

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #73

FRIEDMAN, VICTOR (1949-) AM '71, PhD '75, FACULTY

At U of C: Student 1970-1975, 1993-present

Interviewed: 2013 (1 session)

Interviewer: Kris Rosentel

Transcript by: Mich Elliott

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[00:00:00]

KR: Where you're from and how you ended up here. So, obviously, you were born here, but sort of if you could just take me through.

VF: Sure, sure. So, my grandparents came from Russia on my father's side and Romania on my mother's side. The Romanian side came straight to Chicago, father's side was more roundabout, but my dad ended up here at the age of 13, in Hyde Park. My parents met at Hyde Park High School. My father's younger sister was my mother's best friend in high school. That's how they met. They were local people with no connection to the University. My mom did end up getting an MA in Social Work from SSA, one of the first classes back in the '40s and my dad had an MBA from UChicago. He's passed away, my mom is alive. She lives in Montgomery Place. Yeah, so I grew up in this neighborhood. I started out at Little Village Nursery School, which is located in the building that became, well, first it became the Green Door Bookstore, then they put a coffee shop in the back called the Medici, then the Medici expanded and took over the entire space, then the Medici moved to where it is now, and Florian took over that building, and that's where I went to nursery school. And in those days, what is today Powell's Bookstore, was the Co-op, which is now bankrupt and is Treasure Island in the new shopping center. [VF Note: We called it 'new' because when it was built, during urban renewal, it was the first of its kind.]

So, I remember Hyde Park before urban renewal. Grew up here, went to kindergarten and the beginning of first grade at Phillip Murray, public school. It was not a good experience. I was beaten up by anti-Semites and in first grade there were fifty students in the class, one class, and the teacher didn't know what to do with us, so she made us draw circles, called it handwriting practice. And, at the end of the day, you brought your circles up to the teacher and, if they were good, then she'd let you bring 'em home to your parents and she didn't like them, she tore 'em up in front of the whole class, and mine got torn up

every day, and three weeks into that year, my parents moved me successfully to Lab School. And I'll just mention one thing that, my mother tells a story. I sort of, I think I even remember this happening. I remember my mother bringing me to Blaine Hall and sitting in one of those little chairs, because I was a little boy, and there was an old lady—oh, old, she was probably younger than I am now—who asked me to draw something, anything I wanted. I've already mentioned, I wasn't very good at drawing, so I drew several triangles, and she said, 'What are those?' and I said, 'Those are the pyramids of Egypt.' That got me into the Lab School. That's the way my mother tells the story, and I think I sort of remember doing it.

OK, so I went through Lab School, U-High. Grade school was OK. High school was wretched, miserable. They built what was then called the New Building, it's the modern part, right around the time I was a pre-freshman. They used to have what they called pre-freshman, they combined seventh and eighth grade in one year. So—they expanded the high school. That entire high school used to be Belfield Hall, which they're now tearing down. So, that was the old high school and then they built this new building and then, to fill it and to fund it, they let in all these kids from South Shore, which in those days was all white. Anyway, so all the sudden there's this flood of new kids and many of them had already been through seventh, no seventh and eighth grade, so they were a year older than those us who had gone through pre-freshman, and I was young already, I was born in October, and, you know, started school young, so for example I was 16 when I went off to college, I turned 17 in October. So, there was this huge age difference, and that was not good. And the South Shore kids, they all had a lot of money, you know, the girls would, you know, come back from spring vacation with nose jobs, you know a little band-aid on the nose, and they all went to Florida and came back with tans, and they wore angora sweaters and little pearl necklaces and they had fraternities and sororities.

[00:04:45]

KR: Ugh.

VF: Yeah, can you imagine? High school fraternities and sororities. Blech. Anyway, it was really overall a wretched experience, and I wanted nothing more than to just get the fuck out, which is why I went to Reed College, which was as far away as I could get and stay in the continental United States, plus there's a very strong Reed-Chicago connection, that you may be aware of, I don't know. And, in fact, it was one of my, I did have some friends in high school and one of my friends was the child of Reedies, so I learned about it from them.

Couple things about my background to mention that are relevant. When I hit puberty, I realized that I was sexually attracted to boys, and that was very upsetting. I was obviously pre-Stonewall generation. Also I was Jewish. My sense of Jewish identity in those days was very strong, and I'll give you an example. When I was five, my mother was pregnant with my sister. This was the days before they had that sound imaging or anything so we didn't know what the gender was going to be. The first nine years, I lived at 5344 South Harper, first floor apartment on the corner there. And one day during my

mother's pregnancy my parents brought all the kitchen chairs into the living room and there were all these old people, some of whom I knew, but others of whom I didn't know. It turns out they were all my mother's relatives, most of whom she didn't have much contact with 'cause they lived out in the suburbs and didn't want to come to Hyde Park, and there were other family issues and so on, but with her being pregnant... I was named after my father's father, who died when my dad was 12. So, Ashkenazi Jewish custom, you name kids after dead relatives. And so the meeting was to determine which of my mother's dead relatives would have the honor of this baby being named, and which name would it be if it was a boy and which name would it be if it was a girl. Two weeks after that, my mother's mother died, suddenly, heart attack, and then my sister was born a girl, and so my sister was named after her, Adele, and sort of, no question about that. But what I remember was my mother explaining to me, 'cause I was 5 years old, I was old enough to remember these things, that my grandmother's soul was wandering outside the gates of heaven until a child was named after her, and then her soul entered heaven, which is, you know, Jewish folk belief, and that was comforting, but it also put this enormous burden of guilt on me, right, because, I had to have children, so my parents could go to heaven, and so on and so forth, you get the idea. There was also the time that one of my parents said, and I quote, 'Homosexuality is a fate worse than death.' I don't remember what they were talking about anymore, but of course, the sentence stuck in my mind. So, I grew up like that, hating myself in various respects. I actually spent my teenage years suicidal. I was not happy. I mean, I already told you about the social stuff, but there was this other stuff as well. I did have a few friends, but they weren't guys I was attracted to, they were just friends. Guys I was attracted to were not nice people, so pft, what do you do? So high school was wretched, miserable. I did have a girlfriend, I took her to the junior prom, the senior prom, Jewish girl from my Sunday School class, I went to Sunday school, KAM, Kehilath Anshe Maariv, it's, um, I think they sold it to Jesse Jackson's operation, PUSH. It's this huge building on Drexel and 50th, OK, what happened was KAM ended up merging with Isaiah Israel and moving into Isaiah's building, which is the one that looks like a mosque, you know, but in those days, KAM has its own congregation.

