

*Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles:  
A History of LGBTQ Life at the University of Chicago*

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW #71  
DEL PESCHIO, JOHN (1950-) AB 1972**

*At U of C: 1968-1972*

*Interviewed: September 25, 2013*

*Interviewer: Kelsey Ganser*

*Transcript by: Skylar Liam*

*Length: 01:33:34*

**Interview (September 25, 2013) over the phone.**

[00:00 to 05:30—consent form and demographic sheet]

KG: Okay, great. So then, to begin the interview maybe we can start with -- well sort of with the beginning of where you're from and how you came to know about the University of Chicago.

JD: Oh, well I was born and raised in New Jersey, and in high school I had a social studies teacher, Frank Jeffers, who had gotten his MA from UofC, and was a friend of my family, and I thought Frank was a really interesting person, and through him I... he was the first person who told me about the University of Chicago. Also I was a real whiz kid and did a lot of research about schools, so I was very arrogant. I applied to Harvard, Swarthmore, and Chicago, and that's all I applied to. [Laughs]

KG: You're a very confident high schooler.

JD: Sorry?

KG: You're a very confident high schooler.

JD: I'm sorry I didn't catch that, but I was very confident that I was --- I very much liked the idea of Chicago and did visit -- actually I did visit, the first time I was at the University of Chicago was in August of 1967 for an interview, 'cause I stayed on campus, I had been at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography that summer for an NSF -- National Science Foundation -- project, and I stopped on the campus on the way back, and I loved the campus. I thought it was beautiful.

KG: So what did you perceive to be the idea of the University of Chicago as you said?

JD: I felt that it was a place where I could encounter original texts. I felt that it was an open place for bright people and I didn't want somebody to tell me how I was gonna think

about something, I wanted to really encounter people... Well, what I remember, my idea of the university was corroborated when I first came to the school, I remember going to pick up the books for my first class as a freshman and they were fascinating and I thought 'oh my goodness there's not a textbook in the bunch' and I loved that.

KG: So you were really attracted to the life of the mind reputation of the university?

JD: Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

KG: And it sounds like you generally found that to be true when you arrived, in regards to how your classes were taught?

JD: Well, as with any school, there were brilliant teachers and there were dull teachers, but what I liked was that even if somebody was dull, I was still reading Freud, I wasn't reading somebody's opinion about Freud, and so that was really important to me, and I felt actually that a lot of the advertisements for the university, I thought that they were expertly produced so that when I was doing all of my homework figuring out which colleges I wanted to go to I thought that Chicago -- I liked the pictures, I liked the college catalogue, I liked the way it looked. It was not my first choice. I wanted to go to Harvard [KG: right] and I didn't get in, and I was less clear that I wanted to go to Swarthmore but there was a family friend and a connection, one thing and another, and I got on the waiting list to Swarthmore, and Chicago was incredibly generous to me, and I had a full-tuition scholarship all four years, and I said 'Oh!' you know, plus it was the only one that accepted me

KG: That's very persuasive. [JD: Right.] So when you go there, were you living in the dorms your first year?

JD: I lived in BJ in Vincent house.

KG: Wait really? [JD: Yeah.] Sorry I'm just thrilled because that was my dorm when I was an undergrad.

JD: Oh really?

KG: Yeah.

JD: Oh yeah, yeah, I loved it, I loved it, I was on the first floor, near the toilet as I recall, like right next to the RM in my freshman year, had a view of the Midway, and was the envy of other people because I had a single, and then my second year I was in that wonderful octagonal room on the third floor, I think it was the 439, and so that was my sophomore year, and then in my junior and senior year I was in -- I got a deal, I got a basement apartment on Drexel, through a friend, who actually will figure in this story, and it was \$75. I lived alone, it was great, in my junior and senior year.

KG: So you lived in the dorms your first two years and an apartment for your last two?

JD: My last two years.

KG: So what was the social life like in Vincent in '68?

JD: Well, I met a lifelong friend, Mitch Bobkin, at Vincent House. It was kind of cool. All male, at the time, I think that Woodward was co-ed, but I don't recall any women at -- that may be wrong -- but actually no, I think it was an all male house at the time [KG: Yeah, I think you're right.] and yeah, and I don't know, some cute fellas and some people who I thought were kind of outliers and I remember ... that there was a lot of good conversation, and I remember in particular the house table that we would go to, and there was one fellow who was going on and on and on being critical and I felt monopolizing the conversation at the table, going on and on in his critical fashion about the resident master's wife at the time, you know, and I remember he just was going on and on about how she talked too much, and there was a pause after his long tirade, and I just said very quietly 'a common fault' [laughs] and the table laughed at his expense and I remember the power of wit -- that that was valued at that table, and I remember, I think I liked the whole -- the grandeur of the place, I remember that dining hall, it was so, you know, I was a child of the low-low middle class, if that, so to be surrounded by all those - that kind of lah-de-da stuff appealed to me immensely, that's one of the reasons I wanted to go be at BJ, because it kind of was grand.

KG: Yeah, it's still kind of like that.

JD: Yeah, although I must say that that new south dormitory looks way too shiny to me.

KG: It's sort of jarring [JD: What?] It's sort of jarring next to BJ.

