

Oral History Collection

Chris O'Brien

Interviewer: Mark O'Brien

Date: May 5, 2024

Place of Interview: Richardson, Texas

Mark O'Brien: All right. Hi, this is Mark O'Brien for a Spanish 4173, Dr. Mendiola's class and this is my oral interview with Chris O'Brien, my wife, and we're doing this interview in Richardson, Texas. So Chris, just given your name, but could you tell us exactly where you were born and how long you've lived here?

Chris O'Brien: Actually, I was born in the Dallas area, and I've lived here my entire life. I've never lived anywhere but Dallas. I actually was born in the Pleasant Grove area of Dallas, and we stayed there until just about high school time before my parents moved to Rockwall, but still in the Dallas area.

Mark O'Brien: So, you've been, when it comes to living in Dallas in foods and things like that you've been in Texas. So, you've been exposed to this kind of, these kinds of different products since you've been a little girl actually.

Chris O'Brien: That's right. Southern food, Mexican food, some other different ethnicities food, but mostly southern food.

Mark O'Brien: Okay. So, since we've met in, I'd say, for maybe 15 years, maybe it's a little less you switched to a plant-based diet. Can you tell me what actually

started that process for you to go from just eating meat, potatoes or whatever was available to strictly plant-based?

Chris O'Brien: Although it was definitely a journey, I would say the thing that triggered the plant base, the specifics of it was the China study and that was introduced to me by a colleague at work. He had read it and he brought it to me and thought I would be interested in it. So, I've read it. And that proposed a strictly plant-based diet. In other words, no animal products whatsoever. So, though I had been exposed to other diets that limited animal products, a vegetarian, and that sort of thing, but still allows some other aspects like butter, or maybe dairy or eggs. This was the first time I've been experienced, exposed to something that was proposing, the healthiest way to eat was to have no animal products. So that was the trigger for me.

Mark O'Brien: And what, just so people that are listening know, what was the China, the China Study driven for was to study the long-term effects of plant-based eating or the health effects of plant-based

eating was that what the basis of that study was for?

Chris O'Brien: That's what I took away from it. Yes. And granted, you know, this was probably 12 to 15 years ago, that we're talking about. So, it was a long time ago, but I was very much, it impacted me very much in the sense that in order to do it correctly, and to reap the benefits, you needed to have absolutely no animal products in your diet.

Mark O'Brien: Have you found this to be, living in Texas with the kind of food that's popular here, like Southern Tex-Mex, and even an authentic Mexican and other foods that use a lot of meat and cheese. Have you found this hard to have this diet and continue it? Not only well, let's start with on restaurants. Is it very hard to find a restaurant that does this?

Chris O'Brien: Absolutely, I mean, it's almost impossible. I always joke around with folks that, "Hey, you know, if you want to eat like this, you can't drive up somewhere and have it shoved in the car window door." It's not, it's not available like that, there's just no way to do it and go into a restaurant and trying to order something that's plant based is very difficult. I mean, obviously,

you can fall back to the John, was a salad, you know, and frequently restaurants put cheese in their salads. So, you have to check to be sure it doesn't have cheese in it. And, but folks, that you know, people that work in restaurants are starting to become a little more sensitive to it. But when we talk about 15 years ago, or 12 or 15 years ago, when I started this, it was even harder than it was very, very boring thing to people that to even comprehend that someone would eat that way.

Mark O'Brien: Well, and the reason I bring this up, is I've noticed in the last couple of months when I've been working at Stars games, I come out of the building. And it's similar to what we saw out of the -- What is it, the church, the one that's there on? Gosh, I want to say Ross or maybe Ross, the Catholic Church there that -- the place escapes me, but I come off and there's someone in there is street food, there is street food vendors that are cooking Cerdito and tacos, street tacos and things like that. And they always have meat in it, of course. So I just wondered as I walked by, and I think of you I think how street vendor... wonder what... how that would work for street vendors, if they were

strictly providing a vegan or plant based diet, you know, I don't know if that if people would realize they were eating that and like it or people would look at it and see no meat, you know, so that's why I question it. As to is this what kind of drove -- So you do most of your preparing of food at home I'm guessing, that's what. I see you here, and I'm thinking before that you were. That's what you do?

Chris O'Brien: I do I've and I've gravitated towards that this is not there's not a switch that you flip and then all of a sudden, you're doing things a different way. It's been something that has progressed over time, and I've been influenced by others too, that I've spoken to about this, that we're open to dialogue about it. And yes, I like to prepare my food at home. Because when you start eating this way, you want to know what's in your food. And when you go to a restaurant, you really don't know what's in your food, you don't know how much salt in it, you don't know how much oil is in it. You don't know what they've done with it in the kitchen, you don't know how fresh it is, frequently after food's been cooked, it's a little

hard to tell, especially with vegetables, if they were fresh when they went in. Just things like that. So when I'm at home, and I can cook something, and I know everything that's in it, and I can leave things out, most specifically, I feel better. I feel like I've eaten something that my body can thrive on.

Mark O'Brien: And you're very good at, especially at home with minimizing cross or eliminating cross contamination where maybe in the restaurant, it's not, you don't know maybe you don't want to know, but it's one of those things that they're gonna cook your bean burger on the same grill, they probably cooked the hamburger.

Chris O'Brien: Exactly.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, I get that. So, I guess this drove you, you grow your own food here at home. But how long ago have you -- Did you try to grow food at all when you were younger? Was your, was your parents, say your mother or your dad into this? I know your mother liked to garden, but was she into? Was she into growing food? Or was it mostly flowers?

