

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #9

FORDE, KATHLEEN A. (1963 -) STAFF

At U of C: 1989 – present

Interviewed: 2012 (1 session)

Interviewer: Lauren Stokes

Transcript by: Lauren Stokes

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Interview (November 27, 2012) in Kathy Forde's office, Harper Library, University of Chicago.

[00:00:00]

LS: We like to start with just asking what brought you to the University of Chicago.

KF: I'm from Chicago and I was in graduate school and was at Northern, and I wasn't enjoying myself terribly and I thought that I was ready to leave the program and sort of move back to Chicago. I worked for a while at a magazine in Oak Park and I was doing volunteer work at the time at what was then called Horizons, what has become the Center on Halstead, but I was a youth group advisor. There was sort of a drop-in discussion group on Saturdays and I was sort of an advisor for the young people who would show up for this and I really enjoyed that an awful lot.

I found too, this is sort of more than you asked, but I found that I had a graduate assistantship in the women's studies department at Northern and I found that I actually liked working with the students better than I liked taking classes. [laughter]

LS: Is that the department you were in at Northern, or...

KF: There wasn't a women's studies department at that point in time, I mean, there was, but there wasn't a major, there was just a minor available. I was in the English department but my assistantship was in the women's studies department, so I got to teach classes and work with undergraduates, and I found that I really liked working with people in that age group, and so I ended up working first at University of Chicago Press for the *Astrophysical Journal*, and I found that, I tend to be kind of a quiet introverted person, and I found that it would kind of reinforce my worst characteristics. With a job like that you could go in in the morning and say "Good morning" to your co-workers and then not talk to anybody for the rest of the day and I thought "Aghhh, I can't continue doing this," so that was in 1989 that I started at the University and then in 1990 a job here in the

College became available and it was as an academic advisor, and like I said I really enjoyed working with that age group and so I applied and then came over to the college to start working here in 1990.

LS: Great. So you said you had been at Northern Illinois, you had been doing some coursework towards the Master's but never did quite finish it because you realized you wanted to do something else instead. I'm curious about when you were there, were there, like, sexuality courses in the English department at that point?

KF: That's why I was at the Women's Studies department, right? [laughter] There were just like a small handful, not even sexuality courses, like "Women's Studies," and people called it Women's Studies back then, it wasn't Gender, it wasn't gender and sexuality, and so that was the place where the lesbians and gay men and bisexuals and—I didn't know anyone who was trans when I was in college—but that was sort of my core group of friends and we all sort of moved towards the Women's Studies department as a place to find interesting courses and to find each other.

LS: So including gay men...

KF: Exactly.

LS: Just because that was the place...

KF: Right! And I talk to my students about this all the time, that was one of the benefits of going to school—don't get me wrong, there are a million ways that this is fantastic, and there are so many resources and so many opportunities to be here in the city of Chicago—but there's something about being kind of sequestered in a small college town where you really bond with everyone and you really sort of interact together in a way that you might not if you had more options. And when anyone comes to town, any performer, any queer performer, everybody went, even the people in the community who we saw as grownups with jobs and families and stuff like that, if Kate Clinton the feminist comedian came to town, everybody went to see her.

LS: That's in DeKalb, right? It's kind of awkward to get to from here, if I recall...

KF: Yeah, it's not terribly far from Chicago, it's only about sixty miles, but there's not a great direct route, there's not a train line. You can take the bus, you know, you can drive, but it is a little isolated from the city.

LS: So had you been aware of your sexuality, that you were a lesbian before you got to college?

KF: Yes, I was aware from the time I was in high school. I wasn't out until college but I was aware since high school.

LS: And you went to high school in Chicago?

KF: I went to high school in Chicago, I went to an all-girls Catholic high school on the North Side called St. Scholastica which sadly just recently closed.

[LS and KF chat briefly about all-girls' high schools.]

[00:05:12]

LS: So you knew that you were a lesbian, but you didn't really come out until you were in college.

KF: Exactly. I didn't find sort of a safe space to come out until I was in college. I think I felt like I was far enough away from home that my family wasn't gonna find out and I was gonna to be able to do this on my own terms and I found a community of people who were really supportive at that point. It also was, you know, the mid-80s, and it was really a horribly homophobic time in a lot of ways. I remember our school was surprisingly progressive on issues of anti-apartheid and what was then called the Black Student Union was really smart about forming coalitions, which other organizations hadn't really done well prior to that and was really good about getting all sorts of groups involved including what was then the group called GALA, the Gay and Lesbian Association, and we would show up to support rallies and show up at their events and stuff like that and speak at rallies, and I remember one time—this is in the old days when places had telephones and answering machines—somebody left death threats on the GALA answering machine saying, you know, if you speak at that rally tomorrow we're going to kill you, or something like that, and we just sort of took that as oh well, some idiot's out there, and we didn't do anything about it. We didn't even think there were supportive faculty or staff that we could talk to about this. We just kind of shrugged and went about our business.

LS: Sure. So that was at Northern that the death threats were on the answering machine... and then you came here actually in a really awful year in the history of Chicago...

