A TEI Project

Interview of Jeff Dietrich

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1.1. SESSION ONE (September 28, 2012)

Collings
Good morning, Jeff.
Dietrich
Good morning.
Collings
Today is September 28, 2012, Jane Collings interviewing Jeff Dietrich in Santa Monica. Let's start at the very beginning and hear about where and when you were born.
Dietrich
Okay. Well, as you said, I have to tell you stuff that I actually don't remember. So this could be called hearsay.
Collings
Yes, we talked about that. Right, yes.
Dietrich
So I was born in Newport News, Virginia. I have documentation for that.
Collings
I'm going to need to see your birth certificate. [laughs]
Dietrich

Right. I was probably influenced by being—you know, I'm from the South, so I have that kind of background.

Collings

Oh, how interesting.

Dietrich

So, yes, so I was born in Newport News. My father was an engineer, one of the folks that—you know, he migrated out here when I was nine, but he worked back there with a company. Oh, god, what was its name? I think it was Hastings or something. But they did the—you know Cape Canaveral?

Collings

Sure.

Dietrich

Well, there were radar tracking stations all the way out through the Bahamas, so he would go down and set those up. So my dad was very, very much a kind of person—very much kind of interested in—well, obviously, he's an engineer, but he had that basic kind of American mentality of postwar American meant that we defeated the Nazis, we got the bomb, and he was really saddened when the Soviets launched Sputnik before America launched their satellite. So that's my dad.

And my mom was—my father's father had a farm. He had a farm, a restaurant.

Collings

Oh, that's interesting.

Dietrich

He had a farm, a restaurant in the city called Dietrich's, and I've seen pictures of it and, of course, it says "Famous the world over." I think I'm somewhat like my grandfather and my father in the sense that one has that sense about oneself that you're famous the world over or something. It was just a little place in Newport News. Newport News was a—you know what it was, I just found this out about Collis P. Huntington—he didn't found the place, which was a fishing village, but after the Civil War he didn't want his railroad to go to New York, because the robber barons owned the place. He looked for a different place and he found Newport News, which is in the Chesapeake Bay. It's a deepwater port. He built that port and he built the shipyard there. That's where my uncles all were, my grandfather worked there. I think my mom even worked there for a while. My dad worked there for a while. He was working in the shipyard and he finally decided that this was not for him; he was going to go back to college and get his degree. So I was probably two years old when we went to University of Virginia. I don't remember that, but my dad was on the G.I. Bill and that's where he went to school and then he got a job as an engineer. We lived in, I would say, pretty modest housing, apartment buildings, a place called—what I remember, there was another place called Ferguson Park that was, like, probably associated with the shipyard, housing for workers there.

Collings
Oh, interesting.
Dietrich
Another place called Stewart Gardens and it was probably associated—I'm not sure; I think it might have been public housing. I mean, it had that look, but it was, I think, former military housing. The place was called—I mean, I think there was a place there called Camp Stewart or something during the war or maybe even the First World War. We lived there and it was really quite attractive, actually. I mean, it looked like public housing, but you could see the ocean from our house—
Collings
Oh, how lovely.
Dietrich
—which was pretty amazing. You could walk down to the beach, so I would do that sometimes. There was a big field in the middle of the—I mean, it almost looked like a parade ground. The kids played. It was a great place. It was a great place for kids. I went to St. Vincent's Grade School. We went to St. Vincent's Parish. You had to take the bus to get there. I can't remember if we had a car at that time. In fact, we didn't have a car, so my parents sometimes would take us to a smaller church closer to where we lived, but it was a black church. The nuns at the school were not happy if you didn't go to the white church. So anyway, but we would go there sometimes. I went to first grade at St. Vincent's. That was the same high school, St. Vincent's twelfth grade, first through twelfth. And my parents went to that school.
Collings
Oh, really.
Dietrich
They graduated from that school. They met at that school.
Collings
Oh, gosh.
Dietrich
I think they lived in the same housing project or they lived close by.
Collings
When they were growing up?
Dietrich
When they were growing up, yes. Oh, god, I think my uncle might have still been going to that school when I was going there, and some of my older cousins were in high school when I was in first grade.
Collings
It sounds like a really close-knit community.
Dietrich
It's hard to—I mean, our family was pretty close, but, yes, I mean, relatively speaking. So I went to first grade. There were 105 kids in the first-grade class. I was born in 1946. I was at the beginning of the postwar baby boom.

The Catholic school didn't turn anybody away, so there were 106 kids in this class.

Collings

All Catholic?

Dietrich

Probably. They didn't check documentation. I'm pretty sure, yes.

Collings

Just going back a little bit, your father, you said, did serve in World War II.

Dietrich

He did. He never left the country. I think he flunked out of Officers' Candidate School in the navy, and then he had some background in math and capability. He was in communications or something, so he never had to leave the country. He was stationed in—where was he? He was in Mississippi, on the ocean. There was a naval base there, and that's probably where I was conceived, if you want to get back. My mom went down to visit him and—

Collings

[laughs] Now, isn't Newport News a big naval base now?

Dietrich

It is. Newport News is a big—Collis Huntington built the shipyard there, which I think is still the biggest shipyard in the country, you know, like all kinds of aircraft carriers and—it was a big exciting thing when the SS United States was built there. It was a cruise ship or something, but it would come cruising up. We didn't live on the ocean. We lived on—what was that? It was probably the James River. So everybody would come out of their apartments and wave at the ship. Everybody had a kind of, like, affinity for the ships that were built there.

Collings

Oh, sure, yes.

Dietrich

I can remember going to the launch of an aircraft carrier. It was called the Forrestal. So, lots of stuff was built there.

Collings

And so all these family members who worked in the yard, where they all union members?

Dietrich

God, that's a good question. I doubt it. I mean, it is the South. Wow. I don't think so. There's not a lot of union sentiment that goes through the family background. I feel like I would have heard it.

Collings

Oh, yes, I'm sure you would.

Dietrich

So I don't think so.

Collings

And what was the politics of the family?

Dietrich

Of course—here's the thing. They were all Democrats, but they were southern Democrats. This is, like, the fifties. So they were Democrats because everybody in the South was Democrats, because everybody in the South still remembered the Civil War and remembered that. It was the Republicans and Lincoln. So, yes. Actually, my grandmother had a maid. I think my mom had a maid, you know, like once a week or something.

Collings

Black maid?

Dietrich

Oh, yes. I mean, it was definitely—I didn't even think about segregation because I just didn't encounter it that much as a white person. I mean, I wasn't old enough to be aware of it. So I think that they were generally conservative, but I don't know if they liked Roosevelt or—I wasn't that cognizant of—

Collings

They didn't talk about that stuff?

Dietrich

They didn't talk about it too much, but I know that the Depression was hard on everybody, so I'm assuming there must have been some affinity for his efforts to ameliorate that, but I don't remember.

Collings

So what would they talk about?

Dietrich

God. Well, they definitely didn't talk about politics. I don't have a memory of my parents or my grandparents talking about specific things. I have a memory of being with my grandparents, of being little and going on the bus by myself. My mom would put me on the bus and I would go and my grandmother would pick me up. I was pretty young, like three years old, and I would spend the night there. It was probably a pretty tiny house, but it was nice. My grandfather worked at the shipyard. I think he had a white-collar job. I mean, I know he did. He was a lifelong employee there. But I don't—all right, here's the thing. They probably didn't talk a lot of politics. They probably didn't talk a lot about social issues. My parents and my grandparents, when they got together they would kind of party, so it was a kind of celebratory atmosphere. That's what I remember, just a kind of sense of conviviality.

Collings

Community.

Dietrich

Yes.

Collings

So do you have brothers and sisters?

Dietrich
Oh, yes.
Collings
You do? Are you the oldest?
Dietrich
I'm the oldest and I have three brothers who were born approximately two years apart. My youngest brother is, what, six years younger than I am. My middle brother committed suicide later, in his twenties. And then there was a ten-year—maybe ten. Yes, I guess a ten-year hiatus, and then my parents had three girls who were born, like, in rapid succession.
Collings
Oh, how funny.
Dietrich
So there were six of us altogether. My youngest sister is twenty years younger than I am.
Collings
Oh, gosh.
Dietrich
And my oldest sister is sixteen years younger.
Collings
And what do they do?
Dietrich
Wow.
Collings
I mean, just what directions?
Dietrich
You know, my oldest—my older—she hates it when I call her my older sister. What does she do? She went to LMU and, I forget, like political science or something, and when she graduated, she was at home for a while and my dad called me up and said, "All right, I'm giving Susan to you. I can't do anything with this. And you have to get her a job." So I called up Alice Callaghan and just asked her if she would take Susan on at Las Familias, just, you know, as an intern or something. So she did that for six months and then, I forget, I think she interned—what was it? Not Housing Now, but—oh, god. Do you know Jean Batilia [phonetic]?
Collings
I think I've seen the name.
Dietrich
So she worked for him. Shelter Partnership was the name of the group. So she worked for them for a couple of years. She was living in the city, in Echo Park. So I would see her, like, she would come over and talk, you know, bring a couple of six-packs. Most of the folks at the Worker were about her age, so she really got close to them, and so a group of them, two or three, went to Philadelphia to start a Catholic Worker. She went with them, and she

was there for ten years and married someone there. Her husband finally wanted to leave and then they broke up, and she's kind of been at loose ends for a long time, although a lot of what she does—well, she's still associated with a lot of people in the Worker.

Collings

But it sounds like she shares a lot of the same commitment that you have.

Dietrich

Yes, she does. My other sister lives Richmond and she sells real estate, and my other younger sister lives in El Segundo and she's basically a housewife and a mom. I think she has a part-time job at the church, and her husband is a contractor. So I would say my two younger sisters definitely have that kind of lifestyle that my parents had.

Collings

So the two sisters followed in the footsteps of your parents.

Dietrich

Yes, and obviously my brother did too. I'm pretty certain I'm the only one that went down that road, but, you know, kind of the interesting thing is that my sisters were—I was grown when they were born. First I was away at college and then [unclear], so they grew up with me not being there, number one, and they grew up with me being at the Catholic Worker, sometimes being in the papers, coming down, meeting Mother Teresa or the Cardinal, and so they always had this sense of, like, the Catholic Worker as part of their identity, that it's, as my sister described it, her moral compass. It was something like, "My uncle is a priest and Jeff is a Catholic Worker," so it's a moral north and south.

Collings

Oh, that's wonderful.

Dietrich

And my parents, even though it's kind of a radical lifestyle, but it's still within the context of our kind of cultural background as Catholics. One time when I was at home, I was visiting shortly after I got to the Catholic Worker, and my sister Ann [phonetic] was probably like four or something, and she was kind of whining when I left and didn't want me to leave, and my mom explained to her why I had to go. She said, "Your brother's kind of like your Uncle Bobby. He's kind of like a priest, but he's also kind of like St. Francis and he helps poor people." And she goes, "Oh, okay." So it's a simple thing, but it is definitely profound that a kind of cultural, ideological—it's just a way of explaining that isn't available to everybody, why one would choose such a kind of alternative lifestyle, but my sister could understand it and she was only four.

Collings

Right. Based on the teachings, yes.

Dietrich

Based on her very rudimentary understanding of our religious heritage.

Collings
Growing up, how important was religious education and faith in your household?
Dietrich
I would say we weren't pious or anything, but we went to Mass every Sunday. I think my parents must have gone to a retreat or something. We went through a period where we said the rosary every night. It wasn't my favorite period. [laughter] I can remember walking in, seeing my dad on his knees saying his prayers. And my mom was active in the church, and her brother was a priest. So, yes, it was very, very significant. And like I said, I went to grade one through three to a Catholic school. We came to California and they couldn't get me into the Catholic school, so I went four through seven to public school. Then they got me into St. Mary's, and I went to eighth grade and then to high school.
Collings
So, pretty consistent Catholic education throughout.
Dietrich
I would say, yes.
Collings
When you were growing up in Virginia, all your friends were Catholic?
Dietrich
No, no, no. I would say that they were mostly Protestant. That would be my guess, I mean, the kids in our neighborhood. I don't think Catholics are a large segment of the southern population, generally speaking.
Collings
So you didn't hang out with the other kids at school, then?
Dietrich
No. It was a bus ride away.
Collings
Did that give you any kind of sense of difference, or did you think about it?
Dietrich
No, it didn't really. No. I didn't have any sense that it was, like, kind of culturally unacceptable to be Catholic or anything like that. For me, early memories would be like seeing my Uncle Bobby; he was an altar boy. I was a little kid and I would see him up on the altar and doing the cincture and carrying the cross. You know how that is. It gets imprinted. I'm trying to think. Oh, god. I mean, like first communion, those were pretty significant elements.
Collings
And did you do any of that service as an altar boy and so on, yourself?
Dietrich
When we came to California, when I was older. When I went to St. Mary's I was in eighth grade. I never quite mastered the Latin Confiteor, but I could mumble on.

Collings
So how old were you when you came out to California?
Dietrich
I was nine.
Collings
Nine. Okay. So your father and you—I think you had mentioned why you came to California?
Dietrich
Right. My father was in aerospace, and this was the place to go, but he really wanted to—I don't know if he really wanted it, but this was kind of—you know, it's the American Dream, and California, Los Angeles, Hollywood is the apotheosis of the American Dream. In fact, when we lived out here he would go, "Why do we need to go on vacation? We're already here."
Collings
"We're on vacation." That's great.
Dietrich
Yes. So we came out here and he got a job in aerospace. I mean, he already had a job, but we lived in a motel for, like, three months. It seems like three months. I don't know, for a while. And we loved the motel.
Collings
Really?
Dietrich
Yes.
Collings
Why?
Dietrich
Oh, there were other kids there and it was fun. Got to watch cartoons. "Sheriff John."
Collings
So you didn't have a TV in your house?
Dietrich
No, we didn't, not till we moved to California.
Collings
That was, like, 1955, so that's about right.
Dietrich
Then we dreaded the weekends, because on the weekends we'd all pile into the car and drive to Orange County looking for houses and went to various housing tracts. I can remember they had two houses that they liked and they put $10 down on each of the houses to hold them. Then when they settled on the house, they paid $100 down payment and moved in. And, you know, the G.I. Bill covered the rest.
Collings
Wow. Yes.
Dietrich

And my dad went to college on the G.I. Bill as well.

Collings

In Virginia?

Dietrich

Yes.

Collings

So your dad was really—he was living the dream, it sounds like.

Dietrich

He was, yes. Actually, we moved to Orange County and he had to drive back to El Segundo, basically.

Collings

He worked in El Segundo?

Dietrich

Yes. They could have located out here, but, I mean, it took him like twenty years to figure that out, because they're from back east, and people who live at the beach year-round are kind of tacky. You have your beach home and then you live someplace else.

Collings

I see. Interesting.

Dietrich

Yes. Only the tacky people who work at the concessions live at the beach for a time..

Collings

You guys had been living near the beach before, but now they were stepping up, I guess.

Dietrich

Yes. Well, I don't know. Where we lived doesn't really—it wasn't considered the beach, because there were places that were considered like summer beaches where you had your beach home.

Collings

Okay, yes. Oh, that's really interesting.

Dietrich

I don't know if this is [unclear]. Okay, yes, so we lived in Fullerton.

Collings

Now, along the way, JFK starts to run for president. How did your family feel about that?

Dietrich

God. It's hard to say when they figured out that—and they ultimately changed to being—well, no. The whole time we were in Orange County my mother worked for the John Birch Society.

Collings

Oh, did she?

Dietrich

Yes.

Collings
Really?
Dietrich
Maybe not the whole time. I'll tell you what it was. It was, like, after the kids were a little older, she got involved in League of Women Voters and they got involved in—actually it wasn't the John Birch Society. It was, like, the Cardinal Mindszenty Society, which was the Catholic Anti-Communist League. When I was in high school, my mom took me to—what's his name? It's an Australian guy, like some kind of Christian Anti-Communist League or something. I don't know. Schwarz was his name. Dr. Karl—maybe Karl Schwarz. But it was at the Sports Arena and there were lots of people there. She took me out of school to take me there.
Collings
Oh, that's really interesting.
Dietrich
You know, right up through high school, my parents were very—they were marked by the anti-Communist kind of John Birch and—oh god, what were the hearings?
Collings
The HUAC? The House Un-American Activities Committee.
Dietrich
My mom particularly kind of followed that and was worried about Communists in the government. So they were very, very conservative. It wasn't until—oh god, they used to go out—she walked door-to-door for Barry Goldwater. She was in love with Barry Goldwater.
Collings
Did she get involved with politics when she came out to California?
Dietrich
She didn't get involved until, like, I think there was this period where the boys were a little older and she didn't have to be home all the time, so she was—I think during that time she started to be involved with politics, and it started with the League of Women Voters. But, honestly, Republican politics. I mean, not at a high level or anything.
Collings
But being from the South, earlier they were Democrats.
Dietrich
That's correct, yes.
Collings
Did they actually switch party affiliation?
Dietrich
They did. They did. That's what they figured out was that when you're in the South, you vote Democrat. The people with those kinds of southern values who come here, you've got to switch to being a Republican, so that's what they did. But interestingly enough, when they moved to Manhattan Beach,

they really got kind of liberal and switched again. My dad stopped being an engineer and went into real estate and, really, investment, and he realized that the Republican—well, the way he described it, that President Roosevelt was helpful for capitalism, that he wanted there to be many millionaires instead of just a few billionaires. So he understood that the Democratic policies, the Democrats' economic policies were generally more favorable to the kind of small entrepreneurial real estate investor like himself, and not only everything that he did really revolved around what the government made possible to do in terms of buying up limited partnerships. So anyway, they changed again.

Collings

So he was a very astute observer of the scene.

Dietrich

He was. Well, I guess you get pretty astute when your money's at stake. So, yes, they changed. Then, of course, you live in Orange County and everybody's a Republican, but you come to the South Bay and everybody's kind of laid back, and even if they're Republicans, they're really socially liberal.

Collings

Kind of an Arnold Schwarzenegger sort of Republican.

Dietrich

Exactly. Yes, right.

Collings

So when you were going to Catholic school, when you were in middle school and high school was there any kind of social justice teaching?

Dietrich

No, absolutely not. It was pretty kind of mainstream orthodox catechism, but I think the nuns—I can just remember being in eighth grade in 1960, and there was such a kind of ripple of—and even though they didn't say too much about it, about Vatican II, you could tell that they were really, really focused on that.

Collings

How could you tell?

Dietrich

They just mentioned it a couple of times, "Pray for the Council." I guess it was just that a kind of—I don't a vivid memory; it's more like an intuition.

Collings

Interesting. So what were you thinking about doing with your life? What were your friends talking about? What were your parents talking about?

Dietrich

Oh, god.

Collings

And the war, I mean, what was—

Dietrich

Right. Okay, so am I in high school now?

Collings

Yes, middle school and high school.

Dietrich

Well, the war wasn't going on when I was in middle school. I was a terrible student.

Collings

You weren't interested?

Dietrich

I was not interested and I wasn't motivated. I mean, I suppose, if I'd had, like, any kind of a consciousness about it at all, I probably would have tried to do a little bit better and that would have made my life a whole lot easier, but as it was, I just was not engaged.

Collings

Did you get a lot of flak for that from your family?

Dietrich

Yes, not excessive, but enough to make my life not as comfortable as it could have been if I'd done my homework all the time. So I didn't like school. I'm dyslexic. I wasn't engaged with it. The only thing, like, early on my mom really gave me a love of reading, so I always had—and it was like once I learned how to read and once I learned about books, it was like, "Oh, this is cool. I'll never be bored again. I can always take a book with me." So it was a kind of a salvation, and that probably was my education. I don't think I read anything deeply profound.

Collings

Do you know what you did read? What did you like?

Dietrich

Oh, god. It was mostly like historical novel and bestsellers and things like that. But it did give me, I think, a good kind of background in language and structure. But I wasn't a good student. I went to Mater Dei High School. I hated it. They keep sending me alumni newsletters. I keep sending them back. One time they called up, I was with a group of people and they were calling up to solicit money from me, and, oh, my god, I was not nice to the person. I told them to take me off the mailing list, and, "I hated that school when I went there and I hate it now." So I hung up the phone and everybody's going, "So you didn't really like high school, did you?"

But the interesting thing was many years later, one of our volunteers was the president of the alumni society at Mater Dei, and so she came in one day and said, "I want you to know that I've put your name up for Alumni of the Year." I said, "Are you serious?" She goes, "Yes." Well, and then I thought, "Okay. Well, my mom would really like that."

Collings

Oh, that's nice.

Dietrich

So I go, "All right." So then she comes back the next week and she's like, "This is really embarrassing. I don't know how to tell you this, but when the principal saw your name, he said, 'No, we can't do that.'" Well, he nixed the whole thing, and so I was thinking, "Oh, that's good." Because like I was sort of thinking, "Well, maybe I'm not as radical as I think I am if Mater Dei High School's going to make me Alumni of the Year." So, anyway, I got offered the position.

Collings

Then your notoriety.

Dietrich

Because I was too radical. So that's one of my high points.

Collings

But you did go to college.

Dietrich

I did, yes. My first college experience, I got kicked out of University of San Francisco. I went to a Jesuit school briefly; one semester. Let's see. I think I was on probation for being drunk one time. Then, like, you know, there were a couple of Loyola High School guys that I kind of hung out with. My roommate was one of them. Anyway, I thought we were just kind of moving furniture around from the dorm up to our room, but it turns out that one of the guys was kind of a kleptomaniac. He had, like, all kinds of stuff. We had some of the furniture from the girls' dorm across the way or maybe the hospital across the way. So I got kicked out.

Then my dad went back. We had to drive up and meet with the dean and everything. It was terrible. But they were pretty cool about it. But it was hard, because if you drop out for a semester, you get your draft notice.

Collings

So when did you first start becoming aware of the war?

Dietrich

Well, when you get your first draft notice.

Collings

But, I mean, in high school were you thinking about it?

Dietrich

No, not much. At that time, everybody had to—well, you had to go down to the post office and sign up for the draft. I'm trying to think. I think I might have been in high school when I had my first induction physical, like a pre-induction physical. But when I signed up for the draft, the war was on but it wasn't escalated. Well, maybe it was in '64. No, it still wasn't escalating. So I didn't think anything of it. It didn't seem imminent to me that I would actually—and it's kind of like that kind of thing, like, everybody signed up for the draft. I don't know if everybody did their two years in the military or something, you went to Germany. But anyway, so I wasn't thinking about it, really wasn't till after I got to college. By the time I'm in college, I have to really work hard to not get a draft notice, so it's becoming a major factor in

my life that if I fall behind, like, two units, I get a draft notice, so that becomes a very real element, even like freshman year, sophomore year. By junior year, I'm going to demonstrations in Century City. We're driving up for the mobilization in San Francisco and marching with thousands of people, so that becomes a very, very significant element.

Collings

And you were at Cal State Fullerton at that time.

Dietrich

I was, yes.

Collings

And how did your parents feel about the war?

Dietrich

My dad, I think, probably had a kind of a philosophy, "Go along. Don't rock the boat. Go along to get along." So his personal solution was to go into the navy, to try to find a like a—

Collings

That's what he said you should do?

Dietrich

Something like that, yes.

Collings

Why would the navy have been the—

Dietrich

Well, you weren't in the trenches. And for him, he never left the States. So you find a place where you could do your time without getting your head blown off.

Collings

That was what he was advising you?

Dietrich

Yes, yes. So I don't know. I think it was probably a big thing when I refused induction. I mean, no parent wants their kids to go to jail or to go to Canada, but I do think there might have been a sense of some social stigma, my not serving. I guess I was out of college when it finally came about. Oh, no, I was applying for conscientious objector or I was going to or something, and he sent me back to my uncle, his older brother, for a counseling. My uncle was a nuclear physicist and an elder of a Presbyterian Church.

Collings

Oh, really?

Dietrich

Yes, right. I think I still have his letter that he wrote to me about serving god and country. It was the standard, like, "Render under Caesar what is Caesar's and to god what is god's." Well, from his perspective, "rendering under Caesar" means you pay your taxes and you do your military duty. So that was his basic advice, which I didn't take.

Collings

What were you hearing about the war at church?

Dietrich

Oh, god. [laughs] I think by the time I was in college, I didn't go to church. I'd pretty much ditched that project.

Collings

So did you feel like you were going to come back to it later or—

Dietrich

No. No. I had my first sexual experience, and decided that I probably wasn't going to go to confession anymore. [laughter] So, yes, I definitely was not going to go back and I definitely had antipathy. I mean, I just thought the whole thing was silly and had no relevance and wasn't even worth being distressed about, just ignore it, that it was so unengaged and had no relevance to my life or even to the life of the world I lived in.

Collings

What kinds of things were the people at your university concerned about when you were at Cal State Fullerton, people that you were hanging out with?

Dietrich

I probably was not—I mean, there were a whole set of people, and probably a small set of people that were—I forget the name of the group on campus that was kind of the political activists. I'm trying to think. I think maybe like the year that I was a senior or maybe I was still there working on campus, Ronald Reagan came, and so there was some kind of disruption of that. Some people got arrested, I don't know if they ended up going to jail or not. But the year that I left the campus kind of—oh, it was the bombing of—was it Hanoi? No, Cambodia. And campuses across the country just erupted.

Collings

Just went crazy.

Dietrich

So that was 1970, and I was just gone by then. So there was a kind of massive uprising on Cal State Fullerton's campus, and it did kind of escalate, but as you can imagine, it was a little conservative area, so when I was there, I wasn't terribly involved, but I would go to demonstrations. I guess I kind of felt that right up until my senior year that the war would be over before I had to do anything. I had a year on campus where I was working in the audiovisual department, just a clerk, and I was applying for C.O. That was the time when it began to be clear to me that this is pretty serious. I got turned down for C.O., and then I found a lawyer, the same lawyer everyone else found, Bill Smith, a really just great guy who helped a lot of people. He kind of stalled for me for a while. I mean, he changed my draft board and my draft board changed to San Francisco, which turned out to be a pretty good thing, I guess, because when I was ultimately drafted, I never got prosecuted because there were so many people refusing induction up there. So anyway, on that day that I ultimately ended up going to the draft

board, I did the whole physical exam, and I get to the end and I do the written exam, and the sergeant says, "Dietrich, are you going to refuse induction today?" [laughs] You don't expect that question. And I go, "Yeah." He said, "Why don't you go over there and sit down." Well, there are about twelve other guys there, and they took us all into a room, because they didn't want twelve guys—because when they read you the Oath of Office, they want everybody to step across the line. There's a red line in the room. They read you the Oath of the Army, and then to signify your assent to that oath, they tell you to step across the red line, so no one of those twelve stepped across. I was interviewed by the FBI. I mean, I thought I'd be arrested that day, and when he was finished, he said, "Okay, you can go now."

I said, "Oh." He said, "We'll be seeing you." [laughs] "Okay."

Collings

What kind of questions were you asked?

Dietrich

Oh, god, I can't remember. I wish I could. So I went home, and I guess I wasn't really thinking that I would be coming back home. So I had this time, and my girlfriend—I don't remember if it was her idea or my idea, but anyway, the two of us kind of talked and it seemed like a good time for me to—we'd talked about going to Europe, and so I did.

Collings

What did that feel like, just leaving the country, feeling that you were, in essence, fleeing?