JD: Yes, I thought so, I thought it was sort of mediocre architecture.

KG: We all think it's mediocre in BJ, it's like the blight on the south campus.

JD: Yeah, so, but in terms of the social life, I was... aware, when I was, I think when I was 17, I was aware that I had sexual feelings for men, but I was not at that point out and did not have -- and did feel conflicted about being gay. As a matter of fact I was looking through some things and these very first -- this would have been September 18, 1968 and we, I went to Woodward court and I got this note, and it said 'look fucking good (the girls)' and I'd forgotten that I'd written that, and I found it horrifying that even though I knew internally that I was attracted to men, there was still enough of a construct in my head that even in a note to myself I would say something that *straight*, it really jarred me to think that.

But I loved, I mean, one of the reasons why I wanted to talk about the time is that it was such a key time, from 68-72, the whole country was coming down, and that was so wonderful for me, and so my own journey at Chicago ran parallel to that Stonewall period, but I did not, actually in Vincent house I had crushes on a couple of the fellas,

but, and there was certainly, a lot of, uh, I don't think... I grew up as a boy with my mom and my dad divorced when I was very young, and I grew up primarily with my mom and my sister, so for me it was fabulous just to be around all these boys. I loved that, but it wasn't specific to sex and it was very social.

KG: So what made you decide to leave the dorms?

JD: Oh, well, one of the people -- well as a matter of fact the first man that I slept with -- was on the faculty and he-- and he was taken with me, and I must say I was taken with him, and enjoyed kind of being, you know, the object of, of somebody's attraction, and he had been best man at another professor's wedding to a woman, and that man had a brownstone and was looking to get a little extra money by renting out the basement, and also to have somebody who might be available for childcare. He and his wife had a young boy and a young girl, and it was a lovely basement apartment on Drexel and it was \$75 a month, and I liked the attentions of this older man and it seemed like an incredible deal. And I think I also wanted more privacy. I had my own bathroom, my own kitchen, you know. That's why I -- I made that. Well so my friend, my friend Mitch, who is a lifelong friend, he too had -- you know, certainly at the time at University of Chicago, I know it's getting better now, but most of the undergrads didn't live in student housing, there wasn't all that much student housing, and so a lot of the kids lived in Hyde Park, certainly at the time.

KG: Oh okay. So were you living in this basement apartment with the family or were you living alone?

JD: I was living alone, here was the set-up: it was a brownstone, and as I recall it had four floors, so the family had three floors, the parlor and I think two floors above, and then there was the basement, with the private entrance. It didn't extend the whole floor, however, it was about two-thirds of the basement floor, and in back there was a kind of laundry room, that the whole family used, but it was a private entrance and essentially was a private space [KG: Okay], which was great, I loved it.

KG: Okay, so it's not like you were living like their nanny or something, you were mostly on your own.

JD: Oh no no, I was very independent about that, as a matter of fact too independent, I think they got a little pissed off. I was very, very involved with my life at school, very involved in theater, doing very well in classwork, and I, you know, basically I was not available for childcare which was what they would have liked [laughs]. I would babysit maybe once a month, I would babysit for the kids, I was not involved.

KG: Okay.

JD: And frankly I didn't particularly like that -- I felt that it was -- I didn't find it a particularly joyful family, so... I was grateful for the digs and I tried to have a joyful relationship with them but they weren't, it wasn't...

KG: So when you moved out of the dorms, did your social life continue to be based on people you'd met in the dorm, or were you meeting people through outside social groups or through classes or...

JD: Well, I met a lot of the people whom I hung out with either through University Theater—I was very active in UT—and they of course were not necessarily Vincent house, and met Roger Weiss, by the way the faculty member was Roger Weiss, he was an associate professor of economics, and how this does work, okay, so, I was a member of choir in freshman year, and I don't know exactly how I met Roger, but Roger Weiss and Howard Brown were lovers, and Howard was a professor of music, but Howard and Roger had a home together, and I, through choir, I met Roger, and went to a party at their house and Roger and Howard were really one of the focal points for gay life at the University of Chicago during that period, they would have parties after concerts, the *Collegium Musicum*, which were the group that Howard was musical director of, and the parties were fun, they -- and I think it was actually at one of those parties that it first became clear to me that Roger had a bit of a crush on me, and... and I liked Roger. But it was clear that Howard was Roger's partner. And they were both -- they were both I would say about 40-something. And I was attracted to Roger but -- as it turned out, the very first man I went to bed with was Roger, and I did not... it was exciting but I actually froze because I didn't like... I've always associated sexuality with emotional intimacy, I like that aspect of sexuality, and it was so clear to me that Roger was just -- even though, you know, some of the sexual activity was fun, it was clear to me that I was kind of like a dessert, and I felt like I was kind of a bit player, and I don't like being a bit player, so -- but I was very fortunate that Roger was really quite a marvelous man, and -- though there was a brief period where we sexualized the relationship, it segued very quickly into a friendship, which lasted throughout this time at Chicago. And it was through Roger and Howard that I got into a more of adult theme, where I was meeting people who were not undergrads, which was exciting to me, which I enjoyed.

KG: And where were you meeting these people?