Chris O'Brien: Exactly that my mother had definitely would -
- You would describe her as someone with a green

thumb. She loved plants, she had house plants in the house that she took care of. And then she always, especially when I was younger, she took care of the yard. I mean, my parents had a lovely yard, and it was my mother's doing. But they even did other things like water features. And they, I mean, the yard was just spectacular, at least at the first house that I remember, as a child. We moved not long after that and some of the wind had gone out of them for recreating that environment in a new place. But she even then she still loved the plants and always, always had flowers and plants in the yard and cultivated a really, really nice appeal to the house.

Mark O'Brien: But it wasn't really food based, it was more of just aesthetics.

Chris O'Brien: In fact, to, to an extreme in the sense that my mother never wanted to grow food. But I did, even in that first house I just mentioned. I remember I had to prod her for a while and coax her into letting me, but she finally gave me a little piece of grass out in the back, ground was hard as rock, and told me that I could clear the grass out of that and plant a vegetable garden in

it. And she may have helped me a little bit but my memory of it was that I was pretty much on my own to do it and I wasn't very old, I was probably only maybe six, seven years old -- ah, maybe eight in that range. And she, she kind of put me on my own and I planted vegetables out there and I remember I planted carrots and of course I didn't cultivate the soil enough for them to, it was hard as rock in places and for me to get any depth in there you know, it was it was not very possible at my age. So I was very, very... it was a disaster. It just it, I was able to grow some stuff came up and but then you know, it didn't it didn't feel right.

Mark O'Brien: So how long would you say you tried this?

Chris O'Brien: Oh, it was just over one growing season, growing.

Mark O'Brien: One growing season.

Chris O'Brien: So yeah, just over one growing season. It might not even have been the full growing season. And of course you know, if you don't stay active, if you don't keep on the tasks that are required for a garden, I mean, it goes back to what it was before you planted the garden really quickly. You your pets come in, you have the weeds come in, the grass

comes back in if you don't water it in this Texas summer, it's gonna go really quick. So, you have to be very dedicated if you want to make it happen.

Mark O'Brien: Okay, wow. And so, so then you have obviously you stopped doing that and you've gone through, you know, you go through high school and things, you none of it really started again until you moved. Did you do any? When you lived in Rockwall? Did you do any gardening or growing food in that situation or because at that point, you hadn't been a plant-based eater you really didn't worry about that?

Chris O'Brien: Yeah, I didn't, I actually, that put on the back burner because you as you know, I started, I became a mother very, very early in life. So, I had children to raise and then I went back to school to get my degree, I was doing that. So, I had a lot of diversions. I was not eating healthily. The next time that you know, really health and diet came into my world was when, this is crazy, but it was when cable TV first became available in Texas, because at that point, you could get content on cable television that talked about health and fitness and exercise and all those

things and that's when that started to be planted again. There was a little bit of you know, spark in my mind that oh, I'm, I'm not doing things healthily. I'm not healthy.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: I need to exercise I need to do things like this. And that was in my, I would say mid 20s, early 20s when that happened.

Mark O'Brien: Excuse me. So, when you started with -- So now you get to the point where you're doing plant-based diet. Was there somebody that inspired you to start wanting to grow your own food? Or was this something that you develop just by? Was it a normal process? Or did you read somewhere that this might be the way to do it? I mean, how... what really got you started to do that?

Chris O'Brien: Well, one of the things that I do with my plant-based diet, and that I know is very important is to eat a lot of greens. So if you're...and this was something that came about to with my, with the whole process of becoming plant-based, is you don't, you know. You start out you're, you're not going to eat meat, well, what does that mean, I'm not going to eat meat, what means for most people,

as they start out as they're going to eat around the meat, they're going to go to a restaurant, they're going to order everything that's around the meat, but they're not going to order the meat. That's not a balanced diet. And you find out really quickly that that's not a balanced diet, that you're not going to get the nutrients you need. And although you might be a little healthier, because you're not eating a lot of saturated fat and those kinds of things, you're still probably going to suffer for some other issues in the sense that you just don't have a well-rounded diet. You're -- everybody talks about protein. Protein is not a big issue. But that's another thing that people will tend to incline you to be concerned about whether you should be or not. So anyway, there's all those things. So you don't just flip a switch and have this happen. But one of the things once I matured into eating plant based, I knew I had to have beans, and I knew I had to have greens in my diet. And these things, although they're available in the grocery store, a lot of times they're not the freshest, and they're not always available, you might go to the grocery store, and

there's not any kale. Or it's getting better now, but I'm talking about when I first started to, but even now with a better a lot of times the qualities not there. So, you kind of had to take something subpar, and try to create a meal out of it. And this is one of the foundations of your meal, your grains and your beans are the foundation and then of course your whole grains. So, I just started thinking, you know, I could grow kale plant. I -- you know, why don't I give that a try? I have no problem; I have inherited my mom's green thumb. I've been exposed to, you know, growing plants my whole life and I've, I've always had a nice yard, So I can grow kale. So, I decided to give it a try, and sure enough, I can grow kale.

Mark O'Brien: So I have to ask, you know, you go to a grocery store, and you go down the cereal aisle, and there's 500 I mean, I'm exaggerating, obviously, but 500 different brands of cereal you can pick from, which is one of the things I think people who come from other countries when they come to United States and we've talked about this in class. You know, they're so overwhelmed by the amount of choice we have, you know, and all the things that

we buy. And I did relate to anecdotal story about when the Russians first came to Canada or to United States to play hockey and there was a couple of Russians in Canada, the captain of the Canucks took one of the wives of the Russian players to the grocery store to show her what it was like, and she was overwhelmed with choice. And so, when she saw the meat counter was full and full of meat, and she started putting it all in the in the basket. And she had to convince her, Stan Smyl's wife had to convince her it would be there tomorrow because in Russia, of course they didn't, they had scarcities like this. So, when you talk about things not being available, are -- In this situation. Are there different brands I mean of kale? Or is it like when you get it? Is there like is it farmed in different places? So there's two different brands you can pick from or our greens and vegetables, like you go to an apple stand and there's, you know, delicious and whatever apples they've got your crisp and in there different types of apples, which I'm not smart enough to know...they all taste like apples to me. But how about kale

and greens? Is there different flavors depending on how they're grown or where they're grown.

