hour. There was something that I liked about being there and the connection and all of that. Also camp was a great expression of social justice movement starting with Civil Rights and then anti-Vietnam War, and singing the folk songs and all of that, that was just this feeling of community, more feeling of community, and a community of caring. Our job was to care, was to help, and all of that. So more of seeds of who I was.

Lipkis

So then I went off to the Soviet Union for a whole summer because of my Russian classes. When I got into high school, I did one year at Emerson, a year at Uni--or no, it was the summer between junior high and high school where we decided to go. I'd never been on a plane before. I used my Bar Mitzvah money and a group of us went.

Lipkis

I don't remember exactly how all these pieces came together, but it was a great trip, and I was really struck by the transit systems in Russia and all around Europe, that everywhere I went there were these trains and people could get around. They didn't have tons of cars and they didn't have smog. I thought, "Whoa."

Collings

Yes, yes, this is great.

Lipkis

Yes, why, if they're a Communist country with, you know, how come they get to have that and we don't? And I started questioning that whole notion of that we're necessarily better or something, because if we are why can't we have that stuff? So that influenced me.

Lipkis

Somehow I got back, and I don't remember exactly how and why, but Ed Edelman, who was a city councilman at the time, appointed me to a citizen planning board.

Collings

Oh, that's surprising.

Lipkis

I was the youth representative, I was the youngest ever, and we were dealing with a project that has only just come to fruition in the last couple of months, or completion, there was a plan to run a freeway, the Beverly Hills Freeway, from Hollywood right down Santa Monica Boulevard to connect at the 405. So that was the plan, the freeway. The Citizens' Committee was to evaluate that and figure out what to do, and we recommended no freeway, and lo and behold, no freeway was built and the widening and facilitating of Santa Monica Boulevard was this very long envisioned process.

Collings

I know. Oh, God, that's been going on forever, yes.

Lipkis

Well, 1968, '69.

Collings

I didn't know that. Amazing.

Lipkis

That's when I was involved, and that was the subject, and that yielded, ultimately, what was just finished now in 2006.

Collings

Oh, how interesting, because I live half a block from there, and we've been complaining, "Oh, when is this going to be done?" My God, I didn't know it started in 1968.

Lipkis

Yes, well, I think the talk of a Beverly Hills Freeway was before that, but that's when we were brought in to cope with it. So I have that experience. I don't know why Ed Edelman would have known me to appoint me. I can't remember that.

Collings

Maybe something, some publicity about the trip to Russia?

Lipkis

No, that wasn't publicized, but--and my dad's not going to remember. I just don't--I don't think Ed Edelman will remember, but he's a friend. It may be because the recycling stuff and maybe a teacher recommended or I'm not quite sure what. So I definitely stuck out as weird, and fortunately most of the time it was appreciated, not un. It had to be teachers. Maybe it was my campaign

experience or something that translated over, but I mean, I had that. It didn't go anywhere, I was his citizen youth advisor for a while.

Collings

But I'm sure it was a great insight for you to see how this, start to see how this kind of thing--

Lipkis

Oh, yes, city agency, policies, and part of the influence was I wasn't impressed by policy stuff, whereas most environmental organizations are mostly about policy. TreePeople has always been almost exclusively about action. Forget about policy, we'll just get the job done. We're morphing rapidly now, because there's a glass ceiling of infrastructure of bad policies that yield the work that people do, no matter how good their intention, no matter how much they do, other things yield their work ineffective.

Collings

Yes, but you've probably built up the head of steam, you know, through this other focus.

Lipkis

Oh, hugely. Yes, and that our word is very potent in policymaking now as a result.

Lipkis

But back to this. So I went to Russia the summer I was fourteen, back to camp the summer I was fifteen, and it was a leadership development group, the oldest kids in camp, called TASC, TeenAge Service Camp or TASC. I had always revered them as leaders and seeing them, they were a group that was selected through an application process and all kinds of stuff to be the ones who would then become counselors in training and junior counselors. The job was to give something back to camp, since camp had given us all this stuff. Some time in the prior year is when the Forest Service announced that smog was killing trees in that forest. I learned from our camp naturalist, who had learned from the Forest Service that that was happening, and that there were smog resistant trees available, that would live when the other trees didn't.

Lipkis

Now, so the San Bernardino Forest was predominantly Ponderosa and Jeffrey pine, lots of other species, but the vast numbers, vast majority were those and those trees were dying. They started to decline as smog started to increase. It was known as the X disease, they didn't know what was killing

Collings

They had no idea that it was the smog?

Lipkis

Well, somebody began to suspect it and U.C. Riverside, the Forest Service Research Lab, ultimately got conclusive evidence when they built charcoal-

filtered air chambers around whole trees and they got better, and starting testing difference species. They figured it out and they learned what was happening, and that what was happening is the ozone in the smog and another chemical called PAN, peroxyacetyl nitrate, has a kind of corrosive, burning effect. Not unlike our own lungs were experiencing, but the smog would be ingested or breathed in by the plant and it would burn the stomata, those little holes where the air went in, and when it burnt it, it destroyed the chlorophyll. So as the chlorophyll was being destroyed, the chlorophyll makes the food, less chlorophyll, less food, the tree is weakened and goes into a [unclear] decline.

Lipkis

Trees actually have something analogous to our blood pressure, it's called sap pressure. In fact, what we call sap foresters and biologists call pitch. Pitch, not black as pitch, but pitch because there's so much pressure measurable in pounds per square inch inside a tree that when a bug drills in it's literally pitched out. So if that tree is healthy the sap flows very quickly and kicks invaders out of the tree and then seals the hole. Once they were weakened the blood pressure, sap pressure, dropped to the point where they couldn't defend themselves.

Collings

Now, does that have anything to do with the bark beetle infestation?

Lipkis

That has everything to do with it. Air pollution is what was causing--the air pollution damage and slow starvation is what enabled the bark beetle infestation to get started, and that was spreading and increasing the destruction of the forest.

Lipkis

So by 1970 the foresters said that they thought they were losing about 10 percent of the forest per year due to bark beetles, not drought-perpetuated, but smog perpetuated, and said that if it continued that the forest, as we all knew it, would be gone by the year 2000, if no one did anything about it.

Lipkis

So here I have had this cauldron of social action and doing something about it, a love for the forest. Earth Day happens, I've got a taste of environmental stuff through this recycling. And I also had, again, I think you presently spotted something that I tell at this point, but it's actually the through-line, which is I had a growing frustration with being told, "You're just a kid, you don't make a difference." Even though teachers, everyone spouted the party line, which is, "You can make a difference," the overwhelming nature of our city, our culture of war, made most people feel like I don't make a difference. So when they would say, "You can make a difference," they didn't really believe, and I could hear that. As a kid I could hear it, and I think all kids are in touch with a certain

energy, their own energy, creative expression, as they enter into the world, and encounter the forces that tell them in some form or another that, "No, you don't get to have your dream." And at some point, they give it up and it gets replaced with cynicism and pain and frustration and anger. I think most kids, most teens' expression of anger and frustration come from that process. I was like any other kid holding that frustration. So I'm there with that, maybe more so because of my inability to be fully expressive in school and all of that, but there was certainly already a questioning of authority, this was the late sixties and the beginning of the seventies, and so the other movements that were showing up with the Beatles and the counterculture starting to rise, already the Vietnam War, and so on edge, distrusting, and I learned that smog is killing the place that I could escape to. Earth Day energy and the counselor said, "No one's replanting the forest, and it's not going to get replanted unless somebody does it, and you are the only ones who know, so let's do something about it."

Lipkis

So that summer, when we were planning our project, what we were going to give back for the future of our camp, we decided to convert a place in the camp that had been a truck parking lot and baseball field, that had had oil sprayed over it for forty years every year to keep the dust down, we decided to make that a meadow, a place for picnics, and plant it with smog-resistant trees. So we spent three weeks, fourteen guys, fourteen girls, all of us fifteen and sixteen years old, all with our hormones starting to flow.

Collings

I know, I was thinking fourteen girls and fourteen guys.

Lipkis

Yes, and the girls are wearing overalls with bathing suit tops, bikini tops, and the guys are coming into their... "Gee this is exciting stuff."

Lipkis

So the result of the twenty-eight of us swinging picks, shovels, stripping the earth bare, shoveling truckloads full of manure in 110 degrees down in San Bernardino from a dairy, all of that, if you were to look at it without knowing what was going on it would look like a teen prison camp, except for the bathing suit stuff. But the work was the same, we were breaking rocks, we were doing all this stuff, but it was incredibly fun, incredibly meaningful, infused with purpose. We were expressing the anger, the frustration, and taking it back, taking the land back. I had felt kind of like a loner before that. I don't know if loner is the right word, but I'd seen people I'd been attracted to as leaders, I never thought of myself as one and never had that validation yet. In that environment people, who I had respected, were respecting me. So this was the coming out of a difficult teen tunnel, I think. So I shot through that tunnel with



this experience. It was like all of a sudden I started to feel who I was, and I was worthy, and I could really--we saw that we could make a difference.

Lipkis

A couple things happened, just like the apple tree, just like the recycling, we're doing this stuff, and I'm going, "You know, people need to know about this. They need to know." So I got on the phone and called this woman, who I had met. I guess she was the assignment editor that I met when I did the recycling story. I must have met them through somebody who was helping form news around the recycling. It must have been from a recycling or glass manufacturer or something like that, that happened back in high school. But I called that connection that I had saved, and said, "Hey, we're up here in the mountains, we're planting smog-resistant trees because the forest dying," and she dispatched a crew all the way to San Bernardino. They did a story.

Lipkis

Somewhere, I would hope that it could be found. It was ABC, the reporter was Al Wyman, he might even be dead by now, I don't know. But they did the story. So again, juice, validation.

Lipkis

So that happened near the end of the project. Also the very end of the project, the whole camp, 300 kids, assembles for us to dedicate this park on the last day of camp. We're all holding hands, singing songs, feeling so good. The animals are flying in and returning to the site.

Collings

Oh, how marvelous.

Lipkis

It's like the magic of a Disney moment, but real. We see squirrels, chipmunks, birds, and we go, "Oh, my God, we did this healing."

Lipkis

Now, we weren't literate to know that they were just eating the grass seed that we had sprinkled, but our experience was the trees were in the ground, smog-tolerant, thriving, the grass was there, we created this beautiful thing. That was very potent. Always the last day of camp everyone's going back home, everyone's crying because we created this great community, we've got to go separate, go back to the real world. Camp director says to us, "If you like this, don't cry, make it real in your world back in the city." I went, "Okay, thanks a lot."

Lipkis

So I return, two weeks later school starts, and I found that--so I'm returning to eleventh grade, and I found that a group of parents over the summer have created an alternative school at my school.

Collings

At Uni.

Lipkis

At Uni. They held a lottery, 150 kids were going to get to go into this program called IPS, the Integrated Program School. They held a lottery, I either missed the lottery, or my name was not drawn. I'm in class and I can't return to school, because I'm filled with what I've just been through, and that statement from Jerry Ringerman, the camp director, "Make it real," I immediately went into problem-solving creation mode and I went, "This is so potent, kids are in such a state"--even then there was gang violence. It wasn't terminal at that point, people were getting roughed up, but they weren't--guns hadn't been injected into the scene. I went, "You know, all kids need this experience. I've got to do something to save the forest. I want to create a camp where kids can have this experience."

Lipkis

So I began trying to figure out how I was going to get the kids in the mountains to have the experience of--it was the planting, but it was the bigger thing. It was connecting, connecting to their power, working as teams, yes, helping the forest, but getting something that would give them the strength to come back to the city and know that they could actually make a difference here. So that became a project that I wanted--and I called it The Project. I didn't have any other name for it. It was really clear to me that I couldn't go to class, I had to do this, and someone had created the perfect space for me to do, instead of going to class, go to work, because the purpose of IPS was community service. Yes, there was class and there was counseling, but you were encouraged to go out and do projects.

Lipkis

I was a little depressed, I guess, I don't remember the emotions. But my Russian teacher, whose name was Asta Aristov, was friends with the administrator of this new program. Asta Aristov was also an environmentalist herself. She was a Russian immigrant, cared about the environment a lot, when nobody else knew really what it was. She talked to her friend about this kid in her class, and a lot of the kids in IPS they were just--they got in by lottery, so they didn't have to make a case for why they should be there or whatever, they just went to the beach. They took their free time and went off and did whatever.

Lipkis

I think, by the way, Summerhill, the Summerhill Schools, were kind of the model of education, free education, and all that. Turns out that my preschool was the first Summerhill School in L.A. It's now a K through middle school school and it's called Play Mountain Place in Culver City.

Collings

I've seen that ad. I've seen their publicity, yes.

Lipkis

That's where I went. So back to that spirit, but anyhow several parents yanked their kids out of the program or they dropped out.

Collings

Because they weren't doing anything, yes?

Lipkis

Yes, and three spaces opened and I was one of three kids dropped in. Back to coming in the side door.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

I did not have the luxury of playing around, but I so needed that, and immediately they were there to support me. They introduced me to a UCLA grad student in biology, who brought me over to UCLA, taught me how to use the bio med research library. I immediately started doing research on smog and trees and pulled all this great stuff together and read it and got that background.

Lipkis

My brother had created, when he was in junior high and high school over at Dorsey, somehow got involved in the Crenshaw Youth Services Commission. Another back to community participation. So I knew, you know, little bits about nonprofit and all that (I wanted to create a camp where kids could plant trees and care for the environment, but didn't know how to do it) and I talked to him and got some guidance from him. Somehow I got a [unclear] camp and I didn't know what. I interviewed the people at my camp and got way overwhelmed when I found out it cost like a half million dollars to run a camp. Here I am fifteen. My allowance may have been fifty cents or something, I have no idea. It was just, I can't deal with that.

Lipkis

But at the time I was mostly trying to find resources, make something happen, and just use everything I knew, and I'd identified Chevron as a target to talk to, because they were running these ads back then, not unlike the same ads they run now. Now they're running ones that go, "Do people care? Yes, people do." It shows how their employees are fixing the environment. It was Standard Oil of California at the time. They had a total fraud scheme going, but no one knew it at the time, an additive called F3-10 that was put in the gas.

Collings

Is that the one that's supposed to wash the engine?

Lipkis

Back then it was supposed to wash the engine and what comes out, and they put two cars in bags, big plastic bags, and ran them, and the normal gas the bag was black, and the clean gas, that F3-10, it was crystal clear.

Collings

Problem solved.

Lipkis

Problem solved, and they're the company that cares. It was probably the same PR people.

Lipkis

So I started aiming at them, thinking about them, and the day after I got my driver's license, when I turned sixteen, I drove down to my appointment with the head of PR, and said, "You know, I've got this project, you guys should support it, because of everything you say, and I believe you. This is great."

Collings

What was the project at this time, because you weren't--were you still thinking about the camp, even though it was that expensive?

Lipkis

Yes, at that point, it was, I wanted to figure out a way to get kids to the mountains to plant trees. I didn't have a budget or anything, or even exactly what. I was seeking a partner who would help me design it and carry it out, or an investor. This guy, who took the meeting, very friendly guy, said, "That's really interesting. I was just in the forest and it looked fine to me. I didn't see any problem."

Lipkis

I said, "Well, no, the trees are dying. I saw them myself."

Lipkis

He said, "No, they're not."

Lipkis

I went, "No, they are," and pull out my research and say, "It's all here, the forest is dying and it's from the smog."

Lipkis

He could see, you know, I'm a sixteen-year-old, naive, revolutionary at that point, and finally, because I wasn't budging and he said, "You know, let's say it is the smog. If it is, it's because of Kaiser Steel," who had that largest mill west of the Mississippi right out here at the foot of the San Bernardino Mountains in Ontario. He said, "You need to shut that company down. You need to organize the workers of that company to shut it down to save the forest," and he told me how to do it.

Lipkis

So he took my point of interest, grabbed that, and manipulated me through fifteen, twenty minutes of organizing talk, getting me all fired up. He was my friend, paid for my parking, gave me some industry reports on how air is already better and it's no longer a problem, and sent me out. I took the elevator

six floors to the street and realized what had happened, and I was devastated. If adults are going to be like this,

Collings

Because this was really the first experience you'd had like this?

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

You had been working with so many wonderful people up to now.

Lipkis

Exactly, and why would--why would someone manipulate and trash and stop this poor kid, just with innocent passion? It hurt so much and it was like, that's it, never again. I'm not going to dream, I'm not going to share this stuff, it's time to go play Frisbee, get stoned, and rejoin the ranks. That was reality. I quit flat out. I didn't want to touch it. I was angry.

Lipkis

Well, it seemed like it was six months, it may have been a lot less, maybe it was a month, maybe it was two or three, but at some point I got some rest and the anger started converting to, "They're never going to do that to me again, and I'll show that motherfucker." I'll show them. I went through a process, and what did I learn, what am I going to do different this time? Most of it was about communication, some of it was about get more detail, and that was the beginning of me, and now I can look back, but that was when I first began to understand that failure is not failure, and that it is compost for success. That it is loaded with lessons. At the time, they were so potent that they caused me to quit and the quitting was actually important to rest, to let go, and get the dream back.

Lipkis

Well, that started a cycle of three years of trying and failing, and trying and failing, but still learning. I would talk to foresters and tell them I wanted to plant trees in summer camps, and they'd say, "Oh, it can't be done, because trees got to be planted during the spring. They won't live in the summer. I would always say, "Well, how can we make this work?" Ultimately, I would get answers and ideas. But sometimes the frustration, you know, then learning about the budget, was like, "Okay, forget it. Throw that one away," and quit, and then it would come back. By the time I was ready to graduate high school, so that was two years, the idea had evolved to me realizing I didn't have to open a summer camp, I could just work with all the existing ones. And, no major costs. Use their energy, their momentum, and just offer them a program that would serve them. So that made sense.

Lipkis

During that year, Datsun, you know, Nissan, started a program called "Test Drive a Datsun and Plant a Tree."

Collings

Oh, I think I vaguely recall this, yes.

Lipkis

Yes. So I went straight to them, met with them to say, "Hey, I've got a project in the works." They were kind of interested and they met with me, and we started planning, and I started writing proposals, you know, get a little bit of money to go plant some of these trees. Then I was waiting and waiting and waiting, and I think it was the summer that I graduated high school, and I waited and tried, and abruptly the Nissan program was shut down because they were getting flack for being a Japanese company trying to do domestic work, and back then there was paranoia about Japan and messing in domestic affairs, so they killed the program, pulled the plug. Again, disappointed after being strung along for a long time. Again, I quit. I put everything away and went off to college. I will just go be normal. I've had these years of innovative education, it's fun, but let's be serious.

Lipkis

So one semester I worked my butt off up there. I loved the school.

Collings

Which school was this?

Lipkis

Sonoma State. Lived in the dormitory. Had a great time. A lot of people from camp, a lot of people from my high school, and it was great, and after one semester I was bored off my butt. Over the winter break, I got the flu, and I was in bed recovering after, like, four days, and lo and behold, there's that dream. It's just knocking saying, okay, you got to do this. By then I'm getting really troubled by what I'm--

Collings

Can you please go away? [laughs]

Lipkis

Yes. Yes, it's like what is this? I must be really weird. It was disturbing, but also creatively it just the juices were all flowing there. Again, okay, if I'm going to learn from everything before, what do I need to do different this time? I forget, I think it was as a result of something that I, a class I took, it was a Mexican-American Myth and Art, taught by a Zen master Latino, that gave me enough principles of self-realization that I, and maybe he counseled me or something, but at some point I realized that part of my failure cycle was I was afraid, not of failure, but of success. I was afraid that if this thing succeeded, just to get the kids in the mountains to plant trees, that it would take over my life, (a); and (b) that I couldn't hide and be part of the conspiracy of "we don't

make a difference." And to discover that and tell the truth about that was very powerful, because the next piece of it was, "Oh, I'll just do it for a year." So I have this internal battle going on. It's like the devil and the angel up there, but not devil and angel, it's just some other form. So there's the part of me that really wants to do it and the other part that says, "No, way, it's going to destroy your life."

Lipkis

So I made a commitment to myself to just do it for a year, and then I would return to normal, return to class, and all that, and that shut up the scared voice and I came out of that really strong. I went straight to school. There was a new environmental studies program, I made an appointment with the dean the first day back from winter break, told him what I wanted to do, asked him for independent study credit. He said he'd give it to me, so I cut back on my class load. He said, "Keep a journal," I'd never done that before, "and go for it."

Lipkis

So I bought a journal set and started writing and out flowed--I wrote for like four or five hours, the whole plan. I had the blueprint in my mind from all that learning, and I just spelled it out and then started. I immediately contacted twenty summer camps in the mountains, wrote them a letter, asked them if they would plant trees based on what was happening in their camp, and twenty of them wrote back to say they would and they would take a total of 20,000 trees. I found the trees in a state nursery at the California Department of Forestry, same people I'd been calling over the years to--I had been tracking what the source was over time. They had the trees. I then began trying to figure out how I was going to get the trees and make something happen and things started to go wrong.

Lipkis

I wasn't succeeding raising money and I was trying. My parents were not going to give me the money. I needed about \$600.

Collings

They didn't support the project or they just--

Lipkis

No, they did support the project, but they had watched me try, start and quit, and start and quit, and start and quit, and I don't know if they said, or I just felt like I couldn't in good conscious ask them for a whooping \$600. I mean, I was living on \$5 a week back in those days, and that was a huge amount. So I had to find some other source, and just wasn't doing it.

Lipkis

Well, when I found the trees, they said, "You're going to have to buy them."

Lipkis

I said, "No problem, I will."

Lipkis

Then I was checking in with them saying, "I don't have the money yet."

Lipkis

They said, "Well, guess what? At a certain stage we're going to have to destroy them, those that we have that aren't sold, because we have to make room for next year's crop."

Lipkis

I said, "Fine, what's that date?"

Lipkis

They gave it to me and I tried like crazy, still wasn't raising the money, and just before that date arrived, I checked with them and they said, "We can't wait anymore."

Lipkis

I said, "No, no, no, wait, wait, wait, wait, I'm going to get to Los Angeles and ask people for money, because I'm not getting it up here."

Lipkis

They said, "Well, we'll see."

Lipkis

I flew to L.A., called them to check in as I was in between going to meet with people, whoever somebody would point me to that might have money, and they said, "We're sorry, we couldn't wait. Our guy's on the tractor now."

Lipkis

I was sunk. My mom is there going, "I'm so sorry, I didn't want you to get your hopes up." I'm devastated and she's saying, "Just let it go, give up," and I did for three minutes. Then the wheels started to turn and the expressive shows up. I made a couple of calls, one was to my brother, who had still been politically active. He knew a legislator. I called my brother and he said, "Let me get a hold of this guy." He was in session, but I said, "The state's killing these trees, you've got to do something." I called Art Seidenbaum who was a great guy, used to be a great columnist at the Times.

Lipkis

Now, I need to back up. While at Uni one of the resources I met was a woman named Anita Berman, who had created this organization called Ertia, that's the opposite of inertia. She came to our school and handpicked three or four kids who she wanted to support having Ertia. The idea was to support us somehow on getting our projects developed.

Lipkis

She, in the process of that, and nothing much came of that except I did manifest, she introduced me to Art Seidenbaum, this reporter, who was interested in kids and stuff. So I had a talking relationship with him, where, at



least, he knew who I was. I called him in this moment of crisis and he went, "Sounds pretty weird, but let me see what I can do."

Lipkis

He talked to his editor, who got a young reporter assigned to the story to talk to me. I tell the reporter, he goes, "Yes, right, they're really going to be killing the trees, but give me the number."

Lipkis

So I gave him the phone numbers and he calls them and he calls me back very agitated. He says, "They're really killing the trees. You were right."

Lipkis

So again, distrust, youth, couldn't be that bad, doesn't sound credible, goes and confirms it, and he's pissed, and he's going, "Well, sit tight, we're going to do something."

Lipkis

A little while later he called me back and said, "You can relax, they've stopped killing the trees. They're going to fly down here to meet with you tomorrow."

Lipkis

I went, "Whoa."

Lipkis

So what apparently happened, I'll tell you the part that I'm making up. He contacted the governor's office, because forestry was not responsive. And this may be made up or may have in fact happened, but the implication certainly happened. I'm not sure whether I can quote him, but he had a conversation with the governor's office about tomorrow's headline, "The State Murders Baby Trees," given that he was from the Times. They saw that it made sense to--

Collings

It certainly didn't cost them much to stop this.

Lipkis

Well, no, he had to wake up somebody who knew. It was not in the best interest of Governor Ronald Reagan to have that kind of a headline and they intervened. They called the Department of Forestry and got them off the tractor, and by then the legislator who was--what's his name? He's now dead (Julian Dixon). I will remember at some point. Anyhow, he got on the case and was calling, too. So there was a bit of an uproar and that next day a forester flew in from Sacramento and from Division of Forestry and one guy drove in from Riverside to pick him up, and they both met me at my parents' condo.

Collings

They met you at your parents' condo?

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

It's just such a funny picture.

Lipkis

Yes, you know, Smokey the Bear types in uniform.

Lipkis

How are we doing?

Collings

We're a bit over time.

Lipkis

Oh.

Collings

I don't know how you're doing for your time.

Lipkis

Well, let me--let's try to go six more minutes.

Collings

Okay. A bit over your time, not mine.

Lipkis

Yes, okay. Actually, pause for a minute. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Collings

Okay, now we're back on.

Lipkis

So we're in my parents' living room with these two foresters, and they're going, "Everyone loves what you're doing and we want to help. We've figured out a way that we can help you out. We can make this a demonstration project."

Lipkis

Now, the problem was they couldn't give me the trees. You know, I was planting them on federal government land. So I mean, here's this total public project, but they thought they had to sell them, and they weren't allowed to give them away, because it would be a gift of public funds. But they realized, due to the Times' call, that there were some loopholes, they could be sponsors.

Collings

Or they could reduce the price.

