

I'm French Brandon and I live at the Decker Towers in Burlington Vermont.

What comes to mind when you think about home and where you live?

I guess gratitude more than anything else. I was homeless for 3 years when I came up here. I did all kinds of things to get by. I worked on a dairy farm for a while which was wonderful but, phew, tiring. In Grand Isle. It gave me a place to live which was one of the reasons I took the job. Plus I'd never done anything like that so it was a great experience. I came away from it with a lot of respect for farmers. Hard work. Long, long hours. I love the little heifers. I used to feed them with a bottle when they were weaned from their mothers. It was a lovely experience.

But anyway, I'm quite grateful to be living in a safe, wonderfully culturally varied small city.

I've lived mostly in large cities. I grew up in Brooklyn, NY, and lived in Boston for 25 years. Lived in New Orleans area for 10 years. In between I lived in a couple of country places, but I guess I'm a big city boy, so this took a little getting used to up here. But it's a rich, multicultural, very busy and alert community we live in here and I'm very happy to live here.

So I'm very grateful. I've discovered a lot of things that I wouldn't have discovered otherwise. I live with a very varied group of people in this building. I think there's 160 people. I believe that's right. I could figure it out but I don't want to take our time here. Young folks, old folks. Burlington is no longer white bread...Lots of different cultural groups.

So it's been a real experience here. I've found that I can be helpful and of service and enjoy doing that in my old age here.

Can you talk about the community you've come to know living here at Decker Towers?

I had mentioned before we started recording this Nepali couple I've sort of watched out for and taken an interest in acculturating them and making them aware of things and what not. And the woman...I work in the computer room part time...And the woman—Tika is her name—often comes down, and so does her husband occasionally. I'll set them up with Nepali dance videos on Youtube. They've really taken a delight in that. That's been one aspect of reaching out a little bit. Working in the computer room is a really great experience because I get to meet lots of people and help them.

So I benefit from Decker Towers because it's given me a chance to not be isolated. When I moved here I had a friend who worked in Public Housing and she wasn't sure I'd like it here. And indeed there are some drawbacks. I know some people find this a kind of difficult place to live. But I find it a wonderful place. The cliché I bring out often is if I lived across the street in a 2 or 3 bedroom apartment building. I'd

know maybe my neighbors. I don't always love them and they don't always love me but it's a chance to have a real sense of diversity with folks. And I love that. It probably appeals to my old big city instincts.

Description of city's development project, affordable housing, etc.

It's very expensive to live in Burlington. It approximates Cambridge, where I used to live in Boston, and it's an expensive place

How can these sorts of community issues around development, affordable housing, etc., be bridged?

As always, there are competing and conflicting concerns. On the one hand, I'm delighted with what I see going on along the Pine Street area. When that little deli closed next to Speeder and Earls, I thought "oh well, here we go...the neighborhood is kind of closed down a little bit, it will be silent for a while." But lo and behold, it's been like a renaissance there. It's just wonderful. I know we talked about the magic of First Night. The art hp in September was absolutely magical. I'm quite delighted with what I feel now. I fear that as the artists move in and make the place more livable and pleasant, that's when the upwardly mobile types want to move in. It's very chic to live among the artists, if only we can get them out now and make the place nicer is the unfortunate thing.

It's frightening. There will be developmental changes. There's a need for housing down among all this vital area down here, because we do need more housing. I'm going to speak against my own interests I suppose, given my age, but I would really think the first area for housing we need is for families with young children. I don't know how people with kids make it in this town with the rents being what they are.

I often think that we live backwards. What I mean is when we're young and raising a family—I raised two kids—we're isolated, were on our own, we're struggling all the time. It's a continuous struggle. I remember working two jobs often. And for a while I had a pretty good job in business around the Thanksgiving area loading trucks and what not. In those days, there weren't the concept of childcare—this was in the 60s—it was really a struggle. One of the isolating factors is that people are so split off from each other these days. I think there ought to be ways that older people can be integrated with families so they can provide some kind of informal childcare. I'd like to be an alternative grandfather or something to some kid around here. There ought to be some alternative way to operate socially than living in our little ticky-tacky boxes, as the songs go, and I haven't quite figured out how to do it yet, but I haven't given up.

So I would like to see more public housing or subsidized housing for young families in the south end, to keep it from being just an up and coming artist colony which will soon give way to an upwardly mobile group. I'm afraid that seems to be what history shows us. But I'd like to see some sense of neighborhood and settlement in

the south end, in the corridor. It would be nice see kids integrated into a kind of artistic community too. That would be wonderful.

On the other hand, I understand that the mayors office is very interested in housing, subsidized housing. But I also learned the other day that subsidized housing doesn't pay taxes, they come off the tax roll. So that's a conflicting problem for any mayor...Do we want to do too much of a good thing? Too much of a good thing will kill you. So it's a real dilemma, man. It's a real dilemma.

