

UC Santa Cruz

Cultivating A Movement

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Beth Benjamin: Horticulturalist

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Authors

Benjamin, Beth
Rabkin, Sarah

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Beth Benjamin



Photo by Bob Grunnet

Pioneering UCSC Apprentice Co-Founder, Camp Joy Gardens Writer and Horticulturalist

Arriving at UC Santa Cruz in the fall of 1967 for her first year of college, Beth Benjamin was immediately drawn to the colorful beds blooming on a hillside below Merrill College. By springtime, she had joined the core group of young people working in this new campus garden under master horticulturalist Alan Chadwick. One of very few women to enjoy Chadwick's steady mentorship during this period, Benjamin eventually arranged for a leave of absence from the university to devote herself to the garden—a hiatus that became permanent when her passion for the project overtook her interest in formal schooling.

Benjamin married another Chadwick protégé, Jim Nelson; in the early 1970s, the two of them moved to four sunny acres in Santa Cruz County's San Lorenzo Valley in order to build their own blooming Eden. Still thriving in 2009 as a non-profit educational organization, Camp Joy Gardens offers, according to its mission statement, "a model for an alternative future, a trial ground to experiment with, develop and practice organic techniques and explore related philosophies and ideas." Camp Joy sponsors farm apprenticeships, educational offerings for children and adults, and a community supported agriculture program. Locals flock to the Gardens' annual spring plant sale and its fall harvest celebration, which features dried-flower wreaths, varietal honeys, and other Camp Joy bounty.

Eventually, Benjamin and Nelson amicably went their separate ways. Since then, Benjamin has worked a number of jobs, including several years with Renee Shepherd's garden seed company. Although she has not lived at Camp Joy in more than two decades, she remains actively connected to the enterprise. She also volunteers with the Friends of the [UCSC] Farm and Garden—sustaining the legacy she helped create more than forty years ago.

Sarah Rabkin interviewed Beth Benjamin at Rabkin's home in Soquel, California, on June 30, 2009.

Additional Resources

Camp Joy Gardens: <http://www.campjoygardens.org/>

The Chadwick Garden Anthology of Poets (Friends of the UCSC Farm and Garden, 2009). Introduction by Beth Benjamin.

Valley Women's Club of the San Lorenzo Valley: <http://www.vwcweb.org/>

Christina Waters, "Fire in the Garden," *Metro Santa Cruz*, Oct. 2-8, 1997, <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/cruz/10.02.97/chadwicks-garden-9740.html>

Judith Wellner, "For Beth Benjamin, Being in the Moment is What Life is About," *The Valley Post*, November 21, 2006.

Beginnings

Rabkin: Today is Tuesday, June 30th, 2009, and I am with Beth Benjamin. This is Sarah Rabkin, and we're in Soquel, California. So, Beth, I'll start with basic background. When and where were you born?

Benjamin: I was born in 1950 in Southern California, in Redlands, California, actually, although my parents moved pretty soon after I was born to Claremont, which is a college town thirty miles southeast of L.A.

Rabkin: And did you grow up in Claremont?

Benjamin: I did, and my parents are still living in the same house, which is not something that most people can say.

Rabkin: What did your parents do for work?

Benjamin: My parents were both teachers, fifth and sixth grade elementary. I have two siblings, two years apart, down from me, and they [my parents] taught fifth and sixth grade in local elementary schools. My dad went back, then, to get his MFA at Scripps College, which was an art school then. He pretty early started painting, and so he taught for money all his life, but his heart calling was in being an artist, and he ended up teaching painting at Pomona College as he was older, and then was a pretty well known abstract painter.¹ So I think of him as that, but he made his money all of the time I was growing up by being a teacher.

Rabkin: And did you have significant experiences with gardening as a child?

Benjamin: My dad loved flowers and loved roses. He grew up in Chicago, and he always wanted to have a greenhouse like rich people did, and he loved plants and flowers. My grandmother was a botanist. She wanted to be a doctor, but her husband was a doctor, and in those days you couldn't really both be [doctors]. So there was a lot of plant stuff that went through my life. And my dad, when we moved to our new house, planted a lot of flowers, but the trees got too tall, so there was too much shade. It was a pretty suburban backyard. And so, not really. Gardeners—that was like Mexican guys with pickup trucks. Never even conceived of doing that for a living. Little did I know. [Laughs.] But the love of flowers—I was really involved with flowers since I was really little.

Rabkin: Tell me about your schooling before college.

Benjamin: Actually, I didn't do much college. I went to a private school nearby, kindergarten through eighth grade, Foothill Country Day, that was very small, one class of each grade, eighteen kids in a class. I did not have a very happy peer experience in elementary school, but teachers loved me and parents loved me. I had started school early. I skipped a year, and I was always younger and taller and weirder and poorer and all kind of things, smarter than everybody else in my class, so it was not a good way to be popular. But then I went to high school, and that got different. I was more comfortable in high school, which was a regular public, four-year high school, but graduating in 1967, so that says [chuckles]—that was that era.

UC Santa Cruz

Rabkin: And what made you decide to enroll at UC Santa Cruz?

Benjamin: I was a National Merit Scholar. I wanted to go to Reed College, but the money didn't work out. At that time, actually, I wasn't eligible for a scholarship because my dad had sold a lot of paintings, and so it looked like—there was not money for that. And then I wasn't paying too much attention. I remember one day I heard over the loudspeaker at school that the enrollment for the UC system was coming to an end, and I just went, oh, Santa Cruz. I want to go to Santa Cruz. It was the only place I applied to, and I got accepted. That was the first year of Crown College. They put me in Crown College, and I wrote them a letter and said, "Wait, wait! I'm not a math and science person. Wrong college. You must have made a mistake." And they said, "No, we're trying to integrate humanities with math and science. It will be fine." But in actual fact, I didn't really get too into the school thing.

Rabkin: How had you heard of UCSC?

Benjamin: Boy. Well, I'd of course heard of Berkeley, and—I don't know. It was really almost a whim, come to think of it. And most people applied to more than one college, but—I wanted to be in Northern California. It was the hippie days and everything. I wanted to be closer to San Francisco and Berkeley and so on, but Berkeley was much too big. I knew Santa Cruz was small. I knew it had the college system, which reminded me of home. Actually, I had always thought I

was going to grow up and go to Pomona College, but my dad said, “You should go away from home to go to college.” My life would have been different, probably, had I done that. So I ended up in Santa Cruz in the fall of '67.

Alan Chadwick's Student Garden Project

Rabkin: And at what point, and how, did you end up meeting Alan Chadwick and getting involved with the Student Garden Project?

Benjamin: I noticed the garden right away. On the first day we got there it was in brilliant bloom and I wondered what that was. I started going to classes and was very homesick. I did not make a good adjustment. Now, looking back, I think I was too young to leave home, but I never would have believed that. I don't know what else I would have done. I was homesick and lonely and kind of in the wrong set of classes.

Rabkin: How so?

Benjamin: Well, I do think had I been in Cowell or Stevenson [College] and there had been that kind of core course, I would have gotten more involved.

Rabkin: More philosophical or humanities-oriented.

Benjamin: Yes, or English. I was a writer at the time. I was just not so interested in—like I said, I thought it was a mistake. I stopped taking math as soon as I could and stopped taking science except for ecology. So I didn't get pulled in. I

actually started going up to the garden for a meditation class that was happening up there. A guy named Charlie, who was building a cactus garden in the quarry there—where you walked down to the Bay Tree Bookstore? There was a quarry. It became an amphitheater, I think.

Rabkin: Yes. The Upper Quarry.

Benjamin: He was building a cactus garden there, and that's all I knew about him. So I started going up to the garden for meditation, and it was so beautiful when I opened my eyes that I thought, why am I sitting here with my eyes closed? I started going up and asking for tasks and working in the garden a bit. Pretty soon it was the only thing that I could get in focus. Nothing else was as interesting.

Rabkin: Do you remember your first or early encounters with Alan?

Benjamin: Sure. I remember him in blue shorts and a bright white shirt and with that gray hair flopping over the front and tossing it back, and asking him for a job. I'd go and say, "I need a job." And he'd say, "Hard or light?" or "Heavy or light?" I really wanted to prove to him that girls could work hard, so I always wanted a hard job. So we would go, and my college roommate and I would cook dinner sometimes in the little garden chalet there, on the little hotplate. By April I had dropped out of school. I had gone to see my adviser to talk about it. When I first went in, they tried to talk me out of it, and by the end, they didn't even want to give me a leave of absence because they thought I was a lost cause. [Laughs.]

That's my feeling of it. But they did give me a five-year leave of absence. I never did go back after that. Life shaped itself in other ways.

I was just seventeen at that point. I had met the man who I was to marry, who was also in the garden. So I had a person, and I had an interesting teacher, and I had some outdoor work. I was set. I called my parents. I said, "Well, I'm not going to school anymore." I can't believe they didn't make more of a fuss, but it was 1968, and they thought I knew what I was doing. And there I went, off into the world. I never even went back home after leaving home the first time.

