

**Interviewee: Blackstone, Margaret**

**Interview: February 27, 2006**

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON  
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Interview with: Margaret Blackstone**

**Interviewed by: Leigh Cutler**

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[Begin Tape 1, Side A.]

LEIGH CUTLER: This is Side 1 of an interview by Leigh Cutler with Margaret Blackstone. The interview is taking place on Monday, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006 at the Urban Harvest offices, 1900 Kane Street in Houston, Texas. The interview will be deposited into the Oral History of Houston Project at the University of Houston.

People tell me—I read a little bit about when you applied to the National Gardening Association to get a school garden at Travis Elementary. Will you tell me when all that started happening and how you did that?

MARGARET BLACKSTONE: To the best of my recollection, I applied in the fall of 1985. I had gone back to teaching again after having taught, then been off and then gone back. And Travis Elementary was a very small school, and we were looking to integrate curriculum with something outside, and so I just applied for the grant, never thinking we'd get it, and we got it. And I think we got it because we were trying to apply curriculum to the garden. It actually was more of an honor than it was a money thing because they gave us only about \$650 worth of seeds and bulbs and equipment, and then

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we had to come up with our own money. And you have to understand this is an inner-city school, and at the time it was a very small school, so we really had a hard time there for a while.

CUTLER: How did you come up with the money afterwards?

BLACKSTONE: The first thing was that there was another gentleman in the area, a Mr. Brown, who worked with the—oh, goodness, now.

CUTLER: Oh, Arnold Brown.

BLACKSTONE: Right.

CUTLER: I spoke with him, in Agricultural Extension.

BLACKSTONE: Right, right. He was out at I think Addickes, anyway. He had also applied for the grant, but he didn't get it. And his premise was that he was going to use his people that did nutrition studies and work with families, and so he approached me and wanted to know if it would be all right if his people worked with our families after we got started growing. We didn't really know how we were going to do it, and he offered to bring his tractor in from way out there into the inner city and disk up and disk in the amenities and stuff, and so we did that. And for two years we had long rows, and then it became too difficult. His people did come in, his nutrition—I guess they were home economists—I don't really know. They worked with our families and our children, and they did curriculum with families after school, and cooking and nutrition.

So after two years, then he decided that was too difficult to bring the tractor all the way in, and so a parent gave us the money. By then, the school had become a magnet

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school and we were a vanguard school, which is a gifted component to the school, and so we were attracting people that had a little more money than the underprivileged neighborhood kids, I guess you'd say.

And so this woman was a judge, and she gave us the money to buy the rounds to build the garden plots. And then we also sold cans, we took part in the neighborhood home and garden tour, and we sold things that we made. Parents sold things that we made, and we made money.

CUTLER: What do you mean you sold cans?

BLACKSTONE: We collected aluminum cans and newspapers and stuff and sold them and made money that way. I mean, that was a time when you made a lot more money with them than you do now. We applied for grants and got any number of grants to build a greenhouse and the expansion of the garden. And this was from '85 and '86 on to 2000. One of our parents was killed in the course of working, so her company and her husband gave money for an outdoor classroom. We had parents who were, I guess, construction people themselves, and they would collect stuff left over from jobs, and parents would bring it in, and they would build stuff for us. We had a tool house, a greenhouse and any number of—we had twenty-eight beds, one for each classroom, and we had a nature—bird, butterfly garden, a little nature center. We had a big outdoor classroom with two ponds, a butterfly garden and a fragrance garden. It changed over the years because the kids changed.

CUTLER: What did you do with the food that the kids grew?

BLACKSTONE: Each classroom had its own plot, and so it just depended on what they

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grew. Depending on what they needed in the curriculum, like—well, I can give you some examples if you want examples.

CUTLER: Sure.