And there's some green spaces in the south end. I'd hate to see them completely obliterated. I told you the story of seeing these baby snakes one spring, near the electric company. I would hate to see a sense of nature completely lost. That's one of the things we lost in urban environments. I remember that was one of the nice things about New York; I used to spend a lot of time in Prospect Park in Brooklyn when I was a kid, man. I spent a lot of time there. It was a real refuge. If it hadn't been there, I wouldn't know anything about nature. So I'd hate see nature disappear. And a bike path is nice, but it isn't nature.

What green spaces in the South End are you referring to?

Well I'm thinking that area right along Pine Street. I know that land is kind of iffy...The barge canal, and farther south along the electric company. It'd be nice to make that a green space...keep that in preservation. There isn't much else, I'm afraid.

That park which is nice, down by the 5 Sisters neighborhood. There's a park there with a ball field. And that's nice, but a ball field isn't nature. It's a manufactured space. And I'd hate to think that's all kids saw. We haven't got much, and we can't afford to lose what we do have. I feel strongly about that.

We live outside of nature, as human beings. We don't follow natural time or anything. That's one of the reasons I love having a garden here. It keeps me a little in tune with nature's time. You can't hurry a growing plant, for instance.

What about some sort of community space?

Yes. A place for everyone to be, for everyone to go and feel comfortable and feed off each other, to learn from each other. We were trying to figure out what to do about that more, and didn't we come up with the idea that if only Kerry's Quick Stop were sort of a different place and not so expensive it might be a meeting place for some people.

But we need more than that. We need some space where people don't feel like they need to come in and buy something to gather. The Arts Riot building is an interesting concept. If that could be more of a place where people could hang out more, that could be good. Its sort of a rudimentary beginning but it doesn't quite do it. It's more of a venue, which is nice. But it doesn't do it. The nicest space is where people gather among the food trucks in back of Speeders and Earls. That seems t be

the nicest space. And of course the Art Hop is wonderful. But there doesn't seem to be a place where people can go out and hang out, and maybe kids can play on a swing. It would be nice to have some municipal gardens that people could share and children could learn to garden. That would be wonderful I think.

What about that little lot next to the Maltex building?

That'd be wonderful, I think. Depending on what they do with it.

We've got a lot of backyard space here. Id love to see us...not put it to use...I worry about us improving things to much. But it would be nice to make green spaces accessible and inviting to all kinds of people.

Can you talk about the accessibility of these spaces? More public transport or ways to make getting around easier?

I'm in a different place. Sandy of course has some difficulties with mobility that I don't have yet. I do have a knee problem, but I don't let that stop me. So getting down hilly areas and what not can be difficult for many people I know. I don't know how you get around that. You can't have a community space on every block. That's not practical. It has to be something that has a few blocks around it. I guess for people who have difficulty getting around there could be some sort of shuttle bus or something. But I confess, I don't really know. But you're right, accessibility is critical. Otherwise all the open spaces don't mean anything.

Bobbin Mill has just gotten a new community space. I frankly, when I saw them beginning to build, I was angry in a very primitive way. I don't believe in cutting down trees if I can help it. I see the death of a tree as a personal affront. So I was very upset. But I must say, they've done a good job over there. They've done a remarkably good job of bringing in an unobtrusive, low space. Its almost a Frank Lloyd Wright environment, I'd say. From what little I know about Frank Lloyd Wright. I admire his work. And they've left a lot of trees. And the view from inside is beautiful. You feel like you're in a country setting. I'm very impressed.

That might be a model we could talk about. You've got green space outside, put in some kind of way for kids to play a little bit. And adults too. Maybe a soccer net or something. Just kicking a ball back and forth or something. And then you've got the inside space when people want to come in and do things. It sounds to me like that might be a good beginning. I don't know.

What about other spaces around town that might be models?

I don't know. There's all kinds of little nooks and crannies of course that one tends to forget about. And of course you've got the railroad abutting here, which I understand is a necessity.

But I don't know. We have Smalley Park here. You could put something in the corner of Smalley Park, but Smalley Park is really just a vacant lot. But vacant lots are important. Again, too much improvement worries me. I don't know. I wish I could be

more helpful in that area. There must be some ways to cultivate space. I'm looking out the window now at this group of three houses across the way here. You can see there's a big open space in between, one block to the other block. That's a weird little group. That's all owned by one person I think. And they're continually doing things there, and it looks like a construction site in back. You'll see they've got lumber and backhoes and they're always working on something back there but never seem to accomplish anything. Always seems to be working on it. What am I trying to say here...A space like that could maybe be used for some kind of community space instead of a place to park backhoes and what not. There isn't a lot of space. Space is a premium I think, don't you?

What are your thoughts about making sure this development is equitable and doesn't change the character of the city in the long run?