Lipkis

Well, they could do that. Yes, a penny apiece or whatever, or half a penny. But they just adopted the project as a demonstration project, and they said, "So we can give you the trees."

Lipkis

"Great," I said.

Lipkis

"But trees are living things and what you want to do probably isn't going to work, so we'll give you a hundred."

Lipkis

I said, "No, I wanted 20,000."

Lipkis

They went, "Yes, but, you know, you don't know what you're doing, you're a kid," blah, blah.

Lipkis

I went, "Let me tell you what I know," and I laid out the plan, and they look at me with their jaws open going, "How did you do that?"

Lipkis

I said, "Your people for three years have told me what won't work, and I asked them what would work, and I basically got a forestry education."

Lipkis

They were so impressed that it was actually a viable plan that dealt with the seasons and how they make the trees live by potting them instead of using bare root trees, that they went, "We think you can do it."

Lipkis

I said, "Well, great, 20,000 trees."

Lipkis

They went, "We don't have them. We killed 12,000, but we've got 8,000 left, so you can have those."

Lipkis

I went, "Wonderful, I'll take them."

Lipkis

They agreed to deliver them to my house back up in Sonoma County. So I'd moved out of the dorms into a farmhouse in the town of Cotati, right next to Highway 101 on the Old Redwood Highway. It's this great old farmhouse on seven acres of land and about eight of us lived there at \$50 a month. It was the good old days.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

We ran the food co-op through our house. There was a barn there. So I mean that really supported that \$5 a week food budget, because everything we needed we got through that co-op that was right there. It was great.

Lipkis

So anyhow, several days after that meeting in L.A., a forester shows up at my house in a pickup truck with eight boxes of a thousand trees in each. Actually, more specifically it was two, four, six--three boxes of two thousand trees apiece, and two boxes with a thousand apiece. Something like that.

Lipkis

Anyhow, unloads the boxes and said, "Well, you've got to get these into refrigerators in the next couple of hours, otherwise they're going to be dead,

and you've got ten days to get them potted, otherwise they're going to die. Good luck. Enjoy." And drives off.

Lipkis

So he's going down the driveway kicking up dust and I'm looking at these boxes going, "Hmm."

Collings

And they're crying [makes crying sound.]

Lipkis

Yes. Now what? I don't have a car. I didn't know that piece of the puzzle. So I grab a housemate and enroll him in helping me, and he's got the car, and I got on the phone and got the Sonoma State College cafeteria to take 3,000 and the dorm where I had just moved out of, their dining hall, kitchen, to take 3,000, a Foster's Freeze next door to us got a thousand, and we stuffed a thousand tiny redwoods in our fridge. We had three fridges in our house, so we could stuff it in.

Lipkis

Then I got on the phone and talked to, gave a call to a developer that I had interviewed. They were the bad guys, they were developing, you know, building all these homes on the farmland there, but I had made this relationship with the guy, and asked him if he would donate soil and he said he would, he'd pay for a truckload of soil. Then I got a hold of the local dairy who gave me surplus milk cartons. That was all very, very cool. I mean, it wasn't simple, but I pulled it off in a day or so.

Lipkis

Then started around-the-clock potting operations, getting college kids in, and they weren't fast enough. We just weren't getting the job done. So I called in the Boy Scouts and they worked for a couple of days and I could see we were not going to get it done. Then I brought in the Girl Scouts.

Collings

Brought in the Girl Scouts. [laughs]

Lipkis

We got it done. So ten days of potting party nearly twenty-four hours a day, we got all the trees in their pots and pots being in milk cartons, covering a lot of the land around the barns and stuff of that house. Then I could breathe, the trees were saved. The problem was they were up there and somehow I needed to get them down here, and had no money, no nothing, but at least I had the trees and they were alive.

Lipkis

So Easter break came and I grabbed a few of the trees and came to L.A. to try to raise money, hang out with my family. When I got back the Times reporter called to say, "Just wanted to see how it was going."

Lipkis

I said, "It's great. I've got the trees, they're in the pots, snug and happy."

Lipkis

He's going, "Well, how are you going to get what you need to do?"

Lipkis

I said, "Well, I've got a budget. I've figured out I need \$4,000, so that's about fifty cents per tree, and I figure I'll ask the kids of L.A. to give fifty cents each and we'll raise the money."

Lipkis

He said, "Well, I'd like to tell that story."

Lipkis

So another reporter's assigned, comes out, interviews me. They take that picture and that's at the condo, and I go away. So the interview was like Wednesday, Thursday before Easter. Easter Sunday happens and I drive back up north. Monday morning I receive a call from my dad and five-thirty or six saying, "Something's happened that you should know about."

Lipkis

I said, "What?"

Lipkis

He said, "Well, people are calling because you're in the paper."

Lipkis

So that hit, I think it was Monday morning.

Collings

This article with this wonderful picture, yes.

Lipkis

Yes. The first thing they--oh, I actually heard from somebody at the school security at five-thirty, reporters were trying to find me. Then my dad called at six saying that they were getting calls. Some woman had gotten in her chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce and driven to their house and gave them a check for \$500. I guess, I'm trying to break down that day, and I should--it's all my journals. He called me and said, "Some people want you to come down."

Lipkis

I'm going, "No way. I just got back here." I'm so happy to be out of L.A. again, which I had grown to hate and back in my farmhouse, this is great, this is where I want to be. "No, I'm not coming down. I can't afford to do that."

Lipkis

Then he called back and said, "This woman just drove over and she's just given you a check for five hundred, and Ralph Storey wants you for--"

Collings

Oh, Ralph Storey, yes.

Lipkis

Yes. So the L.A. version of Good Morning, America, Good day, L.A., or something, they want you on the show tomorrow. I'm going, "Okay, I'll come down." I flew down, did the show. Stephanie Edwards interviewed me and it was great. Got home to find a sack of mail.

Collings

Wow.

Lipkis

So that story finished. Let's go the end--

Collings

Is your address in the story?

Lipkis

Yes, it's at the very end. In fact, that's the important punch line. It brings us almost to the end of this chapter, page seven, column one.

Lipkis

Okay. "Lipkis still needs \$4,000 for the project this summer to cover the cost of renting a truck for two months, obtaining tools, mulching materials, paying two hundred and fifty a month salaries."

Lipkis

I haven't seen this, you know, in thirty-something years. So "two hundred and fifth a month salaries for two full-time trained assistants. He asks that anyone willing to help contact him at 1745 Selby."

Lipkis

Then finishes with, "I've given up trying to get money from big business and now I'm going to take it to the people. As he said, if person just contributed fifty cents for one tree we could get it done, that's all it costs."

Lipkis

A sack of mail loaded with letters especially from kids, fifty-cent contributions, some less. It was overwhelming. And it's fairy-tale, but there it is, and we called both my grandmothers and aunt and assembled the whole family and we just sat on the floor of their condo opening these letters and reading and crying, because so many people sent money in memory of somebody.

Collings

Oh, what a lovely idea.

Lipkis

Kids. It really touched a nerve and it turned out to be quite--I mean, it was exhilarating and also a little disturbing, because the next day there was another sack of mail. It took two weeks, but we raised--in two weeks' time there was \$10,000. It was extraordinary. A lot of people were coming forward offering help. A forest products company called Potlatch offered to truck the trees to L.A. American Motors, which had given me an award for the idea of this project and for my recycling and community planning work, the American

Motors Conservation Award, they gave it to me as I was graduating high school. They called and said, "Did you ask? Did we turn you down?"

Lipkis

I don't remember what the answer was, but "We could loan you two Jeeps for the summer."

Lipkis

So that really was the missile that launched everything. It exploded.

Lipkis

This is a good place to break.

Collings

Okay. All right. Okay, great. [End of interview]

## **1.2. Session 2 (November 13, 2006)**

Collings

Okay. This is Jane Collings interviewing Andy Lipkis, November 13th, 2006, at his home.

Collings

We were going to pick up with the donations that had come in.

Lipkis

Right. So in that period of three weeks, the response from the L.A. Times, there was around \$10,000 that came in, which was shocking and delightful. It was all in these tiny little gifts. We needed to do something so it didn't become a tax burden for me, and so we could spend it, and knew that we needed to create a nonprofit organization. As I've mentioned earlier, my brother was involved with nonprofits, and so he had a little bit of--I think he even gave me a sample Articles of Incorporation. I grabbed another family member, Paul Bergman, who was on the faculty at UCLA Law School, and he grabbed two other professors, and together they filed the papers for us and then helped form the board, which was just he and my dad and me, I think, initially. I created a name, The California Conservation Project, Inc., and that was to give us a sense of standing just by name, bigger than a kid who's a freshman at college.

Collings

Right. Right. This is all still so unimaginable.

Lipkis

Yes. I mean, so here I was, and so we picked that name and that gave us, I thought, some bit of credibility. But the funny thing is, from the start, no matter when we used it, people always just started referring to us as "the guy with the trees," or "the tree people." But I had had somebody design a logo at some point, and we called ourselves the CCP, but nobody--that never stuck, it never worked.

Lipkis

So ultimately, this is along much later, we actually, because they were going to call us "tree people" we took--oh, again, a little later in this story, but when we started writing newsletters to people, I met a lovely guy who had someone name the newsletter, it was "The TreePeople News." Then we actually reincorporated our name, changed our name to California Conservation Project, TreePeople, and then later changed it to TreePeople, California Conservation Project, and then dropped California Conservation Project altogether. So we weren't being clever with the name, it was what was applied to us.

Collings

Do you have any idea who first came up with that name? I mean, was that something on the news?

Lipkis

What? TreePeople?

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

What sticks for me is that first summer when we got going, we worked with these twenty summer camps that I was planning on, and it was just--everyone just said, "Here come the tree people," and "The tree people are coming to talk to us." You know, it was little t, little p, but it was just easier for everybody and certainly much more friendly and more representative of the spirit of the work, for sure.

Collings

Yes. Well, very much, because it's got tree, of course, and people, because your whole organization has to do with marshalling the energies of people.

Lipkis

Of trees and people, yes.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

Literally bringing trees, you know, I say bringing trees and people together for a healthier, safer community. But what was interesting is that this friend who was a publisher, thinker, who had his graphic artist people do stuff for us, he created a logo-type of TreePeople as one word. I began to reflect on how powerful that was, that the power is really when they come together, and that there's synergy there. So whereas it was just by name of the newsletter, we started using it as one word, and that's what it is in our logo and has been incorporated as one word, because they really are inseparable. People want to find the magic tree, the super tree, as if that's going to do the job, and it never can by itself.



Collings

What do you mean, the tree that will endure?

Lipkis

Yes, the one that will feed the world. The one that will endure. The one that will survive. The one that's perfect for whatever, and every once in a while you see a science article or quasi-science, bad science article, about here is the super tree for feeding Africa. It's never that way, but our thinking is always that there is an answer out there somehow separate from us, and the fact is trees do magical, great, healing work, but they never can do it without people involved, especially when it comes to cities. Someone's got to plant it, someone's got to protect it, and to simply declare a number or a type never works. So they're inseparable from people. The answer is as much about people energy and intelligence and care and stuff that we're all capable of doing, but we've forgotten, you know, we're not usually invited to do.

Collings

In your book, "The Simple Act of Planting a Tree," deals largely with people.

Lipkis

That point.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

Yes. Yes, and I'm getting ready to write another one and it's even more focused on the power that people have. I haven't worked it all out yet, but it's really interesting, the more I look at the more, the energy, the capacity the people have, and are, this may be heretic, especially in certain religious circles, but it's so clear, if you look at the earth as an ecosystem and all the animals and all the species and what everybody does from a science perspective, every species' role is pretty well defined. We sort of understand them to some degree, except for that of mosquitoes. [laughs] But if you look at the human being as a biological unit of ecosystem and you notice all the energy that is focused to supporting the existence of a human, and tell the truth about all its functionality, not just that it is an animal that eats and creates pollution, but that it has all these faculties of intuition and spirituality and creativity and a real knack at problem solving, and also a heart that drives it, too, packed with compassion. If you say, okay, well, what are the ecosystem functions of that, I conclude that it's pretty clear that the role of the human on the planet is to be a problem-solver healer, healer being one to fix the wounds, to sustain life for others and other species, because we have the ability to do that. We're hardwired for it. We have antennas that respond to pain, that give us adrenaline to propel us forward and the planet feeds us all these different energies, and yet they're not deployed for that. They've been deployed around now mostly

consumerism, your job is to consume, which is not helpful for people's survival on the planet.

Lipkis

Not only that, within the definition of pollution is the waste of energy. So when you look at all the energies that the human has, the ecosystem giving it, and whether those energies are utilized or wasted, and then the conclusion is most of it is wasted, when you think of the creative energy and spiritual and food and all this stuff, and what's the bulk of humanity doing with that, down to the level of the individual to family to community to city, is all that energy being deployed to making the planet livable and healthy and safe for people and everything else and the answer is no.

Collings

Sadly.

Lipkis

Yes, well, it's kind of not--I mean, what we do is complicated, but when you look at it from this perspective it's not complicated, and if you buy all scientific theory as correct that pollution is the waste of energy, then you ask, well, what form is the pollution taking with all this energy being wasted? Then it gets really compelling, because the form that pollution is taking is boredom, frustration, greater levels of frustration, and that turns to anger and pain, personal pain, physical pain, the physical energy that we have not utilized turns to obesity. Obesity turns to diabetes and all kinds of diseases that take us down, that you don't see in populations that are consuming their calories and using them. So that pollution challenge is pretty amazing and that pain needs to be mitigated with drugs, of all kinds. So no wonder we have a highly addicted society that a war on drugs has not been able to do anything but spread.

Lipkis

So from that principle and the impact it's having on people's health and the world and we can pursue all kinds of strands, that was just one, go, well, what could be the benefit to utilizing that energy to contribute, and if we could give everybody a tree as a first step for them to understand that and feel the joy and the fulfillment, if they're planting right, to be able to use some of their energy. There's a multi-level kind of easing of pain and connecting and of easing of alienation and connecting people up to begin exercising that muscle of healing in whatever form. It's not that every--well, maybe everybody should be planting a tree as part of the air supply and water supply, but it's only a gateway to opening, to connecting people up to a much broader participation in community.

Lipkis

So that's a more elaborate statement. That's my thesis for my next book.

Collings

Okay, wonderful. Just let me ask you, when you are mobilizing volunteers, when your organization is mobilizing volunteers, and you have a speakers' bureau and so forth, are those the kinds of things that--

Lipkis

We talk about?

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

No, that's why I need to write this, because this is, you know, Andy's philosophy, which you got a taste of in there. I speak about it a little bit, but we talk about the good things, but I think when our speakers speak, and I haven't done a training of speakers in a long time, so we're about to rebuild that, I think we will infuse it. We've got to infuse it with this stuff, but it's so desperate at the moment that I need to go right it down so there's a source document, so people can tap into that, and then share it, so people go, "Oh, my God, yes, look around. What's the pollution doing to our own family and our own lives and could we use some of that energy now to deploy?" And it changes the dynamic from people thinking of me as some hero in sacrifice. Like, well, we can never do that. So realizing, no, this is the most selfish work that people could do to ease physical pain and improve health and make life feel like it's worth living.

Collings

In fact, when you began this, you were really thinking along these lines, you were thinking about letting other kids have an experience.

Lipkis

Other kids tap that power.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

So this is really, yes, if you will, a lot of trees wait twenty, thirty years before they can produce a seed. The DNA was there all along and it's just starting to flower in another way. So thank you for spotting that. It's like, oh, it's not new at all, but hopefully expressing it in a way that's more relevant to today.

Lipkis

Even my bike ride this morning was to be thinking about how more effectively to get the word out. We had been clever with our million tree campaign, but we have not done much recently on that scale--and that was a long time ago. That was now twenty years.

Collings

Right, and you had an advertising agency involved, even.

Lipkis

Yes, yes.

Collings

Dale--

Lipkis

Doyle, Dane, and Bernbach.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

Which is now DDB Needham [Worldwide]. Yes, and that opened it up for the whole movement that came out of it, but we need to stand on our shoulders. There is so much possible now with, what I say, the hardwiring of the global brain with the Web. You know, there can be a problem, a pain, anywhere on the planet, and the ability for that information to actually get to somebody with an antenna, a heart that goes, "Oh, that's my issue." It doesn't have to be right in front of them anymore, probably there's stuff, opportunity, right nearby, but the fact that there's so much need in the world and an ability to hook up humans to help whatever it might happen to be.

Collings

Now, are you moving toward having your own graphic arm, your own publicity arm of the organization, or do you continue to use others?

Lipkis

You know, we have a communications person, and they need to be highly skilled, but my preference--we've done it both ways. We've made some of our own videos. There's no way that we can pay and afford the highest level talent that there is, and yet the same talent, energy, that I'm talking about, it resides here in L.A., some of the most creative media people in the world at the mouth of the pipeline, who have their own personal issues about whether they're getting to use that energy well or not. The times that we have invited board members and others to use their talent for video making, have created stunning video. So we could never--it would cost us several million dollars to deploy this level of creative accomplished talent and writing and production. When we show some of these videos people go, "Whoa, we just thought it was going to be something industrial, and yet--." It was a production from--one of our best was done by David Zucker who's an accomplished comic filmmaker and from Airplane and Naked Gun and all those two, Marshall Herskovitz, who was the director-producer of Thirtysomething, and all of those. They collaborated with me and produced the mini documentary on us, not documentary, just our own little seven-minute piece that tried to explain what we were up to. Well, it's extraordinarily compelling and emotional, and we need to do it again, because it's very, very old and there's more story to tell now.

Lipkis

So I think that that--yes, the answer to your question is that there are just incredible resources out there that need to be deployed and it would be a horrible waste for us to try to raise the money or produce our own and not get any of the quality that we could.

Collings

Given what a media-rich environment Los Angeles is, and how TreePeople has used the media, could your organization exist, as it does today, if you were based in another city, like Seattle, say?

Lipkis

That's an interesting question. You mean, without the resources to get our word out?

Collings

Yes. Right, and without the saturation of the local news, without the--

Lipkis

Well, it's interesting. I'm going to give you several responses, because we're probably a day, one interview ahead of where we ought to be, but we'll just do this and it'll slot in another place.

Collings

Yes, that's fine. We can go back and forth.

Lipkis

Because as the organization grew, many people have asked, from around the world, they wanted to create branches of TreePeople. The model that everyone assumes in this male-dominated global domination grow game is that we should have set TreePeople up to be a statewide and then national and international organization, because so many people want to do what we do. Because I didn't go to school or business school or any of that, I had no skill and knowledge of how to do that, I had an intuitive sense as I had looked at other organizations from a youthful perspective, but also, I guess, just an integrity perspective. I could see that most of the national networks and big organizations somewhere lost their soul of the local power, and that they became groups who were about harvesting the money from local organizations and not leaving the real strength behind. That, to me, violated purpose, intent, mission of the work, and I developed another approach, which is in a sense not been so effective from the people who judge our clout from, well, how many countries are you in and what are your numbers. We're not the same as the NRDC [National Resources Defense Council], that's almost the same age as us. Totally different reason, different methodology, different purpose, and definitely different strategies.

Lipkis

The methodology informed from inexperience was let us share our pollen and cross-pollinate. [recording off]

Collings

Okay, let me turn back on. Yes, go ahead.

Lipkis

So what we sensed is, I mean, as I'd seen community organizations all around form, deploy the [Saul] Alinsky organization, various strategies, even really good community organizing, but once the organizers left, the organizations tended to collapse. What that would mean here is that organizations would get started, plant trees, and the people would go away and the trees would die. So it's like, why bother? You know, there's all this energy spent with breaking the promise.

Lipkis

What evolved instead was the notion of an organization that mimics a native tree. So sustainability being another through-line here, a native Southern California oak, a Coast live oak, when that acorn sprouts in its natural setting it may send a root down nine feet before it sends up a leaf. Why? It's because it is programmed for sustainability. It knows that in its DNA that there will be seasons two, three, four years, where there's no rainfall and it needs to establish the sustainable water supply, because a leaf is a vehicle for losing water, and if there isn't water to replace it, it dries up and dies and the plant's dead. It happens very quickly.

Lipkis

So thinking analogous to that, how do we allow native organizations with local sense, with local DNA, local knowledge, to form in a way that's responsive to the local resource and nutrients and style and need? So we have helped organizations get started all over this country and a lot of the English-speaking world by Kate [Lipkis] and I going to London, to Ireland, Australia, Canada, even Mexico, and telling stories and sharing strategies and then doing some training and basically training of a leadership team, a steering committee, to give them tools and skills that became the book, but that could allow them to find with their DNA their roots enough to get started and identify local resources, establish that root system. And it has been somewhat effective. We never were funded to get out and make organizations happen all over the place. We did get some funding to help develop training, so the skill development was possible.

Lipkis

So that's a long way of answering your question. As a native adaptive plant in Seattle we would probably form in a slightly different way in response to conditions.

Lipkis

On the other hand, large metropolitan areas, if you're going to effectively get to everybody, the media's got to be a part of it. Media's actually much easier to get

in other communities. You can't get a public service announcement on the air in Los Angeles, because air time is too valuable. You can make a great one, and we made them as good as we could, with stars like Gregory Peck and stuff, in order to have that pop to the top of priority list for a station, but no, it's much easier in other markets to use the airwaves. So that's another answer to your question.

Collings

Yes, okay.

Lipkis

So, should we go back to--let's pick up.

Collings

Yes, why don't we go back. You've got 8,000 trees.

Lipkis

We've got 8,000 trees, \$10,000, the trees were in my house up north. I mentioned that because of the publicity a trucking company offered to do trucking, and we actually had to figure out how we were going to get these things down. We wound up using these wire vegetable crates. I don't even know if they make them anymore, but they were made of wood and wire and they would neatly hold either nine trees or sixteen trees. I'm sorry, twelve or sixteen. Four-by-four or four-by-three, standing up in this wire cage. We could stack them four or five high. So we were able to get all the trees into one 40-foot trailer. Those trees were then trucked on down to L.A.

Lipkis

I'm not sure if I mentioned, my summer camp, JCA [Jewish Centers Association], offered us a home, a place to have an office in the mountains, our nursery, food, and a base, and that was fantastic.

Collings

For the summer?

Lipkis

For the summer. I hired my first--my roommate was the first staff, Randy Crosno.

Collings

You actually hired him? You paid him?

Lipkis

Well, yes, for the summer. I mean, I think I paid everybody two or three hundred dollars for the summer. I'd have to look back. It wasn't a whole lot. It was sort of matching what I thought were camp staff rates at that point.

Collings

And this money came from the donations?

Lipkis

Yes, all those donations. So we formed the nonprofit and an account, put them in, so I could start spending. But mainly we worked on more and more donations of in-kind services that really, really stretched the budget. So camp hosted us and fed us and gave us a phone and office space and all that. American Motors, who had given me that conservation award, they got in touch and said, "We want to help," and they loaned two Jeeps, a Waggoner and a pickup truck. I think Sears donated some tools. So I was able to continue digging deeper. McCullough Corporation, the people who make chainsaws, donated a chainsaw and an auger and some power tools at some point. So the pieces all started really coming together nicely.

Lipkis

The people who I hired, actually, so one was a roommate, another two were from that original summer camp, Camp JCA, who both were going to Sonoma State College. Four of us were at Sonoma State. One was Susan Strict and one was Sunny Levy, and the fifth was a high school girlfriend of mine who was at UC Berkeley, Stacey Wolfson. So Randy Crosno, Stacey Wolfson, Sunny Levy, and Susan Strict, and Andy. Three guys, two girls. Three women and two men. We all moved down to L.A. into Camp JCA, set up our base, and off we went.

Lipkis

Susan had actually helped me communicate with some of the camps and stuff. So these were a group of people who were somewhat engaged in helping before and I brought them on. We trained ourselves, met with the Forest Service, and had already been communicating with the camps, and then told them, "Hey, it's happening, we'll be coming." We created our own little environmental education training program for the summer campers and how we would talk to them, what we'd have them do.

Lipkis

That was kind of important. TreePeople has always been a very learning-based organization, and so given that we knew nothing, we had to apply what we knew from very little experience that we had as youngsters in the world. We were all coming out of our first year of college. So we applied whatever we knew. I had a bent towards logistics and the campaign stuff we had talked about. But we realized that we needed to inspire the kids to plant and to take care of their trees, and to magnify. So back to media. So that wasn't an inappropriate part of the question. My old expressive stuff, I'm remembering, we were talking about. We said, "You know, it's important to plant your tree, but it's almost as important to magnify it and let people know that you did it."

Lipkis

So we started talking about how real change happens, even right from the start. Like, "Okay, we're all up here in the forest, we care, but we really need to clean



up smog. That's really the objective, to save the forest, because hopefully we can do something, but we'd better clean up the bigger cause, not just the problem. And we need to tell a whole lot more people about this."

Lipkis

So we evolved, I think even over the first year, and certainly it evolved over time into some other expressions, but, and I'm not sure exactly when this fully evolved to this Cafe USA concept, but we would talk to kids about how does change happen in the world and where's their power. And from the perspective that they have no power to that they actually have power to make the change today in the forest, but that it can go beyond.

Lipkis

Let me pause for a second. [recording off]

Lipkis

So where were we?

Collings

You were talking about organizing the, amplifying the--

Lipkis

Oh, yes, yes, telling the kids. So what evolved was this discussion about tasting their power today with the planting, but (a) to save the forest, we need to spread the word, and we needed to go beyond. We would have our discussions with them would be about what's happening in the forest, understanding a little bit about the biology and how smog is killing the trees and all that, but also where's the smog is coming from and why, and how do we change that, and letting them talk about the alternatives to the lifestyle that we're living that's killing the trees. They would get into having transit discussions and things like that. Then we'd say, "Okay, how do we effect change?"

