

AL 170

Interviewee: John D. Gillespie

Interviewer: Alan Petigny

Date: July 22, 1993

P: Right now it is twenty to four and the date is July 22, 1993, Thursday afternoon. I am with Father John Gillespie (like the sheriff on television) and we are here to talk about the homeless issue here in Gainesville. Father Gillespie is the Chief Priest at St. Augustine Catholic Church. Could you please spell your full name, middle name and everything?

G: John David Gillespie. I am the pastor of St. Augustine Catholic Church and Student Center since 1981.

P: Before I actually get to the questions about the homeless issue, I am going to ask a few biographical questions on you, if I could. When were you born? Where were you born? Your educational background, and that kind of thing. So, I will begin by asking you your date of birth and your place of birth.

P: I was born September 23, 1946 in Alltoona, Pennsylvania. I lived there until I was about five. My family moved to Jacksonville in 1952 and I began first grade in Jacksonville (Duval County). I went to elementary school and junior high school to the ninth grade in Jacksonville. I transferred to a Catholic Seminary in Columbus, Ohio in 1960. I was there for eight years: four years of high school and four years of college. I graduated college in 1968. I went to graduate school the first year at the University of Florida studying sociology and anthropology, and graduate school at the same time at the St. Vince de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach. I graduated from the seminary with a Bachelor's in 1971 and did a Master's in theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts from 1971 to 1972, when I was ordained a priest. Since then I have taken assignments in Jacksonville, Pensacola, Williston (in Levy County), Crescent City (in Putnam County), and here in Gainesville.

P: When did you first come here to Gainesville as a priest?

G: I was here actually in the summer of 1968, the summer of 1969, the summer of 1970, and the summer of 1971 as a graduate student and seminarian. I was here as a deacon in the summer of 1971 and worked in the parish. I was ordained here in this parish on May 13, 1972 and I came back and lived here at this parish in 1975 until 1976, while I was stationed to work in Williston. We had no rectory [in Williston], so I lived here in this rectory. I came back and have been here permanently since June 13, 1981.

P: Were you the pastor in 1981 when you came here?

G: I came here as pastor, yes.

P: Was St. Francis already in existence at that time?

G: The St. Francis House was actually two separate organizations founded by my predecessor Father Bob Baker. There was a St. Francis House soup kitchen, which was the first thing that was started, and then there was a St. Francis House overnight shelter. They had two separate boards. Some of the members overlapped, but they were incorporated separately and they functioned at two separate sites.

P: Do you recall, I know you were not here at the time, but, the year that it was incorporated at these two different branches?

G: I came in 1981 and Father Baker had established the soup kitchen something like two and a half years before that and the overnight shelter maybe a year to a year and a half before. There was maybe a year to a year and a half separating the founding of the two. Originally, it was not established with any concept of founding something. It was in response to the extreme number of requests for food that were coming here to the church. There were a lot of students on campus who experienced extreme financial stress. I believe it was during the oil crisis of 1978 or 1979. I recall Father Baker saying that what ultimately tipped the scale was after he had three university students, at that time enrolled for classes, come to the Student Center indicating that they had not eaten anything in several days. A few of them came independently. When he realized that there were that many students, especially come the end of each month when whatever money they had in monthly allotments had run out (paying tuition, books and so forth), who could not afford to eat. He brought together a number of women from the parish. Carmen Caudron was one of the key figures instrumental with Father Baker in establishing the soup kitchen. What they began to do was fix a pot of nutritious soup and fix the normal peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. They used the kitchen at the Student Center to make the food, but then they began serving it and eventually began to fix it across the street in what we call Hurley Hall (the old Thomas house, which is a house built in the late teens early 1920s that we have owned and used as a convent in years past and at that time it was standing empty). The chapel portion of the convent, the original garage, was transformed into a soup kitchen dining room. When I arrived, they had been serving for a year or more in that particular site. It was a very good operation. It worked very well.

P: Now, you were here during the late 1960s at the University of Florida. As a student, I am sure you had some sense of how people were in the community, economically speaking. Was there any homeless problem or hunger problem back in the late 1960s as you recall?

G: Well, I was here summers in 1968, 1969, 1970, and 1971, and the summers do not ever really give you a proper picture of Gainesville, nor the University. Even less so in those days because there was very little offerings during the summer. It was before the time that the legislature had mandated that in order to graduate you had to have a certain number of summer credits. [Therefore], everyone who could got out of Gainesville [because] it was so hot. In those days, during the summers there was not a strong sense of what I would call homelessness. I am sure it was there. I was not noticing it as much, but what was very different at that point was that it was still the fabulous 1960s, the time of Woodstock nation and so forth. In this area where the church is, the ghetto neighborhood, there were lots and lots of street people. Street people signified something different then. It was what we called 'hippies.' It was not unusual for people renting an apartment to invite other people in, if they did not have a place to sleep, to sleep on their floor with a bed roll or whatever. It was much more open and I think it was a much more hospitable time. Our country went hard and cold in the 1970s after the Vietnam war, and especially in the 1980s. I think during the Reagan administration, we seemed to become a much harder people. Although President Bush called for a kinder, gentler nation, I do not think that President Bush knew how to lead us into that. I do not think we have captured that. The late 1960s seem to be still warmer and more hospitable.