Chris O'Brien: I don't know so much about how they're grown or where they're gone probably, um, I haven't investigated that honestly. But there are a lot of different varieties of greens and that's another thing I tried to incorporate is different not just kale, although I focus on kale.

Mark O'Brien: Right, right.

Chris O'Brien: Kale is probably one of my staples, but I'm also going to have spinach, I'm also going to have chard. There's, there's other ones as well, some are milder than others, some are more bitter, you know brussels sprouts is although another green, I consider it to be a green that I'll have, and also broccoli as another because those are in the kale family of cruciferous vegetables. So, like I center my -- I usually try to get some cruciferous vegetables, cruciferous vegetables in my diet every day.

Mark O'Brien: And explain what that kind of vegetable does for you.

Chris O'Brien: Um, it's just very, very nutritionally dense. So, you're gonna get a lot of nutrition out of

that. You know, spinach is also, but it's not as nutritionally dense as kale is, and kale just, it's one of those ones that it's just a power food.

Mark O'Brien: Okay, so you're getting a lot of bang for your buck, I guess when you're eating it. You don't have to have a lot of it. You can just eat.

Chris O'Brien: And you'd be surprised after you've eaten it for a little while. I know it has a bitter taste, I know a lot of folks have a genetic disposition to not like bitterness, but it kind of grows on you. It's just like --

Mark O'Brien: No pun intended.

Chris O'Brien: Yes, I like it.

Mark O'Brien: Um, it's, I guess, it's like when people have salads and they put Iceberg lettuce in there. You know, they're not getting any nutritional value because it's white, not even green. You know? So I guess kale is the darker the green the better it is, I guess is what I'm hearing.

Chris O'Brien: Exactly.

Mark O'Brien: So when you first attempted to grow your own food were you were you here in, I mean, in this current, I'm trying to remember before I met you. If you had been growing food, I don't think you

had been at that point. So, your first it, was your was your attempt before that, at some point, when you were living, you know, in Rockwall, let's say your condo.

Chris O'Brien: Its actually much later than that, and you'll probably remember when I tell you that my first attempt at growing food came out of a Christmas present. My son gave me.

Mark O'Brien: Oh, that's right, that's right.

Chris O'Brien: An Aero Garden.

Mark O'Brien: That's right, it was in the garage. Right?

Chris O'Brien: Yeah, at first, I had on the counter in the kitchen.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, I do remember that. Yes. How could I forget?

Chris O'Brien: It has its flaws, and -- but it also has, you know, some, it works to an extent as well. But yeah, he bought me the Aero Garden, and I decided to try and grow some greens. And with that, and had some success, I also had some tomatoes in there and different things, some herbs, basil. And it was a lot of fun. But I quickly realized that growing plants indoors, although it works, you've -- it's, it's more than just putting something on

your counter and having it do it for you so to speak. They were weaker, because they didn't have any pests, or any wind, or anything like that, to force them to become stronger plants. So then.

Mark O'Brien: So let me stop you there. So, you're saying that if you're if it's outside, it's like, almost like a human body, it has to develop immunities to certain things to survive, and so the more does that the stronger the ability of the plant or the product to survive this.

Chris O'Brien: Exactly. I wouldn't say that I'm a -- that I'm you know, necessarily authority on that subject. But yes, my limited amount of exposure to it so far, and then what I've witnessed myself, because, you know, I mean, I kind of use the garden as a chance to like experiment.

Mark O'Brien: Correct.

Chris O'Brien: Like, I don't always want to read about, I just want to see what happens, and so just being observant and watching what happens I've been able to see that, yes, they were plants respond to pass by becoming stronger, they and they even create components that make you healthier from eating them, because they have those things that they put

out against pest in there that help you as well.

And then of course, the wind helps them to be stronger in the sense that they just have to --

Mark O'Brien: Survive, or tip over or break I guess.

Chris O'Brien: Don't just say you want to have a big, big fan blowing on your garden all the time, but it's just a part of the natural process.

Mark O'Brien: Right, right, right. So, so you, so you have this aero garden in, in the, in the garage, and I remember when it went from the kitchen to the garage, and then, and then you decided at some point, I'm going to try to do this outside because I want to, I want more, I don't know, say....product, but you want a bigger yield, I guess is what.

Chris O'Brien: Exactly

Mark O'Brien: The term you'd want to use.

Chris O'Brien: Exactly. And then I use the aero garden a little bit, maybe for seeding for going ahead and starting my seeds early and then putting them out into the garden. And then I went from just using the grow light on the arrow garden in order to do seeds and put them out in the garden, and that worked really well. Ah, but I also like just going

out in the garden, poking a seed in the ground, and waiting to see what happens.

Mark O'Brien: And have you noticed any difference between those two methods? Or have they been --

Chris O'Brien: I think seeding my garden outside is probably the most robust way to do it. Some plants don't transplant well, they don't like to be, like this year is my first year to try a stock of corn, and I knew that I needed to put that in the ground, I couldn't put it in the garden into the garage, and get it started and then --

Mark O'Brien: Right, right.

Chris O'Brien: Transplant it into the garden, expect to have the same success, if any, so I just put it out there. And sometimes I try to be a little risky and say, oh, you know, I can't put this out until this time till the soils this temperature. You know, I experiment a little bit. And so far, I've got a nice stalk with corn growing.

Mark O'Brien: So, would you say your education on this has been from strictly experience of what you've tried? Is it come from any... has there been basis of some sort of book learning or reading? And then you try it? I mean, what was the Neil Sperry you know, the

garden guy, but I don't know if that had anything to do with --

Chris O'Brien: Vegetables?