Lipkis

I evolved this notion of Cafe USA, which was to have them think about the way democracy works, because it's pretty important. Back to all people using it and participating, and the answer tends to be no. Why Cafe USA is like--our government is like a cafe, you go in and we've got to tell the waiters and waitresses, who are all elected representatives, what you want. Now, they've forgotten that they're the waiters and waitresses, and they're not tending to ask you what you want, and we're tending not to see them as that, and we're not actually telling them. All we do is get angry. We walk in the cafe and see everyone else getting what they want, and feel upset that we're not getting served. Then we just blurt out some angry statement and smash a glass and we walk out. That's the equivalent of how we deal with democracy, you know, that rarely does anybody effectively and creatively communicate their opinion and their desire to their representatives.

Lipkis

We said, "So think about that, and think about how you're likely to be best heard," and all that.

Lipkis

So we would have them plant and commit to care for the week or two or three or the summer that they were there in the mountains to keep those trees alive. That was what the Forest Service and the Department of Forestry was not used to. Their way of planting is put a tree in the ground and leave it. So you bury your tree in the ground during the wet season and hope that there will be enough follow-up rain that falls on the tree. You know, that can result in a 1 or 2 or 5 or 10 percent survival, but not usually more than that ever. Our protocol was put the tree in a pot, so it has some ability to--we can plant in the dry season instead of just in the wet season and have people care for the tree for at least two years to get their roots established and it worked.

Lipkis

So we would plant and sometimes, I mean, we were planting one tree could take ten minutes to an hour and several kids swinging picks, because the soil was very rocky, very hard. So basically you created your hole by removing big rocks and that's a lot of work.

Collings

It's a good way for kids to spend their time. [laughs]

Lipkis

Well, it's a way to utilize a lot of energy.

Collings

Absolutely.

Lipkis

But, you know, we could never deliver humongous numbers that way, but the numbers of trees that lived--but we would then have them as part of our process or a follow-up they would all write letters. Or they would talk about how they wanted to communicate creatively, so it was noticed, so it wasn't just ignored. So some made audio tapes, some wrote plays, and they shared it. We didn't know who to target at the time, but Reagan had moved from governor to president, and Jerry Brown was becoming governor, and as he came into office we know he got over 10,000 letters from kids talking about--we said, "You can say anything you want, but it probably doesn't hurt for you to say, you know, the forest is dying, it's because of smog. I planted a tree today, what are you doing?" They did that in some effect and they said whatever else they wanted to say, we didn't usually get copies of their letters, but we know that when Jerry took office, he was highly aware of the problem and desire to do something to help save the forest, which I don't know how much of that is responsible for his long-term green awareness, but he's been aware of us for a long time.

Lipkis

It's interesting that now he's just been elected--

Collings

Attorney general.

Lipkis

Yes. So he may pick up where Eliot Spitzer, is in New York, is leaving office, he leaves that for--he became the governor, I think.

Collings

I'm not sure.

Lipkis

But he was really an aggressive attorney general.

Lipkis

So we spent the summer traveling around to all these camps, planting, and doing all this stuff, and that was great.

Lipkis

Oh, the learning organization. Every time we would do an event, a speech, a planting, always as a part of it at the end was the five of us sitting down--first of all, listening for any feedback from people, but then critiquing each other and critiquing our methodology, what worked, what didn't, what are we going to do different next time. So in that rapid evaluation and fix and truth-telling environment, we were able to learn lessons very quickly, and get to be effective from no knowledge to a lot of knowledge. You know, what motivated kids, what turned them off, what kept them engaged.

Collings

So what were some of the fixes that you needed to make during this process, do you recall?

Lipkis

I don't remember all the specifics, but I think we would certainly involve minor tweaks in terms of the messaging. Where did the kids go to sleep? Where were they interested? Certainly, our planting styles and whether we put one or two or four kids on a team. How we train them to be tool safe, or to include that in the training. How much time, you know, what size group to have assembled for training, because the further you move from one-on-one the less attention is spent, and the more distracted they get.

Lipkis

This is the phone. Excuse me one sec. [recorder off]

Lipkis

That's David Zucker coming to a meeting with another Hollywood person, he wants to show the tapes that I was just talking about, to them, because he's trying to involve them in doing more for us.

Collings

Great. Excellent.

Lipkis

Yes, it's really cool. Are we rolling?

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

What's neat about that, just a point of information, is that the first thing he did, before he and Marshall Herskovitz produced the second one, he had the company that makes their trailers take our news footage and a little bit other interviews to make this really hot tape. So if this company can make me look good in a movie trailer, they've got to be able to better tell the TreePeople story.

Collings

Absolutely. Yes.

Lipkis

So it's just, again, an example of really high value turnaround.

Lipkis

You know, one of the other lessons that we learned, that's what we were talking about, and this happened a little bit later, probably the beginning of the second year of planting season, we brought all of our volunteers to work with the County Forest and Fire Warden on a project.

Collings

These were the children still or these were adult volunteers?

Lipkis

In this case, this was families, adults, church groups, stuff like that. So it's a little later in our process, we were working in the Angeles Forest, bringing groups up there from the city instead of just summer campers. So we started getting people up into the mountains, I'd say it was in year two or three, somewhere. We discovered a really painful lesson and that was that the foresters were only used to working with inmates. They had a military background and they were used to working with inmate crews, and so the volunteers were treated like inmates and people weren't engaged and they were there to do their work, but they pooped out after a couple of hours. What we found was that throughout the Forest Service they learned that people think that they're going to volunteer for all day and that they burn out after an hour or two, and most don't show. So they had to scale back on the size project that they wanted done. That became just the unspoken or spoken internally only, the quiet way of dealing with volunteers.

Lipkis

Our response was very, very different. It was like, whoa, wait a minute, these are our volunteers, these are promises we're making, this can be really fun, it can be nurturing, it can be great, and that's not the experience we had. Let us build the human interface onto this thing. You foresters tell us how the trees

need to be planted, where you want them planted, and what you want planted, so use your forestry expertise and let us bring the human interface. We problem-solved that and said, "We need to add fun, music, celebration to this," and we would stop and have a water fight. We would have people bring guitars and play at the beginning and at lunch and have lunch. Our volunteer days could easily last eight hours with people staying highly productive and get thousands of trees planted. That wound up re-inspiring Forest Service people.

Lipkis

So we evolved that and that made us, you know, people want to come back, and made us successful.

Collings

Now, was this the first time that the Forest Service had used volunteers in their collaboration with you?

Lipkis

When we were doing the first summer we were sort of managing everything, it was just us and the camps. Forest Service knew what we were doing, we were getting permission, but they didn't have the foresters out, they weren't experiencing that. Then later, as we started trying to work with them, they had a protocol for involving volunteers, but not in a very big way. To this day, because it keeps getting forgotten, there's not a whole lot of institutional memory in the Forest Service, because the way you promote is to move to another forest around the country, and you can do that every two years or less. Well, it takes a long time to learn local lore, local knowledge, different forestry techniques because of totally different environment. Southern California is not taught in--our Mediterranean dry forestry is not taught in forestry schools. The local foresters here from the county, went to Israel to learn, because of the same climate, and we learned from them what to do. But in the same way volunteer coordination had not come to a high art. Had it, when I first started, I never would have had to form TreePeople.

Collings

So how did you get involved with them? Did you go to them for this project?

Lipkis

Yes, it's their land and we needed their permission and we wanted to cooperate. Now, that incident I had with the L.A. Times and stuff kind of cauterized forever our relationship with the California Department of Forestry, because I made them look bad.

Collings

The article soliciting the donations?

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

Yes, yes.

Lipkis

They thought that I did them damage and they looked bad and didn't realize we really were galvanizing a movement of support for them, but there's always the other, the shadow side of our work is sometimes stepping on the toes of organizations. We're pretty careful about that now, but for twenty years or so a number of agencies were like, no, no, no, they're too radical, long hair, or they're going to buy it, or I don't know what. It turns out it's more of the DNA of organizations not to accept outside input. It's like what we see with schools.

Collings

I was noticing in that photograph in the Times, you know, you do have a beard and long hair.

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

Did you get to a point where you felt like you needed to have a more corporate-

Lipkis

Clean look?

Collings

Yes, cleaner look.

Lipkis

You know, I think I just changed with the current style and times, frankly. My son looked at this article the other day and he went, "You were a hippie."

Lipkis

I went, "Well." He's starting to look like that. So we all were that. That's what people looked like in those days. Not everyone, I mean, it was definitely--the Vietnam War was starting up and there was this division between the hippies and the clean-cuts, but clearly our act did clean up, and your question is a really good one, and it's a complete other important theme. As we realized, as I realized, that our function was to stay as neutral as possible, to be seen not as--our job, if we were going attack successfully and solve the bigger environmental problems was to be seen as something that everybody could participate in. That you don't have to change. You don't have to become an environmentalist. You don't have to--that who you are today can take action now and I wanted to strip us of as much projection and things that would cause people to not want to participate and not want to hear our message. So we decided not to be political, not to be left or right, not to have all the things that everyone expected of us, because part of this world is that everything's transmuted into politics and we lose a lot in that. It's the dominant game. It's almost like sports, there's a winner and a loser, and the world doesn't actually

have to be structured that way. We lose so much energy and time in the battle and leaving very little, and usually a policy battle, leaving very little energy for implementation. Cash, maybe, maybe not. The laws, if we haven't done the right job of educating everybody on the moral basis of protecting the environment, then a slight majority will always be used to turn around and undo a lot, and then we all lose.

Lipkis

So I decided to keep us much more in the neutral space. We wanted to be an intake system, to have people discover their energy, their joy, but also their caring without closing that down.

Lipkis

So, yes, when you look at my look and all that stuff, it's like, "Whoa, I was not very good at being very neutral," but I tried to become more and more of a blank screen under which people could project values, or see values that work for them that related to them. You know, we probably, if you professionally evaluated that, that's probably mixed success, but there is certainly a fair degree of success in that now, because we're one of the few organizations that has the privilege of going into every school in Southern California. If we had a political axe to grind and all that, we wouldn't have access and authority, and we shouldn't, because our job is to use science to help people understand their responsibility. If we were carrying the political perspective as anti-nuke and all that stuff, it's always tempting, but we'd be giving up a whole lot of much more important power.

Lipkis

Why did I go there? You asked a question, I think. Oh, did we change?

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

So, yes, I mean, when we first got started we didn't identify as an environmental group, because there was no such thing and people didn't respond to that. Still, because environment gets hot, we get tempted to say we're an environmental organization, but I hate doing that because we are also a public health organization and we're an infrastructure organization. It's a funny mix of challenges, because truly we're TreePeople, and if you understand how a tree is this multidimensional solution machine with human, from community builder to family repair, to all the stories, all the things we can point to, with hard evidence of what trees and people doing together, what benefits have come from that, but if we isolate on to any one of them it gets lopsided.

Collings

Yes. Well, to keep it on just we're about trees and people, that is very neutral, isn't it?

Lipkis

It is, and the problem is when people hear of the profound work we're doing with water and infrastructure now, they're going, oh, God. I mean, every one of them says, "You've got the wrong name," because it causes people to so undervalue us, and being undervalued is a burden that trees have due to lack of literacy, and our board members and others feel the same thing about us. So it's like, "No, you're going to change the name." But I haven't, and now there's pretty strong ground around it, and so it would be stupid to change the name. We finally, finally, have descriptor, which really works pretty nicely, which is, "Helping Nature Heal Our Cities," and that's taken a while to come up with that. I had "bringing trees and people together to heal our city," or whatever, but it's interesting, one of--

Lipkis

--we're getting off

Collings

The 8,000 trees.

Lipkis

Well, we've gotten actually the whole flow of development, but we're getting into bits and pieces and it does meander here, but at some point when Marshall Herskovitz joined our board he found, in the same spirit, that people just didn't--he didn't get the strokes from people around him in the industry when he said he was TreePeople. He knew that he had great passion for us and admired the work, but they didn't get it. In the ego-driven world, it's like, well, if you were only somehow different then we'd be more excited about it and we'd get involved. It was always, "Well, you need to be a national organization or an international organization."

Lipkis

So he actually drove--this patches back to that conversation earlier, he drove a strategic options investigation into the possibilities of us becoming a national or international organization. We actually hired somebody from The Boston Consulting Group, who's a friend of mine, who volunteered the analysis, and went around the country to find out what was the need, what was the possibility. She found what I had intuited, which is there was tremendous--this movement that we had clearly helped found, there was a tremendous distrust of authority and centrality, and just as I had intuited, there was a need for local power and control. People get a tremendous amount of power when they do it themselves, when they discover the answers, and that keeps them--that's part of what keeps them going instead of taking command from and ideas from somewhere else. She found that there was a reluctance to being willing to be organized from any central place, again, validation, and concluded that we should write a book and do training. Before her report got out of draft form we



had the contract from Jeremy [unclear] to do this. In fact, that has helped spread that. A number of organizations have been founded trying to do national organizing and they've mostly failed, because there is that access to a sensibility and power that comes from this work that you just can't violate.

Collings

Right. And also you've said that, you know, you need the involvement of community people to actually achieve this work and that that's sort of central to what it's about.

Lipkis

Yes, and it's not about writing a check and having someone else do it.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

We'll get into, and maybe our last minutes today we can map a little bit of the next steps that we'll follow. So where the organization developed, I'll just chart some points here as an outline.

Collings

Okay.

Lipkis

So we did that summer, we planted the trees, the trees came back, I thought I had that promise I'd only do it for a year. I put everything away.

Collings

Right. I wanted to ask you what you were--probably we'll talk about this next time, what you were thinking you were going to be doing.

Lipkis

What happened, yes. Well, I put everything away and went back to school, moved back up north, and thought I could be happy, and that didn't last. So I came back and restarted everything here. The L.A. Times wrote a follow-up article after the summer to tell people. I knew there were so many thousands of people who were tracking us that we needed the Times to, (a), get some credit for what they helped make happen, and to tell the story. So there was a follow-up article in August or September that said what happened. I put everything away, went back to school, and as I said, that didn't work out. I moved back to L.A., dropped out of school to the displeasure of my parents, and started things up again and found trees and hired back some of the staff and some other people who I had met that first summer. Hunter Sheldon who became Hunter Lovins, wife of Avery Lovins, we hired her as we started that next year. Ordered trees, got them in, and sent a newsletter to all the people who

Collings

The first newsletter.

Lipkis

Yes. Had given money, to tell them what we did, and ask them for more, and they gave more, lo and behold. So I restarted the whole process, not thinking I was going to do that. So there were city tree potting and preparation, storage, transport. This is a great story we'll come to, make sure you ask me about it. But I had asked, when I was trying to get the trees down here the first time, I am big on utilizing underused resources in the community, wasted resource. Living up north I always passed Hamilton Air Force Base, and it had all these Army trucks sitting on it. I thought, well, they should move the trees down for us. I started asking them before we had found the trucking company and that offer, I wrote the Air Force and asked them. I never got a response.

Lipkis

Lo and behold, a year later, when we had potted the trees and we were here needing to move them, I got the response. A person got my letter. It had passed through eleven different people in different departments and agencies, and this person said, "How can we help you? I think this is really cool."

Lipkis

I said, "Well, that was for a year ago, but we got another need coming up," and we organized a convoy, a military convoy, to transport trees to the forest. Great story, we'll come back to that.

Lipkis

Got the trees up, did another summer of planting, and then, you know, so we had this tradition of planting in the mountains during the summer.

Collings

So you repeated this as a tradition?

Lipkis

Yes, yes, because that's what our program was. Then as word would spread there were more and more calls from schools and groups who wanted something during the year, and we needed to prepare trees during the year. Then we began to see that we really needed to be planting in the city, because that's where, again, where the smog problem was, and that we could sort of keep it going. We established an office in my parents' house, and were in that cycle. City office, just part-time work, I had transferred to UCLA, started going there trying to be a student while doing some of this stuff, and we continued on the cycle of summer planting in the mountains, increasing educational work in the city, and the education formalized into an education program that would sometimes support planting, but also became it's own thing. Then there was the mountain planting and then we started doing urban planting as part of the educational work. So that grew.

Lipkis

So we can talk a little bit about that and all the aspects of urban planting and what we learned and how our evaluating our successes and failures on that

created the Citizen Forestry Program, which really kicks in in the eighties. And how we started our first office, first the office at my parents' house, and that story and how that worked with sometimes one to seven of us hanging out at their home, to getting our first formal office outside. How having nurseries at people's homes sort of got, we started out wearing out our welcome in people's backyards, because we were taking over, and that created the need for a nursery and how I found TreePeople Center, which is quite a landmark now in Los Angeles. That story's pretty big. Then how we got it, and another bureaucratic fight and nightmare and all the times they tried to make sure we couldn't be there.

Collings

That's a great spot.

Lipkis

And what it's become. Yes, and big story, because it didn't just happen. There was a whole battle that it took, and two mayors, and stuff.

Lipkis

And programs that emerged along the way, the El Nino floods and the disaster relief work that we did, some attempts at whole city programs in Culver City, the Marina Freeway run, as another major expression, the Africa Fruit Tree Airlift, our ongoing fruit tree program that's associated with that, and the Million Tree Campaign, and the lessons from that, of the Olympics' one. Then where we are today, another attempt by Mayor Bradley, after the Million Tree Campaign, to start another one, but no investment, and so it didn't happen. Now, we have Mayor [Antonio] Villaraigosa that we can talk about.

Collings

Who met with you on his first day in office.

Lipkis

Yes, but also met with me, he spent four hours with me during his first campaign getting a very deep briefing on the economics and the science behind true community forest, and that was the basis, in large part, for him-- unfortunately, he didn't consult me back on what he should do, he just declared, "We want to plant a million trees," on his second campaign. Yes, and met with us on his first day and how all that goes.

Lipkis

The other big, big piece of story is the riots and what impact that had on me in taking our work deeper. So from tree planting to true urban watershed management and much more healing the city and delivering some of the social goods and moving back during the Olympics, going to Australia and meeting Kate, and what that did.

Lipkis

So that's a bunch of bullet points if we can sort it out of how we get to today and where it's going from here.

Collings

Absolutely. Well, it sounds like, I mean, in the early days you were tapping into two sort of unstoppable forces or needs, which is planting trees, who can argue with that? And working with kids and serving an educational need. Those are two very potent areas. You're bringing them together and it sounds like it was just a really great way to build up the momentum for the more complex things you get into later.

Lipkis

Exactly, and it's still a key part of the formula. Interestingly enough, we're still taking playgrounds and stripping asphalt out and putting trees on them. I mean, the same, the very first thing we did, we're transforming schoolyards and parks. One could say that if we all we did was set the goal of transforming every single school in L.A. to be a watershed park, that that would enough be a goal.

Collings

Oh, that would be tremendous. Yes.

Lipkis

But, of course, that's just one thing of what we need to do. We can do that and we can do so much more, but to have those be functional, protecting health, make them much better learning centers, but also be protecting the environment, would be huge.

Lipkis

So all that is to come.

Collings

Okay, great.

Lipkis

So if you want to, based on what I just told you, based on the outline in the book of the history, if you want to manage me a little bit more tightly on time.

Collings

Sure. [End of interview]

### **1.3. Session 3 (November 20, 2006)**

Collings

Okay, good morning, Andy. The date is November 20th. Jane Collings interviewing Andy Lipkis at his home in Venice, California.

Lipkis

Great. Good morning.

Collings

Okay.

Lipkis

So we left off at the close of the first year, I think.

Collings

Right. Right.

Lipkis

I put all the tools away and thought I was done, as I promised.

Collings

Promised yourself.

Lipkis

Yes, promised myself. Did park trees at somebody's house up in Brentwood (Ted and Rita Williams), in a corner of their yard, we brought trees back from the forest and left them tidy there.

Lipkis

So I returned to Sonoma State, thinking, "Ah, this is great, back in the country. I can be a student again." Got straight into it. Found a house, started school, and found myself distracted from school and bored. I was thinking about the work and sort of missing it. While I was still trying not to do it, I was sort of wanting to do it. I finished one semester and I think I had almost completely two minds going. One was, okay, well, I'll do a semester and then come back to L.A. Then I ignored that, and said, "No, I'm going to just keep going to school." I rented a house and that got sold and then I was--so as the new semester was starting I became sort of near homeless and moved into another place that just wasn't very nice. I had a couple of disturbing experiences, which basically said, you're avoiding what you got to do, and close down your life in Sonoma County and move back to L.A. I did that, I just, it was really clear that the energy was not there supporting me being there, and it was like trying to swim upstream on a very strong current to stay there. All I did was turn around and go, "Okay, do what I'm meant to do," and move back here. First moved in with my folks. They weren't so happy about that. They weren't happy about me dropping out of school either.

Lipkis

But I picked up the organization, put together a newsletter for all the people who had sent donations, gave them a report on what we did. They all sent money and said, "Keep going." I ordered trees, pulled together a couple people who I had met during the summer, one of them was Hunter Sheldon, and I think Randy, from the first summer, my old roommate, at some point came down, and another of the original staff members. I think they came down after summer. But during the year Hunter and I, ultimately her brother, and some others, just picked up the work and we started taking--we potted trees at schools and various places and began doing some speaking and organizing the

whole summer program. Summer came and that's when the Air National Guard called--did I tell this story?

Collings

Well, you said you were going to tell the story, yes. You alluded to it, yes.

Lipkis

Oh, I alluded to it. Okay. So this is great. So this year we had 10,000 trees, and they were being stored at Hunter's house and my girlfriend's (Tracey Haase) house in Mandeville Canyon. This was just the time we were trying to figure out how we were going to get all these trees, more of them, to the mountains this year, and I received a call from someone in the Air Force or Air National Guard saying, "I have this letter that you wrote quite a while ago. Do you still need us to move your trees?"

Lipkis

I went, "Well, actually, yes."

Lipkis

It was a whole year later. We put together a plan and moved all the trees into Mandeville Canyon, and one A.M. the military raided Mandeville Canyon. We had a convoy of ten army trucks and soldiers and a bunch of volunteers and they rumbled up the canyon and pulled up to my girlfriend's house. That was Tracey Haase.

Collings

Did she know they were coming?

Lipkis

Oh, yes, yes. The neighborhood didn't, but the Haase family did. We had told the press, as well, and they were there. It was quite a sight, all these army trucks getting loaded up with beautiful baby trees. Off we went, we took everything up to the mountains, set up our base camp back at Camp JCA. Again, I put together a team, some of the same people from the year before and some new and we had another great summer of planting. When that finished we sort of began rolling casually full-time, or part-time in the city.

Lipkis

I enrolled in UCLA and tried to be a student there. I was working about eighty, ninety hours a week on TreePeople, and then trying to go to class, and loving the classes, but falling asleep constantly, not from being bored, just tired. Whenever I wasn't talking my body said, "It's time to rest." Anyhow, I enrolled in the geography department there with the ecosystems focus and then found the creative problem-solving program.

Lipkis

I missed Sonoma County a lot being in L.A., and one day I saw somebody eating a whole wheat sandwich with avocado, sprouts, and tomato, and I thought, "You don't look like you're from here." His name was David and he

became a friend and he introduced me back into UCLA, both the food co-op, which I'd joined there. We used to have a food co-op running out of my house in Sonoma. So, like, that was a good way in, and then the creative problem-solving program, which gave me flexibility to keep working on this. TreePeople became a campus student organization.

Collings

Oh, really?

Lipkis

Yes. So we were able to actually rent trucks through UCLA's motor pool. In fact, for a year or two I drew a minor salary of whatever they paid. I think we paid money in, but--

Collings

Like for a T.A. ship or something?

Lipkis

Yes, but it was a student organization and they were able to give us two positions at, like, a hundred or two hundred dollars a month or something like that. I forget what exactly it was. But we had a key to an ASU office in Kerckhoff Hall and it was great.

Lipkis

So I was on campus for about two years really just three--I think three or four--well, a year and a half, whatever that turns into in quarters. I finally dropped out because I was just falling asleep and miserable doing that. But I met a lot of good people and the UCLA system killed off the creative problem-solving program, so I no longer had a home and a base there. It was a great interdisciplinary program, and this is a lot of training I got there in integration, integrated thinking or support for that. Because it was a combination of the architecture and urban planning school, and it was based in the basement there, but included engineering and business. It was fantastic, because we got--I just got the institutional validation until the institution killed it, of the need for integration and how to think that way and how to facilitate that, and it was great.

Collings

Do you remember any of the professors who were involved with it?

Lipkis

Marv Adleson was one of the leads, senior person, at Urban Planning and Architecture. Michael Van Horn was another. A woman by the name of Jane--she may have been in the School of Education, as well. She was Asian. I forget her last name. Those are the people I remember.

Collings

It's just interesting to--

Lipkis

Yes. Well, yes, I mean, given that you're from UCLA.

Collings

Right.

Lipkis

I definitely have UCLA roots and links. There are people who tell the story that I founded it there, which wasn't true, but that's all right. Lots of people like to claim us. But I was pretty young and so they're thinking, well, it must have been.

Collings

It must have been the case, yes.

Lipkis

Yes. So at that time we were storing trees in people's backyards. I was going to school. Hunter was going to law school. I can't remember, I'll have to do some research to figure out which staff then started working for us in what kind of time, but I just remember we evolved slowly an education program based on the request for more and more presentations.

Collings

How did people know that you were willing to do these programs, these presentations?

Lipkis

Well, I think they didn't know, they just asked, because so many of the people who sent contributions were teachers and their students, and when we wrote a newsletter back, they went, "Oh, wow, they're alive, that would be a great story to tell and get the kids involved since they all helped." We would try to find schools or senior centers or places that people wanted to pot trees, as a labor source. So we did major potting operations at University High School, my old school, and a couple other places, but for several years all the science and biology classes came out to pot trees.