JD: Through Roger, and I mean for example, it was a beautiful house, and it was great fun to be 19 and to -- they were friends with Annette Fern who became the director of UT. So I was there at Roger and Howard's house and the guests would be me and the director of UT, so it was pr-- it went to my head. They were smart, fun people, and I felt as if I were entering a more adult world. Which is not to say that I spent most of my time with my peers, and the first person I actually went all the way with was somebody who wasn't actually a University of Chicago person at all, who was in a production my senior year at UT, and he lived off campus, he lived on the north side, and at that point I had already fallen in love a couple of times in an unrequited fashion, and this fella came along. His name was Ed [redacted], he was very nice looking and one night I was at Hitchcock, which was where Bob [redacted] had a room, Bob was also gay and Ed was a friend of his and I remember one thing led to another and we had some marijuana and I was in bed with Ed and it was quite clear that I was not in love with him but I that point I was just tired of being a virgin so I said 'oh wow let's go' and Bob was so sweet and it started --

and this was Bob's room you've gotta remember -- and Ed and Bob and I were all smoking some dope and then suddenly it became clear that Ed and I were, you know, making out and Bob actually gave us the room for the night. It was so sweet of him, I have no idea where he went. So I lost my virginity at the corner of 57th and Ellis in a room at Hitchcock.

KG: Yeah, that's a good story. Um, so it sounds like you were out and gay by this time?

[00:29:56]

JD: Well, what happened, what happened was that -- Yeah, yeah, basically, short answer yes. At that point I was getting involved in -- what happened was that I fell in love with a man who was my age [KG: [sneezes] Excuse me], gesundheit, who was really not able to... it was unrequited, but emotionally I was in love with this kid, and he didn't go to the university, he was somebody I was involved with through community theater in New Jersey, it was clear that I was in love with this kid, and that was actually the summer of Stonewall, that was the summer of '69, and I remember being in love with Jim, I remember once, this was... I was back home that summer, that's right, I was working as a lifeguard, and I was coming into town -- I was reading a column by an out gay woman named Jill Johnston whom you may have heard of, and she was one of the first out writers for *The Village Voice*, and she was talking about what had just happened the Saturday before, which was the Stonewall riots, and I remember -- or maybe it wasn't Saturday -- I remember it was the night that Judy Garland died and I remember "Okay I'm in love with Jim, I'm coming into the city that I love, here's this fabulous out gay person," and that moved me, I felt that I was gay.

KG: So um -- oh go ahead...

JD: No just that I felt very supported, I felt very supported by what was going on culturally, and then as I say, Roger kind of got into the picture, I was -- oh I failed to mention that freshman year I was totally whizbang academically, and that was certainly my most closeted year. Sophomore year—bless the University of Chicago's heart for keeping me on a scholarship because I damn near flunked out, not quite but I mean I definitely—I had a very severe case of sophomoritis, and of course it was the dreadful period of Kent State and I was involved in some of the protests against the invasion of Cambodia, and the whole university was in a turmoil that year.

And also I was coming out, and just the difficulty of -- you know, to be gay in 1969, was an act of rebellion, and I wasn't rebellious, and junior and senior year seemed to settle down more, and I was certainly much more out, and got involved in some interesting things. One of the things that I wanted to mention when I was looking through stuff, is in the spring of my junior year I was involved with a very interesting show that took place at the Blue Gargoyle, and the show was called "What Are Ladies' Voices?" directed by two women and it was very avant-garde theater for the time, the playwrights were Gertrude Stein and Tennessee Williams, both of course gay, and we did something very

interesting, I think, and it went very well, it was an exciting night in theater at Chicago, and definitely connects to what I think this interview and others are trying to get at.

[00:35:05]

We did a play called "Talk to me like the Rain" which is a one act play, Tennessee Williams, and we were specifically interested, and talked about gender at the time, and what we did was, we did the show twice. The first time we did the show, a woman played the women's role, a man played the man's role, the man was Bob Janosik, he was gay, I don't know if the women were gay. So Bob played -- first time through he played the male role in male dress, Marcy Arlin played the woman, she was in women's dress, and then we immediately followed it by me being in male dress, and Ann Beckerman being in female dress, but I played the woman's role and she played the man's role, and that night cooked. I mean, there were really shouts of bravo at the end of that night, and that was really one of the -- that was a key moment for me, where I was so out, I was on the edge, it was very interesting.

KG: Was this part of UT or was it something that students were putting on without the support of UT?

JD: Um, it was -- let me see I actually have the poster. I've got the poster for this production which I would love to give to the university if you don't already have it [KG: Yeah!] which has a -- I have pictures from the show, too, and -- let's see, no it actually, I think it might have been under the -- anyway it was April 23, 24, and 25, 1971, I've got a little thing saying that it was under the student activities board, but no I don't think it was actually uni-- it was an independent production, and as I say, we did it at the Blue Gargoyle, and I don't know if the Blue Gargoyle has come up, but the Blue Gargoyle was also where my very first gay dance, which was fun, and I did that as a senior, so at that point of course I was thoroughly out, but the Blue Gargoyle was definitely a place where a lot of questioning gay energy was.

KG: Yeah we have had some people talk about the Blue Gargoyle, and my understanding was that the dance that you probably attended was put on by Gay Liberation?

JD: Yes, I think so.

KG: Were you involved in that at all?

