PART TWO
Portraits
Woman and child

The Community Garden Project, Boston State Hospital, Mattapan
I was born in the country. I love the smell of the dirt, the smell of the grass. So that keeps me going... roses, any plant. I love to plant; I love to watch anything grow. I kneel down in that dirt and take up a handful of it. I say this is nature; this is something that cannot be duplicated; this is God's thing and I enjoy it.

—Victor Pomare, Roxbury
People who are interested in housing are interested in housing. That's how you gotta take them. And the people who have gardens are interested in housing and gardening.

You can't just say, "Gardens and the hell with housing," or "Housing and the hell with gardening." Everybody's got to get together, and let's figure it out. We've got to keep each other happy.

—James Hall, Charlestown
I come from Arkansas, Arkansas to Boston. I was a mile and a half from the Mississippi River. I would get up every morning and look at the levee. When the sun rise, it'll come up over the levee, and I'd be shaded from the sun from the levee every morning.

Farming sure is different now in Arkansas. Gardens down there, everything they done planted been eaten by the middle of June, first of July. . . . Greens, turnips, and like those bunch of beans, they're planting the second crop of them in the middle of the summer, 'cause down there you could plant turnips and cabbage and collards in March or even February. Yeah, you could set them out even in the middle of February.
John Robinson

The Community Garden Project, Boston State Hospital, Mattapan
I have been gardening every year since I started, which was 1942 or '43, without any interruptions. And I didn't want to garden. They had to nearly shove me into it. I just wouldn’t do any gardening. I could cook and sew, but deliver me from the garden. Well, one day I was with a friend who had a garden here in the Fens, and this man from the Park Department came up to me and said, “You don’t have a garden. And you’re going to take that garden (the vacant lot next to my friend’s garden) and you’re going to dig it up tomorrow.” “I don’t want a garden,” I said. But I came and dug it up the next day just the same, and here I am still gardening some forty years later. And you know it’s been a lifesaver. I even did it on crutches one time, a couple of times in fact.
Mabel Matheson

The Fenway Victory Garden, The Fenway
I've had gardens, at least my mother and father did, all our lives. When I was a baby they had the garden. This was in Virginia up around the Blue Ridge mountains. We had four acres of our own land. We had a house built on it and everything. And most of my people lived around that section; they mostly Cherokee.

When I first moved in here there were houses all around. So I didn't start to garden until they tore down the first house. The rest of the houses still had people living in them. But when they tore down the first house I started to garden and that's quite a few years ago. Now I wouldn't know just what year it was, but it's been a long time. And every time they tear down a house, somebody else would come in and start a garden. Finally they tore all the old places down.
Jesse Byrd

Oscar Street Community Garden, Jamaica Plain
There are too many senior citizens who sit in the house, look out the window, have nothing to do, but who have a great deal to contribute. And my thing is to get these people out doing something.

I think, over and above getting those people out of the house has been the conviviality that exists when they come out here. They do a little hoeing, they sit down, they chat, they talk about things, and they meet other people. Which gives them, in my opinion, an opportunity to think that, “although I’m 75, I’m somebody. I’ve got a place to go to garden, and I’ll meet some friends out there.”

—Edward Cooper, Roxbury

Like I was telling you before, a lot of people will come down here after work and they give their garden maybe half an hour. It’s very good mental therapy. It’s good for their minds; it’s good for their heads. People walk down, they talk. We talk about each other’s troubles, and everybody goes home smiling.

—James Hall, Charlestown
Personally I think it is a crime to take these gardens away. I just see too many good things coming out of the gardens. I see people talking to each other even if they can't understand the language. You can communicate in sign language. It's a bridge between minorities and people of different backgrounds. The garden is so positive that to destroy it the city would lose an awful lot.