Rabkin: Once you officially left school, were you still living on the campus while you worked in the garden?

Benjamin: Jim [Nelson] and I were camping in the woods out there, where it's now the Merrill [College] provost's house, in a clump of redwood trees.² There were several other people who were working in the garden. The campus policemen kind of turned a blind eye to the fact that we would drive up. In those days, you could park up there, along that road. We were sleeping in the woods, and we'd come out in the morning and work all day, and use the bathroom down at Stevenson College and take a shower somewhere, I don't remember where. It was really intensive, working with Alan there and eating all our meals there. It was a wonderful experience, for probably—April, May, June, July. It was really probably only a four- or five-month stint, at which point Alan rented a house, and the group of us who were working there that summer lived in that house.

Rabkin: Where was the house?

Benjamin: You could walk there, back through the woods, through campus, but it was in Forest Lakes, in Felton up a windy road. We ended up leaving. The people hadn't quite realized they were renting to a bunch of kids with dogs and VW vans. I think they thought they were renting to Alan. After that, we lived in Bonny Doon. Some friends of ours had a house, and we lived up there, so we would commute down to the garden each day. But it was still getting there before daylight and leaving after dark.

Rabkin: Wow. Seven days a week?

Benjamin: Pretty much. I would have liked to stay home on Sundays, but Jim always thought Alan would have to work too hard if we didn't go, so, "We should go on Sundays."

Rabkin: When you first started asking for jobs and when Alan proffered "heavy or light" and you took the heavy jobs, what did that entail?

Benjamin: Well, all the beds were steep. There was that path through the middle, and the beds were all running *up* the hill, so there was a lot of double-digging and moving dirt up from down below, where it had slid down. Now it's hard to tell because it's all fruit trees, but where we read on the garden chalet porch, if you looked—you used to be able to see the ocean right off that porch.³ The roses weren't so big. You could really see the ocean. It's not just the roses. Actually, the

roses aren't even there anymore, I noticed the other day. But all those trees have grown up.

We made a very tidy-looking herbaceous bed with a grass verge in the middle. We dug that whole thing out about six feet and put in stuff for drainage, like old bed springs and junk to make drainage under it, and then put the dirt back in, and then sowed the grass so there was a beautiful, very British looking English green lawn with a perennial herbaceous on either side. I saw a slide of that the other day, and I thought, how tidy, compared to what it is now, which is Orin [Martin's] fruit tree madness.⁴ So that kind of thing, just a lot of digging, a lot of digging.

Rabkin: Tell me about your most memorable experiences working at the garden.

Benjamin: Very memorable early mornings. We tried to cut all the flowers before the bees got on them, before the sun got too bright. They'd last longer if the bees hadn't taken the pollen off.

Rabkin: Why is that?

Benjamin: I think the pollen opens, and the bees rumble around in it, and it shortens the vase life. A lot of working with Alan was: was that true or was that not true? It could have been myth. But that was the dominant paradigm, so we did it. It was so beautiful. It would be foggy, and the birds were singing, and [we were] just quietly picking. The thing that I learned with Alan was about working:

a different kind of work, physical work. I had been very sedentary. I had mostly read and cooked in my young life, for my family. I did that early. I didn't do sports, and we didn't do hiking. My dad—on weekends, he would paint, so he didn't want to go anywhere for vacations. And for some reason, my mom didn't want to go without him. So pretty sedentary Southern California suburban life. All of a sudden, we were outside. The idea of working hard just because the job was to be done was a very new thing. It felt so good. You weren't working for money. You weren't working for anything other than here was the job and it needed to be done. Here were the seeds; they needed to be watered. It was a very revolutionary idea, and it didn't really matter if you were tired. So what? Not everybody has had that experience. I liked that. Cutting flowers, I remember well. I remember the festivities. Alan liked to have parties, so sometimes we would cook for him or he would cook for us and make wonderful dishes that no one had ever heard of, like stuffed aubergine, which is eggplant. That was fun.

What else in the garden do I remember? It was such a wonderful, big scale. A lettuce bed would be four or five feet wide and sixty feet long, planted with Bibb lettuce, all beautiful Bibb lettuce. And he wouldn't let you pick a one until it was perfect. Which meant, with the Bibb lettuce, it was headed up so that you have all those little, beautiful, tender, crunchy leaves. It also means that in about two days it's going to go up to bloom. Now, having done market gardener to family garden—you start picking them little, and then you thin them. He wanted everybody to see a whole bed of perfect lettuce.

Rabkin: And then what did you do with that glut of—

Benjamin: Oh! Compost, often. The idea was to grow produce for the kitchens, and we tried a little bit of that. Sometimes on the College Nights they would take it.

Rabkin: Campus kitchens.

Benjamin: Yes. But they really couldn't handle dirty lettuce, and we didn't have facilities for pre-washing things very much for them. And if there was a slug, it freaked somebody out. So that really didn't work. That was part of what Alan's discontent was [about] towards the end—feeling like his ideas weren't really coming to fruition, which was too bad, because it proved to be really important for lots of people. He felt always that it wasn't really working because of that piece.

A lot of stuff would go down in that little kiosk across the road and people would take it.⁵ That's what happened to the flowers. They would get taken by students and secretaries. Secretaries! That was, like—one of Alan's words, "the secretaries." I'm sure they were librarians and teachers and whatever, but he always called them the secretaries.

Rabkin: The female staff people?

Benjamin: Yes. And I think we put vegetables down there sometimes. It was not the highest—that was part of why Jim and I wanted to go start a farm, so that we would really use everything. That was a real motivating thing, so that we would

have actually time to can the tomatoes, not just ripen them and then what? That's a very good question. I don't remember. We ate stuff. There were usually ten, twelve people eating from that garden, people who were working there. We would take vegetables in baskets to the chancellor, and I'm sure people came and got stuff. But it wasn't so much for use; it was more for demonstration.

Rabkin: The gardening techniques that were being employed in the garden there—did you already have some familiarity with them, or were you learning as you went?

Benjamin: No. I had had a little Girl Scout garden in fifth grade, but that was really hard soil. No, it was completely new. It was completely new and everything, starting from mixing up seed flats and sowing seeds and tending the greenhouse to digging the beds, it was all brand-new.

Rabkin: Were you learning all of that directly from Alan?

Benjamin: Yes. I was part of that really lucky group that really got to hang out with him. He did not think of himself as famous or a guru or anything. I mean, he would roar around sometimes, like a king, but we were his cohorts. Later on, towards the end of Jim's and my time with him, he would tell us, and then we would be king or queen for the week, and we would deal with the students, partly because he was getting harder to deal with, and we were trying to take care of him and take care of the people.

Rabkin: Kind of serving as a buffer.

Benjamin: Yes. And that was actually a little piece of why—at the point when Jim and I left the garden, really, Alan cast us out of the garden. Jim might have told you that story. It was just time for us to go. We had left and gone off to Canada and come back, and it was time for us to go get our own place somehow. But there was some talk about how the people who were there living in the garden all the time were keeping other people out. There was an idea maybe that all the students would come and a couple or three times a week spend a little time. That wasn't really happening. There would be really, really deeply committed, involved individuals, but not lots and lots of them. And somehow Steve Kaffka⁶ and Alan and whoever the grownups were felt like, oh, well, we'll get rid of all these people and then it will work better, which sounds nuts to me now.

But also I always have this feeling when I'm telling these stories—I was not very old and not paying much attention to what was going on up here. I mean, there's lots of stuff in the university. Alan really had a mixed audience on campus. There were people who thought he was nuts and they ought to get rid of him, he was dangerous, and then there were people who were enamored with what he was doing. I'm sure all that was going on at that time.

Rabkin: How was he as a teacher?

Benjamin: If you could get with his way of being, he was fabulous as a teacher. He was interesting and dynamic, and he told stories. He talked about things that you had never heard anybody talk about.

Rabkin: Like?

Benjamin: Oh, God! I mean, angels and elves. I was really into all those fairy tales and English gardens. I used to comb the library shelves for books about gardens and magic. I read really early, and I read everything. [William] Wordsworth and [William Butler] Yeats and all those poems and that whole English ambiance. I loved that. Here was Alan, who was embodying that. I love flowers very much, and I was one of the few people who already knew a lot of flower names. He could say, "Hydrangea," and I knew what he was talking about when everybody else didn't. That was a real bond between us, that flower stuff.

The people who could handle him going off now and again were enamored. They would have followed him to the gates of hell. He was wonderful. It was my first time of being physical in the world, in a sense. There was a real magic to that. You could somehow make a life that had something to do with gardens. I didn't quite know how. But that was also 1967, '8, '9. It was a time when people were starting to not go so much in the traces of, "Okay, I have to march right through this life. My parents said I have to get a good job." He [Chadwick] was in a good time of history for that, to attract some followers. But there were a lot of people who never would have been able to work with him. And a few of those

came and worked with us at Camp Joy, and that was why. They'd always kind of wanted to learn what Alan taught but knew that they couldn't put up with all that. He was a demanding taskmaster.