P: How has the mission of St. Francis changed from when you came back, I believe, in 1981 to where it is today? In terms of your mission, perhaps it is the same, but if it is not the same, how has it changed, and if it is the same how has your capability and the scope of your effort changed?

G: When I arrived in June 1981, the presidency of the boards of the soup kitchen and the overnight shelter had passed from Father Baker to Father Roman Julian, the pastor of St. Patrick's Parish. Both of the boards were eager, it seemed, to have the pastor of St. Augustine on the board, so I joined both boards. Later when we consolidated, I continued to be on the board. The missions were separate at that time and the institutions were separate. The soup kitchen's goal was to be able to feed anyone hungry who came at noon time and do so in cooperation with other groups such as the Salvation Army that fed people in the evening. The Salvation Army had more or less staked out that as their prime time and we thought that was very good. We are grateful for their long standing efforts to feed the hungry. We, therefore, took the noon time. Had someone else come along wanting to do a similar thing, we probably may have suggested that they consider breakfast so that people were, in fact, able to find food when they needed it.

We had a conscious difference in our approach from the Salvation Army. It is a little more proselytizing maybe, requiring people to sit through a service before

they eat and a little more effort being made to convert them or to save them. We did not try to do that and never have at the St. Francis house. We have not had any hesitancy to let people know why we care about serving them. It is an expression of our religious faith as well. Although we have lots of people who help us who are different denominations and different faith, sometimes no faith, but a religious faith, but still a deep concern for brothers and sisters or hungry. Anyhow, that has been a difference.

At that point the soup kitchen finished its work after serving a good meal and then the overnight shelter opened up in the late afternoon (generally five o'clock) and began functioning from five until ten taking people in and accommodating as many as our beds would allow. Then closing the doors to the people, letting them stay overnight, watching over them and making sure they had a safe place. In the morning, letting them out around seven or eight and closing up the house again. The facility that we used in those days was a house that we rented from Alachua General Hospital down on SW 7th or 8th Street and it currently has been torn down and replaced by office buildings. Anyhow, that is where we worked the original St. Francis Shelter out of before obtaining the facility we now have and then where we also serve our meals.

P: If I can interrupt you. It seems to me when you are describing the differences, you are describing the differences with the Salvation Army. I was wondering. In terms of the mission that you have, if I was to come here back in 1982 and spend some time volunteering at the shelter and if I was to spend a week volunteering at the shelter now, would I notice any differences besides simply the location? Is the scope larger, is the scope about the same or is it smaller? Do you have other tasks and functions besides simply feeding them? In other words, has the particular service that you are doing for the hungry and the homeless here in Gainesville at St. Francis changed during your tenure as a chief priest here?

G: Yes, I think it probably has. First from the food side, we have been able to obtain more food and a wider variety of food. We have been able through cooperation with the community to come up with a fair amount of canned goods as well, so that now one of the things we can do besides fix a hot meal for people at noon is to have food available at the shelter for the eighteen or so people that might be spending the night there. Often they have to open cans and heat food themselves that they are going to eat, but it is available. We are able on a few occasions to hand out food and boxes of canned goods and so forth to people who have a home to fix it in, but do not have any food. Most of the time we try to keep the community food closet stocked, especially through catholic charities, but also through Gainesville Community ministries. We have not tried to expand into a regular food closet, as it is often called, or [like] now we have Bread of the Mighty stocking food for people in Gainesville. We do a little

of that, more than we did previously, but we are not trying technically to get into that.

We also experienced a major change, and I think a very painful one. One that I feel a little bit bad about and I also feel angry about. We had been able to let people sit down at the table and eat their meal with relative dignity and comfort. However, because of some people that I would consider busybodies and rather unfortunate political types, we found about six months after I was made pastor that we were challenged and told that we could not serve meals where we had been serving them. The Health Department came and cited us for two violations. They put a notice up on the door saying that we were not allowed to serve meals there anymore. I was naive about Gainesville City politics at that time and did not know that there was a lot of dirty dealings going on behind the scenes. In my naivety, I agreed with Sister Clair, who was our parish representative and working most with the soup kitchen, that the best thing we could do is begin serving meals in paper bags. We would put hot soup in a cup and sandwiches and hand them to people, but we could not at that stage allow them to sit down inside.

Now, the reason, it turned out, that we were cited, was that we were in violation of the Alachua County Health Codes because we did not have a sneeze guard over the food serving area, and we did not have separate bathrooms for men and women. Now, I did not know whether that, in fact, was true or not. For a couple of weeks I was a little bit buffaloed by the whole thing. Then I began to say to myself, "Let me find out if this really is true and let me find out how this happened." The main thing that was stuck in my craw was the fact that the Health Department inspector never actually went inside the building and never laid eyes on what he considered the violations. He was instead bulldogged into doing what he was doing by a couple of powerful, back scene politicians.

P: Do you know who they were?

G: Yes, I do know who they were.

P: Who were they? Remember this is not going on radio, this is for history.