Dietrich

Right. I didn't think of it as fleeing, so I just felt like I had been granted this kind of time slot. I had a little bit of money saved, very little bit, and I hitchhiked to—where did I go? I guess to New York. At that time Icelandic Airlines was the cheap airline. They didn't have a flight to Belgium and I didn't want to pay the extra $50 to fly to London or whatever, so I flew to Iceland. [laughter] I had been with friends, so it was still like a kind of fun summer vacation. I can remember flying into Reykjavik. You're flying over the North Atlantic and it's all dark, and then you're flying over Iceland and it looks like the fuckin' moon. It's all lava. Then I take the bus into—oh, what's the name of the city? It's not Reykjavik, but anyway, the only big city in Iceland. Then I'm looking for a fishing boat to take me to Denmark. [laughter] And it's March and it's cold and the youth hostel doesn't open till April.

So anyway, these kids find me and ask me if I needed a place to stay, and I said, "Yeah." So they took me home. I think they were, like, high school or first year of college, and they lived in student digs where the toilet didn't work and lots of people slept on the floor, but they just took me around and went to clubs. But it was interesting that they really had such a sincere love of their country and kind of steeped in their culture. They insisted that I read

The Sagas, and they talked about the Althing, which is the oldest Parliament in Western Europe. They took me to the Communist Embassy. It was Lenin's anniversary or something. We all got little Communist pins. But the interesting thing was that I was so disaffected from my own country and they were so connected with their country.

Collings

Oh, how interesting.

Dietrich

So I got a boat. It was, like, a three-day trip to get to Denmark, and it was pretty fun. I stopped at the Faroe Islands and the Shetland Islands and Scotland and then on to Denmark. Then I got out at Denmark and I was feeling pretty despondent.

Collings

Really?

Dietrich

Well, it was cold and rainy. Anyway, I kind of made my way south as fast as I could and spent some time in Morocco, met some folks there. Of course, everybody had to go to Marrakesh. Then some people had given me some money to buy them some hashish, which I did. It was put in a table, and apparently I got duped. Probably just as well, you know, that "old hash on the table" trick. So, anyway, they got the table, but not the hash. So I hitchhiked through Europe and spent some time in Morocco, came back.

Collings

Who did you meet along the way on your travels?

Dietrich

Well, the kids in Iceland. And then, oh god, I forget her name, Zarah, in Morocco. We lived in Morocco for, I think, a couple of months, maybe longer.

Collings

A local girl or another traveler?

Dietrich

No, she was actually—I don't know if she lived in San Francisco. She ultimately lived in San Francisco. Then when I was coming back, I'm coming through Spain and getting a hitchhike and this guy picks me up, and these two British kids there, I think they were in high school. But they were going to Avignon for the festival.

Collings

The Theatre Festival.

Dietrich

Right. They said, "Why don't you come with us." They just had a tent. So I did. We pitched the tent right by the—is it the Rhone?

Collings

I don't remember.

Dietrich

You walk across the bridge and there's Avignon.

Collings
Yes, "Sur le Pont." "On the bridge." [laughs]
Dietrich
Yeah. So, I mean, that was probably the most kind of—well, I wouldn't even call it touristy, but, I don't know, it was the only time I ever really got a sense of being in Europe, like in the daytime we'd get up in the morning and go, "Okay, well, I want to go to the Papes Museum because the Picasso exhibit is there." "All right. Well, why don't we meet at the film festival and we'll see the new Robert Redford film. And then in the evening, the American Theater Company is playing and they're doing Sophocles, Trojan Women. So why don't we meet and we'll have—." Well, we didn't have any money to go out for lunch, but we had lunch in the park.
Then one night they took me, said, "Let's go see the Sartre play, The Devil and the Good Lord. It's playing in the courtyard of the Papes Palace." Of course, it's in French. "Well, don't worry about it. We'll just—." So they went and bought the book and translated it and read it to me, because they spoke French because they were from England and they went to public school. And then afterwards, you walk around and everybody would be sitting out in the cafés, and all the kids would be there and people would be going, "Oh, there's this cool nude beach in Greece. You really have to go there." Or, "Oh, my god, I just came from Switzerland and the lakes there, oh, my god." Anyway, so—
Collings
It's like a whole scene.
Dietrich
Yes, it's a whole scene. All the kids are all on the move. So that was pretty fun. I made my way back to London. I almost didn't get—when I got to Dover, they weren't going to let me land, because I don't know how much money it was, it was just enough to buy a plane ticket, maybe a hundred bucks, and I just got in by the skin of my teeth. Oh, god, I was in London for maybe three days. It was cold and rainy and dreary, and I didn't have any money, and I suppose I could have called my parents, but I didn't. I finally got a plane ticket. I was thinking when I came home that I would probably be arrested.
Collings
And why did you come back?
Dietrich
Well, I hadn't ever intended to not come back. I mean, it was always my intention to come back. So anyway, I got back to the airport and it was dark. The first thing was getting through Customs without getting arrested, which made me pretty happy.
Collings
Yes, I bet. [laughs]
Dietrich

So then I spent the night in the airport, and I'm reading the newspaper about all these murders and everything. Maybe it's just because I'd been in Europe and I can't read the newspapers anyway, but it seemed really scary. So the next morning, I get up and just walked to the curb and got a ride and, wow, it only took me, not too long, maybe a day or two days, to get to St. Louis. I was hitchhiking there and some people came by and picked me up in a kind of Volkswagen van, and they said that they were going to a Peacemakers Conference and would I like to go. I mean, it was kind of like one of those things. I don't know, it was kind of cool to be hitchhiking, and there was a kind of camaraderie. I mean, I suppose youth always has kind of an affinity, but I think it was amplified by the kind of social situation and really a kind of profound, I think, cultural change, really a kind of tectonic change in many ways.

Collings

And not to mention just the numbers of youth.

Dietrich

Exactly. Yes, right. So I went to this Peacemakers Conference. It could have been like something really flaky, if not illegal, but it turned out that the Peacemakers were a really legitimate anarchist group, as legitimate as anarchist groups can be. It was founded by three guys who went to Union Theological Seminary and refused induction to the Second World War. So these were guys that had refused to pay their—and it was a group of people that had refused to pay their taxes all their lives and lived on the income, taxable income, had gone on some Freedom Rides in the South, had protested all of the American military, every military system that had been invented thus far, and had spent a lot of time in jail for their political perspective, actually their moral/ethical perspective.

It was pretty transformative. It was very transformative to me. First of all, in those days you didn't trust anyone over thirty because everybody was owned by the system, and so here were some people that had really lived their lives in a very distinctively—in a life of resistance, and I was pleasantly edified. Then there were some younger people from the Catholic Worker in Milwaukee, and they had just come from a kind of court scene—not a "kind of." A court scene in which Mike Cullen, the founder of the community, and fourteen others had burned draft files and had gotten two years for that. They were the second people in the country to do a draft board raid, the first being the Berrigans. So I just thought that was—it just struck me that if Jesus were alive today, he would be feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and sheltering the homeless and burning draft files, and it was being done by these Catholics, for god's sake. So that was a moment of revelation for me, a profound revelation. But it's not like I said, "Oh, why don't I go to Milwaukee," or, "Where's a Catholic Worker?" I didn't do that. I went back home. All this time, I'd had three dollars in my pocket when I got out of the airport, and I still had the three dollars when I got back to L.A., actually

Laguna Beach. So I'd been at home for, like, two weeks. My brother was in jail.

Collings

For what?

Dietrich

He had a lot of mental problems, and I think maybe the particular drugs he was using didn't help that. So he actually was arrested breaking into my parents' house while they were gone, and that just started a whole long thing where he had a breakdown while he was in jail. He assaulted a guard, so he got charges that could have been easily dismissed, became compounded.

So he was in jail and I visited him there. I was walking out of the jail and I saw this big blue van, like a laundry van, but it said "House of Hospitality" on the side. The only reason I knew what it was, that it was the Catholic Worker, is because I had done this epic journey across the country and around the world, because, otherwise, I would have walked past it thinking that they were selling coffee and doughnuts. So they were giving out coffee and doughnuts to people getting out of jail. So I stopped and talked to Jerry Fallon, and he told me where the Catholic Worker was and I came over a couple weeks later. It was basically just Dan and Chris, but they were living with a couple of other ex-priests and nuns in Pasadena on Arlington. One of the houses that—no, it's still there, but it's owned by the State of California because that's where the 710 Freeway's supposed to go, but it doesn't look like it's going to go. I had long hair. I had my battered cowboy hat on, my cowboy boots, and my Moroccan purse. I smoked little roll-up cigarettes with Moroccan tobacco, actual [unclear] tobacco, so I was kind of cool. "Where'd you go to school or what you been doin'?" "Oh, I've been on the road, you know." And he said, "Well, what you do before that?" "I was English major." "You could be the editor of our newspaper." You walk in the door and twenty minutes later, you're the editor of a newspaper. So, Dan and Chris, ex-priest and ex-nun. Chris was an Immaculate Heart community, Dan was a diocesan priest, and they had a son. So Chris would make food and he took the food down every day to Skid Row. They had started initially, like, six months before I came, and it started around Christmastime of 1969. There was a group of folks called Catholicos por la Raza, who invaded midnight Mass, not at the Cathedral. What's that other church down on Wilshire?

UNIDENTIFIED: St. Basil's.

Dietrich

Yes, St. Basil's. The Cardinal was saying Mass and—

That was very famous, that invasion.

Dietrich

Oh, was it?

Oh, yeah.

Dietrich

Well, it was certainly seminal for us. Dan wasn't part of that, but a lot of his friends were. He, at that time, had already left the priesthood. So I think—what did he do? I think he went down and fasted for a two or three days on the Cardinal's doorstep. And then he was just fasting there and noticing—at that time on Main Street, the Union Rescue Mission was there. It was kind of the heart of Skid Row, so he was noticing lots of folks that were in need. So they decided to just start serving a meal out of the trunk of their car, and that's how it started. It really started almost as part of the protest against the church and a kind of extension of the Catholicos por la Raza.

Collings

What was the protest against the church regarding?

Dietrich

You know, it was before I got here, so I don't remember whether they were asking for reforms or some kind of entrée for Latinos. I don't know. Or it could have been about the war. I don't know.

Collings

We can find out.

Dietrich

It was a pretty big deal. I wasn't around, but as Teresa said, I think it got some pretty major coverage. But the main thing for us or in terms of my personal history is that it's what caused Dan Delany to start serving a meal, and he already had thought about a Catholic Worker. But just to say that it started as a kind of protest against the church. So I came about six months later. I came in September of 1970, and probably about two months after that, we got closed down. No, about two months after that, we moved to Boyle Heights. A fellow seminarian, a priest, Bill Von der Ahe of Vons market, gave Dan $5,000 to put a down payment on a house in Boyle Heights, so we moved to Boyle Heights. Then sometime around Thanksgiving, we got closed down by the police and the health department. We started serving—what did we do? We asked St. Joseph's Church—we'd been cooking at St. Joseph's Church. We asked them if we could serve a meal in their church, and they declined, but said that if we found a place, they would pay the rent for us. So we did. Dan found a place, and it's basically where we are now. It's not the same building. It was earthquake-damaged, and Dan was pretty handy and he spruced it up. In '71, January, we opened the kitchen. We were going along, '71, '72. Since '72, in the summer of '72, we had a big breakup, and Dan and Chris—well, they ultimately left. It was very hard. I think that it's tough for communities. Basically what happens is that when you start something just as a couple, you don't have to have much structure, because you can take care of everything on the fly and you're already in pretty good communication. But one you invite someone else in, they're either a member of your family, like your kid, which is a diminutive role to have, or you have to create the entire structure. You have to have some kind of community structure other than

the family, in addition to the family structure. It has to be separate from that. And, I mean, nobody gives you like a manual on how you're supposed to do that. Plus, no one wants to do it because it's really hard to do. If you only have one or two people, it's like, "Why am I going to go to all the trouble of going to all these meetings?" It doesn't feel like it's worth it, but that's kind of like the basic conflict.

Collings

Would this be a good time to break for now, for today?

Dietrich

Yes. [End of September 28, 2012 interview]

1.2. SESSION TWO (October 5, 2012)

Collings

Today is October 5, 2012, Jane Collings interviewing Jeff Dietrich in Santa Monica. We were just saying that we're going to pick up a little bit. We're going to backtrack a little bit.

Dietrich

So we were talking about the importance of—well, I'll tell it again because I think I already said it, the importance of actually really refusing induction into the military.

Collings

I wanted to specifically ask you that question. Why did you refuse induction?

Dietrich

I would like to take a great deal of moral credit for that, but I honestly can't. Here's the other thing. Even though I was raised in a really, very—I mean, we went to Mass every Sunday, I went to Catholic schools. I did not get anything from my religious heritage that would support me to take a position in opposition to war. It all came from the culture. It came from Joan Baez and David Harris, the Resistance Movement really here in L.A. that was kind of based out of UCLA, Tod Friend and, oh, what's his name? Jesus. You probably know him. Joe –god, I'm blanking, but he was at UCLA. Anyway, so, I mean, I didn't even have contact with those people other than kind of like through the media. I went to a draft induction physical with my friend Leonard Klakunis, who had changed his name to Riley Wildflower.

Collings

To Riley—

Dietrich

Wildflower. He refused induction ultimately. So I was kind of waiting outside for him and so I got leafleted. Somebody gave me a leaflet from the Resistance Movement, from probably kids from UCLA. So I was aware of that, but I actually think that when we went to the induction center, I think Riley just picked it up from the movie Alice's Restaurant, but we knew that

people were burning their draft cards. So it all came from, really from the larger culture, nothing, I'm sorry to say, from my religious background at all.
So, as I told you, I tried to figure out ways to avoid the draft. I kept hoping that the war would end. Bill Smith was my lawyer, and he helped me and changed my draft board around to San Francisco, so we stalled for about a year. He referred me to an orthodontist. I went to the orthodontist, and he looked at me and examined me, and then he closed the door and he said, "Okay, look. You don't really need braces, but you have a little bit of an overbite and I'm willing to do this for you, but you have to go to all the appointments. It can't be just some phony kind of thing." Because he had done this for other people and he knew that it meant that you could get a deferment if you had braces on your teeth. So, anyway, I went that far. I had the appointment with the doctor, and then I got my final draft notice and I just decided that the most—I didn't think of myself as a particular ethical person, but it just felt like I should just do it in a kind of honest way, and I had such a respect for people who had done that. I mean, I didn't know anybody that had actually refused induction, so I did. I went and I refused induction. I told you that story where they put us all in a room, and there were twelve of us and nobody crossed the line. I mean, this was San Francisco, so they were having like twelve people a day refuse induction. It turned out I never actually got prosecuted or indicted for refusing induction, I think largely because there were so many people that had done it by the time I did it. So I don't take any great moral credit for that. I really just feel like there was such a powerful movement that was very, very influential, I mean, so it really changed my life. As I told you, after I refused induction, I really thought that I would be going to jail. The FBI let me go after they interviewed me, and so I just thought that it might be a good time to—I wasn't trying to escape. I just thought it would be a good time to take a break, because I'd been—you know how people—you fantasize about taking a trip like that, and often it doesn't happen. So I had a few dollars and I hitchhiked across the United States and I went to—I told you—I'm sure—I don't know why—hey, Theresia.

Collings

I think that the things about coming back across and the fortuitous—

Dietrich

I just want to make sure—I feel like I'm retelling this. So, yeah, I went to Europe and I spent a couple of months in Morocco. Let's see. Did I tell you that I tried to smuggle drugs to—

Collings

Yes.

Dietrich

Okay. So I got back to the airport in New York. I thought I was going to be arrested. I wasn't, and hitchhiked to—well, I hitchhiked across country. I

had three dollars in my pocket when I got there, when I got to New York, and when I got to St. Louis I had three dollars in my pocket, because people would pick me up and took me home and fed me and gave me rides. Anyway, this hippie van picked me up and we went to a Peacemakers Conference. It could have been like a hippie gathering or something, but it wasn't. I mean, it was really people of substance, older people. I mean, they probably were fifty by that time. [laughs] But the Peacemaker guys, three guys, had been students at Union Theological Seminary during the war, during World War II, and they had refused induction, and they'd lived on their taxable income all their lives and been to jail, did the Civil Rights Movement, got beat up in the South, did marches against all the weapon systems, and really just very, very commendable people, frankly, moral giants.

Collings

So what was happening at this meeting?

Dietrich

I can't remember exactly.

Collings

Was it a rally?

Dietrich

What I remember most was that—I mean, like some of the guys, like somebody named Wally Nelson was one of the founders. He was a black man and he talked about living someplace in the South, had a farm, and lived under the taxable income and did a lot of antiwar work. So it was people that had a lifestyle of both simplicity and resistance. As I said before, I met the Catholic Worker there, and that was the serendipitous thing that I think Theresia wanted me to emphasize. Well, frankly, if I hadn't refused induction, if I hadn't decided to go on this trip, and as I said, in retrospect, it was a kind of epic journey, a quest or something. I mean, I didn't really realize that at the time, but, I mean, I found my life's vocation and it was rather—let's see. We could say it's serendipitous or we could say it's providential. So I wasn't looking for this, didn't know it existed, but I met the Catholic Worker at that conference. I'm pretty sure I told you this too, that the Milwaukee Catholic Worker feeds the poor, has a hospitality house, and they also were the second people in the United States to burn draft files. So there were fourteen Milwaukee Catholic Workers and friends who went in to a draft board and took the draft files out and burned them and went to trial, and they got two years for that. So I just thought that was really, really, really radical. As a young person, it was very inspiring to me, and it was a moment of enlightenment where it just occurred to me, because I was not interested in—I was not only not interested in the church or religion, I had just like ditched that project altogether, and sort of more interested in Buddhism, you know, I mean, like all the kind of hippie kinds of interests.

So it was just a moment of just enlightenment when I just thought, well, this is what Jesus would be doing if he were alive. He would be feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, and burning draft files. So it's not like at that moment I just signed onto the project, because I hitchhiked home. Took me a couple more days to get home. I still had the same three dollars in my pocket. So I was staying briefly in Laguna Beach, and stayed with a friend in—oh, fuck, I can't remember where. Not Garden Grove. But anyway, I was kind of like a—it was actually pretty fun. My friend was separated from his wife and he was like a real bachelor, and so he gave me hospitality. I cleaned the bathroom for him, made the bed, fixed him lunch and dinner. You know, he wanted to marry me, you know what I mean? [laughter]

Theresia

[unclear].

Collings

Yes, exactly.

Dietrich

That took like all of two hours and the rest of the time I laid by the pool and read, and then he would take me out to titty bars in the evening. [laughs]

Collings

What were you reading?

Dietrich

Oh, god. Giles Goat-Boy, and Kazantzakis. I read all of Kazantzakis. Oh, god, The Alexandria Quartet, and then—oh, what's his name? Oh, god. Who's the—I'm just blanking. I'll get it in a second. You can help me here. Colossus of Maroussi, Hieronymus Bosch and the Oranges of Big Sur, Henry Miller. So, yeah, I was continuing my education as an English major.

So I guess the main thing is, you know, I was staying with my friend, and then I hitchhiked up to Los Angeles because my brother was in jail. So I visited my brother, and I was walking out of the jail and—I think I told you this, but I'll do it again just to emphasize that this was another kind of providential moment where if I hadn't refused induction, if I hadn't hitchhiked across the country and throughout Europe and Africa and come back, and in the middle of the country, I meet the Catholic Worker, so when I'm walking past this van, if I hadn't done all that, I wouldn't know that that van giving out coffee and doughnuts was the Catholic Worker. I would have just assumed that it was a commercial vehicle. So, I mean, who could predict that you take a trip and then it determines the rest of your life. So I do think that that's a kind of—I don't know. I think it's kind of unusual. I mean, it's like a kind of story in a novel or something. But, yeah, so I met the Catholic Worker and immediately became the editor of the newspaper. But in the long term, what it did was—I mean, almost immediately I went to the Catholic Worker, and Dan and Chris were there and I told them I was an English major. "Oh, you could be the editor of our newspaper." So I was,

and that was good. Dan was an inveterate talker, a propagandist and a promulgator of the Catholic Worker, of really the Catholic Left, and filled with information, and I really got a good education from Dan, particularly. But when I first came, I was immediately attracted to it because I was a draft resister. I was basically a criminal. I was an outsider, and I didn't really have any prospects in the larger culture. In fact, I was totally disaffected. I'm assuming that I'm going to go to jail. When I get out of jail, I'm going to be a felon.

Collings

Had you had contact with your family besides your brother?

Dietrich

Oh, yeah. Yes, I did. I stayed with them for a little bit, maybe a week or so. You know how it is. Once you've moved out, to move back in, that's not cool. They always want to know what you're going to do and you're not doing anything. So I moved in. I cleaned the garage, baked bread. Then my brother—did my brother come back? Anyway, I mean, they weren't mean or anything, but it's uncomfortable to have your adult child be home and not know what they're going to do next. Anyway, I found residence elsewhere and then I found the Catholic Worker. I mean, I found the Catholic Worker like less than a month after I got home, maybe three weeks, and then I moved in there. But the thing that I think is really important is that it's not something that appeals to a lot of people or most people or maybe almost nobody, because everybody's kind of programmed for a certain direction in the culture, and so when that program gets disrupted, as it did with me, through no fault of my own except that I was eligible for the draft, it really disrupted it. And then other possibilities open up or other things that you wouldn't ever consider seem far more reasonable than you would have thought them to be. So, something like the Catholic Worker, where you make $15 a week and all the beans and rice you can eat, I'll tell you why, looked like a really great situation for me, because I immediately understood that what was important for me was that it would be important to be in a place where people supported my position as a draft resister. I knew, or at least I assumed, that I would be indicted and taken to court, and what I wanted to do was stand in front of a judge and say, "I do not refuse the service. I'm not a coward. I'm not a slacker. I just refuse to serve the way you want me to serve. I choose to serve life. I choose to serve in the way that Jesus served. I am ready to go to jail." So you're standing there in front of a judge, and you've got to have something to stand on, because the law's against you, and really the kind of moral and ethical community are against you, but you have to stand—but what the Catholic Worker gave me and what I recognized immediately, was that it gave me a moral standing ground, a moral foundation for taking that kind of perspective. And I think that a lot of kids who took that position didn't ever have that strong a moral foundation. They could not trace the roots of their resistance back through

the gospels to Jesus and through the scriptures to the prophets and Moses, that that's your moral foundation that you stand on.
So I understood immediately. I mean, I didn't have it that well defined, but I knew it was a moral standing ground, and I knew that it was a kind of alternative community that supported me in a way that my family couldn't support me. My family loved me and they would support me in spite of what I was doing, but this was an alternative family that supported me because of what I was doing, because it was morally right and morally consistent with this long history of spiritual resistance. So that's the important thing. It feels like it was almost a fluke. Actually, even when I signed on for the project of the Catholic Worker, it was hard for me. When you're twenty-four, a year is a long time. Now they fly past like it's a week, but when you're twenty-four, making a—I didn't even make a year commitment. I said that I wanted to be here for at least a year before, in my mind, at least a year before I got arrested and taken to court. So I was on a kind of short—I was just assuming that my life was kind of incremental until the draft thing was settled.

Collings
Did you ever have a particular feeling—I'm not actually sure how this worked, once the war was finished, once the draft was finished, what the natural legal resolution of your case would be?

Dietrich
Right. I do.

Collings
What was that? How would that work? At that point, were those cases dropped?

Dietrich
You remember the Watergate?

Collings
Yes.

Dietrich
Do you remember Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon? And when he pardoned Richard Nixon, he pardoned all the draft resisters and all the people who had gone to Canada. So I got that blanket pardon. But I was at the Catholic Worker for a while. I think I was already married—no, it was '75, I was already married, and I had avoided doing any civil disobedience because I figured if I got arrested, they would just keep me for a couple of years. I think it was '74, December, January, February, November, there was this guy in Pasadena named Vince Eirene, and he was planning on doing a civil disobedience action. Philip Berrigan and his wife and the people at Jonah House community had called for a national campaign against—at that time I think it was Carter who his secretary of defense had proposed a civil defense program in the event of a nuclear attack. So they had sent out plans, how to dig a bomb shelter, you know, like you dig a hole and you put

a door over it and then you throw dirt on top of that and you're supposed to get into it. Well, I mean, how absurd. It's a way of making the whole idea of nuclear war more of a reality and that it's a survival reality. So it was in opposition to that.
The request was to go to a public space and start digging a bomb shelter. [laughs] So, in preparation to that, I did make a phone call to the Federal Marshal's Office to see what my status was. It was a little trepidatious. I called up, and the guy, he said, "Well, let me go check." This was before computers, so I guess he went to a file cabinet or something. He comes back and he goes, "Yeah," and a long pause, "There's nothing for you, Dietrich." So, anyway, I did that action.

Collings
Now, this is before the pardon or after?

Dietrich
It was before the pardon, yes. So I still thought I was on their list.

Collings
On the wanted list.

Dietrich
Yes.

Collings
So should we go back to—

Dietrich
Sure.

Collings
What was the work of the L.A. Catholic Worker when you first got involved? What was the mission of the group? You were the editor of the newsletter. What was the newsletter saying and who was it—that kind of thing.

Dietrich
Let's see. I think I told you that it started out of a protest in '69, something, Catholicos por la Raza. And I told you, like, Dan and Chris—Dan was fasting on the steps of the Cathedral. He'd been an ex-priest, and the cardinal came out of the door and, "Dan, what are you doing here?" I mean, Dan had been a priest for like ten years, maybe, or maybe five, but anyway. So in doing that fast, Dan had noted that there were a lot of homeless people. The Union Rescue Mission was right next door to the Cathedral, so Dan and Chris started taking soup down to the—I think they served the first meal in from of the Cathedral, maybe on, I think, Easter, Easter of 1970. When I came to them, they'd been going for six months. They lived in Pasadena, and Dan and Chris were an ex-priest and an ex-nun. There was another couple, an ex-priest and an ex-nun, and another, so there were five former religious types that had rented this house in Pasadena that was one of those freeway houses that the state owned where the 710's supposed to go.
Anyway, so I came there and we were basically serving a meal, I think every day. We would drive the meal down to—oh, fuck, right across the street

from the Miserere House—oh, what's the name of that street? I'm blanking right now. And in the morning we would take coffee and doughnuts down to the county jail for an hour or two and just sit there, and anybody that was released, you know, you'd just greet them. So that was the work I came in September and then we got a house in Boyle Heights on Cummings Street. I forget. I think his name was Bill Von der Ahe. He was a priest with Dan Delaney. He was a priest, but he came from a wealthy family, the Vons market people and so he gave Dan the $5,000 to buy the house, and we bought the house. Then in the meantime, we got closed down on the soup kitchen. So we found a place to rent and Dan fixed it up, and we opened the kitchen, the soup kitchen, in January of '71. We were involved, of course, in service and hospitality, but the community was founded, really, I would say, almost in a kind of opposition both to the church and the state in some ways, and opposition to the war, that was a very important element, but clearly there was antipathy towards the institutional church, and so our newspaper reflected that. And, of course, as someone who came out of the Antiwar Movement, a lot of the stuff in the paper was about the war and resistance; The Pentagon Papers. Winter Soldier Investigation was really a big thing for us, which was the soldiers of Vietnam who gave testimony to all the atrocities that they had committed and just over and over documented what was not an aberration, but consistent policy of atrocities and terrorism committed by American troops. It was just a powerful, powerful work.
We worked with the farm workers a lot. I was very, very close to a lot of the organizers in the the farm workers. I think I might have told you, Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker, came out in that first year, it was December of 1970—no, it wasn't '70. I'm trying to think. I'll get it in a second. No, it must have been '71. So she came out for a trial for a draft resister, Pat Jordan, who was editor of The Catholic Worker at that time. So she came and testified, and Louis Vitale was one of the witnesses in the trial. So I got to meet Dorothy and interview her, and I got to drive her up to La Paz, where Cesar Chavez lived. I got to just sit there and hang out while they chatted. So that was really exciting for me. So it was about those social movements. Dan was very kind of steeped in nonviolent tradition, so we talked a lot about Gandhi and nonviolence and Martin Luther King.

