

11-4-2009

Interview with Seth Pollack

Seth Pollack

California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ohcma_chinatown

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History and Community Memory Archive at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chinatown Renewal Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

CSUMB Oral History & Community Memory Archive
Chinatown Renewal Project
Interviewee: Seth Pollack
Interviewer: Elizabeth Warner
Date of Interview: November 4, 2009
Duration of Interview: 01:02:39

Elizabeth Warner 00:00

Okay, well, my name is Elizabeth Warner, and today is November 4, 2009. And with me, I have Dr. Seth Pollack. And we are here at CSUMB in his office. So, thank you for the interview today.

Seth Pollack 00:23

My pleasure, Elizabeth. Nice to have met you.

Elizabeth Warner 00:26

Yes, and I understand that you recently returned from a year abroad in Cape Town, South Africa, and you were awarded the Fulbright scholarship. Can you tell me a little bit about that experience?

Seth Pollack 00:39

Oh, it was a great year. I got to go back to Africa for the first time in 20 plus years, and this time with my family, my wife and two teenage girls. And to live and work in South Africa, a place I didn't know at all—I knew, I had been in, lived in West Africa, but South Africa was new to me, but a place that I've been so interested in, especially because my field is higher education and social transformation. So, I was just so curious to see what's going on in higher education, and in a country that's going through so much social transformation, as is South Africa, so that was just—it was just a great year.

Elizabeth Warner 01:29

Oh, I bet. That's really, really interesting. And how was the university different from CSUMB?

Seth Pollack 01:39

Well, you know, I worked at two universities. It's interesting, because in the—the Fulbright Scholarship Program gives you a little bit of guidance as to what kind of proposals they're wanting to support. And in South Africa, they said, they want to support work that's in traditionally not underserved universities, and the university that had the most connections with is the University of Cape Town. And the University of Cape Town is the number one research university in all of South Africa and all of Africa. And it's kind of modeled—it sees itself as the Harvard or the Oxford of Africa. And it wasn't the underserved research, you know, university that Fulbright was looking to, but it was where I had a lot of connections and work possibilities. So, in my proposal, I said, Okay, I'm going to work at the University of Cape Town. And in addition, I'm going to work at another university, which was the University of the Western Cape. Now that was a—historically, it was a colored university. In other words, it was the only university that colored people who—in South Africa colored indicates a real cultural distinction of a group of people who were the—came from the Dutch intermarrying with the local Bushman population, and again, intermarrying with the slave, the Malaysian slave population that was brought in. So, you have this, kind of a group, a cultural group called the colored in South Africa. And this was the one place that coloreds could go for higher education. Now, after apartheid ended in '94, the University of

the Western Cape was no longer designated a colored university, but it has that tradition. And as a result, it has much more of a connected, kind of grassroots tradition in it. It was very, very active in the anti-apartheid struggle. So, I worked at that university, doing service learning, curriculum work with mostly the department, the School of Pharmacy, which was fascinating to get really close to issues of primary health care, and issues of AIDS, and HIV in a place where—South Africa has the highest AIDS rate in the world. So, it was very interesting and moving and powerful to be involved with the School of Pharmacy, who was working with AIDS a lot in the context of service learning. And then at the University of Cape Town, I worked with a number of different departments. I worked with health sciences. I worked with engineering. I worked with the School of Law, and I worked with the business school, all in trying to help them develop and improve their service learning programs. In South Africa, they've seen that the university has a responsibility to really be engaged in the transformation of the country in the building of this new society. And so service learning makes just beautiful sense there. And it's supported at the—as a federal initiative at the level of the national government, so it was nice to then see it be in a place that has seen the importance of it, and to bring our expertise and our experience as a university, who's been doing this now for almost 15 years, and to help guide them and provide some insights.

Elizabeth Warner 05:23

That's a wonderful opportunity.

Seth Pollack 05:25

Yeah, it was great.

Elizabeth Warner 05:27

Okay, so if we can move on, I thought I would ask you a little bit, what it's like to be the Director of Service Learning here at CSUMB.

Seth Pollack 05:38

Oh, gosh, it's, you know, I have—I couldn't think of another job in higher education that I'd want to be in or want—it's just, it's my dream job in higher education. You know, when I went to graduate school to become a professor, I never saw myself working in higher education. My background is in community development and grassroots social change work. And I always saw myself as doing that work and never wanted to profess anything. Part of, you know, my deep conviction is that there's knowledge in community, and who are we, in our little ivory tower context to think that we know better. So, I've never seen myself as a—see myself as professor in that regard. But here, I get to be director of the piece of this university that is trying to help create connections, and create pathways of exchange between our university and our surrounding community. So, that's the ideal job for me—a chance to really help the university leave its ivory tower, and make meaningful connections with people in the community who could really benefit from the things that we as a university, I think can offer, which is, you know, the insights that we can bring and the ability to be responsive, and to listen, and to help begin to address some of the social problems that are part of our world.

Elizabeth Warner 07:25

How would you say since the beginning, when we started, you said almost 15 years ago, and now that we're fift—or now that we're so much further, how have you seen the students' attitude change?