KF: Sure and it was interesting because I wasn't... you can be an employee of the university and depending on where you work in the University you can sort of not have a great tie to the College or to the rest of the University. So when I was at the press I sort of heard about this stuff and read about it in the gay newspapers at the time but I didn't really know... I wasn't greatly involved in anything at all other than being horrified by everything that I was reading.

LS: Right, right. So you didn't know any of the students who were targeted specifically but were just kind of aware of it generally... I actually was going through the Maroon last week and found an article your partner wrote about it that was republished in the Maroon.

KF: Oh really? That's funny I didn't realize that.

LS: I can send it to you if you want to see it... I recognized her name because I'd watched the

thing on Chicago Gay History. [Ed.: video interview with Kathy and Yvonne Zipter: <http://www.chicagogayhistory.com/biography.html?id=781>]

KF: What was weird is, she wrote for, *Windy City Times*... well, what was it then?

LS: Outlines? Or something?

KF: So then the owner, Tracy Baim, broke off and founded another newspaper and that would have been, you're right, in the late 80s, that was called Outlines. So Yvonne wrote for Outlines and I'm pretty sure that's where whoever was targeting queer students was putting their personal messages, classified messages.

LS: 'Cause they were personal ads, right...

KF: If I'm remembering correctly they were pretty innocuous. They were things like "Gay graduate student at UofC looking for a roommate," and so if a person would answer then they would get outed, and then, you know, horrible things would happen, so it wasn't even like somebody replying to a sex ad at all.

LS: That's just so horrifying and difficult for me to imagine.

KF: I know, yeah, and at that time I felt like I was a little bit of an outsider sort of looking in at this happening, but I remember being struck by, it seemed like it took a long time for the University to sort of get on board with being supportive of the students.

LS: So when you came over to the advising office that was in 1990, right, what was afoot then in terms of...

KF: So I think everything, resolved isn't really the right word, I think it just sort of fizzled out, I don't know this for certain but I think there were a number of people who felt like they knew who did this, who was responsible for this, but they could never prove who did it, and I don't know what happened to the person. I think they may have left the university or have been asked to leave the university but like I said this was nothing that I knew about from my affiliation here at all, this was just speculation out in the press and stuff.

LS: Right, right. So when you came into this advisory, you started as a College Advisor...

KF: Yeah, so I started as a College Advisor, and like I said, I had been working at Horizons as a youth group advisor and I'm pretty sure that it was the reference that I gave from the person who was the director of youth services at Horizons at the time that helped me get the job because that was sort of my greatest experience working with that college-age age group.

I've always been out and in fact sometimes I kid around with my boss and say I'm pretty sure this was the only reason that I was hired. [Laughter]

LS: Because they wanted to reach out to the gay kids on campus?

KF: Well, and they saw that I had a lot of good experience and they thought that this would be a helpful way to sort of reach... we're an office that supports students individually of course, but if there's ways we can support groups of students that's important to us as well.

[00:10:42]

LS: So did you immediately find yourself in a role of talking to, what was it at that time, it was GALA, right, were you supporting those students?

KF: Mostly I was... advisors are assigned students based pretty much randomly, and so you sort of inherit a student load of 250, 260, whatever the load is in any given year, students mostly from an advisor who has moved on and then you get a hundred or so of that 250 or 260, there's about a hundred incoming students who are just your students, they haven't had another advisor at all, and I think things sort of started slowly, a lot of the queer kids started to come out to me who were in my advising load and then would sort of talk to their friends and say hey, you know, my advisor's a lesbian, why don't you go talk to her if you're having problems with this or questions about this, so I ended up being definitely a resource within the office, and started to take on a slightly greater role after that.

And the Dean of Students who I worked for, Katie Nash, who hired me, who sadly has since passed away, was just always fantastic. Any time I had an idea or wanted to move forward on something, she was incredibly supportive.

LS: So it wasn't, I know there's the LGBT Mentorship program now, at what point did that become institutionalized, that if you're a queer student you can come and apply for a queer mentor.

KF: I sort of unofficially worked with the students who were the officers within GALA for years and years and then when it became Queers and Associates when the name changed, and I guess we should probably talk a little bit about LEGFASO, so one of the things that I did in the early 90s, and my partner was involved with as well, was we were part of LEGFASO, and LEGFASO was an organization that was formed by people who were mostly younger faculty at the time, people like George Chauncey, Melissa Roderick, suddenly I can't remember anybody else who was involved, Lauren Berlant was involved, who were interested in agitating the university to get benefits for domestic partners.

At the same time, there was a gay graduate student who was suing the university because he wanted gym privileges and library privileges for his partner and the university was fighting that at that point in time.

LS: Oh wow. What year was this?

KF: This would have been the early 90s. I think, you should probably verify the year, but I think U of C got comprehensive domestic partnership in 92 or so.

LS: That sounds right. [Ed.: The University voted to approve same-sex domestic partnership benefits in December 1992.]

KF: We were... it was so weird that on one hand the university was fighting this graduate student and...