Collings

So you saw the work as being kind of a launching pad for larger social mobilization.

Dietrich

Well, yeah. I think that maybe that's not quite the right term. I saw it as an integration of—and I don't know if I understood it that well at the time. I just knew that this was an environment where I was encouraged to participate in movements for social justice and antiwar, that that was part of our mission. So I think—I don't know. I mean, it took me a long time before—I mean, there was a part of me that used to think of myself as more

of an organizer as opposed to a dispenser of social compassion. In my older years, I understand it to be of one piece, somewhat hopefully integrated, but I don't really have aspirations for a job as a political or social activist organizer.

Collings

So it wasn't a sense of sort of bringing about a change in the structure of the government.

Dietrich

Well, yeah. That's the other thing that's a tough piece. Certainly when you're young and you're an activist, you have the illusion that you were going to make some kind of grand change, and the tenor of the times would give one that—

Collings

Yes. People used to say, "After the revolution."

Dietrich

Exactly. So, I mean, you're just kind of steeped in that element of the social milieu, I mean, you're just drenched with it, so you can't help but have that sense of that possibility. And, of course, when you're looking around and America's pulling out of Vietnam, the president is abdicating, and even my dad, who was pretty conservative at the time, he absolutely got that the whole thing was falling apart. I mean, he seriously thought that there was going to be a revolution in this country. So, I mean, if my dad thought that, you can see how easy it was for me to think that. But I think that if you're going to stay in this kind of work for any length of time, you just can't nurse those kinds of illusions, because you're bound to get disillusioned, and you have to see what you're doing as just doing your part for the long haul. I mean, biblically speaking, you're just planting seeds and you don't get to reap the harvest. I think that that's the important thing is that those kinds of political illusions are not helpful for the long haul. What's helpful is to ground yourself in some kind of tradition, some kind of spiritual tradition that sustains you, that you can see yourself as part of this historical tradition and you're just one little piece of that and you're just trying to do your piece. You don't want to have too grandiose a sense of what your piece is, because, after all, what are we doing? And that's the thing. You're just making soup and you're making beds and mopping the floor. This is like "women's work." It's like the work that nobody else wants to do, that has no status.

Collings

But it's so essential.

Dietrich

It is essential, and it's essential, I mean, that people see that that's being done. I mean, it's not a mass movement, but it does have a ripple effect. We have to believe that, and occasionally you get to see that. You get to see, like, people who've passed through here, they're still doing it twenty-five

years from now, so one takes heart from that and is encouraged by seeing others who caught the example and dedicated their lives to it. I mean, that's a big, major piece, but there are other things, smaller things. Really what it does is, what you want is people to go, "Oh. Oh, that's kind of like what Jesus was doing. Oh." It gives people—like, you want to be different from the larger commercial culture, and so you live in a different reality. You live a gift culture and not a consumerist culture, and you want to give witness to that, because the commercial culture is so ubiquitous, and so people lose this kind of imaginative possibility, so when they see others who've come together to live their lives in a different way, it sparks the imagination and it gives hope.

Collings

Right. I know that you don't have much more time today, but I wonder if you would share your memories or impressions of Dorothy Day and Cesar Chavez when you met them.

Dietrich

Wow. Well, I don't have a strong memory of Cesar, just that he was sitting in his rocker and he and Dorothy were chatting, so I don't have a specific memory of that conversation. What I do have is a memory of Dorothy as kind of like—I mean, for me, it was different for—I don't know what it was like for people who lived with her, but it was like having your grandmother visit and she would tell you stories about the olden days. So she would talk about early days of the movement, early days of the Antiwar Movement and the Labor Movement. You know, she was sometimes quite candid about how—well, I mean, it's one thing to be a scandal in the way of resisting the war, and being a scandal by living in poverty, but she actually talked about the scandalous situations in the Catholic Worker when the editor of The Catholic Worker ran off with the wife of some other—so she spoke of several kinds of sexually scandalous activities, and said, "I don't know why the church doesn't just kick us out." So I guess that's the other thing, too, is that even with Dorothy Day and her presence, it's still, like, a pretty tenuous kind of situation, and it does allow a great deal of freedom and it allows deal of spontaneity and a great deal of possibilities for the spirit to move, because you don't have this institutional structure. On the other hand, though, it also allows for a lot of chaos and a lot of kind of scandalous activities. So it was encouraging to me that Dorothy had lived in the midst of this and really had resisted the temptation to formalize the project on an institutional level with boards of directors and formal fundraising activities, so that it's still edgy in both ways. I mean, it's edgy in the sense that it can be spontaneous and creative, it's edgy in the sense that it could fall over the edge at any time, because there's no institution that's taking care of it. So that's, I think, what appealed to me initially about the Catholic Worker was that kind of—Dorothy wouldn't use the word "anarchist," but she used the

word "communitarian," but really just a kind of non-institutional, non-authoritarian. So I was attracted to that immediately.
You know, what I liked about Dorothy was I was drawn to the example of her lifetime commitment. I was drawn to her sense of compassion and her kind of sense of social justice. And I loved her early history. She was kind of a bohemian and she lived in Greenwich Village at the turn of the century when it wasn't artsy-fartsy. She hung out. She was a Communist. Well, she was a Socialist and a member of the IWW. She worked for two newspapers in New York. In fact, where was I reading—I was just reading recently that the University of Illinois was taking credit for her. I was in their alumni magazine, that one of their alumni was at the Catholic Worker, and the magazine mentioned Dorothy Day as an alumni. She didn't graduate. She left early and went to work in New York as a journalist. I think she probably wasn't twenty-one yet, worked for The Masses newspaper. I don't know, did you see the movie Reds?

Collings
Yes, a long time ago.

Dietrich
Well, she was supposed to be in that movie, but she was ill at the time. They had these—

Collings
Yes, the speaking parts.

Dietrich
Yeah. Because she knew all of those people. She knew Jack Reed and Emma Goldman, and she interviewed Trotsky. Of course, that's kind of a romantic period in the history of America. You know, it just has a glow about it, both this kind of political resistance and these artists, and—oh, god, I'm trying to think. She was good friends with the greatest American playwright. Where is Theresia when I need her? Mourning Becomes Electra, Long Day's Journey Into Night.

Collings
Tennessee Williams.

Dietrich
No, no, no. Shit. Theresia.

Theresia
Yes?

Dietrich
Long Day's Journey Into Night. Who wrote it?

Theresia
O'Neill.

Dietrich
So, I mean, you saw the movie. I mean, they all hung out together. So, I mean, that was really attractive to me that she just continued through a lifetime of kind of consistency.

De Vroom
Do mind if ask a question? Actually, one of the most controversial things about her was that she didn't want anyone to get into World War II. Did she ever talk to you about that?
Dietrich
She didn't talk to me, but it's pretty well known. Well, she worked actively against World War I, and so when World War II came, obviously Catholics were not opposed to the war, but even more controversial was her kind of opposition to the Spanish Civil War. I mean, obviously she had some affinity for the Republicans, and the entire Catholic Church is supportive of one of the Loyalists, whatever they were, Franco and the Nazis. But by the time World War II came on, well, the movement was divided. Lots of Catholic Workers went into the military, because you can see the movement's politically Left and was supportive of anti-Nazi work. And in fact, the Catholic Worker had been protesting at the Nazi embassy, and going down to protest when the Hindenburg came in, and I forget the name of that big German ship. But anyway, they were already protesting against the situation in Germany and particularly with respect to the Jews.
So the movement was already predisposed to being anti-Nazi, and so when the war comes along, lots of Catholic Workers signed up and there was a big conflict. Some Catholic Workers wouldn't have The Catholic Worker newspaper from New York because it maintained its pacifist position. A number of houses closed down and there was conflict in the movement. It was not a good time for The Catholic Worker. They had a subscription list of, like, some phenomenal—like 200,000 or something, because it took off kind of immediately. It kind of captured a particular imagination of the time. It was a kind of Catholic Leftist position at a time when it was acceptable to be Leftist. So it was snatched up by a lot of parishes and schools and stuff, so they had a big mailing list, but they lost more than half of that because of their pacifist position and about half of the houses closed. So throughout the war and throughout the fifties, the Catholic Worker was kind of limping along. I mean, it did not expand during post-war prosperity. It was only until the sixties that the Catholic Worker began to really have a major resurgence. I mean, it was down to, like, less than twenty houses. Now it's, like, around two hundred houses. A large factor is that many, many of the people are of my generation that started houses.
Collings
So the Catholic Workers that you ran into in Milwaukee, they were members of this kind of outlier Leftist, remnants of what was left of the Leftist wing?
Dietrich
No. Their house was a new house, and it was founded by somebody who was kind of younger, my age, maybe, and an antiwar kind of activist. So it had already started to have an impact on the Catholic Worker. I probably told you, Catholic Workers were the first ones to burn their draft cards. They

were the first ones to protest the war in Vietnam. When Vietnam had an embassy in some apartment building in New York City, they would go there and protest outside.

Collings
So would you say that this Leftist wing had a resurgence, then, during the Vietnam—

Dietrich
Right. I would say the resurgence is all about the Antiwar Movement. I would say also that the Catholic Worker, in its initial stages, was very much formed by the kind of cultural movement of the Labor Movement, that that was the energy that brought it together, that a lot of young people who were interested in labor activities and justice were drawn to the Catholic Worker.

Collings
But that was before the Vietnam War era.

Dietrich
Right. That was in the thirties.

Collings
Because when you think of the Vietnam era, you don't necessarily think of labor as being opposed.

Dietrich
No. So I think there are two elements. One, the initial founding of the Catholic Worker, a lot of the energy came out of the Labor Justice Movement. Then in the sixties, seventies, it was the Vietnam War that energized the movement.

Collings
Okay. Shall we leave it there for today? [End of October 5, 2012 interview]

1.3. SESSION THREE (November 16, 2012)

Collings
Today is November 16, 2012, Jane Collings interviewing Jeff Dietrich in Santa Monica. We are going to sort of go back in time to 1970. The month you said was—

Dietrich
September.

Collings
So it's September 1970, and you look around—

Dietrich
Okay. I look around. You know, I'm pretty much of a neophyte, so it's really kind of shocking that there's so many people on the streets. As I said, there wasn't the same kind of milieu of people, like, camping out on the streets. My sense is that there used to be more really, really low-cost housing, even like all-night movie theaters, which are no longer there. But that was one of

the places that people went to, particularly when it rained. So those kind of elements were still there. We were serving across the street from a Catholic entity on Skid Row called the Miserere House. It's still there. It's called the St. Vincent Center now, but the guys still call it the Misery Center. [laughs] Because it really was miserable. It smelled of disinfectant and it had chain-link fences inside, and the bathrooms smelled of vomit and urine. It was a kind of culture shock for a kid from the suburbs, but I wanted to be there. I wanted to experience that kind of, well, what I consider like a more real world than the suburbs. And I'm not putting that down, because it was very good to me, and the only reason I could do that kind of stuff was because I got taken care of when I was young and I had a very secure environment. You can be somebody who can easily give that up if you've had it and you don't have to strive for it. You've already had it. I was part of the Catholic Worker, very, very new to me, but I was also a draft resister and I had a political orientation and I also felt like I was not part of the dominant culture. I was very alienated from that, but I had also this sense from Dan Delaney, who really, he was just imbued with the Catholic Worker has a prophetic kind of perspective; that is, as in the prophet of the Old Testament that not only are you supposed to feed people and be compassionate and offer hospitality, but you're also supposed to address the issues that are causing the problem of poverty, and you're supposed to stand up and speak out.

So I already had that from my kind of youthful political involvement in the Peace Movement, but that was confirmed in a kind of spiritual way once I came to the Catholic Worker. I mean, it took a long time to figure that out, that that's what we're doing, that the political work is really grounded in the vision of the kingdom of god as the place of justice and compassion, and that we're supposed to be working towards that now. So that's my orientation.

Collings

So it was completely impossible to just do political work then, coming from that point of view.

Dietrich

Yes, from that point of view. I think it's a bit more holistic, but it's also, like, a bit more piecemeal, too, because I can't totally focus on the political stuff, because the actual work of operating a soup kitchen in the Hospitality House and living in community and trying to keep that all together, that's very time-consuming. Like people at LA CAN, they have the ability to focus full-time on that stuff. For me, it was just something that we could do periodically.

Collings

Because the actual work on the ground was—

Dietrich

The actual work on the ground was very consuming, very time-consuming. Fortunately, I was young at the time, so that didn't bother me so much as it does now. So that being said, I think one of the first—well, Dorothy Day came, the foundress of the Catholic Worker came a couple months after I got there. She was here for the trial of The Catholic Worker editor, Pat Jordan. He was a draft resister also. So she came out, and I've probably told you that we took a drive up to see the farm workers. I'd already been working with the farm workers, just volunteering on weekends at the boycott. That's where I really learned political activity.

Collings

Oh, because you hadn't talked about that.

Dietrich

Okay. I'll talk about it in a second, but just that Dorothy was here and we took her up to La Paz, where Cesar Chavez was, and they had a conversation and I got to sit in on that, just like a fly on the wall, but it was a significant moment for me, really a solidifying moment in some ways. And I was being recruited by the person that ran the newspaper, so it was interesting to me. I was doing the boycott on weekends. It turns out I'm really good at that kind of stuff. But it took me a little while to kind of—

Collings

When you say "that kind of stuff," what do you—

Dietrich

Well, what you're supposed to do is stand in front of a supermarket and ask people not to shop here. But one of the organizers in particular—I can't remember his name—he would come by and say, "How things going?" I go, "Oh—." And then he goes, "Just a second." He'd clear the fucking parking lot out in thirty minutes. I mean, the place would be empty. So I picked up on that.

Collings

How would he do that?

Dietrich

He'd just meet every car that came in and turn them away before they even got to the door. So I picked up on that. There were numerous times when store managers would come out and say that what I'm doing is assault because I would stand in front of people. Anyway, it's not like I wouldn't let them pass, but I made it difficult for them to get into the store. [laughter] So I got really good at that kind of stuff, and I just began to appreciate the political aspect of the farm workers and the whole issue of economic justice and labor unions. As you know, that's a significant part of the history of the Catholic Worker. One of the first things that Dorothy and the Catholic Workers did was to support the Merchant Marine strike, like in the thirties. I can't even remember. They would set up a soup kitchen and serve people, and just be in solidarity with the workers. So it was significant in the sense that I began to—and just the fact that Cesar Chavez was Catholic and that

Dorothy Day was, like, one of the original supporters of the UFW, so that was a real education for me.

Collings

So you're on Skid Row. First of all, would you mind saying just a word or two about the community that you found there at that time? Because later on, it's quite rather different, you suggested.

Dietrich

It is. When I came, Dan and Chris were living in Pasadena in one of those freeway, you know, state-owned houses that's supposed to be a freeway through Pasadena, that's never going to happen. But they were living there. They had a new baby, John. He's a former priest and she's a former Immaculate Heart nun. They were living with another couple who was a former priest and former nun, and another former priest. So there were like four or five people in the house. But Dan and Chris were doing the Catholic Worker.

Collings

And the people that you were working with on the street, how would you characterize them at that time?

Dietrich

It was a very, very different population. I feel like I came at the end of a particular era. You know, many people have predicted the end of Skid Row because of Social Security, because of welfare, because of any number of social reforms, and there had been a diminishment of population in skid rows. L.A.'s Skid Row was significantly different because—and this is my guess, is that after the war the urban renewal stuff went full force and started on the East Coast and moved progressively towards the West Coast, but it took a long time for it to get to L.A. What happened is that those skid rows were, like, wiped out, and wiped out in the name of good and building really great housing for people. The trouble is that when they rebuilt the housing, the people that were displaced couldn't afford it. So that begins, I think, the rise of homelessness in America. But Skid Row in Los Angeles was still, like, coherent. Bunker Hill was still like—I think the Music Center was in place, but it was surrounded by empty lots and it still is, many of them. So that was a loss of a great deal of housing, and housing activists had been really—what's his name? Is it Roy Wilkinson?

Collings

Frank.

Dietrich

Frank, yes. I mean, I didn't know him, and I just know that as kind of a little bit of history, but I know that that was a great struggle and that housing activists were already in place here in L.A. to try to do something about keeping Skid Row from being decimated like Bunker Hill because—okay. I'm getting a little bit ahead of the story.

Collings

That's okay.

Dietrich

But the population of Skid Row was still older white males. They were kind of dying off, and they were older white alcoholic males, and they were kind of the last of a particular breed of tramps and hoboes and itinerant workers. A lot of them, I think, still did some farm work or some kind of itinerant labor. They were marginally employed. As I said, you could be a deviant alcoholic and be, like, wiped out, but all you had to do was get yourself together a couple of days a week and go to day labor and you could make enough money to purchase housing, and then you would eat in the missions. So a lot of people had housing that they actually paid for themselves.

Collings

The SROs.

Dietrich

Yes. I mean, it was substandard, but it was very, very cheap. Nobody really wanted to live there except these people, but anyway, so—

Collings

I think you said that it was predominantly white at that time.

Dietrich

It was, yes. It's kind of like what you think of—

Collings

I'm thinking of the Bowery in New York City.

Dietrich

You're thinking of the Bowery. I'm thinking of a book called Hobohemia. It's just the last of that generation of people probably displaced by the Depression. So it was very different. So we were serving in a van. The police, as they are wont to do, called the Health Department on us, and so we closed down for a little while. We were cooking a meal at St. Joseph's Church, the Franciscan church. We asked the Franciscans if we could serve in their church, and they said, "If you find a place, we'll rent you a place." So Dan Delaney found a place. It was called the Regal Annex. It had been damaged in the earthquake. He was pretty handy. I mean, we all worked together, but he had kind of the vision and he really did train me, too, about what the vision is, that it's not only a soup kitchen, but we're going to have a Law Center and we're going to have a legal clinic and a medical clinic. So that was kind of imprinted on my forehead. He really was my teacher. Chris was also my teacher. I still can't go past the bathroom if there's no toilet paper on the roller. She would get so pissed. It seems a sign of kind of irresponsibility. It speaks of a frat house. [laughter]

Anyway, so Dan fixed up the kitchen and we opened the kitchen in probably, like, January of '71. First thing we did, even before the kitchen opened, we had David Harris, Joan Baez, his wife. He had just gotten out of prison for draft resistance and organized a California initiative to have people vote

against the bombing of, I don't know, like North Vietnam or something. So he came and spoke, and we got involved in that campaign.

Collings

How did people in the Skid Row community receive him and other such speakers?

Dietrich

None of them came to that. It was basically our supporters from our mailing list that came. So that was probably one of the first campaigns that I worked on. I was pretty good at getting signatures, and, as I said, the farm workers. Do you want to talk about the blood strike?

Collings

Yes. What was the blood strike? In your book you suggested that it was following the model of the United Farm Workers Union. So how did the blood issue come to your attention?

Dietrich

It was just kind of a fluke. But there were a whole lot of whole Blood Banks on Skid Row and it was a kind of significant source of income for people.

Collings

Sure.

Dietrich

We met Ray Correo, who was going to Claremont College, a graduate course in ethics or something. So it was a project that he had in mind, I think maybe as part of his ethics course. He was a bit of a charismatic kind of person. He just came up with this idea, like, trying to get more money and better care for the people who gave blood. I think we might have met Ray because he was a friend of David Harris. I'm not sure how he found us. But Ray had been in the navy during the Vietnam War. What did he do? What's that book about the soldier in World War II that gets executed for desertion? It's pretty famous.

De Vroom

Kowalski? The movie, the Sheen movie?

Dietrich

Yes.

De Vroom

Martin Sheen. Yes, I can go look if you want, but it's Private Kowalski. Is that his name?

Dietrich

It's Private something. It's not Saving Private Ryan.

De Vroom

Kowalski is the guy's name.

Dietrich

So anyway, he fasted for, like, sixty-five days and ultimately got, like, a dishonorable discharge from the navy because he refused to go on board the Kitty Hawk that was going to sail to Vietnam. So he was very politically

oriented, and he came with this idea, and, I mean, it sounded great, it sounded interesting, but it was even more than that. We did some preliminary work. We had a press conference, and first time I ever wrote a press release. I was shocked the next day when every news outlet in the city was there, because I think it had a kind of intriguing appeal. I mean, it's Skid Row and it's blood, and everybody can relate to blood. And the day after that, we were on the front page of the Times. And the day after that, we were the subject of an editorial in the Times. So this was like the first thing that we ever did, and we're going, "Oh, this is really interesting."
It was a really hard kind of campaign because it was six weeks, and I lived in the basement of the soup kitchen with about six or seven of the homeless people from Skid Row, and we would get up at six in the morning and go to the Blood Bank and picket in front of the Blood Bank, and we got threatened with bomb threats and bodily harm. So, clearly, we were having some effect on the project.

Collings

Were you able to convince people who wanted to go to the Blood Bank and sell their blood—

Dietrich

That was the deal, and that's why it was kind of like—

Collings

—to not do it?

Dietrich

—the United Farm Workers. We would just go, "This is what we're doing. We're trying to get more money. We're boycotting this place right now. Could you go across the street to that place?"

Collings

Okay. Because I was wondering if it would be really a hard sell otherwise.

Dietrich

Right. So we would turn significant numbers of people away to go to the other side of the street. Not a big sacrifice. And a lot of people related to that, would say, "Oh, great," because, you know, like, five bucks is not a lot when you're selling your life's blood, particularly when the markup is so enormous."

Collings

The markup is high. Right.

Dietrich

So what ultimately happened was that there was already a movement afoot in the state legislature to do something about Blood Banks, that there was some concern about basically hepatitis. At that time there was no AIDS. Anyway, we kind of testified—Ray testified before the legislature, and ultimately what happened was that they closed down the Blood Banks, which wasn't our goal, you know. [laughs]

Collings

So how did that kind of blowback affect you there in Skid Row? Were people angry with your organization?

Dietrich

We changed our focus to plasma banks for a while. But basically, I mean, I don't know. I think what you do is to—at least for me, because I don't have a whole lot of winning campaigns. And I forget, somebody said the only things worth fighting for are the things that you're probably never going to win. And to quote Leonard Cohen, we're supposed to be beautiful losers, because you fought the good fight and you hung in there and you stayed true to your values. So, I don't know, I mean, for me, that's what it is, and I'll struggle with anybody that wants to stand up for the poor and for justice, and I don't expect to win, but I think that what you desire is that, even if nobody reads it, you left a record of some kind of integrity. So you always think that what you're doing is not—I mean, you really have to tell yourself that you're probably not going to see results in your lifetime, that you're just planting seeds. So that was a blood strike. Right in the midst of that, that's when the community kind of blew up again. The Delaneys had left maybe the year before.

Collings

Right. If you want to sort of jump over to that. You had said that there was a struggle with the young Turks led by Jeff Dietrich. [laughter]

Dietrich

Right. Well, I was a young Turk. I was the leader of the young Turks, and much to the Delaneys' credit, we had a pretty significant struggle. They, like much of everything, I mean, everything was in place. The kitchen was there. I mean, I did the newspaper, but I did it under the auspices of the Catholic Worker, Dan and Chris. We not only had a kitchen, but we had a house. It wasn't paid for and it had significant mortgage, but the structure was already there, which is, I think, really the hard thing for people who are kind of starting from scratch is, first of all, to get the capital just to do anything. And then you're kind of like a neophyte and you're kind of starting from—so you're practically inventing the wheel. And it's a non-institutional situation and so you're kind of creating a—oh, shit, what's that word? Out of nothing.

De Vroom

[unclear].

Dietrich

Thanks. So just to give them such credit for what they set up, and that they left with such grace. They could have taken the mailing list, because that was all their friends.

Collings

Wow. Well, what was the struggle about?

Dietrich

[laughs] I believe that we're not unique. We've gone through this many numerous times. Well, even if you work for—fuck, even if you work for

UCLA, the issue is always about power and who's in and who's out, but it's more raw when you don't have flow charts and structures. It's just head-to-head. So when the Delaneys left, I'd get up early and get stuff done, which is not my forte. I started to look like an authoritarian asshole, and my friend Danny Bender [phonetic] took umbrage at that. Then I think, like, when the blood strike came and all this media and everything, I think it really rankled him because I was getting all the attention. Anyway, like, he got drunk and tore the house up, I mean literally like the furniture downstairs went out the door and the furniture upstairs came down the stairs or out the window. And later, I tried to avoid going there because I could feel the anger. So, anyway, I hid out for a while, and so we're still carrying on the blood strike and everything. But ultimately I went back and he was going to, like, pummel me. I threw myself on my knees and started praying the "Our Father" out loud. I was so pissed. Well, he didn't pummel me, okay, so anyway. But it was just a tumultuous time.

Collings

So this was trying to just figure out how you were going to serve this mission and work it all through with all the various personalities involved.

Dietrich

We hadn't come close to that yet. I mean, I'm still, like, too—

Collings

And you also had in the eighties what you called the big breakup from thirty-six live-in members to six.

Dietrich

There you go.

Collings

And the core community began rethinking and rearticulating their mission. So is this all sort of a piece?

Dietrich

Well, I mean, after Danny left—I'll tell you what. During the blood strike, Catherine Morris, Sister Catherine, and I became great comrades and she would hide me out in the convent, but we just got to be really, really close. I mean, every night we would go mimeograph leaflets. So she was just a kind of 24/7 kind of comrade. So what happened was that we had the blood strike and then in the summer I took a vacation. I was really, really—you know, it was only two years, but when you're twenty-four, two years is a long time in your life.

Collings

For sure.

Dietrich

And, frankly, I've never had a more tumultuous time since then, thank god, but it was physically and emotionally tumultuous, and I was ready to take up the Farm Workers' offer. I was thinking, "Boy, I would really like to have a job where I didn't have to be in charge." Anyway, so I took this trip and I

kind of thought about Catherine. So when I came back, Dorothy Day was here at the house. She had been arrested with the farm workers. I think this is ’72, and there was a big strike up in Fresno and a lot of Catholic religious people were arrested in support of the farm workers. So Dorothy was arrested, as well my wife, Catherine. So they were in jail together for, like, two weeks. Then Dorothy couldn’t leave the state, so she came back to—I mean the conditions of her release were that you had to remain in the State of California. So she came to the Catholic Worker, and basically I tried to avoid seeing her as much as I could because I was really planning on leaving.

Collings

And you were thinking about taking up the Farm Workers’ job?

Dietrich

Yeah, I was, not before I went on a long pleasure trip or something, but that was my next kind of option. So Dorothy was there and then she left, and so we had a community meeting and I just said I was leaving. Then at that same meeting, Catherine said she was leaving. So I walked her to the car and I’d been thinking about maybe—you know, it was just like, what if I married somebody that really wanted to do what I wanted to do and actually did it better? So, anyway, I asked her to marry me that night. I thought that she was just—well, of course I was thinking she would say no. And she did. And I said, “Well, why?”