JD: Well, to the extent that I attended the dances and stuff, but no, my primary affiliations were with University Theater and I was not -- there were a few moments when I was specifically political, but I was always much more interested in reading or doing theater, I wasn't -- I didn't take part in the sit-in in the administration building. However, I do remember that when Nixon invaded Cambodia, I'll never forget, I was attending a rally in front of the administration building, a wonderful woman speaker was talking, and suddenly somebody tapped her shoulder and interrupted her to tell her that four students had just been shot at Kent State at a demonstration very like the one that I attended, and

that night we found out that David Rockefeller and the president of the university and some members of the board of trustees were having a meeting at the center for continuing education, which is that Edward, dreadful Edward Durrell Stone building, that I think is now the New Graduate residence, and we did -- and I was a member of that, I did become political that night -- and we, uninvited, went into that building and essentially sat down and said that we needed to talk to David Rockefeller, and Ed Levi, which we didn't of course but -- but I wasn't a particularly -- that was political, but not, and actually I don't remember -- I do remember Gay Lib but I don't remember it being particularly on my radar at that point.

[00:40:53]

KG: So it sounds like you were a little bit involved in Vietnam politics but not involved in gay activism, right?

JD: Sorry, what was that?

KG: I said it sounds like you were a little involved in Vietnam activism but not so much in gay activism?

JD: Well, no, see I would disagree with that assessment. I would say I was very involved in gay activism, but in my own way. I was -- it was often a topic in my school papers, my senior thesis was about James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room," I have comments from my professors at the time -- I was really... but my loves were theater and academics, and those were the places in which I represented being gay. Specifically political has never been my bag. Although I vote, in every election.

KG: In what ways were you being gay in theater aside from the performance that we were discussing?

JD: Um, well, actually that's another interesting story. I don't know if you know that there had been a plan to do a production of "Boys in the Band" at the University of Chicago. Kenneth Northcott, who was very involved in UT at the time, and was a professor at the university, wanted to do a production of Boys in the Band and he wanted to cast me as Harold and I grabbed because I -- Harold I think is a great role -- and I never knew what happened about that, but I suspect that that was just a little too gay for the powers that be -- it had something to do with Pierce House, that Pierce House wanted to do a production of Boys in the Band, I was cast, I remember talking with Kenneth Northcott and being very excited about the possibility, and then all of a sudden, "Nope, sorry, that's not gonna happen," with very little explanation.

KG: Oh okay. No, I don't think I've had anyone tell me about this.

JD: Yeah, well that's definitely true, and I remember my excitement at being cast as Harold, but unfortunately that didn't happen. So that would have been another area. And then I remember I was cast as Polonius in a production of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are



Dead, and we played Mandel Hall I think probably fall of '71, and I remember -- and I wasn't really conscious of it, but I was -- there was kind of an extracurricular acting class that I was taking at the time, and you know, even though I was out there were still moments when I would suddenly be a little embarrassed, because you know, being gay was very new to me, and I unconsciously played Polonius very gay. And... or maybe consciously, but I-- whatever. And my acting teacher said in front of a group of people, "Oh I just loved how homosexual your Polonius was!" and I kinda cringed, I thought "Oh really??" which it kind of gets me to another thing...

[00:45:00]

I think one of the things that I love so much about "What are Ladies' Voices?" is that one of my lifelong awarenesses is that I'm femme -- you know, my mom -- and it's... I played Polonius very femme, and of course you can be butch, you can be femme, you can be whatever you are, when you're gay, but... I have certainly felt discomfort, people judging me because I'm effeminate, and I've always resented it, but I've also been vulnerable to it, and -- so to me, actually, a dialogue about the butch and femme thing is far more interesting than mechanical talk about sexuality and who's on top and who's on bottom and all of that stuff. I've actually written about it, I wrote a poem called "fifi the dangerous fag dog" which is on the web [See Appendix I], which talks about how gay men can be very afraid of femininity. which I think is a real mistake, uh, you know, I love my mother, I love my sister -- love them and have been influenced by them, and so be it. I actually think I've gotten more grief for being effeminate than being gay [KG: Really?] yes.

KG: Do you think that -- was that sort of thing happening while you were at University of Chicago or just sort of over the course of your entire life?

JD: Well luckily, and one of the reasons I loved Chicago, is that that wasn't a big problem at Chicago -- although I do remember, I remember during the period when Roger and I were an item, that -- oh, and I had just been cast as Harold, and Roger too knew that this production was going to happen, before it began, and I was talking in a very -- I was excited, I was talking in a very, probably loud voice, and exuberant, it was exciting. And we were at a table just outside Hutch Commons -- it was a beautiful spring day, spring of my junior year, and even Roger -- now meanwhile I've been to bed with Roger -- even giving me an indication that, "could I lower my voice, could I be a little bit less gay?", so there were those tensions, you know here's this man who's in a committed relationship with Howard, of course he was an older generation, I remember Roger essentially non-verbally another man, they have a house together, and yet Roger's uptight about -- meanwhile he's sleeping with me, but I've gotta, I've gotta butch it up, so as not to embarrass, I dunno, the gods, so that kind of stuff was there, but among my friends...