LS: The gym privileges! [Laughter]

KF: Exactly! And I always say, at the U of C, we may not be the first to do something, but when we do it, we finally do it right, we do it in a really good way. We weren't necessarily the first to do domestic partnership, but when we did it, we finally did it right. A lot of institutions were granting domestic partnership benefits to same-sex partners and to students and graduate students with same-sex partners, but they were giving, like, library and gym privileges, and you're like great, big deal. So U of C was one of the first places that gave extensive privileges, including health insurance, which is what you actually really need.

So I was sort of active with LEGFASO, we were working to get domestic partner benefits, there was this weird and interesting split in the group, so like I said it was mostly younger faculty members and then younger staff members who were doing a lot of the lobbying for this but there were primarily but not exclusively some older faculty members who were a little bit involved in that but also looked at LEGFASO as a way to socialize and we used to have brunches once a month that were actually quite nice, people would host them in their house or we would go to a restaurant, but there was this weird sort of a split with some of the older faculty members—it was really actually quite classist—who wanted the organization to remain only faculty members because they were worried that if staff members were included, what would happen if the secretary or the janitor in their office knew that they were gay and so it was this whole split between the younger and the older wing which was very interesting and then after we got domestic partnership the group kind of fizzled out because where did we go from there.

LS: Because that had been your sort of rallying point.

KF: Yeah, exactly, and there were some other people who did want to continue it on a social level which was fine but nobody sort of wanted to take up the mantle and make that happen.

LS: So do you have a sense of what finally convinced the administration to change their stance on that?

KF: I think it was the fact that there were all of these faculty members who they recruited

heavily to be here who were interested in this who were saying this is something that's gonna happen, get on board or be left behind. And it was really interesting because I don't remember who it was but the person who was the head of HR, who I believe was a straight man, ended up being really influential in this, because at some point this had to be approved by some body. I don't know what the body was, if it was the board of trustees or who, and my impression is it was mostly or primarily straight people on this board saying things that were at the time really homophobic, not intentionally being hurtful, but saying things like well, if we allow gay men to add their partners this is just going to cost a ton in AIDS care—so homophobic and ignorant—and this person from HR said you know what, if you want to start excluding people because of expensive practices then you should probably start excluding women because if a woman gets pregnant and has a problem pregnancy that costs *this* much money, and *this* is the tinier amount that AIDS care costs.

LS: No more wives, right...

KF: Exactly. [Laughter] If you're looking at it just from a numbers point of view you don't really have a leg to stand on here.

LS: That's good, so he was kind of an ally in that particular fight. Did the graduate students get anything at the same time?

KF: Yeah, so then the graduate students get the same benefits that faculty and staff get.

LS: And that was simultaneous in terms of... were you working with graduate students in LEGFASO? Was that at all connected?

KF: No, we weren't at all, really. So I think the graduate group was kind of moving in a parallel direction from each other.

[Brief discussion of benefits]

[00:17:57]

LS: So that happens in 92 and then you're also advising the undergraduates. I'm really curious, just because you have such a long experience with talking to undergraduates who identify as LGBTQ, what's your impression of how that experience has gone for them over the past twenty years at this point?

KF: Let me circle back to that so I don't forget this part... so after we did this, after we got domestic partnership, the provost at the time was really excited about this accomplishment and about what it signaled for UChicago, and he gave us money to have a big reception, so we had this reception in the fall, and it was a ton of fun and a bunch of people came. I remember a bunch of students were there and I remember being really impressed because a lot of straight faculty and staff showed up and a lot of administrators showed up and that was just a really nice show of support, and the reception was such a

hit that the provost at the time said here, take this money, do this every year, and as long as I'm provost, you can do this, so every October we would have what we call a Welcome and Welcome Back reception for LGBTQ faculty, students, staff, friends, and then when the next person, when Geoff Stone became provost, he continued it, and he was so supportive of it that even after he stopped being provost he put money in his budget so that we could continue doing it for a number of years, so we have just continued this, so that welcome reception that the office of LGBTQ student life has every year actually started in response to U of C getting domestic partnership.

LS: As a domestic partnership celebration.

KF: Yeah, so I would sort of run the reception for a number of years and I'd interact with the students in Queers and Associates, and I would always say is there a project or something you want to work on this year, we can work on whatever you want, and one year, about 2000 or so, a student said you know what, we really love that reception but we would like to have more time to work with faculty and staff members than just a once a year shot.

I had been thinking about trying to start a mentoring program, and I didn't really know what shape it would take, and I said, you know, if you want to do this now, let's work towards that, and so this was in 2000, and I worked with this crazy, so-much-fun, amazing guy from CAPS, what was then CAPS, named Jim Howley, and he and I went on this fact-finding mission to see what we could find out about mentoring programs, and we searched a bunch of schools and we couldn't find anything at that point in time. Most of the places that had it would have peer-to-peer mentoring, which was great but wasn't what we were looking for, and often they would be housed in their Student Mental Health Offices.

LS: LGBTQ peer-to-peer mentoring?

KF: Yeah.