Rabkin: People have talked about his responding differently to men and to women. At least one person I've talked to mentioned that you were probably one of relatively few women who were in that close position with him. Can you talk about how he responded to your femaleness, or what that dynamic was like?

Benjamin: That's an interesting question. We were really close, although I never felt like I was— He always had some sidekick, some fellow who was his handler or took care of him. I was never in that capacity. But I was also a wife, right? It seemed like there were a few other women. At the time, I didn't believe there was any difference, so I just acted that way. But I suspect Alan had some opinions. I don't think he trusted women particularly. We were— It was a relatively formal relationship. And, again, so much of Alan was almost mythologized. Like, was he ever married? Was he homosexual? What was the deal? I mean, who knew? But that wasn't the territory we traveled with him. He was just fun and interesting, and that was that.

I never thought, okay, what am I going to do with this? But that's never quite been my style in general, anyway. It's interesting because I know there are some apprentices at Camp Joy right now who are having those thoughts: okay, I'm learning these techniques and these skills, and what am I going to do with that? I can't even remember having that thought, partly because I was with Jim,

so I didn't have to. I had a mate. I figured he'd help figure it out. Different than being a single person, I think.

I can think of three or four other women that he was really comfortable with, of my peers. Sherry [Wildfeuer], who went on to—Kimberton Hills, one of the biodynamic farms back east.

Rabkin: That was one of the Rudolf Steiner Camphills?

Benjamin: Yes, in Pennsylvania. [There were not] too many women Chadwick was comfortable with. I was always comfortable with him. I never felt like it was much of an issue, but probably didn't feel like I was in the "in" club. But I wasn't ever used to being in the "in" club anyway, so—

Rabkin: You alluded to Alan's roaring around sometimes—

Benjamin: [Laughs.] Yes.

Rabkin: —or going off, and other people, of course, have talked about his sometimes tempestuous or mercurial nature. Were you witness to much of that kind of behavior?

Benjamin: Oh, sure, sure. I have such a memory of being in the garden. I was weeding or doing something—and there was some student who had come up, just on a pleasant little walk in the garden. They were walking right through a

newly-sown carrot bed, which they ought to have felt is really different, to walk in a newly-sown carrot bed than on the path. But people don't know, if they don't know. And I can just see Alan loping down the path, raising his fist, with a fork, shouting, "Get out! Get out!" [Makes sound signifying screaming.] There was a lot of that. And then if we would come in the morning, we'd come so early, and we would have stayed so late, and if you'd left the cups out, they'd be flying out the chalet porch.

It was my responsibility for a while to water the greenhouse. I remember going over there to the greenhouse to water, and he had just watered because he decided it needed to be watered. I was so frustrated because I wanted him to know that I knew, and I was almost there. I had a little discussion about it that didn't net me anything. I remember him going away and my kind of hunkering down behind the greenhouse weeping with frustration and thinking, he's just acting like a two-year-old. I mean, it wasn't like you didn't know all that stuff was going on. But the good part was so good, it didn't really matter.

It would change so fast sometimes. He was in a lot of physical pain, and that would be part of it. And also I thought later, after I got in the role of teaching myself, apprentices and so on—he'd never taught young people, ever. When he came there, he'd been doing the gardens in South Africa, where he had bunches of people who, they weren't slaves, but they did exactly what he said. That's who he was used to having. All of a sudden, he's got all these really nice, dedicated but not too disciplined California hippie kids, who really didn't know how to do anything yet. He couldn't fire them, and he wasn't paying them, and it must

have been challenging. No wonder he would get frustrated. He wasn't trying to build our self-esteem. [Laughs.] But he certainly did. That's a more modern concept.

Rabkin: So did he see himself more as a master gardener with helpers and subordinates than as a mentor-teacher?

Benjamin: He wasn't someone who had trained as a teacher and had learned how to teach. But he certainly was a mentor-teacher. He really emphasized that he was teaching us to "observe and learn from the garden." It wasn't that he was trying to offer us things which we were to digest. Learning yourself from paying attention to what was going on was really paramount.

Rabkin: Did he have strong ideas about how things should or should not be done?

Benjamin: Yes. There was the way you did it. But depending on whether it was this soil or that soil, you would do something different. There were the techniques, but you needed to know why you were using them. Some places you did need to double-dig, and some places you didn't, although we stopped doing much double-digging later because the idea of turning the soil upside down all the time ceased to be a good idea. You didn't want to get that top layer down so much; you want it to stay up.

No, he definitely had a way to do everything, which was what so exciting. I mean, who had ever had that before, really, in a meaningful way? I had really good, relaxed parents, but a lot of people had parents who really told them what to do, but it was all about stupid stuff that you were not believing in, so who cared?

Rabkin: So there was a certain thrill in being introduced to a whole world of ways to do things that would garner results.

Benjamin: Yes, you had a sense of being part of a tradition and part of techniques that had been around—the history. He would talk about the French market gardeners and the manure that was gathered from the horses, and the Greeks. He told a lot of stories. Often at tea time he would tell lots of stories. He really gave a lot of himself. He talked a lot. You'd always go with him, and he'd show you how to do everything the first few times, but there was also a lot of what you might call social time that was story and myth and legend. At the tea table, he'd be talking about flowers. He'd have a bouquet, and he'd be leaning over, and gesticulating and talking about the exquisite mathematics of the way the six petals fit together and the little star in the middle, and everybody would be trying to act like they knew what he was talking about. Then all of a sudden he'd sort of look sideways and he'd say, "Well, well, well! Pussy in the well," some little English nursery rhyme thing, just to just knock you off, just because everybody was being so important about it all.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Benjamin: And so serious. He really liked to do that, be silly. He would hide behind the compost heap and toss things at you. He liked playing games. He was very British in that way. I think they like that. They like charades and all that stuff. If we were cutting dead dahlias off a border—I can often remember hiding my clippings in the compost heap: open it up, put them in, hide them, because if Alan came by and saw that I had picked them off too soon—you didn't want Alan to see that.

Rabkin: You mentioned the tea table. Did you have regular tea time?

Benjamin: Yes.

Rabkin: Every day in the late afternoon?

Benjamin: Every day in the late afternoon. The sun would start to get low, and you'd set sprinklers, and somebody would go up and put the kettle on, and then blow the conch or a bell or a horn or something, and people would come up. Sometimes there would be professors' wives or whoever, who would bring up home cooking or cookies or treats. Yes, there was always tea. When I think about it, we ran on a lot of caffeine. There was very strong coffee in the morning and a lot of very strong tea in the afternoon, and that helped.

Rabkin: Since you weren't making money from this work, how were you keeping body and soul together?

Benjamin: God knows. When I told my dad I was dropping out of school, he said, “Well, of course. Fine.” He came up to make sure Alan wasn’t a cult or something, and then he said, “Okay. But, of course, I’m not going to send you any money anymore, because you’re on your own now.” And then a few days later he wrote me and he said, “I looked up ‘educate’ in the dictionary, and it doesn’t say anything about school, so I guess I could send you thirty bucks a month for a while.” So he did that for not too long. That went for some stuff. We didn’t need much money. We were living in the woods. The Friends of the Farm and Garden formed pretty early, and they gave some food money. Everybody was young enough. There were cars and bicycles, but gas was cheap. Nobody got sick. There was nothing else that anybody spent money on. We are talking a short period of time.

And then in the summer there were a couple of people who got work-study money, and we would kind of—commandeer it, say, “Ah! Good! [Claps hands.] We’ll put that in the common pot.” People were pretty willing to do that. So there was some of that. There was probably a couple or three people’s money that we lived on.

There was a little money that came in—the garden was supported by discretionary student funds, I think, at that time. That’s what Alan was paid from. Jim had a little bit of money. We didn’t have much.

Rabkin: How did you pay rent at the Bonny Doon place?

Benjamin: That's what I'm trying to remember. There were a bunch of people, so—I know that the place we lived after there, we were each coming up with fifteen dollars a month rent. That was really a lot. [Laughter.] Jim and I—boy, I can't even remember. It sounds nuts, but I don't even remember. And it wasn't too long a period. But we must have come up with some cash somehow.

Rabkin: What would you say were the most important things you learned from your time with Chadwick and the garden?

Benjamin: All the techniques: how to sow seeds, how to dig a bed, how to harvest, how to cut flowers. All those things have been things that I've always used. It was being presented with a way to be in the world that was not so human-centered. A lot of people go around, and they don't even see that they're living in a world that has plants in it, or birds or anything like that. I think I was that sort of person, too, or I wouldn't have been attracted to this whole world. I feel that's a huge gift, to be able to see what's going [on] around beyond the human. I think there are plenty of people who worked with Alan, or in that garden up there, who didn't go on to be gardeners or farmers, but they got that piece, just of having a place in the natural world. That's, I think, my biggest gift, being introduced to that world and the idea of work as a wonderful thing, as opposed to something you're trying to get out of, get over with.