[00:49:20]

Well we also -- this is -- my friend Mitch whom I've actually talked with Mitch about this interview, I said "Mitch I'm gonna mention your name do you have any problem

with it?" he said no, some of my initial reluctance in being friends with Mitch is that Mitch was an effeminate gay man, and a little too close to the home, also from New Jersey, and I remember particularly in my early years at -- my freshman year at Chicago, being particularly very attracted to masculine and, you know, in many cases straight guys because it felt comfortable, because it was attractive, because it was unknown, but Mitch was the first person -- first peer -- whom I came completely out to, and he to me, so in my embracing Mitch as a friend, I think I also embraced my own identity as an effeminate man, and got more comfortable with that.

KG: Okay. Yeah that's interesting. Do you think people were uncomfortable with you as an effeminate man because it was too womanly or because it was more visibly gay behavior? Does that make sense as a question?

JD: Well, I think... run that by me again.

KG: Sorry I was just -- something I was wondering about while you were talking. Do you think people were more uncomfortable with effeminate men because they reminded them of women or acted like women or because they were more visibly gay?

JD: Do you know, I think that it's an interesting question, and I don't know. I think that it's important to understand that, quite apart from one's sexuality, there are also demands to act in a certain way, firemen are required to act male, hairdressers are required to act effeminate -- nonsense, of course, but any time you step away from the comfortable, and obviously still, unfortunately, I think masculinity is supposed to reside in the male body, femininity is supposed to reside in the female body, and that's obvious nonsense, we're much more fluid creatures than that, so I would say, yeah, there's probably a gender anxiety, and that may go into the gay thing too -- I don't really know, I think it's related, but I certainly know extremely butch men who are gay, I've also known extremely femme men who are straight, so I don't think it's really... but I do think that an effeminate man poses problems, still, and for that matter it could be that a masculine woman poses problems, still. And obviously we still have a long way to go, although I'm delighted in terms of gay rights, but, you know, good luck if I fall in love with a guy in Alabama and wanted to live there and be his lover.

KG: Yeah, there's definitely some places where it hasn't really reached... [JD: What's that?] I said that there's definitely some places where gay rights hasn't really reached to its full extent.

JD: Oh absolutely not, right, and the thing is even though we have far more legal standing than we did, there's... you know, I mean homophobia is real, and alive and well, unfortunately.

KG: Yeah I would agree with you on that. One thing that you mentioned is that you were also-- being out and gay in your academic life, and you mentioned your senior thesis I think. So could you talk a little bit more about being gay and being academic.

JD: Oh sure. I was in a seminar my senior year with Wayne Booth, who was a wonderful teacher, I so enjoyed my time with him, and we spoke -- well my senior thesis was about James Baldwin, and I still have the paper, and it spoke about, at least that he was -- some of the themes of the paper were about the importance of honesty in the sexual life. I don't know if you know the story of *Giovanni's Room*, but it was a very brave book for Baldwin to write, because he had a huge success for *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, and then his next book was about -- first of all had no black character, and James Baldwin spoke as an African American -- and the love story in *Giovanni's Room* is a love story between two white guys, and he was told by publishers you cannot publish this book are you kidding me? And he did, and I loved it, and that was the topic of my senior paper.

[00:56:03]

And another great teacher whom I loved was Janel Mueller, and she was fabulous, and I remember one of the topics that I wrote about for her was sexuality in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and in Milton the angels can completely -- they can take on any physical form they wish, they can be men, they can be women, and they can change roles fluidly, and they -- when they have sex they completely intermingle, they actually abstained bodies, or fused bodies, it's kind of a metaphysical union, and I would often bring sexuality into the discussion, because it mattered, when I think about it, even as a senior in high school -- oh and this definitely relates to University of Chicago -- it was, remember me mentioning Frank Jeffers earlier? He went to the university. Frank was my teacher in senior social studies, and he asked us to write the topic of our paper on a sheet that was going around - - that would be passed around the class. And I actually forget what my specific topic was, but it had something to do with homosexuality, and I remember my actual fear of putting that word, homosexuality, on the piece of paper, because I knew it would be circulated among my classmates in high school, but I remember that I did put that word down, and looking back at it I'm glad I did.

[00:58:19]

KG: Yeah that's interesting, it sounds like you were bringing homosexuality into the conversation in your academic life well before it was on syllabuses, syllabi.

JD: Oh, you know, I don't really know about the academic evolution of all of that stuff but absolutely, I mean I thought that -- I've always felt that sexuality is a fascinating topic, I mean basically I, my own position has always been I get so pissed off with people asking why am I homosexual, it's like "why?" you know, "why are you heterosexual? Why do I have to do anything other than celebrate my sexuality?" You know? Sexuality is a gift in whatever flavor it comes, and so I -- yes, I think I have, I do think I'm a gay activist, but again in -- not -- although of course I've, I'm a member of various gay organizations now but no I mean I wasn't -- I really think that the most important thing is to feel comfortable, you know?

KG: Yeah of course. Could I ask you if you had any classes that dealt with gender, sexuality, sort of without your prompting?