LS: That's interesting, it just seems like your peers are often your peers...

KF: Exactly, and that's why we wanted students to have a substantively different experience, because students, you know, have so many more role models than they used to, and can sort of envision what their life is like up until about 25 or maybe 30 or so, but seemed, at least at that time that we were starting the mentoring program, seemed that there was kind of a drop-off point to what they could imagine their lives would be like in their late 20s or early 30s, they have parents as role models, but most of them probably didn't have queer role models at all, and how do you sort of fashion a life, and you know, how do you do the things you want to do, and what's it like if you want to have a family.

I always think that, you know, my partner and I have been together forever, we're going to have our 25th anniversary next month, and I always say we're the most boring people in the world, and yet students are just really interested and continue to be interested in what I think of as the intangible things. Like they would ask questions of us like "When

you bought your house, were you nervous?” and looking back on it, initially, I think, yeah, we were really nervous, we didn’t think we’d be able to afford it, but then, sort of thinking a little bit deeper about it, I thought oh yeah, we *were* really nervous, we didn’t know what it would be like twenty years ago to buy a house and be *the* lesbian couple on the block. What would that be like, would we be accepted, would we be shunned? And you know, Chicago has this occasionally horrible history, six months or so before we moved to the neighborhood that we moved to, this sounds so antiquated, but an African-American family had a cross burnt on their lawn. And we’re like, okay, so how is this going to work out for us? So like I said I hadn’t even thought about that at all, but yeah, that was actually a big concern, and how do you...

There was a mentor in the program, she and her partner have a couple children, and you know, students would ask, like “How do you navigate parent-teacher conferences? Who goes?, and how does that work with the teacher and do your kids ever suffer homophobia because of who you are?” Just stuff that you probably don’t have anyone else to talk to about this.

LS: Right. So you kind of found that you thought of yourself as this boring couple, and now you’re this resource for undergraduates, who—I remember feeling the same way. There was one out gay teacher at our all girls’ high school, but he was a guy, who was the drama teacher [laughter], so we’re like, this is great, but we’re all women here, and so how do you be an out lesbian? I mean, I had no idea when I was eighteen.

KF: I had a friend in college who told the goofiest story. She actually was a friend after college, but she told the goofiest story. When she was in college, she played softball and she and her girlfriend were on the softball team and they thought they were the only lesbians there and of course they weren’t. Then they started to find a small group of other lesbians that they would hang around with, and they knew that the coach was a lesbian, but she was not out to anyone, so I don’t know why they did this, but after Christmas they went around and they collected all of these Christmas trees that people had thrown out, and then they dumped them on her lawn. [Laughter] I don’t know what they were trying to do, if this was like vandalism, if this was them thinking they were being funny, and I remember talking to her afterwards, and this was four or five years after she did this, and she’s like “I can’t for the life of me figure out what we were trying to do, but at the time it seemed like Yeah, let’s do this, this will be great, we’ll do this all together.” But yeah, there was nothing for her at that time. She felt like there’s nobody that I can talk to who’s sort of older than my friends, and then apparently that manifests itself in some really weird and, you know, maybe unhealthy ways, like dumping dead Christmas trees on someone’s lawn.

[00:25:04]

LS: [Laughter] Are there a lot of... how big has that program gotten in the meantime, the mentorship program?

KF: At our peak... I think that we’re often victims of our own success, which is good. When

we started there were not a ton of resources for queer undergraduates, and I started this with the full blessing of Katie Nash, who was the Dean of Students at the College, and we got funding from the Dean of Students, and I remember we had a one year anniversary party, and Katie showed up, and John Boyer showed up, and we had this big cake, and it was really great, so for a while we were kind of the only game in town, so we had a pretty big participation rate. At our peak, among faculty to students and staff, we had about a hundred people participating in the program. Years-wise this would have been probably like 2003-2004.

Then the good news is we start to get more resources and more people working on LGBTQ stuff, with the opening of 5710 five years ago now, five years ago in February, and the opening of the Office of LGBTQ student life and then with the hiring of Jeff Howard, there's tons of fantastic stuff here, great resources available, and so we definitely are a smaller program, and the program has just recently transferred over to Jeff's office, which is really nice, because he is able—and I continue to work with him on this—but since it's housed in that office, he's able to offer mentoring for graduate and professional school students.

We couldn't do that with our program because the program was funded out of the College and so the resources had to be for college students, and I would always get, you know, fantastic graduate students who would apply to be mentors, and sometimes I would make exceptions if the person was like forty and had come back to graduate school and had been working for a number of years, but we really wanted students to have a very substantively different experience. You know, not that there's anything wrong with a fantastic 24 or 25 year old mentor who's a graduate student, but we wanted them to have somebody a little bit older with a little bit more life experience, so it's really great to have Jeff be able to offer that, because some grad and professional school students need mentors and want to have mentors and some want to be mentors.

LS: I guess they all have sort of their different challenges, like if you're planning on being a lawyer or a doctor, there's a particular set of... what does it mean to be queer in that context, so that's interesting... I'm trying to remember what my next question was [laughter].