Seth Pollack 07:40

Well, you know, it's interesting, we've all commented, those of us teaching service learning this year, have commented that there's been an incredible receptivity of students to the service learning courses. I don't know whether that's an Obama effect, or whether that's an effect of the fact that many high schools now require community service, so students have more of a connection to this kind of work. But there seems to be now a real interest and receptivity to this kind of—the courses, and to be able to really connect with the community. So that's been, that's been nice. Now, what was it like 15 years ago? I think it was newer to everybody. Yeah, I think it was newer. I think people didn't know what service learning was. I think there was a sense that this was this forced volunteerism, you know, and so we had to tell students that this isn't required volunteerism, which is an oxymoron, but this is service learning. And that's different. Now, that's just not a semantical difference. I think the real—we really try to emphasize that what service learning is about is the learning that's happening as a result of your participation in a community-based experience. Right?

Elizabeth Warner 09:11

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 09:12

So, we're not sending you out there to do a bunch of hours and checking off, you know, your hours and then passing you in the class. It's really about, what are you learning about your role in making this community and this neighborhood and this society a better place? Right? What are you understanding about your role, your sense of social responsibility, your ability to work in cross cultural, whether it's race, ethnicity, social class, gender, you know, what are you learning about your ability to really become what we like to call a multicultural community builder, someone really who has the skills and the knowledge and the desire to build more just and equitable communities. So, that's really, again, not just a semantical difference. We really want to help students grow as members of the community. And I think that's something that the greater society appreciates more and more these days, as we recognize that we need compassionate, concerned, committed people. We also need people who have skills in—as businessmen, and as teachers, and as journalists, right? And as scientists, but what we like to think of at CSUMB, is that we're helping to graduate not just technically skillful scientists and teachers, but also socially responsible scientists and journalists and teachers and writers. So, you know, that's something I think that's unique here is that we've been able to focus on that as a dimension of the curriculum, as opposed to just sending students out into the community and say, you know, go park cars at Pebble Beach for the, you know, the golf tournament. And when you do that for 30 hours—

Elizabeth Warner 09:56

Here's your grade.

Seth Pollack 10:13

Here's your form and that's it. You know, what am I learning by doing that? Right? Come on, closer, closer, closer, okay stop, you know, how's that helping anything? So, we really tried to, you know, take the emphasis off the required volunteerism, approach this work and say, this is really about you developing the knowledge, the skill. We try to, you know, take the emphasis off the required volunteerism, approach this work and say, this is really about you developing the knowledge, the skills, and attitudes to be a community member, and not just an individual in the society.

Elizabeth Warner 12:03

I think that's wonderful. I think that's great. Okay. Can you tell me how you got involved with the Chinatown Renewal Project?

Seth Pollack 12:15

Yeah, you know, well, Chinatown was one of the first places I visited when I first came here. And I was brought there by the founding director of the Service Learning Institute, Marian Penn, to introduce me to Robert Smith, who was the executive director of Dorothy's Place, which is a soup kitchen. And that's on Soledad Street. And I remember going there the first time and feeling really out of place, not really understanding the neighborhood at all. But I was brought down there to meet Robert because that was one of our initial community partners when the university started in 1995, with 600 students. We had done the background work to identify some service sites in the community where students could go and do their service as part of their core course. And Dorothy's Place was one of those. And so since '95, you know, 10, 15, 20 students a semester have been a part of that experience on Soledad Street. The second time I went down there was—I was teaching a course with Sandy Lydon. Sandy is a historian and has written a book on, a couple of books on immigration in the local Monterey Bay area, and the role of the Chinese in the Monterey Bay Area, and the role of the Japanese. And we were co-teaching a class on—I think it was called Multicultural Communities of the Monterey Bay Region. And we did a field trip down to Chinatown. And that was then going there with different eyes, because the first time I went down there as a service provider to see the place, the soup kitchen, the homeless soup kitchen, that our students work with. Now I went down there in a big old bus with Sandy, who's a historian and under—and knows everything about the experience of the Chinese and the Japanese here in Monterey and in Salinas. And I was seeing the community now through a historian's eyes, and seeing the Buddhist temple and the big gong that's there, and the Confucius Church, which used to be the school, and I had no idea that that was a part of this place that I had seen earlier, which was called Chinatown. You know, it's like, oh, they just called it Chinatown. You know, I didn't know that it had any significance there, besides you could see some little—I guess I just was being naive, you know. So, that was the beginning of my exposure there. It then—I became—I kept going down with my students, we got more and more involved with Dorothy's Place. We get very little connections with the Buddhist temple or the Confucius Church. Our real connection there were with two organizations—with Dorothy's place, run by the Franciscan workers, and with John the XXIII, which does needle exchange and work with addicts in the area. So, those were two organizations who were our community partners and where we had a significant number of students working in the Chinatown area. So, that was my initial connection. Now, it got a little bit more involved around 2005. And what had happened was that the building that Dorothy's is in, which is called the Green Gold Inn.