Mark O'Brien: Vegetables. I think it was just garden. I remember listening to when I first came to Texas on the radio, and it was just people calling up about certain plants and trees that were in survival. I never heard anybody say I can't grow my kale. But, you know, where did this education deal from? Did you? Was it because you had to? Um, you let -- you read about it and said I'm going to try it, or because the Aero Garden was so good. You thought well, let me just try to bigger in a bigger environment, and I'll just experiment out there like I was with the Aero Garden where did it really? What was the genesis of your education for this?

Chris O'Brien: Ah, it was actually kind of, you know, not to use a pun word here, organic. I mean, I didn't just set out with this idea that I'm going to become a gardener. It's just been something that's crept into my life. Um, I had my starts, and I had some success. I had some failure. I mean, I you know I had aphids, like I've never seen before in my life

and you know, just different things in this but it's always intrigued me each step of the way. I've been intrigued a little bit more I was like, oh, next time I'll try this, of course, next time is not tomorrow. Next time is next season.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: Or the next opportunity I have. So, you have plenty of time for your brain to, you know, sit, and chew on it and think about how you might do it differently. Or you might be -- you do go ahead and seek out some, some information. But I'm always careful, like, I want to read about how you're supposed to do it., but I also want to kind of figure it out on my own, just a little bit, because, you know, that's the only way I might accidentally stumble onto something even better than what I read and so I don't want to be too anchored on everything that I read. Ah, I just enjoy, I, that this is the whole thing with biology in general, I just enjoy watching it happen and being really, really, you know, impressed by what can happen, ah, with plants, they impressed me.

Mark O'Brien: So, so it sounds like this is mostly just cut and try and you know just.

Chris O'Brien: Now look, you know it's not totally trial and error.

Mark O'Brien: There you go, totally trial and error yeah...

Chris O'Brien: It not totally trial and error, I, I can't, you know, I've done a lot like, I've done the reading with regards to you know, I gotta keep the soil in good condition. So, for me, that has not been any kind of slash and burn, or some of the things that you might read about. I've been using compost, and that's another area that I need to get myself up to speed on. I've struggled with it, I it hasn't been one of those things that I found easy, I've tried a couple of things at first, that just didn't work at all. And I'm trying different things now with some of my scraps in the kitchen and just, you know, again, it has to get to a maturity level with it's not, and that's part of the fun, I mean, you're not going to just all of a sudden decide to say, I'm going to compost and then have.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: This wonderful compost.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: It takes time. And it's a process and you just have to kind of get to where you enjoy the process of it.

Mark O'Brien: So how much I mean, Am, I was gonna say that -
- I'll save that question for later. So, if you -
- What have you found that limits your ability to, to grow something here, and we can talk from a different, a couple of different perspectives? Let's talk about space, is there a limitation to what you can grow? Because certain...certain crops would, or products would require more space? Or because you're really, you're really just somewhat growing for sustainability, right? You're not, you're not, you're just, you're just growing what you can eat, you're not necessarily trying to grow to go sell it at the farmers market in downtown Dallas.

Chris O'Brien: Exactly.

Mark O'Brien: So, you don't need a big huge 12 acre plot. But given what you have in the backyard, is there enough? I mean, is there something that you don't grow because you don't have enough room?

Chris O'Brien: Ah, I don't think I grow at the total, at the scale I would -- I still need the grocery store. I

mean, I, and I need the grocery store for my vegetables and mainly for my fruits. Ah. So I'm not, I'm not anywhere near a point where I could just go off the grid and supply my own food source. I mean, I'm not growing any grains, mainly when I'm growing as grains, so... so they're large plants, and they're fun to grow. And then like I said, I'm taking a foray into corn, I've got a little bit of carrots, I've got herbs, you know, I have the mint, my mint does wonderful. I have basil that I use and I'm actually addicted to fresh basil.

Mark O'Brien: Didn't you try tomatoes back at the condo also?

Chris O'Brien: I did, I had tried tomatoes. And again, this is where my, my desire --

Mark O'Brien: And that caterpillar was eating it up for some, whatever that was, yeah.

Chris O'Brien: That was actually a very interesting piece for me. I mean, I had planted the tomatoes and I had struggled with them and I had them in pretty good shape. And then here comes this caterpillars, and they literally ate every single leaf off that entire...

Mark O'Brien: I remember that. At the townhome.

Chris O'Brien: Tomato plant. It was intrigued by it; I could have pulled them off. But again, this is where I enjoy the process and watching things. I want to see what happened.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: And what happened was they ate the whole tomato plant. And then they went on their merry way to become moth and the tomato plant came back and it came back as strong or stronger, and it even produced fruit now that fruit never, never ripen because the cool weather came and it ran out of time.

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: I could have done some... going back now knowing what I know, now I could have done something different. I could have covered that plan or found some way to, you know, create some kind of a greenhouse environment for it and ripen that fruit. But it was stronger, and I, I took away from that, that's one thing I go back to for resilience. That plant gave me a lesson in resilience. You know, you can come back from things.

Mark O'Brien: Un-huh.

Chris O'Brien: And here's a lowly little tomato plant is teaching me about, you know, being resilient.

Mark O'Brien: Life?

Chris O'Brien: Un-huh.

Mark O'Brien: So, let me go back, you mentioned a few minutes ago, excuse me that you had to, you still rely on the grocery store, obviously, because you can't grow everything in the backyard. As far as fruits and vegetables go, but do you notice a difference If you buy something say kale, let's say sometimes you go to the store and I know you bring kale back. Do you notice a difference in the taste between what you bring back from the store and what you grow in the backyard?

Chris O'Brien: Well, let's look at that from a different perspective. I noticed that difference in the appearance.

Mark O'Brien: Okay.