So in terms of the students, over the course of the 90s, so to go back to something we were talking about earlier, actually, when you came in this 87 to 91 period, there was this Great White Brotherhood of the Iron Fist and there was a lot of really overt homophobia on campus. Having had more interaction with the undergraduate students since then, have you... what's been the homophobia trend, I guess, as sort of awful as that question sounds?

KF: I would imagine there still is, I mean, this is a very naïve thing to say, but I would imagine there is still homophobia, but it seems that if and when it happens, and if and when students step forward to talk about it, it's taken much more seriously, and people do something about it much more quickly than they used to. So I think that this is now seen as a place where that's just not acceptable at all, which is really great to see.

I'm trying to think of sort of the differences between... I remember, I can't remember what year this would have been, but there was a gay male student who was dancing at a frat party a number of years ago, who was dancing with another man, and he got a beer can thrown at him, which is horrible, but what—and I talked to him afterwards—but what he said was, the response from the university and from people in his house, and his resident heads, and within the central Dean of Students office, was just so fantastic and so supportive, that, you know, he just felt really, I mean, he didn't feel good about it, but he felt like this is something that people are taking seriously.

LS: Right, which is a big change from 1991...

KF: Yeah, exactly, and then I remember talking to a colleague who worked in this office, a gay man, and we said sort of privately, like "Wow, he was dancing with another man at a frat party, that would have never happened when we were in college," [Laughter] that's fantastic in and of itself!

LS: Yeah, just that, the space wasn't entirely safe, but just that you could even imagine that it might be, is a real change from probably 1984 or something... that's interesting... What about in terms of, because you've been working with GALA and then Queers and Associates... was that a very straightforward change? At some point did they say, now we're queers?

[00:30:20]

KF: Yeah, it was, at some point, it was really funny... there was always a movement to be more inclusive, because Gay and Lesbian Association is not a terribly inclusive name, and I remember it was funny at the time, this must have been about the mid-90s, the students involved had sort of thought about, should we figure out a way to be like BT-GALA, would that be better, BT-GALA, A for Allies, and then they started to think that, they had been good U of C students and taken some gender studies courses and started to think about sexuality on a continuum and realized that queer was a word that was much more encompassing and it was a way to sort of take back language that had been used against them.

I remember, again, we were not necessarily the first to do it, but we always do it right, or we do it in a really good way, I remember them doing this pretty early on in, and I remember I had a Queers and Associates poster up on the bulletin board outside of my office and some student was there outside of my office, and he came in and he was looking at it, and he said "Excuse me, can I ask you a question?" and I said "Sure," and he said "I'm from a California school, and I'm just here visiting a friend of mine, and I noticed this Queers and Associates, and I have to tell you that if we named something Queers, it would be seen as an insult." He's like "I don't mean to be disrespectful, but could we talk about this?" So I ended up talking to this student who's not even a U of C student about this, so that was very interesting.

- LS: Do you remember what year that happened?
- KF: I can't remember, I should try to figure it out.
- LS: It's one of the things we're trying to pin down...
- KF: I remember quite well the students who were involved at the time, so there was a student named J.D Huntsman... I should look him up, and try to figure out what year that was, because I remember there used to be a very active e-mail list host, like a GALA list-host, and I remember him posting an awful lot about the name change at that time.
- LS: Right, should we become Queers and Associates, should we just add a lot of letters...
- KF: Yeah, and at least the people who were responding were quite supportive and excited about the name change, making it much more encompassing...
- LS: And then, in terms of sort of what students have been... even in the eight years since I've been in college, I feel like more and more undergraduates are already out when they get to college, and the bare experience is even different from eight years ago... do you have any thoughts about long term trends that you've seen?
- KF: Yeah, we're definitely seeing more and more students who are out when they get here, and have come out in high school, and put being out on their application in some way, whether they're the head of the Gay-Straight Alliance, or whatever their other sort of volunteer activities are, and it used to be... so there have been a handful of gay male, I guess just mostly gay men and me, occasionally gay men and lesbians who work in this office, well that's not true, there was another lesbian for a little while who worked in this office...

But anyway it was very common back then, like in the early to mid 90s, students can switch advisors, it doesn't happen terribly often, but they can fill out a petition to Susan Art, who is now the Dean of Students, and who is also wonderfully supportive, and they can switch advisors, and it might be the kind of thing like oh, you know, my advisor's really nice, but he and I or she and I just don't click very well, or I'm looking for an advisor who gives me more direction, my advisor is more open-ended, that kind of stuff, students can do that, it doesn't happen terribly often, but back then it was really common for lesbian, gay, bi and then the occasional trans students to switch advisors to have a gay or lesbian advisor, and so I remember at one point I had an advisee load that, if you think about whatever percentage we think, like if ten percent of the population is queer, I had, like, fifteen percent of my advising load was queer.

- LS: So there was clearly some switching going on.
- KF: Yeah, exactly, and so that kind of stuff doesn't happen as much. I think because students who feel they can come out to their advisors feel very supported by their advisors, and

not that advisors were homophobic or unsupportive in any way, but I think it's just more common than it used to be.