And I thought she’d say, “Well, because I’m a nun. Because I have vows.” But she didn’t say that. She said, “Because I’m too old.” She was, like, twelve years older. Well, she still is twelve years older. [laughter] And I thought, “Oh, man, that’s so lame. Of course we can get over that one.” So anyway, after about a couple of weeks, she consented to marry me, and so we got married in ’73, and that was really kind of the basis of—I mean, as I said, I was out the door at that point. But when we got married, I mean, we never formally stated that, but it was just that it was basically that we were both going to do this together. It’s a pretty hard thing to do by yourself. So that gave me a kind of psychic stability to just hang in there, and I knew at that point that it was a life’s commitment. I don’t know. I guess our relationship is so anomalous that it might not work anywhere else but the Catholic Worker, but it has worked well for the Catholic Worker. It’s been a significant foundation for the community. So that was ’73. I guess maybe ’74 or so, Catherine saw an article in the paper about the City Council meeting about Skid Row and redevelopment on Skid Row. I mean, we were still quite new to the area, and so she went down to City Hall. I don’t know if you’ve ever been to a City Council meeting.

Collings

I’ve seen them a little bit on TV.

Dietrich

Well, it's just that they always have people standing up, and half of the people that stand up are a little wacky and they're there all the time, and I don't think anybody gets listened to because the decisions are already made someplace else. It's pro forma. It's just a show of democracy.
Anyway, Catherine spoke. I think she cried. Afterwards, she was deluged by lawyers who wanted to represent her, who wanted her to be their client. Legal Aid Foundation—I can't remember the guy's name, but he was probably pretty important in terms of housing issues.

Collings

Gary Blasi, maybe?

Dietrich

No. It was actually even before Gary Blasi, but Gary would know the guy. And there might have been some ACLU people there too, but I remember the guy from—god. Anyway, Catherine's going, "I don't want to do it. You have to go next time." So I went next time. Anyway, they ended up, what they wanted and what they were looking for and what they didn't have was a client. They were looking for somebody from Skid Row that they could represent, and we were the only—all of the missions, they had no kind of social justice vision. So we were the only ones that were really available, and so we kind of fell into this and they just, like, prepped me, and they hooked me up with Community Design Center and Gary Squier. Gary Squier was an intern at the time, but what's his name, the director, used to be the director of Skid Row Housing Trust.

Collings

Oh, I know who you mean, but I can't think of the name either.

Dietrich

So we kind of plotted together and then we brought out this kind of quote, unquote—

Collings

I think Paul Zimmerman was sort of his protégé.

Dietrich

Oh, is that right?

Collings

At the Design Center.

Dietrich

It could be. He's still around, right? Fuck, what's his name? I'll think of it in a minute.

Collings

I don't think it was Marvin. I don't think it was Marvin Adelson.

Dietrich

No. Bonar.

Collings

Bonar. Oh, yes, Jim Bonar.

Dietrich

Jim Bonar. So I'm working with the Community Design Center and we come up with this idea. Well, there's this guy named Leonard Bloomberg and he worked on Philadelphia Redevelopment or something, but had the kind of social end of the project, and so we brought him out as our quote, unquote, "expert." He taught at Temple and he had some credentials. We kind of gathered, or they did, folks from Redevelopment and the folks from—there might have been some council people there. I don't know. Then Gary Squier and myself wrote a kind of alternative plan to the Silver Book. The Silver Book was the plan that would wipe out Skid Row, put the USC Extension on Fifth Street and all kinds of—so we had an alternative plan. It actually got adopted largely because—I mean, I was just always a little nervous working with these people because—you know, so I get appointed to—not the board of the CRA, but one of the project area committees. And there's all these businesspeople on the board, but it turned out, like, Frank Rice was a closet Democrat. He was the vice president of Bullock's Department Store. He was the representative of the Central City Association. So the Central City Association—and this is why it was so weird to me. I mean, I didn't understand the politics at the time. It just felt so easy. Everything fell into place, and just feeling like, "Am I being duped or what?" It was the plan was a good plan, it was good for people, but it was so—I thought you had to man the barricades to get anything. So it just went so smoothly.
But in retrospect, what seemed to happen was that Bradley got elected and he's kind of rethinking the redevelopment stuff for downtown, and the businesspeople, you know, they have an agenda, but it's not detrimental to Skid Row and it's actually, like, kind of positive for Skid Row people. So I'm working with these folks and the plan gets passed. We actually founded the Skid Row Development Corporation, hired Martha Brown Hicks. She worked for Housing in Santa Monica. She was just this very, very dynamic African American woman and charming, and she could charm her way into any councilman's office and charm money out of them. And the same with the feds. She already had like a kind of relationship with people from HUD. So it rather quickly developed into a kind of very healthy service entity, and the first of its kind. I mean, it's the first entity on Skid Row that was not a mission.

Collings

So you're talking about the Skid Row Housing Cooperative?

Dietrich

No. All right, there's something that precedes that. It's called the Skid Row Development Corporation. It's still there. We had a set of projects, kind of employment projects, so they built a building. And they have a transitional center. But they actually were instrumental in getting the little park set up downtown.

Collings

And there was a food co-op as well, wasn't there, at that time?

Dietrich
That was Catholic Worker. So it was good, but it always plagued me that it was so easy to do. But what happened was the Bradley administration was there, they were rethinking, and the head of the Redevelopment Agency was Jim Wood, James Wood. He was the head of the AFL-CIO. So we had the support of city hall, the unions, CRA, and the Central City Association. Well, of course everything's going to go smoothly. I just didn't realize that I actually was in the midst of really kind of basically all the players.
The basic tradeoff was that Skid Row would be consolidated, that the missions on Main Street and Los Angeles Street would be centralized into more of the heart of Skid Row. Then the other thing was that the people at the Redevelopment Agency were pretty progressive. They thought the housing should be saved and that it shouldn't be just wiped out.
Collings
The SRO housing.
Dietrich
Yes. So I believe that they came up with this plan of saving the housing. So ultimately they ended up spinning off a nonprofit called SRO, and they hired Andy Raubeson from Portland, great, great guy, really just a really saintly guy. Fuck, he was a cop. [laughs] I can't believe it. He was also an orphan. He was raised in an orphanage. He just had a real compassion for people. He would walk the streets. I mean, there are a lot of nonprofit organizations on Skid Row now, but there's nobody that walks the streets unattended without their personal security guards. [laughs]
Collings
Oh, really?
Dietrich
Well, yeah.
Collings
Without a personal security guard?
Dietrich
I'm talking about the executive directors. Well, Martha would walk the streets. So, yeah, a lot of things kind of spun out of that, the SRO. Then I think maybe around 1980, Alice Callaghan came on the scene.
Collings
Introduce her.
Dietrich
Alice Callaghan is an Episcopal priest. She actually had been in the same religious order as my wife, Catherine. Alice entered the order when she was, I think, seventeen and just out of high school. Actually, my wife has known Alice since she was seventeen. She's my age now. She's probably sixty-five. So, anyway, she started Union Station in Pasadena. She worked for All Saints Church and then she became a priest. So she was kind of casting

about for a mission, and I said, "Well, why don't you come down to Skid Row." Because at that time, all of these Latino families lived on Skid Row.

Collings

What year was this?

Dietrich

Sometime in the late seventies, there was a movement, a rather massive movement, an influx of undocumented people, families moving into SRO housing. I think what happened was that—I mean, I don't know the larger economic issues, but I know specifically that some of the coyotes were familiar with the Skid Row area and the availability of pretty low-cost housing. Now, these were ten-by-ten hotel rooms that a family of ten might live in and sleep on the floor. So they would move in with all these kids. So Alice came down to work with the families, and she started a center just down the street from our soup kitchen. It was basically, like, initially a service center, but then she got into the housing issue pretty strongly and she was very close with a lot of the planners at the Redevelopment Agency, and she was quite an advocate for housing.

So a couple of things that she did. The first thing that she did, in addition to the service center, was that she had this very close relationship with the Redevelopment Agency, and what she would do is work with the Redevelopment Agency and with the city attorney, because the people in this housing were—it was illegal and it was really unsanitary, but nobody wanted to do anything because they didn't want the news coming out and seeing all these homeless families on the street and being evicted from their housing. So they didn't know what to do about it. Alice kind of came up with this plan that she would get relocation money for every family. So she would start with one hotel and she would just go through and offer people like $5,000 and help them to move, get them furniture, and get them into a more appropriate housing. So one by one, hotel by hotel. And then when that hotel was cleared out of families, then the city attorney would step in, and maybe before that, and just say, "All right. You cannot rent to multiple peoples. This is an SRO. You have to rent to a single person." So essentially what she was doing was moving the families out, really changing the landscape of Skid Row that had changed drastically because of this influx, and bringing it back to what it originally was always was, basically, a place for single men. So as she was doing this, she began to realize that saving this housing was really important. The CRA was already onboard with this and they already had the SRO, but Alice's thinking they're going too slow. And her plan is to just "Buy up as many hotels as I possibly can." So I think Gary Squier ultimately worked for her for a while. As you know, Jim Bonar worked for her for a while. So, in addition to moving the families out, what she sees is the important thing is to save this housing and to really save it for the marginal and poor who tend to be single men. So she founded the group called the Skid Row Housing Trust, and up until very recently—well,

she was the president and founder, but she was always on the board. And it just came as a terrible shock to her, just last year, that she thought that she had saved all the housing and that it was kind of in perpetuity, but as it turns out, Councilwoman Perry says what they asked the Skid Row Housing Trust, or they suggested, "What we'd like to do is to change this housing on Main Street to mixed-use, to low-income,." You know, we're talking 40,000-a-year income, as well as homeless people or formerly homeless people. And Alice thought that they couldn't do that, because the charter is really about the poorest of the poor. But it turns out that they can do that, and it turns out that the offer was really good. And Alice said, "Turn it down." And three of the board members said, "Turn it down," because it sets a precedent. She bought that hotel—I think it was the Genesis—really to draw a line in the sand that, "This is the battleground. This is our turf," and really to piss on it by putting poor people in there. This is even before the forces of gentrification had started, but she could foresee that happening. So the forces of gentrification are such now that it turns out that the City Council can change those charters if they want to, which was a shock to her. Anyway, she ended up resigning, and that's a significant chunk of her life. So I know it was very disappointing, if not demoralizing.

Collings

Well, as you say, the Gentrification Movement did start, and the SRO housing is quite diminished now. Would you like to describe that process in the downtown area as you saw it from your vantage point?

Dietrich

I just read something—who was it? Carol Schatz. You know Carol Schatz?

Collings

No.

Dietrich

Well, she's the director of the Central City Association and she was one of the, if not the person who introduced and got passed through this—I think it's called creative re-use or something for old office buildings.

Collings

Right. Such as that bank building which is now a condo project and so forth.

Dietrich

Exactly. I guess it was probably in the late eighties, early nineties, and Tom Gilmore was one of the first to take advantage of that. So, I mean, he got, I think, significant money from the city to start the project. So that's been going at a pretty heavy kind of pace for the last twenty years or so. I also think that the Grand Avenue Project, the kind of nexus of Cathedral, Music Center, art buildings, and the Convention Center, the whole kind of concept to tie it all together as a kind of promenade or something, I mean, that's in the works and has been for a long time. And Eli Broad. Well, you know he's building an art gallery on Grand Avenue. I can remember maybe eight years ago or so—I wish I had the article, but it was in the Times that Carol Schatz

and Eli Broad, and Broad was saying how—and this was in print, that, "The problem with downtown is all the homeless people and we really have to do something about that." So that's why Carol Schatz and, I don't know, maybe the mayor, certainly some council people took a high-profile trip to New York City to meet with—oh, who was the police chief of New York? Bratton, Bill Bratton. I mean, he had kind of—

Collings

The Broken Windows.

Dietrich

Broken Windows, yeah. So, I mean, it was just clear that there was—I mean, the pressure was not only from just Tom Gilmore and the developers along Main Street and Spring Street, that it also was from higher up, the highest levels of civic power. So then they hired Bill Bratton, and it took him a year or two, maybe two years, before they introduced Safer Cities. I forget, I think it was 2008.

Collings

Let's see. I think that we've got that in the timeline. Well, starting sort of 2006.

Dietrich

2006, yeah. Well, once it started, it went like gangbusters, block by block.

Collings

So how did it seem to you and your group on the street? Safer Cities Initiative is the new game in town. What did that look like?

Dietrich

Well, I'm really grateful for Gary Blasi's research into it, because gathering all that information, you really have to—they don't print it up. The authorities deliberately don't print it up so that it's easy to document. So they had to go to a lot of sources to figure out that in the city, in the first year of Safer Cities Initiative, the police issued 10,000 jaywalking tickets—I mean 10,000 tickets, most of them were for jaywalking, and it was supposed to be all about this crime stuff. And even the crime things that they did, they weren't violent crimes that were going down. So what they would do is they had something called a buy-bust program. An undercover police officer would go up to a person, a Skid Row person, "Do you have a rock that I could buy? I'll pay you twenty-five bucks." Well, that's an exorbitant amount, apparently. So the guy would go, "No, I don't, but let me go get one. But can I have a hit?" So he'd come back with the rock, and then he'd get busted for dealing. So, I mean, the city attorney's all in on this too. And the plea bargain deal is, "Okay, you get two years for this. If you want to take it to trial, you could get six years for this in the state prison." But the whole idea is to get people off the street. You can put people in jail for jaywalking and sleeping on the street, but they're out in a few days, but if you put them in prison for a couple of years—so there's 250 of those in one year. But then people go to state prison, they're locked up for a couple

of years. Well, they come back to the same place. It's just that now they're not eligible for food stamps. They're not eligible for housing. So it boggles the mind that this is a kind of program that is supposed to—no, it's really just a program of harassment, and all I can see from it is that the objective is to make life on the streets so intolerable that somehow people will go away.

Collings

Self-deportation.

Dietrich

Exactly. But it just hasn't happened. I mean, if you go down at night, the encampments are still there. They're not there in the daytime, for the most part, but at nighttime they're still there, because we won a court battle that the judge said, "You can't put people in jail for sleeping on the streets unless you have some alternative for them." So that was, like, six years ago and that is still in place, and Carol Schatz has been working assiduously to try to get rid of it.

Collings

Is that the court decision that you were sort of very surprised by, that you wrote about in one of your—

Dietrich

No. The one you're talking about is more recent. It had to do with the shopping carts and taking people's property. But even that, we won in the federal court, the local federal court. The city appealed it. We won in the Ninth Circuit Court. But what's happening now, I mean, we won in the Ninth Circuit Court. It was, like, a month and a half ago. All right. So the police do not take people's property. They don't take people's shopping carts. Here's what they do. The red shirts take them.

Collings

The red shirts?

Dietrich

Yes. The private security guards operated by Central City East Association. All of the BIDs downtown, the Business Improvement Districts, there are four of them: the Central City Association, the Historic Core, the Fashion District, Little Tokyo, and the Arts District. All have a Business Improvement District, and property owners get a surcharge tax that's collected by the county and then given to the Business Improvement District as an operating budget. So they hire private security guards, they hire trash collectors, and they do kind of advertising, promotion of the business district. So the private security guards now take the shopping carts. And so my wife was there—no, no. Somebody was eating in the soup kitchen, and I said, "Catherine." And she goes over and the private security guards are taking somebody's property.

Collings

Inside the soup kitchen?

Dietrich
No, across the street. And it's on the truck, and the guy comes running out and he says, "Hey, that's my property!" And the private security guard goes, "I'm sorry. You have to go to the warehouse. They're taking it to a warehouse." "But it's my property." And Catherine's going, "It's his property." "I'm sorry. That's the procedure." "But you're stealing my property." "Well, why don't you call the police." Well, the police are already there. They're standing there watching this. It's part of a program.
Okay, so then the guy goes down—this is not the same guy, but a different situation—goes down with LA CAN to file a criminal complaint. "They stole my property." And the cops are going—the guy at the desk is starting to tell General Dogon, who is recording all of this, that—
Collings
Who's General Dogon?
Dietrich
From LA CAN. And suddenly the sergeant comes up and say, "No, I'll take care of this." But basically they refused to file a criminal complaint. So this is how they get around the injunction. Anyway, you win one victory, and one step forward, two steps backward.
Collings
Do you have time today to talk about the shopping cart or shall we come back for that?
Dietrich
We should probably come back, yeah.
Collings
Shall I turn off now?
Dietrich
Yeah.
Collings
Okay.
Dietrich
Thank you. It's delightful. [End of November 16, 2013 interview]

1.4. SESSION FOUR (December 7, 2012)

Collings
Today is December 7, 2012, Jane Collings interviewing Jeff Dietrich in Santa Monica. Just a little bit off tape, we were talking about the characterization of particularly your strategy, which kind of flies a little bit in the face of how you were painting it last time, of going to City Council people and saying that, "Skid Row's going to be redeveloped, and we're going to be moving the soup kitchen to your district." And then as a result of that, Gary Squier came

up with the containment strategy and there was complete buy-in because of the pressure. So you were going to respond to that characterization.

Dietrich

Right. So, as I remember it, as I told you, I just went to the City Council meeting and I was suddenly overwhelmed by the response of the opposition, you know, our side, and people wanted to represent me. So, god, the guy from Legal Aid—oh, Jesus, I can't remember his name, but he's the one, I think, that put me in touch with the Community Design Center. And I don't remember—I might have been reading Leonard Bloomberg's book, but they probably were too. I mean, it was kind of social fallout of redevelopment. He was from Philadelphia, and he was very amenable to coming out and talking with us just as an approach, a kind of social justice approach or a kind of social welfare approach of just trying to figure out how to be human in this process of redevelopment.

And apparently the Philadelphia people were amenable to that, and so he did a lot of social work and really almost went person-to-person to try to diminish that Skid Row population by getting people housed. So that was some thoughts that he brought to L.A., and we met, I think, as I said, with some of the City Council who came—the Community Design Center hosted him and invited these people mostly from the Redevelopment Agency. And then, as I said, I think that the mayor of Los Angeles or whoever was in charge of hiring the head of Redevelopment, hired somebody who was very, very amenable to a kind of concern about the human outfall of redevelopment. So he was really approachable.

So, anyway, my thought is that it was a fortuitous moment in which the mayor was pretty approachable, he was new and he wanted to do the right thing, and he was a Democrat, for god's sake. He appointed the head of the AFL-CIO, Jim Wood, to the CRA. He was amenable. I mean, he wanted to do good stuff. He wanted to take care of his workers, but he also wanted the process to not be draconian, and so he was also amenable. I mean, there were lots of things that he did wrong, but I think he had a good heart. Then, as I said, the Central City Association was on our side. I mean, if they're on your side, you can't lose. I mean, they own the city, and if they're not on your side, you're not going to get anywhere. So, I mean, it's only in retrospect that I began to understand the dynamics of it all, that it was a pretty unique and singular situation historically that allowed for these things to happen, particularly when you consider what the Silver Book looked like. I mean, it was one of those like [demonstrates], you know, kind of like wipe the whole thing out and create a vacant lot and go from there. So they had plans, or they had dreams of turning it into, like, an extension of USC and putting a library there, and it had nothing to do with the people that were already there and that had been there historically for over a hundred years. So, but I do like—you know, it's a great description. [laughs]

Collings

It sounds like this was a period perhaps informed by the thinking around the War on Poverty and some of the—

Dietrich

I certainly think so. I think it was a little after that.

Collings

Yes. But some of these ideas were circulating through.

Dietrich

Yes. And I also think that the people who did housing advocacy in the fifties and sixties, they probably had already protested Bunker Hill. God, in 1970, if you went up to Bunker Hill, it looked like a wasteland. So I think that there was a really informed set of folks that had been working on this stuff forever. I was in the unique situation of being the only person—the only kind of—I don't want to say credible, but the only organization in the Skid Row area that had that kind of progressive perspective already, so they were anxious to have me as a client. So I was a client. And I think that the Legal Aid Foundation, they had a suit already against the city, probably many, but around the redevelopment stuff, and they'd already been working with the Design Center.

Collings

So it sounds like it's in direct contrast to what you're dealing with in the context of the Safer Cities Initiative.

Dietrich

Oh, absolutely. It's night and day, night and day. And it wasn't until my friend Ernie Savage, who's making a film on Skid Row, I mean, he had this great just historical analysis. I mean, he's basically a Marxist. [laughs] But he kind of had a sense of who the power players were and a sense that what had happened in the seventies was really unique, and he understood that it was exactly what I said, that it was this kind of fortuitous convergence of unlikely forces, of labor, of downtown business, and the Mayor's Office. You don't get much—Wendy Greuel, who's running for mayor now, I mean, I think she might have been an intern at the time, but I think she still has a memory of that experience.

Collings

Well, that's very interesting. So to sort of contrast with that, you had mentioned last time, as we were finishing up, you were talking about the incident of the shopping cart being confiscated.

Dietrich

Right. This was just yesterday.

Collings

This was a different incident, and you had mentioned General Dogon, Steve Richardson, with the camera from LA CAN, and I saw something, sort of a blog post about him, that he's faced arrest and prosecution for his videotaping efforts and other—

Dietrich

Well, I don't—

Collings

And that these recent criminalization retaliation efforts are just more examples of the LAPD and city attorney's ongoing targeting of community leaders who oppose the Safer Cities Initiatives and its efforts to criminalize the residents of Skid Row. So, once again, night and day, as you were saying.

Dietrich

Oh, totally. Totally. And as I told you, we won that Ninth Circuit Court decision, and we celebrated briefly. And the police do not take our shopping carts or people's stuff, but what they've done is that the—we all know what a BID—

Collings

Business—

Dietrich

—Improvement District, and so the Central City East Association BID is now doing exactly—yesterday.

Collings

With the red shirts.

Dietrich

Yes!

Collings

So what happened yesterday?

Dietrich

Well, they did exactly what—well, not exactly. They came and they confiscated two shopping carts across the street.

Collings

Again?

Dietrich

Yes. And so my wife was kind of negotiating with them. She's the good cop. I'm the bad cop. So I was just infuriated. I went out there and said, "This is my shopping [unclear]." And the private security guards, they speak cop-speak, "Well, we can't do anything about it now. We've already put it on the truck. I'm just doing my job." "Well, your job is stealing my property." So I get up on the truck and he says, "Sir, you have to get down from there." I said, "What are you going to do about it?" He says, "Just touch me and you'll find out what I'm going to do about it." And they were pulling out the handcuffs. I'm sure that they'd already called the police, but the police weren't there yet. They were going to take me down, and I'm sorry that they didn't, because we had a camera there. And I'm going, "You have no authority to arrest anybody, and, yes, I'm on your truck, but I have every right to be on your truck to take my property back. This is my property. I have ten witnesses here who say that this is my property. You have to give it back to me." "Sir, you'll have to talk to my—." "I don't want to talk to your

fucking supervisor." So, anyway, I'm, of course, you know, in high gear. I was careful not to touch him, as he was careful not to touch me, but it was clear they wanted to do something, and I wish they had. They had the handcuffs out, and I would have loved for them to take me down and put me on the ground and put handcuffs on me, and have that on tape as I'm trying to get my property back.
Sorry. I do get—I mean, it's just an infuriation that they believe that the Ninth Circuit Court decision or at least they claim to believe, or at least they've been told by their superiors that that doesn't apply to them, that it only applies to the police. Well, last time I checked the Constitution, the court covers everybody. All individuals within the southwest region have to comply with the law.

Collings
And they're a private security force.

Dietrich
They are and they really like it. They all want to be cops and, you know, they have that kind of—well, I don't know. I call it cop-speak. I don't know. You have to go to school to learn it, you know. "Could you please step back from the car, sir?"

Collings
It's a kind of a technocratic language.

Dietrich
It is, yeah. And I hate it from cops, but from these guys, from these wannabe guys, just—plus they're taking my property and they think they have every right to do it.

Collings
And when you said that you had a camera there, was that—

Dietrich
Somebody with a cell phone.

Collings
Oh, I see. Okay. And just to fill in the history a little bit, what do you know of General Dogon and LA CAN and the videotaping work? Has that been something that you have been a part of, you know, that you witnessed?

Dietrich
Right. I am very, very supportive of LA CAN. For years the Catholic Worker and Alice Callaghan, I mean, we worked—we still work closely with Alice, but she kind of backed away from the kind of street actions, and we didn't do a lot, but we did a few and some pretty fun ones. So she was kind of our mentor and leader, well, really from the eighties through till about 2005 or so and it kind of became clear that she wasn't going to move.
After Safer Cities, and really what it was that there seemed to be a big change in the L.A. Times, and so both of us for a long time had gotten Op-Ed pieces—oh, and she could call up a reporter who would come down and cover our pretty flaky little demonstration. There were four of us, or five or

ten of us blockading the mayor's bathroom or something, but they would cover it. And they stopped doing that kind of stuff. And, in fact, the whole tenor of at least their reportorial staff—whew, oh, god, it was just horrible. I mean, it's like all the police had to do was put out a bulletin and they reprinted it and never asked any questions. And particularly with Safer Cities, I believe that—well, I'm certain, I mean, if you read—are you familiar with the Manhattan Project?

Collings
Sure.

Dietrich
Yeah. Okay, good. [laughter]

Collings
Not personally.

Dietrich
Not the atom bomb.

Collings
Oh. What?

Dietrich
It's a think tank, a conservative think tank really directed towards "reclaiming," quote, unquote, public spaces from the homeless.

Collings
Oh, no. Not at all. Let's hear about this.

Dietrich
Well, write it down. You should check that out. And so they're the ones promoting the Safer Cities stuff. When William Bratton came to L.A., he brought the Manhattan Project with him. So they would do, like, workshops, I mean, very, very effective at kind of promoting their perspective, which is, frankly, draconian.

Collings
I'd always heard about it as Broken Windows Campaign.

Dietrich
Right. So who's the guy? He's on their board. So he comes as part of the package as well. What's his name? Broken Windows. He teaches at UCLA. He just died. Anyway, the developer, so he was part of the package, so he would do seminars for City Council, for the mayor. So when they hired Bratton, they got this whole package deal. I mean, it cost $50,000 for a seminar or something. But they have this whole kind of articulated ideology. Oh, Jesus Christ, I can't remember her name. In fact, so one of their major—you know that there are all these conservative think tanks out there, and this is one of them that hire academics, and they don't have to do a peer review on their sociological—so they do all this stuff and they get lots and lots of money for it, I mean the same kind of people that promote, you know, that say that cigarettes aren't bad, or that there's not anything about climate change that we actually—so that's what they do. Jesus, she was on

the front page of the L.A. Times Magazine one time back just before Safer Cities. God, you're going to have to follow up.

Collings

Definitely. We definitely want to follow up on this.

Dietrich

But she's really—I'd never heard of her. So she had the bylines on the front page. So on Skid Row, she did a drive—

Collings

Drive-through?

Dietrich

With the police, and wrote this kind of scathing article. God, I can't remember the name of the—it just said that she was with some particular journal or something. Well, I called Information. I couldn't find it. Well, it turns out the journal is the journal of the Manhattan Project. So, I mean, she's just like this hired gun, but in her bio you wouldn't know that. You would just think that she was a L.A. Times reporter doing this drive-through, not that it would have made a whole lot of difference. But she's really smart and she's really got her ideological perspective really tightly wrapped. She's very articulate and really bright. But it was so misleading the way the Times presented it.