What is the character of the city? I know someone who has a position of real responsibility for housing, and he's very concerned that this is turning into a very much yuppyish community. And I share that concern. Its very nice, especially as you get older, to live in a safe community. I've lived in a lot of unsafe communities, and I always kind of like it. I like a little bit of a wild side. But now that I'm older, I would welcome a little more safety, I suspect. And for families and kids it's important to be safe, so I'm half teasing here. But I wouldn't want to see us become just a vanilla bland...I'm not sure I agree with the no broken concept of neighborhoods. They try to pin that on Jane Jacobs but I don't think that's true. She believed in neighbors looking out for each other. I think broken windows is Giulliani and his cohorts in New York City. It's almost fascistic in my mind. I'm not opposed to all graffiti. I think graffiti can be creative. I'm not sure we're better off having blank white spaces than some kid who has been able to put up some artistic and good looking graffiti.

Some graffiti can be quite artistic. Banksy, a famous artist. So I worry about wanting to control things too much and manage things too much. When you manage and control and micro-manage, you may get what you want, but you wont get what you might have had. It narrows things down too much. So I'm worried about this becoming a model of a well-off or rising economy kind of environment up here. And I think it could become that. We've got a lot of bright people who technical work up here and that's a place to make money these days I guess. Like Dealer.com, the first person who was our project leader here at the computer room when to work with them and that's wonderful, but Dealer.com...I know it's a very hip place to work and a very kind of California model...its still very much a business. I just worry about this community becoming like that completely. Upwardly mobile kinds of businesses. What happens to people, families that don't have that kind of money. I think diversity and a living space for everyone is critical. I don't think you should have to be well of to live some place. poor people can live in a city too and it can be their city, I think. So I'm troubled.

But we're better of than some places. We have a fighting chance. The fact that you're sitting here and asking these questions is hopeful. We gotta all keep our eyes and

our wits about us and be careful with what we let happen and stop from happening. It's not a very specific answer.

What are your thoughts about a sustainable, local economy, kinds of work places the city should be encouraging, that would be beneficial to the city?

I think it's wonderful that we have the Intervale and the small farmers there. And I think that's quite unique. I don't think there are many small cities that have that availability of farm co-ops around. I'd love to see us have more of that. I think we should encourage that. It's something that's become favored by a lot of people and it's something that we should encourage. Not just for the well being of this community but as a model for other places. I think it's really critical that we eat close to where the food is grown and that sort of thing. Again, I think it's a wonderful model for kids to see. Rather than a kid who thinks that a potato is a French fry. I would love to see that become a really bustling model. A place where kids could work in the summer on some of these farms, or maybe a first job after high school. Again that's not real high-techy, but I think it's wonderful and critical.

We seem to be a good incubator for artists. But unfortunately to really get anywhere you leave eventually I think.

There is a shared housing...over near the other side of UVM [Burlington Co-Housing] and it would be nice to see more models like that. I was interested in perhaps joining that myself a few years ago until I began to see I could make a pretty rich life for myself right here. It'd be nice to see things like that that are multi-generational. And I think they are. I think they have children of all ages there. I think that's so wonderful, so important. If I had to pick one critical thing that I would like to see happen it would be for people to not be isolated from each other by groups or by ages or by classes and to see the benefits. Because I think there are benefits to people breaking down the barriers between each other. All kinds of benefits. Benefits in terms of self-growth, tolerance, understand, patience with each other. Ultimately I think in terms of what creatively comes out of that. That's how you keep things vital and alive and open to new directions. Otherwise people break down. Once you create compartments or walls between people then people feel compartmentalized and it's like they're on this team or on this side and the other people are on the other wall. It's frightening, I think it's how people become disassociated from each other. I don't think I've ever seen a wall I like, frankly, of any kind, whether it's metaphysical or real.

We need to break down walls from each other. I think that's one of the things I try to do here. I try to say hello to everybody, I try to approach everybody. I think that's what one has to do. It's so easy for various reasons to pull back from each other. First you pull back and you set up barriers because you're frightened or you're nervous or anxious or defensive. And it's so important to stay open to new experiences because otherwise you're not growing. If you're not growing, you're dying.

In a nutshell that's the critical factor for me.

But how you bring that out into a small city and make it work is our job, huh? I'm glad you're on the team doing that because I think it will be great and I'd like to help as much as I can.

And I think you're right. Places where people meet and gather informally are critical to that. But everybody needs a place to live and everybody needs some kind of income. After that I think we can be pretty flexible. We don't need as much as we think we need. We need some more intangible things that I think we've forgotten about, perhaps.

Any other big picture comments?