BLACKSTONE: In the fall, my teaching partner and I would go from Hispanic culture, into Native Americans, into a little study of Thanksgiving, in that area, so we would always plant New World plants in the garden: peppers and tomatoes and squash and things like that, that had to do with what the Native Americans ate. If we were taking part in the home and garden tour, we would combine plants and flowers. One time everybody in the school planted—one of our teacher's sons got married, and he married a girl whose father was a cotton farmer, so in the spring, late spring, we planted cotton in the whole garden, and it grew over the summer, and in the fall we picked it, and every child in the school spun and wove some thread and wove a little bookmark. At the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus discovering America, we all planted corn and got up there and boiled corn and stuff.

And so it just depended. People had pizza gardens; in other words, the ingredients for a pizza. If they were learning about vines and that was part of what they had to do, they would plant vining plants.

[Recording interruption]

BLACKSTONE: Let's see. I'm trying to think of some other things that we did. People

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would plant, like, a Mr. MacGregor's garden, or they would plant bulbs. We had a big seed kind of saving, where we were talking about the different ways that plants would propagate. The older children planted by the moon. Our speech teacher won a big award because she had to—it was a time when she'd have her kids in the room, teaching them things, but then she also had to take them to another location and speak with them, and so she had to know how they could deal with these new sounds or whatever they were trying to correct in real life, so they would plant a garden, and she would teach them about Monet, and it would be Monet's garden or something, you know. And she would use it that way. And she won some kind of a big award with that. I don't remember what it was, but anyway, she just got her master's or doctor's degree.

CUTLER: So it was all really strongly incorporated into curriculum, no matter what the subject was?

BLACKSTONE: It had to be. It had to be. And each teacher decided what they needed to do. Sometimes they did, like, a whole grade level. First grade level was studying butterflies, and so they planted big butterfly gardens, and they could give a real demonstration of how the butterfly would have to lay its eggs on the plants so that the larva would eat, whatever. So sometimes whole grade levels would do something; sometimes it would be just individual classes. We kind of incorporated everything we did, in math and language. We'd have our art teacher would go out and draw in the garden.

When I knew I was going to retire—because I was pretty much for almost fifteen years, I guess, responsible for the garden, and when I announced I was going to retire, I

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was afraid that it was going to just disappear. By that time, the principal had some discretion with funds, and so she hired three part-time mothers, who were gardeners themselves or were master gardeners or had kids in the school, to come in and help the teachers, and they became the garden teachers in place of me, and they kept the garden up and gave suggestions.

I mean, we just did everything. We did group plants to dye, what Native Americans would dye with plants, you know, and just everything.

CUTLER: You were teaching second grade?

BLACKSTONE: I taught second grade with a partner. We usually shared forty-five children, gifted children, but not everybody—the school—you had your choice: you could pair with somebody; you could teach a self-contained classroom.

CUTLER: What sparked this idea originally for you? I mean, it's something you read about, or did you like gardening and that gave you the idea for applying for the grant, or what was it?

BLACKSTONE: [Chuckles.] I really don't know. Okay, I had gardened my whole life. When I came to the school, I lived in the neighborhood, but it was an older neighborhood that the houses were fairly large. The older people had died off, and they were being rented, and it was a fairly run-down neighborhood that was not going anywhere, and the school was very small, and the building was very small. They had had a third building that they had torn down, so actually the rooms were very small. And we didn't have any science lab or anything like that. And it was just kind of a way to—I kind of thought about what did I want to do with my own children, working with it, and at that time I had

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a self-contained classroom; it was not a gifted—you know, not a magnet school yet.

And so I applied for the grant—I mean, not really—thinking, *This is a national grant. You're not gonna get it.* But I applied for it, and my principal was—you know, that was kind of a way to introduce myself to the principal, to let her know that I really wanted to do this, and she was amenable to it. And then when we got it, of course, it was a great thing and very much—when I started it, and then it seemed all the parents—that's an unusual thing. It's difficult to get a garden started in a school if the teachers and the parents are not really behind it, because it's a lot of hard work, and when you have little bitty children—you know, let's face it, it's not like middle school or high school kids. You have to really watch them. You have to work with them. The hard work of putting it together has to be done by adults—you know, with the children's help. They can't do that.