Anyway, that's how tight they are. They meet with the editorial board of the Times. Bill Bratton goes with them. He brings all of his academics and everybody's kind of dazzled, but it's really about making the city safer for business and making the city "safe," quote, unquote, so that suburban people will come back into the city. It works, I mean, but basically what it does is it just covers over the problem. I mean, there's no systemic change at all. And, as I've written, actually in the Times, but in my own paper, for over the years we've been responsible for the mess on Skid Row in some ways, because we bring suits, we protest. So there's, like, this enormous—this is before Safer Cities—mass of people with shopping carts and tents and camping gear. And we're going, "Yeah, that's really good." We're really happy to see this, because maybe as long as the poor are visible, maybe something will happen. And once you make the poor invisible, then nothing's going to happen. So, yeah, our goal was to make the city look ugly and unattractive, so that the city would do something about the problem. Well, it turned out they did, and what they did was really oppressive, what they're continuing to do.

Collings

So it's kind of interesting to think that here you are working on Skid Row, and it's almost as if a storm is brewing on the horizon, the sheriff is coming into town. How did you first sort of get wind of this?

Dietrich

I actually—and I wish I had the article, but must have been sometime around 2002. I just read in the Times that the head of the Central City

Association, our local councilwoman, and Eli Broad and some other council people took a trip to New York and met with Bratton. And even in that article, Broad was saying, "The main issue for downtown is the homeless. We have to do something about that." Well, that was what they decided to do, I mean, they met with Bratton and they probably met with people from the Manhattan—it's the Manhattan Institute.

Collings

Manhattan Institute, okay.

Dietrich

Manhattan Project. That doesn't sound good. Sorry.

Collings

Yes, I was wondering. [laughs]

Dietrich

Yeah, I know. Maybe a year or so afterwards, Bratton came to L.A. and with great, great hoopla.

Collings

So was there a sense that you were going to have to organize in a different way to meet this challenge?

Dietrich

You know, we're not that sophisticated. [laughs] Mostly we just run a soup kitchen and respond to what's in front of us. But I did kind of see that it was a really scary move to hire him, and just as I'm waiting with the new archbishop to find out when the other shoe drops, we were waiting and it took a couple of years before he moved on that, what I assumed to be the primary reason why they hired him, because his work in New York was all about reclaiming Times Square.

Collings

Right. That was his signature piece, that kind of work, yes. So let's talk a bit about the shopping cart campaign, because it seems like that's an important piece of this entire thing. Basically, 1996 to 2010 leads to the distribution of 20,000 free shopping carts. How did that all begin?

Dietrich

God, almost by accident. Like Dorothy Day says, "We were just sitting there." [laughs] We'd had a friend come over.

Collings

That's a great quote.

Dietrich

Yeah. Well, actually we were. We were drinking beer on a Friday. We'd had a speaker, a filmmaker, and we were kind of telling him about how the police take people's shopping carts and their possessions and put them in the street. Oh, first they write them a ticket for possession of stolen property. Anyway, this whole team of city employees, driving a big dump truck and a big skip loader, and two police cars and five or six workers grab the cart and throw it in street, and then the skip loader comes up and crushes it with the

big skip loader shovel, and then picks it up and throws it in the dump truck. So it's against the law for people to possess this stolen property, but apparently it's okay to crush the property and throw it away.

Collings

So they don't dump out—

Dietrich

No. They took the whole thing.

Collings

Wow. That's pretty shocking.

Dietrich

Yes. So we're telling him what's going on. He says, "You know, why doesn't somebody just buy people shopping carts?" So I start laughing. I'd had a few beers, and I said, "Are you serious? Nobody's going to do that. Only Catholic Workers would do something like that." So I think I might have said this already, but I knew, you know, we had an extra $30,000 that we'd sold our house for the price we paid for it in 1970. We gave it to the House of Ruth. I mean, they'd been operating a shelter for women in our former home for, like, twenty years or something, and so we sold it to them for the price we paid for it in 1970.

Collings

Wow.

Dietrich

Probably it's worth over 300,000 or more now. But we had this money in a bank account. I went to a party one time and somebody was saying—idle conversation about that if there's no movement on a bank account, then the state just comes in and seizes it.

Collings

Really?

Dietrich

Yes! I swear! So I tell my wife this story, and I said, "You should go down and just check on our money." [laughter] Because it was in a checking account because we don't take interest.

Collings

I see. You don't take interest at all?

Dietrich

It is an ideological perspective of the Catholic Worker based upon—well, I don't know. Have you noticed how much the debt crisis is crippling so many people? And have you noticed, like, how powerful the credit card companies are and Wall Street banks? Anyway, Dorothy Day understood that it's all based upon debt, and, frankly, it is the scriptural perspective of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament that debt slavery is the way that the empire controls its subjects. So, anyway, she went down to check, and she went up to the teller, and the teller said, "Oh, just a moment." Then she

goes over to the vice president's desk, and then he strolls over and talks to Catherine, said, "Oh, well, the state has already—."

Collings

Oh, my gosh!

Dietrich

"Has already moved to seize your account, because there hasn't been any movement on this in two years." And Catherine goes, "You don't have my phone number? I'm not dead. You could call me." No, they don't even do that.

De Vroom

It's true in Europe as well.

Collings

Really?

Dietrich

So she got there just in the nick of time, because sometime later I was reading in the paper about people that had this happen to them, and their money was gone and they were trying to get it back. Well, I'll tell you what, once the state's got that money, you don't get that money back.

Collings

This is shocking.

Dietrich

So we got our money and we had it and we were planning to distribute it to our sister houses, and so I just thought, well, we were thinking about the year of Jubilee, which is about debt forgiveness.

Collings

Right. Exactly.

Dietrich

So I just proposed that perhaps we could buy some shopping carts with the money and that we would have a big demonstration, a press conference in front of the police station. So, I mean, once we thought about it, it was a kind of obvious thing to do, but it is really a kind of waste of money, I mean, because they're so ephemeral and people take them, people lose them, but it did get some good press. It actually got international press, and anything that kind of exposes the situation is really delightful for me. So, yeah, we've basically been, ever since then been buying shopping carts. I mean, we're kind of really tight right now, but it was only recently, since this last court decision, that I actually published in our newspaper that we spent money on shopping carts. Because even though our supporters are very, very—you know, they're generous, and over a forty-year period we've probably culled out anybody that thinks we're crazy, so they all love us. But I didn't tell them, because it's profligate.

Collings

It's profligate?

Dietrich

The project is profligate, wasteful.

Collings

In what sense?

Dietrich

Well, basically, they cost fifty bucks.

Collings

Each one?

Dietrich

Yes. And you're giving a homeless person basically fifty bucks and they're probably not going to have it for—they're certainly not going to have it for a lifetime. Maybe a few months is the lifetime of some of these shopping carts.

De Vroom

What happens to them if the police don't seize them?

Dietrich

Well, that's the thing. We can't figure it out, but they do disappear. But you do put them out there and you can't keep track of them. I mean, I suppose we could put little computer chips on them or something. [laughs]

De Vroom

License plates.

Collings

They're marked in some way so it's known that they can't be seized.

Dietrich

It says "Catholic Worker" on it and it has a kind of legalese document on the front. But they do disappear. Sometimes they turn up in Santa Monica, Hollywood, Long Beach, San Pedro, and people don't put those things on the Red Line, so they walk those shopping carts all of that distance.

So the project, I guess it's just really part of what I think of as our witness of grace and generosity to the poor, which is how I think of what we do at the kitchen, that it's wasteful, that it's profligate, that it really produces no particular long-term effect. It's ineffective, but Americans are committed to effectiveness and all kind of charitable projects are judged on the basis of their effectiveness, and the great thing about the people that support us is that they don't really care if we're effective. They only care if we are generous and graceful, and so they give us money for that.

Collings

Is it naïve to suggest that if somebody has one of your shopping carts, that it gives them like a sense that—

Dietrich

No. That's part of it.

Collings

—they can organize themselves without fear that this thing is going to be confiscated at any moment?

Dietrich

Right. Yes. That's absolutely the core of the project. Yes. It's empowering the poor.

Collings

It is.

Dietrich

Yeah. And it gives them dignity and it gives them ownership. But, you know, the shopping cart is emblematic of two things: one, the kind of bounty of consumer culture, but then it's emblematic also, on the flip side, of homeless. Someone pushing a shopping cart filled with their possessions is so obviously homeless and so, frankly, repugnant to the general population. They get to Santa Monica, but they don't go to Beverly Hills and they don't go to Manhattan Beach with their shopping carts. They don't go to the South Bay, generally speaking.

Collings

Was there ever a thought of buying some other form of conveyance?

Dietrich

Still thinking about it.

Collings

If you're living on the street, you've got some stuff that you need to move around. I was thinking that you had chosen the shopping cart because that's what people were used to and would appreciate the most, but I'm just guessing.

Dietrich

No, occasionally we think about it. They're still probably the most serviceable means of transport that we can think of. I did just write this recently, but it's a source of income for people, because they do recycling, it's a source of transportation and storage of their worldly possessions, and, you know, for a lot of people, it's a source of ambulatory assistance.

Collings

Like a walker.

Dietrich

That's right. Lots of people, they walk the streets all the time in bad shoes and they have bad feet. So it's a pretty serviceable item.

Collings

Do you feel as if your project to give these shopping carts laid the groundwork at all for what came later, which was the injunction against seizing shopping carts?

Dietrich

Oh, sure. Yeah. We had even had a suit, previous to that, about taking people's property. So, yeah, it definitely did, and it's also part of that effort to keep the poor visible. So if you have enough people with shopping carts—and they're still there. They're still there. But we had done a survey—or my wife kind of did a drive-through. We'd given out like 100 shopping carts like a month or so or two months before, and she could only find 25. Now, that

doesn't mean that they're disappeared, but we do have a sense that sometimes there are midnight raids or that there's some entity that is perhaps taking these shopping carts, but we can't prove it.

Collings
Just to get them off the street and out of the public eye.

Dietrich
Yeah. Well, that's the idea.

Collings
So you've given out 20,000, right?

Dietrich
That's an estimation, but yes.

Collings
And so it's like about 100 a month. How do you do the distribution?

Dietrich
What we used to do, and haven't been able to afford, is that we would buy them 500 at a time and then the company would deliver them to us at 100 at a time. If we bought 500, we got like a 10 percent discount or something, but we can't afford that right now.

Collings
And would you hand them out at the kitchen?

Dietrich
Yes. We keep them kind of behind our clinic, and at 11:15 every day, we give out shopping carts, although we don't have any right now.

Collings
Would this be a good time to sort of backtrack, since we're talking about some of these kinds of campaigns, and talk about the Porta-Potty campaign?

Dietrich
Sure.

Collings
1993 to 1997, you worked with Alice Callaghan, and there was some civil disobedience involved, as I understand, and the project was to get L.A. to provide thirty-two outdoor Porta-Potties. So what was the progression of events?

Dietrich
Oh, god. I think we did several sit-ins at the Mayor's Office and, as I said, a blockade, actually, of the private restroom of the City Council members.

Collings
Is that when that came in?

Dietrich
Yeah. So, as I said, Alice had some contacts at the Times and she would call and they would come. And it doesn't really matter if you get on television or if you're in the Valley News. If you don't make the Times, what you've done didn't happen. So we, and probably with these really kind of pretty, like, cutesy kind of actions with just a few people, they would cover it, they would

put it in the paper. Now, I don't know why, I mean, but I do think that the staff at the Times were much more progressive than it is now. So we had an ally at the Times, and that was the other element of the original redevelopment project. They were supportive. And what's his name—who was the editor and publisher? Chandler, Otis Chandler, he was there. And Tom Johnson was the editor. Tom was just great. And his son used to work with us.

Collings

Oh, wow.

Dietrich

I actually, like, sat down at social gatherings with Tom Johnson.

Collings

Oh, that's remarkable.

Dietrich

I could call up Tom Johnson and say, "Hi. You know, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's coming to town, and I just wondered could we meet with the editorial board?" We did. [laughter] He's, "Oh, yeah. That's sound great. I can't come, but I'll have so-and-so set it up." We had lunch with the editorial board and chatted about American nuclear policy. Anyway, so those were kind of like—well, I mean, you kind of think like at the time you're just going, "Oh, well, of course." [laughs]

Collings

"We're doing good work."

Dietrich

Why wouldn't they be interested? [laughter] Yeah. So where was I?

Collings

You were going to talk about the Porta-Potties, but when did you start to notice that change? Was there a moment when you said, "You know what? This is different"? 00:44:39

Dietrich

Yeah. It was, like, in 2001, and I was in jail for a protest that we'd done at Vandenberg Air Force Base. I got six months for it, so I was jail. I was in solitary confinement when I heard one of the guards come in and say, "Yeah, they did the World Trade—those fuckin' ragheads. We need to go get 'em." So gradually it filtered through that the World Trade Center had been destroyed. I wrote an article just about the responses that people in prison were having, the guards.

Collings

That sounds really fascinating.

Dietrich

And there were a lot of kind of Muslim people there also. Fuck, one of them was talking about—I can't remember, like the Battle of Alexandria in 2000 and—you know, like Alexander the Great. But just that this city held out forever. Anyway, so I wrote that up, and for the first time I got rejected. I

got rejected because it had a bit of religious overtones to it, and the editor, someone I didn't know, didn't—well, I sort of had an inkling that—and then Alice would write something at least once a year and get published, and she was getting rejected. So it felt like there was a kind of sea change beginning at the Times. Well, I actually already had marked it when I read in the paper, it must have been still in the eighties, that Tom Johnson, the editor and publisher of the Times, had been promoted. And I thought, "You can't get promoted from that position. Look at the masthead. There are only three people on the masthead, and they went to their eternal reward or demise. You don't get promoted from that." I called up the L.A. Weekly, the editor, and I said, "Hey, did you see this? You know, I really think this is really important. You guys should—." He said, "Well, he got promoted."
And I go, "Oh, fuck. Okay." So anyway, I mean, I thought that was the biggest story in L.A. and the most important story and the most reflective of what was happening, which was the privatizing, the selling off of the L.A. Times to corporate media. And it was all because Otis Chandler "retired," quote, unquote, but I think he probably got forced off the board by his conservative—I mean, Jesus Christ, the Times was nothing but a Fascist rag since its inception. It was only because of Buffy Chandler and Otis Chandler that it became what it was for a while, and it's still better than what the Times used to be.

Collings

Did you ever talk to Tom Johnson's son anytime after that about this?

Dietrich

Well, I did, but I didn't talk about this. He was really kind of a bit in reaction to his pretty heady upbringing, and so talking about his family was the last thing he wanted to do.

Collings

So we're starting off the Porta-Potty campaign, the progression of events, and you had said that you had started with barricading the councilmen's bathroom.

Dietrich

Right. Oh, here's another name: Charlie Woo. I think I might have met him once, but he's a pretty seminal figure in Skid Row, on the opposition. Well, he's Oriental, obviously, but I think Chinese. I think he's an immigrant, and a kind of "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps," and a businessman, owns a lot of fish companies on Skid Row, and had his own initial campaign to do something about Skid Row, I mean get rid of the homeless, basically. So probably one of the first things we did was blockade his fish company and get arrested. He is the kind of founder of the Central City East Association and really just an assertively important businessman who lobbies strongly for the area and against the homeless. So he's an important figure. Anyway, so the bathrooms. So we did a number of actions and, as I said, they were

really quite modest, but they did get coverage. In retrospect, what we had was a media strategy.

Collings

Oh, interesting.

Dietrich

Yeah. I mean, we basically had a contact with the L.A. Times. That's our media strategy. [laughs] So we would do these little things and we would get coverage, and I think we would get noticed. I don't know. Bradley didn't cave for the Porta-Potties.

Collings

What was the city's thinking about what people should use?

Dietrich

You know, the city wasn't really thinking about that. I also think, like, Santa Monica doesn't really like it that all of the runoff from L.A. goes into the bay, so there were suits about that too. I don't know if that had an impact. But then Richard Riordan, a Republican, gets elected. Well, hello. Well, he's Catholic, and he actually knows my wife. He was on the board of the—

Unidentified

He [unclear] dorm room.

Dietrich

Is that right?

Unidentified

Dorm. Not room.

Dietrich

He was on the board of Mayfield School, and he already knew Alice Callaghan. Anyway, he had this, like, educational kind of project always, so he was very intrigued with Alice Callaghan and he knew her from Mayfield, and so he was very friendly with her, and he still is. He's still a big contributor and supporter. He was the one that authorized the Porta-Potties. So you would probably have to talk to Alice about the details of it. But somehow it went through the Planning Commission and it became a pretty solid kind of thing. There would be hearings every once and a while, to which we would go, where people said, "Well, these are terrible things." But we would testify. Anyway, they were there for over ten years, and it wasn't until the liberal mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, came in that the Porta-Potties got taken away.

Collings

And what was his justification?

Dietrich

Well, they were pretty standard. Oh, I'll tell you what. Here's the thing. Steve Lopez—

Collings

From the Times.

Dietrich

—came down to Skid Row. Yeah, right. Did you see The Soloist?

Collings

I know what it is, but I haven't seen it.

Dietrich

That's fine. Don't bother. But you should see Lost Angels.

Collings

Okay.

Dietrich

It was made about the same time in conjunction with The Soloist, and it's very, very good and very informative. It's just being released locally in theaters, I think, actually, the best thing I've seen on Skid Row. It's very, very well done, a really excellent director, great kind of documentary storyline, and he kind of culled Skid Row people who had worked in the film, and the director was friends with LAPD founder, John Malpede. Definitely you should see it. So we did the campaign and we got the Porta-Potties, and they got taken away. Okay, so Steve Lopez writes this whole series of articles. It was a sea change for Skid Row. I can't prove this, but I believe that the Manhattan Institute had already been laying groundwork for Safer Cities, and it is really difficult to document or to really verify how much impact these kinds of lobbyists have on editors. I'm sure they would deny it, but that's a component. I mean they say that the whole idea is to gain the moral high ground. Well, this is what happened, is that the Times, they sent Steve Lopez to Skid Row, and Steve Lopez is, like, on page two or page three. Well, all of these Skid Row articles are on page one, front page, week after week after week. And the first one is about the Porta-Potties and how awful they are and how unsanitary. Two days later, they were gone! Yes. Drugs and prostitution.

So I read that article and I knew that—they were gone in two days, like overnight, and, like, legally you're supposed to have a hearing before the Planning Commission or whatever it is. So he has this whole series of articles and then the Times calls, like, a colloquium or something, and so community, quote, unquote, "stakeholders" are invited. I went with Alice, and Steve was on the stage, as was Bratton, as was the editor of the Times, who, it turns out, I think he might have actually worked with Mother Teresa once in his life. So he talks about Mother Teresa, and the whole theme is, "We can do better for the poor than this." And you're sitting there listening and going—there are like a thousand-column inches on the front page of the Times devoted to Skid Row and you haven't seen shit about Skid Row in decades, and suddenly it's like this—and Steve Lopez is up for a Pulitzer and he's got a movie award. He's Mr., like, Compassion, but he's really the front man for this whole Safer Cities project, because they're doing this. I'm not imputing nefarious motivations or perhaps even consciously propagandizing, but that's how it worked out, that's how it played out, that the fallout of this seminar, of all these articles, of all this sentiment about how we can do

better for the poor, better than Porta-Potties, better than tents on the streets, we can do better. They didn't do better. They just came in like Nazis and took people's stuff and put them in jail. That's what they did. The only thing that their project is about is covering up the problem. So I attribute it all to Steve Lopez. If he's that stupid that he didn't know that he was the instrument of Safer Cities, then I really feel sorry for him. I mean, I know that's the last thing a journalist wants to hear is that they've been used as some kind of instrument for nefarious public policy, but that's how it played out, so I've never forgiven Steve Lopez for that. I've never forgiven him for not being at least conscious enough to know that that's the kind of shit that he was doing. I knew when you have that much focus on Skid Row, that the outcome of it is not going to be a blessing for our people; it's going to be a curse.

Collings
And with this focus, was there an effort to talk to people like you, to talk to people like Alice Callaghan, to talk to others working on the scene, or was it completely divorced from what was actually being done at the time?

Dietrich
No, there was never any kind of effort to contact us. I mean, we kind of early on, for a long time have been the kind of opposition.

Collings
So, once again, night and day, compared to this other scenario that we discussed.

Dietrich
Yes, absolutely. And I think we should probably end here, if you don't mind.

Collings
Absolutely.

Dietrich
Thank you so much. [End of December 7, 2012 interview]

1.5. SESSION FIVE (January 11, 2013)

Collings
Now we are on, and it is January 11, 2013, Jane Collings interviewing Jeff Dietrich in Santa Monica. We thought that we would start in with your memories of Gary Squier.

Dietrich
Well, let me just start with kind of a first—I didn't know that Gary had died. I haven't been that close to him in a long time, but Alice Callaghan is friends with Anita Landecker, his wife. So, anyway, I was thinking of going to Gary's memorial, but Alice didn't want to go and suggested that we'd go to—I'd already invited her to the closing of the King Eddy bar, kind of the last Skid Row bar. It's really on 5th and Main. Woody Guthrie and lots of L.A. writers,

Fante, John Fante, and—I'm blanking right now. Anyway, so she called up Anita and said, "No, we can't come, but we're going to go to the King Eddy bar and drink a toast to Gary," which was really about saving the housing, saving not just—well, it was saving the structures, really, but also maybe a little bit of the character of Skid Row. So when I met Gary, we were probably about the same age. I think he's about five or six years younger than I am. I think he biked down here for Oregon—I'm not sure—from Portland. I don't know where he went.

Collings

Well, it was Oregon. I didn't know about the biking.

Dietrich

Yes, I think he went to Reed College or something, but he had this background, well, education in housing and preservation, not destroying housing, which is kind of a unique view. So he was a kid. He was working for Community Design Center and he was a VISTA volunteer, for god's sake. But as I was reading the obituary in the Times, it just reminded me that the only plan that was afoot for Skid Row was called Silver Book, and it was all about like the traditional way of doing redevelopment, which is just take entire blocks and wipe everything out and then you build it the way you want it to be built. So, way before I came on the scene there were already people kind of thinking, like, why don't we just save this stuff?

So Gary was already on that page, and along with Gary, I wrote something called the Blue Book, and that is actually still—and it got adopted by the City Council. I mean, it was really because of the lawyers and Jim Bonar and the Community Design Center. We're all kind of a tight-knit group. So that came up, and it was, I think, probably a fait accompli that it would get passed, because they didn't have anything else that they were thinking about, and they didn't like that project because it was way expensive. So we offered a kind of moderate project, and reasonable people were going, "Yeah, we're probably not going to get rid of this population. They're already here. They've been here for a hundred years. We probably should need to just kind of accommodate it and work around it." So like I told you, we had the—I didn't organize it. It was just there, the Central City Business Association, which is critical if you want to do anything downtown. I mean, I didn't know that. I was a kid. But it just happened. Then the unions were a part of it too. I mean, Jim Woods. And so Bradley is pretty tight with the unions and so he's giving them their bone. But he's hiring somebody from—god, I forget. I think it's Minneapolis. Kind of a progressive kind of guy that was head of the Redevelopment Agency there. So it was a big jump for him, but he was already predisposed to making sure that we didn't displace people as we did this.

So everybody was sort of on the same page. It was a little bit difficult for me because I was just a kid, and I didn't know how things were, and I didn't really know that things were actually working so well that it wasn't a

conspiracy or something. It was really a great kind of confluence of political forces that came together and did some really good stuff that are still in operation today on Skid Row, basically saving that housing, not tearing it down, not wiping it out, basically kind of consolidating services closer into the area, which is fine. Currently, the people on the opposition, you know, downtown people who want to develop Skid Row, now it's really expensive property, and so they kind of spin these fantasies about, "Well, why should we be the only neighborhood that gets homeless services?" Why should we be the only ones where people come who've been released from—parolees. It's true. That's a rational argument, but it's not real. It's idealistic. Where else are you going to put them? So the Bradley administration already knew that they weren't going to put them in Beverly Hills or El Segundo or even Santa Monica. So, by default, we had all of these people and they sore of knew that, which I thought was a kind of really insightful perspective, and still the official program of the city of Los Angeles, which is our little Blue Book program that basically Gary wrote that. I did some things with him, but we worked very closely. As you can imagine, we were about the same age and kind of friends, but he would always, like, kind of temper my belligerence.

Collings

As Bratton puts it somewhere, it's a county-wide problem, so—

Dietrich

Well, there you go. It is. And all of the county money, basically, most of it for homeless services spent right there in that fifty-square block area. Now, Bratton can talk all he wants about spreading that out, but no realistic person is ever going to think that that's going to happen.

Collings

Right.

Dietrich

Although in some ways it does happen simply because the Blue Line or the Red Line, or whatever, got all the way out to Lancaster and there's housing out there, and that's where they're putting a lot of poor people now, who actually could live in a formerly suburban homestead like this, but they don't know how to deal with that. So all the neighbors are complaining. Anyway, there is housing out there and there is transportation out there, so send them fifty miles away. But it's not massive. It's just one of those things that, ironically, poor people now get to live in the suburbs because the housing market is so depressed.

Collings

Right. Well, that concentration of the population, you had pointed to the writing of Heather Mac Donald in the City Journal. She would call that the homeless industry.

Dietrich

I have a deep sense of the professionals who were involved in that, but on the other hand, I think Heather Mac Donald is living in the clouds as well. I know that there's a sense in which people who have made their vocation of service that it seems like they just want to keep it all to themselves, but, frankly, I believe that Heather Mac Donald is employed by the people who actually run the capitalist program, so she thinks that the capitalist program is going to work. I think it's absolutely not working for most people below the level of billionaire, but it certainly does not work for people who are basically the superfluous people. So, I mean, you start off with not giving them reasonable educational opportunities. Anyway, just to say that these are people that start off with incredible disadvantages. Many of them do a great job, but a lot of them don't, and so what we leave for them as we ship our manufacturing jobs overseas, what we leave for them is the drug economy, and that's working okay for them.

Collings

That's an interesting point.

Dietrich

Well, that's exactly what we leave for them. We take all of the jobs out of South Central, which used to be a pretty major manufacturing center with steel and automobiles and people, black people actually getting real jobs that supported their family. That ended starting in the seventies and into the eighties, and that's when we saw this massive influx of young black males on crack. So what we've left for them is the drug economy, and that's where the jobs are, actually, and that's where the opportunity is. So Heather Mac Donald is—I mean, I just get so—"irritated" is not the word. I just get so angry, because she's really smart and she's really bright and she could actually teach at a real university, but Manhattan pays her a whole lot more money and she doesn't have to go before peer review and she doesn't have to talk to any other sociologists about her work. She just puts it out there. And Manhattan Institute has a whole press program. I mean, they're doing great.

Collings

Right. The City Journal.

Dietrich

The City Journal. Right. And the cops love her. It's a whole program of quote, unquote, "taking back the streets from the poor" and really making it a quote, unquote, "common land," which is so—because the common lands were—I mean, that was there the struggle began in the fifteenth century in England when we took the common lands away from the common people and they migrated into urban areas. But now we don't want poor people in our parks, homeless people peeing in our subways, but that's what we've left for them. So now we want the common lands to be common to the middle-class and the wealthy and everybody.

But as I've told you, much of what our efforts have been over the years have been to try to make sure that the poor don't become invisible, and we want them in the common lands. We want people to have to deal with that, because that's the problem that we have made for our larger social structure. We've cut back taxes. We don't do property taxes. We only have money for jails. God, we don't even have money for bailouts for middle-class people in the midst of foreclosure, for god's sake. We have billions for Wall Street. I mean, this is so simple. Of course, when it gets down to the poorest of the poor, what we have is housing at county jail, and the same with mentally ill people. County jail is the largest mental illness institution in the actual world. So I feel like it's really difficult not to be just infuriated at Heather Mac Donald, because she's so good and so attractive and has a pleasing way about presenting herself. But also the people that did Broken Windows are part of the package. They're not as attractive as she is.