G: Pat Fauf and Monica Smith, who are two neighborhood, they would like to call themselves 'leaders' and I would prefer to say 'bushbodies.' At any rate, they were upset at the idea of there being hungry people in their neighborhood. The problem, of course, was that the hungry people were there long before the soup kitchen opened. Many of the business men in the area, when Father Baker decided to open the soup kitchen, independently came to him and thanked him and praised him because they said they had so many people coming to their businesses asking for money, panhandling, or asking if they could sweep the

floor to earn enough money to buy a meal. He was praised roundly by the business owners for a year or two after he opened the soup kitchen. Then with a couple of business owners, their businesses changing hands, some other people coming in, and the neighborhood becoming more aware of the soup kitchen, people began to say it is the soup kitchen that is bringing the poor people into the area. We said, "No, the poor people were here and we opened the soup kitchen because they were here. They were here before and they were panhandling before. You may not have noticed them together that much but they were here." This particular group, they like to call themselves the University Park Neighborhood (I will dispute whether that is a valid name or not later if you wish to know some of the other issues), were fresh from several victories and they were feeling flush with power. They were the group that managed to get restrictions put on parking in the ghetto neighborhood by having to have decals. They also had managed to get ordinances passed through the city saying that no house owner or owner of a property could have more than three unrelated people living in a house. If there were more than three, then they had to apply as a landlord and register the house and made all kinds of codes. So, that had a significant effect on the density of the neighborhood and other neighborhoods in the city and now they were looking for other things that they could shape to fit their wishes. The group ultimately ran a ground on the issue of the Burger King and the drive thru. Fortunately, they foundered over that issue and shipwrecked their political power. We are a whole lot better that they are not pulling all of the strings behind the scenes.

P: I am sorry. What were they now trying to do to your efforts?

G: In terms of the soup kitchen, while they were flush with power, they tried to shut down the soup kitchen.

P: What year was this?

G: This would have been late 1981 or early 1982. I think it was late in 1981. Since I came in June 1981, I think it was within four to five months after I had been here which would have been in the fall of 1981. When we began serving bag lunches which people had to sit down and eat at a corner or under a tree or in a parking lot, we thought that was not the way to go with the soup kitchen. We thought the dignity of the people being fed was offended by that. They were hungry enough that they obviously would eat, but we thought it was better to give them a decent place to sit down at. While they were seated we had volunteers who would sit and talk with them and often find out what their problems were. We were able often to refer them to job opportunities or housing or medical concerns.

P: I assume then these were mostly students at this time.

G: Not mostly students. Probably ten to twenty percent students. The rest would have been others. One of the complaints or myths that people forever bring up about soup kitchens is that when you open a soup kitchen they say you bring in people from all over the eastern seaboard. They come flocking from Philadelphia and Baltimore to have our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. What people pig-headedly refuse to acknowledge is the vast majority of the people who come to most soup kitchens are residents of the city itself. In fact, in the city of Gainesville, it is striking to so many who are here because of the University and who do not have roots who are not second or third generation to find out how many people are actually fourth and fifth generation Gainesville residents. The black community of Gainesville is very stable in terms of residence and I have, myself, ran across a number of young, say twenty, twenty five year old, actually people up into their forties who have never left Alachua County in their entire lives. They have never seen the ocean, either the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic and who's families go back to the time of the Civil War or approximately back that far. It was not called Gainesville in those days, Newnansville and other names to it.

At any rate, what you will find I think in our soup kitchen is that probably at that time sixty percent of the people coming in would have been Gainesville residents. Another ten or fifteen percent would have been college students (we could call them Gainesville residents here because of the University), and then maybe twenty five or thirty percent, whatever the difference would be, would be people coming through town. So that last group that most opponents of soup kitchens and shelters are most opposed to. They always imagine that drifters are criminals and some of them are.

P: I am going to come back to some of the problems that you have had, either the regulations and people throwing up hurdles and so forth, and neighborhood associations complaining, etc., but just a few other little areas before I get into that. Let me ask you, you told me who the homeless are pretty well just now, but why are they homeless and why are they hungry? What are the reasons for the plight that they find themselves in?

G: I think it would be possible to write an interesting social history of the United States or really any country probably, from the standpoint of who is homeless at any given time and why because that changes. The people in the 1960s who were street people or candidates for using a shelter and soup kitchen were very often people who had chosen to drift, to move around, to travel, to live free and off the land, at least for a time or to be rebellious and drop out. That is not the case these days. That segment is all but disappeared. A segment that was not present in the late 1960s, but is present today because of medical legislation or social medical legislation, when we decided in conjunction (I think it was with the push for the Baker Act, but I do not recall all of the details of it), we decided to

reduce the population of people in mental asylums. If I remember correctly, it dropped by about 75 percent. They kept 25 percent and turned out [the rest]. For every four in institutions they kept one and turned about three out. The idea was that there were too many people hospitalized and they should be back with their families or in neighborhood residential houses or something of that sort. Well, a lot of them wind up drifting. They can not hold a job, their family does not want them around. Sometimes it is not because they are a danger to anyone other than maybe to themselves, they might or might not be a danger, but they are just too idiosyncratic to get along with people. So, ever since that movement, it was legislation, I think, under H.E.W. years ago, but anyhow a lot more of those people are on the streets. You will still find that homeless people include a lot whom we would have hospitalized before, but now we are not doing it.