Elizabeth Warner 16:04

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 16:05

And I didn't—at first, I didn't even understand why they call it the Green Gold Inn. I didn't realize that green gold was lettuce. Duh, right? And that, you know, this was, you know, the green gold of Salinas Valley is right there. So, and that Chinatown maybe had a role in that, which I came to understand was pretty significant in that it was the Chinese, the laborers, who were here in the 1860s, who drained the swamps, and made it possible for Salinas to become an agricultural valley. Salinas was swampy, was all covered with, you know, with series of lakes and reeds, and it wasn't a place where you could really traverse in the rainy season, let alone grow anything. People were growing wheat along the hills, but nothing in the valley. And until the Chinese were brought in, who knew how to drain the swamp like that, and turn it into fertile land, right? So, you know, in around 2005, Robert Smith came to us, the director of Dorothy's, and said, we need your help. And it turns out that the building that they're in—the Green Gold Inn—the lease was about to expire, that the city actually had bought that building and given it to a nonprofit, which was jointly held by the Buddhist temple and the Franciscan workers who ran Dorothy's with a sunset date, that after a certain period of time, after 10 years—I think it was 10 years—I think this started in '95. After 10 years, the use permit would expire, and Dorothy's and the homeless shelter would no longer be able to function there. The idea being that the city wanted to help address the needs of the homeless, but only on a temporary basis, because the ultimate idea was that this neighborhood was going to be revitalized. Well, the city actually, and this is an interesting part of the history of the city, why did they move homeless services to Chinatown? Because before there was the swinging door, which was on Main Street, across the tracks, but as they were revitalizing Main Street and creating the environment for the Steinbeck Center to become the focal point for the development of downtown Salinas. Homeless Services weren't really a part of the picture on Main Street. So, they got moved where? To Chinatown, across the tracks. Well, how would you feel if you were, you know, if that was your community, and you had your cultural center there and your temple there, as the Japanese American community does, or as the Confucius, the Chinese American community does. They weren't too happy with that.

Elizabeth Warner 19:03

I can imagine.

Seth Pollack 19:04

So, they kind of struck a deal with the city and said, okay, we'll do this in the short term, and we'll allow this thing to be here. We'll help—we'll even help kind of be a part of the structure that's going to manage it. But in 10 years, that will sunset, that will expire. And we'll, by that time, we'll have really seen the beginning of a new Chinatown and redevelopment, and we won't need to have this here anymore. Well, those 10 years past, nothing really had changed. And yet this lease was still about to expire. So, it was in that context that Robert Smith came to us and said, the university needs to help us, because we need to come up with a strategy, or a way, or a process or something to help this community really struggle with and tackle these pretty hard issues, which is, how do we take care of the people who've fallen through the cracks? And where do we do that in society? And how do we do that in a humane, respectful way? And how do we also have a thriving community here, community where

people want to be, where people want to come for lunch, where people want to walk the streets, and not just a place where the destitute come to hide, or the folks who are looking for illegal activities, drugs and prostitution, come to hide, right? So, it was an interesting question. We said, maybe we can help. Right. And that was really the beginning of our involvement in the Chinatown Renewal Project. And it was really in response to this question of, we have a tough situation, that us as a community, not just the Franciscan workers who were running Dorothy's, but that whole community, and the whole city of Salinas, really, and in fact, Monterey County, because Salinas is home to the lion's share of the homeless population in Monterey. About 3,500 people are homeless in Monterey, and a good number of those come through the Chinatown area, right? So, this was really in everybody's interest to try to figure out, what are we going to do with Chinatown? What are we going to do with homelessness, with our response to homelessness? And how do we help create a thriving community?

Elizabeth Warner 21:39

Yeah. Wow.

Seth Pollack 21:42

That was the beginning. Should I keep going?

Elizabeth Warner 21:44

Yeah, I mean, that's great. I mean, obviously, I mean, so CSUMB, we decide that we're going to help.

Seth Pollack 21:52

Right.

Elizabeth Warner 21:53

What did the city of Salinas say?

Seth Pollack 21:54

Right. So, the city of Salinas said—and that was in March—they said, we're going to create an event, which was going to be called, something like, Chinatown, a Future—the Future of Chinatown. So, they create a—on, it was March 4, 2005. The mayor was there—at the time it was Anna Caballero—city council members, members of the Buddhist community, members of the Chinese community, social service workers from Dorothy's, from the Victory Mission, which is across the street, which is a men's shelter, from Shelter Outreach Plus, which runs a men's shelter above Dorothy's, residents who are property owners from the area, businessmen, people from downtown Salinas from the other side of the tracks, the Steinbeck center, Main Street, you know, the Oldtown Association. We had a few hundred people there. And we spent the day thinking and talking in work groups, trying to envision what could be different. And from that day was created an organization called the Salinas Downtown Community Board. And their mission was to help facilitate a community conversation to revitalize Chinatown. Now, what was interesting, they created the structure. And there was a lot of energy to really make that happen. But there's really no capacity to really create a functioning organization. So luckily, at this same time, we applied for a grant from HUD, the Federal Housing and Urban Development Office, and they have a project that is especially designed for Hispanic serving institutions, universities that are Hispanic serving, which CSUMB is. They have a special project set of funds that are available to help