Collings

Have you met Heather Mac Donald?

Dietrich

No. [laughs] But, you know, that was the shocking thing to me. I'd never heard of her until I saw this article in the L.A. Times, which I kind of think of as my hometown paper. So I sort of know something about it. At that time, they had this very slick L.A. Magazine or something and it was a Skid Row article on the cover. She did a ride-by with the police. So I read her bio and it said that she was the editor of the City Journal. I'm not even sure if they said she was the editor. So, of course, I'm thinking City Journal. I'll call—

Collings

This is an Op-Ed. It's reprinted, but this is an Op-Ed that she did as well.

Dietrich

Right. So I'm thinking City Journal, well, city of L.A. Right? I just call Information, when we had Information. Well, we still do. But, "City Journal? No, there's no City Journal."

I had to have somebody do like an Internet search—and, yes, it's the Manhattan Institute. What are they doing here? Well, of course, they're part of that whole package that come with Bratton, part of the background package where they brief the editorial staff, they brief the staffs of all the council people, and they have a whole media packet. I mean, they're pretty clear about how to make this project work.

Collings

Oh, yeah. Very.

Dietrich

"If you want to clean up your city, this is what you do." So they've got the whole package and everybody adapts it, and they're supported by very large capitalist organizations that—had you heard of them before?

Collings

No. But, of course, I'd heard about Safer Cities and—

Dietrich
Right. But that's part of a Manhattan project. They are under the umbrella. I mean, it's great. It's very, very sophisticated.
Collings
Yes, it is.
Dietrich
And you're kind of working on—"I've got these grubby shopping carts and I have to—well, I have about an hour or so that I could go down and talk to the mayor, but I still have to put the soup on." You know, so you've got a whole other project that's kind of hands-on, and you're up against this incredibly sophisticated organization that is very, very capable of manipulating public opinion, and when I say that, I mean, it's not obvious, but I have to say that I cannot believe that Steve Lopez was not part of that project. I do not believe that he was aware of that, but I do believe that the upper levels or at some level all of the Manhattan project apparatus came to play. And I don't have any doubt that the mayor was supportive of that already and the Central City Association was working all their connections, which are numerous. So they're working with all of really the kind of major players—not "kind of." The absolute people that actually run the city.
Collings
Now, in her article, she decries the fact that—she's talking about Gary Blasi, and we can talk about him in a little bit, but says, "Sadly, Blasi's research—," and this has to do with discriminatory prosecutions.
Dietrich
Right. Policing our way out of homelessness. Do you have that?
Collings
That particular article?
Dietrich
Yes, you should.
Collings
I have other things like that, yes.
Dietrich
He works at UCLA.
Collings
Yes. So she says, "Sadly, Blasi's research has made waves among Mayor Villaraigosa's aides at City Hall," and then she's disappointed that Lopez, more recently, had written what she calls a Blasi-inspired article about the enforcing of—
Dietrich
Well, god bless him, yes.
Collings
—enforcing of jaywalking laws in Skid Row. I was wondering how you would see that.
Dietrich

Oh, my god. Well, I see it as a pretty minor footnote to the tsunami of the Bratton and the Manhattan Institute, and it makes me happy that she found it a little bit of a setback. But I don't think of it as a major setback at all. But Gary's efforts with the students of UCLA, the law students, put that together and it's not easy to put together. The information is not available.

Collings

What did they put together? Let's just sketch it out.

Dietrich

It's a study that the UCLA Law for—I forget the name of Blasi's institute, but Law in the Public Interest or something.

Collings

I think that's it.

Dietrich

So he's got graduate students that are working with him. What they have to do is sort through all of the police records, because they're not all centralized, but basically what he finds out is that before the police came to Skid Row, it was one of the lowest crime-reported areas in the city, and that got verified for me at a funeral service that we did not too long ago at Christmastime. This woman who's an administrator at one of the social services downtown said, "This is the most safest environment I've ever been in. When I go home to South Central, I'm always looking over my shoulder to see if there's a drive-by. Nothing like that happens on Skid—." And people always come to me and say, "I'm blessed." And it's not to say that crime doesn't happen on Skid Row, but it doesn't happen in the same way where there are intensified gang warfare and territorial rights about who's dealing what with drugs. So when the police came, they made it into, like, this enormous crime area, and they imported in, like, fifty extra officers, and what they basically did was to enforce all of the quality-of-life crimes, which I think Heather Mac Donald talks about in her article, that that's Broken Windows policing. You put people in jail for peeing on the sidewalk, basically, or you get them so many citations that—so there were 11,000 citations in one year for jaywalking. I mean, it was more than all of the other areas of the entire city combined, maybe the county as well, because there were police on every corner and they were just waiting for you to jaywalk or run a red light or pee on the sidewalk, which I understand is not a great idea, but we spent ten years getting Porta Potties, and after the first article by Steve Lopez, the first thing the city did was remove those Porta Potties. They hated those Porta Potties. Of course they're unsanitary and they're centers of drug dealing and prostitution, but they also were places where people actually filled them up with excrement and urine, and god knows where all that is going now.

So what just infuriated me about Heather Mac Donald was that she has this kind of blithe kind of sense about an ideal of how things should be and really an ideal of how human beings should behave in public spaces, and that's

really great, but, you know, sometimes people need to perform their personal acts in public spaces. And it happens all the time in Calcutta, but we don't really want to recognize that that's the way it works in America as well, so we cover it over with this kind of propaganda and this kind of ideology about what public space is really about. But I do think that the Occupy Movement recently has tweaked that perspective a bit more, and probably gotten Heather Mac Donald even more into high gear, and that's why I love Occupy. It put the problem in public space, which is what we've been trying to do for our whole lives is to—I mean, you don't get any credit for ensuring people's rights to sleep on the street. [laughter] "Oh, you've done a great job. You've ensured that the poor can sleep on the—."

Collings

[laughs] Can sleep on the street.

Dietrich

Yes. But, you know, the opposition says, "We can do better. The poor shouldn't have to sleep on—." But what they do is put them in jail! And the poor would rather sleep on public streets. So you hope that the public consciousness might do something more for the poor than put them in jail. Because the poor can hide. They know how to hide. Jesus Christ, I mean, not looking at Les Miserables, I mean, don't we think that that's a kind of metaphor for who we are, the punitive nature of our criminal justice system that focuses primarily on the poor. And if you own a bank, well, that's the best way to rob a bank. If you work on Wall Street, they reward you for stealing billions and they give you more. But if you're poor, that's the focus of the criminal justice system. So we want to get them off the public streets. I just applaud the Bradley administration, for all its problems and issues, but as you noted in the Times, there's a great picture of Gary Squier. I mean, god, he's just a gorgeous guy.

Collings

Yes, you're talking about the one for the obituary where he just looks—

Dietrich

His obituary, yes.

Collings

—like such a young, idealistic—

Dietrich

Oh, my god. And he was.

Collings

—wonderful. Yes.

Dietrich

He was also well informed and really worked really—not easily within the administration, but brought, as the article said, a kind of sense of advocacy for the poor and for really low-cost housing. So if you want to trace it back to its origins, the very large project that the Bradley administration set in place was to say that the SRO, the brick-bearing wall, etc., housing, single-

room occupancy, not to tear it down. So Gary and Jim Bonar were the ones that carried that project into the political arena, along with a lot of lawyers. So the Redevelopment Agency hired Andy Raubeson, and then Andy Raubeson wasn't going fast enough for Alice Callaghan, who's like a little bulldog, Sister Alice Callaghan—or Father Alice Callaghan. So she started another organization that basically got money from the city and other sources, and I think hired Anita Landecker as their first administrator—that's Gary's wife—because she wanted to buy up as much as she could. But Gary was the one that really took that project to political fruition.

Collings

A great legacy.

Dietrich

A great, great legacy, yes.

Collings

And a great loss.

Dietrich

And we celebrated his—I don't know. It was pretty fun going to the King Eddy bar.

Collings

Was it?

Dietrich

Oh, my god. Well, you know, I mean, it was packed. I had to walk all the way around this round bar and I had, like, a bunch of Catholic Workers with me. So there was a [unclear] woman sitting at this open booth and she goes, "Jeff! I knew you guys were coming." Anyway, she was one of the [unclear], one of the people that eats at our soup kitchen. She saved a whole booth for us.

Collings

Oh, wonderful.

Dietrich

Then the next person I met was this guy from Stories bookstores. "Aren't you Jeff Dietrich?" "Yeah," I said. "I work at Stories. I was there when you did the reading for your book." That's pretty cool. He said, "Did you know that John Fante was—?" I said, "I did." And then the next thing is this guy comes in, he's a big, tall black guy. "Jeff!" He's really big, so he picks me up.

Collings

[laughs] That's funny.

Dietrich

He's the coolest guy in the whole place. He's a jazz musician. I said, "Where have you been?" He said, "I'm still on 5th Street." I said, "Do you still play [unclear]?" He said, "Yeah. In fact, I was in front of your kitchen when the—," I forget who was there. There was a big concert there. I wasn't there. But anyway, so it was an eclectic group.

Collings

Sounds great.

Dietrich

Yes, and then Barbara, one of our community members, she loved the bar. So she was very enthusiastic, chatting with everybody, and a couple of people from the Mayor's Office telling her that we're anarchists. And then she wants to bring me in to defend the position. I'm going, "No." [laughter] So, anyway, it was a really great place, and now it's going to be—well.

Collings

It's not closing. It's being gentrified, right?

Dietrich

That's correct. So it's fairly symbolic.

Collings

Yes, it is.

De Vroom

Is this the same owners now?

Dietrich

No.

Collings

No. They lost their lease, or they couldn't afford the lease anymore?

Dietrich

I don't have the details.

Collings

I thought I'd read something.

Dietrich

I mean, I'd never been there, so I felt like, boy, I should better—

Collings

Get over there now.

Dietrich

Yes. On Fridays we have this kind of gathering, a kind of in-house learning, whatever, cultural critique, and afterwards, we have a few beers. We said, "Why don't we have a few beers? And would anyone like to go to the King Eddy?" So everybody said that would be a good idea, so we all went. And we walked in, people said, "Hey, the hippies are here."

Collings

[laughs] Yippies or hippies?

Dietrich

Hippies. We're the hippie kitchen.

Collings

Yes, I know. I just wanted to make sure I heard correctly. I just wanted to ask you one little more follow-up regarding the Heather Mac Donald writings.

Dietrich

Oh, my god.

Collings

She talks about Andrew Smith, the captain of Central Division.

Dietrich
Andy Smith, yes.
Collings
She describes these scenes where people on the street come up to him and greet him and are so happy to see him.
Dietrich
Right.
Collings
What's your perspective on that?
Dietrich
Here's my take. You live on the street, you want to make sure that you know who the authorities are. You want to make sure they kiss their fuckin' butt. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Massa. It's so good to see you, Suh." So they know how to get along by going along. That's how it has to go. It's not to say—fuck, I know Andy Smith. Andy Smith goes to my home parish of American Martyrs. But he's a cop. He's a major cop. He's no longer a captain, but I do think he's got some—I don't even know if he retired. We actually had him come over to the house one time, I think after he retired.
Collings
That's interesting.
Dietrich
Because we sort of wanted to know, okay, so how come we know where all the drug dealers are and your people don't know who the drug dealers are?
Collings
What did he say?
Dietrich
He said, "Well, you know, we can't really keep an eye on everything." Anyway, it was just odd to us that they were always busting people with basically nothing, but they just didn't have the intelligence to figure out who the people were that, like, actually had a little bit more. And even the people that bring in the drugs, I personally do not count them among the most dangerous people in our society that they still have, like, an apartment in Long Beach. You know, they're, like, not even mid-level people. There's nobody bringing in drugs to Skid Row that is massive. I don't want to be cynical about this, but I do think that the people that really do it, that they pay off the people they need to pay off. There's so much money involved. I mean, even the television programs that you see have that all on there, but that's probably just like a kind of tip of the iceberg. So anyway, just to get back to your question, yes. So, lots of cops are—Officer Dion Joseph, who was my nemesis. Have you seen him?
Collings
No, but he was also mentioned in the article.
Dietrich

Right. I mean, he's a Christian, evangelical Christian, and he helps people get into programs. I just do feel very strongly that there are a whole set of people that are really clear that you need to be kind of cool with the cops, particularly the ones around that are on the street. I do think that it doesn't really matter if you're poor. Even though you're a target of a vindictive society, you still have an allegiance to the authority figures, and the poorer you are, you are often more aligned. You always want to be aligned with the authority figures, so police are the authority figures on the street.
I actually have more of a kind of affinity with kind of more "criminal types," quote, unquote, that go, "Those fuckers, they're always in our fucking face and they're the ones that are—." So that's my perspective. But I think the larger portion of the poor population have a tendency to want to be—

Collings
They want to hedge their bets.

Dietrich
Well, they're not hedging their bets. Many of them have a very deep kind of affinity for law and order. They actually think of themselves as being disordered and so they—

Collings
Interesting.

Dietrich
Well, I think it's not only interesting; it's, like, basic, actually.

Collings
That they think of themselves as being out of order?

Dietrich
Yes. If you're just unemployed, it must be my fault. We live in this hugely individualistic society. And we live in a society where anybody can make it. If I'm not making it, it must be my fuckin' fault, right?

Collings
I see.

Dietrich
Yes. Right.

Collings
So, one last question about Heather Mac Donald. She talks about how when there were efforts to clean the streets, Catholic Workers would actually lie down in front of the street cleaner. [interruption]

De Vroom
You know, the woman who lived with us for years and cleans our house [unclear], she's the most radical Catholic in some ways, but she respects authority and the cops, the doctors, [unclear] same exact thing, which is that gives us structure to our lives. "If we behave, we'll be okay." So she's been through all this radical stuff, but there's this other side of her that's—like my mother, as well. Very conservative about authority is the way forward.

Collings
That sense of order, yes.
Dietrich
Okay. Heather Mac Donald.
Collings
And Catholic Workers lying down in front of the street cleaning trucks. What is that about?
Dietrich
I think that must have been me.
Collings
Was it?
Dietrich
Yes. We've actually been doing it—I think that she's referring to something that happened specifically. Well, anyway, we've been doing it for a while, not all the time. It's part of our project to keep the poor visible. And also, really, I mean, these people spout this kind of rhetoric about concern for public space, concern for all of the people, but they lack all compassion for people who actually are being targeted by the larger system. There are no real jobs available for people, and we could make their lives easier. We could decriminalize drugs, which would be wonderful. It would free up lots of money for social services. Of course, it'd put a lot of prison guards and cops out of a job, and those are Heather Mac Donald's biggest fans.
My biggest concern is that people have their rights respected, that they have some dignity, that you don't get to take their property, and that if they're publically visible, that maybe the public will do something other than put them in jail, and that would be my hope. You know, I have an admiration for Heather Mac Donald's journalistic skills, for her intelligence, her ability to tweak the project, because I certainly try to, but she is able to do it at a little higher level than I am. But I just wonder—I don't know. What do you want to be remembered for? I mean, part of me is like I don't want to say when I get to heaven I'll have lots of friends there that remember my name and remember that I tried to do something for them. Maybe that's not really what's going to happen, but even if that doesn't happen, you want to—what did your life stand for? Who did you stand with? Who are the people that loved you and who are the people that you risked your life for? What was it that you would really be prepared to die for? So those are the issues and the people. You know, I still get room and board of $15 a week, and I suppose Heather Mac Donald probably gets a bit more than that.
Collings
Well, I think one thing that we really need to talk about, and I don't know if you want to get started with it now or leave it for the next time, is the actual work in the soup kitchen. You had said, I think perhaps last time, "Mostly we just try to run a soup kitchen and see what's in front of us." And you said that, "What we do at the kitchen is grace and generosity to the poor," and

that this is the sort of the thing that is happening and the rest is kind of a counterweight to that. It's keeping the poor visible, as you were saying, and it's a sort of communication arm, but the actual work is this daily work.

Dietrich

It's a big project. I mean, I'm happy to talk about it, but I probably—

Collings

You want to start in with it next time?

Dietrich

Yes. Can we do that?

Collings

Sure. Absolutely.

Dietrich

That'd great. Thanks, Jane.

Collings

Thank you. [End of January 11, 2013 interview]

1.6. SESSION SIX (February 1, 2013)

Collings

Today is February 1st, 2013, Jane Collings interviewing Jeff Dietrich in Santa Monica. I have a couple of follow-up questions for you from last time, and then we said that we were going to get into the description, the discussion of what's entailed in running the soup kitchen.

Dietrich

Sure.

Collings

But just a minute ago, you had offered some thoughts about Eli Broad.

Dietrich

I just suggested that from my personal perspective, I think Eli Broad is perhaps the major player in downtown, that his art museum and the whole kind of vision of making Grand Avenue a kind of promenade that goes from the Catholic Cathedral to the Music Center, MONA, and then down the hill and trying to connect it with what's happening—what's it called? I want to say sports arena. What is it?

Collings

You mean the one for football?

Dietrich

L.A. Live, which looks a bit like Las Vegas to me.

Collings

That's a good observation, actually.

Dietrich

Like a square block or so, but that that all should be kind of like one long kind of corridor really of making downtown look like a kind of Disneyland for

adults. His concern, as I remember, in an article that I read in the Times, and I wish I could remember when it was, that that was all part of taking a delegation to New York City to meet with future Police Chief Bratton and really diminishing the impact of the homeless on this kind of development. So that's one thing, and then the other part, of course, is Main Street and Los Angeles Street where all those old, really quite beautiful buildings are being developed as lofts. So that's kind of like the front lines of the development issue.

But the whole reason that Bratton was hired and the whole reason for Safer Cities initiative was to diminish the impact of the homeless. So that's why we got, in 2006, fifty extra police officers to police around Skid Row and arrest people for really—really just to harass people, to harass people for what they call quality-of-life crimes. So thousands of people were arrested. Ten thousand tickets were given out for jaywalking. That's more than all of the tickets combined in at least L.A. city, maybe L.A. County as well. So I attribute that to Eli Broad, and I believe that the Central City Association, the Downtown Business Association, is very, very attentive to what Eli Broad is saying. So it's quite a powerful coalition, and I think that the mayor listens to that and I think that the council people are already on that page. What do we want? I mean, we want a tax base in the city of Los Angeles. And I understand their desires. Their contemporary concerns about developing downtown are actually in conflict with what they've done for the last, at least, fifty years. I'll just go with the last thirty years, since the Bradley administration, for sure, which solidified what was actually happening. We talked last time about Gary Squier being hired as the housing person for the city, and he was a housing advocate, and he was a housing advocate for the poor, and it was really about saving that core of housing that was there that really came about to provide housing for single white male adults. So I just thought it was very progressive on the part of the Bradley administration, and, frankly, on the part of the Redevelopment Agency to go, "Look. This is what we're going to do. We're going to try to save this. We're going to consolidate this area." It was an unfortunate choice of—I forget what it's now called, what we called it—containment.

Collings

Yes. The containment strategy or policy.

Dietrich

Basically like moving everything off of Main Street. The missions, the Union Rescue Mission and the Midnight Mission were up there. So the city paid a lot of money to move those people down to San Pedro and consolidate the services in a smaller area. It was a very, I thought, very progressive vision that they had. But honestly, the people that are in charge now have no vision about what we're going to do about the people that are there, because they've been allowed to be there for a hundred years, frankly, and certainly it has had a civic legitimacy for at least the last thirty years, saving

that housing and not bulldozing it the way that redevelopment occurred in the past, and that's why redevelopment was up there on Bunker Hill. They just came in and bulldozed it. There are still parking lots that were once housing for homeless people—or not homeless, but very, very poor people. I mean, boarding housing-type thing. So it was a whole, like, switch in how we understand redevelopment to happen in urban areas, but that was before anybody thought that downtown could have a, quote, unquote, "revival."

Collings

Yes, of course.

Dietrich

So now that that revival is taking place and the City Council under Jan Perry has given developers the opportunity to use city money to develop this property—and I can understand why they would do that. It's unused property, and these beautiful buildings and—

Collings

Yes, lovely buildings.

Dietrich

They are. So lots of younger—actually, it's weird to me that—I mean, it's not weird, but the whole movement from kind of suburban to urban areas, but the people downtown don't have kids; they have dogs.

Collings

So they're not concerned about schools.

Dietrich

Exactly. But they have dog parks and they have dog-grooming facilities and everybody—oh, I don't know, but lots of dogs. It's really cute. I like it. And I try to avoid all of the new yuppie bars that they've created, but I have to say, I certainly find them attractive. But it's just that that kind of policy is in conflict with the former policy of really trying to keep that area for really, really low-wage workers and people on welfare, etc. And that's still there, and it's not going to go away. They're not going to tear it down. And so it's going to be a kind of eternal conflict in which really those people who are on the street and even the people who live in those motels are going to be targets of police oppression, because what they want is for them to go away, but they don't have a plan for where they're going to go and they've already created a center where people need to stay. Just recently there was a big kind of scare, and it probably will come up again, that the two parks on Skid Row have lost their funding. There was a plan to close those two parks down. Well, you close the two parks down, where are those people going to go during the day? Well, they're going to be on the streets, and then you've got to arrest them or give them more tickets. So there are all these conflicts. They want people off the streets, but they won't provide a park for them. It does appear that those parks will remain open, at least for the next six months. I mean, those are the only two amenities on Skid Row, and we were very, very worried that when those parks would close down, the only

other open space for people on Skid Row is our garden. We're already at capacity. We don't need, like, three times more people coming to our garden.
The other thing in contemporary issues is that the St. Vincent Center, what's called the Cardinal Manning Center on Skid Row, it's on Winston Street, it's been there at least for fifty years. So I was having a conversation in our garden with one of our folks, and he said the woman who was in charge of the St. Vincent Center retired and they hired a new person, a younger person, who took out all the couches and the TV sets and closed the doors, basically, to anybody who wasn't on a program for alcohol abuse. They always have forty beds available to anybody that wanted them or if you signed up in time for them or whatever. But it was a kind of open situation. Now they've gone over to what the Midnight Mission and the Union Rescue Mission does, and it's all kind of the Safer Cities larger plan.

Collings

So what do you mean they've gone over to—what do they do?

Dietrich

There are no amenities for—there's no comfort for people on the streets unless you're willing to go into a program. So I was talking to my friend Tee [phonetic], and he's a great guy and I really love him, but people in the streets sometimes, they side with the oppressors, most often. So he says, "Well, of course they're closing it down, because people abuse the facilities. Do you know that they would go in there and sometimes they would go into the bathroom and they would shit in the urinals." I said to Tee, "You know, this is a Catholic place, and Catholics believe that when we serve the poor, we serve Jesus. So when you go into the urinal and you go to clean the bathroom and you find a pile of shit in your urinal you're supposed to say, 'Jesus left me a present. I am so blessed today.'" Well, of course, we don't always do that. [laughter] And the guys around him said, "Yeah, Catholics are supposed to be more compassionate."
He says the woman that, quote, unquote, "retired," I said, "Look. She's looking for a job. She didn't retire. She was let go and she wants a job." So my sense is that the Catholics have gone over to the same kind of Safer Cities project. I call it the dark side, personally, that we don't provide anything for people on the streets, that the only way to make this work is to make things really miserable for people so that they will go into a program, they'll get sober. But then, of course, people get sober and they've got felonies. Even if there were plenty of jobs around, these would not be the first people hired. Just to say that nothing that happens in terms of the civic mentality in the city of Los Angeles is really connected with the reality of our economic situation or even our social situation.

Collings

I was interested, actually, on the theme of people on Skid Row getting work. The comments that you made in that Op-Ed that you shared with me, that

you had published most recently, where the person that you are talking with was talking about how you have to go through these online applications. So there isn't that opportunity to make the personal connection, to have somebody take a look at you and get a sense of you and maybe hire you, that there was in the past. I would think that this would be an additional impediment.

Dietrich

Indeed. Ernie, the person I was talking about, he's just a really great guy and he's got a long work history, but he's over fifty and I think that that is an impediment in itself. But as he was trying to explain that whole online thing is really—

Collings

That's a major hurdle.

Dietrich

A major hurdle. Right. Exactly.

Collings

Looking back to the seventies, when you said that the Skid Row was predominantly white, do you have any sense that attitudes, policies towards Skid Row may have changed as Skid Row became predominantly—

Dietrich

Black? Of course. Black. Right.

Collings

Because you were describing this very progressive attitude, which has something to do with the times, the people, and place, but what about the racism question?

Dietrich

I want to put the Bradley stuff in place and just say that it was pretty good policy. It was a good policy and it was a good policy decision. Lots of people had impact on that, and it was just an opportune moment. So let me just put that there. But probably in the eighties the whole kind of racial configuration of Skid Row changed dramatically. So we had this influx, really of younger black men, and the older white guys either died off or they got old enough to get SSI and find someplace else to go, because it got a little tougher on the streets. So that was part of the population change. I think also if you walked around the streets of Santa Monica, you would probably see, I think, a larger number of white homeless people on the streets, and the last thing they want to do is go to Skid Row. That would be like going to purgatory for them, although I think the city of Santa Monica has been cited several times for driving people at least in the direction of downtown Los Angeles, as well as people in Orange County and Long Beach. So they do dump people on Skid Role, and I want to empathize in a certain sense with the people who know that that's happening. The other thing is, yesterday we were at a rally. I forget the name of— the City Council is voting. I don't know how they voted, but it's an ordinance that says if there are more than

three people who have felonies living in the same facility, then that facility could be closed down.

Collings

Wow.

Dietrich

Yes. It really comes from the Valley, I think, council people from the Valley, because in various cities in the Valley there are, quote, "recovery" homes and halfway houses, so people don't like that and it diminishes their property values. But the Times article—I think it was Monday; no, it was Wednesday—about this issue actually spoke about Boyle Heights, which is where I live, and the various facilities that could be closed down in Boyle Heights. We could be closed down. I have a felony, as well as a number of formerly homeless people that live with me. So we could be subject to being closed down. But, frankly, all of Skid Row hotels could easily be closed down.

Collings

Interesting.

Dietrich

So that's on the books. Well, I don't know if it got on the books, but it was a pretty broad coalition that was opposed to it, but it's all the do-gooders, starting with United Way and various religious organizations, so there was a pretty large kind of push to not have this happen. I don't know what happened. But that's what you're struggling with, is just that this is a big problem, but nobody knows how to deal with it adequately, and so the choice is always to go towards the punitive response with Safer Cities, closing down housing, and without even any kind of reflection on, well, what are we going to do when we close down these parks and everybody's on the streets? So it's a constant struggle. I think even with the way that the economy is going right now, that it doesn't actually bode well for our people, that everything is closing down, that services are diminishing, and that middle-class people, what little they have they want to hang onto it and they don't want their property values to be diminished. They want to be able to take care of, well, of course, their own families, etc. So I feel that there is an increasing sense that as the economy diminishes, that there's not a connection with the poor and the homeless who were already suffering from that. It's a sense that we want to be disconnected with that and make sure that we can hang onto what we have.

Collings

So we've talked about, obviously, the Bradley administration. We've talked about Riordan. Just in broad strokes, how would you evaluate the Villaraigosa administration?