JD: That's interesting in my first fall in -- no. Really it was not -- no not so much in the fall. There. Now was... no. No. Not that I can recall. It was mostly -- well of course when, in the seminar with Booth, since there were only like 7 or 8 kids in the seminar, certain sexuality was discussed, as a matter of fact Mitch was also in that seminar with me, and he was doing an analysis of Laura Nyro's wonderful album *Eli and the 13th Confession* and one of the songs in that album is about Laura Nyro's love for a woman, Emily, and so yeah, we'd discuss it, and I also remember in Wayne Booth's class reading excerpts from *Tiny Alice*, by of course Edward Albee, who's gay, and -- but no, I can't remember a class -- well in freshman year we studied Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and of course Freud, we talked about sexuality, but I don't really think that his version of it is my version of it.

KG: Right. Did you ever have a problem being out on campus? Especially since it sounds like a lot of your professors knew and were discussing this sort of thing with you?

JD: I don't remember really having -- I do remember-- actually I recall, well in terms of gay dating or social ostracization, being socially ostracized, no, it was a very fluid and welcoming place, so no, I didn't feel any of that. I did feel that some of my classmates had occasional homophobic reactions. I remember -- I actually forget the fella's name but I thought he was kinda cute, and we were in theater together and I was being flirtatious, and I remember with anger him saying "Are you gay?" and it really threw me -- not that he thought I was gay, like, yeah I'm gay, but the anger threw me.

[1:04:23]

Oh and actually I hadn't thought of this, but in my senior year I was involved in a show off campus, I was involved in a show called *Indians* by Arthur Kopit and I used to take the El to get up to where it was on the Near North Side -- it was on Lincoln Avenue -- and one time -- it was actually a great encounter -- one time a guy sat next to me and he was trying to rob me, and at first of course that was terrifying, but as we spoke I-- there was also something else going on. I remember opening up my makeup kit, because I would bring my makeup kit with me to the show that I was doing on the north side, and when I opened up the makeup kit to get some money, because the guy was asking for money, there was all this makeup and the guy said to me "Are you a sissy?" [laughs] I kind of chuckled and said no, I was an actor, and... and it actually kind of broke tension, between us, and I don't know why, but -- actually I think there was something kind of femme and lovely about this young man too, and I remember by the end of the time I had gave him a buck and he kind of smiled and called it quits and he didn't -- because at first he was kind of like, you know, so that was actually a situation where being femme helped me out, it kind of broke the ice.

KG: So this guy was trying to rob you initially and then he decided that he actually kind of liked you?

JD: Exactly! Exactly. And the thing was, when I opened my makeup kit, that he saw the makeup, that was what kind of broke the ice because we both chuckled. I remembered that oddly enough it got less and less frightening... so that was kind of lovely.

KG: Yeah, wow that is unexpected... an unexpected end to that story.

JD: I know! I know, I hadn't thought about it in years. I assure you that was the case... if I had to guess, that boy was gay.

[1:07:06]

KG: Mmhmm. Speaking of you doing a play on the North Side, were you part of communities in any other parts of Chicago?

JD: Well, Ed, the fellow whom I finally did sleep with, you know, went all the way with, Edward's kind of, you know, part of the Boystown community, on the North Side, and oh well, actually, in some ways, I still was in the closet.

Here's a funny story: I slept with Ed, lost my virginity, such as it was, and on Hitchcock, in Hitchcock, and we went on a date, we went for a date in his edge of the woods, the north side, and we were gonna go out to a gay bar and, I dunno, you know, be gay together, and I opened the door to his apartment, and Ed is in full drag [KG: Wow], and I suddenly got all straight on him [laughs] and said "Ed, there is no--" meanwhile I'm 5'7", Ed was probably 6'2" and I thought -- he has a rockin' body -- and I thought "oh my god," he was in this kind of a tube dress, and I didn't know that Ed was into drag at all, so I said to Ed "sorry, get into boy's clothes" so, you know, I'm sorry I did that, I should have just gone out and been a sport and had this lovely 6'2" in drag fellow on my arm, you know, why not, but I got all straight on him.

KG: Well that can be sort of a surprise -- I can't say I've ever shown up on a date and had the date be in drag before.

JD: Oh yeah, it was definitely a surprise, it was like "Oh my goodness!"

KG: So you did have some friends on the North Side who were active in Boystown though, it sounds like?

JD: Oh my goodness, I'm just thinking of another story -- oh yes indeed. One of the fellows who was in the cast... I'd not thought of this... one of the fellows who was in the cast in *Indians*, fella named Ben, who was married, to a woman, he and I slept together and they clearly had a very open marriage because I was -- I spent the night with Ben and the following morning Diane, Ben's wife, came in totally unphased and asked if we'd like some coffee, and I remember thinking "Well this is a brave new world". So yeah, yeah, I definitely -- 'cause Ben had no connection to the University of Chicago at all, he was through theater, and he also lived on the North Side.

KG: Okay. I'm just gonna look over my sheet here quick and make sure I didn't miss anything super important before I ask you a little about your life after the university, if that's okay.

JD: Oh sure, sure.

[1:10:55]

KG: So when you graduated did you go back to New Jersey?

JD: When I graduated I went to New York, moved to New York.

KG: And what did you do there?