P: What percentage would you say have these perhaps mental or emotional problems?

G: I would have to guess off the top of my head, but I would say 15 percent, 20 percent of people. I am not talking about psychopaths or sociopaths. I am talking about people with maybe neurotic problems or obsessive/compulsive difficulties, whatever, sometimes with emotional breakdowns.

P: Lawton Chiles.

G: No, not the Prozac crowd necessarily. But what I think we wind up having in large numbers now are those people who in the 1960s and 1970s, when we were trying to be the great society, we thought that a lot of resources should be made available to try to help people sustain themselves on the farms or in their homes or in their apartments. [Then] we began to be a harder, and I think crueler American society. I guess we would mark that as after the Vietnam War. Not necessarily because it was the Vietnam War, but by that end, we decided that we could not afford to help people and so we have cut a lot of people adrift. Particularly mothers trying to take care of their children who in order to hold a job would have to have the kids in daycare and two-thirds of what they earn in their job would have to go to pay for the daycare. Therefore, they can not continue to sustain themselves and they wind up, eventually, so far behind in rental payments and so forth that they are out on the streets. We do not seem to care very much anymore. I think one of my deep problems with the country and with our local community is how many people have reached positions of power on platforms of harshness and coldness, not caring enough anymore. So, I guess the caring is really at issue more than anything else.

P: Somewhat of a rhetorical question, or rather this is a question I always ask whenever I deal with social issues. For the typical American who is working nine to five and having a hard time making his mortgage payments, why should he

care about this issue? What would you say to someone who has a home in Gainesville and is struggling to make it and is apprehensive about its property values and does not like the idea about homeless people around his neighborhood and around his kids? What would you say to him to tell him that this is in deed a problem that he should show concern for?

- G: The first thing that I would say is that I would agree. I would be happy to hear that he does not want homeless people around. Then I would like to know what kind of strategy he would be interested in doing to not have homeless. I do not want to have homeless either. I would like the homeless to have homes. [When] a lot of people in this city [say they] do not want homeless, they mean send them some place else. Get them away from me, if they are out of sight I do not care what happens to them.

The homeless, for the most part, become homeless right out of our own communities. We went to school with them. They were our playmates and we played on the same football teams together and so forth. For a number of reasons, very often having to do with broken homes with the high rates of divorce and drug use, those people are now on the streets, but they are part of our neighborhood. They are citizens of our community.

We have a strong strain of democracy running through the United States, intertwined with the republicanism. I do not mean the republican party today, but let us call it a "gentry-ism" that says that the Constitution suggested that you could only vote if you were a property owner and if you were of a certain color you only counted as three fifths of a person. The roots of our democracy in our country are not pure and harmonized. There are some irregularities in that there continues, to the present day, to be a lump in the pudding. A wrong notion that citizens are only citizens if they own property and are paying substantial taxes. Poor people are citizens as well.

There are thousands of examples that we can site where someone who was raised poor becomes a great contributor to society. In our own area one of the great examples is Mary McCloud Bethune of Bethune Cookman College who made a substantial contribution to the state of Florida and to the south in establishing that college but with out of almost complete poverty, but a strong character. So, the poor and the homeless are an important resource. They are of us. They are not so different and they are not so unpromising that we can somehow afford to waste them or get rid of them or ship them out. We have an obligation to try to help their lifestyle and their skills for the overall good of their own families and our own society.

I think that also in these days, one of the things that people need to remember is the so-called hardworking homeowner and member of society which is not very

far away from homelessness themselves. As many people point out, you may only be three or four payments away from having your own house repossessed and find yourself in the streets. It is important that there be a place for people to go who can not maintain the middle class or lower middle class lifestyle.

It is also a concern, and I think should be a concern, for people to realize that when there is homelessness and helplessness it breeds hopelessness and crime. We seem not to bat an eye about passing more and more legislation, spending legislation to double and triple the number of prison cells and the number of police officers on the street and so forth in the face of the fact that the more we spend on that, the less successful it seems to be. When Jessie Jackson was in town last year and speaking at the O'Connell Center, he and his inimitable, almost rap style kept reiterating to people how much more expensive it is to keep a kid a Raiford or Starke State Prison. [It is] about twice as expensive to keep them there as it is to send them to Harvard, Princeton or Yale. So, if we decided we wanted to spend our money differently because we had a different set of beliefs and priorities, I think we could reduce the tax burden and create for ourselves the type of society we want to live in. Right now we are bull-headedly convinced that we have to keep spending massive amounts of money on containing crime, as if nobody has any idea where crime comes from. We may not be able to wipe out all crime, but we know where a large amount of it comes from and we know what to do about it. We just are not committed to it.