Lipkis

Our headquarters was my parents' condo. After the second summer there was starting to be some pressure between '74 and '75 to liberate a backyard that we just totally took it over at Tracy Haase's house. So I was thinking, "We're going have to find a nursery," and I was driving to an event in the valley from Westwood and went over the Santa Monica Mountains and saw what looked like a ranger station to me, and thought, "Whoa, what's that doing in the city?" I pulled in and looked around and some firemen were there. It turned out to be an old, old, old fire station built in 1922, rumored to have been buildings left from William Mulholland's construction of the L.A. water system, including the St. Francis Dam. That was the dominant rumor, that these are portable buildings, and you could see the bolts where they were actually bolted together, and they said that the built the dam and then moved the stuff there and then the dam



broke. We've had Katherine Mulholland there and she couldn't verify that one way or another in trying to figure out whether we had historic buildings or not. We weren't able to prove it, except we did find a gift from the Water Department to the Fire Department of buildings there. So definitely it was through water and Mulholland, and it was certainly in his time.

Lipkis

Anyhow, the firemen showed me around and there was a nursery that had been built in the twenties and abandoned. There were great redwoods on the site and all kinds of unique specimen trees that had been planted by the firemen over the years. Rumors, again, that the original fire captain on the site was friends with the head of the arboretum and got some great trees. The firemen referred to the whole place as "the country club." It was about thirty-three acres and there were trails and benches and stuff, and they all liked to hang out there. Aside from being a nursery, they had a, they called it a fire-resistant plant research planting that was there, and then they also had a bunch of empty garages and sheds that had been--sheds and stables, stables for horses and sheds for Model-T fire trucks, and it was called Mountain Patrol One. So before there were fire stations in the hills and helicopters they patrolled on horseback and then Model-Ts and then in pickup trucks. Then as the city grew they built fire stations in neighborhoods as they expanded the city.

Lipkis

But the bottom line was that the firemen said, "Well, we're going to be moving out to a new station across the street."

Lipkis

I went, "Whoa, we need a nursery and here it is and it's empty." I was already in the mode of financing TreePeople from other people's waste, other people's either underutilized resources or unutilized or discards. That's how we really--you know, we were recycler composters in the ecological sense, and there is so much waste in this society and in this city and there was plenty for us to sort of live off of. So from the underutilized military trucks for our convoy to companies giving us their leftover vehicles or whatever.

Lipkis

So I remember coming back to our office, my old bedroom, when I got back that day and said, "I found our new nursery." I said, "It's at Coldwater and Mulholland," and then everyone laughed and they went, "Right."

Lipkis

That began a long process of trying to get access to it. So the fire department said they were going to be turning it over to the [City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and] Parks Department at some stage. They swapped thirty-three acres on the top of the hill there with thirty-three acres of land that the Parks Department had in the Sepulveda Basin that they'd leased to move

and create a big brush fire fighting facility down there. Then they were going to move across the street into their dispatch station and build a fire station out of that.

Lipkis

Well, that sounded great. So I went to the fire department and asked them for permission to co-occupy while they were there, to put tools in--there was a beautiful old, old two-room shed that they had built for holding just fire tools. Well, our tools were the same, shovels, basically, and hose and picks and stuff. Again, it was empty, completely unused. I also wanted to start growing the trees up there, but we didn't need to be there all the time, we just wanted to use the space. So I asked the fire department and they said, "Oh, that's a big thing, you're going to have to go through our board and get all kinds of permits." Then they said, "But it's not ours, it's going to the Parks'."

Lipkis

So we went to the Parks Department and they said, "No, it's not ours yet, it's still fire department's."

Lipkis

So we're in this big hold, not unusual. I made a presentation to the board of the fire commissioners and they endorsed the work and said, "Yes, we'd love to have you." That was very unusual, they don't share their facilities with anybody, but it happened. But, as they said, they were passing it on to Rec and Parks. I'm forgetting exactly what the sequence was, actually, between the two commissions. Both were difficult.

Lipkis

Well, we began working with the Parks Department who said it's not [inaudible], we said it is, we need your permission to be here. We began working with the staff, and ultimately wrote a proposal and then got the agenda for their board meeting and saw the staff recommendation was no. "Here's the request and don't allow it."

Collings

Based on? What was their thinking?

Lipkis

Just, we don't do it. They're young. They didn't even justify it, they just went probably no institution--I mean, who knows what. It was one of those moments where my mom went, "Well, nice dream. Sorry." I was really pissed off for about five minutes and then I went, "No, I've got to go that meeting and maybe something will happen."

Lipkis

I put together a bunch of photos of kids taking action and planting and stuff like that and went before the commission. This was the first day of a new director of the department. Our item came up and they voted and it failed and I went,

"Wait a minute, I want to speak." I'm just this kid at that point. I mean, I was eighteen or nineteen by then, but--

Collings

Did you still have the beard and all that at this point?

Lipkis

Oh, yes. Yes, I never didn't.

Lipkis

They said, "Okay, come up," and I said what I wanted to do, passed around the photos, and they all looked at it and said to the director, "How could you say no to this?" And they did something they rarely do, they completely overrode their staff and said, "We're giving you a permit. We want you to be able to do this." So we had that.

Lipkis

I think the problem then was that I hadn't gotten permission from the fire department yet, because they were really, for security and everything, they just didn't share. But Rec and Parks gave us that okay, even though their staff hadn't wanted it.

Lipkis

Then there was a major fire in the Angeles National Forest. We're talking about exactly this time of year in '74, and it was one of those big, big, big ones, and we said, "We're ready to reforest that and we've got trees, but we need a place to store them." We had gotten permission from Rec and Parks, but it was still fire department land. So we pushed and because of the fire and because of the timing we got the green light to--basically, they issued a thirty-day permit for us to move trees on and use them. We were there for ten years with a thirty-day permit.

Collings

Continually renewing it, or just it never gave up?

Lipkis

I just rode. Yes, it never came up.

Lipkis

We moved our trees in November 7th, nineteen--no, that was the second phase. Somewhere like January of '75 we moved the trees in and began the reforestation in the Angeles. That became a during the year weekend volunteer projects sort of thing, as well as going back up to the mountains. So that gave us more continued work around the city, on the edge of the city.

Lipkis

We then got word that the fire department was, at some point, going to move out of the place, and when they did that it was really important because of vandalism, it was important that we have bodies there immediately, the same day, because being up in the woods, and there used to be street racers on

Mulholland Drive, they just knew it'd get ripped apart within minutes. In fact, the fire department even said that, you know, the fire guys said, "Well, we can't wait to kick this down, because it was so old and rotting."

Lipkis

I began the process of trying to get a permit to move in and that was a nightmare. Again, the Rec and Parks Department said, "No way, can't do it." This time we mobilized a campaign to get letters from all the homeowner groups and residents. I spoke to all the homeowner associations, and they all said, "Oh, we'd be really happy to have you," because we basically said, "We'll build a park for you there." The Parks Department wanted to have it be a truck service facility. So we just organized and got all these letters written to the mayor [Tom Bradley] and to the council and to the Rec and Parks Commission. Again, the staff opposed it, but the community wanted it. So we got permission to occupy the buildings the day the fire department moved out, again, stayed on a thirty-day permit. November 7th, 1977 the fire department moved out and moved across the street and we moved in.

Lipkis

Now, in between our staff had grown to the point where we really needed more than my bedroom as an office and a candidate for congress, Gary Familian lost the race. He had paid for a year's rent on a storefront in Santa Monica, and gave it to us. So we had a storefront office on Santa Monica Boulevard and 15th Street. It was great.

Lipkis

Funnily enough, a couple of months before we were offered that the Northrop Corporation closed down its L.A. office and moved to Orange County and gave to the United Way hundreds or thousands of desks, everything from this huge corporate headquarters. Beautiful Steelcase desks and stuff. So United Way put out the word to all the nonprofits in town and said if anybody wants, and we went, we saw, and my staff thought I was nuts. Like, "What are you going to do with that? We don't even have an office."

Lipkis

I said, "We're going to need it some day."

Lipkis

So we rented these big, big trucks, got the furniture, moved it into one of the sheds at Coldwater, and then lo and behold, we were given the office within a month or two after that, and we were fully equipped at no cost. We moved all this furniture down.

Collings

How did Gary Familian know about you, what was the relationship there?

Lipkis

Well, various people were becoming donors and actually in my process of trying to connect up with the fire department, one of the fire commissioners, whose name was Bruce Corwin, and so he was on the fire commission. He met me through that and was quite supportive and he wound up introducing me to some potential donors, one of them being Gary Familian. I remember having dinner with them all. That was how. So we just sort of maintained that relationship.

Collings

Boy, it sounds so far like your speaking skills, your presentation skills, your all-around social skills are an important part of this picture.

Lipkis

They are, but they're being developed all the way along. So I started as a fairly unrefined radical kid, teenager, and as I had to have more and more of these meetings with people, I have no idea how amusing I was to them. They must have been quite comical, but I was fairly self-assured, probably shouldn't have been, but certainly naively so in what we were doing, and people were willing to take us under their wings. There were plenty of people who wouldn't, but other people felt like, oh, I can help. It was like that guy from the California Air National Guard, my letter had gone through fifteen offices, people saw it, stamped "No way," passed it on, but it didn't ever get thrown out. It finally landed in the hands of someone who went, "Why not?" And that's the miracle of TreePeople is it just takes people going, "How can I help? Maybe there's something I can do." And the resources then flow and they look miraculous, but we still have those desks.

Collings

Yes, that's good furniture.

Lipkis

Yes, yes. Old Steelcase.

Lipkis

So we were there at that office and kept waiting for permission and the thing kept being delayed. Actually our lease ran out in the storefront. Then my brother was part of a mobile medical practice that had an office a little further east, also on Santa Monica Boulevard, in West L.A. The building he was in was kind of old and funky, and there was a huge space that was vacant, and the owner of the building donated that to us for like three or four months while we were waiting to get in there. That day finally came and we moved our stuff in and started--we not only set up the office and moved in, but we moved in beds, because we had to maintain a crew twenty-four hours a day. So we were just like a fire crew. I got the captain's quarters, and everybody else was in the dorm. There was a kitchen. There were three or four of us twenty-four hours a day. We just lived there, worked there. I still maintained, paid rent on a house

in Santa Monica with David Winkleman, who I had met. I had, by the way, moved out of the house with my parents at some point, some months after moving down here, found a place in Venice with a bunch of people going to UCLA.

Collings

But you were still using their place as an office at that--

Lipkis

Yes. Yes. Then we got to move to Santa Monica. So, yes, that was funny, to actually not be living there, but going over.

Lipkis

So, yes, still paying rent in Santa Monica, but being at TreePeople usually six days and nights a week. It was just nice to know I could get away somewhere.

Lipkis

After a while we realized that we really--we wanted to start investing dollars in building this thing. Not dollars, we wanted--it needed to be better than a broken-down place and we needed to raise some money and nobody wanted to give us money, because we only had a thirty-day permit and we really needed a long-term lease. So we began working on that.

Lipkis

Again, I contacted UCLA, Department of Architecture, to give some designs, and another architecture school, Syark, gave some ideas, and I tried to find someone who could build something for us. But the Rec and Parks Department just would not give us the long-term lease. They finally, again, just administrative battles with always a different director, but it was always, no, we're not--they didn't want to give us a long-term lease because it would mean they would lose control of the site, and that would become controlled by the city council and they didn't want to do that if it was longer than three years. Finally, we settled on a three-year lease and that lasted for a long time, continually renewed.

Lipkis

But it was during the Bradley administration that we had to get the long-term lease. Wendy Greuel was his parks staff member. That's how we met her. The mayor really wanted it, and yet the department staff really resisted. I remember one day I received a call from the head of the ARCO Foundation, and he said, "What would happen if there was a daycare center built at 12601 Mulholland Drive?"

Lipkis

I went, "Well, that would move us out."

Lipkis

He said, "Thanks, you didn't hear this call, but, by the way, I have a check for a million dollars from ARCO to give to the Parks Department to build this daycare center there, and it shouldn't happen."

Lipkis

And I went, "Thanks."

Lipkis

Then he said, "You didn't hear this from me."

Collings

Boy, handy to have all these friends.

Lipkis

Yes, well, we try not to ever mistreat anybody. But what happened, the Rec and Parks Commission got involved, because the mayor said, "Make this happen."

Lipkis

Their staff didn't want to and the commission said, "You don't even have any money to do anything with these parks. Why are you holding on this? Here's this public-private partnership, this is what we say we're about, just get out of the way and let them do it."

Lipkis

What the chair of the commission said to the director of the department was, "You don't have any money, so just get out of their way." So what she did was go after a major grant, so she could say, "Now, we have the money," instead of just partnering.

Lipkis

I let somebody in the mayor's office know and they were so angry that a million dollars that could be going to inner-city childcare was going to Coldwater and Mulholland, and that was sort of the final straw of their resistance, because the commission just got actively involved angrily with their staff and said, "You will make this happen."

Collings

So how did the million-dollar childcare center get shut down? That seems like that was a pretty weighty movement.

Lipkis

Well, the mayor learned about it and basically said to the director of the department, "I'm going to feed you to the council members in downtown."

Collings

So this was the last straw, this was the defining moment?

Lipkis

It was. It actually was with this incredible breakthrough where she got into big trouble with her commission. The commission just said, "You will let them move in and you will pass this on to the city council," and that resulted in us getting a twenty-five-year lease. We wanted a hundred, but

Collings

So what was your vision for the organization at this point?

Lipkis

I knew that we--I should back up and say, not only did we move in when we moved in, but in anticipation of moving in we wanted to have that be an education center. L.A. needed an environmental ed center and it needed our nursery and all that, but it was to be a place where the community would come to learn, to plan, to get trained and stage stuff. So that was the vision that we would help provide those services. So we actually began writing environmental education grants even before we got in and as we got, I think we got some funds granted to us once we moved in and we hired a couple of educators to help guide that part of the organization. But from then on we were conducting education programs in the schools and pretty quickly we started reaching almost 30,000 kids a year, just from a little bit of start-up money mostly. I think we would charge a little fee or contribution to help pay for educators' time. (Those kids would spend the better part of a day touring our facilities and then plant a tree seed in the nursery and take another one home.)

Lipkis

But the interesting thing that happened, all this is--so I got you through to us having a long-term lease and that had to go to the city council and they had to approve it. Anyhow, we have that. They would only do that with the justification of us spending a bunch of money on the site, which we wanted to do. Actually, at one point, Buckminster Fuller had offered us this big dome that he had made that was kind of central display for the L.A. Bicentennial, but Rec and Parks wouldn't let us have it up there. So people give us all kinds of things. So we didn't take it. I don't know where it wound up.

Lipkis

But we moved in in November of '77 and by January or February of '78 it started to rain and it was an El Nino-sized storm, but nobody knew what El Nino was at the time, it was just raining and raining and people were getting into trouble. Another friend from college, his parents lived in Benedict Canyon, down the street, and their home was threatened with a mudslide and he called to ask if they could borrow some tools from us and I said, "Sure," and we took them over there and saw that it was bigger trouble than they could handle with just a few people. So we said, "We need to get a lot of people down here." So we rounded up a bunch of neighbors and we brought in tools for fifty or a hundred people. I think we had at least fifty people. Got sandbags and built the sandbag wall and protected the house.

Lipkis

Well, City Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky watched us do that, and it was several hours of operation, and there was nobody that helped them, so we just got the



volunteers to do it. He was impressed. Well, the storm went away and everything was fine for a week or two, and then another wave of storms came in. In L.A. when you get three days of rainfall nonstop the soil is saturated and things then let go and you've got landslides everywhere. It was raining and there was a big storm predicted and some warnings went out and things were bad. Well, we had exercised ourselves from that last time and felt good about our ability to get volunteers trained and supported. Zev called and said, "Can you do that on a larger scale, because it looks pretty bad?" His district was the hills.

Lipkis

We said, "Sure, we'll do it."

Lipkis

Sure enough, I mean, the storm didn't stop and it got really bad and we put our heads together, and this has been another hallmark of TreePeople is just fast thinking, creative problem solving, how do we scale up? We didn't know exactly what we were doing. We knew we needed to get people up there, we knew we could train them and somehow dispatch them. Zev had the city install these emergency phone lines called ring-down lines, from the fire department dispatch to us and from the emergency command center, actually, to us. So all you did was pick up the phone and it starts ringing on the other end. So they installed those things and all hell broke loose. We went to the media and said, "We need volunteers." They put out the call and people would call us and we'd tell them where to show up at our headquarters and we put them in teams and trained them and started sending them out.

Collings

And this was just for the hill area, the hills?

Lipkis

Well, there's three hillside areas in L.A. that are significant. One is the Santa Monica Mountains, two is Baldwin Hills on the south side, and three is on the north and Sunland-Tujunga.

Collings

Okay. So were you dealing with these three?

Lipkis

They all showed up as problems. The councilman who is in Sunland-Tujunga was taking care of a lot of the stuff on its own up there, but wound up calling for, their office called for help, because we started getting pretty good and had bodies and we were sending crews down to Baldwin Hills.

Lipkis

But, lo and behold, various things showed up that were really quite useful. Ham radio operators, and when they realized we had something going they offered their network, which was great. So that gave us communications. We heard

from these four-wheel drive clubs. You know, all these guys with, whatever they're called now, well, they became the SUVs, but the clubs had them before they were widespread. There were still quite a few of them around, but they were big four-wheel drive vehicles and people wanting to be macho. Urban assault vehicles. They offered their help and we said, "Yes, we need the vehicles."

Lipkis

Then carpenters sort of showed up en masse, because they weren't working, they were all idled during the rains, and student environmentalists. So we had these four parties that gave us essentially an army. The hams were expert and they helped set up our office, that we had a generator there. They pulled together the communications and several hundred ham radio operators. They were able to put an operator in every vehicle. The four-wheel drive clubs came in. Red Cross and Salvation Army came up and started feeding. So we set up a whole emergency command center up there. It was pretty impressive.

Lipkis

The storm went for three days, we pulled together about 800 volunteers. Wait a second. No, I'm forgetting. Yes, 800 volunteers or 900 volunteers and saved about 300 homes. I'll have to check the headlines.

Collings

Did you notice anything--could you categorize these volunteers in any way? I mean, did they tend to be people of a particular political persuasion? Libertarians, perhaps?

Lipkis

The amazing thing is, it was an incredible mix. People came from all walks of life. They were hearing on the news people are needed, and we made sure that--they had to be eighteen and they were able-bodied. There were a lot of guys, but women, too. It was across the spectrum. There were definitely the wilderness people, the environmentalist, but also jocks and, as I said, carpenters. So that was also critical, because here we saw for a disaster everyone put their politics aside. It's interesting that you ask the question, because it is so divisive and we have been trained to look at our world from what tribe are we in, and it keeps us so far apart. It's like the mission of Babel from the Bible, when people were cooperating they could do anything, and so God got scared, like you're too much like me, so he gave them different languages in Babel, because they built the Tower of Babel and that will make sure they don't cooperate. Well, our political tribes are so divisive and keep us using all our energy in the battle instead of in healing.

Lipkis

So in this case, it was really delightful, and that actually led to something. But we were on the news, people watched it. Actually mostly in the newspapers. It

was pretty amazing. So that ended and we went back, you know, sent everyone home and we went back to doing our normal work.

Lipkis

Then in 1980 the storms returned with a vengeance and we were ready. We saw all the signs and we started calling up volunteers and organizing ourselves and lo and behold, it hit. My staff went crazy, because we had committed to a whole city forest program in Culver City and meant to be doing education work and all this stuff, and we were getting more and more sort of quasi-professional staff, and the last thing they wanted to do was stop their work and do disaster relief. They didn't sign up for that, and yet, I said, "You know, this is the city's priority, got to do it."

Collings

How large was your staff at this point?

Lipkis

Probably between six and ten, by 1980.

Collings

Full-time?

Lipkis

Yes, and some were educators and some did planting work or volunteer coordination. I just don't remember exactly how many.

Collings

What did you look for in people when you were hiring the staff?

Lipkis

Gung-ho generalists. We used to call ourselves--well, kind of like, we operated like a fire crew and whoever had the most skill for a given task was the lead for that. So we did hire some people who had backgrounds in environmental education. Rocky Roeder, Irv Peterson were our first Ph.D.s in environmental ed that came on our staff. But others were just people who cared about the environment and really wanted to work, either with the trees or whatever.

Lipkis

So anyhow, when the flood hit in 1980 we were able to--we maintained the network, or called the four-wheel drive clubs back and the ham radio operators and put everything together and started rolling. This one went on for ten days, so we wound up with 3,000 volunteer days and saved about 1,200 homes. It was huge. It was really big. Every night people were--you know, the news crews were all with us, people were watching homes getting saved. These volunteers coming out of nowhere. It gave the people of L.A., I've heard from so many people, several came to us who are on our board now, came to us because of that. They said they were ready to leave and move out, because L.A. was soulless, they thought, and when they saw the community just come

together to save itself they were encouraged to stay. David Zucker from our board, a filmmaker, tells that story, and others.

Lipkis

So it was great. I mean, I could tell so many stories from that that are really fun, but probably a bit of a distraction with how much more we need to get.

Collings

Maybe we could come back to those, once you get the rest of your chronology filled in.

Lipkis

Yes. It was fundamental because doing that both gave me some more philosophical underpinnings. I saw what happened when people chose to volunteer. People who were in the disaster crunch who did what the macho American myth tells them to do, which is look out for number one, those people suffered tremendous emotional, crippling emotional damage, because they saw their house being destroyed, and didn't know what to do. I watched many people just freak out and crumble. But I watched other people in the exact same circumstances, their home is threatened, instead of looking out for number one and being overwhelmed, they joined the group, and they said, "We've got to help everybody, not just ourselves." They were strengthened. That joining the group gave them a shield and gave them strength and they had access to people, and they didn't get emotionally damaged. They were strengthened. They went through the fight together, and sometimes they may or may not have lost their house. But that is a pivotal piece of information about-- and you see it now with new medical research coming out. People who volunteer have higher immune systems and T-cell counts. It's an amazing thing. So there's a whole body of work to talk about that I will be writing more about at some point about that, but it was during the floods, that I got that experience and perspective.

Lipkis

Several other things happened that I'll just note, because they become through-lines. That integration of multiple kinds of people from across the spectrum, one of them was the four-wheel drive clubs. They said, "We knew you were environmentalists and we thought that you would be attacking us, but we found that you were wonderful people, and you didn't attack us." It opened their minds and their hearts. They had bumper stickers that said, you know, "Kill a Sierra Clubber," and stuff like that. It became such a vulnerable experience for them that their leaders came and said, "Everyone's always fighting us for the damage we're doing, but they never accepted that they were." They said, "Could you teach us? Maybe we are and maybe we can fix that."

Lipkis

So they invited us to actually do these massive education events with hundreds, or thousands of people, four-wheel drive enthusiasts, out in the desert to show them how they were damaging stuff and how to behave differently. Then they became an army for us for plantings after fires. We pulled together over a thousand club members to move into the forest and do a massive planting.

Lipkis

So a lot of change started happening just because of that coming together instead of fighting. Very, very important.

Collings

Absolutely. This flood work sounds like one of the more transformative events of the organization.

Lipkis

It absolutely is, because people saw us not as--you know, I still that long-haired kind of hippie, and a lot of people didn't want to embrace us, but when they saw we weren't ideological, that we were there to actually serve, it opened a whole lot of doors and hearts and a lot of people saw us for the first time. They never knew of us.

Lipkis

Another very big thing came from it, but the funny thing is, you talk to people now who went through it, people who remember us, and they have patched together a mythology around it. They think we were there planting trees on the landslides to stop them. That's just what they recall. Those weren't people who were involved, but people who watched the media. I went, "No, we weren't. We used the shovels--."

Collings

They would be pretty fast work.

Lipkis

Well, right, you can't stop a landslide with a tree. You can prevent one, but not when it's pouring. No, it's just what they did with their synthesis of that, what made sense for them.

Lipkis

What came from it that was so big, was after the floods, so ten days, Johnny Carson invited me onto the show.

Collings

Yes, I saw that picture.

Lipkis

That's where that came from. He was just so blown away, everybody was, that all these people just came and helped and there was so much goodwill.

Lipkis

I should say that, also mark that we, what happened in Los Angeles also happened in New Orleans. The fire department and police department could not

get their vehicles in and could not communicate into the hills. The communication system didn't support hillside activity in the canyons and all that, they didn't have vehicles that could get them in. So we were so coordinated with them, that at times we were putting hams in police four-by-fours. The fire department was constantly turning over dispatches to us to get in and handle the rescues. So it was big. People watched. No one knew how bad it was with the communications break and all that, because we filled the gap like a balloon. We built this neural bridge network that filled the gaps. That was my unique set of knowledge, and I'm not patting myself on the back, that's just a bit of my nerdiness.

Lipkis

So when I was in high school, I don't know if I said, I used to make terrariums and listen to a police scanner. I listened to the police department and the fire department while I was doing this. So I had two aspects of my brain engaged.

Collings

Oh, that's interesting. You never mentioned listening to the scanners before.

Lipkis

But I did mention that I was making the terrariums?

Collings

Well, I don't know specifically that, but those types of interests, yes.

Lipkis

Yes, so I'm doing this creative really focused landscape in a bottle. So it was all this manipulation, while I'm listening to the scanner, completely different part of the brain. Well, what's happening is, I was learning the code and logistical thinking and learning about the deployment of both the fire department and the police department.

Collings

Why were you listening to the scanners?

Lipkis

You know, it was interesting to me.

Collings

How did you even get into this? It's kind of an unusual activity.

Lipkis

Oh, this is funny. It is, yet there's a lot of people who do.

Collings

There are.

Lipkis

But I know exactly how it happened. During high school, so I was in that Innovative Program School doing my research and all that. Well, that wasn't all the time, there were other things going on in town. One of them was the Cambodia and Kent State riots at UCLA. Well, we were protesting the war. I

went to the campus to join the protest and the police were there en masse and tear gassing and all that stuff. I found this guy who was listening to a little radio and he was listening to the cops. I thought, "I'm hanging out with him."

Collings

Good thinking.