universities connect to and be involved with community revitalization projects. So, we said, ah-hah, here's a process. Here's a source of funds. Let's see if we can't get some funds from HUD to help reinforce this community revitalization process. So, we applied and we got the first grant, which was \$600,000. And with that, we opened an office, the Soledad Street Community Learning Center, right on Soledad Street. And the city gave us about half an acre of land to start a community garden. Right. So, the role of the university then became pretty key in that we were actually there on the block. So, now we were in—a vested neighbor. But more importantly, we had the time, the capacity to really help this fledgling group get off the ground. So, we did kind of mundane things. The first stuff we did was pretty mundane, like, we sent letters about meetings, right. So, we organized a roster, and we sent letters and organized the first meeting, because even though this group was created, it wasn't ever formally—it never met. Because there was really no one to just help move this process along. So, we did pretty mundane stuff at the beginning, which was facilitate these community meetings, which started once a month. They started—the first one was in the Buddhist temple, hosted by the Japanese, then there was one at the Chinese Confucius Center, then there was a third one that was in a church, which used to be a Filipino church. And then finally, we had our building up and running. And since then all those meetings have taken place in our community learning center. And to this day, from I think it was January 2006 until today, we've been hosting that monthly meeting of the Salinas Downtown Community Board, which, you know, between then and now, has just accomplished amazing things. So, we looking, we're looking now at a little over three years, almost four years from this beginning, March 2005. Where are we now, we're now in 2009. So, a little over four years. And it's amazing what's happened in terms of a vision, and really beginning the step by step transformation of the neighborhood in a way that's consistent, and that responds to the needs and the desires of the community—

Elizabeth Warner 26:40

And that will last over time.

Seth Pollack 26:42

And that will hopefully last over time, right.

Elizabeth Warner 26:45

That's wonderful. So, you mentioned that we were part of the community garden, and helping get that going. And now we know that it's that active area of the community. I noticed that they still need volunteers. Can you tell me a little bit about that? How can just anyone get involved? Is there a way to just call and—

Seth Pollack 27:10

Yeah, well, you know, that garden is really a great story, because that was a dump. People drove up Soledad Street, took a right on Lake Street, and just unloaded their old couches and frigerators, and whatever they wanted to just throw away was there. It was just this overgrown mess. Plus, it was a place where people hid and did drugs and, you know, there's just a lot of not good stuff there. And that's kind of what people thought of the neighborhood. So, in a way, this plot of land was sort of the image of the neighborhood to the outside community. So, what's happened though, is that over the last couple of years, this dump is now this beautiful garden, and everything in that garden has been created by members of the community. Either we had, for two years, we had funds to be able to employ a crew

of homeless folks. So, we had, you know, a crew of people from Dorothy's in the neighborhood who were really struggling, many of whom were homeless, many of whom were kind of marginally housed. And they built every bed and planted every seed and built the nursery in that garden. We had community volunteers come and put up the fencing and build—we had, we have a straw bale toolshed, which was built by community volunteers. Everything in that garden was built by either homeless folks or community volunteers. We had the Buddhist temple put up a beautiful little meditation garden, with a beautiful bonsai tree and an image of a pagoda. And then we had the Chinese community put up their Chinese pagoda. So, we had a little battle of pagodas. And those were both installed and designed by the communities themselves. So, it's, you know, more than anything, it's a metaphor for growing community. And that garden was the first positive thing in the neighborhood in decades. Right behind the garden is a business called window—Windows and Doors. They manufacture it, and they're pretty high-end stuff. And just a couple of weeks ago, we were there for the lighting of the chop suey sign, which was a big event. You know, that sign which had been, you know, out for, gosh, 30 years was cleaned up and relit on the Republic Cafe. So, we were there for that event. As we were walking over there, the owner of that business came up to me and said, "Seth, I just want to thank you. And not just you, but the university because the single most important thing that has happened in this community in decades was that garden." And that was pretty cool to hear that from someone who's—I mean, her livelihood's there, right? This is her business. It's right there on the backside of this—what was an empty, ugly lot. And now, it's a garden where people walk through. And the cool thing is that, in the years that it's been going, we've had no vandalism in a neighborhood which is full of crime—that, knock on wood. But I think, you know, I don't think you need to knock on wood, because what that is an indication of is not just luck, but the fact that the people in the community appreciate it, are invested in it, and see it as something that's valuable to them. So that's been really nice. Every other Sunday, we have community volunteer days. So, students and community members come down and work in the garden. We do workshops around alternative construction, sustainable construction methods, using mud and straw bale. We do workshops on composting and gardening techniques. So, excuse me. So, it's a really vital place for the neighborhood and more and more it's become—

Elizabeth Warner 27:19

And a safe place, it seems like.

Seth Pollack 31:23

Totally safe place.