- P: Let us move into some of the problems you are now facing in regard to helping the homeless here in Gainesville. I understand that there are some obstacles coming from the City of Gainesville and Alachua County and I want to ask you to elaborate on that.
- G: Throughout most of the 1980s, certainly the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, by my personal perception, one of the best friends to St. Francis House was the Gainesville City Commission. The commissioners were very helpful and very friendly. Jean Chalmers comes to mind as a very strong supporter. I would not say during that period that we had the same kind of support and help from the agencies of the city or the code offices and so forth, but when we had to come to the City Commission, we found ourselves heard well, and cared about at the commission level. In the last three years or so, I think that has changed and the commission is not as willing to own the problems as community problems. That really is, I think, one of the core difficulties that people, when they reflect on homelessness and hunger in the community, short circuit their thinking and say that is St. Francis House's problem or St. Francis House is creating the problem. Instead of saying we are a community in the latter part of the twentieth century, we have homeless, and we have hungry. People prefer to say, "No, we would not have those problems if tomorrow St. Francis House ceased to exist. If tomorrow the Salvation Army would burn to the ground." Somehow people think

that there would not be hungry and homeless, that they would go away because the institution that they identify them with, they have a tendency to blame for the problem. That, of course, has the same logical cogency as saying that if Shands Hospital was swallowed up by a sink hole, if Alachua General were burned down, if North Florida Regional were closed, and the VA Hospital disappeared, then, thank God, all sick people would disappear from our community. We would all be healthy because those hospitals are keeping us sick. Well, there may be some problems with the hospital systems in our country. There definitely are, but that is not the origin of illness in our community. Illness would not disappear, and in fact, our health would deteriorate significantly if we lost those four institutions.

Similarly, the hunger and the homelessness is not created by St. Francis House. While to the average thinking person it sounds stupid for me to even say that. Why should I have to say that? Who would think that St. Francis House creates it? The reality is because of poor thinking, fuzzy thinking and media spin put on issues at times. People do short circuit and say, "The hungry are here because St. Francis House is here. The homeless are here because St. Francis House." That is not at all the case.

We are faced in this community with a situation in which people who are very skilled with the typical expertise of lawyers, have found and been working at finding, code ways to try to cold shoulder St. Francis House out of the downtown.

P: How?

G: When we moved downtown after we had to vacate the building that Alachua General Hospital owned, we bought the old Violet House, it is called. We turned that into St. Francis House. From the beginning, we had hoped to be able to raise enough money to tear that old building down and to be able to build a more adequate facility that would handle more people and that would allow us, once again, to begin serving inside the meals. It has been a thorn in my side for these eleven years, that we still have not been able to serve people in a more dignified fashion. When it rains, hungry people get soaked trying to get a meal. When it is brutally hot and no one of Gainesville gentry would be caught outside less they get a tan on their delicate southern skin, they do not mind that homeless and hungry have to stand out in that brutal sun and try to eat. We would like to be able to serve people inside.

We have made plans and when we began making those plans public, the initial contacts with the code boards, the inner circle of the Gainesville business community, particularly the Magerns with their ear to the ground, find out immediately when someone says, "I would like to apply for a permit for this or what would the code requirements be to do that." They began the process of

trying to exclude St. Francis House from any kind of significant expansion. They stirred up complaints within the neighborhood. It was not too hard to find people saying, "Oh, I do not want any of those hungry people around, or I do not like to see them, they are dirty," whatever. They made an effort to turn publicity against us.

Fortunately, publicity seemed to go our way more frequently than against us. We indicated that we would be willing to have a St. Francis House in other sections of town or another site if there was an adequate facility. We found six different sites and found ourselves blocked at every turn when we tried to get the right rulings to go into there. One of the best sites we had on tenth avenue would have worked out very well for us. Cynthia Chestnut, one of the leaders, we understand, quietly behind the scenes said it was too close to her neighborhood. She would not have it come in. One after another people found reasons to do it.

In one of Rod Long's [a City Commissioner representing the east side of Gainesville and the black community at large] finest moments, maybe not wisely, but at least courageously, said that he would head up a committee to try to find a place for St. Francis House and managed to get all kinds of flack from some of his own constituents as well as others. After we tried five or six other sites, we said, "Well, if we can not be welcomed in any other place and expand, we will do it right where we are."

Then people panicked. Ken Magurn said he would sue us. He did not give very good grounds, but he said he would sue. We sat and talked with him. We worked out an arrangement. He said that he would not sue our efforts to expand if we made a serious effort to try to find an alternate site. Well, that was a direct insult to us. I took it as if the six other efforts had not been serious and had been a game. The other members of the board, against my advice, agreed to cooperate with Ken Magurn one more time. We went for the piece of property just south of where we are about three or four blocks.

We got a whole group of coalition stirred up around Louie's Luncheon downtown and they wanted to keep us out of the neighborhood. After we made a serious effort and delayed a year and a half over that, we went back to our plans to expand where we are. Ken once again began saying that he would sue. We reminded him of his promise that he would not and it was worth about as much as I said in the beginning it was going to be worth. He then indicated to someone who passed it on to me, I did not hear this from him, that if he did not sue, he would get someone else to do it for him.