And so they just all got excited and got behind it. At one point, when they were reworking the school, they were going to get rid of the garden. They were going to fancy it up—you know, make it a patio or other things like that, not a real working garden. And a man came that they had hired to do some work on the Sparks Park, which was what we were getting, and we were going to have to kind of move one of the temporary buildings into the garden area, was going to happen, into our orchard area. And when he saw the garden, he just went crazy, and there wasn't any way that they were going to get rid of that garden then. Once he saw that—and he was a national—and I don't know his name; I'm terrible with names—but he had come from Dallas actually down to consult about this Sparks Park and how they were going to rearrange it, because it was a very

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small campus.

CUTLER: When did this happen?

BLACKSTONE: Well, it had to be about twelve years ago, thirteen years ago, because the Sparks Park—it was when they were getting ready to build the Sparks Park, and that was—oh, dear, what was I going to say? He came down then, and then they celebrated their ten-year anniversary of the Sparks Park about three years ago, so it had to be about twelve or thirteen years.

But anyway, he was saying that it was a very European idea. And it seems like now there's a lot of explosion. And then when I was doing some speeches and talking and teaching other teachers, I went back and looked, and they've had them in Europe since the 1600s.

CUTLER: With schools?

BLACKSTONE: Yes. And I mean as an extension of their science lab and particularly for the lower grades, because in particularl urban children don't have any—you know, my principal didn't even know—she'd say, “And this is a—” and she'd lean back, and you'd say, “Tomato plant.” And she said, “Tomato plant.” [Laughs.] You know. So I mean it's not just the children, it's everybody, and that the parents would get—and we had a lot of Hispanic people from Mexico who knew a lot about the growing, and they would come in, and, I mean, it was just really—it was wonderful. You know, yes.

CUTLER: Okay, I'm going to stop for a second.

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[Recording interruption]

CUTLER: Were there other schools in Houston that had programs before Travis, or was Travis a model for others to be created?

BLACKSTONE: For a long time, I think Bob, Bob Randall, thought that we were the oldest school garden in the Southwest or maybe oldest continuous garden, because I think the next year another school in Houston got the gardening grant, but I don't think it was continuous. I think it started and stopped. But then later on, I think they found that there was a private school that had had a garden, and that the private school's garden more or less—I guess the kids lived—maybe there was a boarding school of some kind, and I think they actually fed themselves with the garden, so I don't know exactly how that worked, but I think it had been going longer than us.

CUTLER: And that was just somewhere in the Southwest?

BLACKSTONE: I think it's near Houston. I don't know if it's in Houston or something. But he can probably tell you about that. I read about it in the newspaper, and it seemed like it was back in the sixties or so.

CUTLER: Okay.

BLACKSTONE: But ours—and that's still a continuous garden. The Travis moved to another campus in temporary buildings, and they're gardening in containers there now, so even though the physical garden has been destroyed, they vow that they're going to put it back. And in fact, they wanted to build a garden for this new school and work on it, but

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then the school people didn't want it. So I think there are other mechanisms in Houston. I think the Men's Garden Club has a big container gardening thing, where they teach kids to grow in containers. I think, like, River Oaks School has a big natural habitat, and other schools have started gardens and tried to do gardens. I think Berry Elementary at one time had a big school garden, but I don't think they have it anymore, but I think they were actually teaching agriculture, kind of, there. So I don't know. Our school has been a model for a lot of other schools, but I don't know that we were the only one, because a lot of people stop and start, depending on who's there.

CUTLER: Right. And when you were developing yours at Travis, were you inspired by any other cities nation wide?

BLACKSTONE: I did not know about any other gardens, and I'm sorry to say I was that ignorant. I know that there were community gardens in the East. I didn't know about them. It was just a time in—you know, education goes in cycles, and it was a time in education where we were moving toward integrating more of what we were learning into real-life experiences. I had come from a school where we had a laboratory to go in and work. The school was a lot bigger and had more amenities, and I was just trying to find a way for—you know, where we had a school that didn't have—I mean, we had teeny tiny rooms. Our art teacher didn't even have a room; she had a cart, we were so crowded. And it was just a way of giving kids experiences. It was just the right time.