Lipkis

Yes. It's like, I want to protest, but I'm not wanting to get arrested.

Collings

I don't want to get tear gassed, yes.

Lipkis

Yes, and gassed. I thought, well, that's sort of me with doing the responsible or chicken thing, I don't know what it was. But I was so impressed with that, I went and got one of these basic radios from Radio Shack and I just started listening. It was fascinating. I had that link of interest from back in the floods when I was growing up and rescue people and all that. I'd watched "Adam-12" and "Emergency" on TV, so I had that interest, and this sort of filled that. Lo and behold, I was getting a training in logistics and emergency command stuff, that nobody gets unless you're in the agency, but I had an entire mind map response system all built in my brain. I had no idea why, and wasn't even consciously carrying it around. But when the disaster hit I knew exactly what to do. I knew where the holes were in their operations and I knew how to communicate with them in a way that gave them confidence to trust us.

Collings

I mean, I think there's an argument that if you hadn't been listening to those transmissions that this disaster thing wouldn't have worked.

Lipkis

I wouldn't have been able to do this. No, no, probably not, because it was huge for them to trust us. I mean, when you think about it, L.A. does not--big cities do not use volunteers during disasters. They just don't. We hadn't mobilized volunteers for a major event in town since, like, World War II. So partly because of liability issues. They'll fly in firefighters from Canada and Australia before they'll use people for firefighting, because it's so dangerous.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

But, yes, so yes, you can find this through-line back of very weird activities that would wind up showing up as having produced value and that was that.

Lipkis

So, yes, I was on the "Tonight Show." That was huge. Johnny Carson wrote this big check.

Collings

Did you enjoy being on the show?

Lipkis

Yes and no. I mean, it was scariest thing I'd ever done in my life. It was fun, but being backstage behind the curtain waiting to be called out, I thought I was going to die. I mean, my heart was beating so, so fast and so powerfully I just remember feeling my pulse--

Collings

What were you afraid of?

Lipkis

Oh, I think it was just stage fright. I had no idea what was going to happen and I was me holding this little tree and I'm standing back there and hear the music go and the curtain open and I just stood there and they pushed me. So I just sort of jumped onto the stage and breathlessly got there and sat down with him and put the tree on the coffee table and totally threw him for a loop. He has all his questions, everything sort of laid out, and if you listen to the interview you'll see he just sputtered through like all the questions he had prepared, "How did you do this? You were all over the place. I was just so impressed," and blah. I didn't know what to answer.

Lipkis

Anyhow, it was a fun interview. In fact, at one point he picked up the tree, when he ran out of everything scripted, and he went, "So this is going to be a redwood?"

Lipkis

And I went, "It's already a redwood." [laughs]

Lipkis

He turned it into a very funny moment. He said, "Oh, I meant the kind I could drive my car through."

Lipkis

I went, "Well, it is, and if you look close you'll see the little hole."

Lipkis

Anyhow, on a commercial break he asked how much money we had lost from all the tools we lost, and I said, "It was \$15,000," and he wrote a check out right there, on the spot, and gave it to me. It was amazing. So, yes, it was a real high point, except that I'd just broken up with my girlfriend, so that was a low point.

Collings

Well, I'm sure she was very impressed when she saw you on the show.

Lipkis

Yes. It didn't bring her back. We're still close friends.

Lipkis



But anyhow, it caused me to start thinking, my God, if we can mobilize people for disaster in this city and do this, there's an ongoing environmental disaster and we're not mobilizing people at that kind of scale. We really need to think about how to do that, and like, let's get the people of L.A. together to do something really big. Like what would be huge? Like a million trees. So just at that time, probably before the floods, but I was thinking about it through them, and especially afterwards, the Club of Rome issued, or actually it wasn't the Club of Rome, it was the Environmental Quality Commission, first one for the president, issued the global 2000 report, "What's Going On?" It was looking out into the future saying, "What are the trends? What's happening?" And it was a horrible glimpse of the future, of basically saying where everything was going. It was labeled "The Doomsday Report," by the media. But the conclusion interested me, it said, "Without global cooperation and action we're doomed to their fate. Somehow we've got to turn the corner."

Lipkis

I went, well, okay, we need to demonstrate global cooperation and action. We'd just come out of that cooperation event of the floods. L.A. had just been named the host of the '84 Olympics. I thought, "Hmm, eyes of the world, needs to learn cooperation, let's do something humongous that really requires everybody. Let's plant a million trees."

Lipkis

I started thinking that's what we should do. Within a week I receive a phone call from the City Planning Department. I think the guy's name was Jon Perica. He's going, "We have just put in an air quality management plan that we have to plant a million trees in L.A. to achieve better air quality and to tell the feds that we're going to do that. It's going to cost us at least \$200 million to plant and another couple hundred million dollars to maintain them. We've just seen you with all these volunteers and we wondered if you maybe could do something as part of this?"

Collings

Funny you should say that.

Lipkis

This is amazing timing. I remember being in my parents' condo in Westwood when the call came in. It was strange that they found me there. I don't know where they found that number or anything, but they did. I said, "We will do it, and we'll do it for nothing," because I was just--or a fraction of the cost. I began at that moment to put together this campaign to plant a million trees for the Olympics.

Lipkis

So that came out of the floods, too. So it was, yes, quite the pivotal moment.

Lipkis

I should catch my breath for a moment.

Collings

Yes. [recording off]

Collings

Okay, we're back on.

Lipkis

Two funny stories on the floods, just actually three stories, two funny. Salvation Army was feeding us and Red Cross and basically their food ran out and people got pretty tired, because they were working twenty-four hours a day and bedding down. I put our volunteers on just calling suppliers.

Lipkis

Oh, I know what happened. We saved the home of somebody who had a deli.

Collings

That was good thinking. [laughs]

Lipkis

Well, we didn't know. After we saved their house they said, "Hey, I run Art's Deli," or "I am Art of Art's Deli, and can we help in some way?"

Lipkis

I went, "Yes, we really need food." So they showed up with some trucks full of food or a van full or something. But the food line went from soup kitchen run by Red Cross to a Bar Mitzvah. We had these great spreads of deli meats and just lovely food and cheeses and salads. It was like, whoa, this was really cool. That gave us the idea, when that ran out we started calling all the other delis in town and they matched. So volunteers were well fed. That was fun.

Lipkis

In terms of all the odd--there were lots of odd characters. I think I told the story that I created a uniform for us.

Collings

No. No, you talked about the TreePeople name.

Lipkis

The name, California Conservation Project. Well, we made a patch and it looked like an agency patch, mountains and trees and water, California Conservation Project, sewed them on brown Sears work shirts and all of a sudden we looked semi-official. This actually goes back to the floods and firefighting. So we're in the forest wearing these things at times, or we'd put them on, because we found ourselves being good Samaritans early, long before the floods. Somebody's in an accident or their car's broken down, you show up in the middle of the forest, you're wearing a uniform, they're much more likely to be willing to let you help them. Working with agencies, we looked like agency people, except we were a little shaggier. No one wanted to admit that they didn't know what this agency was, and so again, it was more of that easing

the interface. We weren't doing anything fraudulent, but it allowed people to include us more.

Collings

Wearing this patch.

Lipkis

Wearing the patch on a brown shirt with a little walnut name tag. So that was quite cool.

Lipkis

Our people, our staff were wearing those during the floods. We hadn't even invented TreePeople T-shirts yet, that came a little later, and we're who we are. Kind of soft and friendly and we believe in hugging. Two of our larger staff guys in uniform were giving each other just a supportive hug after one long day, and these burly four-wheel drive club guys come in and went, "God, I've never seen two men hugging before." Yes, it was just culture clash.

Collings

Yes, I was wondering about the culture clash.

Lipkis

It was there, but again, the bigger call made everything light and flow. It worked just fine.

Lipkis

The peak end of that whole thing, it was as stuff was calming down, we received a call from someone, I don't even remember where, but this old couple in Malibu in the mountains were stranded. A creek had cut them off and they were up against a mountain, and they were there and people were throwing food to them. They couldn't get out. They were okay, but they were stuck and they needed to get to work. I was getting rather cocky at that point. Yes, their car was by the house and they couldn't get across this major gorge. I went, "Can we build a bridge for them?" Or somebody asked if--you know, whatever it was. It wasn't about getting their bodies out, it was about restoring their life. We figured we would build a bridge. I got on the horn to various suppliers, talked to our four-wheel drive people. I think we had some engineers from those construction workers, so we designed it through the night, had the materials ready in the morning. The Coast Guard was going to actually fly a helicopter in to lift these major beams, telephone poles, into place. It turned out that they couldn't get the helicopter in, but we were able to figure out how to do it with our bodies.

Lipkis

So everyone's moving at five a.m., we show up at sunrise with all the materials, everything's set, and within a couple of hours we built a bridge they were able to drive their car over and we broke a bottle of champagne over it. So those are fun flood stories.

Collings

Yes, absolutely.

Lipkis

So the Million Tree Campaign, that's huge. I could attempt to do that in ten minutes.

Collings

Well, you could introduce it.

Lipkis

Yes, let's see how efficiently we can go. It's well documented in our book, "The Simple Act of Planting a Tree." There's a whole chapter called "Taking it to the Streets."

Lipkis

So you've got the grounding. The purpose was to demonstrate massive cooperation and individual action. It was not to have TreePeople, and as volunteers go out and plant a million trees. We had the prescription to plant a million, but that was all we had and we knew we wanted people to do it. So with the awareness we had generated from the floods I knew that it needed to be a communications campaign. So I somehow--oh, one of the volunteers in the floods who I got to know said that they knew somebody in advertising who was the president of an agency. I went to him (Ronnie).

Collings

This was Doyle, Dane, Bernbach?

Lipkis

Doyle, Dane, Bernbach. I'm forgetting the guy's name, but I'm sure we have it documented somewhere. Set up a meeting with the president, went to him and said, "We want to plant a million trees. We want the people to plant a million trees and be really motivated. We need educators, and you're the best educators there are, as far as I'm concerned, or translators, and I'm already--." When I was a kid in the early days telling the TreePeople story, it was really easy, I was the translator, people could understand kid language, and I think that's why the public responded. But the more I'd learned the less able I was to communicate with the public, because we had too much data. So we needed the translator broadcasters.

Lipkis

So I said, "I would like to give your people a chance to sell something they actually believe in." A highly offensive statement to an advertising executive. He didn't get too perturbed by that, he just said, "I doubt if anyone's going to be interested, but if they are I'll let you know."

Lipkis

Well, I got back to the office and he called and he said, "I have a whole team for you. People really wanted to do this." He was surprised. He said, "I've given my permission, so come on back, we'll do a briefing."

Lipkis

So we laid out what we wanted to do to a creative team there. We informed them what the issues were with smog and energy stuff, from what we understood at that point, but it was mostly about air quality. They went to work and called us back and presented all these ideas. They created what has become a globally used term, but they did it for us, Urban Releaf, r-e-l-e-a-f, and Turn Over a New Leaf Los Angeles... Help Plant The Urban Forest. They gave us a whole creative approach of bumper stickers and billboards and bus signs and posters. It was really very cool.

Collings

Did you find that you needed to take different messages to different communities?

Lipkis

We did not have that sensitivity yet. L.A. still thought of itself as a white English-speaking community.

Collings

One community.

Lipkis

Yes. We were quite unaware.

Lipkis

There were two newspapers in town even then, the L.A. Times and the Herald Examiner. We knew that there was La Opinion, but I don't know, I guess my lack of cultural sensitivity--

Collings

Because I could imagine some communities being interested because it would create park space for kids and others being interested because of air quality.

Lipkis

That's all absolutely true, we just didn't know it. I wasn't sophisticated enough at all, and that starts coming in a little later. But at that point that's just no.

Collings

Yes, part of the history is that that was not there.

Lipkis

Yes, not there at that point. It's become there profoundly now, highly tailored messages to different communities and meeting their needs for nutrition and all kinds of things.

Lipkis

But they came back even with a script--well, they said, "We need a spokesperson," and they gave me ten names. They said, "You can only work

from this list, no one else will do." One was the mayor [Tom Bradley], one was Barbra Streisand, Gregory Peck, and more just big, big names like that. Now, I started calling and trying to make contact with these people. It was just me. I didn't have really a board who could help in anyway, nobody knew anybody. Lo and behold, someone in Gregory Peck's office said, "Maybe we can help." I mean, everybody else turned us down flat.

Collings

How did they assemble this list of names?

Lipkis

This was the ad agency.

Collings

But why did they choose those names?

Lipkis

I think they decided they needed to be A, A, A list.

Collings

Oh, but these people had not indicated any interest going in?

Lipkis

No. No, it was like you are so obscure nobody knows you except from this flood fight, we've got to take a name that's so big that it's going to create attention and create credibility.

Collings

All right.

Lipkis

Gregory Peck said yes. Then they created a script based on him and gave it to him and he said he would do it. I guess he said, "Oh, this is interesting, send me a script." So then they created it.

Lipkis

Again, here we've got no money to run this campaign and they were willing to do the creative work, but they didn't have budget to produce the stuff. So we had somehow begun a relationship with General Telephone. I think one of their people joined our board. I don't remember exactly how that relationship got built. Actually, it could have come from us complaining about poor service and giving them feedback and then when they did something well we actually wrote them an acknowledgement letter, and they were so shocked that anyone would do that, that it went up the ranks and we established contact. Anyhow, somehow they got involved on our board and I asked General Telephone, who had an industrial film division for training, if they would loan us their crew to do the shoot, and they were delighted to get to work with Gregory Peck. The producer-directors, all that, from the agency came out and together they worked together. Some of them took over equipment, others- -but we produced this

totally professional shoot of a TV commercial, zero dollars. The thing was cut that night and ready to go to all the TV stations.

Lipkis

Now, I've left a whole lot out, but things didn't happen that quickly. I mean, it took a while to get to the point where we had Gregory Peck doing this and it wasn't at the very earliest stage of the campaign, because I had launched the campaign in '80, '81. Oh, I've actually got a bunch of gunk or story to tell, perhaps, about the Olympics.

Lipkis

But anyhow, we did the commercial shoot and Gregory Peck asked Kate, my wife, and I back to his house afterwards. This is a burn-in memory for her, in which we're there and he serves her tea. He asked her what she would like, and went off to the kitchen and made it and served it for her, and that was really cool.

Lipkis

Where I was going, I'll say this part of it and then we can pick up.

Collings

Okay.

Lipkis

So we announced that we wanted to plant a million trees and was starting to get word out and I started--someone introduced me--oh, I had hired a fundraiser and he got a meeting with Peter Ueberroth, who was selected to run the Olympics. In the earliest of days, we met with him, and boom, Peter says, "Give me a proposal for a million dollars for a million trees."

Lipkis

I said, "Well, that's not what I wanted to do."

Lipkis

And the fundraiser is just elbowing me and saying, "Shut up, just go with it."

Lipkis

Peter's conditions were, "You can't tell a soul that I asked this. It's got to be totally secret. Come back to me with a plan."

Lipkis

I went into the organization, back to TreePeople staff, and said, "A donor has shown up, I can't tell you who it is, they want to give us a million dollars to distribute a million trees to a million kids in L.A. Let's figure out how to do that."

Lipkis

There's a whole illustration of my lack of military approach. We staff meeting'ed it to death for several months and gave back to him with a--the staff didn't want to do it and I didn't say, "Forget it, just do it," and we worked up this, you know, several million-dollar approach that would get trees planted

through an education program that was right, by the way, instead of just distributing dead trees, but he got pissed off. We gave him the proposal and he didn't want to deal with us after that, because it's not what he asked for. We made it too complex.

Collings

Now, why didn't your staff want to do it?

Lipkis

Well, they were right, they didn't want to just give--they were right from an integrity perspective. They didn't just want to hand out a million trees and have them die, they thought we needed to do a better educational program and all that.

Collings

Right, do the follow-through.

Lipkis

Yes, and with the trees costing at least half the money or more, I had quickly put together a way that L.A. Unified [School District] could get the trees to all the kids through the school system, but we just--I didn't make decisive action. My dad was watching all this and he went nuts, because we wasted all this time, and more than that an Olympic opportunity.

Collings

I know you have to go now, we'll talk another time.

Lipkis

But we can finish this up.

Collings

I did want to ask you, did you ever try to do something that didn't work, because there seemed to be so many fortuitous turns of events, and it can't always be that way. So I was just sort of wondering what the pattern was with that.

Lipkis

Yes, I mean, there's plenty--I keep saying, we fail all the time. There are many failures, or little problem-solving cycles. We'll note this, we'll come back to some of those. The whole city program in Culver City certainly could have been stronger and there were some problems, but there were also little amazing solutions at the end.

Collings

Are we done?

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

Okay. [End of interview]



#### 1.4. Session 4 (December 5, 2006)

Collings

This is Jane Collings interviewing Andy Lipkis in his home on December 5th, 2006.

Lipkis

And it is.

Collings

It is, yes. Okay, we were just, as we just said off tape, we were going to continue with the chronology.

Lipkis

Yes, and so where--

Collings

That's what we were looking at last time.

Lipkis

Thank you, that helps. What was it, we started talking about the Olympics. How far into it did I get?

Collings

Really not at all.

Lipkis

Like I finished the--

Collings

You were talking about getting the property up at Mulholland, and then just within the last eight to ten minutes--

Lipkis

Then we did the flood stuff?

Collings

Yes. Oh, yes.

Lipkis

It was after we got in there, I talked about that.

Collings

Yes, definitely talked about the flood.

Lipkis

Okay, and that led to the set up for the--

Collings

Then like eight to ten minutes on the Olympics, just very briefly.

Lipkis

Right. So I got the set up from the floods to the city asking us for--

Collings

Yes. Yes.

Lipkis

Okay, great.

Collings

Then I think off tape we talked a little bit about how your organizational structure needed to change, you felt, as a result of the--

Lipkis

Yes, and I could do that then. So we did about the initial conversations with Ueberroth on tape?

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

Okay. Great. So he had made an offer for a million dollars for a million trees to a million kids. We struggled with how to do that with integrity and came up with an answer that he didn't like and he closed the door.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

At the same time we spent a lot of time spending money as a staff and not delivering and not--and sort of not earning our keep and consumed the money. So I went off to--well, coincidentally I went off to Hawaii for a workshop, a learning retreat and a break, and while resting realized that we really needed to make changes. In fact, saw, once I got some rest, that we really did need to do the million trees somehow, even though the staff was somewhat reluctant. I got back and discovered that we were pretty much out of money. We couldn't sustain everyone we had and the drive and the dream to do this campaign just was overriding.

Lipkis

So I talked to some advisors when I got back and came in and basically said, "Look, we've got enough to pay everybody thirty days' severance, but we don't have any money beyond that. So I've got to close it down and just change the structure. We're going to launch into planting a million trees because it's so important to get this message to the world and anybody who wants to work as a volunteer is free to stay, stay on."

Collings

Who were these advisors, by the way?

Lipkis

One was a friend named Bill Anderson from the National Park Service. The National Park Service had moved into L.A. in a big way to set up the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. At the time I really didn't have an active board of directors. It's a good reason for a board of directors, to create more balance and better advice, but this was--it was still relatively early in our

development as an organization. We didn't have good financial management, good advice, anything on that front.

Lipkis

So anyhow, about four people decided to stick around and make it work. But within hours, the same day that I made the announcement and let everyone know that we were about to undergo a change, the incredible validation showed up, somebody called with 100,000 trees to donate to us on the spot. I mean, the word wasn't out there, they just, they had called.

Collings

And who was this?

Lipkis

It was a nursery somewhere out in Pomona. They had these hundred, 120,000 trees and we went, "Wow, that's a really nice way to start things."

Lipkis

Four staff people, including me, decided to stay on and two were education interns, Bruce Flynt, Chris Imhoff, or at that time Chris Reiseck, and one was a staff member named John Earl, and I. We sat down to figure out what we could do with no money and we just started to roll. As we put things together and announced that we were going to do the campaign, resources, more and more resources started to show up. To take advantage of the 100,000 trees we thought, "Oh, that would make a great launch." I contacted our old friends at the Air National Guard, who provided the trucks before. We scoped out the trees and what that was about, and figured out their sizes and stuff and we knew that we would fifty, a convoy of fifty trucks to move them all up to our headquarters. We thought, "That will be a great way to launch the campaign," get the mayor up there and stuff. The Air Guard started working on it, they wanted to help and they could only find twenty-five trucks, military trucks, in the region and so we mobilized a two trip convoy of twenty-five trucks.

Collings

Now, when they got--maybe you don't know the answer to this question, but when they got back to you saying that they would like to help a second time, were you still dealing with, like, the same person? I mean, was there some person who was interested in this?

Lipkis

Yes. Now, I'd have to look in my notes to see the name of the person. It was a person, in fact, when I--when you go back, all the years back when I said in the second year that a person called, it's the same guy. He was somebody in a position of authority at the 146th Tactical Airlift Wing out in the San Fernando Valley.

Collings

Who really supported this type of thing.

Lipkis

Yes. He said, "There's no reason why we can't help, and I think it's a great idea."

Lipkis

I don't know if I said, but that became an annual tradition, every year we would, I think I talked about it once, but every summer when we needed to pot up trees, move them to the forest. Now, we did it for probably four, five, six years.

Collings

All working with this same person?

Lipkis

Same person, same contact. They always got really good publicity. Their people really enjoyed the training exercise of learning to drive in the mountains and do convoy and all that, and they're doing good service for the state, which is part of their mission.

Lipkis

So, yes, at some point the guy retired and handed it off to someone else, but the tradition was alive and well. So it wasn't hard. They talked to a number of military reserve units around and they were working on the twenty-five trucks and then realized that the fuel involved in that was going to be a lot and they located these huge, huge trucks that were like forty, fifty feet long. I mean, they're sort of longer than allowed, but they're huge. They got eight of them and made those available and we pulled together 200 volunteers and I think they started at like five in the morning and met them out in Pomona, loaded the trucks, brought them in, and the mayor, Mayor Bradley showed up, and a major alert out to the media. It was great. The media showed, hundreds of volunteers. The trucks pulled in and we unloaded them. Bradley himself used his muscle when they couldn't get the back of the truck open, he came over. He's a former football player. He muscled it open and we unloaded them and it was a great opening. Then we were off and running and trying to figure out what we were going to do.

Collings

So you had re-contacted Peter Ueberroth then?

Lipkis

No, actually I tried and he wouldn't take the calls. He wasn't interested in anything. He closed the door and that was it. No, it was, we're going to do it without them, and we would love official recognition and we would love to partner and we're willing, but we're not going to let the lack of that get in the way. We're just going to get it done and we're going to get it done as efficiently as we can without funding, without any grants, just declare that it's got to be done. It's interesting, I've done that numerous times and the more mature we get

as an organization the less we do that, the less responsible it is, and yet in the early days that's where the real magic and the power was, was to take on something because it was right, because we needed to do it. I think that's what the public loves, as well, and people get bored with the predictable and the well managed and the well planned, though staff don't like it. But there is actually something in between, which is to take on a challenge that you're not quite sure how you're going to solve, that still galvanizes people and challenges them to bring their creativity in.

Collings

Well, I suppose at that time there would be less riding on a non-success. I mean, because the organization is so young.

Lipkis

Right, little organization, not known. You know, we got known because we saved a lot of people's homes and some lives and people appreciated that, but there was no money riding on it either. So there wasn't really a potential for scandal. Having done this from being a kid and not having any professional training at it, actually I didn't know anything about planning or anything, so we just shot from the hip and did it. I think the public got it. I think they appreciated that this is something that's calling on their participation and it's not some wired preset program that doesn't matter whether they participate or not. It's only going to work if they're involved. There's something about that edge that really helps and that we need to continue to find, because everything else in this urban life and this society we live in is so pre-manufactured, where you don't have a summit between two countries until the answer's already worked out.

Collings

Right.

Lipkis

Well, no risk--nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Collings

Yes, exactly.

Lipkis

And yes, the stuff goes on in the background, so that's what keeps the risk low. But anyhow, so we launched with no money, no way of knowing exactly how we were going to get there, but a trust that we put the word out and we would figure it out as we went.

Collings

Yes. Now, the money that you were operating with earlier, was that still the donations that had come in?

Lipkis

Yes, it was from our donors.

Collings

And Johnny Carson's check, which replenished the equipment that you had lost?

Lipkis

Right.

Collings

Yes. So that was the basis of your funding earlier?

Lipkis

Yes, it was the same donors who wrote back when I sent out a newsletter after the first year. They wrote back and then we started mailing to them once a year.

Collings

Yes. So that was how you were paying the staff?

Lipkis

Yes, and we were, along the way we developed a newsletter called "The TreePeople News." I'm not sure I told that story, but that's when we first started toying with the name TreePeople. People were calling us that us. Did I talk about that?

Collings

Yes. Yes, and explained it really well.

Lipkis

Yes. But it started out with the newsletter that then became our name. So we started doing first one newsletter a year and then several, and that became a way that people started sending money.

Collings

But those donations kind of dwindled off, because it wasn't the same big rush that there had been in the beginning, because of that--

Lipkis

Yes, and we were becoming our own sort of institution, but we weren't delivering a compelling case for why we needed to be there and what we were doing. We were doing environmental education and we were getting grants for some of that and people didn't perceive the urgent need.

Collings

Right.

Lipkis

Well, when we simplified the message and turned up the challenge and the heat for a million trees, people were really quite galvanized by that. It was because of our storm reputation, I was able to ride on that. Someone, I'm forgetting. Her name was Ronnie [Korn], but I forgot how we met. She knew, I think it may have been one of our 10k runs. Did I talk about that?

Collings

No. No, let's get to that, especially the Marina [Freeway] run.

Lipkis

Yes, that's the one, and it happened before the million trees, I think, or during it. Now, I'm--the first one was '79, '80, '81, '82. So, yes, we had started that before. So I'll do that and I'll come back to the campaign.

Collings

Okay.