Elizabeth Warner 31:24

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 31:25

You know, one of the—I was down there about a month ago, on a Sunday for a community work day. And one of the people in the community, who I've known for a few years, who's been homeless and has had a tough life. He came up to me and just greeted me in the nicest way. He said, "How's it going?" I said, "Good, how you doing?" And then he spent the next hour in the garden with his clippers, cutting flowers. And he made this gorgeous bouquet that he took with him to church. So, I said to Iris, who's our garden coordinator, and I said, "Did you see what was going on?" He says, "Yeah, he does that all

the time." And that's kind of his little calling card. So, I was thinking, wow, here's somebody who didn't have much connection to much in the world, whose life was kind of defined as this outcast, good for nothing, invisible person who, you know, struggled to communicate and in a context of respect, and who wasn't feeling very respected, who now is making beautiful bouquets of flowers and taking them with him wherever he goes. I said, if that's everything we've done, it's worth it. If it just for that, you know, our work is successful. I know, it's not just that, but that's sort of, like, a little—

Elizabeth Warner 33:15

But that's kind of the connection, where you can see—

Seth Pollack 33:20

It's a safe place—

Elizabeth Warner 33:21

It's a safe place.

Seth Pollack 33:21

People want to be there. People feel connected. There's beauty there. I mean, there's beauty in a place, that there's not a lot of beauty for people who are on the streets. And there's beauty there now. And there's health there. There's, you know, we were there the [laughing] other day, too, someone comes in, says Iris, "Where are those chilies?" I hear you have these chili peppers. I need some for my sauce. Iris says, "Well, in that bed over there." And of course, the woman didn't know what chili plants look like. Right?

Elizabeth Warner 33:53

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 33:53

So, she says, "Oh, no, not that one over there." And she takes her over and she starts explaining to her about the chilies and what—how they're growing. And here's someone who, you know, got free access to delicious, fresh chilies for her sauce, and who's beginning to get a connection to what food is like. So, I think there's a huge—what growing food is like.

Elizabeth Warner 34:16

And it's a curiosity to learn—

Seth Pollack 34:19

Right.

Elizabeth Warner 34:19

—about things that—

Seth Pollack 34:19

Right.

Elizabeth Warner 34:20

—you know. It's really neat. Let's see here. I wanted to ask you, what is the Microenterprise Program?

Seth Pollack 34:36

Well, you know, when you talk to folks on the street and in the world and in the homeless services area—you know, the word homeless is really misleading, because that's sort of the, well, it's a reality for many of the people, but they're not suffering only from homelessness. Their—homelessness is where they've ended up—

Elizabeth Warner 35:01

After a series—

Seth Pollack 35:02

—for a series of—for a variety of reasons, coming from a variety of places. But there's two things that are really—everyone recognizes as really key to addressing homelessness. One is housing. Pretty obvious. And the second is employment. So, while, you know, while the community process of re-envisioning the future for the neighborhood and, you know, redeveloping a thriving Chinatown is going on, we said, boy, we have to do something around the employment idea. How do we help people begin to, you know, get back on their feet? So, the microenterprise idea, which is, you know, helping to start small businesses or helping to grow the capacity of people to be employed, and to go into business, grew from that. And it really started with folks who are working in our garden program. So, we did a lot of work in helping teach them about gardening and growing food, but also employment, employability skills, job interviews, reliability, group work. You know, all the things that when you've been isolated and alone and invisible for years, those are skills that fade away pretty quickly. So, how do you be part of a work environment? And how do you be respectful? And how do you, you know, how do you solve conflict, you know, in nonbelligerent ways and productive ways? So, that became a part of the, our curriculum, for the workers at the garden. From that has grown a, what we call the green core, which is now we have a group of individuals who, again, are formerly homeless, or kind of marginally housed, who were working explicitly with around employability and getting them connected to jobs. And also, we've helped support what the Franciscan workers had started, which was the Peter Moore and Work Co-op. And they've started a T-shirt silk screening cooperative. And that's been our main way that we've helped grow the microenterprise effort. So, they're located in our community learning center. They meet every Saturday to actually do the production of the shirts. We've worked with our—our business school has provided some really good training with them around budgeting and kind of planning and marketing, helping them improve their designs and their marketing. They've done—we've also helped them access clientele. Like here at the university, they've produced T-shirts for various conferences and student groups. We had a—we hosted a national conference here on service learning, and they produced the conference tote bag, you know, which was very cool. We're helping them develop a website and develop their web marketing. So, you know, that's one way in which we're trying to again bring support for addressing the real core needs of the people in the neighborhood, which is housing and employment. So, microenterprise fits—and we're trying to work—the second microenterprise project that we're working on now is a vermiculture project, which is linked to the garden. Vermiculture is worm compost. So, we're going to—we're developing a and ultimately will be marketing a worm compost that we'll be producing in the garden in Chinatown. So, hopefully we'll get a

cool name for that and a cool marketing strategy, and again, our business school will be helping in that. And with those funds, we'll be able to really sustain the community garden and be able to hire garden stewards, who will be there to help the community when they come do their gardening.