And when I wrote it up, I had to give some examples of how we were going to use it, and I made them up. I'm sorry about that! [Chuckles.]

CUTLER: No, it's understandable...

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BLACKSTONE: Yes. But it did work because, I mean, it was how *I* was going to use it, and then as other people came along and people got enthused about it—you see, they were writing their own curriculum, too, and working it out, and so they took whatever essential elements or whatever we called them at the time that we had to have in science, and we applied that to the garden—you know, working outside in the garden. You know, you can go outside and you can learn about weather and climate and insects and growing plants and soil and bugs and all the kinds of things in the garden that you are not using a book inside, you're getting experiences outside, and it just lent itself to that.

And it was a group of very exuberant teachers, who were very creative. And, I mean, they wanted to do that. They didn't want to—even though it was hot, they were willing to go outside and work.

In the beginning, as a teacher, you do it on your own. You didn't have any garden mother there to help you or say, "Get out there." In the end, the garden mothers would make sure that the fertilizer was there, that the seeds were there that you wanted, and they would meet with you and decide what you wanted, and so it was a lot easier in the end, when we figured out how to do it. But in the beginning, we did it all ourselves.

CUTLER: And it was pretty challenging?

BLACKSTONE: It was because it was—you know, just for example, we planted, my teaching partner and I planted a long row of I think it was corn or something. I don't know what it was. In the first place, we didn't realize that we didn't have enough corn to really work, and I don't know if it was corn, but we were thinning it. We were trying to teach the children to measure between the plants and thin. You know, it's hot and we're

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in our clothes and all. The kids are out there, and we looked back, and this child is going and pulling up every—you know, we'd pull a plant and measure and pull a plant and measure, and we had all these kids out there. He's pulling out all the other plants. He was thinning, too. So we had this whole row of nothing. So, I mean, it was very challenging. And we didn't know what we were doing when we started.

CUTLER: How did you know things like what season to plant certain vegetables? Was that something Agricultural Extension was helping you with?

BLACKSTONE: Well, he did, helped us with—he helped us about how to work with our soil. He did a soil sample test and did that. But the thing about it was I had grown up with my father. We lived in the city, but he had a small truck farm, like. He raised vegetables and sold them as a part-time job and sold them to the market. And so he had fruit trees and berry vines, so I basically knew what grew at certain times. Now, I didn't know all the new varieties of vegetables, and, when we got the grant, we got seeds and bulbs and things, and then you had parents coming in.

We had a parent group, a parent support group, called Friends of the Garden, and they would come in, and they knew a lot about gardening, so we weren't alone, it was just that we were—we weren't alone, we were alone, if you know what I mean. People were not without expertise, but it was just—it was really hard work. I mean, you were doing that over and above your regular job. But parents came in. We met on Saturdays. We met a lot of Saturdays and worked, particularly after we didn't have the long furrows anymore and started the—you know, it took us a while to get the thing set up and the plants moved in. And, of course, there was always something. You know, you'd think,

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*Oh, boy, I've got it all set up now and then Oh, no, they're going to come in and move the fruit trees. So it was just that. But there was a lot of expertise there.*

CUTLER: Besides your support from Ag Extension, was there other government support? Arnold had mentioned working with [Congressman George Thomas] "Mickey" Leland and [Congresswoman] Barbara Jordan, but did you have any—

BLACKSTONE: No.

CUTLER: —with your school? What about HISD [Houston Independent School District]?

BLACKSTONE: Okay, when we got the grant and they opened the garden, we did have someone from the school board come. Unfortunately the picture's in the scrapbook and not in the pictures I had today, but we did have I think a school board member come and talk to us at that time. You see, if our principal hadn't supported it and the administration hadn't supported it, there wouldn't have been any way we could have had the garden.

CUTLER: So HISD wasn't really involved?