Chris O'Brien: Tremendous. I mean, I go and pull a kale leaf, now granted the way I harvest my kale is one leaf or two a, a time.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: So, I harvest from the bottom, the plant stays vibrant the plant still produces, and I can eat

off that one plant because I have some very large kale plants for a long time. So, I bring, I can go out there and I can cut a leaf and it is literally perfect. And it's fresh.

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: It's, it hasn't spent a single day yet, in an environment outside, if it's natural, and I bring it in and I chop it up and I put it in my food. There's no comparison to that with what you buy, first of all, they're not even very well equipped at most of the stores I see for, for selling kale in a way that doesn't damage it. It's the, what this shelving that they use, they shove it into these spaces, and it gets damaged. So, you have broken leaves, and they're start to wilt, and sometimes I can coax them back, I bring them back, I trim them, I trim like fresh flowers, and I stick them in the fridge, and they come back a little bit because they are still alive.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: They are not dead, and then I can eat them and feel somewhat good about it. But in general, it never, never compares to I get out my garden.

Mark O'Brien: Would, would you say that with other things too at the grocery store like spinach and fresh. I don't know what else they would have, their okra and things like that. Do you find it to be the maybe. I won't say leave it too late, but just the environment of growing it wherever they grow up putting it in a truck and driving it to the store and then trying to make it.

Chris O'Brien: You know, it does.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, I mean, you figure it's gonna take at least the best case four or five days to get from where it is to the store. And then they got to put it on the store. So, it's probably been picked for a week before you get to it. I'm just --

Chris O'Brien: No, and a lot of people wouldn't even notice this because they haven't maybe they're one piece of the chain, but they're not at the beginning of the chain when they saw that plant when it was first harvested and what it looked like then to all the way to the end, when they see the person who's buying and what it looks like then. Obviously sometimes that chain can be really short, you know, maybe the kale is just coming from some local --

Mark O'Brien: Right, right, right.

Chris O'Brien: Farmer here in the area and it's really short
you get lucky.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: Other times you mean as you know, some berries
and things like that you go from the grocery store
coming from Chile or --

Mark O'Brien: Right, oh yeah.

Chris O'Brien: Really far away and you know it's been a long
time.

Mark O'Brien: Fruit comes from California. And it's just yeah,
yeah,

Chris O'Brien: Yeah.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, yeah, no, it's true. So now you have a
garden in the backyard, and actually you have, I'm
sorry, you have a garden on the -- In the
flowerbed. But then you have a garden stand, I
guess, I guess that's what I would call it next to
the house.

Chris O'Brien: Like a little raise -- raised bed.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, a raised bed. How is that? How, do you
notice difference between the two and that they
both, I mean obviously not the same depth on the
stand, but do you need that kind of depth to grow?

Chris O'Brien: Oh, I think a stand is gonna, it's gonna inhibited me a little bit because number one, you know, my flower bed that I found I had happened to have a nice location that was confined that got a lot of sun, and it was a bed itself. You've got earthworms, you have all kinds of an ecosystem in that soil, you're not going to reproduce that ecosystem and a container.

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: Or is very difficult to, and that container is going to be submitted to Texas heat is, is tremendous, and it's going to have it on all the corners all around the outside surface of it. So that soil is going to heat up more than soil and the ground would heat up, so you're not, you're just not going to have the same level of, of an ecosystem there. So, I tend towards wanting to do the no till, and where I don't disturb the soil too much when I plant something, because I want all that stuff in the soil that's going to help it to be healthy.

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: Because I'm going to be eating what's coming out of it. Ah, which leads me into the next foray into my adventure, which is to have my soil tested.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: And make sure that I do -- don't have any, you know, things in my soil that I may not want; and if I do I take measures to remember that, because I'm just getting to the scale now where that when might concern me when I was just getting a leaf or two here and there, it's still a concern, but I want to kick this further and eat more and more stuff that I have grown.

Mark O'Brien: So, you mentioned earlier when you talked about, excuse me. The slash and burn effect, you know, we studied that in class, like the Milpa in Yucatan where they will grow their food and then in the offseason, they cut it down, they burn it to enrich the soil. Um, how do you do that here? I mean the, I know you said you don't do that. But how would you, I mean, I'm not saying I guess you're not growing, isn't it you're not growing enough quantity, at the same time that would drain the soil of nutrients or --

Chris O'Brien: Oh no, I have to watch it because --

Mark O'Brien: So, you have to be careful how you, how you grow and what you --

Chris O'Brien: Yes. And I'm approaching that now in the sense that I'm going to need to rotate. I can't grow the same stuff in the soil, over and over.

Mark O'Brien: Right, right. That's my, yeah, okay.

Chris O'Brien: I needed to rotate, I need to probably give them a rest on some soil, and that's where we come into this space constraints, right?

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: Because I don't have a ton of space.

Mark O'Brien: You can't, you can't go somewhere else on the yard and grow there for a while. Well, this one take, yeah.

Chris O'Brien: Exactly, and like I mentioned before, I don't really want to till too much. I don't want to turn up the soil and that that's it. So even though I'm composting and I'm trying to get to a level where I can reintroduce, um, organics into my soil again, and replenish it which I use now with worm casings, and some, you know, various things that you can get it at the gardening store, but I want to use compost as well, and then I can enrich my soil again. But then I have to kind of, I have to

incorporate those ingredients. And that's going to take a little bit if I want to protect that ecosystem as well. So then I am going to need more space, I'm gonna have to say, oh, I need to rest this one maybe for season and plant or I need to swap where my herbs were maybe come over here and where my herbs, where I had my herbs, I put my kale. But then there, those are whole grains. I have some studying to do.

Mark O'Brien: Sure.

Chris O'Brien: But I'm looking forward to that, figuring it out.

Mark O'Brien: And, I think what's fascinating is it sounds like very similar to things you read about, and I don't want to get too dramatic, but ancient, old civilizations or people that have been growing on the lands for years that they have to learn how to manage that land, this is, yours is just a little bit of a smaller microcosm of what, what this larger problem is, you know I'm sure farms have the same issue, um.