JD: Oh my goodness, well, all kinds of stuff. The two things that I've really loved, in my life, are theater and writing. Never made a dime at either, really, but the idea when I went to New York was to become an actor, and so I had no money, and got a job very quickly as a secretary at NYU, found myself an apartment in the village for \$150 a month and started studying with Uta Hagen, who was a great teacher at acting, and a great actress herself, and studied with Uta for a few years, basically supporting myself with all kinds of jobs. I worked as a bartender, I worked as a waiter, I worked in various secretarial capacities... unfortunately have not found a way to do something that I loved and also have it be a thing that pays well. But -- and that is unfortunate, but I must say I've had a lot of fun so I... one of the things I'm most grateful to the university for is that it did not destroy my curiosity. I'm still a passionate reader, I still -- I remember as a kid at the University of Chicago one of the things that was often spoken about is that there's the Socratic Method where you start with the assumption that you don't know what the terms are, that you don't know -- that the more you recognize that you have no idea, the more genuine exploration can take place -- and in that Socratic vision you juxtapose with the Sophistic vision, which is that I know exactly what you should do, I know exactly how things should go, and all that Sophistry and certainty and... being certain has never really attracted me at all, I'm much more interested in the mystery of being alive, and Chicago was wonderful at not in any way destroying that desire, you know, to not have it all figured out, to try to continue to explore.

KG: Do you think that your friends had a similar experience of kind of having their curiosity fostered at the university?

JD: You know it was a mixed bag. My friend Mitch was -- I don't think it was as good a fit for Mitch, I don't think that Mitch really enjoyed the intellectual rigor as much as I did. Mitch of course was super bright, and he was actually a very big man on campus, he was editor, of the -- in senior year he was co-editor in chief of the *Chicago Maroon*, but he didn't graduate, because basically he didn't go to class very much. He was -- somehow I don't think it was as good a fit for Mitch. And then... some of my friends loved it and some didn't, but uh... it worked for me.

KG: Do you think your experiences were typical for the time that you were there?

JD: I would like to think that there are no typical experiences, so I don't know, you know I don't know. I think that -- I think that Chicago at the time was a very wide open place, and there were all different kinds of people, and it was of course much much smaller, the college. There were only, I think, 1700 kids in the entire college. And... maybe 2000 but you know not many, not many kids. And there were certain people who had real issues with the administration at the time, I remember there being a sit in to take over the administration building, ostensibly over the [hammering and dog barking]

KG: I'm sorry John, someone's pounding on my door and no-one should be here... I'm really sorry, I think I should check on this. Someone's trying to get into my apartment.

[Conversation about a dishwasher while John pours himself a glass of water]

KG: Okay not a break-in.

JD: Oh goodness, oh, God forbid.

KG: Yeah, the landlord just didn't tell us that he was coming to fix the dishwasher, so that's annoying but not dangerous. So anyway I told him to go away, so we can go back to talking about how there are no typical experiences.

JD: Oh yeah I was talking about -- there were definitely kids who -- there was a lot of political -- there were a lot of politically active kids in my class and I knew some of them and I just... in a way they seemed a little too sure of themselves to me, as if they really knew who the good guys were and the bad guys, and I wasn't for sure. I certainly thought that the Vietnam War was an incredibly bad idea, but it wasn't clear to me that the administration of the University of Chicago was the enemy, and I was very very grateful that when the administration building was taken over, that the professor president Levy did not bring the police on campus. But I was also saddened that so many kids were expelled -- to me that seemed very rough justice. So yeah there was definitely I think some --- it was a very fascinating, rebellious time, but I would think that most of the kids who were at the University of Chicago -- at least most of the kids I knew were having a great time.

[1:20:58]

KG: Has your perception of the university changed at all since you've been gone?

JD: Um, I worry -- and I actually met President Zimmer very briefly a few years ago when he came to New York, and I asked him specifically, I said "You know I do hope that the university gets" essentially I said "I hope the university retains its questioning quality" because I must say that a lot of the stuff I'm reading now, it seems that there's so much more interest in careers, in getting ahead, in -- I worry that it may become an institution that in order to survive in that economic competition with other top universities, becomes

more like them and less like itself. I would very much -- you know not that I -- it would have been lovely if there had been more opportunity, I certainly think it's lovely that there's the Logan Center, and it would have been lovely if there had been more support and more contacts when I first came to New York for the theater, or for that matter, for theater in Chicago, so I understand the usefulness of that, but I also think it's very important -- you know if you're a gifted young bright person, is it really that important that you immediately get on some career track? And I think not, and I worry that the university may be losing some of that. But I hope not.

It's certainly a much more physically rich university. I think that it's wonderful that there are more places for students to live, as I was saying I love the new gym, and I love the new center, and Lord knows, I tell you, if I were applying to schools these days I sure as hell would not just apply to Harvard, Swarthmore, and Chicago, I would -- because I don't know if I'd get into the University of Chicago, so I would definitely have to have more of a backup plan than I did in 1967.

KG: Yeah, everybody says that though.

JD: Right, but I do think it's actually true that it was certainly, in terms of statistics, easier to get into the University of Chicago in 1967. However, it was exactly the same group of people -- it was at that time I think far more self-selected, but it was still... lively, bright, life-positive, in most cases, people, who -- but I do think that there was less emphasis on career development, which always just seems a little premature to me, you're only 17 years old, you know, why should you want to know what you wanna do when you're 17 years old. To me that's a little frightening.