Rabkin: You and Jim took a hiatus in Canada, trying to make a living gardening. Tell me a bit about that time. Why Canada?

Benjamin: It was still the Vietnam War going on. Jim had already resolved his draft status, but there was a feeling that America was a country in a bad war, and so the idea of Canada was really thrilling. I had always been a “Canadaphile.” Loved the idea. He had a friend who lived up there and had some land, so he’d asked us to come and help them do a garden. So that was probably why it was. But there was also something about how great that we could not be living in America. So we went up there and helped for about six months, but really couldn’t figure out how could we do what we wanted to do and make a living? People either didn’t eat vegetables or they grew their own. Nobody would have thought of buying flowers at that time.

We had made a beautiful garden for the friends, but they thought, aren’t we going to be done gardening soon so that we could do something else? That wasn’t our idea of life. Our idea was: how do you make a life where you can garden all the time and hopefully make a living somehow? And the winter jobs were very unappealing.

Rabkin: Where were you?

Benjamin: We were in eastern British Columbia. The nearest town was Nelson, a little teeny town called Slocan Park. A lot of old Russians there who kind of welcomed the draft resisters because they were Doukhobors, who had their own history of being draft resisters. So that was pretty wonderful, but we came back to Santa Cruz. We wanted to work with Alan some more. So we got back and worked the rest of that summer, at which point we left, tumultuously, and lived

in Santa Cruz and had a little market garden. Got odd jobs, built planter boxes, pruned. Jim met an old guy who taught him how to prune. That was in 1970. And then January of '71 we were able to get the use of the land up in Boulder Creek.

Rabkin: Before we go on to that, tell me a bit more about this expulsion from the garden.

Benjamin: [Chuckles.] It's hard to even describe it, because I don't know very much about where it came from. There were maybe eight or nine of us who were working in the garden full time, and we had this structure where we were buffering Alan a little bit. And people would come, there were probably, I don't know, a dozen kids who were coming over, and everything felt pretty much fine. But there was some idea that we were in the way of people's being able to experience the garden. So we came to breakfast, and Alan said, "Well," (this is how I remember it) "Things are going to change. Since you guys don't live on campus, it shouldn't take you more than a couple of weeks to be gone," basically.

Rabkin: This was news to you.

Benjamin: Yeah! I always like to have Jim around when I'm doing these [interviews] because sometimes he remembers stuff that I don't. But I remember it as being as sudden as that jaw-dropping: "What?" We made a big fuss. I wouldn't have argued with Alan, but Jim was calling him "Mr. Chadwick" and saying, "It's our garden as much as yours, and how can you kick us out?" And

then I was putting up notices calling a student meeting because [the garden] was still student-related. There were a couple of people, Steve and Jim, who were students, still, and on some sort of board, I think, that determined what the student discretionary funds should be spent on.

Rabkin: Steve Kaffka.

Benjamin: Steve Kaffka and Jim [Pewtherer], who had been roommates, were some of the few people, including Phyllis Anderson—there were not too many people who actually stayed in school and worked with Alan. I was trying to call a student meeting, and Steve and Alan kept saying, “It’s not personal. This is nothing personal.” I kept saying, “It *is* personal. This is our life!” And they were saying, “It’s a personnel matter.” “No, it’s not personnel.” And I kept putting up the [sign], and Alan would take down the sign, and I’d put it back up. And I remember Alan saying to Jim something about, like, “Can you control your wife?” Anyway, it sort of came down to, “you’re either going to go away or I’m going to call the campus police.” We said, “No, we’re not leaving.” So he called the campus police, and they were totally confused.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Benjamin: Because they’d been letting the little blue Plymouth come up and park there. But we ended up leaving. It was very shocking.

Rabkin: Were you escorted away by the police?

Benjamin: Sort of, sort of. I mean, we were pretty mild-mannered folks, so we weren't kicking and screaming or being dragged or anything, but kind of. It felt like that. It seems like we went down to [the campus police] offices there at the base of campus and tried to explain what was going on. Then we moved up into Bonny Doon and lived up in Bonny Doon with some people, and Jim was pruning. We did pruning for a while, until space opened up in another house in Santa Cruz, which is where we ended up doing a little market garden.

We ended up getting back on some terms with Alan. He never apologized or anything, but by then we had sort of started to make another life, and it did feel to us, I think, eventually, like, we were just getting graduated. It's funny. At the Back Forty [CASFS Reunion in 2007] I remember having a conversation with Steve Kaffka, just sort of trying to go, "Steve, what do you remember about that? What *happened* there?" And he started saying something which even now ruffled my feathers up. I don't even remember. I didn't want to even hear about it. I'd digested it all, but not completely because all of a sudden my little heart was pounding—"Wait a minute!"

We moved on and moved to Santa Cruz, and took the empty lot next door and made a very pretty little garden out of it, and lived there until we moved up to Boulder Creek in 1970. I loved it. I had been working really hard. For me, it was delightful to just kind of live in Santa Cruz and do little odd jobs and have a home garden and not be under this [makes grinding sounds] pressure to always produce. I'd clean the house. The house turned from a place where a bunch of

people lived to a little community, and we ate together. That was fun. And some of those people ended up going up to Boulder Creek with us later.

Camp Joy Gardens

Rabkin: So tell me about that. Tell me about the beginnings of Camp Joy Gardens and how you and Jim started the place.

Benjamin: A woman named Cressie Digby had grown up on that particular piece of land in Boulder Creek, across the street from it, and by this time she was probably in her seventies. It was a beautiful four-acre meadow that she had been thinking maybe she would turn into a trailer park. It was a horseshoe shape. She was going to put a pool down in the center there, and angle the trailer mobile homes along the edge and around the pool. Luckily, her other idea was maybe a little farm. There was a lot of press about the [Chadwick] garden. She had been reading that, about young people going back to the land, and she wrote a letter up to Alan. I'm not sure how we saw it, but at the same time we had to leave the other house in Santa Cruz, because it had been sold, and so we asked Alan if we could contact her, and he gave us his permission to take the letter.

She lived in Hayward. And she let us actually just move onto that [Boulder Creek] land. It was in January, so I was about six months pregnant, and there was a barn that had electricity to it that had been a horse barn. Just the two of us moved up. There was one of those little campers that fits over the back of a pickup truck, a little teeny bathroom, a little teeny-weeny bathroom and a double

bed. We lived in there until I couldn't fit in there anymore. [Laughs.] And by this time, a couple of other people had come up from Santa Cruz to live with us.

We didn't sow any seeds until after Leifin was born at the end of March, but there were things to do, like putting in the water system—starting some stuff. That first summer, I think we had about eight people, and we got quite a lot of garden planted. We built a room in the back of the barn. That was where Jim and I lived. The front of the barn was a kitchen and a living room. There were a couple of teepees. It was just a few people. And eventually we tore down an army barracks on Angel Island and brought the wood. We ran into some issues with the building department and the planning department and red tags, and it all got called off, and we ended up getting a permit and building an actual house from this army barracks.

At that same time there was a lot of publicity about the illegal building—that was a big issue in Santa Cruz County. There were people up at Last Chance Road, which was up Swanton [north of Santa Cruz off the coastal highway], and up in Mendocino there was a lot of stuff about owner-builders and illegal stuff. It was a thing that was going on in the early seventies. We met a guy who owned a big piece of land up in Davenport, which actually became Molino Creek, where the dry-farm tomatoes come from.⁷ So that guy, Harlow, said, "Oh, if you get evicted, you can come live on my land. That would be great. You guys are so energetic." We said, "No, better yet, why don't you buy our land from Cressie Digby so she won't have to worry anymore, because she doesn't quite understand all this commune stuff, and then we are forming a 501(c)(3), and then

you can donate it to us, and you'll get it off your taxes, and everyone will be—win-win." So that's what actually happened.

Rabkin: This guy had the wherewithal to buy the property.

Benjamin: He was one of those trust fund kids. I forget. It was AT&T or some big money. Somebody told me what it was not too long ago, but—rich guy. Young rich guy with interesting ideals of the sixties and seventies.

Rabkin: Up until this point, you had been staying free on Cressie Digby's land, or renting from her?

Benjamin: It was free, actually. She let us just come there. She actually paid Jim—I think he put in a fence. There were some things that he did for her on that land, but they weren't so much for her; they were for the project that we were going to do. And then before Harlow had bought the place, we needed to pay the insurance. And then we paid the taxes for her, but she had always said she would sell it to us for what she'd bought it for plus what she'd put into it. Pretty amazing, really. Seventy-five-year-old realtor lady. She just thought it sounded interesting.