We have been through all kinds of ups and downs like that, but we have continued forward. We still want to expand and we want to have a better facility

for the poor. It was interesting when there was great opposition to the site next to Louie's Luncheon that the people of the neighborhood said they did not want the poor in their area which is four blocks away and is already a poor area to begin with and some of the city leaders said they did not want that either. Then, all of a sudden, there looked like there might be a possibility of bringing the State HRS office for this region into the area and HRS wanted to build farther out to the outskirts of the city and the downtown redevelopment authority wanted to get the office building right in the downtown. With Gail Collins and others pushing for that, the city suddenly began to say that they would like to put this building in and they would have to acquire several blocks of property, including where we are at St. Francis House. As that seemed to be unfolding, we were asking them and others the question, "Who do you think comes to HRS offices? The poor. The people in need of assistance and so forth. Now you have just spent about four years telling us why you do not want the poor to be concentrated in this area coming in for food or shelter. Yet suddenly because you can see an expenditure of maybe twenty million dollars on an office building downtown, you have reversed yourselves and said, 'Oh, we would love to have the poor coming in large numbers to an HRS building downtown.' Do you note the contradiction? Do you have any feelings about why you are in favor of one and against the other?"

We have decided that we can expand right where we are and we are quite willing to do it. We have plans and we will go forward with it. Going back about four years ago, there was an effort made to interpret the codes in effect at that time explaining that we could not expand St. Francis House where it is because we would be within a thousand feet of another shelter and the city had come up with these codes to try to keep shelters spread around. On the one hand, the official position of the city is that, by its codes, shelters should be in multiple neighborhoods throughout the community and they should not bunch up. [However], the neighborhoods are allowed to sway enough weight, hence the city will not put the shelters in the other neighborhoods and the one neighborhood where they can by right go, the city then, with its thousand foot code, is trying to keep shelters out. There is again a contradiction.

We were told that we could not expand because we were too close to the Bridge House which was an alcoholic shelter. We were about 985 or 990 feet from the Bridge House. We challenged. We said, "How are you taking that measure?" The code does not say how.

[End side A1]

G: We were able to get the code office to settle on saying that the proper measure of a thousand feet would be front door to front door. By shifting the design of our building that we were proposing at that time, and moving the front door from the

west side over to the north side, we were able to come in within the thousand feet. We were playing the games that were being dictated. We always managed to win, but it would delay us sometimes three months, six months, add more expense to what we were trying to do.

In the meantime, we were getting more and more frustrated saying to the city, "You city fathers, you city mothers, you city leaders, are the ones ultimately responsible for taking care of your citizens." If there is a bubonic plague in the city, you need to find a way to deal with it and bring more doctors in. If there is a mosquito infestation, you have to do something about it. If there is falling stars, you are going to do something about that. Well, there is hunger and homelessness and you are responsible for doing something. You have bungled it. You have followed the Reagan theory which was that it is not the responsibility of the federal government, and because of subsidiarity it should be taken care of by the lower level. So when Washington said they could not do it, they said it was Tallahassee's responsibility. Tallahassee said we can not do it, it is the county's responsibility. The county said we can not and they left it to the city. The city said we can not, it is up to the churches. Well, the churches responded and are doing a good job and the city then starts trying to block the churches from doing it.

It is actually the responsibility of government and the whole theory of government sits on the principle, the foundation that we agree to put into the hands of our representatives certain powers for them to exert in the common good. If the common good is not being served, then the government loses its legitimacy. In terms of the homeless and the hungry who are citizens, I have to emphasize that they are citizens, the vast majority of them are members of this community, but at any rate, their common good is not being looked after.

The city was blocking us in many ways. Eventually, what the latest and most complicated of the maneuvers that was implemented was because the State of Florida was requiring all communities to come up with redesigns (I forget exactly what they called them, but it is redoing the whole codes) and the development planning for a community for the next fifteen or twenty years. Communities have to develop these guidelines and they have to be reviewed by the State and maybe adjusted if they do not fit the guidelines and eventually they are locked in as law. The leaders pushed in our community to get our code together and they slipped in some things that they hoped would not be caught which was law that made it very difficult for us to serve the poor. We challenged and we went back and forth on that.

P: What did they push in? You just alluded to it.

G: I am going to tell you what they are. In general, they were putting in a whole set

of codes that had to do with environmental protection, development, roads, sewage and so forth. What they put in, and hoped would not be noticed, was further restrictions about how close soup kitchens and shelters could be to one another and how many people they could serve at a given site. That was one of the key proposals. That no soup kitchen would be allowed to serve more than one hundred (there have been several different numbers thrown around). Now, I am forgetting at the moment what we finally wound up with, but it was a significantly reduced number. I believe the figure that went in finally was 75. The way they arrived at the 75 number was by questioning us at St. Francis House how many people do we serve daily on an average or how many meals. We said we served about 150. A few weeks or a month or so later, the figure that was used then was that you could only serve 75. The only reason that they settled on 75 was it was half of what we were doing already.