Chris O'Brien: Oh, absolutely.

Mark O'Brien: So, with all this, you know living in Texas, you know I'm from California, where the sun is out

a lot, and your temperatures, I mean, if you're. Well, if you're on the coast, and they get into the hundreds, it's a big deal. But in the Central Valley, where most of the growing of crops is in California, it can get into 100 degrees, maybe not quite the intensity we have in Texas, but it can be pretty warm. Do you find things here, are there certain things you can't grow, or you have to be careful about based on the weather, that the unpredictable weather patterns sometimes, or even just the hot summers in Texas?

Chris O'Brien: Yeah, we have a challenge when it gets really hot, like last year, I had issues because we have so many days that were over 100 degrees, and even up to like 108 and more, with the sun just going to burn your plants up.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: So but I found techniques, you know, I actually created a shade tent for my plants and I put them over them for some of the tougher time periods, in late July and August, and that worked, it was very helpful and kept some of the moisture in the soil coming from drying out so much, and it kept the heat off of them. The thing I'm trying next too is

to have things that shade each other. So, you know, like my corn stock.

Mark O'Brien: Uh huh.

Chris O'Brien: It's, It's just a very small foray into it, but that is part of my thinking is that it's going to get big and taller and I can potentially use that for some a little bit of shade and the others and I'm thinking what else can I use, that would over the growing period, maybe provide some shade. Um, but then also, you have to think about too, there's some things you can't grow in Texas, because the soul content, the alkalinity of the soil is not conducive, like I would love to grow blueberries, I could grow blueberries, but I would plan to do it in a container, or I'd have to be very specific about a place that I chose to do it and I'd have to monitor the soil in order to --

Mark O'Brien: So that they wouldn't grow or they would grow, they would be like, really small or they wouldn't be very tasty. And what caused, what, what limits.

Chris O'Brien: They probably would just struggle.

Mark O'Brien: Oh, ok.

Chris O'Brien: They would struggle in it without the right content in the soil, and the right alkalinity, they

would struggle. And so I wouldn't get the good crop. The whole point is to get something better than you can get in the grocery store.

Mark O'Brien: Right, right, right.

Chris O'Brien: In the end. I mean, it just doesn't make any sense to have a plant or even in a person or an animal, and feed them, which is what you're essentially doing with the soil of a plant, what's not right for them, you know, if you want them to thrive... So, I would love to try blueberries, I would probably need to move to do it right.

Mark O'Brien: Could you grow, um, you know, I grew up -- my mother -- my grandmother lived in Washington state up near, outside of Renton and she had a cherry tree in her backyard, and we would go out as kids. I remember visiting her and we would eat the cherries off the tree. Of course, we had to try to beat the birds to it, you would get the cherry off and there would be a slice in it from the bird. Is there any kind of fruit like that that you've considered growing here in Texas? I don't know that, does fruit like that grow well in Texas, I, I don't know.

Chris O'Brien: Well, that and that's kind of one of the beauties too about having these different areas, right, that you go there, and there's something that you can't get at home. That's wonderful there.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: Maybe you can't reproduce that at home, but that's why people travel and it's why they trade, right?

Mark O'Brien: Sure.

Chris O'Brien: But yes, I mean, if I wanted to grow some fruit here, I could but I'd probably pick something that was more conducive to the environment, you know, peaches or pomegranates or something that I can grow here. Ah, the hot summers are always going to impact my growing. I mean, it's just, it's hard on plants.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: That hot of the summer. But by the same token, I have a longer growing season. I can start earlier, and I can end later, and, if I can make it through that sometimes I can even go over the winter. If I tried to like this past year, I was able to keep all my kale and greens alive through

the winter. And they're, they've come back really stronger than they were last year by a huge margin.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, I remember.

Chris O'Brien: I was just waiting for the pest to come now.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, so, remember going out there before the frost and the... the cold snaps to cover it up. Yeah, we see you see it. You know that when someone's covering their plants, you probably cover your greens, right?

Chris O'Brien: Oh, absolutely.

Mark O'Brien: So.

Chris O'Brien: Although they are pretty hardy, they are frost tolerant, most kale and --

Mark O'Brien: Oh, really?

Chris O'Brien: Yes, frost tolerant. I don't have to go out and just cover it. Now my corn is not frost, so you have to kind of think about that too when you're mixing up your garden.

Mark O'Brien: That's why you don't record an Iowa in the wintertime. It's only exists in the summer. Um, but did, to grow, like to grow, say a peach tree, I mean, would you need quite a bit of.

Chris O'Brien: You need space!

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, I mean, you couldn't put one like, you've got the maple, you can't see this on, the on, on the, the on the audio but you've got maples in the backyard we take one of the maples out.

Chris O'Brien: No. No. No.

Mark O'Brien: And put in an apple tree, but then you wouldn't want to take the maple out, right?

Chris O'Brien: No, I love all my, all my plants are equally loved, but yeah, my maples are dear to me I wouldn't take one out but I would, I have considered planting a fruit tree, yes.

Mark O'Brien: There's a spot in front where there's an open.

Chris O'Brien: Yeah.

Mark O'Brien: Where a tree use to be.

Chris O'Brien: It could get a little crazy, I have to watch myself.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah. Um, so the, so one of the other things I wanted to also talk about was, so at the church that we attended, we, that we attend, they started that we go through Dallas when we lived in downtown, and I think you first started, the Genesis was when we lived downtown, we were trying to find a place to grow things.