And at one point, we thought, oh, my God, we have to get her out of here, because she had an idea that it would all be corn, nice rows of corn, and we would have little calico aprons that matched, and we would have a farm stand. It

was not quite what we had in mind. But it worked out well. She moved back to Boulder Creek and lived across the street for quite a long time, until she died.

Rabkin: Did she get to see the flowering of Camp Joy Garden?

Benjamin: Yes. We have a great picture of her standing, looking so proud, in the midst of this herbaceous border with these tall hollyhocks. It a little bit confused her, but she thought it was great. She was very supportive.

Rabkin: So you were six months pregnant when you moved onto the land, living out of a trailer and then living in a barn.

Benjamin: In the back of a barn, yes.

Rabkin: With a newborn baby.

Benjamin: Yes.

Rabkin: And starting this new garden enterprise with some other friends who were living in teepees on the land?

Benjamin: Mm-hm.

Rabkin: And how did that all feel?

Benjamin: It was great. There were the usual difficulties of living with groups of people, meetings and all of that. I think there was always [a] central theme of what the place was about: This place is about the garden, and this is what we're doing here, and we're going to make our living in some way related to the garden. So there were issues sometimes with someone who'd think they were going to get to come and, "Oh, I'm going to build a woodshop here, and it's going to be my wood business." Well, that sounds nice, and in those days, whoop!—that meant you have to go. That's not going to work. The barn isn't going to be your woodshop; the barn has to be the animal barn. I think now it might be different. Now we might go, "Hmm, let's see. Maybe if you had a wood business there, maybe we could do something and it would make some"—it would be different now. But in those days, Jim and I really held that central purpose and taught people how to do things.

It's amazing to think: How did that work? How *did* that work? Because it was really magical. A lot of people working on one project all together make things happen. That's also one of the most wonderful things about the CASFS [Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems] project. You don't get that experience of having ten people working together on things in most of your life.

Rabkin: And the apprentice program provides that.

Benjamin: The apprentice program does that.

Rabkin: What were your goals and hopes and visions for the garden when you started out?

Benjamin: We wanted to make a beautiful garden, sort of an English garden. We laid it out with rose arbors and central paths and beds. We wanted it to be a garden, not just a farm or a bunch of vegetables, where people could come and be, and where we had time to do it on a family scale so we could really grow our own food and do all the food preparation things that we thought were so fun and interesting. All those goals of having a group of people live so that you could share resources and not have so many cars and share a washing machine, and that whole sustainable thing that people were thinking about, that they shouldn't have stopped thinking about when the gas prices went down. It was all laid out in front of us. There wasn't too much long-term planning about it. We were there. We were building a garden. We made the shape of the garden. Okay, now it's spring and now it's summer and now it's fall, and now it's spring again. It's like the directions are all on the package, really.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Benjamin: And then you have kids, and then the directions are on those packages, and then it's like, "Oh, my gosh, now they're in school. Well, I guess we should get involved with the school and bring the kids over to the farm." Having it be a garden that was not only a farm for food and farm for money, but [also] an educational facility was important, too. We did incorporate as a 501(c)(3) pretty early on. At the very beginning we operated under the auspices

of the Santa Cruz Philosophical Horticultural Foundation, which was Paul Lee, Page Smith, those guys. It was an umbrella that had the William James Foundation and the Homeless Garden Project⁸, and there were others, but that was what we were. I think it was '78 that Jim and Bob and I did the articles of incorporation for Camp Joy itself.

Rabkin: Tell me who Bob is.

Benjamin: He was my second husband. He lived with us after about '73, I think. He came and farmed with us for a long time. Had actually been a friend of my dad from the town I grew up in. To make a long story short, that's who I was married to for a very long time after Jim and I— We were the first three incorporating people. So, yes, that idea of teaching and showing was very big for us.

Rabkin: Tell me about that educational function of the garden, how it evolved and what the educational programs are at Camp Joy.

Benjamin: It's been so many things over so many years. I have not lived there since '85, but I've been involved with it as a board member and as president of the board for quite a while. Jim and I both ended our second marriages more or less the same time, 2005. For years, I had lived about a mile away, in Boulder Creek. I'd worked for Renee Shepherd, had my own house and my own garden and my own job, and I was involved a little bit with Camp Joy but not much. Then when Jim and Teri split, I sort of felt like it was my baby I needed to help

again. So I got more into doing the budgets and that kind of stuff. Then this last couple of years, I felt like more being on the ground. So that's been nice, actually going over and picking flowers and making food and digging and—

We started out, I think, just growing vegetables, building the garden, building the house, building the greenhouse. Then we started doing kids' tours. It was a pretty informal. People would drop by and say, "Can I stay here for a while?" Then there were some years when we did much more formal programs, actually charged people money—at nine o'clock we're going to do this and we're going to have this field trip this month, and I did that for a while. There was a certain trickle through of people who had applied to UC Farm [apprenticeship program] and not gotten in, over the years, or people who had come up as part of the apprentice program down there. They'd come and visited Camp Joy or something, and then next year they wanted to be there, someplace that was perhaps less structured, less academic—just with the animals and people. That appeals—goats, chickens, all that.

And there's a charter school. There's a home school that we've done kids classes with, spring and fall, for some years. And every year there's a calendar with programs for adults: beekeeping, pruning, that kind of stuff, and some fun events that also raise some money. Just like any other little farm that has a public connection. Cheese making, wreath making, basket weaving, gourds, some garden art and stuff like that. Every year it's like, okay, well, how do we keep the farm going? How does there be enough energy for the farmers and enough—
The farm itself doesn't really pay for everything that it needs to pay for. There

have been some years when we've had some input of cash from benefactors, but it's always been pretty self-supporting. We do actually give some little stipends now, but most of the Camp Joy life, nobody ever got paid anything for working there. It was a room-and-board situation. It's always been pretty cashless, really. Most people have had some little outside work. It's nicer when people don't have to work away, but when you start giving stipends and you multiply it times eight people and twelve months, even a little bit of money—like, these last couple of years, I've felt like I'm kind of making payroll. I'm going, okay, five hundred times four. Okay, there's half a person for a month. And then there's more issues about, "Well, how many hours were we supposed to work?" It's been an interesting thing, to be trying to give some money into people's pockets, because obviously we need that, and not have all the other stuff come up. In a way it was easier when nobody got paid anything.

Rabkin: It was less about quantifying the work people did.

Benjamin: Well, it just raises a bunch more issues. Nobody really wants to count hours or anything. You just want to find people who really want to be part of the work and do it. And, boy, you're lucky if you have a forty-hour work week.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Benjamin: That's not very many hours. What are you *talking* about?

Rabkin: [laughter] As your children were born and grew up, how did they become involved with Camp Joy?

Benjamin: Well, they *were*, because that's what was going on. There wasn't much else. It's funny. My kids are now thirty-three and thirty-eight, and both of them have kids of their own now, although Leif, my son, who's the older one—he was the only kid there for a long time. There really weren't other people with children, probably because there weren't really enough living facilities to really go, okay, I'm going to make my end place here, the way Jim and I did. They were just completely part of everything. Leifin was the Camp Joy baby for the first five years. He was our entertainment, and there were always people to play with him. You could say, "Oh, you're going to the beach? Great! Take Leif." My second child, I learned to play a little bit more. All of a sudden, I went, this is my last kid. How come *I'm* not going to the beach? But still, I really operated with kind of a kid under each arm, or there really was nothing else that was going on. They loved that, until they got into elementary school, and then they thought they knew everything already, and wanted to go learn about something else. But now they're both really involved, still.

Rabkin: How?

Benjamin: Leif and his partner and their one-plus-year-old little girl actually live [in] one of the Camp Joy houses. We ended up getting another piece of land next door. It has two little houses on it. So they live there, and his partner, Vanessa, is very involved in early childhood education, so she's trying to develop that part.

And, again, it's always an issue. What are you doing for room and board? You have a young family. You want to have time with your family that's not about the farm. You need to have some money for the things that we need money for. This is not even thinking about college educations or retirement or anything. This is just—and they're not even buying shoes yet.

I think me and Jim and the other people there were pretty happy being really, really poor. We just had made most of our fun with our friends who also lived there, and I don't think we ever hardly went to the movies. It just wasn't a cash-based economy, much.

Rabkin: Let alone thought about health insurance.

Benjamin: Eh! You know, didn't do any of that stuff. So that's Leif. Vanessa would be completely involved with Camp Joy; Leifin, less. He's just got his own—it's been interesting seeing all the things you thought were so fabulous for your kids. Well, they grow up and you sort of hear about they weren't all so fabulous. It was hard having all those people leave. I didn't think about [how] his best friends left a lot.

Rabkin: He would get attached to people who lived and worked at Camp Joy.