LS: Right, just didn't necessarily know what to say, in a way that wouldn't be true as much...

KF: Right, I remember a couple of years ago we had an in-service, talking about resources for trans students, and a number of advisors confided in me that they were really disappointed that they didn't have any trans students, [laughter], and was it something that they were doing wrong?

LS: That's interesting in and of itself... obviously that happens that kids also come here and they come out as trans, and is that also something that you see more now?

KF: Oh, definitely. And much more, you know, parent involvement and parent support, definitely.

LS: People are less afraid generally of coming out to their parents now than they used to be? I know that's extremely variable...

KF: I was going to say, I don't... at least of the students who are coming here it was really interesting, we often will get trans students who will contact our housing office, because you know we have a really great open housing policy, and or contact Jeff and the LGBTQ Student Life Office just to talk about resources for trans students during like their prospie weekend and stuff.

So yeah, I mean we probably have a very small sample of the trans students in the US who are here at the U of C, they seem like, at least in the past five years or so, much more able and interested to come out as trans and sort of seek resources that are appropriate for them.

[00:36:20]

LS: With the open housing policy, were you involved at all in getting that going?

KF: Yeah, it was mostly Ana Campos, who is the acting director, or the interim director I guess of the Housing Office, is just fantastic. She's just wonderful, and she put together a committee that was made up of primarily people working in housing, so it was resident heads, some housing staff, you know people who work in the office over there, a lot of students who live in housing, some are RAs, some students who just live in housing, and some Resident Master was there, I was there as well, as a representative of the Dean of Students in the College office. Ana just did a ton of work sort of researching what different schools were doing, and we were shocked to hear what some of the schools were doing. I can't remember where it was, it was a school out East, it might have been either Yale or Harvard but I can't remember, they allowed you, if you were trans, to live in—a lot of places had just, sort of special trans housing, and we didn't want anything like that.

LS: Like a separate dorm, where trans kids went?

KF: Yeah! You can live in like the hippie dorm, you know, or the wellness dorm, or you know, we don't have any theme housing here at all, so some of them had stuff like that and then some would allow you to live—and I didn't understand this entirely, but let's say that you identify as female, they would allow you to live in a single on a floor with female students as long as you had purchased a special lock that would go on your dorm room. Why you as a trans student would need a special lock over anyone else's lock...

LS: Like to lock you in, rather than...

KF: Yeah, I'm not entirely sure why, but that just... I think a lot of places try to do things to seem accommodating and to be helpful to students but don't really realize what they're saying or doing, so we got to, you know, have the benefit of hearing some of the good things that were happening at other institutions and some of the things that we just didn't find helpful at all, and we crafted what we thought was a very UChicago policy that was very supportive and helpful.

LS: So what is the policy, what's it's...

KF: So after your first year students can live with anyone they want, students can live with someone... they select their roommate based on who they want to live with, not the person's gender at all. There are a couple of houses that stay within housing as single gender houses and even though essentially the policy says it's for students in their second year, if you're an incoming trans student there's information on the housing application that says if you're interested in hearing more about the Open Housing option check here. The hope is, the housing office wants to be able to accommodate trans students in their first year, there are just some issues with some of the students come here and they're not yet 18 and so their parents have to sign their housing contract and so there's stuff that the housing office wants to make them aware of, like we can house you in this house, but your parents are going to sign this form, and we want you to know, are you going to be comfortable with telling them that you're living in this housing situation?

LS: Okay, okay. So you can ask to live with anyone.

KF: Exactly, and it works out really well, I mean lots of people, and then this was another thing too, when whoever had to approve this, whatever governing body above all of us had to approve this, they were saying things like, well isn't this just a chance for... like would pregnancies go up, because straight couples would be living together, and one, that assumes that straight couples aren't already living together [laughter]. Even if you know, you have a boyfriend, and your boyfriend lives in this house, but spends his nights all the time with you in this house, they're assuming that's not happening, and also, why would queer students get to live with their partners?

LS: Partners, and straight students not...

KF: Right, that doesn't seem right, and so there was a lot of sort of not-understanding, and people had to explain that to whoever was making these decisions, but...

LS: But it went through, so that's good...

KF: And part of this was, you know, predicated on the work that queer students did a couple years before to get more gender-neutral bathrooms available on campus.

[00:41:00]

LS: When was that, that was a big initiative here?

KF: Again, you should probably, I should figure out which years it was, I'm but I'm thinking probably like the mid-2000s? 2005, 2006. [Ed.: starting in 2003] There was just a group of students who thought it would be really important to have bathrooms available sort of all across campus, and it got a lot of attention, including getting picked up by Rush Limbaugh and made fun of by Rush Limbaugh, which is actually kind of a good thing [laughter], but what's sort of interesting about any civil rights thing is it always benefits more than the intended community, so after we started to institute some gender-neutral bathrooms on campus, we started to hear from Muslim students who weren't necessarily trans, but who said these are so helpful to us, because if we pray during the day we're supposed to do ablutions beforehand, and it's really nice for us to be able to use a bathroom that's a single-user bathroom.