The effort was being lined up to try to cut us back in terms of effectiveness, but the response they would make in defense was, "No, no. We do not want to not serve the hungry, but we do not think that they should all be gathered together in the downtown. We think that they should be served throughout the community in different sites." We reminded them that we had tried to do that in different sites and we were blocked everywhere and the community attitude in many instances had not changed. I should probably add that the widespread support throughout our community for St. Francis House is significant. The vast majority of the people do support us and make great contributions. Churches all through the community believe we are doing great work. But there is enough political savvy in a few hands to try to block us from one place to another. So, every neighborhood has managed to organize enough to try to keep the St. Francis House out. Here the city is saying that the great new plan would mean scattering us throughout communities.

Then they said, "Churches can become service centers or food distribution centers for St. Francis House, but if they choose to do so, they can only serve twenty people and they can not be within a thousand feet or so (actually I believe it is something like 1,250 feet and there is an 1,800 foot thing). They have got all kinds of complicated things that they have invented out of thin air.

- P: Let me stop you there and ask you, have you ever gone and spoken with these city officials one on one? I mean just as we are speaking right now and looked them in the eye and asked them, "What is the deal here? Why are you trying to obstruct what we are doing?"
- G: Of course I have. I have spoken with almost all of them including my own parishioners, including the mayor of Gainesville, whom I have talked with and who I think at this stage has probably left our parish because of the confrontation. I have spoken with him on television. I have spoken with him in the city chambers. I have spoken to different groups. I am not the only one.

There are dozens of others, at least, who have done it. We have pointed all of these things out. It is not something unusual or novel. It is known. It is just a dirty situation.

P: Have you been able to bring any of you parishioners around or at least make them less hostile to what you are trying to do?

G: Probably ninety percent of our parish of five thousand people supports us very strongly. Among the provisions that were trying to be worked in to restrict soup kitchens, although the people, the restrictions that were being proposed were being proposed I think rather skillfully but also dirtily, in a dirty fashion. They were being proposed as ways to help St. Francis House accomplish its goals, but they were being proposed by many of the people who for ten years have done everything they can to block the existence and operation of soup kitchens. So, we did not make any mistake to misidentify them and call them our friends or our helpers. Anyway, what they proposed was that the soup kitchens be spread throughout the community, but to make sure that they could not actually be spread throughout the community they found all kinds of measures (1,000, 1,500, 1,800) to keep kitchens from opening. Then they said that if a church does try to open up as a soup kitchen, it can not serve more than twenty people or twenty meals actually which might be fewer than twenty people because we serve more than one meal often to the hungriest people. They may take two, sometimes even three meals. Added to that was the factor that they knew, of course, that the churches and such, if they were willing to serve on one day a week or two days a week, were unlikely to dedicate their facility to serving seven days a week, including Sunday, at the very time that they might be having church services. So, they were cynically aware that it might help lock things.

The most cynical of the moves, in my estimation, was the appeal, irrationally, to the murders of the students in Gainesville two and a half to three years ago and the claim that (not openly or publicly made, but quietly behind the scenes made) the soup kitchen and what it represents is why the students were murdered. In other words, they implied and actually expressed, but not publicly, logic was that the murderer (we do not really know who the murder is, we think we have the suspect) was drawn into the community by the soup and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches of St. Francis House and as a result, while he was here, murdered five of our students. That is a very cynical and, of course, very wrong conclusion, but it is an emotionally gripping one for some people.

The appeal was made and from information that I have from people behind the scenes, and in fact even speaking with the President of the University of Florida, President Lombardi, it was said that the University wanted to keep soup kitchens away from the campus. Soup kitchens were a great danger to the health of the students. Now, I asked President Lombardi if that was his wish and he told me

that it was not. He said that he tried numerous times to stay out of the issue. He did not want to take a position and did not want the University of Florida on record, but that city interests which was supposedly largely Tom McKnew, the mayor at that time and probably for him, Nathan Collier, was being pushed to take a position. He said given the two positions of being for the soup kitchen or being against the soup kitchen, he came out against the soup kitchen being near the campus, but that he tried his best not to be on record about this. The person that was being used to pressure the President was John Battenfield who is the Vice President for Public Relations. As far and I have been able to piece together from people behind the scenes it was Nathan Collier and John Battenfield setting the whole scene. Nathan Collier being the son of Courtland Collier, a lawyer in town and a large property owner in the ghetto neighborhood. Nathan's interest was to make sure that St. Augustine Student Center not reopen a soup kitchen anywhere near any of his properties. I think he was the one who suggested the panic reaction saying that students would be endangered by having a soup kitchen near them.

The original proposal was to have a thousand foot buffer all the way around the University of Florida campus. After that was well on its way to being proposed, suddenly someone realized that the west and south side of campus are not within the jurisdiction of the City of Gainesville for the most part. They are the county. They had to alter their plan and make the plan say that on the east and the north side of the campus there would be a thousand foot buffer in which no soup kitchen could operate. The idea was that was dangerous for the students and the appeal was to the murdered students. We pointed out to them immediately that if their true concern was the murdered students, they should establish some connection between the soup kitchen and the murders. Secondly, the murders occurred on the south and on the west side of campus, the very two sides which they wound up excluding from the buffer zone and the murders did not occur on the east and the north side.

P: When was this being done?

G: Last year starting in April of 1992. The code as it now stands basically says that the north and the east side of campus within a thousand feet are to be soup kitchen free, which of course, sounds a little bit like being nuclear waste free.