Benjamin: Sure, sure, they were acting like his parents. We're talking about the first five years of his life. You don't think about that. Oh, yes, Elizabeth is going off, and she's going to marry Billy, and they're going to move away. You don't

even talk about it with your kid. All of a sudden, you go, oh, yeah, I bet it was just like having a divorce in your family! But we never thought of it that way exactly. And he expressed that to me.

Towhee was five years younger. She's more involved—but she's got two kids, a two-year-old and a nine-year-old. So they're growing up at Camp Joy. All those little kids are growing up at Camp Joy, which is fabulous. I just love it. But you're trying to keep your own house clean and deal with your own kids, and a farm can take every hour that five of you could put into it, and there would still be more to do. So how to make your own boundaries with that. The whole issue that we've talked about, Jim and I, about sustainability and what happens when you get older and how do you determine what space you need for yourself and what time off. Your farm is not going to give that to you, but if you've been there for a while, there's a seasonality to it like there isn't in many jobs. If you've been there for twenty years, you know that after the wreath sale and Thanksgiving, people go away, you don't have to put out so much. You don't have to water. You can kind of calm down and recharge until about March, and then you can start gearing up again. If you're just there for the summer, it's just this blinding amount of work that's like, "What? You want us to be here on a weekend, too?"

Anyway, it's all interesting stuff. You get older. I have this time now where I've been being at Camp Joy more, so I've been pulled back into the net of its need for fifteen of me.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Benjamin: But I'm trying to write. Empty space does not just give itself to you. You have to stake it out. You know that you should be pulling weeds. I said to my counselor, I said, "Why am I so obsessed with Camp Joy now?" She said, "Up until recently, you had your own home, your own garden, your own husband. You didn't owe anything. Now it's different."

I think it's a common thread for a lot of people who went into farm in the age that we are. Okay, how do you make time? Some people seem to do it very successfully, and lots of relationships have gone on the rocks because people didn't make time to just be together. It wasn't enough to just be working together.

Visions for the Future of Camp Joy

Rabkin: What are your hopes and visions for the future of Camp Joy?

Benjamin: It's coming into a time of transition, of how to transition us sort of out of it. Sometimes I think, Wouldn't it be fabulous if someone else would appear who would just take over all this educational part? I have another house that I own, that's paid for. I'm not worried about where I'm going to sleep. Jim can live at Camp Joy probably, and be the resident wise guy. I would just like it to keep being a little farm and to show the people of the Boulder Creek area what can happen on a little piece of land, and the fences be fixed and— It's been more than thirty-five years since we've built all those things with recycled materials, by

people who were just learning how to build things. There's a reasonable amount of deferred maintenance.

And it's always going to change. I said to my son—I said, "You know, what you don't get to have here at Camp Joy is nobody telling you what to do. When Jim and I came, and our friends, there were meetings, and they were sometimes interminable, but there was no Alan Chadwick, or there was no dad, or there was no anybody saying, 'Hmm, shouldn't you do this a little different?' Whereas you guys all—you always have to filter it all through us." I said, "You probably should go somewhere and start your own place, but it's really great you're around here."

I hope it can keep going and the soil can keep getting better and people can still be involved with it. I mean, just to have it have been a garden, a sunny, four or five acres in Boulder Creek to have been a garden for almost forty years—it's a wonderful resource. I think we may really need it. I mean, I don't know what's going to happen in the near future, but I think the skills that people learn there are more important than ever, ever. One's fantasies could really run wild about what's going to happen in the next ten years. So I'm glad it's still there. I think it really needs to be there. We get kids, grown-up young people, who call and say, "I remember making apple juice at Camp Joy. It was so wonderful. Can I come and work this summer?" So we're starting to get some circulation of generations, which is a very nice thing. But I don't know who will take Jim's place exactly. He needs to be able to do some of the other things that he wants to do, and that means he has to learn how to back off from being in charge of everything.

I think it's kind of a classical situation of transition, but without a real clear— It's not quite like a farm family, where the son really wants to take over the farm. Even with that kind of stuff, there's usually a couple of siblings and you're haggling about what and who's going to do it. But we don't own it. There's a board of directors. If you leave, you don't get to take any of it with you. I seem to have stayed involved because I wanted to stay close because of the kids, and then it's just my place. I live here now.

I don't know. I just want it to still be a farm and garden and be taken care of and have people love it. It is a beautiful place just to be in. I can't think of any more goals than that, nothing more specific. At one point, I kept thinking, What a fabulous job if some third-year apprentice from the UC Farm wanted to run the apprentice program with all the knowledge that they come away with, which is much more— What you get tired of at Camp Joy is answering questions and showing people how to do things, not so much doing the work, although that can get tiring, too. But if you had some young, frisky person. What a great job, if we could kind of manifest enough money to pay somebody like that. But then, along with that, goes, okay, well, where would they live? It's a big piece of work, the next piece, I think, that we're just coming into.

Rabkin: I just had an image of the letter that Alan got from Cressie Digby that went up at the Chadwick garden. Maybe another letter materializing I don't know how many decades later.

Benjamin: Going back the other way.

Rabkin: Camp Joy needing a person to come, and would someone like to—

Benjamin: Yes, and it could be revolving. Imagine it. What a great job that would be if you believed in all this stuff. You can go run a little program. You'd be coming with so many skills. That's a dream. But then I feel nervous about the university, too. [Laughs.]

Rabkin: How so?

Benjamin: It's just like the state, the state government or any large corporation. There's just a lot more hoops to jump through. Camp Joy has existed very well without that. It's like we've never written any grants. Well, a couple of little, Community Foundations, a couple of things, but we haven't been responsible for receiving money from anybody that we've had to do anything for. And there have always been a lot of people there who really don't like getting told what to do, so it's kind of limited the fundraising ability. Because if you say you're going to do something and you get money for it, you have to do it. It's bad enough to have to do the CSA and fill those baskets every week. Not "bad enough." It's a whole different kind of responsibility that we've managed to not have to do.

Rabkin: Which CSA are you alluding to?

Benjamin: The Camp Joy CSA. That's one of the money-making things, is that people pay ahead.

Rabkin: How many members do you have?

Benjamin: It's been variable. I think there's twenty, twenty vegetable families and—not so many flower families this year. There's been fifteen. There's ten. It's small.

Rabkin: So you have vegetable shares and flower shares?

Benjamin: Yes, or both.

Rabkin: And how many months out of the year do you run the CSA?

Benjamin: It got even moved a little later this year. Nineteen weeks: June, July, August, September, October. Not starting the beginning of June.

Rabkin: And where else is your produce going?

Benjamin: Later in the year, when there're more things like peppers and apples and pears, it goes to mostly the New Leaf markets. So there's CSA, New Leaf markets, the plant sale in the spring, the wreath sale in the fall, some money-making events like harvest dinners and stuff. The home school has been a big part of it. I don't know what's going to happen with that, because that's a charter school. That's money that's going to—may very well change.

Rabkin: With the state budget problems.

Benjamin: Yes. They've already cut back what we thought we were going to do for the fall, but we're sort of doing it anyway.

Rabkin: Any farmers' markets?

Benjamin: Don't need to. And the nice thing about the CSA, as I'm sure you know, you end up getting a network of people. Those are the people who come to your events. Those are the people who come stroll around in the garden brunch and send their kids to the classes and give you a feeling like you belong somewhere

Rabkin: Do they pick up at Camp Joy?

Benjamin: Yes.

Renee Shepherd's Seeds

Rabkin: That's nice. Well, let's jump to Renee Shepherd's [Seeds].

Benjamin: Okay.

Rabkin: I know that you went to work for Renee Shepherd's garden and eventually Renee's garden seeds. Tell me how that came about.

Benjamin: I did. Jim used to prune Renee's fruit trees in Felton. I remember talking with her about the idea of starting a seed catalog. That was when she had

Shepherd's Seeds catalog in '83, I think she started. I didn't work for her at the beginning, but I started filling seed packets for her, at home, piecework, just for a little extra money. And my kids would do it. Then she went into flowers, which was maybe a year or two after. I knew a lot about flowers from working with Alan, so I helped make flower choices and I helped do the flower packet backs.

Rabkin: The things that tell you how far apart to plant and how deep?

Benjamin: Yes, the text on the back of the package. And the catalog copy. I worked part time for her. I went in working full time—this was after I had left Camp Joy, January of '88. I had left Camp Joy. I was doing a lot of different part-time jobs. Worked for a winery, still was teaching classes at Camp Joy and doing flowers. I thought, I better have one job or it's never going to go anywhere. I'm going to have to do too much driving. At that time, Renee had space in the office, so that was when I went to work for her there.

Rabkin: What did your duties involve?

Benjamin: It started out being customer service, a little bit of marketing and the writing of the horticultural stuff. It was really kind of the horticultural knowledge. Then I ended up being the office manager. I forget what I was when I left. Ninety-six was when we closed it up. By that time, I was writing most of the packet backs or at least the first draft. I wasn't buying seeds yet. It was when she started Renee's Garden—I was the seed buyer. It was just she and I who started Renee's Garden. I did anything that needed a computer, and was the

buyer of seeds. Until three years ago. Now I just scaled it all back to just doing the horticultural correspondence.