Elizabeth Warner 39:19

That's great. It's really neat. Is there anything that you can say now that—well, you mentioned the guy that was picking the flowers—but in what other ways has the community impacted you personally? Or what's the—besides maybe the garden, is there another area where—

Seth Pollack 39:47

Well, you know I teach—the course I teach is called Hunger and Homelessness. So, a lot of my students are involved with the Chinatown Renewal Project, either working in the garden or working at Dorothy's or working at the Victory Mission. So, I've gotten to see it again through their eyes, and watch as they learn from people who they never thought they'd have anything to learn from, you know, as they work alongside of homeless people and folks who were in Vietnam, who really are still struggling with drug and alcohol abuse and learning from them, and connecting to their wisdom and their poetry and their stories and their dignity and their humanity. So, if there's anything that this experience has had for me, it's been a real reminder that it's just too easy for us to—it's just too easy for us to look beyond the humanity in people. And having had the chance to really develop friendships and relationships with people in Chinatown has been really humbling for me, helping me appreciate the opportunities I've had in my life and commit myself to helping others get these opportunities, you know. That's been really wonderful to see, to have that in my life, and then to be able to help students to get close to that. And I have 30 students this semester who get to get close to that. And hopefully, I'm helping them because they're not coming in as strangers, they're coming in as students. And then, of course, they become their own people, right? But, you know, I feel like I've developed a real relationship there, and then the students kind of come in on that kind of—

Elizabeth Warner 40:09

Nice kind of a trust level [unclear].

Seth Pollack 41:37

There's a real trust level that's been developed, you know. Yeah, it's been really powerful. We've had folks from—who live on the streets come to campus and, you know, be campus employees, because we've been, they've been part of our organization. And, you know, again, for someone who's been disconnected and alone and invisible—I keep saying invisible, because that's really the thing you hear the most, even to themselves. Folks we've worked with on the street have said, you know, you stop caring about yourself.

Elizabeth Warner 42:33

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 42:34

You stop caring about whether you smell as—you don't take a bath. You don't change your clothes. You stop caring. You lose complete touch with your own humanity, and you have no self-respect. And

it's amazing how little by little, treating people with respect, with dignity, recognizing their dignity, giving them opportunity to be in community, how it's like, you know, people start to come back to life again. It's kind of—the garden is just the best metaphor, right? Because little sprouts start to sprout and come alive. So, that's been incredible. In a bigger sense, what's been really nice is that—or not just nice, but powerful—is Chinatown is an incredibly great example of the impact of marginalization in our society. You know, the folks who historically lived in Chinatown were put there for a reason, because no one wanted them on the good side of the tracks, right? And we did that for 140 years. And do we want to keep doing that? Or are we going to keep doing that in different ways? Or can we be in community in a different way? So, what I've really appreciated about the process in Chinatown is helping be a part of and bring together a process where, you know, the Chinese community, the Japanese community, the Filipino community, the Latino community who was connected there, the homeless services community, excuse me, the homeless folks themselves, you know, are able to come together in dialogue and listen to each other, and start to really see that, you know what, it's not about finger pointing and blame, right? It's about trying to hear each other understand the situations and the realities and come up with solutions, right, that address the real needs. And the real needs are pretty similar, right? The people at the Buddhist temple, they want to come to their community and walk in the streets and feel comfortable.

Elizabeth Warner 44:59

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 45:00

And the homeless, the folks who are there, they want to be able to walk in the streets and feel comfortable, right? They don't want to be harassed and molested and frightened about what's going on with the drug dealing in the neighborhood. So, you know, there's some more, there's more common concerns than first people thought. And it's been really inspiring to sort of watch this happen and watch people begin to—we're not done yet, there's still a lot of difference, you know, we'll never be done. But we have a process and we have a community that's emerging, that's recognizing that, you know what, we're in this together. And that we've got to—we're not going to end homelessness, but we've got to address the needs of those people who are homeless. What do we do, as Robert says, I just love this. What do we do with people who break? Do we just throw them away? Is that what we do as a society? What do we do with people who do all the agricultural work in our community? Do we just put them over there and hope that they—we don't have to look at them. And yet, the food comes beautifully to our table magically. And I think this whole process gives us a chance to kind of look at that reality in the face and make some different kind of decisions about how we want to be in the world. So, I'm thrilled, you know, and I think that this—since the first grant, which was for \$600,000, we've gotten two additional grants. And with the third grant, which we just got—a third grant for \$600,000—we're going to be able to begin the creation of the Asian—the Chinatown Asian Cultural Center, as an Asian—excuse me, the Asian Cultural Center and Museum, I think is what we're calling it. So, that's incredible.

Elizabeth Warner 46:59

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 46:59

You know, to really start the building of an institution that's going to help bring to life the history of this community, and help begin to create a future for the neighborhood, which is going to be able to really capture the cultural history of the past and be more of a welcoming, inclusive kind of community. And as the mayor of Salinas loves to say, and we totally support him, it's really to really honor the cultural diversity of Salinas. And there's no other place than to do that than Chinatown. So, what a great opportunity that this is creating.