LS: Oh, wow... I had no idea that that was one of the things about gender-neutral bathrooms, that's kind of awesome.

KF: And boy, if you've ever had, if you're lugging a toddler around, or... you know we spend a lot of time with my niece and nephew, with our niece and nephew, and our nephew, he just turned eight, and I'm sorry, I won't let him go in a men's bathroom by himself, but he's kind of too old to come into a women's bathroom and not make other people uncomfortable, and so if there's anything like a family bathroom or a gender-neutral bathroom where you can all go in and lock the door, that makes things much easier...

LS: That makes things easier for parents and all, right... I'm trying to think of other questions. So you're *civilized*, you had also mentioned [Ed.: referring to "in a civil union"], your partner, is she also at the U of Chicago?

KF: She is, so she's been here forever, sort of forever. She worked here even longer before I did, and she worked for the U of C Press, and she actually left the press about six or seven years ago. She had really wanted to become a massage therapist and sort of felt like now was the time to do it, and she went, ended up going to massage therapy school and having a great time and learned great stuff and then she worked as a massage therapist for probably about five or six years but it was right at the time that the economy tanked, and it was so funny because she loved the work that she was doing but she kept saying "I

miss campus,” even though she’s way over at the Press, which is almost up by the Metra tracks, I miss the libraries, I miss having intellectual conversations, we always kind of kid around that the Press is the kind of place where once you’re there, you’re always there, so she ended up going back to work at the Press, so she’s kind of got the best of both worlds now, she works full time for the Press, but then ends up doing massage on the weekends.

LS: Did you meet when you were both at the Press?

KF: No, we actually met when I was at Northern. I always tell my students it’s so much easier to stalk people now, like if you’re interested in someone it’s so much easier to stalk her.

LS: [Laughter] That’s kind of dangerous though, right?

KF: Yeah, exactly, it can go too far, into criminal areas, but...

LS: Yeah [laughter].

KF: You know, when we were in college, we had to pretend to run into someone, so you would stand in a building for three hours and then say “Oh, do you have a class here, I didn’t know that!”

LS: “Fascinating!” [Laughter]

KF: Yeah, exactly, but so I say that I used to stalk Yvonne. She wrote that column for *Windy City* and then for *Outlines*, and I really enjoyed her columns, and I enjoyed her humor, and I knew that she liked Kate Clinton an awful lot, the feminist comedian, and we were doing a women’s history month celebration at Northern, and I ended up, I had this goofy idea that Yvonne actually worked in an office, like at *Windy City Times* writing on a computer or something like that, of course it’s not like that, she was a freelance columnist, but we were going to have Kate Clinton perform, and I knew that she would be interested, and I knew that if she wrote about it she would generate a lot of publicity for us, so I ended up contacting her and leaving a message for her at *Windy City Times* or at *Outlines* at the time, and she and two or three friends came to DeKalb, and she knew Kate Clinton, so Kate Clinton and her then-manager slash partner introduced us, and I always teased her that she could have cared less about meeting me, because Kate Clinton was there and Kate’s way more exciting and interesting...

So that was sort of the spring of 1987 or something, and I was really pretty disenchanted with my graduate program and wanting to leave, and I was talking with Kate Clinton’s manager, and I said I think I’m not going to finish my program, I think I’m going to move back to Chicago and she said well, what are you going to do, and I said you know, as an English major I’m like oh, I don’t know, I guess I’ll work in publishing, and she said “Oh, you should contact Yvonne Zipter,” and I said “Yeah?” like my ears perked up, and she said, “She works in publishing, and she’s *single*.” That wasn’t true at the time, but I wrote her—so then I always tease my students about this, too—I wrote her a letter, who *does* this? like “Dear Yvonne, How are you? I don’t know if you remember meeting

me...” but then I moved back to Chicago and we just started running into each other an awful lot and sort of having friends in common, and she was with someone, and I was with someone, and then eventually we ended up getting together.

LS: When you were both single... that’s really exciting. I guess now people write Facebook messages that are kind embarrassing when you go back to them and are like, oh, God, how did I do that? And so you also mentioned that you’d bought a house... do you live in Hyde Park?

KF: No, we live on the Northwest Side.

LS: Ah, okay I live in Rogers Park, so...

[Brief discussion of Chicago neighborhoods]

[48:30]

LS: I have what are your favorite things about this job listed as a question... but I feel, so do you have anything to say to that? What is your favorite part of this job?

KF: Interacting with amazing students and getting to know people, I mean, I really enjoy the colleagues that I work with in this office, but also across the university, that’s pretty fantastic, so getting to develop relationships with students and with other staff members across a time period, so you have this fantastic opportunity to meet a student when they’re here in their first year and the way our advising system works, they stay with their adviser through their four years here, so the person you’re meeting, when they come in for orientation, is often very different from the person who graduates, and it’s fun to be a small part of that.