Dietrich

Oh, my god. Well, all right. Just in terms of my very tiny lens on it, I'm certainly assuming that Villaraigosa, he's a Democrat, he's probably really,

really liberal and he has good sense about environmental stuff and he wants to do all kinds of things, and I hate to be sympathetic to him, but I feel like the pressures for downtown development are overwhelming, and they seem really obvious in the sense of increasing the tax base, using abandoned buildings, turning them into high-cost housing, that that is so attractive. Well, of course, the Downtown Business Association, which I think of as the major player, along with Eli Broad—I can't even name the others, but I will mention Carol Schatz as my personal nemesis. She's the director of the Downtown Business Association. So that's a lot of pressure. I don't want to be sympathetic, but I just want to say I can't imagine any politician, no matter what his politics are, standing up to that, particularly if they're putting cash in your pockets. So it's a great, great obstacle. In fact, Jesus, yesterday one of the women, Gypsy—she's been on Skid Row forever, she's a little bit crazy—she came up to me yesterday and she said, "Do the hippies ever do demonstrations about park closings?" Because she was worried about the park closing.

I said, "Yes, and we're thinking about doing that." She goes to—the park across the street from us has an AA meeting every day, every night from eight to nine. It's called the Drifters. They've been there forever, not at the park, but they've been on Skid Row. It is kind of one of the premier AA gathering places because people come from all over, and Skid Row people come in and they talk together. She wondered if—no, she didn't wonder. She just assumed that if the park closed, that the obvious place to go would be the hippie kitchen garden. And I'm thinking, that's a whole extra project.

Collings

An influx.

Dietrich

Yes, exactly. But I just wrote my name down on a piece of paper and I put my telephone number down, and I said, "Okay. Just give this to the person who's in charge and have them call me." I knew that there was not a chance that we would actually take on that project, but I wanted to honor her concerns, and I just wanted my community to talk about it because it's such an important project on Skid Row. I couldn't imagine actually taking it on.

Collings

Why is that?

Dietrich

Well, so you run the kitchen all day and you're done. In theory, it could work, but it really means, like, that we sleep in the kitchen every night because the cook has to get up in the morning. So in theory it could work, but it really means that it's a project and that person has to be there this time, whereas they could come in at ten o'clock, you know, and kind of slide in. So it just makes another kind of structural responsibility. We already have—

Collings

A lot.

Dietrich

A lot. But I wanted to honor Gypsy. I wanted to just say that I would talk to the community if it came up. Anyway, but that's what's happening. I think the parks are going to stay open, and that's good because it would be really, really difficult for everybody, but particularly—well, maybe not

Collings

Do you support any of the current slate of candidates for mayor in terms of these issues?

Dietrich

I actually like Wendy Greuel. I like Wendy Greuel because—I have not examined her whole record, but she was an intern in the Bradley administration when we were doing all this stuff, so she has that whole history. I don't assume because of that that she would be particularly amenable to our issues, given all of the pressure from development. So I don't assume that, but I like Wendy personally, and I guess I would say that we would probably have a bit of access. It doesn't mean we would get anything from that administration. I just feel like whoever's elected, that there's a dynamic that's in place that I don't expect to win. I don't expect that we are going to create the—it's not the kingdom of god that I want, but a little bit of a kind of safe space for our people. It would seem reasonable and doable, but I just think that that's probably not going to happen, but I do believe that what's important is that we continue to press for that. If we get anything out of that, that would be great. So, no, I don't.

Collings

I just have two follow-up questions from last time. I don't know how productive they will be. You said that Officer Dion Joseph was your nemesis. I was wondering what you meant by that.

Dietrich

God, don't I have so many nemesis. Or is that nemeses? Well, I was reading some of the material you gave me from the Manhattan Institute, my other nemesis, what's-her-name.

Collings

Heather Mac Donald. [laughter]

Dietrich

You know, she's so bright and she's really smart, and I can hardly read that stuff because I'm just [unclear] as a cop-hater.

Collings

Well, it's so crafted. There like no point of entry. It's like a round ball.

Dietrich

I know.

Collings

You can't get inside it anywhere.

Dietrich

Even when the Times published it, they didn't identify her as a fellow of the Manhattan Institute. The Manhattan Institute is a conservative whatever. But just to say they have their whole project and that came with the Safer Cities stuff, and that it's a major conservative reaction to the sixties, really to civil rights as well, and to all of the fallout of people demanding or insisting upon their constitutional rights. So people who are cop-haters, according to Heather Mac Donald, are people that insist that poor people have civil rights and that you can't just take their property. I'm a cop-hater because I see cops taking people's property and violating every sense of what the Constitution is about. I mean, just point-for-point. I mean, it's not even ideological or idealistic. It's just like, hello. These are people. This is their property. So, anyway, so I'm a cop-hater, and so Heather writes about walking the streets with Officer Dion Joseph as well as Captain Smith, and talks about how the people on the streets love the police and they know the police by name. And it's true. It's true. But if you live on the fucking streets, you fucking damn well better be in really good, close connection with the police. If you are that vulnerable, you do not have the possibility to be obstinate with the police. So you want to really be close to them. And of course they do.

That's one element, but the other element is that poor people are often the most conservative. They're the most conservative, and as I told you that story, whenever they close amenities, there's always going to be the voice of lots of folks on Skid Row who say, "Yeah, well, it's because they abuse their privileges, and of course they're going to close that off to them." So, poor people don't like other poor people, and they don't really have tolerance for other poor people, but of course they're with people who are often out of order.

Collings

Was there a particular incident with Officer Dion Joseph that you were pointing to when you singled him out?

Dietrich

No. I just know that he's quite affable, and I know that people like him, but I also know that he has a very conservative both religious and political perspective that really come together not only for him, but for the city as well, that everybody has to be on a program and that the way to get people on a program is to put them in jail. And if you use tough love—and I feel like it's the rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous, so that kind of perspective of tough love and tough law enforcement merge really easily together. So that's why the missions are working together with the city, that they have an ideological perspective that allows them to work together for a particular vision that works for both of them, that the city can harass people to the point where people will go into a program. So I find that perspective to be antithetical to my own, which is to look at the larger social picture, because I think that that's what Jesus is doing. He's not asking people to go into a

program. [laughter] I don't know. I mean, it seems to obvious to me. And I know that works for some people, but I'm just saying that when you read the scriptures, Jesus didn't say, "Okay. This is what you need to do before I feed you. This is what you need to do before I give you a bed tonight, before I provide hospitality for you."

So I feel like that the entire opus of scripture is completely denigrated by that perspective which, frankly, is associated with conservative Protestant fundamentalism, which isn't to say—I don't want to get into the Catholic stuff right now, but we could, considering that Cardinal Mahoney has just been kicked out of the church. But we at the Catholic Worker and probably all Catholic Workers are supported by people who still think that Jesus feeds people and that that's what you're supposed to do. And it's not that we're stupid. I mean, it's not that we don't know that all kinds of things go on. That's what my friend Tee, Tyrone, said when I told him, I said, "You're supposed to go, 'Jesus left me a present in my urinal.'" But just that Catholics are supposed to be more compassionate. So, yes, we have that kind of ideological marking that really comes from our Catholic tradition, and it's not only just that we feed people, but we have a social justice perspective. We see the larger picture and we wonder why it is that only poor people get put in jail for their addictions, when there are so many people in Santa Monica and Westwood—if the police did a drug raid at UCLA, I'm sure that they would find lots of drugs there and they would probably find some pretty major drug dealers as well. But they're not going to do that, because if they did that, what would happen? Well, we know what would happen. Every daddy, every parent would call their lawyers, and the president of UCLA would be on the phone to all their lawyers. My people don't have that defense, so it's easy to go around and arrest poor people for drugs. It's easy to blame all of our deficiencies on the visible people who live on the streets, and it's easy for the police to exercise their authority there. You go to UCLA and you try to walk around UCLA and arrest kids for doing drugs, you will not be an LAPD officer for very long, but if you arrest twenty-five, quote, unquote, "drug dealers" on Skid Row, you're going to get promoted. That's how it works. Poor people are the low-hanging fruit. And that's the way police get promoted.

Collings

That's very interesting as well. Shall we start to talk a little bit about—I don't know how much time you have today—the running of the soup kitchen?

Dietrich

Sure. Let's go to twelve.

Collings

Okay. So you have said things like, "Mostly what we try to do is run a soup kitchen and see what's in front of us."

Dietrich

Did I say that?

Collings
Yes.
Dietrich
That's good.
Collings
You also said that you had the sense that—and this might be from the article. You said that the Protest Movement of the sixties and seventies were not sustained because they were missing this element, but that's kind of a larger issue. How do you run the kitchen? What's involved? It sounds like a big project.
Dietrich
It's a pretty big project, but let me just tell you that the essence of the project is—and I hate this word; I have to think of a different word. But it is a ministry of presence. That makes us sound like we're religious or something, which I try to avoid.
Collings
Well, I do like that notion of presence.
Dietrich
The presence is what it's about. We were criticized one time by some other people on the left. We didn't have meetings and we didn't gather the people for a meeting. And so what I was thinking in response to that was that of course we have a meeting. We have a thousand people coming every day. And I forget—but it's like poor people don't want to come to a meeting. [laughs] Homeless and hungry people gather around food.
De Vroom
No one wants to come to a meeting.
Collings
Right.
Dietrich
Exactly. These are organizers. Anyway, just to say that we gather the people around the bread, around the food, and then we try to be present to their concerns. So we see a thousand people a day.
Collings
A thousand?
Dietrich
Well, we serve a thousand people. Maybe it's five or six hundred people. So you're there. You're there and you're wiping tables and you're a servant and you're listening to what their concerns are. When somebody like Ruby comes up to you and says, "Do you ever do protests at a park?" you listen to that. When she's concerned about where the AA meeting's going to go, even though you know you probably can't take on that project, you just tell her, "Okay." You give her your name and phone number and, "You tell that person give me a call and I will take this up." So the core of Christianity, the core, really, of Catholicism is the Eucharist and it's the gathering around the

table. So we gather around the table and we break bread and we share our concerns. So we are there present to the concerns of our people, present to the concerns of the people with whom we break bread. So that's really what the project is about. That's what Jesus was about. Jeez, I mean, he brings five-thousand people together and immediately the authorities are on top of him. "Why do your people not wash their hands?"
It's exactly what's happening today. Those people in Jesus' time were, quote, unquote , unclean." The unclean of our time are drug addicts and poor people who don't have a job. There are lots of people, as I said, on the Westside who do drugs. They aren't the target of the authorities. In Jesus' time, there were lots of folks who were unclean, but they could maintain the façade of being clean. They could go to the temple, etc., etc. The people on the Westside can keep that façade. They're just the same as the poor people on the streets. Our people just happen to be the five-thousand people in the wilderness who have no place else to go, and the authorities are concerned because they're unclean. And our people will be put in jail because they're unclean, but they don't do anything different from what's happening in the better neighborhoods of this city. So we want to be present to that situation. We know that Jesus understood that hypocrisy was the essential project that he was trying to unveil, the hypocrisy of the authorities. So we listen to the people, we listen to their concerns, and we are with the people, and oftentimes we get castigated for—and, frankly, I think it's not too far in the future that they will attempt to close us down because we don't have a program. We just serve people food, and you can't do that. So we are a nuisance, so nuisance abatement will be the next issue that I envision for the future. So the kitchen is—

Collings

Is it seven days a week?

Dietrich

No. We do it three days a week: Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. We serve anywhere from six-hundred to fifteen-hundred meals, very simple, beans, rice, salad, bread. On the alternate days, we serve breakfast on the streets. It's just such a big project that it wears my people out. It wears me out. I have to go home and take a nap these days. I'm old. So we can't do it more than three days a week, but we do have alternate projects.

Collings

Where do you get the food?

Dietrich

That's a problem, because we're not tax-deductible, and so we don't get Food Banks, etc., so we actually pay money to buy beans. We buy beans and rice. We have pasta that the church provides for us. We have another church, maybe two churches, that provide large cans of tuna, a couple times a month we'll do tuna noodle, which is a really big—people love that.

Collings

I'll bet.

Dietrich

And we get lots and lots of donations, which is really great. So we give out lots of produce, lots of bread. We get very few donations that diminish our production costs, which are going up. For decades we had a place that gave us free lettuce and tomatoes for our salad, but now we have to buy it, and lettuce—

Collings

Is getting expensive.

Dietrich

Oh, my god, it's like $40 a case right now because of the—

Collings

Drought.

Dietrich

Drought, yes.

Collings

In one of your newsletters you were talking about using frozen hospital food that was like day-old or something?

Dietrich

Don't tell the Health Department. We haven't done that for a long time, but it was a really, really sweet and lovely nun who has passed away at—god, where was it? I'll remember it in a second. But she was kind of in charge of the food, and she hated it to be thrown away, so she froze it and we would go pick it up, and it was very, very popular. I'm sure if the Health Department saw it, they would just be abhorred. So we'd have to unthaw it, use meat cleavers to chop it up and throw it in the pots, but it was, like, really good stuff. It was like beef stew. I mean, it was really top quality. So, yeah, we have not done that particular one for a long time. [laughs]

Collings

So what's a typical day? What time do you get started?

Dietrich

Oh, man. Right now, tomorrow, my wife is gone, so I'm taking her place. She and Jessie leave the Catholic Worker at six-fifteen, and Catherine goes into the kitchen and sets up the kitchen, and Jessie sweeps up around the place and kind of moves the drug dealers to a place that's a little more helpful for us, that they're not blocking our streets. So that's six-fifteen. And then the early crew, the watering crew, leaves the house at six-thirty. They come down. They are four people. They sweep the garden and water all the plants. Then at seven-thirty the late crew comes down, and probably around eight we gather around the kitchen table, hold hands, say a prayer, and give out jobs. The last several—probably five years or so, we've had lots of volunteers. So that's great, but sometimes we spend extra money to keep our volunteers employed. You have to go out and buy some fruit or something for them to chop up. Anyway, so then someone will be assigned

to go vigil at the Federal Building against the war every day, but, basically, most people are there setting up, chopping lettuce, chopping onions, buttering bread, and preparing the meal for the day. It would be either beans and rice or pasta. Pretty much that's what we do. We have about five, six, seven different kinds of beans. Then when everything's prepared at around nine-thirty, or before nine-thirty. We would gather again for a prayer and then the servers would be assigned and we would start around nine-thirty, sometimes before nine-thirty, and we would serve from nine-thirty to twelve.

Most of the people that have been part of the longer-term Catholic Worker would be kind of watching the line, making sure—so there'd be four or five people posted around the line, greeting people and making sure that everything goes smoothly. There would be two or three people in the garden, wiping tables, cleaning up, sweeping, but really they're there to kind of intervene if there are any problems. We don't have security guards, unlike most places, so we're really vulnerable to anybody that comes in. We have no way of locking them out or anything. So there are a number of people that come into our garden that are mentally ill, that have PTSD, or that are just kind of generally pissed, and sometimes they're generally pissed at white people. But that's part of the project. You're there and you recognize that you are potentially the target of people's—because you are the closest, most vulnerable white person, that you are potentially going to be targeted. It doesn't happen all the time, or very often, but it does. I mean, like, particularly at the end of the month, people really—they don't have any money and they haven't had any food, and so whatever we're serving becomes a kind of major interest for them.

Collings

I would think.

Dietrich

It's really a survival interest. And so we try to provide for them in a way that does not create a violent situation, try to do it in the most humane way possible. You try to give order without being authoritarian. So most of the time it works, but—

Collings

So there's kind of a serving station and people line up and the food is doled out?

Dietrich

Right. So people are outside. They come through the garden. Our kitchen is a prep kitchen, and so at the end of the kitchen we have a serving counter. So people line up outside and then they come through the serving counter and they pick up a plate of beans and some salad and bread.

Collings

So it's already on the plate when they pick it up?

Dietrich

Yes. So the server would put beans on the plate, hand it to them, and then they would go to the next station, and someone would put salad on it, and then someone would put bread on it.

Collings

Is there any issue like, "That's not enough. That guy got more"?

Dietrich

That is a constant issue. You're always trying to arbitrate that. You're always trying to make it as fair as possible and as consistent as possible so that everybody knows that we are being fair. So everybody gets it, and then somebody says, "Well, can I have some more?" Most people don't say that, because most people have already been there. "Yes, you can have more, but you have to go around to the end of the line." And you can go through the line as often as you want. And the same with the bread. "Could I have—?" "Yes, you can, but you have to go around again." So lots of people go around. They come with their own containers. We usually have plenty of containers. If anybody wants a container, then they can get a container, but they only get one scoop. And then they go around, and sometimes people go around five or six times and they fill up their container, and they fill it up not only for themselves, but for other people as well. Lots of people don't want to go to the other serving entities on Skid Row, so they take enough and we give them—as long as they get in line, we give them as much as they want so they have enough for the next day or next couple of days, or, as many people have told me, they bring it to people in their hotel room.

Collings

So do you close when you run out of food?

Dietrich

No, we don't. We never run out of food. We close the kitchen. We stop serving in the kitchen at noontime. Then we bring the food out to our garden. Almost always there is plenty of food for anybody that comes late, so we probably serve fifty or sixty people after we close. Then we bring food in, but even then, people come and anybody that comes to the door, we'll serve them a plate. Sometimes it's hard to get out of the place. Basically it kind of like tapers off. So we clean up and the food is outside, and people can continue to eat, and then we close the garden at around one o'clock. And then it's Miller Time.

De Vroom

It's quite an operation. You should actually see it. Quite spectacular, I have to say. It's quite amazing.

Dietrich

Well, I think the unusual thing is that actually people can come and if they come early and if they don't bring twenty people or five people, if they come as an individual, they can serve. You have, I think, a fairly unique experience of actually preparing food and serving food, talking to people, and then cleaning up afterwards. It is an experience of actually creating

something that is very helpful for people, and if you do that, you feel like you actually have accomplished something. It's a little bit different, and I don't want people to not send me a check, but it's a little more involved than just sending a check. So if you're looking for an experience of service, then it's fairly unique, I think. But it is, I think, quite satisfying for most people who come to us.

De Vroom

Do you mind if I ask a question?

Collings

Oh, go ahead.

De Vroom

Because what was so moving to me, because I was publishing his book, so I was talking to all—I wanted to understand the whole thing [unclear]. So I started talking to everybody. I worked at the kitchen a couple times, and then I just started talking and [unclear]. And one of the things that struck me, as we were talking about, there's forty people in your—I mean, there are kids who are coming to do their service [unclear], but there are people, your regulars. You can't believe who's working in this kitchen and it does run like a military operation. I mean, I hate to use that word.

Dietrich

No, it's true.

De Vroom

But it is like you can't believe how this thing runs.

Collings

Precision.

De Vroom

Precision. And I remember talking to, like, the French guy. I learned his whole life story. There's your Polish chef whose hands don't touch meat. There's your Korean nuns. There's this air of the [unclear] fortune. There's a CIA guy. I mean, I don't know what he does. So I was interested not just in doing the cooking, but just to talk. It was stunning to me that what's really moving about behind the scenes, and there's his people and the people he lives with. Then there's all these people that are regulars that are—it's a really incredible, I don't want to say community, but group of people, and they all vary. I mean, [unclear], to me, is one of those amazing things. What's moving to me is I hate this crap about, "Oh, I feel so good because I help the poor." It's not that. They're just in there doing their thing.

Like these two guys in the back, all they do is chop onions because they're the only two guys who can face it, and I can chop onions, so I was back there with them. And then there's a few people buttering the bread, and then there's the people doing this. Arnel [phonetic], your poet, who is this incredible dishwasher. This one guy, John, who only does [unclear]. It's this really weird—it's almost like village that's running in this amazing way. It's

like you're at a dinner party with all these crazy—not crazy, but really different people.

Collings

Eclectic.

De Vroom

And also not predictable. Like your right-wing, I think somewhat corrupt person [unclear] student loans for kids, but he's like—I think he's—I don't know. It's not what you'd think. It's not a bunch of, "Oh, you know, hold hands." That may be part of the community a little bit, but it is really this—it's like I was not prepared for that, this amazing group of people. "Amazing" is the wrong word. These are not people that necessarily would talk to each other in a coffee shop necessarily. You know what I mean? It's very disparate elements.

Dietrich

It is.

De Vroom

Very disparate.

Dietrich

Because of what we do, frankly, because security and the potential for violence is always at the edge, at the surface, that everything has to run smoothly. So Catherine sets everything up. There's a different person every day who does organizing, which basically he's the coordinator of the kitchen. He takes care of the volunteers, makes sure they have a job, greets them and sometimes has to train them on the spot. But you have to make it work really smoothly. It only can happen if the line flows, because we're asking people to stand in line. If you ask them to wait in line for a long time, then you are going to have the potential for violence. But if it seems to be moving the whole time they're in line, then it works well. And, of course, we eat outside, we serve outside, and that is really, really helpful because people—

De Vroom

It's beautiful.

Dietrich

It's really a beautiful environment. It works better if you're not contained in a container. So there's this beautiful environment and it moves quickly and efficiently, but also it's really tough because you need, like, a particular person to be the server, because it has to move quickly, but you have to smile and you have to greet each person that comes in, and each person has to feel as though they are valued as a person. Every person on that line has to smile. If they're not smiling, someone will go through and say, "You have to smile now." So the organizer has to—there are a couple of people, the salad server and the bean server are pretty regulars, but the other people, you choose them for their ebullience. So that's one thing. But then what Theresia was talking about is just there are a lot of volunteers and it's quite an eclectic group. So it's kind of grown into a kind of Breakfast Club. We

actually serve food to our volunteers and they all are very—well, not all, but, you know, I mean there's a kind of camaraderie among those people, and particularly—she mentioned the onion choppers. They're kind of like the—

De Vroom

I chopped onions for like five hours. Just to say, I mean, one day I was there and a truck pulled up outside, a little pickup truck, and these were do-gooders. There's nothing wrong with these people. They pull up next to the kitchen. I was telling Catherine. And they had sack lunches. So here he's got this beautiful, this organized line [unclear]. It was like a riot. And I'm thinking to myself, "Wait. You're getting food here. Why are you running out—?" It was really bad. Catherine went out and tried to stop it.

It's something you wouldn't even understand, but it's like there's more food over here and we're going to get this for free and everything was organized. So you think, why is he doing it this way? But then when you see what would happen—and these were people—it was like a high school that showed up. I'm sure they were meaning well, but, I mean, it was just like people could have got trampled because somebody had a bologna sandwich in a sack lunch. Not that that was better food than you were serving, but it was just this need. I didn't understand that it was working so clockwork, has so much sense to it because of security, but also because of just making sure nobody—

Dietrich

Yes, just to create a human environment and to do it with dignity. So if you've been doing it for a while, you kind of have made lots of mistakes and so you try to do it in a way that you just have an environment where people feel valued and where there's dignity. And as I said before, that's our gathering place. That's where we come together. That's our meeting of presence. That's our ministry of presence that we meet around the breaking of the bread. And we can close now.

Collings

Absolutely. It's twelve o'clock. Wonderful. Thank you very much.

Dietrich

Thank you. [End of February 1, 2013 interview]

1.7. SESSION SEVEN (March 1, 2013)

Collings

Today is March 1st, 2013, Jane Collings interviewing Mark Dietrich in Santa Monica. We thought that we would talk about what's happening right now, city of L.A. asking the Supreme Court to overturn the ruling on homeless belongings.

Dietrich

Right. And you might have noticed that in that article, the city mentions the quote, unquote, "tuberculosis outbreak."

Collings

Right. The rare strain of tuberculosis, yes.

Dietrich

Starting in 2007, by the way, there's been this epidemic, but now we're just hearing about it because it's all coordinated with the city's desire to get rid of homeless people, number one, and to overturn the Ninth Circuit Court decision about supporting homeless people's rights to have their own property and not to have it taken. So, number one, I want to say that this article is an affirmation of how much of a thorn in the side that we are, because we think we're always just throwing little pebbles at the Goliath, but obviously it's something they want to get rid of and they're willing to go to the Supreme Court for that. So I consider it an affirmation of all the work of homeless advocates in Skid Row. Secondly, I just want to kind of applaud the way that the city is able to coordinate their press information. So this information about the TB outbreak came out, like, three days ago, and then three days later, they're talking about getting rid of homeless people on the street because it's really for their own good.

Collings

It's a public health issue.

Dietrich

It's a public health issue. They always frame it that way. If you read what the Manhattan Institution says, that this is how you do it. You have to take the moral high ground. You can't say that, "We're just arresting homeless people for being homeless." No. "We're doing this for the protection of the public and for the protection of the homeless themselves." And it's, frankly, fucking infuriating. But they do it well, and they apparently have unquestionable attention of the media. Nevertheless, one of the things I want to mention is that they're concerned about this TB outbreak and they're concerned about homeless people, but they thing is that you don't get TB from sleeping on the street. Sleeping in fresh air is the best thing you can do to avoid—

Collings

That's a good point.

Dietrich

—contracting tuberculosis. You get tuberculosis in congregate settings. Jails, prisons, and the dormitory settings of Skid Row missions all are pathogens of tuberculosis because you're in an enclosed space. People are coughing and breathing on you, whereas if you're on the streets, you're safe from TB. In fact, they don't even mention it, but people who get tuberculosis, homeless people get tuberculosis and staph infections all the time. They don't get it from being on the streets; they get it from being in these

congregate settings because those are their alternatives to sleeping on the street.

Collings

What about this reporter, Andrew Blankstein?

Dietrich

I don't know Andrew Blankstein. Alexandra is familiar to me, and she's been, well, frankly, a bit of a nemesis for some years. I don't know, it does really feel like the reporters—I'll tell you what. The current kind of perspective of the Times, in terms of their editorial section, is quite liberal and quite favorable to the homeless and quite favorable to the Bill of Rights. They have advised in their editorials that the city attorney not pursue this, even to the level of the Ninth Circuit Court. So I assume that they wouldn't be favorable to going to the Supreme Court. So just to say that the editorial section is pretty favorable, and as you might have noticed, they print me, periodically. So I do get a little voice in every once in a while, but the reportorial section, whoever's in charge of that—all right, I want to say at the very least, we did get a couple of paragraphs from our civil rights attorney, Carol Sobel. I'm grateful for that. But the whole article was this public relations piece about how—or at least if you read it, if you were out in the suburbs—

Collings

Are you referring to this particular article?

Dietrich

Yes, this particular article. What is it?

Collings

From yesterday, "L.A. to Ask High Court to Overturn Ruling on Homeless Belongings."

Dietrich

Right. If you had no knowledge of what's going on, you would just assume that these people are operating in the best interests of the public and the best interests of the poor, to protect the poor from themselves. But from my perspective, it's a well-orchestrated public relations campaign to allow them, first of all, to go forward with the Supreme Court project and maybe even get a little publicity for Carmen Trutanich for his upcoming election, and then that you're really protecting the poor by putting them in jail and missions. I don't think that's the case.

Collings

It's going to be very interesting, very important to find out how the Supreme Court goes on this one.

Dietrich

Well, will they even take it up?

Collings

Or if they take up it, yes, of course.

Dietrich

And then if they do take it up—

Collings

Five-to-four.

Dietrich

They love to overturn the Ninth Circuit Court.

Collings

Yes, that's true. So we said today we were going to talk about your—last time, we talked about how the kitchen operated, and we sort of carved out a time to talk about political protest work. There's so much to talk about, I mean, starting in 1978 the Catholic Worker joining the Alliance for Survival, a lot of antiwar work in the sense of petitioning against the Arms Bazaar. Where would you like to sort of plunge into this? There's definitely the stuff about you were in prison on 9/11, and it would certainly be interesting to hear about what you were there for, how the news of the airplane attack reached you, what people in prison were saying, and then perhaps move on to the Iraq War protest work. if that would make sense.