Rabkin: Horticultural correspondence.

Benjamin: Which means somebody e-mails and says, "Help!"

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Benjamin: "Help! My zucchinis aren't setting fruit" or "Your seeds are terrible. Nothing came up."

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Benjamin: Or, "I live in East Texas. What can I plant now?" Mostly they're e-mails. Ninety-seven percent is e-mails. Occasionally I have to call someone. So that's a fun little job. Keeps my fingers in. But I have not done all the seed buying and so on since, I think, January of '07. December of '06 is when I stopped working for Renee full time, and have been on this little funny sabbatical which is about to come to an end.

Taking a Sabbatical

Rabkin: Oh, tell me about that.

Benjamin: Well, in 2006, I ended up getting divorced, selling our house and deciding that also my relationship with Renee was not very constructive for either of us anymore. So I came out of two very long relationships, Renee and Bob, my second husband. I decided I would take the money—in the dividing up—selling our house and dividing up what came from that, I got my other little house paid off, which has a studio in the back, so I rent the front house to my daughter and her family. I have a little studio in the back. The mortgage is paid. I thought, I'm not going to put the rest of this money in my end-of-life pocket; I'm going to do something interesting. Because it was a long marriage, and I didn't have any non-“we” stuff.

I thought, I need to go see what the world is about as a single person. What other work are people doing? I thought maybe I would go around and see all the people who had lived at Camp Joy over the years. I was going to maybe write about it, but that didn't seem to happen. Anyway, I've been many places. I've done lots of traveling. I've done some really interesting workshops in psychology. I've been writing poems. Then I ended up working for our county supervisor. I didn't really look for that job; it came to me. But that just ended last week, as a budget cut. I like our supervisor very much. That was good.

I have been having a fabulous time as the economy has been tanking. I could just put my travels on my credit card and—yeah. But I'm almost at the end of that. Three years. I had been in an office for twenty years. I thought, what am I doing? I want to own my own mornings, and I want to do something else. It's been a really, really remarkable piece of time. Not many people get to do that. I have my

kids. I'm not responsible for any family people, and yet I have them close. I have had amazing gratitude for this piece of time.

Rabkin: When you were just embarking on this sabbatical time in your life, you did an interview with the *Valley Post*, and you were speculating about what you might do with this traveling time.⁹

Benjamin: Yes.

Rabkin: And you said you might go look at other small garden, farm projects that were similar to Camp Joy. Did you do any of that?

Benjamin: Not very much. I did go and visit a woman who used to live with us in the early Camp Joy. I went to Minnesota. I went to Montana. I went to Oregon and did visit people. I got on the Organic Seed Alliance board. I have not yet been up to Port Townsend. I've sort of met with people off there—but I've never been to Port Townsend. I've always wanted to go up there. Maybe this fall.

Didn't do as much of that as I thought. But it still appeals to me very much, how wonderful it would be to go off and write that up a bit, or integrate it with the website. I mean, how cool if you could actually go on the Camp Joy website, which is pretty static, but you could click on those people who were there in 1974, and you could click on Michael Stusser and you would go to him, and you'd have a little thing, and then it would show what he's doing now, and then

it would have links to things that he thought were wonderful and interesting. I don't know how to do web stuff. But it's a great idea.

Rabkin: It's a great project for someone.

Benjamin: It could happen, yes. I like those family tree things very much, to see what came of it, what did people do with what they started.

Other Activities

Rabkin: Though you moved on from working with the UCSC Garden in order to start Camp Joy—before that, actually—you have remained actively connected to CASFS [Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems], I gather.

Benjamin: I was on the Farm and Garden board for a while. That was around when the Roots and Shoots thing happened, the 25th anniversary celebration.¹⁰ I was on the board in those days, and then I kind of—whoof, that was too much, and I sort of stopped being very much connected. And then I got involved with this latest fundraising business—for the housing.¹¹

Rabkin: Housing for the apprentices.

Benjamin: Because it just really piqued my interests, and I had some time, and working with Tana Butler and Don [Burgett] was interesting. So I've been really involved in the last little while, but I suspect that'll die down again.

Rabkin: Have you had significant connections with other farmers, or farming or gardening organizations in the area? Eco-Farm [the Ecological Farming Association], CAFF [Community Alliance with Family Farmers]?

Benjamin: Yes. But it was more through Camp Joy or through Renee's Garden or Shepherd's Seeds. Yes, Eco-Farm, CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers]—from the conference. I've always gone to the Eco-Farm conference. What a great thing that is. It seems like I'm missing some important piece here. [Pause.] I was pretty much really wrapped up in the work world of Renee's, and I had lots of farming things that were from that, but it wasn't so much through Camp Joy. But, yes, for my own personal self, yes. It continues to be interesting to me.

The Sustainable Agriculture Movement

Rabkin: Because of Camp Joy and Renee's and everything you've done, you've been connected with the movements for sustainable gardening, agriculture, food systems for quite a few decades now.

Benjamin: Yes. [Laughs.] Isn't that funny?

Rabkin: I wonder, when you look at those decades, whether you see significant changes or growth over the course of that time.

Benjamin: Well, certainly. Yes, when you think of what is the household word today? That was just completely whacked when I started. When we started organic gardening, “organic” was just a word that was really weird. And Rodale magazine and health food. There wasn’t even a health food store. We don’t even call them health food stores anymore, really. What do we call them? Natural food stores. The whole consciousness of the consumer is hugely broadened. And that’s just in the last few years, really. I think this whole last few years—it’s very thrilling to see people paying attention to the right stuff and to have the president even believing in all this stuff. It’s so wonderful. Did you see that article about [First Lady] Michelle Obama in the White House blog? It was on NPR [National Public Radio]. The kids harvesting, the fifth graders harvesting. Just her beautiful self saying all these things about vegetables. Ah! I loved it!

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Benjamin: I think we’re in an amazing time right now. I think things are going up in many ways, and people are aware in ways that they haven’t been. And yet we’re still on the downward flush from all the bad stuff. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I think people are starting to be inspired to actually not have to be quite so comfortable. I think people are maybe going to be willing—the thing about making sacrifices for the environmental good is it isn’t really.

Rabkin: It isn’t really a sacrifice?

Benjamin: It isn't really a sacrifice. Just stopping wasting stuff, would make a big start. I think we used to talk about that in the early Camp Joy days. I forget when that first gas crisis was, and people were starting to talk about electric cars. It was public conversation. Then that all got shut down, and look what we would have by now. It would be so different if that discourse had not just disappeared. [Sighs.]

What else is different? Witness the Eco-Farm conference. It started out as a few little hippie farmers, and they all had a lot in common. Now you've got Safeway Organic and that whole big, big scale of what is a factory organic farm, and it's different kind of things to talk about. My friend Mark Lipson¹² is going to Washington and lobbying about the farm bill. You wouldn't have had *that* happening all those years ago. Yes, it's gone from a very, very small movement to very big. And now we'll just see what happens with that. Will anything really change, or will people get just comfortable again? Will things get kind of padded back together? I kind of don't think so. It's sort of exciting to think it won't, [that] all this talk will go somewhere.

And it's very scary. Having grandkids, you know. I remember when my kids were little, getting involved with the Valley Women's Club and that whole nuclear issue, Helen Caldicott and Physicians for Social Responsibility, and that really strong push of what's going to happen to the world for our kids. I'm getting my second wind of that. What have we done? We've brought another generation of kids? What's the world going to be like when they're forty? It's scary. But luckily we don't wake up in the morning worrying about that stuff,

because there's always good work to do. Yes. We really need good leaders to herd our lazy asses in the right direction. [Laughs.] People have such a propensity for not wanting to change.

Rabkin: Have you seen changes in the presence or roles of women in the organic scene?

Benjamin: Sure, sure. I think lots of new farmers are women, organic farmers. There's more—and not organic farmers, too, I think. The world has changed in the way of what we think women can do, I think, even though I notice young women my daughter's age still think someone else is going to take care of them.

Rabkin: Really?

Benjamin: But not as many people are that way. My daughter's friends—a lot of the girls did get real jobs, but a reasonable amount of them are still sort of thinking that someone else is going to take care of that. But maybe they're like me. I never thought too much about that. But I think the images of what women do are hugely expanded. Yet when you fall back into who does the dishes and stuff, it's not all that different. It takes a lot of conversation.

Valley Women's Club

Rabkin: Tell me about your involvement with the San Lorenzo Valley Women's Club.