Lipkis

So this follows the theme of communication opportunities. I wanted to have a 10k run, they were really popular. It was a good way to, we thought to raise money and engage the public in something physical. So we organized one for the trees and for the urban forest. I think we had a small grant from the state and part of the mission was to get the term "urban forest" established out in the world. That was one of the deliverables for our grant. So we were working on creative ways and so we thought we'd have an urban forest run.

Lipkis

We planned to run it from the West L.A. Federal Building up Sepulveda into the mountains to Mulholland Drive and then back down. So it wouldn't really get too much in the way of too many people's lives. But Prop[osition] 13 had passed and the city council decided that police couldn't be used to support these races. So there had been a number of races around and it cost a lot of money to have cops close streets and all of that. So we were in the middle of filing for permit for it and they said, "No, we couldn't do it."

Lipkis

So I started looking around for another venue, because we'd already advertised that it was going to happen and we had a deadline.

Collings

And you had a grant?

Lipkis

Well, the grant wasn't to produce that, it was only to do our work, but the deliverable was to get the message out about urban forestry.

Collings

That's so fascinating that the deliverable is to get a phrase entered into the lexicon.

Lipkis

Yes. Well, we offered that. We said, it's needed, because it's an important term, it's not out there. So I started looking around and then found what I thought would be an ideal site, which was the Marina Freeway, which turned out to be exactly five kilometers, with a parking lot, and only one place where it actually crossed a street. So I immediately got on the phone to the people at the police department who we'd been working with, and I said, "Look at your map, look at

the intersections where the Marina cross Culver. Now, are they yours or are they CHP's?" In other words, can we do this or not?

Lipkis

They looked and said, "It's clear, no problem, it's CHP. We won't have involvement."

Lipkis

SO I then got on the horn to CalTrans and said, "We'd like to hold a 10k run on a freeway."

Lipkis

They said, "Great, we have one that we'd like to show you where you can do it."

Lipkis

Because we wanted to have people run and plant trees as the unique piece to this. So they took me all the way out to the 118 Freeway in the Simi Valley, that was under construction. It was almost done, but it wasn't open. They said, "Here you go, and we've already checked the books, there's precedent, roads closed, bridge closed in San Francisco, you can do it, no problem. We'd love to have you here."

Lipkis

I went back then and said, "Well, I want to do it, but not there. We want to do it where people are."

Collings

Yes, exactly.

Lipkis

And it's sort of important that we close a freeway just to make--I started getting very excited about the statement, the educational statement and all of that.

Collings

Well, we just talked earlier, you were thinking of it as sort of an environmental art piece, as well.

Lipkis

Yes, right. So you've got that whole set up you can graft in here. But I couldn't talk about that, it was the purpose. And they went, "Well, no, you can't close a freeway."

Lipkis

I said, "But you said there's precedent."

Lipkis

They said, "Well, yes, but--" they were in a corner.

Lipkis

I said, "Okay. Let us work on this."

Lipkis



They came back with their set of rules and said, "Sure, there's precedent, and yes, all you've got to do is meet all these requirements," and they gave me the requirements and they were sure they were done with me.

Collings

That they'll never see you again?

Lipkis

Yes. The requirements included essentially legislative resolutions, which are essentially laws passed by both the State Senate, the State Assembly, the city of L.A., the county of L.A., the city of Culver City. Did I do this before or no?

Collings

No.

Lipkis

No. Okay, so every one of those legislative bodies had to introduce a piece of legislation supporting the run, plus we had to provide \$10 million worth of insurance.

Collings

Ouch.

Lipkis

And have the city fire and people on hand and paramedics and pay CalTrans' expenses.

Lipkis

Let's pause for a second.

Collings

Yes. [recording interrupted]

Collings

All right.

Lipkis

I think we had six weeks to pull all this off, and advertise and recruit and get everyone there. Oh, boy, what a challenge. It was like, okay, it's all over.

Collings

What about the \$10 million?

Lipkis

Well, it's great when people define a challenge, basically you're creating the engineering metrics for what you need to do. So they defined the hurdle and we just had to figure out how to get over the hurdle. So what they were sure was a fatal body block, turned out to, once again, be a problem. Did I talk about the philosophy of the problem? It's more like a math problem or an engineering problem, something to be solved, as opposed to the problem being a sign that you failed. So, yes, it's disappointing at first to have the problem, but then I just went, "Okay, here are the problems we have to solve. How are we possibly going to do this?"

Lipkis

Well, we had made friends in some places and I started with a family friend, who was a state senator, Hirsch Rosenthal. I called him and said what our problem and challenge was, and he said, "No problem, I can introduce a bill. You'll have to fly up and testify at the Transportation Committee, but we can make that happen."

Lipkis

So we got that process started. We asked the city councils and the supervisors to introduce something, because remember we had just done the floods, we were heroes in some people's mind, and it wasn't hard to ask for something really simple in return, though that's not simple, it's that it's no big cost and it's no big sweat, and it's what legislatures do.

Lipkis

So we got that rolling, and then I'm scratching my head about how do we get that insurance? We started checking around and only Lloyd's of London would provide it, and it was going to be really, really expensive. But a different strategy emerged when we began looking at corporate media sponsors, which we needed to get the word out. Radio, a rock music station called KZLA, turned out to be owned by KABC and they carried a \$90 million policy. So it was a simple administrative rider for the day named TreePeople and the State. So we got the insurance. Piece of cake.

Collings

Now, why did they want to do that for you?

Lipkis

Well, they became a sponsor and they needed to insure the event anyhow.

Collings

Okay.

Lipkis

So if anyone got hurt, they didn't get nailed.

Collings

So their radio station printed on the T-shirt or something?

Lipkis

They helped promote. Yes, we put them on the shirt. No, it was KLOS. That's right, they were ABC. Anyhow, yes, they got--

Collings

KLOS, was it?

Lipkis

I think so. But, yes, we put them on the shirt, they did the promotion and the outreach. As all this process was going on we printed posters, we leafleted all the runs all over town, people started registering, things were going pretty well. Then I got a call the last week before the run from the L.A.P.D. saying, the

same guy saying, "Meet me out at the Venice station." I did and they said, "We've got a problem." They said, "We can't close those intersections."

Lipkis

I said, "Do you have any idea how big this has gotten?"

Lipkis

The commander for the station says, "Come with me." He brings me into the locker room and shows me, our poster is in their locker room with--he said, "Half my division is running in your race. We know it, we're all excited about it, we've paid our dues. We're running. So we've got to figure out a way to solve this thing, but we can't have cops there."

Lipkis

Just two weeks before, I mean, these are all interthreaded, but we were--a crew of us were living up at TreePeople pretty much twenty-four hours a day and one night a cop had been shot just a quarter mile from us in Coldwater. So the whole street was closed and there were what seemed like a couple hundred cops. We set up an emergency kitchen and fed them and took care of them all night long. Didn't have to do that, but we did, and it's just who we are.

Lipkis

So the cops are saying, "Can we build a bridge or something?"

Lipkis

I went, "I don't think so. It'd be a lot easier if we somehow can get around this policy." I said, "Think about what TreePeople has done for the city and you're telling me you can't give four cops for a couple of hours?"

Lipkis

He went, "Yes, you're right. I've got to turn around and go try to sell this," and he personally went to the Police Commission and got them to reverse their policy and allow us what we needed. So that came through the Thursday before the Sunday, and we still didn't have permission yet from--CalTrans was saying, "You know, no legislative resolution, no nothing." So we had the insurance, we had L.A.P.D., we had everything lined up, and it wasn't till I think it was Friday that--it still had--it had to go through the whole Senate first and then the assembly and we actually were waiting for the secretary of state to get the document from the Assembly and I think it happened, like, late on Friday we had someone there, run to the secretary of state to certify it, and then fax it to CalTrans. They got the document and they went, "You've done it. Okay. What do you need?" And they pulled all their people together for an urgent meeting and figured out the logistics.

Lipkis

In the meantime, we had organized, again, hundreds of volunteers, the ham radio operators and the four-wheel drive clubs and the people that helped in the floods.

Collings

How would you communicate with these people?

Lipkis

Which people?

Collings

Like the four-wheel drive clubs and all that?

Lipkis

Oh, well, they had their internal network and I would communicate to their leaders and they would get all their people together.

Collings

So they had kind of like a phone tree?

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

Yes, okay.

Lipkis

So we had raised--gotten corporate sponsor, raised seedlings, everything was in place. So it was just the lack of CalTrans being willing to provide the people and the crews to close the freeway down and we got it at that eleventh hour. Lo and behold, we deployed all the volunteers and CalTrans coned off, closed the freeway, everything was set, and 5,000 people showed up. It worked like clockwork, no problem. People parked in the Fox Hills Mall, walked up the ramp, ran the race, came back, it was clean. The absolute mega surprise was we had accomplished that mission with the contract. Front page of the L.A. Times and front page of the Herald Examiner, this incredible photo of this absolute sea of bodies. That, with the name Urban Forest, twice on the front page of the Times, a picture of the banner and the caption.

Lipkis

So we were able to declare that part done.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

So that process, I think even created some political momentum just to see, not only were we doing the emergency work and the planting and a lot of people stopped and planted trees along the way.

Collings

So they carried it with them along the run?

Lipkis

We had them on the side where they needed the plants. All they had to do was stop and take the time to plant. Those trees are there today. That's the forest along the side of the Marina Freeway near the Centinela off ramp. We did the

run four more years after that. Another one of--I think the third year was another set of front page pictures. So that was cool.

Collings

So was this sort of a transformative event for the organization, would you say, in the way that some of the others have been?

Lipkis

Yes, every time--because there's two things. One is that I have a creative idea or vision and see stuff that needs to happen and know intuitively what it's going to do for us, but can't usually convince people, or couldn't, to trust me. People couldn't conceive that we could do it or what the value would be or what happens with public awareness that goes through a collective shift. It's very different than just a simple getting an article in the paper or something like that, when you create an event somehow large enough that there's a collective awareness, which is very hard to happen here. I mean, it just doesn't happen much in this town, but you can do it, and they're important to have happen. It's to change perception and get people enrolled. These things mostly happen around scandals and major emergencies, not much really affects Los Angeles. The riots did. The Olympics coming to town did, but it wasn't lasting.

Lipkis

So the internal shift was, oh, my God, we can do this. It's not a skill set that anybody brought to, but it's one I guess I just embody. So that emboldened us a little bit, gave us a little bit more confidence. So that was part of the building our way towards knowing that we should do the Million Trees and having that same consciousness that we needed to get something to get the focus of the whole Southern California community on doing something together positive. So that really was the vision and that's what drove it, and I knew by then that we had lost the ability to communicate effectively, to translate our own message into what the public could understand.

Collings

How did you know that?

Lipkis

Well, in the early days when I was just a teenager telling the story really simply, people could get it and get involved. The more science we knew, the more facts we had, the less able we were to get it across.

Collings

I mean, in the beginning you were talking about specific projects. Did you continue talking about specific--

Lipkis

No. No, we were talking about the bigger picture, fix the environment and all that. So the specificity and simplicity of a million trees really worked for us, I'm not sure it's working for the mayor right now, for the mayor's campaign,

because it's been done, I think. But it made sense. People may have been skeptical then, but they were able to get their minds around it.

Collings

Sure.

Lipkis

And absolutely has its limitations and problems and I didn't recommend doing it again, because it's too simplistic, but at the time it worked. It got a lot of people focused in.

Lipkis

But back to the run and the floods. Somebody who helped in the run, and maybe in the floods, her name is Ronnie Korn-something, knew the president of Doyle Dane Bernbach, and she introduced me to him, set up so he would take a meeting. Did I--it seems like I got into this.

Collings

Yes, you did. You did talk about the Doyle Dane Bernbach campaign.

Lipkis

Oh, great. Okay. And Gregory Peck and all that stuff?

Collings

Right, right. Right.

Lipkis

Okay. So we got way into that?

Collings

Yes. Yes, you talked about that, but you hadn't talked about the--

Lipkis

The Ueberroth thing.

Collings

Yes, exactly.

Lipkis

So that had happened before. I guess it's because you asked a--

Collings

I think maybe you skipped ahead, yes.

Lipkis

Yes, I did, and it was only because you asked about problems and challenges and failures, so I cycled back and went, oh, yes, well--

Collings

Oh, yes, there had been this, yes.

Lipkis

And as you will see every time we've started something it's been usually met by a major problem, if not failure, and most of the time I just didn't stop, or I would stop for a while and then figure out how to solve it. And once again, the solution, the fact that with the run that we were able to get KLOS involved not

only gave us insurance, but it gave us a much greater outreach. So we wanted 5,000 people, but how do you get 5,000 people?

Collings

Now, there's an article about the run in the book "Sculpting the Environment."

Lipkis

Yes.

Collings

That seems like a--I mean, how did that happen that the stuff about TreePeople and the run would be--

Lipkis

How'd it wind up in the book?

Collings

Yes, would be in a book about environmental art?

Lipkis

Again, we're way out of sync, but I'll answer the question. It's funny that while we were later in the Million Tree Campaign, an environmental artist came to me named Baille Oakes, and he worked with wood and he wanted to do something to contribute. At the time we were working on creating a temporary portable forest in downtown L.A. That is a whole other--it's a long story of a pretty significant failure. But the Community Redevelopment Agency had invited us to take a lot at Fourth and Grand, Fourth and Hill, on Bunker Hill, that at some time in the future was slated to have a building on it, but in the short-term wasn't going to. They said, "If you want to plant it, that would be great."

Lipkis

So we began the process and really--you know, we thought, "Oh, this is great. We need a downtown center, we can bring people from all over to learn about and see what trees to plant and pick up the trees and do all this stuff."

Lipkis

So we built quite a head of steam on it, got some great design, and as part of the design this artist got enrolled. So I will tell this. I might as well finish this story. As we're building this enthusiasm all of a sudden the CRA, the developer, I think, got cold feet and they were afraid that when it's time to build their building that people will chain themselves to the trees and not let theirs be taken out and it will block their multi-billion-dollar project. So they started pulling the plug on it and they wouldn't do it upfront and they wouldn't do it honestly, they just made it look like it was our lack of resources and us why they were doing it. Yet, it was just--so it was kind of ugly behind the scenes. Pulled the plug.

Lipkis

The interesting thing is we had published designs and was quite exciting, and CBS Evening News did a piece on it, and it didn't happen. Very disappointing because a lot of time and energy went, like a year and half went into planning and putting it together. The cool thing about it is three years later the city of Glendale, actually, their Redevelopment Agency, did it in their place. It became what we did to deal with the concerns of the developers to say, "Okay, we'll make this a nursery. It will be a portable forest. We can plant trees in boxes in the ground where they'll get to grow and when it's time to build your building we just pluck them up and take them to a school or a park, so trees aren't getting cut down." But they wouldn't go for it. But that concept was then implemented beautifully in downtown Glendale where they built a park and it was there for two or three years and now it's new buildings and the trees are wherever they are in the community. But we were pretty depressed about it for quite a long time and frustrated.

Lipkis

But the artist involved stayed connected with us, and that's Baille Oakes. Many, many years later I was visiting him and he said he was doing a book on environmental art. He said, "I think you're an artist, and I want to invite you to do a chapter."

Lipkis

I said, "Well, that's really interesting because sometimes I think maybe I'm an artist, but no one else has ever said anything about that."

Lipkis

So that got me thinking about everything I do from the perspective of art. So I agreed to write that chapter from the perspective of artist. I used to live in Sonoma County. I was there when Christo [and Jean Claude] built the Running Fence. I've always been attracted to his work, and the more I learned about what he did, the more I realized, oh, my God, I'm actually doing the same sort of thing, involving community with these massive projects that wind up being temporary, but changing perspective. I had been noodling the notion of art for me as taking a piece of the world, every day world, and putting a frame around it and giving it back to people to see their world differently and to understand something more about the world, something that's unconscious to them. I think maybe that may or may not be what all artists do, but that became my own working definition of art and then realized I was doing that and then realized, oh, that's really an important educational perspective. When I started looking back through all the stuff we did I saw it over and over again.

Collings

Did coming to that realization help you going forward or was it more a thing of just kind of understanding what you were doing?

Lipkis



It helped me understand what I was doing, but also it does continue to drive what we do, and clearly that was a foundation for some much more serious big projects that came later. The big, big stuff that we're working on now, the T.R.E.E.S. Project. I mean, that's been--I started on that in--

Collings

T.R.E.E.S., the acronym?

Lipkis

Yes. Trans-Agency Resources for Environmental and Economic Sustainability. I started that in '92 after the Rodney King riots. So I'm jumping way, way, way ahead. So I'll just mark it and saying that I knew that we need to have people look at cities differently, very differently, in order to get to sustainability. That notion, it's great that you asked the question, really completely drives it. I had to scientifically prove that, in fact, it works and we've now spent, since '92 to now, doing that. So my next project is to actually go back into the creative mode in writing and pictures and new media to share with people a picture of the world and their life in a way that they see it like they've never seen it and understand it like they've never understood it. We'll hopefully joyfully enable them to participate in a new way.

Lipkis

So maybe we talked about that at the beginning. I'm not sure. A little bit.

Collings

Oh, yes, we talked in the beginning about your--kind of like overarching philosophy.

Lipkis

What comes back.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

So yes, that principle has been throughout and we have done other media events along the way, but from 1990, on Martin Luther King's birthday, planting the entire stretch of King Boulevard as a living monument to him, now visible from space. So that would be a good picture. And the actual culmination of the first phase of the T.R.E.E.S. project was an interesting media event, as well.

Collings

So up to this point, up to the Million Tree Campaign, the Marina Runs, how was the staff--the staff was still volunteer at that point?

Lipkis

No. Well, again, the story's being told in funny sync. So the staff was getting paid when the disaster started and the Marina Run was during the time when people were getting paid. Then 1980, I forget what the date, actual date was,

but June, July, when I came back and sort of shut it down and reformatted, then nobody was getting paid. That lasted only a few months, because once we put the word out that we were doing the campaign, people started sending money again and resources, and we only had a few staff.

Lipkis

Bruce Flynt, who had been an education intern said, "I want to do education, that's why I'm here." He was there as a volunteer in the first place. He said, "I think I can set up a program that will make enough money that it'll run on its own. So we'll just charge schools a little bit."

Lipkis

I said, "Show me your plan, I'm open to it." He did and I said, "Go for it."

Lipkis

So he and Chris Imhoff launched the Education Project, which instead of being run by professionals, it was run by college interns, but it still produced a lot of value and it was more sustainable.

Collings

So when you started hiring staff back again, did you hire in a different way than you had before? Did you structure things differently than you had before?

Lipkis

I don't remember. I was pretty reluctant to, because of my lack of organizational and business knowledge and no training, I didn't quite know how to just get an administrative manager and let them run the stuff, that I would absolutely do it now. And we were going by the seat of the pants in the campaign. So I hired people to come in with a clear philosophical alignment and I would test that and basically say, "We never know when we're going to be paid or not, so you've got to be willing to work knowing that you might not get paid." Basically my agreement with every staff person, volunteer, board member, is it only works if you're here in the spirit of service knowing that you'll get more than you put in as long as you're not looking for where you're getting it. And sure enough, the satisfaction, the joy, the fulfillment, really does pay off for people. I don't want anyone to be there in sacrifice, because that just never works for morale and building a strong team spirit.

Lipkis

Now, we're so many years later, we're an institution, I don't do the hiring, and we have administrative people, and we have HR people, and we have all the issues that people have in organizations with staff, but still we work to find people who are really aligned. We're getting to be paying a little more towards normal, instead of just horribly underpaying everybody, which is sort of--I guess that's the answer to the question, my very naive response, and yet it was all we had the resources for, was, "Okay, we can't pay much. I don't get paid much." I was getting paid around \$10,000 a year when I started taking a salary

again. I was even paying some other staff more than me. Basically it was like, you know, "You've got to be committed to do this work, and there will be some level, small level of under compensation, but that's it." So that was kind of the filter.

Collings

So how did that affect the decision-making process? Because you were saying, like, with regard to the initial Peter Ueberroth offer that you were having these four-hour staff meetings, and the staff didn't want to do it.

Lipkis

Oh, right. Right.

Collings

And the staff didn't want to do it. Well, if you're hardly paying them anything, it's kind of hard to not go with what--

Lipkis

Listen.

Collings

Yes, exactly.

Lipkis

Yes. Well, actually those four-hour staff meeting times we were paying people a little more. Sort of the more we paid the more dissatisfaction we would have.

Collings

That's interesting.

Lipkis

Yes. Well, because we could never get to comparable scale.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

There was no comp. I mean, there's no model of equivalent of what we were doing, except sort of we came out of the summer camp model, which you underpay college students for a couple of months and that was it. You've long passed that.

Lipkis

But we underwent a lot of different decision-making models, from full collective consensus to, I think, I'd have to look back through my journals, but I'm sure of this, I said, "Okay. New decision-making model, I'm always a collaborator and will always listen and take input, but ultimately final decisions have got to rest back with me. So I'm going to be making decisions more rapidly, so we don't have all these long, long, long staff meetings."

Collings

When did you say this?

Lipkis

At the point when we turned on the Million Tree Campaign. it's like, I'm the one who's responsible, anyhow, so I'm making the decision. I think we did have a board by then, and it just wasn't active in management, but I did inform them and had their support. But we've always had staff meetings, communal input, because people do need to have that sense of ownership if they're going to be involved at all. So that is as you insightfully pointed out, the trade off.

Lipkis

So we should try to get through the Million Tree Campaign in our few minutes.

Collings

Okay.

Lipkis

We launched, then DDB came in and started doing all the advertising and we were pushing away and doing events and various things. A person who happened to have come to visit TreePeople the day that we launched with the mayor and the army guard, his name is Lionel Fifield, he is an Australian who had also been in Hawaii at this retreat that I went to. It was called the One Earth Gathering, it was organized by the Findhorn Foundation. It was all about doing things to help the planet. Being there is what re-inspired me to launch the campaign. He came through town to visit, was so impressed by the Army, the mayor, all this stuff, and it fell to him to organize the One Earth Gathering in Australia. He ran a place in Brisbane called the Relaxation Center, and he coordinated with a bunch of different groups around the country, and thought, "Australia's got all these problems and there are answers all around the world." Deforestation was a huge issue in Australia. When Lionel organized this stuff for 1982, we were halfway through the campaign, and he invited me to come to Australia on a speaking tour for a month. I thought, "Whoa, that would be fun." I'd never been there.

Lipkis

So the campaign was well underway and in good hands, I thought, and I went off for that month of speaking. While there after nearly a month of being on the road, staying in people's homes, speaking every day, the last major city was Melbourne. I can't tell the whole romance story, but I was there getting ready to give my opening speech, welcome speech, and there were people just from all over the world there, and then 800 people at the conference, here to learn these good new-age ideas. While running through the lobby to find a tree that was out at a portable nursery out front, I saw this person and a little voice said, "She's the one." I went, "What?" Just instant recognition and spotting, which was just amazing.

Lipkis

I kept moving and then ran back through and saw her again, again that recognition. Did the welcome session for an hour and a half or whatever, and

was standing in the foyer and talking to Lionel Fifield, who brought me to Australia, and looking at Kate who was at a hunger project booth.

Collings

Oh, it was a different event?

Lipkis

It was the same. There were all these booths representing all the causes that they had assembled people for to help solve these problems. No, it was that same day, just ninety minutes later. We made eye contact and I was asking Lionel where there was a native plant nursery that I had heard of that I needed to go see. Kate was listening and said, "My dad's a member, I know where it is. I'll find out for you," or, "he knows where it is, I'll find out." We made contact and--

Collings

The rest is history.

Lipkis

The rest is history. Making a long story very short, we only had dinner together and I had to fly off to Tasmania, two more cities, four days of speaking down there, came back, and she met me at Melbourne Airport for a hug at my invitation, and spontaneously got on the plane with me.

Collings

Oh, my gosh.

Lipkis

And flew to Sydney on her way to work, completely unprepared. She just--we had this incredible collision at the airport and she said--she was actually engaged to somebody else, and said, "I think I may have fallen in love with you."

Lipkis

I said, "I think I may have fallen in love with you."

Lipkis

"So can you come back?

Lipkis

And I said, "I can't, I've got to keep going."

Lipkis

I had a TV show to do in Sydney in two hours or three hours. I said, "Well, there's room for you there." She just did a 180 and went to the counter. All she had with her was her American Express card with the car left out in short-term parking by the curb.

Collings

Oh, God. Still there, right?

Lipkis

Yes. Well, she said, "Get me on that plane." We flew together, started our work together immediately, she showing me around Sydney where she'd grown up and it was great. Then I flew off and she flew home, and yes, the car was there. She was here five weeks later for a visit and we confirmed that it was right and she went home, packed her life, and came back. We got married on the weekend of Earth Day, 1983. Yes, so we had very, very little time to court.

Lipkis

She was an advertising executive and came here and immediately joined the team. Actually, while she was here, this is how incredibly effective she was and we were together, while she was here on that short-term visit somebody--no, it wasn't that short-term visit. Delete that. It was right as soon as she arrived. There's all kinds of stories, which I'm not going to tell, because we'll save that for the more romantic movie. But she immediately helped with organizing the fourth Tree Run and the publicity, but once she moved here, got here, went to work immediately for TreePeople, no pay, and noticed that I was getting paid less than several of the staff and thought, "That's crazy." At the time we had what we called that annual payroll savings plan, meaning we didn't pay when we ran out of money.

Lipkis

Her dad was, at the time, an executive with Guide Dogs for the Blind in Australia. So retired from business, but knew the philanthropic world and knew business and the two of them saw how inexperienced we were in management. Her mom and dad came over for our wedding and spent six weeks here living with my parents in Westwood and they got along great. Anyhow, he started volunteering and helping. At some point, Kate said, "You know, the most important thing I can do--forget about advertising, the most important thing I can do is somehow insure our fiscal viability, so people will never not get paid again." I think she probably wasn't willing to live under those shaky circumstances, but it wasn't an ethical way to operate either. And she has met that promise.