I just think its important that there be more ways for people of all classes to come together. It isn't as if we live in terribly far away neighborhoods that are walled off if you will almost. Its small enough so we can still have miracles things like Art Hop and First Night. I hearken back to here because I think it was something that could uniquely happen here and couldn't happen in a big city. It was wonderful kind of magic that happens some times in big cities at these kinds of festivities. But it had that unique neighborhood quality that you don't see in larger cities. There was a sense of safety I think because it was small enough and neighborhoody enough. I met people there that I hadn't seen in a few months, I saw so many people I knew. So there was this sense of being festive and exciting but also safe and neighborhoody, again because of our size maybe as a city. I think were a uniquely wonderful place to live. And a good size.

I think I read somewhere that once a city gets to 100,000 people or something right around there it breaks down that sense of neighborhoodness and that sense of people knowing each other. So that may be on to something here. That size may be what is going to help us keep some sense of a humane and human character. I think we have a pretty approachable government in this city. It has been so anyway. I think the progressives under Bernie Sanders when he was mayor helped a lot. My best friend in the world worked for Bernie for many years. My sense is they set a good template, a good model for involvement in government. I think that is critical, we've got to stay involved in what is happening

We've also gotta be aware of learning ourselves. I know very little about...if they made me dictator tomorrow I wouldn't know what to do about this place. So, unfortunately the people who always have all the answers are the ones who don't get involved it seems like.

I think we've gotta make sure that we stay involved and stay open to listening to each other. That's why I think what you're doing right now is wonderful.

I think your idea of places for community gathering is critical to keeping that sense of people not walling each other off from each other.

Do you have any insight into what might help people feel more comfortable getting involved in the community?

I hate to say this...I'm not a luddite in any way. I love the fact that we have the internet, I think its wonderful. I would not want to go back to a period without the internet. Its great to write with, great to communicate. You can learn do anything you want on Youtube just about. And you can find out anything you want. But of course, facts are not wisdom. One of the things I see here that troubles me in this building is that people are very addicted to staying in their own little apartments and watching their Comcast and staying on their internet. And there is a lack of people needing other people. People don't realize that they need and desire other people. There are people who live with their television sets and other people who live with their video games. And I don't think that's healthy. Its something I've seen from the early 90s. So more than 20 years now.

Things have changed. I lived in Bay St Louis in Louisiana, which is an area that really got flattened by Hurricane Katrina. When I moved there it was sort of a little artist colony and a retreat for people in the summer. Not a lot going on there. But it was a nice place to be and people depending on other people for their leisure time. There were a lot of potlucks and things like that and people getting together. This would have been the early nineties. One thing that happened there was casinos came in. Worst thing that ever happened. You had to start locking your doors, crime went up. But more important, people started going to casinos for their leisure time rather than going to other people. And I think I see the internet and our digitalization of society as an extreme example of that. People don't go to other people anymore for just conversation, for just hanging out. People don't hang out anymore it seems like. You walk down the street and people have their i....I just do not think that's healthy.

We need each other. We really do. We want each other. It's crazy to live isolated. So that scares me. I see it in the building a lot. I see people finding it easier and safer and less demanding if you will to just stay in their apartments. Not everybody, but there's a general tendency in that way and I don't think it's good for us as humans, were social creatures. We need to groom each other [laughs]. It makes me worry about kids coming up and socialization and what not. Again, that's where maybe meeting places and places where people could gather would be an antidote to that. So I'm with you on that. I think it's critical, maybe more critical than ever.

It's got to be a place where people don't have barriers to get in. We have to tear down the walls.

I've been thinking about walls a lot lately. I think about the wall Israel puts up with the Palestinians...anyway, I don't like walls.

You know Robert Frosts poem about good neighbors? I think in the end he doesn't necessarily think that good fences make good neighbors. I've been thinking about trying to rework that poem maybe. An anthem against walls and against fences.

I think I feel fortunate to live in a community where there seems to be an interest in general in trying to make things better and to use Sarah Russel's favorite word "fairer." Sarah is the assistant director of residents here and my boss in the computer room and a wonderful woman. She gives me great hope for the future of mankind, or man and womankind. One of the things I'm trying to say is I see BHA as having a very care-centered, client-centered view of housing, and I think we're fortunate to have a lot of good people. I don't see any real evil characters around. I'm sure there are some, but I haven't discovered them. Usually they're front and center in many places I've lived.

So I think we're fortunate to have a lot of people who want to make things better and fairer. And I think we need to work with that.

I'm fond of saying of late, "we don't need Superman or Superwoman, we just need everyone to do the best they can." That's all we need. It'd be a wonderful world.

And how we motivate people to do the best they can is a critical factor, I think. How do we motivate people to do that? Because its in everybody's best interest. But they just don't know it, we just don't know it sometimes. But you can't tell people. They have to discover themselves.

It's hard to get people involved.

I find that so true here, but you gotta keep going. I feel so lucky to be surrounded by BHA people who share the enthusiasm. When I bring something up to Sarah, she runs with it.

Conversation ends with informal conversation about different BHA staff