Chris O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Mark O'Brien: And they wanted to have these community gardens which you see all over the place that, they're not like ubiquitous, you can't, every corner there isn't one. But there's one over by the church here just around the corner from us, and there was some downtown, and we did try this at... at the church where we had a number of the community gardens. Do you think those are feasible things for a metropolitan urban area to work on? Or do you think that that requires, it, it. It's a hobby more than it is someone that's going to be sustainable, grow sustainable food, as I kind of look at it. As people looked at it as a hobby, but I don't, I don't know of anybody that actually has a community garden and they go down and they actually pick, they pick the fruit to go eat it because, like when the one we saw in Boston, for example, over by the Fenway Park, it was huge, it was huge.

Chris O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Mark O'Brien: A lot of them were flowers, though I didn't see a lot of food.

Chris O'Brien: Yes, they were growing flowers.

Mark O'Brien: Yeah, but I mean, I'm just wondering if that's something... How do you how do you envision the

community gardens? I mean, you've worked with it for a while.

Chris O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Mark O'Brien: Down in East Dallas. What were the limitations with that? And what were the positives with that?

Chris O'Brien: I was excited about it when we first proposed to do that at church. And, and as they got, got it going, and everything, of course there was a lot of hands in it.

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: And as you know, I mean, I'm still experimenting,

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: And so, I'm trying to figure this some of this stuff out on my own. Would I benefit from having a community of people? Yes. I think I would, I think that part would be good. But then... then you get the thing where it's like, okay, when I want to work in my garden, I have to pack up and head somewhere, right?

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: I have to get a car.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: And I tend to like go outside and work with my plants, it's therapeutic. Adding that trip, that commute to, it is going to distract from it, and then you've got your tools that you need. Um, and then you know, it's just a little bit, there's some, a little bit of a difference to it. Right? You get there and you get, I don't know, I like the idea that I can go out just before I'm eating and decide what I'm going to harvest and bring it back into my kitchen and cook it.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: So, am I potentially going to do a community gardens, just because I need the space? Possibly. Most of them I've looked at there, they're doing raised beds and, you know, I can certainly go out and plant a community garden and maybe meet some folks that are doing the same thing. I am... have like minds, and that's probably something I will get into because it seems like it would be beneficial, but right now it's kind of having fun doing it in the backyard and the whole space that I have.

Mark O'Brien: And so then, maybe this isn't the right question to ask. So, is there a way to do this? And I guess

I'm thinking in the terms of someone trying to grow in an area where there isn't a lot of dirt, like we have a backyard, you know, is there, is there any kind of process that you can grow something in an environment that doesn't have a soil -- a natural soil that you have, like out of the backyard? I mean, maybe you put something on top of the apartment building, you know.

Chris O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Mark O'Brien: And you just drag mulch up there or something like that. I don't, I don't know, even know what it would be, you know, is that does that limit your ability to really grow good food?

Chris O'Brien: Well, I think you can do all that, and I think even that people should have explored it, because I mean, even though it might not be perfect. It's better than nothing.

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: And significantly better than nothing and you might stumble on something really great. I mean, we have to explore and experiment and try different things. At the end of the day, do I think the plants need to be in the ground? Yes, I think they need to be in the ground. Like we mentioned, you

can do the container gardening to an extent, but I don't think you can take it to the level that I would eventually like to be at, and then also you mentioned other type things, you know, there is a hydroponic which is what the Aero Garden was based off.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: And that's something that another... another way that you can grow food but again, you have to incorporate some ways to keep this plant strong. I mean, though, you don't want your plants to get eaten up by pests. I mean I've got a beautiful, beautiful set of greens out there and I know the pests are coming because --

Mark O'Brien: They always do.

Chris O'Brien: I've already seen caterpillars. I know they're coming, and I want to stay organic so I'm not going to put anything on there. I'm going to depend on the plants and a little bit of, ah, interference on my part to help them along as much as I can, but I'm gonna depend on them. You take all that away, and I don't think you have the same, and that's just part of, ah...the challenges, and part of the... what it means to try to garden.

Mark O'Brien: So, okay, so now I'll ask another... and this is another... this is actually for my own personal edification was, you see people in the grocery store that say...excuse me.... that, well, this has grown organically versus some other product. Are they strictly there talking about pesticides and how they keep the bugs off of it. So organic would be like you're doing in the backyard, that you're not spraying anything, you just have to kind of keep an eye on, on the, on the little critters that are gonna come in and try and eat your... your...

Chris O'Brien: Eat my food?

Mark O'Brien: Eat your food, and figure out how to minimize the damage that in this...

Chris O'Brien: In some cases, I have to share a little bit.

Mark O'Brien: Right, right. Right, and is that what they're really they're talking about when they say difference from organic...

Chris O'Brien: That, and fertilizer.

Mark O'Brien: Because everything is grown. Yeah, everything has grown. I mean, it's organic from the ground. But...

Chris O'Brien: True, but yes, you're talking about the fact that I haven't used pesticides, and I haven't used

fertilizer, per se, I've used some kind of compost, and I've used something that's natural...

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: As opposed to just, ah.. chemicals.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: You know... that I went out and purchased. And then flood on the garden, to give nutrients to my plants, which tend to use a spark overgrows and things get stringy, they're just not as healthy. There is just no shortcut. I mean, we want to create a shortcut, and maybe there are some, you know, there are some shortcuts, but there is a give and take for each one of them. At the end of the day, you just got to go out there and you have to get your hands dirty, and you have to live with the pests, and you have to live with the failures sometimes and then come back. But you know, again, we still have that grocery store. There's times...

Mark O'Brien: Oh, yeah.

Chris O'Brien: When people were doing this, and they didn't have the grocery store. It was the... it was this or starve. So naturally, we've evolved to have these safeguards, you know, the... the pesticides and the... it... between starving and... and you know, using them,

you probably go with using them, but we're evolving to a point I hope where we can eliminate those and still not starve, and that's where you see organics coming in. There're more expensive and all of this but...

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: It's something I think that we need to support as a, as a people.