BLACKSTONE: Later on, HISD itself wasn't involved. Our school did. But later on, they did. And they didn't give us any money, either. But later on, they did electrify our greenhouse and our tool shed, and so that was while they were running electric lines to something else; they just put it in there, and that was the extent of what they did for us. Now, we got grants from the state agricultural association. For a while, they were giving grants to schools, a couple of thousand-dollar grants to schools, and we got two or three of those grants to do different things. The main one I can think of is to grow beneficial

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insects. Every grade level grew different ones, and then we released them, and so we used that money. But most of the time, the grants were from, like, chemical companies and oil companies and things like that, where they would just give you so much, and we'd have local people—also business grants. Individual teachers would get grants, or they'd get a grant for a whole grade level or something, to work on.

CUTLER: These state agricultural association grants—when was that? Was that in the early years?

BLACKSTONE: No, I would say it was maybe in the nineties sometime, but we got two or three of them, I believe.

CUTLER: All right. What was your role when Urban Harvest got established? How did you fit in there, if at all?

BLACKSTONE: Well, I was kind of a liaison from the school. The school had a membership in Urban Harvest, and then I taught some classes for Urban Harvest, training teachers. A couple of times, I went to schools with Gary Edmondson [Urban Harvest's School and Youth Gardens Coordinator], and we trained teachers. And then people would visit. You know, our garden would be an example, and he would bring people to visit the garden.

CUTLER: I wondered because your program really got started almost ten years before the organization really came together?

BLACKSTONE: Yes, we did. Right, right, right.

CUTLER: I just wondered how you got connected with Bob Randall.

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BLACKSTONE: I think I probably just probably heard about it and started to come. Maybe we took a class. I think some of the teachers took classes here. We took classes here together to learn, I don't know, pruning or growing tomatoes or something. You know, we'd come after school or something. And so we just kind of knew more about it then, and we were members, as a school, of Urban Harvest. We got information.

Then we began to get—about, I would say in the nineties sometime—I don't know, I think maybe California or somebody started more of a school garden thing, and people started publishing a little bit of how – and I noticed they had some books out there about things you could do in the classroom to help growing—teaching kids about growing. Then I know Ms. [Alice] Waters' is out there. I saw something, an article recently about her with the middle school near her restaurant.

CUTLER: Who's that?

BLACKSTONE: Alice Waters, isn't it? Has a big restaurant [Chez Panisse] in California.

CUTLER: Oh.

BLACKSTONE: And then somebody called me, and I don't know whether they'd published it yet or not, and interviewed about school gardens, and they were going to publish a book and something like that. But it was mainly just kind of a fluky idea. Had it just been me at the school, it would not have lasted, but there were just people there who found it interesting and wanted to do it and wanted to expand their classroom, and found it an interesting way to do it. You know, every year we'd just keep growing and keep growing whatever—people would apply for grants that they knew could—you

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know. And then you built the butterfly garden and you bought perennial plants with that money, which stayed there, or the dinosaur garden or whatever, you know, and so it just kind of grew like that. We all worked together. It wasn't just me. It was all of us.

CUTLER: Did you see improvements in the school and in students over the years with the incorporation of the gardens? Do you think the school changed?

BLACKSTONE: Well, the school changed a lot, but it's hard to say—you know, it's hard to attribute that because the change in the school was—I mean, there were a lot of aspects to it. The neighborhood changed from an old, dilapidated neighborhood into a new—a lot of professional doctors and lawyers and dancers and all that, too. People living in the neighborhood, redoing the houses. The school went from being a regular neighborhood school to a magnet school, with gifted children in it. It went from a population in the kids of maybe 300 to almost 700 children. And now they're building—I mean, they've torn down the school. The only thing that's existing is the front part of that 1926 building, and they kept that because it was designed by a famous architect that did the City Hall and stuff. So they kept that, but everything else is going to be brand new. And they bought a whole bunch of property around there and expanding the playground and the garden. It's going to be moved into the back and everything. So it's going to be totally different.