Elizabeth Warner 47:41

I agree. Let's see. So, the plans for the immediate future—we just, you just spoke about the grant, so that's what we'll be working on is the Asian community center?

Seth Pollack 48:00

Right, but what do we [unclear]—

Elizabeth Warner 48:01

Asian Cultural Center.

Seth Pollack 48:06

Asian—the Asian Cultural Center and Museum.

Elizabeth Warner 48:10

Okay.

Seth Pollack 48:10

Right, so that was—right, the current plans, and we're working a lot with two professors at CSUMB, Rina Benmayor in oral history and Lila Staples in museum studies. And they have been working this past year and this year on conducting oral history interviews and developing museum exhibits, collecting artifacts, and it's really the beginning of telling the story of the neighborhood. And—

Elizabeth Warner 48:37

What's happening.

Seth Pollack 48:38

Yeah, and what's—and again, creating a space that's going to be the cultural space for the future of the neighborhood. So, I think it's a really exciting, exciting project. And it's all happening in the building that was historically the center of the neighborhood, which is the Republic Cafe, and so many people in the neighborhood have an incredible positive memory of going there for family dinners and, you know, that was the happening spot. So, it's nice to reopen that and we hope to do that by 2012, to reopen the Republic Cafe as a cultural center and museum.

Seth Pollack 49:26

The other thing that's happening is that we're really working on, you know, the realization of the plan. You know, we [stack of papers on desk fall over]—my leaning tower of papers. So, you know, this was

the Chinatown Renewal Project Plan, which was developed in 2007. And we brought in funding from Caltrans to facilitate this planning process, and there's some really nice images here around what a new Chinatown will look like with housing and affordable housing and restaurants and, you know. So, this was really the beginning of that process. And we then received a second Caltrans grant to take this, these ideas and deepen them. And we brought in some classes from Cal Poly, because CSUMB is a wonderful institution, but we don't have all the kinds of expertise that this project certainly needs. So, we were able to tap into the planning department in architecture. And we had three classes from Cal Poly work on specific pieces of the revitalization plan. So, we had one group who worked on the museum design. We had one course that worked explicitly on the overall neighborhood development plan. And then we had a third group that worked on an affordable housing project that is designed for a specific plot in the neighborhood. So, what's happening now is the community is in the process of discussing what this affordable housing will really look like. So, it's kind of exciting now that, you know, what started as, you know, this abandoned neighborhood with no one interested in—any future viable projects were not even on the drawing board, you know, from this garden and our little community learning center, and little museums going to spring up, and now we're talking with various folks about what might an affordable housing unit really look like. And so that's been a really exciting conversation.

Elizabeth Warner 51:42

Now, is this so far off that it would still be 2012 or—

Seth Pollack 51:49

Well, you know—

Elizabeth Warner 51:50

I mean, do we have any go-aheads?

Seth Pollack 51:51

You know, we're—it's a process. So, there's some developers who were interested, and if they had—

Elizabeth Warner 51:57

We're just looking for funding?

Seth Pollack 52:00

They were ready—they're ready to go and would love to apply for some funds that the federal government makes available, and make this thing happen tomorrow. And so, it's not clear when, but what's really exciting is that this community is now talking about, in concrete terms, about how many units, where should it be—

Elizabeth Warner 52:21

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 52:21

You know, affordable.

Elizabeth Warner 52:22

Good discussions.

Seth Pollack 52:22

Who do we—who's going to be here? Is it going to be for homeless people? Is it going to be for—do we want it market rate housing, do we want it—You know, those conversations are really happening in a very tangible way. So, that's what's exciting—

Elizabeth Warner 52:36

Yeah.

Seth Pollack 52:36

—to me is that, you know, we've helped create a process, and now there's something to really talk about. And there's people who are still willing to come to the table and really enthused about being at the table now, as we talk about, well, what would 90 units of affordable housing look like? And do we want it all, you know, SROs—single residency occupant for individuals—or do we want families there? And do we want it to be partly affordable, or some market rate, you know, what's that really going to look like? So, we have really very concrete things to talk about now.

Elizabeth Warner 53:16

Yeah. It's very exciting. Is there anything else that maybe I haven't mentioned that we could discuss or—

Seth Pollack 53:33

Well, one of the real issues, I think, in Chinatown is its isolation, right? Chinatown is cut off on every side by the railroad, by the one-way streets that don't allow circulation. There's really only one way into Soledad Street, and one way out. So, there's—it's just a hard place to get to, and it's isolated. And in order for this to become a thriving neighborhood, that needs to change. So, I think one of the really critical pieces which we haven't quite gotten our hands around yet is how do we get across the railroad tracks? And how do we reconnect Chinatown back to downtown, into the Steinbeck Center, you know? And I hope that that's something that we'll be able to do in the future is come up with a strategy to kind of get the attention of Union Pacific, because they're the ones who own those tracks. And we haven't quite figured out how to bring them to the table. We have all the other parties there at the table, but Union Pacific hasn't been in the conversations yet. So, it seems like if we're really going to address Chinatown's isolation, we're either going to have to build a bridge across those tracks, or maybe reconnect the streets and be able to cross at street level. But somehow overcome the physical isolation of the neighborhood.