—Gretta Norton, Bay Village
Thelma and Edward Cooper
Highland Park 400 Survival Garden, Roxbury
I just get a charge out of walking up here, as I did this morning and do three or four mornings a week, and see Mrs. Jones and Mr. Smith picking tomatoes or talking about the weather. And I have in my hand some carrots that I just got from one of my neighbors. And I picked some string beans, and Mrs. Jones said to me, “Mr. Cooper, I haven’t had any of your string beans this year!” So I gave her the string beans and she gave me the carrots. Now, this is good for her; it’s good for me. And I want to say that I’m bragging when I say that I’ll be 82 next September, but being able to get out and come up here and do the many other things that I think I’m doing is good therapy for me! So when I say that I’m doing this for the community, I’m doing this for me too.
Benny Wilson, Magnolia Hall, Elizabeth Burnett
*Highland Park 400 Survival Garden, Roxbury*
Visitor, Wilhelmina Williams, Annie Gayle
*Highland Park 400 Survival Garden, Roxbury*
Benjamin and Earlene Scott
*Highland Park 400 Survival Garden, Roxbury*
Richard Heath, Israel Cook, Kim Archung

Highland Park 400 Survival Garden, Roxbury
Shanti Ananda, Satyeana and John Ananda, Ishael, Aurovina and Tipareth Ananda

Highland Park 400 Survival Garden, Roxbury
I don't care how bad your night's been, how bad the morning looks, when you look out and there's a flower, there's life; there's a bird sitting in the tree in the feeder, in the birdbath, it can give you a mood you didn't have when you got up. There's nothing more beautiful in this world than nature, as far as I'm concerned. And we have it, thank God, right here in our own garden.

—Evelyn McMahon, Brighton
And you do get close to people in a garden. For example, Adam Washington, one of the gardeners, died a few months ago. He died on Christmas day. And it was one of the times that I realized, you know, a real sense of linking with families! Because I don't know about Adam; I don't know anything about Adam's history. I just know he was an awfully nice guy, who had a real open heart. He was a key person in the garden, a loving, giving person and I just felt devastated when he died. It's a real loss for the garden and it really made me see that you get awfully close to people, in a way you don't realize, when you're talking over tomatoes.

—Alice Nelson, Dorchester
Tuey Har Lee

*Torre Unidad Community Garden, South End*
Maria Ortiz and Joseph Howko

*Rutledge and Washington Streets Community Garden, South End*
Catherine Noseworthy and Carol Cleary
Faneuil Public Housing Development, Brighton
Eloise Pate and children

Harrison and Plympton Streets Community Garden, South End
John Berlandi

*Old Colony Public Housing Development, South Boston*
Margaret Egan

Old Colony Public Housing Development, South Boston
That lot was on a fringe neighborhood—nobody watching it. And trucks would come and dump junk on it, so it meant there were rats and filth. So one day Sis and I were drinking tea and just talking and we said, “let’s clean it up; let’s do it!” And we went out there one Saturday with shovels and rakes; and Matt came along, and Sis and Sis’s daughters and their husbands, and their children, and then the children up the street. And then the other kids in the street see you working up there and they wonder: what’s going on?

The thing about a neighborhood such as ours is people are up for action. You know, when the ambulance comes by everybody turns out of their house and the same thing when you see a group of people around. Everybody, it brings everybody out of their houses and everybody wonders: what’s going on? And people may not be doing anything so they’ll come and join along. And that’s really helpful. . . .
... And so on Saturday morning we got a lot of cleaning done. We ended up just raking and raking, and even little kids like Hubie, who was only four years old at the time, would be out with their rakes. They just wanted to be like the adults and older kids, raking and cleaning up. And, boy, we spent all spring doing that and whenever we had free time, we'd go out there and more kids would come. And then we decided if we don't do anything it's just going to get dumped on again. So we thought, "Well, let's put some gardens in here." Actually, that was the idea of the children. They had that idea. They said, "Well, let's put gardens in here." ...
Dionne, Rocky, Earlena, Tamicka, Rina, Nina
*Green Village Garden, Dorchester*
And it became like a play area or a get-together area for the kids as well. And you'd look out your window in the morning, and while kids were waiting to go to school, they'd be running around the garden plots, or looking in. And the children would go out into the garden at times that you were surprised. They really kept an eye on their garden.