P: Or drug free.

G: Or something along that line as if the soup kitchen could be an analog to nuclear waste. The irony that we have pointed out to the President of the University and to others is that for almost twenty years now, the largest operating soup kitchen in the community has been the Hare Krishna's food distribution at noon in the Plaza of the Americas on the campus at the University of North Florida. Of course, the University is embarrassed over that, in part because the soup kitchen

operates there and secondly, because they have tried through legal means to get them thrown off campus and can not, obviously because the Constitution exists and allows freedom of expression and allows the gathering of the Hare Krishnas, part of whose gathering includes providing the food. Because they can not control soup kitchens on the campus itself, the University allowed itself, I think, to be hoodwinked into joining with benighted interests in the city to try to block what was happening off their own property.

To the shame of the University, the original founding motive for the soup kitchen was hungry students enrolled at the University, but literally starving in their dorm rooms. The continued service of the soup kitchen includes hungry students and students coming to volunteer their time to feed the hungry as well. The University has let itself get into the posture of being anti-soup kitchen when, in fact, the appeal to them was for the safety of the students on campus.

P: When the soup kitchen was first created, or rather when St. Francis first went into giving food to hungry students, did the University express any displeasure at that time?

G: To the best of my knowledge, they were not even aware of it and did not notice the difference. They certainly said nothing at that time to Father Baker, nor did they in later years to me. The University's interest is limited or minimal, but as they are drawn into it by some of the local business people and property owners, that is how they have got brought [into it]. To President Lombardi's credit, he was honest enough to say in this particular meeting that I had with him with several other ministers from the area that he tried his best to stay out of it and was not allowed to stay out of it. In other words, they pressured, pressured and pressured the University to go on record. Finally, they went on record and said, "Yes, keep the soup kitchen away from us." Their reasoning is very flawed and they should be highly embarrassed. I hope that they feel embarrassed and like they have egg on their face.

P: Are you ever in touch with Father Baker?

G: Oh, yes, regularly. He is a good friend of mine.

P: Is he aware of what is happening?

G: He is aware of what is happening. He has established another St. Francis House Overnight Shelter and Soup Kitchen in St. Augustine. Having notified Father Baker of the situation, Father Baker is prepared as I am myself, as I think is the Bishop of our \_\_\_\_\_, John Schneider, is prepared, if the time comes and we need to, to serve meals here at the Student Center as we once did in fulfillment of Christ's own admonition that we feed the hungry and shelter the homeless,

clothe the naked and so forth. We are prepared to do it in defiance of the city code and prepared to risk being arrested if they wish to and have the ordinance visited and the issue revisited in court.

P: I do not think they would want to do that.

G: I do not think they would and we are quite certain that we will win. We know for legal reasons and we have lined up our legal reasons. We have them all ready to be brought in. I do not happen to think that it is a good way to move things within a community to go one way or another by doing it through the courts. I think there is far too much appeal to courts and I think that we should find ways to compromise and work together. That is the spirit that we have served the community for the nearly fifteen years of St. Francis' House existence and I do not relish the idea of going to court. I have not anxiety about doing it nor about the outcome. We continue to serve meals here on Thanksgiving and Christmas. We serve two, three, maybe four hundred people in our church. Technically we will be in defiance of the city codes. It does not bother us very much and if they wish to make a point of it, we are again prepared to defend ourselves.

P: What are your short term goals and your long term goals?

G: The short term goals for St. Francis House are to open up a kitchen on site where the food can be prepared instead of being prepared here at St. Augustine and having to be trekked down in a van every day and most of all to have a place where people can sit down and with dignity enjoy a meal and can be treated like human beings and we can interact with them and find out if there are further things we can do to help them. Secondly, we want to expand the shelter size, probably double the number of beds that we can handle and make it a more adequate facility.

Long range, we hope to continue the services that we have. We have expanded into other things, helping get jobs and so forth, but we try not to take over that other agencies are already doing. We want to make sure that the operation of the shelter will continue to be very smooth. That the volunteers from around the community will have satisfactory experiences when they come in so that they will feel good about what they have been able to do, and that we can keep the facility itself in a wonderful, clean, bright, well landscaped condition. To say, in the name of our community of Gainesville, of whom most people are very supportive, that we recognize your human dignity and though you may be hungry and you may be homeless, you are our brother and you are our sister.

P: Any final comment? Are there any questions I did not ask you that you wish I had asked you?

G: No.

P: A final question. Have a lot of other denominations and the Salvation Army cooperated with you in trying to change the way the city is?

G: Absolutely. We all see ourselves as involved in a common project. We have different approaches to it but we see commonality and we are supportive of the Salvation Army. They are generally supportive of us. Bread for the Mighty, Community Clothes Closet, Community Food Closet, Gainesville Community Ministries, Catholic Charities, the synagogues in town, the other churches in town, there is a great coalition at work in doing this which is why we do not feel really frightened, only frustrated by some token opposition from the city or other individuals. I reiterate that throughout most of the 1980s, the City Commission of Gainesville was one of our best friends.

P: I want to thank you very much for your time.

G: You're welcome.