Benjamin: That's another thing that I actually just stepped down from, being the president. That took up a lot of time. That's a wonderful group that started in 1978, people with little kids—mostly [dealing with] environmental issues. What's going to happen to this valley? Issues with water, issues of erosion, issues of over-development, health of the river. There was an organization called Save the San Lorenzo River and then Save Our Shores. All those at the same time were starting up. And the people who started the Valley Women's Club had those concerns about the San Lorenzo Valley. All those people are still my really good friends, and all of them are getting older, and the question is: What is it that gets young people involved in this stuff? Why are all us gray-haired ladies having such a good time with this, and know how enriching it is to do this kind of community work with people? How do you share that?

Rabkin: You're at this point not seeing the next generation coming in.

Benjamin: Not much, not much. A little. I think part of it is there're many more two-parent wage earners. That's hard. It's really hard [if you] both go to work. And if you've got kids, you got soccer games [after work]. So do you really want to go out on Wednesday night to a meeting? Not really. It's a big issue with the Valley Women's Club. There are a couple of young people, but it's really important. What is that hook to involvement in something beyond your small life? I've loved being part of the Valley Women's Club, and I'm really happy not to shape my life around it at the moment. Chances are, I would go back to being on the board.

Rabkin: So it's an environmental activist's group.

Benjamin: Yes.

Rabkin: Which is not what the name sounds like.

Benjamin: Right. It's sort of a joke. It got named that little white-glove lady thing. They've talked about changing the name for years. There're men who are also members. But it basically started out environmental—environmental, social and political life of the San Lorenzo Valley.

Farmers' Markets

Rabkin: You've been connected with some other organizations that are part of your home watershed, the San Lorenzo Valley. Felton Farmers' Market. You've had some connection with them.

Benjamin: Yes.

Rabkin: Tell me about that.

Benjamin: Well, Wendy Krupnick¹³, who worked with Renee in the Shepherd's office, was one of the main beginners of the farmers' market, so our whole office was involved with the farmers' market. And quite a few of the people who were part of the Shepherd's Seeds were board members. I was never on the board, but I liked farmers' markets very much.

Rabkin: I was just at the Felton market last Tuesday. It's a happening thing.

Benjamin: It is. All the farmers' markets. Everywhere I go, I love to go to farmers' markets. I've been to the farmers' market in Baltimore; I've been to the farmers' market in Montana. I just think it's the best thing. People are there, looking so excited, and you get to talk to the farmers. That's another thing that has changed. I mean, just think of that.

Rabkin: The burgeoning of farmers' markets.

Benjamin: The burgeoning of farmers' markets. What a wonderful—what fun!

First 5 Commission

Rabkin: There's something else I think you're involved in, the First 5 Commission?

Benjamin: The First 5 Commission, I'm still on.

Rabkin: Tell me about that.

Benjamin: Mark Stone, who's our fifth district supervisor—he asked me to be his commissioner. California voters voted to tax tobacco to pay for the health of children from zero to five, and every county has its own commission, has its own board. The Santa Cruz one is a really good one. Yes, I will miss working for Mark, but at least we're still on that board together. And that's severely being

challenged. They almost swept all the funds out of it by that last ballot proposition.

Rabkin: Wow.

Benjamin: We think we actually managed the money very well. We didn't want to give it away, and now we don't have to. That's been fun. I'm actually the only person on that board who doesn't come with an early childhood education or health background. But I don't have to. I'm just one of the community appointees. I have huge respect for the people who are on that board. My mom was a teacher and ended up teaching early childhood education in college, and I always thought I had no interest whatsoever in that. And now, partly because of the First 5 and partly because of the psychology stuff I've studied, I'm very interested in that first year or so of life.

Rabkin: Is it having grandchildren, too?

Benjamin: No, I think having grandchildren was a wonderful lab project for everything else I've been thinking about. I think having grandchildren is about the best thing. I never thought I would love anybody that much again. I'm lucky because I've been with my grandkids almost every day of their lives. They're close. Not too many people get to do that. Mostly people go far away.

I was picking dried nigella pods at the Camp Joy garden the other day, for the wreaths, and my nine-year-old granddaughter was with me. She was helping me

for a little while, and then she got bored. But then she went and laid down on the bench in the big grape arbor. It was one of those beautiful summer days, and the rose scent was going through, and the birds were peeping, and she must have laid there—I kept looking around because I thought maybe she'd fallen asleep, but she hadn't. She was just being in the garden. She didn't have her book. She's a big reader. She's almost always got her book. She didn't have any of her electronic devices. And I thought, this forty-five minutes is a real big thing in her life. You get to do that with your grandkids. If I hadn't have been there putting around and being with her, she wouldn't have been doing that. She would have been home reading. I love reading, but to have your kid spend almost an hour just being in a garden is pretty nice. I like getting to facilitate that.

So First 5. Grandchildren help, but that wasn't what interested me. If you think that to make the world better—okay, we don't want to have war, we don't want people to be angry and afraid of each other. Well, where does that start? How far do you go back to get to the roots of all that? Because that's where your important work should be. Maybe all the important work is in the first eight months of life. Maybe. I just think those thoughts. Well, why does everybody believe that? Because they're afraid. Well, why? It all goes back to that very beginning of how did you make yourself based on what you got.

Rabkin: Yes.

Benjamin: What do you think the world is about? How safe do you feel? Anyway, that's what I get to do, be a grandparent.

The Future

Rabkin: Beth, where are you hoping to put your energies over the next few years?

Benjamin: Ooh! I'm embarking on trying to figure that out, partly because I have to now think about money. I was about to apply for a job at CCOF, which looked interesting. And then I thought, why do I want a big, full-time, totally involving job right now? I've got maybe ten years left of my work in life. I've got little grandkids. I've got parents who are both alive and fine still, but time is different for old people. I have to figure out something about money. I'm hoping something will fall out of the woodwork.

What do I love? Food and flowers. I can't imagine doing anything much different, but I'm open for anything that might happen. It'll probably be more of the same, just see what work needs to be done. It was a big deal for me to step out of that marriage, just as it was a big deal to step out of Camp Joy. And out of Camp Joy, I was stepping into another relationship with somebody in another life, so it wasn't quite so brave. But it was a big deal because that was really my identity of who I was in the world. I was Mrs. Camp Joy.

When Bob and I split up, it was really the first time I was ever not just saying, okay, this is the next thing to do. Do it. This is the next thing to do, do it. I really was, like, okay, all is open to me. I didn't seem to deviate much from all the stuff

I'd done before. I don't imagine things will change. It'll be in the same set of subjects. More writing.

Rabkin: Poetry? Prose?

Benjamin: I write poetry mostly. You have to make some space around it. I have a very difficult time making empty space in my life. Activity just flows in. "Sure, sure, sure." I've almost got it figured out, how to make myself some empty time. That's appealing to me. Being by myself is a lot more appealing to me than it ever was.

Rabkin: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to touch on?

Benjamin: I don't think so. I think that the issues continue to be how to get more people back on land in a way that feels fun, how to invigorate self-sufficiency to some degree, but have it feel good. You don't want people to have to go marching back to the farm like in China, the Cultural Revolution. You want people to go, "This is cool, growing my own food. I can invite my neighbors over, and we can eat it together." That's what life should be about: Less money. Less work hours. More time with your friends and family. There you are. That's all. I can't think of anything else.

Rabkin: Thank you, Beth.

¹See <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/arts/design/07fink.html>

² See the oral history with Jim Nelson in this series.

³ Benjamin is referring to the 15th annual Poetry and Music in the Chadwick Garden event, on June 27th 2009, sponsored by the Friends of the UCSC Farm & Garden.

⁴ See the oral history with Orin Martin in this series.

⁵ Many of the narrators in this oral history project mentioned this kiosk across the road from the Garden, where campus members picked up free flowers.

⁶ See the oral history with Steve Kaffka in this series.

⁷ See the oral history with Mark Lipson of Molino Creek in this series.

⁸ See the oral history with Darrie Ganzhorn and Paul Glowaski of the Homeless Garden Project in this series.

⁹ See Judith Wellner, "For Beth Benjamin, Being in the Moment is What Life is About," *The Valley Post*, November 21, 2006.

¹⁰ The 25th anniversary of the UCSC Farm and Garden was called "Roots and Shoots," and brought apprentices from around the world to join with Friends' members, Farm & Garden staff, and campus and community supporters in a celebration of Alan Chadwick's garden and the accomplishments of those who trained there. Louise Cain wrote in the September 1992 issue of *News and Notes*: "What was overwhelming was the way the apprentices of every year were still bonded to each other and to the land, and the realization that the apprenticeship experience had defined, changed and enriched hundreds of lives."

¹¹ The Grow a Farmer Campaign was an intensive and successful fundraising effort in 2009 to raise \$250K for permanent cabins for the CASFS apprentices. The University was no longer able to allow the apprentices to live in tents during their residency. See <http://www.growafarmer.org/aboutgaf.html>

¹² See the oral history with Mark Lipson in this series.

¹³ See the oral history with Wendy Krupnick in this series.