—Alice Nelson, Dorchester
Tamicka, Rina, Nina

*Green Village Garden, Dorchester*
I mean, what's the difference between a child living in the city and enjoying a butterfly flying around or a caterpillar or whatever and a child in the country? We're entitled to those things too. Our children should see those things too and enjoy them.

—Marcia Chaffee, South End
One little girl, who planted cucumbers the first year, had so many cucumbers she couldn't eat them all, was giving them away to everyone. This was one of the tiny box gardens that's smaller than this table. The second year she planted them again because she had so much fun the first time. Every year she's planting cucumbers and she's getting more all the time! I don't know if it's the dirt in her bed or not, but she is amazing! They are like the weeds in her garden, the cucumbers! And that's fun, because there's just a real pride. You see the pride in the eyes of the kids when something's really coming up. They bring their friends over, and they say, "This is my garden."

—Alice Nelson, Dorchester
Earlena

Green Village Garden, Dorchester
Orchard Park Public Housing Development, Roxbury
You look at this place. It's overgrown, but it really fills an important need. We've got plenty of trees. A blue jay or cardinal flies by, and right around the corner's a busy street with buses and trucks... this is a little island in all this madness.

—Rick De Angelis, Dorchester

There were lots of old mattresses and beer cans and things on it, and little trees, wild trees on it. I went to the city and asked them if I could clear it up, because I had a house right in front of it. I bought that house in front of it. And I wanted it to be clean. I want anywhere I am to be clean and have flowers or trees or roses or something. They told me I could go ahead with it, but they didn't have any money to give me to help clean it. I told them, “it's quite all right. I just want to know that I can keep it clean.”

—Victor Pomare, Roxbury

They say, “Oh, it's been vacant for twenty-five years.” But it's ten years that we've had it. It was vacant for fifteen years, but for ten years we've taken good care of it; we did something with it; we produced something. We put these trees in. See that crimson maple, that was the first tree we planted. We put those arbors in. We've got apricot, peach, three types of apples, a massive rhubarb patch, three hundred raspberry bushes, and so much more. You cannot move this. We could never catch up and make up for what we put in here. We made something out of nothing.

—James Hall, Charlestown
East Brookline and Saint George Streets Community Garden, South End
James Hall

_Sullivan Square Community Garden, Charlestown_
I was born here in Charlestown, 1930. I'm 56 years old just a few weeks ago. But all through my life, we've gardened. My father used to send us out before school in the morning. We'd take the basket with the string on it, and pick up the horse manure. We used to call them road apples. And a lot of people knew then what road apples are. And we used to put them underneath the rose bushes.

Now first thing I do when I get out of work, I go home and change into my work clothes, my farm clothes, call them what you want, but this is where I come every day, to the garden. Like I said, I was an alcoholic one time. It was eight, ten years ago that I made my first move to stop drinking. I found out that there are a lot of nice things to do in this world besides drinking or hanging around a barroom. It's such a waste in a person's life. You know, I just can't believe that I'm involved here, in this beautiful garden, and that I helped to create all this. It took time; it took a lot of hours. My father, God's mercy on him, he always said, "There's never enough light in the day, boy, to do what you want to do." And it's so true.
Joseph Ciampa

Marginal Street Community Garden, East Boston
I come from the old country, from Italy. We had a garden there. Some people, they don't like to farm; it's a lot of work. I know it's a lot of work, but I enjoy myself. And some people don't know how they got to do it, plant a garden. Like the younger generation. They never see it done. But, I mean, when you got it in the blood yourself, you know how to do it and you really like to see things grow.
Collin Simmons

Bromley Heath Housing Development, Jamaica Plain
My grandmother, she always had a garden, that was back in North Carolina, where I was born. And I always worked with her in the garden. So when I came up here, I just found a spot and I’ve been doing gardening ever since.

... And I meet a lot of people through the garden—but then to me there ain't no strangers. Everyone I meet I’m friendly with and then they friendly back. My grandmother always said, “Treat others as you want to be treated yourself,” and that's my way. It's like the good book say; it's in the Bible: as you sow so shall you reap.
Gong and Shui Lum
Torre Unidad Community Garden, South End
Lee Shee Chin
Torre Unidad Community Garden, South End