Collings

So putting together, like, a business plan?

Lipkis

Yes, and a better fund development plan and real planning and all of that. That's scratching the surface of everything she's contributing.

Lipkis

But I should go back to that meeting point at the conference in Melbourne when I said, "Well, what do you do, and how did you get here?"

Lipkis

She said she was an advertising copywriter. I went, "We can use a copywriter."

Lipkis

Anyhow, she actually plugged straight into the campaign amongst all the other things we were doing and took over from Doyle Dane Bernbach and started writing the ads. I mean, once they did the initial stuff, they were sort of done, and we got posters and a TV spot, and that was fantastic. But we had a whole lot of need to quickly be writing spots and turning stuff around.

Lipkis

So that brings us to the last year of the campaign. We had recorded about 200,000 trees planted towards the million, so we were 800,000 short with a year to go. We had given away, by then, not only the 120,000 trees that we had, but with McDonald's we had developed a promotion. McDonald's and Georgia Pacific tied up to give away a thousand trees from each McDonald's in Southern California. Well, there were 300 McDonald's. That's 300,000 trees. We did that for two years and we mobilized the whole thing and created instructions on their little tray liners and all kinds of good stuff.

Collings

So they were giving them away, like, with Happy Meals or something like that?

Lipkis

Yes, something like that. Come in, buy a meal, buy anything, and you got a tree. They all ran out within a day. People really wanted them. It was really easy.

Lipkis

But here was the thing, we only agreed from the start, the rule we set is we'll only count the tree if we receive notice in writing that it's been planted. So every tree went out with a postcard, and people, if they paid the postage and sent it back, then we counted it. But people knew that the most important thing was to actually plant it, not tell us. So part of our campaign became tell us all about it.

Lipkis

We also created a postcard that was a tree tag that we put on nurseries.

Collings

You needed to make the postcards like a raffle ticket.

Lipkis

Well, yes, we didn't have an incentive. You're thinking where we are today.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

But we were too pure for that and didn't even think about that. We just thought, oh, people will want to do it. But we weren't that smart and I was pretty stubborn.

Lipkis

So we distributed by then 720,000 trees, but out of the 600,000 I think we could only count 40,000 trees or something like that. So we were at 200, we were thinking, "We've got to get the word out," and we were trying to figure out how we were going to do that. Again, no major funding for this. We thought, "Okay, telethon. That gives us better than sound bite. We can really do something with that."

Lipkis

I started talking to all the TV stations to see if they would give us an hour and we could roll around the clock on a weekend and do it for little cost. It was looking like a good idea, but we were still going to have to find money to produce it and stuff, but it seemed like it was going to work. Well, when I called ABC, because I was calling every station, they said, "Well, how about we do something better than that? How about we give you a mini-series on the evening news and tell the story every night for a week?"

Collings

Wow, this was a gift.

Lipkis

Yes. Yes. These things kept happening and telling the story now as professional as we are it seems so irresponsible, but, again, we were finding our way, we had no money, we were still essentially kids.

Lipkis

The same thing happened with the [L.A.] Times, and I will tell that story, because it's an important part of the campaign. But they said, "Let us do it."

Lipkis

I said, "Well, I want to go to all the stations."

Lipkis

They said, "Don't worry about it, just we'll work with you."

Lipkis

Together we outlined what the series would be and then we had this major confrontation with them and said, "Look, we're going to get people turned on." And they said, "It's not going to work to just have a postcard, let them phone you or something." Remember, there's no email in the world, no Internet, no nothing.

Collings

Right. Yes, that would have made it really easy.

Lipkis

Oh, simple. Pause.

Collings

Pause. [End of interview]

### **1.5. Session 5 (January 5, 2007)**



Collings

Good afternoon, Andy. It is January 5, 2007.

Lipkis

A very windy day.

Collings

Right.

Lipkis

So we're picking up with the question of incentives to inspire people to make their trees count. So in our Million Tree Campaign, we offered no incentive, the million trees for the Olympics, and people just had to write us, or eventually called us. We allowed people to call a hotline. That did a lot of good. Now, this was in the day before the Internet, so people had to use a stamp. We required them to send us either a preprinted postcard that we made or make up a postcard. But the only incentive that we offered and we did not ultimately deliver on that promise is we were going to create a monument with everyone's name on it. We couldn't raise the quarter million dollars or half million dollars it was going to take, which was almost more than the campaign itself costs, so we let that go.

Lipkis

But the interesting implications now are here Mayor Villaraigosa wants to have a million trees planted in L.A. and they're sort of thinking the city should do half and the public should do half somehow. But there isn't yet, from my take, a compelling message to move people to do it. That will come and we will help build it, but ultimately you've got to have your tree count. So the question is, back again, what do we do to motivate that counting, because it seems like so not an important act compared to getting the tree in the ground and, of course, keeping it alive. Now, we have the Web, and now we have all kinds of ways to do stuff electronically to make it easy.

Lipkis

So I've actually devised some whole Web-based approaches for helping people choose where to plant, how many trees, what kind of tree to plant, and then actually be able to incentivize them right online for getting free trees or discount trees, or having their stuff reported to the Department of Water and Power, various things like that. But because we want to--we can't make or coerce anybody, us for sure, TreePeople can't, but the government isn't inclined to and it doesn't work well. But I looked to incentives that would somehow be credible, that would catch people's attention, to have them go take the extra steps, because if we do that, then we can provide them a lot of expert guidance, and that's exciting. I won't give more details, but that if we get the chance to do it, I'm excited about relevant incentives. It might be rebates, it might be

discounts, it might--maybe it's some privileges as being a community leader, a community caregiver, or like a discount at Starbucks. You never know.

Collings

Oh, that's a good idea. Last time you said that it seemed like the Million Tree idea, as it was being proposed by Villaraigosa at the moment just didn't seem to be having the momentum that the previous did, and you said that you thought possibly because it had already been done.

Lipkis

Well, in one sense it's been done and people know it. The other is that because it's coming from a politician I don't think people know how to deal with it, and the language coming from the mayor's office isn't yet clear, because he tells people around the world that he's planting a million trees, and well, people go, "Okay. Well, great, plant your million, however you're going to do it." It hasn't yet turned into a call for action that's saying, "Hey, you, personally, we're talking to you."

Collings

I'm just wondering if, like, perhaps, like at sort of the earlier period, which was almost like a kind of period of flowering for grassroots environmental groups, if there was more excitement about an idea like that and that it's harder for people to get energized about it.

Lipkis

I think that there's all kinds of things in the way, but that doesn't mean it can't be done. It calls on us to use higher skill to communicate what the tree will do and what people's role needs to be. For some reason my son just an hour ago, he's never really showed a whole lot of interest in this work at all, he went and watched a film last night, which is a PBS documentary on making cities green and sustainable, and we feature heavily in it. It airs Thursday night, next week.

Collings

Oh, next week, okay. I saw it on your website.

Lipkis

Oh, okay.

Collings

I saw it.

Lipkis

Well, he saw the film last night, there was a preview and he came out and said, "You know, I used to tell you that I wanted to plant this striped variegated lemon-lime tree, and I still want to do it, and I'd like to do it as part of the million." We were talking about where to do it. So that just happened like an hour ago, which is really interesting. So something grabbed him and I don't know what. It would be interesting to understand the motivation.

Lipkis

I had proposed to the mayor's office as part of the planning and design of this campaign that we need to do research, we need to understand what's motivating people today, what messages, what issues, to link this to. You can't just say, "It's a good thing, you ought to do it," because there's too many cultures, too many agendas, too many everything, and yet there's plenty of motivators, we just have to use the right ones. I have a hunch I know what a lot of them are, but it is--the importance of this piece of conversation is that this stuff does not happen easily. It doesn't happen because you've got an idea and go, "It would be great to plant a million trees," and that's been done. It takes a lot of work to figure out who's going to do it and then who's going to keep it alive and how you're going to motivate people. It's still needed.

Lipkis

In fact, hopefully within the next couple of weeks I'll be writing a piece for the website on how to make sense of the million tree goal and what it means, so people can actually get beyond skepticism and scratching their heads and going, "Well, is this me?"

Collings

Now, one of the things that you had said about the Million Tree Campaign, you know, when you were working with DDB, you said at one point--you said later on you transitioned to highly tailored messages to different communities, but that you weren't doing that then.

Lipkis

Right.

Collings

Do you see this new work with the mayor as being part of that?

Lipkis

Well, we're suggesting it, and again, that's why the research. You've got very different populations around town with very different needs. There are people who need food, there's people who need to put down roots, there's people who think that they're doing good already and they don't need to anything more. One size message doesn't fit all, for sure, and anybody who thinks it does is going to be sorely disappointed.

Collings

So how do you tailor those messages to different communities?

Lipkis

Well, you figure out which communities you want to hit and then you talk to them, listen, you find out what are issues that are important, where the pain is. I mean, for me tree planting is about healing, it's about, if we're asking people to do something extraordinary, which is to go out of their way to do something they don't normally do, do they have the tools? Do they know where to plant? Are they ready to make a several year commitment as a parent? We say it takes

five years to plant a tree. Because it requires a shift out of normal momentum, it requires a shift of time, energy, values, and a commitment, that's big. So we have to find out what is important enough in a person's life to cause them to be willing to do that, because it's not only act. Even one act is big, because it will be different.

Lipkis

So like anybody doing sales work, you need to understand there is a market and what is the interest. The fact is, the market, because of the number and because of the goal, and I think the legitimate goal and legitimate need is the target is between a half a million and three million people in L.A. Three million residents, that would be everybody; half million, so well everybody plants a couple of trees. But truly what you need to do is because of what we're asking people to do, is to find out what their needs are, find out how to have them see that planting this tree is going to help meet some of their needs, whether connect with their family, give them a sense of power, as with gang kids give them their power back, allow them to make their mark in a different way, feel connection with their team, feel connected to L.A. Maybe it's financial or goodie incentive. Is it linked with religion or not, you know, are there cultural roots that people bring some values that are a message and can relate back to about their home or their village or whatever it is that says that, you know, that's needed here, you're needed here. But the question is always, what do we need to offer in terms of context and way to think about this in order to grab people's attention and cause them to go, "Oh, let's do something way different than we normally do."

Collings

So how can you find that stuff out? I mean, do you do like focus groups with different communities?

Lipkis

Oh, yes. We're doing community engagement work now. We're working in the harbor, in the North Valley, we're going to neighborhood meetings, we're going to neighborhood council meetings, and so we're talking to people and we're interviewing people. At this point, just casual conversations. With funding we would actually engage public opinion research people and do telephone polling and focus groups to structure, properly structure the questions so they know how to ask them and how to interpret what comes back, and we have done that in the past. We've actually used focus groups a couple of times to scientifically get to--because we always want to know the turnoffs. It's really, really important, because there's little time. You've got little time on the air, you can't afford to really waste either the time or that communication, open the window of their mind. But the city doesn't want to pay for that right now, they don't understand it. So they've already gone through one whole cycle with the mayor

launching the thing and getting the word out, it's on trash trucks, it's on banners, it looks cool, but it's not yet motivating.

Collings

Is there a chance that that's kind of like as far as it will go?

Lipkis

Well, there are some people who think so, but I hope not, because if that's all it does then it's dead. No, I would hope, and we're here to help motivate them. Right now we're the prime funder of the mayor's campaign, because people have promised money, but nothing is flowing. We've engaged my time, the time of many of our staff, we're hired more staff, and we're actually spending money doing planting and organizing. If you go to the Million Tree Campaign website, you'll see we're the only people doing anything. That's because we have private donors who allow us to do work. Most of the other organizations rely entirely on public funding. So if they're funded then they can do stuff. We're going, "No, it's important to provide some leadership. This isn't a bad thing, it's a good thing, and let's define it." Because for me I would like to motivate a million people or more to take action as a community to fix the environment. That's the opportunity now. We have to move the society to be able to think consciously and act appropriately, and if we're going to turn on a dime to address global warming and some other mega issues that we're in seriously behind responding to global warming and everything else. If we were to turn it around today and stop putting carbon in the atmosphere, according to experts we've still got from already in the atmosphere we've got two more degrees of warming already in. That's a crisis, because two degrees is pretty much that's it. I mean, major melting of the icecaps. Two degrees is pretty radical. Well, we're going to have to move people to act very, very quickly to change lifestyles and all of that. This work of just beginning to exercise that muscle, to know that we could do stuff, that we as individuals can choose en masse to do it, because it's unlikely that we're going ever see sufficient legislation passed to compel people to do what's needed. So I see a great opportunity to begin that, to exercise muscle that people don't know they have. And that starts to point to where I'm going from here and a little bit of where TreePeople is going.

Collings

Yes. Have there been any times when you were conducting like community research, where you discovered something that you would never have anticipated, where you were surprised by--

Lipkis

Messaging. Yes, a couple of things. Once we discovered that we had equal or greater name recognition than the Sierra Club, which is this huge national organization, that was interesting. Probably the most eye-opening and sort of

validating, was when we actually did focus groups trying to build a campaign for DWP, and we did them in the valley, in South L.A., and in Central. In South L.A. and in the valley, there was an extraordinarily high distrust of government. People said that they would actually trust TreePeople to bring gang members onto their property to plant trees, but they didn't even want the government spending their money doing it. They'd be more willing to make a contribution, than to have government provide the funding. It was really interesting data, because we hadn't realized the distrust was that high or that people's trust of us was, on the other hand, that high that they would take a risk of having, a youth at risk on their property doing something for them.

Collings

Interesting. You know, sort of spinning off of what you were saying about getting people to recognize their own power and to improve their neighborhoods and the environment, that's kind of sort of how--you've sort of got into the trees thing through the Rodney King--

Lipkis

Yes, the actual T.R.E.E.S. Project, yes.

Collings

Yes. I mean, would you want to talk a little bit about sort of the process of what the civil unrest at that time meant to you?

Lipkis

Yes. I think it's important to state that in looking back every ten years or so I have, not because it was scheduled, but just that's when the itch came up to evaluate our effectiveness. Here I am spending my life doing this and are we getting the job done? Is it time to change strategies or change paths or whatever? After the first ten years, we said, "Are our trees alive, and are we doing stuff right?" And we realized in some cases they were and in some cases they weren't, and it was important to change our tactics to get them to live, and that's how we created the whole idea of citizen forestry, the training. Instead of doing it "to" neighborhoods or "for" neighborhoods, we turned it around completely to grow leaders. That became incredibly effective, because doing the follow-up we found that 95 percent of the trees planted by citizen foresters were alive after five years, while nationally most urban trees are dead within seven. So that was huge, huge result s.

Lipkis

I'm forgetting what the interim tune-up was, but I know we started doing storm water education, the recycling program, and all of that in our second decade, the Million Tree Campaign. Well, after twenty-something years everything came together with me wondering if there could be, should be more. The Rodney King riots hit on the heels of me getting to understand about sustainability and seeing the global proportions of this massive challenge that

we're now facing. The Global 2000 Report, which motivated us to do the Million Trees, we still hadn't turned around that destruction of the planet.

Lipkis

Is this okay with the music?

Collings

Yes, it's okay. Yes.

Lipkis

Okay.

Collings

I mean, it's there, but it's--is that okay?

Lipkis

It's not a problem.

Collings

Yes. I mean, it's not drowning out the--

Lipkis

Okay, great, because I could have then turn it down a little bit if you want.

Collings

That's your call.

Lipkis

It's not distracting for me, because I'm used to, but if it will be a problem I'll--

Collings

No, it's fine.

Lipkis

Okay. He has a friend coming over. Actually, let's freeze it, I will let him know.[recording interrupted]

Lipkis

So I began understanding even more about learning about sustainability and that it was a three-legged stool, environmental, social, and economic, having to do with equity as well as keeping the planet livable and getting people employed with meaningful work, rather than non-meaningful work. That's when the Rodney King riots hit.

Lipkis

Also I'm a founder of the L.A. Conservation Corp. I don't know if I've got this on record in there, but--

Collings

No, I don't think you do.

Lipkis

In about 1985, approximately, I need to check the records when, but it wasn't too long after I got married, TreePeople was approached to launch a corps down here. We got the first grant and I recruited, helped recruit the--

Lipkis

Better stop that for a minute. [recording interrupted]

Lipkis

Okay. So I helped recruit Mickey Cantor, who became the chair of the board. I've been on the board ever since the beginning, recruited people, helped hire the staff. Why I say that is because it also had me attuned to the issues of youth unemployment, youth violence, youth frustration, not that I didn't have the frustration myself as a youth. But it was after the riots and hearing that a lot of the issues were about unemployment and poverty, and the hopelessness linked to that, and that there was a need for 50,000 new jobs in L.A., and that some of our kids from the corps who had at one time used the--the purpose of the corps was to be a steppingstone into the workforce. There used to be job-training programs that would take the kids who the corps helped make job-ready, how to dress, how to show up on time, how to take orders, which they were missing those pieces, and therefore failing in job-training programs. So the corps became this motivator, trainer, missing link, and gave kids a real hope and sense of their power. But the economy changed and those programs all ended, and so we're turning the kids back into the most they can hope for is to work at McDonald's, and that's pretty depressing.

Lipkis

So some of the corps members had been killed in urban youth violence, and that pushed me over the top to go, you know, we have to find a solution. And on the heels of the riots, all that came together at one time, there was that recognition that we needed 50,000 new jobs. I said, "Well, what would that cost?" and found out it was a half of billion dollars a year. That just was not on nobody's agenda, but I started thinking about sustainability and how do you create full employment for people and where could that money be in a healthy system.

Lipkis

We had gotten a little bit of money, thirteen million from the Forest Service for riot recovery, not to TreePeople, but to the Urban Greening Initiative for programs in L.A. and jobs up in the forest.

Collings

This was to sort of repair the city after the riots?

Lipkis

Exactly. What that did was hire four hundred people who were put on buses every day to go build trails in the forest, not a very compelling program, but it was three months of jobs. I wasn't happy about that, because it wasn't the right thing. The Rebuild L.A. people, when we were say, "Hey, we need to fix systems," and all that, their response, because our name was TreePeople was, "We don't need to talk about landscaping until after we rebuild. We'll see you in a few years." We're going, "You don't get it, that's not what it's about."



Lipkis

Well, the next big federal check or program to show up in town was with a half billion dollars was from the Army Corps of Engineers, no social connection at all, no job connection. It was to raise the walls of the L.A. River, because we'd so over paved L.A. that we created a major flood problem. I thought, "Oh, my God, 50,000 jobs could be in that half billion dollars, and they're talking about a flood control program, but flood control is really water management, that's really watershed management. Forestry, as far as I've ever heard, has always been synonymous with watershed management. We're practicing urban forestry, so are we practicing urban watershed management?"

Lipkis

I looked and found that, "No, we were not." We were promising that trees do all these good things, but in fact, we weren't practicing, or even thinking of urban watershed management. Nobody was. It didn't exist as a term. The watersheds were the upper forests. But the answer was, we could be. We'd have to change what we do.

Lipkis

We'd already built the human social neighborhood component so trees could live, but what this required was a radical change from planting trees randomly to very strategic focused precision planting, or strategic planting, or the acupuncture of planting. Right tree in the right place to effect healing. A completely different world.

Lipkis

That's been an interesting message to get out, because everyone has a romantic notion about what trees are, and we're talking about something that's requiring science and focus in order to yield the results we all actually want, not just a tree alive, but if a tree is going to create jobs it has to do a whole lot of work, like control floods, like trees in the mountains do, or produce water, or produce energy savings. It can do all that, but trees don't do that randomly.

Collings

They have to be part of a system.

Lipkis

Yes, you essentially have to engineer a functioning community forest, as we call it. So it's a system where trees are interacting, but you've got all the other things in the forest, the mulch, the leaves that fall off.

Lipkis

So anyhow, back at this point, I began understanding this stuff and started trying to talk to agencies about the opportunity. Instead of wasting a half a billion dollars, and I had to look deeper, the half billion to build these walls, well, that had to be linked to a pretty big problem. How much water were we leaking? It turned out we were leaking about a half a billion dollars worth of

water every year, and we were spending another half billion dollars a year on the flood control system each year to get rid of that water. So there's a billion right there just in water, mostly just in L.A. city and L.A. county. Well, voila, there it is. There's the 50,000 jobs that could be employing people meaningfully tending L.A. to become this really healthier city employing people doing it, and we wouldn't have to find any new money. We'd just have to redirect. When all of that came together in a flash of realization, I could not rest on my laurels. It was one of those life-changing ah-ha's again, where I really had to go out and show that this was possible.

Lipkis

I actually did a personal strategic plan when I turned forty, which would have been twelve years ago. So this is 2006--

Collings

Seven now.

Lipkis

But it was '94 when I--because I had started the work, really, in '92, post-riot, and went deep in the planning of the retreat, and came out of that and went to the chair of my board and said, "Okay, I have to stop doing the day-to-day work, I've really got to make this project happen," and got permission to spend more time doing that. We ultimately hired an executive director so I could really go deep. It took me two years to get the funding together to get it started and then, by then the TreePeople was going sort of down in flames from poor management. So I agreed to come back and run the organization and bring that project, that T.R.E.E.S. project with me. The key person in that was a friend, former managing director of TreePeople, who was formerly my assistant. Her name is Caryn Bosson, Caryn Diamond Bosson, who helped me write some of the grant proposals and she coined the term T.R.E.E.S., Trans-Agency Resources for Environmental and Economic Sustainability.

Lipkis

Anyhow, what I set out to do was prove that it was technically and economically feasible to retrofit the city to function as forest, and do it with existing money and planned expenditures. L.A., not only hemorrhaged that billion dollars a year, but had planned to spend about \$20 billion in new infrastructure, flood control, waste water, water supply, storm water, but all in different areas, different projects, all competing with each other, all disintegrated. My vision was to integrate it. People thought I was crazy, and those who didn't think I was crazy, who agreed that it would make sense on paper, just said, it's never going to happen because agencies won't talk to each other.

Collings

What was the relationship between that and the Los Angeles San Gabriel--

Lipkis

Oh, well, this comes much later.

Collings

Yes, okay.

Lipkis

It does come.

Collings

Because this was an effort to get agencies to talk to each other.

Lipkis

Exactly, and in fact, so I went out and did the research, and we raised a million dollars. A \$150,000 challenge grant from the Forest Service triggered the city then kicking in a quarter million and the county some money, and the EPA, and the city of Santa Monica, and the Metropolitan Water District. We brought all these diverse agencies together to fund this economic analysis--there was another component for design. We needed to design the retrofits of how you would change all the land uses in town, homes, apartments, commercial, industrial and public land. So we brought together a hundred of the best architects, engineers, landscape architects, foresters, and hydrologists, from around North America, and four days in design designing the retrofit of L.A. with goals of capturing that water, eliminating storm water runoff, capturing the whole waste, green waste stream, major reduction in energy use and greenhouse gas production, 50 percent reduction in water importation, create the 50,000 jobs. So these high-level designers worked for four days and created an incredible set of engineering documents, guidelines, for how you do the retrofit to fit into this economic price envelope that was important. So that was design.

Lipkis

The second was economics. We spent two years doing a deep cost benefit analysis on the air quality, energy savings, water supply, water quality, flood control, property value increase, health impacts, of this strategic planning effect, if we were to change the land and make L.A. function like a forest. That was a two-year effort, with 200 agency scientists. Huge. It was led by a guy named Jeff Wallace, who started as a volunteer and then got hired as a consultant. He came out of high-tech software and engineering. He led this process the way they do software development, which is all based on consensus, so that all your pros agree with what you've--you don't have a garbage-in-garbage-out problem. Everyone concurs. So all the major agencies participated, came to consensus on the numbers, if they couldn't we didn't use them. So they couldn't come to agreement on the values of water quality, and so we didn't use it, but all these other things are in there. Huge process, great value, because the water agency

signed off on it and the energy agencies and sanitation and all of this. So it was their numbers. It was good stuff.

Lipkis

Then we needed to build a demonstration project to show that it wasn't just an idea. So we retrofit a single-family home in South L.A.

Collings

In Crenshaw.

Lipkis

Well, this Crenshaw high school and then a little further east and south, 50th and Western, the home of Rosella Hall.

Collings

How did you choose that house?

Collings

We needed a typical house. We wanted one not in a wealthy area, because some of the people wouldn't--I was trying to convince agencies to get into this urban watershed thing. County Supervisor Yvonne Burke said, "You know, it's all right for the rich people, but not the poor people in this town. There's no room to store water and put tanks and all that."

Lipkis

I said, "Well, there really is."

Lipkis

So instead of being dismissed

Collings

Something for Ed Begley, Jr.?

Lipkis

--westsiders. Yes, yes, and people with money. We focused south and east and reached out to Mothers of East L.A. and Concerned Citizens and others and said, "Do you know people who might be interested in participating?"

Lipkis

It turned out that this woman was actually one of our donors whose daughter had been in the Conservation Corps. We looked at a number of homes and a couple people who offered them, but this one was just perfect, classic California bungalow, and she was willing to do it and maintain it. So her house was the model that we used in the charette for a single-family home. We retrofitted her house and held a flash flood rainstorm event in August of 1998. God, it's hard not to say 2000. And that was revolutionary.

Lipkis

We brought all the agency people back, the skeptics, everyone, and brought a 4,000-gallon water truck and dumped the water on the house in five minutes' time in this massive rainfall event, and it didn't leak water. The water was captured. It went into cisterns, it automatically went into the irrigation system,

and people were blown away, especially the agency people, and most especially one person, Carl Blum, at the time head of L.A. County Flood Control, Deputy Director of L.A. County Department of Public Works, who we had been suing earlier.

Collings

That was the suit that you joined with FOLAR and Heal the Bay?

Lipkis

Yes. And over the river walls proposal that we couldn't stop. We actually asked--back to that, we had asked the county to include urban watershed management as an alternative to the walls, and they said, "The watershed is in the mountains, it's not the city, can't afford it, it won't do the job."