Dietrich

Let me just start with the Arms Bazaar, because I do feel like I kind of started it. Well, we'd been around for ten years before we did this, and a lot of the people from the Catholic Worker were part of the Alliance for Survival, which was a large, popular antinuke organization. So we were kind of approached to kind of do the civil disobedience part of this project down in Anaheim, and, you know, we were just doing what we thought we should do. So four of us got arrested the first year, I think in '78, and I think we spent a night in jail and the judge gave us a suspended sentence. So we figured, "Let's do this again." Some months before the Arms Bazaar came back next year, the community sent me down to Orange County, and I think I rode my bicycle down to Orange County.

Collings

Oh, really?

Dietrich

I didn't have a car, so I rode my bicycle all around, collecting signatures. And then on the weekends, lots of people would come to markets. Anyway, I think we got like 10,000 signatures, which is like 10 percent of the population of Anaheim at the time.

Collings

Boy, that's really impressive.

Dietrich

Yes, it was fairly significant. Nevertheless, the Arms Bazaar was still there, so there was a big rally, candlelight vigil, couple thousand people. And then we had organized like thirty or thirty-five people to blockade. So we all got arrested, and it was good coverage. You know, we'd been circulating petitions about the Arms Bazaar in Orange County, and then you go, "Well, we're selling our weapons to foreign countries." Well, Orange County people

were really pissed about that, you know. [laughs] So anyway, we got arrested. Well, went to court. Anyway, most people went home, but myself and Kent Hoffman [phonetic], who had been arrested the previous year, were sent to another courtroom, Judge Sullivan's. Anyway, he gave us six months, which was a little shocking, you know. [laughs] I was thinking maybe thirty days for a probation violation. But then he says—which was his undoing—he said, "All right. I'm giving you six months, but if you write me a letter in thirty days saying that you won't do this again, I'll let you go." So there was that little kind of Sword of Damocles hanging over your head. But it was kind of like this dangling thing that—how's it going to end? Will they do it? So the Times was interested in the outcome of this, so the reporter comes and interviews us. Anyway, we were not going to do it, although I do have to say contemplating being in jail on the outside is different from being in jail on the inside, thinking, "Oh, well, I could do, like, a year or something in jail."

Collings

That's what you said when you were on the outside.

Dietrich

Yes, on the outside. But once you're inside, you're, "Holy shit. Six months." It seems like forever. Of course, you're kind of the first time in, like, the big county jail and it's a little scary.

Collings

I'll bet.

Dietrich

Anyway, so reporter comes and interviews—and you go, "We're not going to write this letter." Although, yes, I mean, I would have liked to have gotten out of jail, but I wasn't going to bitch myself out, you know. So in the meantime, the Catholic Workers had kind of organized a letter-writing campaign, and apparently the judge got some thousand letters in support, castigating him for this sentence, and it had some publicity in the Times. After two months, just before Christmas, we got word that we were being taken back to court, but the interesting thing is, like, I'm in jail and all the guys sort of—well, they read the paper.

Collings

Yes, I was going to ask you if they knew.

Dietrich

"You mean you could get out of here if you just wrote a letter? Well, you're going to write it, aren't you?" I said, "No." "You are so stupid." They were, like, all over me, what a numb-brain I was for not doing it. But then the article comes out in the Times about this, about not writing, and they go, "Whoa. You can't write that letter now." [laughter]

Collings

That's interesting.

Dietrich

Yes. So they had a kind of transformation. And then about two months into the sentence, just before Christmas, the judge calls us back into court. Of course, we're both a little nervous about this. Most of the guys were going, "You're getting out of here." But I wasn't so sure. The judge had offered to allow the media to come into the courtroom, and we were a little nervous. We said, "We don't want to do that." But what happened was, we went into court. I mean, I've been doing this for, like, forty years and nothing like this has happened on quite that scale. But Judge Sullivan brought us into court and apologized. He gave us a little—not a lecture, but a kind of little sense of what judges do in terms of sentencing. He talked about punitive and he talked about kind of educational—anyway, he said, "So I really thought that you would write the letter, and when you didn't, I recognized that you had the courage of your convictions, and I want to apologize to you."

Collings

This is unbelievable.

Dietrich

Yeah, it is, totally. So publically he would have apologized on the media, but we were scared and we didn't want the media there. But it was his intention to apologize. He said, "I've gotten," like, eight hundred letters or something, "all of them taking me to task for my sentencing. I've only gotten one letter in support of my sentencing, and it's from the National Rifle Association."

Collings

[laughs] Interesting.

Dietrich

He said something like, "The heartless judge apologizes to you." I mean, he said it in public.

Collings

Wow.

Dietrich

And we're both going, "What is going on?" We said, "He's going to release us." "Well, we're planning to come back next year, you know." He said, "Yes, I understand, but I have here a letter from the Arms Bazaar people saying that they're not coming back again next year." [laughs]

Collings

Wow.

Dietrich

Yeah, so that's the highpoint of my—

Collings

That was 1979?

Dietrich

Yeah, '79.

De Vroom

You have a book about this. You might not know that he wrote a book, that there's a book of letters you wrote, right?

Dietrich
Uh-huh.
De Vroom
That we're going to reissue next year. I think it's important you just mention. You might want to talk about it.
Dietrich
So when I was in jail I wrote letters to my wife every day. When I got out of jail—it was all in pencil. Nobody could read it. But my co-editor, Joan Trafficanty, could actually read my pencil scribbling and nobody else could read it, so she kind of transcribed it and typed it up. When I got home, all of the letters were transcribed and typed up, and I'm going, "Hmm. That looks like a book to me." So, anyway, I sent it off. Got a few rejections, but finally got a publisher. So most people don't have that kind of success in their—
Collings
Well, it also speaks to a particular period. I mean, this is the 1970s, late 1970s. I guess I have to ask myself the question of whether things would have transpired as they did in our current climate.
Dietrich
Right. I know.
Collings
Would there have been even the offer of write a letter in thirty days, and would there have been the letters to the judge?
Dietrich
Well, we certainly were in that kind of post-Vietnam kind of reflective era.
Collings
Right.
Dietrich
Kind of thinking we were going to be in a post-Afghanistan reflective era, if we aren't already, but, nevertheless, we are still like in a kind of mood of ascendancy in terms of the empire. I think probably Robert Sullivan, well, he said he'd come down to the kitchen and help us. He never did.
Collings
I was just going to ask you if you'd had any further contact—
Dietrich
Yes, he did offer that.
Collings
You never saw him again, then?
Dietrich
I never saw him again, but I am assuming from his surname that he probably was of Irish Catholic descent, but I don't know that for sure. But he was somebody that had a conscience and a sense of humanity, and really humility to apologize when you're wrong. Of course, you know, if we hadn't had all that publicity, it would never have been an issue, but we did have a

fair amount of publicity, and it put some pressure on him, made him think. So that was a very, very high point.

Collings

Absolutely.

Dietrich

Well, we got out of jail. The Arms Bazaar didn't come back to Anaheim.

Collings

They went to Germany?

Dietrich

We found out that they went—they were planning to go to Wiesbaden, Germany. We had former Catholic Worker friends who lived there, and so we just sent that information. Anyway, they had a big demonstration, a die-in. People had to climb over their supine bodies. They didn't come back to Wiesbaden next year. They went to the Panama Canal Zone, and we just didn't have any pull there. [laughter]

Collings

Do you know where they are now?

Dietrich

I don't, no. Oh, and I got a book out of it too. So it was a great moment of elation. I have to tell you, very few times—I've never gotten anything that good. So in some sense, you have to kind of come to terms with your own limitations. And so much of what we do is really, in terms of our resistance work and our justice work, is really symbolic in a way that just says—well, first of all, we kind of keep in mind what Rabbi Heschel said, that, "We don't do these things to change the world. We do these things so that the world won't change us." So you make a kind of public stand in opposition to what's going on in the larger culture. I mean, as difficult as it is to be in opposition to the city and the downtown business developers, how much more difficult is it to be in opposition to U.S. foreign policy? Dan Berrigan has said—and I keep this in mind—that we're kind of like shooting peashooters at an elephant. But it is the effort to make a public stand in opposition to injustice and war. So that's why you do it. You don't really expect it to change, but you can't not do it. It's just an act of conscience.

When the first Gulf War started, we went to the Federal Building and poured blood and oil on the steps of the Federal Building. Well, that's not going to stop the war, and, in fact, we couldn't even tell the press that we were doing it because we would have been stopped at the front steps. Even if they would have covered it, because, as you know, in the midst of war frenzy, the press really tends to get on board with the administration and they never print anything in opposition to the press releases that come out from the White House.

Collings

Prior to that, you had been involved with stuff going on in Central America, the Wednesday Morning Coalition. Did you find that the coverage of that was more favorable?

Dietrich

A little bit. You know, Martin Sheen was there every week, and there were forty or fifty people. It was good that there was some public recognition that this was going on. Well, anyway, it was symbolic. You're struggling with that kind of whether it's worth it to do that or not. This is the kind of perspective of the minority that it's worthwhile to just be symbolically out there. Even if it doesn't get covered in the press, it gets in the Catholic Agitator. It encourages people of the same mind to—really, it lifts people's spirits that there are people out there that still care and still have some sense of integrity.

Collings

How does it sort of work in terms of the organization? You had mentioned last time about going to the closing of—I forget the name of the bar downtown.

Dietrich

King Eddy.

Collings

That you had just come from a Friday kind of self-criticism session.

Dietrich

Cultural critique.

Collings

So I'm wondering, is it at those kind of weekly events that you sort of map out what the political work is going to be, or how does it work?

Dietrich

[laughs] I think it probably happens more often after cultural critique when we have Happy Hour and everybody's a little buzzed, and somebody goes, "Hey, why don't we give out shopping carts, free shopping carts?" And I think Cesar Chavez talked about the same thing, like, "Yeah, we get our best organizing ideas when we're out drinking." Because you kind of let down your guard a bit and you just kind of let things flow, and the stupidest idea comes out, but that proves to be, like, the best idea. So I don't know. We're so caught up, first of all, in kind of day-to-day, just trying to make things—

Collings

Yes, I'm wondering how this other piece even gets into the mix.

Dietrich

Exactly. I don't even want to say—all right. So we do the day-to-day thing and it's a grind in some ways. But we also—Wednesdays we do Bible study. I mean, that sounds kind of prosaic, but it is a time when we reflect upon our work for a couple hours, I mean, if it's good. It doesn't always happen, but you do reflect upon what you're doing, why you're doing it in light of what your original motivation for doing it was, to feed the hungry, clothe the

naked. But you read the scriptures, and then you have to keep reminding yourself that this is not stupid, because everything in the culture says that you're being stupid. And particularly when you're younger, your parents think you're—well, they probably think you're stupid, but if they're nice, they won't say so. They're just praying that you get over this phase as soon as possible, and most people do. But the more you can kind of reflect on what it is that you're doing and why, because this is useless. We're just serving free food over and over again, and the larger culture says, "You're a homeless enabler." Well, if you're a homeless enabler, that's what Jesus was. So you just have to keep that in mind, that Jesus was already doing this before you did and that Jesus thought it was a pretty good idea. So you just have to keep reminding yourself.

And the same, I think, with cultural critique. You reflect on the culture and you reflect on what you're doing, so at least it keeps you from falling asleep, because it can get numbing sometimes and you can just go through it in a kind of rote kind of way. You have to keep awake to what it is you're doing and why you're doing it, that you are offering an alternative, and even though almost nobody else is doing that, it's not only worthy, but it's based on a scriptural foundation.

Collings

It almost sounds like the civil disobedience and the antiwar work is almost like a form of retreat, like you get to grapple with basic values in a way that might be sort of more direct than—

Dietrich

You mean when you're in jail?

Collings

Well, I wasn't talking about that particularly, but you're talking about the grind of the kitchen work, and then you have these more ideologically focused actions.

Dietrich

Yes. For me, it's just that sense that you have to be actually physically present to the suffering and vicissitudes of the poor, because it's too easy to forget. It's too easy to forget if you don't do it on a regular basis. It's just something that you have to do to be physically present, and then you have to kind of reflect on it, because you can inure yourself to that as well unless you're kind of intellectually and emotionally reflecting on it. So you have to have a situation where people can kind of vent about, like, how bad it is, but you also have to have a situation where people can talk about why it's important to do what we do, because the whole culture is in opposition to what we do. And you can see it, I mean, just in the L.A. Times.

Collings

That's right. What you mentioned just a minute ago about the times that you were in jail, so how many times have you been in jail, roughly?

Dietrich

Like forty or so, or fifty, but mostly it's been kind of like a few days or overnight. I've actually only done one six-month sentence. As I told you, in '79 I got a—

Collings

A reprieve.

Dietrich

A reprieve. Right. So I've been fortunate to be someone who has kind of benefitted from my incarceration, not quite in the way that the authorities would hope.

Collings

So how did you benefit?

Dietrich

Well, I mean, just in terms of the book, but also, you know, when you're in jail for a while, you get a chance to read, kind of reflect on things. So as you alluded to, it is a bit of a retreat from a life of absolute activism, so I do benefit from it in that way, like I read scripture. Particularly when I'm in federal prison, people can send me books, so it has benefitted me intellectually.

Collings

How do the other people in the prison respond to you?

Dietrich

Well, as I told you, like that first time when I was in county jail, they typically are derisive of someone who—they would go, "You could have gotten bailed out for 200 bucks." Anybody that got that low a bail would not be in jail, but we don't pay bail.

Collings

Would explain that?

Dietrich

Well, first of all, we don't pay bail because a lot of people don't have that kind of resources, so it's an identification with the poorest of the poor, number one.

Collings

So would you say that to people in prison who ask you about it?

Dietrich

[laughs] No, that goes over better with middle-class church groups than—

Collings

Just wondering.

Dietrich

So the guys in jail, that doesn't fly with them. They just think you're stupid for doing it. But basically, it's like you're going to get some jail time anyway, you might as well do it now before you go to court. So they're a little derisive. But then there's a whole set of people that go, "Oh, wow, that's really impressive." I wrote an article, it's in the book, it's also in the original book, about—oh, no, it's not in that book. It was in the federal jail, you

know, just about this whole experience of being taken into court. Just that it's a very, I want to say demeaning experience, but even more than that, it's kind of diminishing because you're a prisoner and you're kind of being brought into this almost church-like experience.

Collings

That's interesting.

Dietrich

And you're in the holding tank all day long and you get your five minutes in court. Guys would come back from the courtroom and they would say, "Yeah, well, I got a [unclear]." I got a year. In the federal system, nobody get a year. You get five years. Anyway, one of the old-timers in there, he'd been in the courtroom with me. I thought I'd done the best I could to tell the judge what I was going to do and why I wasn't doing what he wanted me to do. So I thought I'd kind of blown it or not done that well. So when we got back to the holding cell, one of the guys said, "You know, I ain't never heard anybody talk to a judge like you talked to him. My father told me that there were people like you. You're a real standup guy."

Collings

Wow.

De Vroom

[unclear].

Dietrich

So, anyway, every once in a while—not everybody, it's not universal. And I don't really try to explain everything. I just say, "Well, I'm here for protesting," or something like that. But if people are interested, I'll go further into it.

Collings

And what were you in for six months for?

Dietrich

That was in 2000. We were trespassing at Vandenberg. We did a kind of backcountry action where we went into the base. They kind of have look around for us, and put them to a little more trouble. So we were there for, I don't know, like twelve hours or something, kind of getting cold and hungry and they hadn't found us yet, so we turned ourselves in.

Collings

How did they know you were there?

Dietrich

Because they knew there was a protest. I forget. I don't know if we informed them. I can't remember if there was a larger group that was part of this. There had been a pretty big demonstration the year before, and everybody had gotten, like, a ban-and-bar letter, but this year, for whatever reason—oh, I know what it was. There was a change in administration, so the previous year it had been the Clinton administration. This year was the Bush administration, and just a month or so before, there had been a Greenpeace

action at this same base in which they kind of came in from the ocean in their wetsuits and everything. It was pretty spectacular. And I think they weren't happy with that. So for whatever reason, definitely a change of administration.
They arrested us and held us. I ultimately got six months. The judge just assumed that I was the ringleader, which, in fact, I wasn't, but, nevertheless, so I got six months, but the first-time people got three months. So it was really a kind of real change in attitude on the part of the prosecutors.

Collings
Federal prosecutors.

Dietrich
Right. So I was in jail, I think it was late May, early June. I got a six-month sentence, so I was there when 9/11 happened, and I was actually in solitary for refusing to work, so it must have been like six in the morning. I overheard a couple of the guards talking about something. They were talking about going over and getting those, quote, unquote, "ragheads."

Collings
Even at that time? Because it wasn't even known till later in the day.

Dietrich
Well, maybe it wasn't six in the morning when I heard that. Probably about that time people hadn't quite figured it out yet. So anyway, I was in solitary. I eventually got released from solitary and I was in general population. But just kind of generally speaking, it was a little nerve-racking to be located so close to federal facilities. [laughter] I didn't think they were going to bomb the prison, but there was a thought in my mind that the major Federal Building in downtown Los Angeles might be a next target.

Collings
So where was this prison located?

Dietrich
It's downtown L.A. It's on Alameda Street, Alameda and Temple, let's say.

Collings
So you actually were in the Federal Building in downtown L.A.

Dietrich
Yes. And I don't think of federal prisons as being a target.

Collings
Right. But I see where you're going with this.

Dietrich
But the federal prison's right next to the Federal Building and the Federal Courthouse. So there was a thought in my mind. I mean, everybody had a kind of apocalyptic scenario at that moment. It was like, okay, well, why wouldn't there be a couple more attacks?

Collings
How were prisoners responding to it, that you were talking with?

Dietrich
There were a few Muslims that had a little bit different take, but generally speaking, the white American prisoners were unified in their patriotism and anger and outrage.
Collings
What about black and Latino prisoners?
Dietrich
Here's the thing. This federal prison, so there are a lot of Latino people, but they're mostly from Latin America. It's a weird place, because county jail is almost all—its major population is Latino and then the second population is black, but they're all like street kids and gang kids. Those people are not in federal prison. So it tends to be kind of a little bit more educated. Well, some bank robbers, lots of drug dealers. The majority opinion was concern, was patriotic, but people in that institution, they have such a profound sense of how weighted the system is against that, that they have some antipathy towards the federal government.
Collings
That's what I was wondering.
Dietrich
But I don't think it's all that politicized.
Collings
So you said that you weren't the ringleader. Who in your group participates and how does that work?
Dietrich
Well, this was a while ago, but there were a set of people in the community, younger people, that had a desire to do something at Vandenberg, so they'd done that the year before and they actually kind of precipitated it. I thought it was a great idea, so I just went along with it—not went along with it; I was an enthusiastic participant. But it did kind of well up from some of the younger folks.
Collings
Is there within the organization a kind of target list, I mean like some kind of sense of the kind of protest work, the civil disobedience work that the group will be doing?
Dietrich
There is, yeah. We'd been at Vandenberg for, like, twelve years or thirteen years now. So we go up there on a regular basis and we have once or twice a year, like, a demonstration outside the base. People would get arrested at the gate, generally speaking, although, like, five months ago, two of our community members did a backcountry action. They went into the base and they hung banners on the missile silos saying "Stop the Drones." They were planning to get arrested, but Theo decided that he would make himself known. Anyway, he got arrested, so he's doing ten days now. He's currently at the federal prison downtown. Then we have a couple that went up to

Seattle this weekend. There's a group called the Pacific Life Community that is composed mostly of Catholic Workers from Seattle to, like, Las Vegas. So there will be a gathering—this year it's up in Seattle—and people will do a civil disobedience action at the Trident missile base. Next year, it'll be in Las Vegas and it'll probably be at the drone base in Las Vegas. Then probably the next year it would be at Vandenberg again. So there's probably a set of, like, oh, I don't know, like fifty or so people that would come to these events in an attempt to kind of be mutually supportive and to form a little bit larger organization.

Collings

So where do you see the work going forward?

Dietrich

Well, here's the thing. And this is not to be, like, pessimistic or anything, but part of what we kind of have created is a situation where we foster sister houses. So we have nine or ten sister houses, and so when the people that have kind of like leadership inclinations are missioned off—I mean, it really happens rather spontaneously. What tends to happen is this, that people come to us and they're here for a while. They know about the sister house stuff. They know that if they wanted to start a place, we would support them. So they tend to kind of go back to where they're from and start a place. And I suppose you could say that's been fairly successful. So what we've tried to do or what we've really fostered is a sense of kind of expanding the movement by starting new places rather than building up our empire, if you're in Los Angeles, because we tried that and it was rather disastrous. I mean, it was kind of fun, but once you get too big and you have too many projects, you kind of lose focus. So there is that.

But the other thing is, of course, that when you have this kind of mission program, you don't have people in-house that are going to take over for you. That's how it's looking right now. So when you say how do we go forward, I'm just kind of thinking of kind of hanging on and doing the best we can. My wife's almost eighty now. I'm going to be seventy in not too long. So the leadership isn't looking at starting new projects. We're just trying to hold onto what we've got. I actually at this moment, you know, maybe I have, like, five people that I can count on. There are ten or eleven people in the community, but their commitment is only for the next, like, two to four months. So I don't know if anybody beyond the five people are going to be there, and those five people, they're not in the best of health. I mean, they're not infirmed, but they tend to be older people.

Collings

Who are those five people?

Dietrich

That would be Martha and Jessie and Jeff and Catherine and Faustino.

Collings

And they actually live at the house?

Dietrich
Yes. Faustino's been there for like twelve years, thirteen, maybe. Martha's been there for twenty or twenty-five years. Her husband Jessie's been there for, like, twelve years. So they're pretty solid.
Collings
So how do you judge the health of the Catholic Worker Movement if you were to compare it now to, say, in 1970?
Dietrich
Wow. Well, I would say it's very, very good. When we started in 1970, I think pretty much the day we opened our door we were the oldest Catholic Worker west of the Mississippi. Now there are dozens of houses west of the Mississippi and there are over two hundred houses throughout the world. Now, most of those houses are probably pretty small, but, nevertheless, they're out there. And here's the thing that I think is so important about what we do, and I was thinking about it today, is that there are so few independent players that it doesn't look like what we do is very sophisticated, and it's not. It's just simply being present to the suffering in our culture, in our society, and then it's not like you come up with some strategic master plan to figure it out. It's just that you're present to it and you want to respond. People who run large nonprofits, they're not independent players. They're not going to be politically critical of anybody. They're careerists and they're professionals. They can't make independent ethical decisions with any integrity because their funding all comes from the city or the state or the government. And when that happens, you're not going to jeopardize that. You're not going to jeopardize your organization. You're not going to jeopardize your career, quite frankly, because most of the people that are in charge of those organizations are there—they're careerist.
Collings
So you'll always choose the lesser of two evils.
Dietrich
That's right. You may not even see that you're choosing the lesser of two evils. So there are very few players who can just—and I'm not even saying I'm a player. I'm just saying that who can assess a situation and say, "Well, you know, let's go down to City Hall and blockade the mayor's bathroom." Well, who's going to do that? Not only does it sound stupid, but it jeopardizes your career and your funding. You're just not going to do it. So you have to kind of stay, I think, kind of small, and probably you have to not have a board of directors, or if you have a board of directors, you'd better damn well hand-pick the so that they're not going to be nervous when you do something that is publically notorious.
Collings
So you said that you had tried empire-building at one point and it was a disaster.

Dietrich
Well, probably sometime after the action in Anaheim. We probably had ten or so people, but just opportunities began to present themselves, and so you just go—and doors open and so, you know, like all that stuff with the Skid Row Development Corporation happened around that time. So then we had, like, a public visibility in some ways.
Collings
Right. This is late seventies.
Dietrich
Early eighties—would gravitate towards us. So Nancy Minty came, and I think her brother, Dan, was living with us at that time. She had just graduated from UCLA Law School and she was kind of like casting around for some—anyway, we already had a little bit of a law clinic, but she just ran with it. So we had a law clinic. We already had a medical clinic, but then the families started moving into Skid Row and there were lots of kid around. They were starting fires and getting into trouble. We were doing stuff in a kind of ad hoc way with the kids, and Maggie Mead [phonetic] shows up. She's a teacher and kind of thinking about—I said, "Well, you should be in charge of our playground program." So we built a playground.
Collings
Boy, this is ambitious.
Dietrich
And Tony Trafficanty, you know, '77, Tony Trafficanty and Joan moved in, and we moved over to Britannia Street, which is a big place. Anyway, so he was a baker, so he started Justice Bakery. Then I was the president of the Skid Row Development Corp, so I got him this facility. So it's starting to look like—and we got a medical clinic and a bakery. Anyway, just to say that it was a lot of projects with a lot of people, and it's not that anybody—and then, of course, it's not like one of those kind of—well, even if it is—a kind of formal structure. I mean, even with a formal structure, I guess it helps, but there's still going to be problems and intrigues. So you get a lot of people and there's going to be personality differences. You kind of grew a lot in a short period of time without really defining yourself, and so the people that are involved in what I would call peripheral projects, they have a whole other agenda than the people who are in the kind of core project, which is the soup kitchen. So you get a little bit different perspective on things. So it led to a long period of conflict. So after that conflict, we went from, what, thirty-nine people down to six. And then we came up with this idea of starting sister houses. Then, of course, we sent off like two of the six to start a sister house. Anyway, so it keeps you scrambling. But just to say that that was when we went through a great deal of trauma and we were just trying to figure out how do we do this, because people do come with leadership skills and you want to give a venue to that. So that was what we came up with.

Collings
Speaking to your earlier point about how when you have these nonprofit organizations who are getting funding streams from other places, they can't go out on a limb and pour blood and oil on the Federal Building, where was the money coming from for the playground program, the medical clinic, the legal clinic, the bakery, at least to start them up?
Dietrich
Probably the bakery funded itself. We did the playground program and the medical clinic out of the general fund, initially probably the law center, but it wasn't that expensive initially. It was just Nancy, but she moved within a few years towards—she needed a legal secretary and so she had to hire, which is fine. But it's just a little bit kind of out of traditional Catholic Worker kind of—so we were kind of dealing with the whole thing of are we a nonprofit. And I think the people that were involved in these projects, again, they're professionals. They're nurses and lawyers and so they have a little bit different perspective from somebody's whose not a professional, "I'm just a soup cook and I'm just here." So it's not that they were particularly career oriented, but I do think that when you go to a professional school you do get a kind of ideological formation from that experience and it was a bit at odds with at least what Catherine and I thought of as traditional Catholic Worker. So it did precipitate a two-year-long kind of dismantling and it was very, very emotionally traumatizing. It was kind of like a divorce from, like, fourteen people. Most of those people we are in good contact with. I think there's probably one that we have never heard from again. But, nevertheless, just to say that for years—and when you go through something like that, not only does it affect you emotionally, but it actually, like, diminishes your structural capacity to continue. I don't know exactly what it is, but there's a pool of bad feelings, and so people just didn't come around for a long, long time. So it took a long time to kind of build it back up, or at least to get to a minimal level of functioning. You know, I think we probably need to—
Collings
Yes, I think so. Let me just turn this off. I think actually we've sort of come to the end. Would you like to say something at the very end?
Dietrich
I think I've probably already said it, but this is really basic, simple kind of work. As one of our summer interns said, "You know, this is not rocket science." And it's not. But it gives you a kind of authority of presence and it gives you an experience that most people don't have, and it gives you a kind of independence to be able to act. It doesn't mean that you're going to have the most effective actions, but it does give you the opportunity to act with some kind of integrity on the behalf of the poor and justice.
Collings
All right. [End of March 1, 2013 interview]

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