So part of the change was the change in the people who lived in the neighborhood and the money and the status of the people who live there, and part of the change was due to the, I think, upgrading of the whole school when the gifted program came in, because then we were able to get more money. The principal used the money not—she didn't use

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it just for the gifted program. She went in and found more money and raised the elevation of all of the school so that as a school, the children in the gifted program—and lots of times what happens, you'll have a gifted component in a school and it'll be totally separate from the neighborhood children. But in ours we had to work together as a grade level, so that everybody—we intermixed our children. We did all sorts of activities together, and there was a dividing line as far as how far we took our children in a grade level, because our kids could—you know, in the gifted program—could spiral up and do more and do more intellectual work, and it wasn't so much that grind of just the basics. But all of the kids had lots of opportunities to learn more and to do more with the curriculum.

I think the garden was a big part of that because it was such an important thing to the teachers. If it hadn't been important to them, it would not have lasted. And they kept finding new ways to use it and incorporate it into what they were doing so that—I mean, they had a regular weekly program of—some classes went out every single day. Now, that's very difficult when you have a day filled with TAKS and TAAS [standardized testing in the state of Texas] and all this stuff you're working on, but they went out to observe the garden, to walk, to look at the weather. Whatever it was they were supposed to be doing, they found a way, and over the years they worked on that more and more. So I think the garden lifted the school, and the school lifted the garden. It was kind of a mutual thing there, yes. But it was because of the personnel at the school.

CUTLER: I think you really touched upon everything that I was wondering about, but if there's anything else you think you could think of that might be important to the history

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or just the community gardening movement in Houston in general.

BLACKSTONE: Well, I just thought it was interesting that recently—it's not right in our neighborhood, it's kind of further over, but on Yale Street, which is maybe ten blocks from where we live, the people used a vacant lot to start a community garden, and you wonder if—and some of the schools in the neighborhood—I went to work in one of the neighborhood schools, and they started a little garden. I don't know if it's still going or not. Another of the schools—it's further over—Harvard—has more of a nature center. But they have done that, and then a lot of people that we train in working with teachers that signed up to come to classes in the summertime about how to incorporate this into the curriculum. And you wonder if the gardens didn't spark those people to start that community garden over there.

CUTLER: Oh, yes.

BLACKSTONE: Because I'm wondering if any of those people who started it, and I don't know who started it, were some of the parents, but I do know that there were some parents that, for a long time, the Heights—you need to get out?

[Recording interruption]

BLACKSTONE: ...mothers that was very active in the Heights association. When the Heights association did—you know, the esplanade? I don't know how familiar you are with Heights, but there's a huge esplanade and running track, and they're planting and

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everything. She was very instrumental in that. And she also was very instrumental in our garden. So I'm wondering, you know, which came first. Was she wanting to do that because of this? So I was wondering if it changed any of the attitudes of the people about—because the one experience that I had that opened my eyes more than anything else was the parents at the meeting, when they were doing the Sparks Park and they were going to come in and they were going to make it a neat little setting around a little patio. They were going to build everything around it. And I kept saying, "Well, that's not the garden anymore. That's flower beds." "Oh, no, no, no, that'll work."

But once the man who knew about gardening and had some higher expertise pointed out to them about how much of a learning experience and how international and European and chic this was, you know, I think it changed all their attitudes. I mean, we had a double, an immediate double in the number of people who came and volunteered for the parent group in the garden, because he said, "All we need is animals."

CUTLER: [Laughs.] Yes.

BLACKSTONE: If we had animals, we would have had, I guess, the fertilizer and everything, he said. In Europe they do a lot with animals, too.

CUTLER: Yes.

BLACKSTONE: I said, "Well, I don't think we can manage that in the city." But anyway, yes. But, I mean, I think that one thing opened their eyes so much, and then, in working with it on—and we had a very small area for a garden. There are a lot of schools that have huge areas, and I don't know how much they'll dedicate to this new area that they have, but we just had a minuscule area, really, you know. But we used every inch of

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it. [Laughs.] Yes, we did.

CUTLER: Great.

BLACKSTONE: That's it.

CUTLER: Okay. Thanks.

[End of interview.]