LS: Right, and to get to watch that so many times... that does sound like fun. Have I forgotten to ask anything, is there anything you can think of that we should talk about?

[Brief off-record discussion of potential interviewees from the 1990s]

[52:10]

LS: When you mentor, this is another question from my interest, when you mentor with students, what is that relationship like, do you meet for coffee once a quarter, do you...

KF: What we were looking for when I first established the mentoring program was, the requirements were pretty minimal, so if you were a mentor, you would have to be at least twenty-five years old, you had to have been out for a number of years, you had to have some life experience to be able to share with the student, which I guess would mean you couldn’t just have come out of a coma and then start mentoring [laughter]... but the requirement was that you met with the student in person at least once a quarter but that you interacted with the person at least once a week, and that could be, you know, if

you're more comfortable with the phone, calling them on the phone once a week or sending them an e-mail. Most of us end up interacting with our students much more often than that... so, I was mentor most recently to a student who graduated in the spring. She was actually here as a Point Scholar, do you know about the Point Foundation?

LS: I don't.

KF: Oh, the Point Foundation is fantastic. They're an organization based in Los Angeles and they're the largest scholarship grantee for LGBTQ students of merit in the entire country.

LS: Oh, okay, so coming out of high school...

KF: Yeah! Coming out of high school, and they support college students, graduate students and professional school students, and part of what Point does is they set them up with money but they also set them up with a mentor in the area, either the mentor is nearby or the mentor might be really involved in a field that they're interested in, that kind of thing, so my most recent mentee was also a Point Scholar, and she and I would just get together say once a week during the quarter and just go out for coffee, and then I'd invite her to different things that we were doing, so when the queer film festival was in town we tried to get together and go see a movie together, that kind of stuff.

LS: Cool... looking back on it, when you were in college yourself at Northern, do you remember having any over-25 gay or lesbian role models who sort of inspire your work now?

KF: I do! It was interesting because there was a woman, I don't even know how I met her, see, that was just the thing, that if something happened, then everybody was there, and I have a suspicion that maybe I met her at an event or something, and she, I don't even remember where she worked, I remember the office, but I don't remember what capacity she worked in, and she was in her—I think she lived kind of hard in her early twenties, she had all these stories about crazy drinking and stuff like that—but she probably was in her late 30s or early 40s which when you're in college must seem like you're ancient or something, but she would have the most fascinating stories about what her life was like, and she had a girlfriend when she was younger, like in her twenties or something, and the crazy ways they would be closeted, so they would meet at places so that they wouldn't be seen going to places together and stuff like that, so I remember sort of interacting with her and just being fascinated by all of these crazy stories that she would tell.

LS: When you were in college in the eighties, do you remember... you said you'd always been out, so there weren't any weird things where you were trying to hide that you were meeting a woman, or...

KF: In retrospect I think... I went to graduate school because I didn't know what I wanted to do next, and I sort of thought like oh, well I have this interesting assistantship, I'll go do this, but in retrospect I was pretty unhappy, my program wasn't... I wasn't closeted, and I would gravitate towards instructors who I was pretty sure were lesbians, and they were

not out at all, so there was this whole weird thing where they would be supportive of me, so they would say like “Oh, that’s a great idea to write this paper on Virginia Woolf,” I’m just making stuff up, I don’t know, but I would write something and then they would be, in my opinion, and maybe I was just too hypersensitive or something, but maybe they would be more critical of the papers I wrote that had queer content than things that didn’t have queer content as if they had to show that they were being more serious or firmer, and I remember thinking this is really crazy, I’m not very happy here, and you know, I kind of wanted to move on... but you had some other question and I think I took it in a very different direction.

LS: I’m forgetting... oh, I was just asking about your own experience with, had you been mentored when you were under twenty-five and trying to figure out what it was all about.

KF: Oh, so then I found this sort of community of women... one of the PE instructors and coaches at Northern, she and her partner had me house-sit for them while I was in graduate school and they had a cat and it was really great because when you’re in college and you live in either a dorm or a dumpy little apartment, to have access to a whole house with cable TV and stuff like that, and a refrigerator and a kitchen, that was awesome, so part of the summer I house-sat for them and then apparently I got the reputation as the person who could house-sit for the lesbians.

LS: That’s not a bad reputation to have! [Laughter]

KF: Because I could be trusted to not spill their secrets or whatever, so I remember a couple summers that’s all I did was house-sit for different women when they went on vacation, these different lesbian couples, and it was fascinating to me, there were these women who had definitely made their lives together but done so in a way that seemed really, like they had close groups of lesbian friends, but they didn’t seem to interact with pretty much anyone else, and it’s almost like they were just their own little community and they were not gonna risk getting to know their straight neighbors or anything like that.

LS: But that there were these lesbian communities in DeKalb...

KF: Right, exactly, and you had to get jumped in practically to be a part of it.

LS: That’s interesting... I imagine do you feel different about your neighborhood, you’re friends with your straight neighbors...

KF: Yeah, exactly.

LS: Alright. I think those are all of my questions... thank you so much.

End of Interview

[00:58:43]