KG: Yeah, I'm just thinking about what you're saying now and I'm wondering if it's because the job market has gotten really hard for recent grads, and people my age are really scared about -- not necessarily not having a career but not having any job at all.

JD: Right, although the thing is -- yeah, I know, but what a shame. I mean, that's not a good reason to shut down possibilities young. The point is that whatever choice you make, makes other things not possible, and I -- I don't know, I think I would ask you the question, do you find that even in the early, freshman and sophomore years, there was a lot of thinking about what I'm gonna be doing in order to make a living, and should I take coursework specifically for that career choice?

KG: I think that as far as universities go, University of Chicago still has a decent population of students who are committed to the concept of the liberal arts education -- you know what I mean, that it's not professional school training, and I think the Core at the university really enforces that because your first year and a significant part of your second year you're taking classes that are specifically for broadening your general knowledge about social science and history and literature and science and things of that nature, so even if you come to the university with the desire to only take Econ classes so that you can get into business so that you can eventually go to business school or something like that you still have to read Freud and Marx and Durkheim and-- you know



all of those people, so. I definitely see what you're saying about people pushing for the job thing but I also think that... compared to my friends who went to state school we definitely still have more of an emphasis on liberal arts versus job training. Does that make sense?

JD: I'm glad to hear it, because I do think it's important to not be certain about lots of things, and it just makes me sad to think that one has to be so sure about what one's doing so young.

KG: Yeah, I think on the one hand nobody really wants that, people my age don't want to have to know, but with student loans in the state that they are, people who are 22 are really scared of not having work when they're done with school.

JD: Oh I get that, I get that.

KG: And I'm saying that as someone who just got a full-time job last week, I graduated in June. So-- that's my perspective on it.

JD: And you just got a full-time job?

KG: Yeah, I was just offered one last week.

JD: Well congratulations!

KG: Thank you!

JD: Is it something that interests you?

KG: Yeah, it's actually in the Regenstein, and...

JD: Oh no kidding?

KG: Yeah, I'll be buying books for the library.

JD: Cool!

KG: I'm really thrilled about it because I learned Russian in my undergraduate career and I'll get to use it at work, which I was not expecting. That was kind of my hope but it was not my expectation so I'm really thrilled that I'll get to do that.

JD: Wonderful, wonderful.

KG: But anyway, aside from my life story that's just my perspective on why people are so obsessed with having jobs even though they're like, 17-18 years old.

JD: Right.

KG: Is there anything else you want to talk about while we're still doing the interview?

JD: Um, let's see I'm looking at -- I looked at some notes. Um, no I think that I certainly enjoyed speaking with you and I hope that I've conveyed some of the essence of what it was like at that time.

KG: Yeah, I think this was, personally I think this was a really valuable interview because we had a lot of people from the time period that you were there but they were all involved in Gay Lib, so it's nice to talk to somebody who was gay but not doing Gay Lib, to have a different perspective of gay life at the university.

JD: Sure, yeah.

KG: Oh one thing I was going to ask you, you mentioned you were going through stuff from college, what sort of stuff have you kept from your college days?

JD: Well I've got some notes to myself, I've also got some photos of that show that I mentioned, *What Are Ladies' Voices*, I have some -- I've got for example the paper that I wrote for Wayne Booth that's called "James Baldwin's Artistry in *Giovanni's Room*", and -- so that's what I've got.

KG: Okay, yeah. I might have -- so as I mentioned I have this job so I have to stop working my student job, but I might have the graduate researcher contact you about your pictures from the *What Are Ladies' Voices*, because I don't think we have anything on that.

JD: Okay, great. Well I would love to share that with you, and there's a picture of me, and there's a picture of the whole cast, and if I say that was a very interesting show. And there might be a review -- I wasn't able to find a review of the show, but I would think the *Grey City Journal* would have reviewed it, so-- yeah absolutely. So what I've done is I've got all of this stuff in a folder and if any of it is of interest or -- then I'd certainly share it with you.

KG: Okay that's great news, yeah, I'll just -- the graduate project fellow's name is Monica Mercado and I will give you her contact information and have her contact you about the actual items. She goes to New York pretty frequently so maybe that would be the easiest way to get copies or the original items or whatever -- Whatever you would like to do to --

JD: Monica and I have exchanged emails, when I first read about this project I said something encouraging to her and she got back to me, so she may actually even have my email.

KG: Oh okay, yeah I'm sure she does.

JD: I'd love to share stuff.

KG: Okay, well that's great. If you don't have any more points that you wanna bring up I think I'm gonna shut the recording off.

JD: Okie dokie.

[01:33:34]

*End of Interview*

## **Appendix I**

Fifi, the dangerous fag dog

Fifi, the dangerous fag dog,  
makes guys nervous,  
gay or straight.  
She's so femme!  
Pink ribboned,  
she knows  
drag queens' stones  
were Stonewall's first stones.  
She knows mincing gaits got there.  
Fifi, strut,  
you feisty bitch,  
strut your dangerous rhinestones.

--poem by John DelPeschio published in Pearlberg, Gerry, ed. *Queer dog : homo/pup/poetry*. 1st ed. San Francisco, Calif: Cleis Press, 1997.