Elizabeth Warner 55:12

Yeah. Sounds good. So, it seems like everything's going very positive, and there's a lot that's going to happen in the future. Let's see.

Seth Pollack 55:32

You know, just—okay, so, if we want to talk about the not so positive also?

Elizabeth Warner 55:36

Sure.

Seth Pollack 55:37

I think the hard—one of the hardest things is what's going to—how do we—how does the drug dealing happen somewhere else? Because right now—and I think that's one of the things that happened over these conversations as before people kind of conflated the homeless with the drug dealing process that's going on down there. And now people have seen that maybe there is some overlap, but those are two separate issues, right? And, in fact, you know, many in the homeless services community say that people don't go to Chinatown for services because of dangers. And it's not a safe place at certain times of night, and it's not comfortable to be there. So, homeless service providers don't want to be there, and homeless folks don't want to be there. So, you know, it's an interesting question. And still, I think something that really needs some hard work is how do we really make that neighborhood drug free?

Elizabeth Warner 56:48

Are the police not present?

Seth Pollack 56:50

The police have been a part of this project and very active in every phase, and they've been incredible. They've been willing to listen, they've been willing to explore new approaches, they've been responsive to our requests, but they're working under significant constraints, and significant other pressing issues in the communities. In a sense, you know, things happen in Chinatown, no one really cares, because the people who are there—yeah. It's different in the neighborhoods and in the communities. So, in a sense, there's an implicit understanding—well, it's okay, it's only Chinatown. And that's what really—but we've been working with the police. And as I mentioned, I think that's one of the hardest realities is what's going to be the process that's really going to turn this place from an illicit business zone to a welcoming community. And that's something that I think we're still struggling with in a real way.

Elizabeth Warner 58:07

And is it—are these people that are hanging out? Or are they just strictly coming in and, you know, doing their drug deals and taking off, or—

Seth Pollack 58:18

Yeah, well, you know, as—

Elizabeth Warner 58:20

You know.

Seth Pollack 58:21

This is—when you build walls, so things happen on the other side, because it's kind of safe and in the dark. So, folks come who have product to sell. They're there all day. And folks come through who want to pick up something quick, and they come in and leave. And there's some folks who are hanging out on the streets, and others who come through and—right, that's, in order for the—

Elizabeth Warner 58:50

Seems to me that the homeless are getting the bum end of the deal, [chuckles] to say, because they're not even necessarily a part of the real problem. They're just caught in the middle.

Seth Pollack 59:01

Exactly, exactly. So, how do you provide services for homeless and in a way that respects their humanity, and also recognizes that many people who are homeless come from a situation where for one reason or another, they've really struggled with alcohol and drug problems, and they're still struggling with that. So, you know, it's a very difficult and intertwined reality, homelessness and drug abuse. And the fact that this is a, at times, can be an open drug market on Soledad Street is not helping anyone in their attempts to recover and to reconnect.

Elizabeth Warner 59:53

And do the shelters have any sort of a policy? Do you have to show up sober in order to get housing, or how does that work?

Seth Pollack 1:00:03

You know, each organization who delivers services has a different approach to the work. That would be an interesting set of conversations to have, is to talk with the folks from Dorothy's, to talk with Sun Street Center, and to talk with Victory Mission, and to talk with Shelter Outreach Plus, and to get—to talk with Interim. Those are five different organizations, all of whom are working with the same population. And I would suggest, all of whom have very different approaches to how to help people. And so—and sometimes those approaches are in conflict with each other. Some emphasize love, unconditional, and others emphasize recovery first, and then love. Others emphasize sort of connection to God first, and then things come. So, you know, it's an interesting process, and there's not—there's an interesting set of different perspectives. And that's also a challenge, to help those, all those organizations and collaborate and try to coordinate their services, when in fact, they really are coming at it from very different perspectives.

Elizabeth Warner 1:01:33

Now, is there a women's shelter also or—

Seth Pollack 1:01:36

Yeah, you know, Dorothy's a number of years ago opened a women's shelter in the Green Gold Inn, where Dorothy's is located. So, that happen—that opens at 6:30 in the evening, and women come every night of the week. There's between five and 15 women, and they're there and then they leave in the early morning. So, when Dorothy's is ready to serve breakfast, the women are gone by 6:30 in the morning. So, but that's one of the only places in the county where single women can go who are homeless.

Unknown 1:02:20

So, I have one minute left.

Elizabeth Warner 1:02:22

Okay, well, thank you, Seth, so much and—

Seth Pollack 1:02:26

My pleasure. Thanks, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Warner 1:02:29

I feel like I have a greater understanding of what we're doing and really appreciate it.

Seth Pollack 1:02:34

Great. Thank you.

Elizabeth Warner 1:02:35

Thank you very much.