Lipkis

In the process, in talking to Carl Blum, I said, "Well, cisterns could do it."

Lipkis

He said, "Yes, but it would take a million." (20,000 gallons each)

Lipkis

I went okay, so we're going to design for a million, but they, again they thought, they either didn't understand it, didn't appropriately analyze it, and they dismissed it. And that was why we joined the lawsuit, because we wanted a judge to say, "No, you missed the point, you really do need to analyze this as an option."

Collings

But the lawsuit failed?

Lipkis

Yes, they were allowed to move ahead and the only settlement was that the county agreed they would start thinking about watershed management. That led to that process.

Collings

And that led to this organization, Los Angeles and San Gabriel Watershed Council?

Lipkis

Watershed Council. So Dorothy Green was the lead catalyst on that. I was right there with her helping think it through, but she was certainly the head and founder.

Lipkis

So we began thinking, "Oh, this might be that integrated place," and it certainly became that for a while. It ultimately became a nonprofit organization, hired an executive director, and started taking on a life a bit of its own, which was less council-y and more organizationally, which was very challenging. It's coming back to councilness, but it alienated some of the agencies, so it moved away

from that great integrated planning space that it had started to be. But it still, it's a great organization and it's doing some really good stuff.

Collings

In terms of these retrofits, has anybody sort of with means kind of stepped up to do their house this way? I'm thinking of some of the Laurie David and these types of people?

Lipkis

It's interesting, a number of people are trying to do it on their own. There's quite a lot of barriers. The city owns the rainfall and so the old codes still apply, which require all water to go to the street. So different people at Building and Safety pretty much tell you no when you apply. If someone comes to us and tells us that they want to do it, we'll help them get through the regulatory framework to allow it. One of our donors didn't tell me, but she got turned down and was really, really frustrated.

Lipkis

But my approach was instead of trying to find more individuals to do it, because it's really expensive to do on your own, it's the equivalent of self-funding your own solar system, which is actually more money, more money than the water catcher, but it's more than most people have to spend. Nobody should have to bear that burden, because you're not asked to chip in \$10,000 each time a new sewage treatment plant is built or power plant. A bond is purchased and you help pay it over time. That's exactly the way this should be done, that it just shows up on your water bill and it's not--you know, maybe there's a slight increase in rates, but for the most part it shouldn't be a burden financially on you. You're hosting this piece of public infrastructure that you share.

Lipkis

So our approach has been to get the agencies to buy in and begin changing policies, and that in fact, is happening. So that epiphany experience that Carl Blum had at the house when we created the flash flood and it worked so well, and there's great video footage from every television station and newspaper showed up to cover it. He came back and said, "I'm sorry, we didn't understand, we think you've cracked it."

Lipkis

I mean, this was such a big day, because what had only been a concept in his head from listening to me, nobody could picture until we built it and then he saw how simple and elegant it was, and his whole mindset, which is the mindset that afflicts most public works people in the country, is that it requires unacceptable lifestyle change. People won't do it and it's his responsibility to protect them from floods and all this. If they're not going to do it, he's going to hang, because people are going to get hurt and he's held accountable. So he

didn't think that what we were talking about was a viable option. When he saw how simple and how doable it was and how manageable it can be on an ongoing basis it totally turned him around.

Lipkis

So at the press conference where we had this flash flood, when the report said, "How much would it cost to do this?"

Lipkis

I said, "Well, probably about \$10,000 per house."

Lipkis

He heard me answer and he blurted out, "But it doesn't have to cost that much. We could do it in a weekend." He'd already been going through in his head to see how viable this was. Everyone's house looked better. So they would choose this, and it was not hard to do. So he called back and said, "Sorry, we didn't understand. We think you've cracked it. We need to blow up this model as quickly as we can, because we should spread it throughout the county." And, "Andy, you said it's going to take fifteen years, I, Carl Blum, know it's going to take fifty, and it's going to cost more than you think, but we've got to start today."

Lipkis

So we began working together. He said, "I have a potential place to try this on a larger scale, it's called Sun Valley. We have a flooding problem there, we were about to build a storm drain for \$42 million, I've just put it on hold. Let's do a feasibility study of scaling up your idea here," and we did that. That resulted in them saying, "Yes, let's move ahead," and then began full planning in the EIR. Six year's worth of watershed planning for that neighborhood. And the Environmental Impact Report and all of it was passed, approved, two years ago by L.A. county supervisors.

Lipkis

The interesting thing is it also included another cost benefit analysis, an updated one, that showed that the cost of the option that they chose, the path they chose to follow, would cost around \$200 million instead of forty-two million or fifty million, but even the \$200 million, would generate back \$300 million in benefits to the city and the county, so it was worthwhile. The county signed on and said, "Let's do this," and the work has begun.

Lipkis

So the first thing we did was retrofit was a park, which is at Sun Valley Recreation Center, it actually grabs floodwater from the whole watershed above it, brings it into the park, cleans the water through a great filtration system, puts it in the ground underneath, two huge basins. What the community got for that, what we brought in a grant of nearly a half million dollars to build a new soccer area with lights, community jogging track, the two baseball fields

were renovated. So the community gets better, the park gets better, underneath is this whole water filtration, infiltration groundwater recharge machine. We transformed the park from a water user to a water supplier. This one is good, because the City Watershed Protection Division is managing the underground equipment. The county paid the seven million for installation. The Parks Department gets the park and manages the surface. So it's a multi-agency affair and it's working well.

Lipkis

We've built two other big projects, retrofitting two schools, putting in watershed gardens or parks on the campus. Those have not fared so well. They function perfectly, they did the right thing, but the school district was lovely in that they let us raise money, bring more money into the campus and change the campus, and even after approving the projects they, on one in the valley, they now claim that it wasn't a good design, and they don't know how it happened, because some trucks needed to get to a certain place and were driving over this beautiful green river that the kids had engineering and thought through. But the district did approve it, because we couldn't have otherwise built it.

Lipkis

Anyhow, we brought in the outside money in each case, but that was for construction and no agency--well, the district won't even let another agency maintain the stuff, as far as we know, but they're not deployed around water quality and all of that. So they haven't done the kind of maintenance that we think is needed to keep the systems functioning. We need to have that more active partnership to bring in the flood control and storm water and watershed agencies, along with the Department of Water and Power, in partnership with the school district, to create the right investment fund for both installation and maintenance.

Lipkis

So there are stunning examples. One is called the Open Charter School near Westchester, and the other is in Pacoima, the Broadous Elementary School. Pictures of all that is available on our website.

Lipkis

So here we are twelve years after I started that project, or fourteen, depending on what you pick as the start date, and we've had an incredible impact. There are 8,000 homes in that watershed, we're hoping to retrofit up to 40% of them with cisterns, with whole new landscapes. I would like to see more. The county is working to raise that money. Good news, we have a new administration in Congress, we should be trying to get some of that resource. But at least half the money should come from local, and the city and the country are working together more than ever before to combine their money. The mayor is very supportive, as is the council.



Lipkis

In the process of that watershed planning effort in Sun Valley, L.A. city began its every-ten-year waste water master planning process, as required by the EPA. They decided to take a look at an integrated approach, instead of just waste water, bring in water supply and storm water and waste water just as I had been saying. They had been thinking about some of that, you know, more and more the watershed mentality was starting to catch on. So they asked the question, "Would it be feasible to do this?" The answer back was, "Yes, and people would support it for cost savings and efficiency in the long run."

Lipkis

So we were part of that feasibility study. I was hired by the city during that process and then stayed on as a consultant for the next round mostly as an educator facilitator-translator to help translate the message to different populations. Sometimes different engineers from different fields couldn't talk to each other, because they used the same words, but it meant different things. Definitely community members of all sorts. We had 175 stakeholders, community leaders, as the steering committee for this, and it included the Jarvis Taxpayers, as well as the building industry, as well as environmental groups, really diverse group of community leaders. It became my job along with city staff and consultants to really educate them about what the possibilities were. We took them to the house in South L.A. I ran a whole day workshop on our cost benefit analysis and modeling tools. So especially the most conservative could look at those numbers and understand what they meant, where they came from, and that it was actually going to, long-term, achieve a savings. Everyone signed off on the project with consensus. The city had not seen that before. It was huge.

Lipkis

So now that has been--it was called the IRP, Integrated Resources Plan, for the city of Los Angeles Wastewater Program. It just passed the city council through its environmental impact report, and early implementation has begun. So we'll see more resources from that going into Sun Valley, but also citywide. Hopefully, we'll be able to use this to really scale up for the cisterns and gray water and all the things that need to happen.

Lipkis

So from, we just went through this very, very quickly, it's actually a much longer story, but from that vision to reality, twelve years. Very, very long road. Probably the biggest, clearly the biggest, longest project I've ever done and most impactful.

Lipkis

Now we arrive at today, and so where are we? TreePeople still trying to increasingly practicing strategic planting, trying to get more people to do it, but

even getting the agencies to change that or come up with the resources for it is a very long, slow process. We're looking forward to a special planting coming up sometime, hopefully, this year in Venice, where new storm water boxes that support--you cut into the curb and we can create a cistern tree well, a place to plant a tree and the tree helps collect the water and clean it and store it in that well all along the street. So the polluted runoff turns into water for the trees. These are being tested on the East Coast. We're going to try the first ones here in L.A. soon, about fifty trees on Grand Boulevard. The technology is very young and it's a bit scary, but there are other technologies coming online with engineered and manufactured soils, which also can support the trees and provide the water. So we're hoping to be able to test all of those.

Lipkis

TreePeople is in for the long run to keep facilitating as a partner with the county the implementation of Sun Valley. It's a long-term project. Politicians come and go, staff come and go, who's going to keep [unclear]? It becomes part of our role and our promise to the community. A huge long story about managing that stakeholder process, educating, in a predominantly Spanish-speaking population to accept a longer term solution that was not a storm drain, which they had been promised for so long.

Lipkis

So moving ahead, I took a sabbatical. I was granted one from the Durfee Foundation, and I realized on it that if all I did--it would be possible for me to stay so locally focused on Sun Valley and stuff, just to make sure it happened, and our notion of integrated urban ecosystem management happened, that that won't be all the way done with proof of concept until sometime in my sixties or later, and we can't wait. The world can't wait. So we've got the science, we've got the economics, and it's time to start extrapolating. I sort of hate to do that on one hand, because I'd love to have everything proved, but it's viable for the engineers and it works. The biggest challenge is getting, now, the public to see and understand this is a whole new way of looking at a city and a whole new way of looking at their life. That cities and the world doesn't exist without them. This notion that the humans are somehow separate from the ecosystem just doesn't work anymore. Everybody is truly a manager of the environment, whether they like it or not. Every dollar they spend, every penny they spend is having consequences often quite negative in people's lives, whether in China because of what we're buying, or in the water that we drink is draining all the way from Montana and Utah. It's killing off species of dolphin in the Gulf of Mexico, because the water from the Colorado River isn't getting to the end anymore, it's coming here.

Lipkis

So what we do is causing great impacts. So the notion that you can make a difference is really very harmful; you do make a difference with every penny you spend, everything you do, it may be positive, it may be negative, it's most likely negative if you're not well informed. It's not that your intent was bad. We got a city of great intending people, but right now we're one of the world's largest contributors to global warming because our per capita income and how we spend it, because we drive so much, because we use so much water and so much energy. We can change that.

Collings

Well, by shifting to watershed management, you're asking people to envision the future. You're asking them to envision, you know, a different way of doing things, whereas when you're focusing on the tree planting there's something very, sort of nostalgic and sort of poetic. Everybody knows the value of a tree.

Lipkis

The poetic value, but not the--

Collings

Yes, exactly, the poetic value, that's very easy to sell.

Lipkis

Yes, it's mythical, it's poetic, it's romantic. Don't pollute it with science, they say.

Collings

Right. But precisely you're turning to this more systems model engineer, and that sounds like a very different proposition.

Lipkis

Well, it is. It is and it isn't. I, being a unifier, think it's the same. It's this progression of--that's uncomfortable for a lot of people, but it was uncomfortable when we started talking about recycling and it was uncomfortable when we started talking about storm water and we built major programs with the city for both of those. Many people come to me and say, "You know, you need a new name, because TreePeople just doesn't do it."

Lipkis

I go, "Well, yes, and you need to understand what a tree is, because a tree is a sustainability machine. It is a flood control machine. It is a water supply machine. The tree and the mulch and everything around it is one of the most effective water cleaning technologies known on earth. It don't get much better than that. There are some very, very expensive reverse osmosis treatment systems, but you can't drink water that comes out of a thorough reverse osmosis system, it will kill you, because it strips all the minerals out and acts as an acid that will eat your body. In terms of purifying water and making it ready for humans and for life, trees and the soil and that whole ecosystem around the

roots is what cleans and purifies and has for all the millennium that this planet has functioned. And trees are energy machines and all of that.

Lipkis

So we're toying with what's next. I am getting back to a level of independence to work on vision and communication and leadership and technology to help people see this stuff, help people be motivated, help give people feedback so they can begin as individuals and as families and as communities acting as these managers, and I'm very excited about that. Huge, huge education job to do, to have people see and understand the world works a lot differently than the mythology that they've grown up with. Our challenge will be to make it romantic, not scientific, but to have it be grounded in science, so they actually know and believe and get the feedback that they are making a difference positively.

Collings

So can TreePeople continue as a volunteer organization with this new focus?

Lipkis

I believe it can. So it comes back to the Million Tree Campaign as a bit. Will the mayor's million trees be part of our ability to make this change? I hope so some. I don't know if the sequencing is going to work. I was talking with someone this morning, who was hearing me talk. She said, "Yes, God, now post-[Hurricane] Katrina we begin to really see stuff differently." This issue is not just Los Angeles, it's all over the world, every new city, every big city. Europe is now having perpetual urban flooding, people getting killed, because it's been so over paved. Cities like London, where there's abundant water, is now coming up water short in terms of drinking water. Their people have been on water restrictions for the last couple of years, because of drought and shortage of drinking water. Not a shortage of rainfall, not a shortage of water, but drinkable water. Happening all over the world.

Lipkis

So was invited last year to go to China to speak to officials in Shenzhen, a city that twenty years ago had 50,000 people and today it's nine million.

Collings

Oh, really?

Lipkis

Yes. Also met with the Chinese federal officials in forestry and environment. They love our model. They want to copy it. They basically said, you have to make it succeed so we can lift it and copy it, because they know they're--they're also functioning unsustainably and as their economy grows their consumption is starting to really expand. So many places threatened to way overtake L.A.'s negative impact on the world.

Lipkis

So what am I saying? We need to succeed here, but I can't just stay focused on L.A. TreePeople needs to do what it does, keep educating and motivating people. I need to go deeper in creating tools that will help people see and understand what's possible. To see and understand that as humans, part of their biological programming, is to participate in healing and that that can make them happier and healthier. To get the agencies to see that this can work. So I've got a lot of stuff carved out for me. Is it going to be separate? Is it going to be still a special project of TreePeople? To be determined.

Collings

Yes, because earlier you were saying that you had given some thought to whether TreePeople could become a national or international organization, and then you had decided against it, because you felt that it was, for an organization of that sort, to work it had to be grounded in the community it came from.

Lipkis

Local.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

Local information, local problems, local leadership.

Collings

Right, but precisely you're suggesting this is not a local problem.

Lipkis

Well, the problem and the technologies of solution there is an approach, an ecosystem-based approach, an integrated approach, that there's an international need for. The specifics actually turn into local again, because each different ecosystem has a different function. We could call them all forests, but they're all very different. There may be soils in which you can infiltrate water and clean it, or maybe you have to use cisterns, because there's more water available. The economics of doing one thing isn't necessarily the same. We have tested the approach.

Lipkis

I was brought to the city of Seattle to help run a six-day charette there sponsored by their, basically their public works department. They needed to put a forest back into Seattle, because they needed to recreate the salmon habitat in the city because they had wiped it out under a good premise. They took all their storm water and instead of sending it polluted to the bays and killing the creeks and the bay, they took all the storm water and put it through the sewage treatment plant. The problem is they robbed all their water from the creeks where the salmon spawn and they're going extinct and they need to reverse that, to fix that, to bring the salmon back. We were actually hired to take this

T.R.E.E.S. concept and apply it in Seattle and it's very exciting. They are taking it very seriously and well on their way. Their story was on PBS last night.

Lipkis

So it's interesting that you raise the question about that juxtaposition of the community organizing strategy under the brand TreePeople and having a homegrown citizen forestry operation, versus this infrastructure approach. I mean, one is bottom up, which definitely needs to be local, and one is top down, which there are protocols that will be similar in every city, but the specifics have got to be different everywhere, because the problems are all different.

Collings

Right.

Lipkis

So in every case, the notion of viewing and understanding the local ecosystem is critical, bringing everybody to the table and managing as a whole is critical. I mean, it's just like the human body. As medicine got more specialized and you have heart people and liver people and brain people and nerve people, all those different doctors who specialized, they started fixing those systems that they knew and missing other issues and losing the patient. Only recently has medicine begun to get integrative. They quite resisted that and lost a lot of people. So here the highest level professionals are the most resistant to doing that integration. Cities are the same, and yet we can't afford to be hemorrhaging the cash, the resources, the world can't sustain it, our cities can't sustain it, our people can't sustain it. Learning to think and do integrated is critical.

Lipkis

So my question is, what's the highest best use of me, and what's the most effective--me being one of the few champions of this at this point, what's the most effective way to get the thinking out. We want populations to demand the efficiency of their politicians and--

Collings

Shall I pause?

Lipkis

Yes, thanks. [recording interrupted]

Collings

There you go. You were talking about individuals demanding the efficiency.

Lipkis

Yes. So my job now in short term is to take all the lessons we've learned and put them into a really compelling package of a new vision to help people look at the city and go, "Oh, my God, it's right there and we never saw nature, that we're part of it, it's there." And to have people begin to understand that adrenalin drip in them that actually compels them to try to do stuff to help, but

that all the pathways to help have been cut off because we professionalized helping. When somebody's hurt in an accident, we don't know how to do healing before the paramedics and others show up. Well, the fact is just touching someone, talking to them, holding them, can keep them from going into shock.

Lipkis

You know, there are all these amazing signs that we have with research that people have shown that people's T-cell counts go up when they volunteer. So I mean, there's incredible evidence of the need for people to engage with each other and helping, and yet you don't see pathways and call for that.

Collings

Shall I pause?

Lipkis

Yes, thanks. [recording interrupted]

Collings

Okay.

Lipkis

So I hope to write a piece that will be a source document that will become material for multimedia to deliver in the most compelling way. Is it TV? Is it movie? Is it web? It may be all of those. That's what I'm starting to work on now, actually talking to Google about a project and we'll soon talk to some publishers about what this package is, because it's important to get the vision out there. TreePeople doesn't have to do it in any community. We have been asked to share the inspiration and help in some way and we have to think about what that's about, but to have a clarifying, transforming vision that it's time for, and people are waking up. Hopefully they'll stay awake, but I don't know. The Al Gore movie [An Inconvenient Truth] is helpful. But we've seen three cycles of global environmental awareness and then drop, but it's kind of like a spiral, it never goes all the way down. But we need to keep raising that literacy and that motivation.

Collings

So you think that the engineering professionals that you deal with in this project are like more environmentally aware in the sort of more holistic sense, than the ones that you were dealing with perhaps twenty years ago?

Lipkis

Yes. A whole new generation, they came up with environmental ed. They're still not getting trained in the schools how to do this integrative management yet. That's another leap that has to happen. But they're coming in with the values, they're coming in with the sensibilities, there's more learning about watershed approach, low-impact development approaches. So UCLA's starting to teach bits of that and the USC School of Engineering, when I first started

speaking at these infrastructure summits that the American Society of Civil Engineers had, I was this oddball. Well, they issue an infrastructure report card every year. Well, in ten years it has radically changed. They're now preaching--they're starting to preach more integration. They are certainly talking watershed and water quality, because it's still engineering.

Collings

Right.

Lipkis

The interesting thing from the companies, there are a couple of companies, CDM, Camp Dresser and McKee, CH2M Hill, who were the leads on the city integrated resources program. Montgomery Watson is another one who worked with us on Sun Valley. There's others. They're increasingly embracing this and getting business, doing it. City of Santa Monica is hiring them. Another one is called Psomas. I did a training for their staff and they want more. So it's happening.

Lipkis

It's time for me, now at the--sort of finish this twelve, fourteen-year cycle, and I have to now, and now going into a strategic assessment with a number of key advisors to go, "Okay, we've shown what's possible, and we've gone way beyond a single house, and a single school, to a whole system, given what's happening in the world, the urgency is there. So how now to most effectively deploy this information?" So it translates into policies and programs and action.

Lipkis

Because where I was going when the phone rang, is people need to demand it of their governments, because the agencies don't want to work together. It's very comfortable to have your own turf and it's very hard to work together, and yet with computers we have the tools to synthesize and do integration. The cost of lack of integration is hemorrhaging cash, hemorrhaging lives. The cost of lack of integration, when it comes to intelligence, is 9/11's, or when it comes to climate intelligence, is unprepared Hurricane Katrinas.

Lipkis

So the need for that is out there, but there's a public conversation of people demanding that and there isn't yet places training people much how to do that. That's starting to happen, but we really, I think that this is a set of thoughts that can go critical. I'll have to pick which piece.

Collings

Yes. So earlier on, you were asking individuals to participate in the sense of planting trees, and now you're asking them to participate in the sense of learning something and demanding something?

Lipkis



Well, believe it or not, it's still planting. We're basically saying to people, our mission is to inspire, has been lately, to inspire people to take personal responsibility for the urban forest and educate and support them in planning and caring for trees in the urban forest where they live and to improve the neighborhoods in which they live, learn, work, and play. That's transforming slightly to inspire people to take personal responsibility and participate in making this a sustainable urban environment, as a model for the world. So that's TreePeople's.

Lipkis

We've developed inside that a primary strategic objective of creating functioning community forests in every neighborhood in L.A. So now we're starting to say, "Yes, don't just plant a tree, you need to--" and that whole notion still of where you live, learn, work and play, means there's four areas where you're needed. Where you live for sure. Where you learn, the schools in your neighborhood. Where you play, the parks. Where you work. Those are the places you touch that are part of your daily life and we want to invite people in a really fun, compelling, not overwhelming way, to think about how they'll take action in each of those, not just one of them, and how to do sustained action. That's where the whole notion of incentives has to come back in.

Collings

Yes.

Lipkis

So I'm thinking of creating a world-class music event with people like U2 and all these people that will appeal to a mass, and it may not be one event, it may be multiples, because of multiple audiences and all of that. But you can't buy the ticket. You will want to do anything to buy a ticket, but there's no way to buy a ticket. You actually have to earn it.

Collings

That's what they do with the--on KROQ, the rock station. You have to basically earn tickets by calling in when they announce--

Lipkis

Exactly.

Collings

You have to listen to the station continuously to get a chance to call in.

Lipkis

Right, and that's the simple term. Well, guess what? You're needed to do more than sit and wait, and if you go and volunteer and you plant, and you attend three or four maintenance events, because you've made this lasting commitment. We can't force people, but we can make it exciting, and then you've got your ticket punched the five times that's required for you to then go to the event for free.

Collings

That's a great idea.

Lipkis

And it gets more complex than that. I mean, you know, if, like, our house, we've reduced our waste by actively recycling so much that we only put a quarter bin of trash, if that, in a week. Well, that's saving the city a lot of money. If we do it right the city should say, "Thank you, you're saving money, here's a rebate for your troubles." Or if we're paying our gardener more to tend the compost and these systems and things that we've put in, and that's saving large quantities of water, it's saving the city from being fined for water pollution and not having to build more landfill space, they should be giving a rebate that says you're a partner and you're getting the job done and here's some more to share back with your gardener. That's how we started generating those jobs. More hours tending the land as landscape, as watershed instead of as landscape.

Collings

Right. I mean, this is just sort of a general question, but how has your environmental activity impacted your personal life? I mean, are people in your family allowed to buy plastic things from China? [laughs]

Lipkis

You know, it's interesting. Yes, and what do we eat? It's certainly affected stuff a lot. I chose to try being a vegetarian because of the consciousness, I stayed it because my arthritis went away. So here was a benefit completely unanticipated. Arthritis was not a fun thing and medicine was not working very well. Nobody's talked about if you stop eating meat your arthritis goes away, but that was the result for me. Well, nice benefit to sustain that action. My family's not happy about the fact that I'm a vegetarian, because I'm the main cook. So I do cook meat for them on occasion, but not as much as I probably would be if I was eating it all the time. Though Kate [Lipkis] is also quite environmentally conscious because of her Australian background and because of being frugal, and so she's the one who beat me up all the time about not bringing reusable bags to the store, and it took a while for me to learn that. The whole family's done the waste reduction stuff. Then we keep converting light bulbs and slowly converting our irrigation system. Our last house had fifty trees, most of them fruit trees, and this is a very different environment and I'm very--because I'm focusing on whole cities, I'm having a hard time just doing a garden here.

Collings

Yes, sure, you only have so much time.

Lipkis

Well, and perspective is really different. To do the design here as now--I used to make terrariums, really focused on a tiny space and making a beautiful little landscape in it and I could do gardens quite easily. It's hard for me to change the scale from a whole city down to my own yard aesthetically, but I need to do that. So it's definitely affecting our life, but we're not living environmentally radical lifestyle as much as we would like. I mean, we have solar hot water on our pool, we don't heat our pool. We have a pool, though. Driving a Prius. I ride a bike whenever I can. But, no, we could be certainly 80 percent more effective.

Collings

Well, I was just wondering.

Lipkis

Yes, but we keep pushing our own envelope bit by bit, but I think my job is as much to be a viable model and the more radical you are the more easy it is for people to dismiss this as all right for some, but it's not where we're going. This sport can't be dismissed.

Collings

Yes. [End of interview]

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