Mark O'Brien: So, given all this you've done to grow your own food, and it shows the extent that you have, and things you'd like to do in the future. What have you seen to be the biggest limitation? And then what have you seen to be the biggest advantage of what you've been doing here?

Chris O'Brien: It's been a tremendous advantage to me, just the learning, and the watching and the being amazed, and having fun with it, and then in... in the midst of all the fun, you get something yummy to eat. It's just so rewarding, it's hard work. Hard work is always rewarding. In the end, I think you know, you feel good about it, even if you fail, you still feel good about it, so enjoy that. The limitations for me, you know, the basic ones, right, which I think everyone would find that they

have, is time, having the time for the unpredictability of the weather, ah...

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: And then also, you know, it's just, I don't know, it's just a hard thing to do.

Mark O'Brien: Well, I guess I would look at it, and yes, and I guess that's the term I would look at is.... growing your own food, you have to be, I think, committed...

Chris O'Brien: Uh-huh, very much so.

Mark O'Brien: You know, you can't just start growing it and say, I'm not gonna worry about it today.

Chris O'Brien: Yeah. No, you can't.

Mark O'Brien: I mean....you look, you look at people in the past who've had farms or even... even they study, the people that in many other countries that are growing food, indigenous people that have grown their own food, and, you know, they work at it every day, and you.... they go out into the field every day and they do stuff. And even if you're in an urban environment, you still have to do that, I think I can see that as a limitation for many people from starting to try to grow their own food.

Chris O'Brien: Somebody has to do it.

Mark O'Brien: And other than that... exactly, other than that, they want to go have a hamburger, as opposed to eating a salad, say every day.

Chris O'Brien: Right.

Mark O'Brien: But... so, I really appreciate the time you've taken, I'd, I'd like to ask you one more question and that is -- what do you see? And I know this is a hard one, and we talked about it before we started. But what is your vision of, of, of the future of food growth in -- and when I say food growth? I mean, more sustainable food growth in the sense of people that maybe will try to go off on their own to grow food in North Texas. Do you think that? Do you know enough people? Do you have friends that even tried to do this? Or do you think it's... you see around but in your own personal opinion, do you think it's possible for people to... to really be able to expand where they are in... in -- I'm sorry, where they're living and be able to maybe be a little sustainable in their own in, in their own way with some of the food?

Chris O'Brien: That's a tough one. I mean, just knowing what I know...is involved in how it's a process. Ah, like we started out with the fact that I'm -- I eat a

plant-based diet, and do I see more people, because I see that as being the impetus for my garden.

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: Right? I became plant base. I had trouble finding foods that I wanted to eat that were fresh. I wanted them to be better. So, I started growing a garden, it's the things came together in that scenario, and -- but then it also go -- went back to my childhood and the fact that I had some -- I knew I could do this, I'd seen it happen. I don't know that everybody...not everybody has that trajectory in their lives and... but as people become more plant based, I think they are going to start thinking about this and I do think people are realizing the benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables. Then you take in the fact that our urban areas, I mean, we have to factor this into their design, we can't you know, as we sequester people more and more into apartments.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: And that type of living, you're going to have -- and I've seen this, there's been some communities going in downtown area where they incorporated farming into it, there's not, it's

perfectly possible and even, you know, a good thing to consider. You're building a housing development, put in some farmland, let folks in the housing development that be part of the community, that you're gonna grow food, and maybe it's a small subset of the community that does that, and maybe they help to support the others, who knows, I mean, I see that as another avenue. For those folks living in apartments, something similar could be devised,

Mark O'Brien: Uh-huh.

Chris O'Brien: And, you don't have to get in your car and drive, you know, 15 or 20 minutes to get to your garden that you're in the community with, it's right there, you walk outside your house, you meet your neighbors, not people that are you know... and that would work perfectly. Ah, I would love to see that right now, as you know, living in a typical community in an urban area, gardens aren't pretty.

Mark O'Brien: Right.

Chris O'Brien: Like they don't, they don't bloom and look wonderful.

Mark O'Brien: Right, right, right.

Chris O'Brien: And they can be you know, kind of, you know, awful looking at times this as the process goes. So, they I can be attractive too, but don't get me wrong, but they're not what people are used to seeing.

Mark O'Brien: There are not always in neat rows down the -- yeah, yeah.

Chris O'Brien: Exactly, and so we need to start thinking about gardening differently like that, you know, like I couldn't really, in our neighborhood, as you well know, plant corn out in the front yard. People would frown on that. But I think we can evolve.

Mark O'Brien: Good. Well, I think everybody realizes, um, I'm sure most people -- even I, when I was little, my brothers, sisters tried to grow this little packet seeds you buy --

Chris O'Brien: Oh yes, they do grow.

Mark O'Brien: And put them in the yard, and you do try to try to grow things you know, and you try to grow a carrot and see how that tastes, but I will say that I think, I personally, as someone who's not driven to eat a lot of vegetables.

Chris O'Brien: I know.

Mark O'Brien: I, I would say that I've been -- in some of my travels when I was in the Midwest working, when I first started working and I would be invited over to my friends, these people that I worked with, my colleagues their homes and they were farmers, they lived on farms, that there was a huge difference in the taste between fresh beans and fresh broccoli, um.

Chris O'Brien: Yes.

Mark O'Brien: And fresh corn, even though I kind of stop eating that for other reasons, but, but fresh food out of a garden is so much better than what people get in cans. I think there's a lot of people in the world that don't realize how fresh and good that can taste because they're either -- They're too busy going to the store buying it in can.

Chris O'Brien: Correct is the difference between something that's alive and easting something that died quite a while ago.

Mark O'Brien: Exactly. So. well, I appreciate the time, and that'll be it for this interview, and I hope that people who are listening that you've enjoyed it. Thank you.

Chris O'Brien: Thank you.

[End of Interview]