So, yeah, so I got out of Hyde Park, went to Reed, and had a wonderful experience in terms of social life. I was in a room with two other guys, in a dorm with only sixteen guys in it, so it was like a little fraternity house, really, but they were all people like me, intellectually at least. Same basic values, you know, open to different kinds of music. I liked East European and Middle Eastern folk music. I was not into rock, but I got into rock precisely during that period, '66 to '70, so when Revolver and Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and The Doors first album and Jimmy Hendrix, all that stuff was coming out when I was in college. My roommates and dormmates went to that stuff, but, you know, they were cool with my playing Ravi Shankar, who was beginning to get popular, George Harrison playing the sitar. I saw Ravi Shankar when he first played in Chicago. The Indian Students Association here brought him, he was at Mandel Hall, that was back in the '50s. Anyway, it was a good time in many respects. We bonded, and many of those guys, including the two who were my roommates, one guy from next door, a couple from upstairs, are still among my best friends in the world. In fact, they're the oldest friends I have except for my relatives and one friend of my parents. A child of a friend of my parents that I'm still in touch with. She lives in Hyde Park. So, yeah, that

was good, but I was still suicidal, and I got this tremendous crush on this guy in folk dancing, and he was straight, and I was afraid to do anything about it anyway. I was what you call a situational heterosexual, you know how, straight men, when they were in prison, will have sex with other men, just because they're so horny? Well, for me, college was like being in prison, and I was having sex with girls 'cause I was so horny, and there was nothing else I could do. Stonewall happened in '69, in my senior year, and there were some repercussions. There was one openly gay woman and one openly gay guy. The gay guy wasn't very attractive. The woman was good-looking, actually.

But, they tried to form a homophile association at Reed and I was way too closeted to try something like that, on top of which my parents started sending me to psychoanalysis when I was a sophomore, the end of my sophomore year. I was pretty unhappy in many, well, obviously there's other respects. Doing lots of drugs, I mean nothing major, no needles, but, mostly marijuana, hashish. Little bit of opium, some LSD. I tried mescaline, psilocybin, but the major psychedelics still bored me, to be perfectly honest [laughs]. I had one bad trip that was quite interesting, but basically it was just nothing. But—Oh, I was doing some speed, too. It was great, you know, when you feel great, it's great, then you come down and it's not. I did the shittiest work of my college career on speed, you know, I thought it was great, and then it's not. But I always got my homework done on time. I took lots of drugs, but I always got the homework done on time. Anyway, so my parents put me in psychoanalysis and for somebody like me, at that time, the standard Freudian explanation was I was really straight and just needed to work out my problems, so the one, let's call it homosexual experience that I had, which was Christmas vacation my senior year, I came back to Reed early, the dorms weren't open, stayed at a house off-campus with a friend of mine and her boyfriend, who was also a friend, and we had a three-way, and I blew him, so that was for me wonderful. I thought it was great. I remember picking pubic hairs out of my teeth, thinking to myself, 'I'm a cocksucker now.' I just, I thought that was great. But then I went to my psychoanalysis session the next time, and the shrink treated it like I was backsliding. I was doing something that I shouldn't do. It was kinda... taking a dump on the floor when you're being potty trained, you know what I mean?

[00:13:52]

KR: So, did you end up in psychoanalysis because you were gay, was that why?

VF: Yeah. Um, although, my parents never, we never conversed about that being the reason. As far as they were concerned, it was just problems. My mother, I know, suspected. 'Cause she found, you know, magazine pictures and stuff, you know, the kind of thing that mothers find when they snoop in their teenage son's dresser drawers, serves 'em right. Anyway, so that was that. And I, well, so, sophomore year, I, the beginning of sophomore year, six of us from that freshman year dorm rented a house together. Everybody said we were gonna get busted because we were just so outrageous, but we didn't. But, four out of the six dropped out at the end of that semester, a lot of drop-outs at Reed, only a third of my class graduated, 100 out of 300, I think it was. There was one guy who was at least bisexual, and he and I were friends, so we got an apartment together,

but he took up with this girl and, you know, listening to him screw her every night drove me nuts, so there was this girl had, at folk dancing who had been pursuing me, so I turned around and said, 'OK, start taking the pill, let's, you know, do it.' And we started going together. And we got along, I mean, you know, in many ways. She was Jewish and similar background to mine and intelligent, creative, not bad-looking. Some people would say good-looking. And that was it. I stayed going with her the rest of my college career. Had that one incident, but then you know, we got engaged and then my first year in graduate school here, she was a senior at Reed, so we were engaged but apart, and there was another, there was a gay guy in the Slavic department at the time, but I didn't know he was gay. There were even a couple of, there was another one that I was suspicious of, and I think he was at least bisexual, but... Nothing ever happened.

And then we got married, and this is 1972 that we're up to my second year in graduate school, the War in Vietnam was going on. '72 was the year that Nixon mined Haiphong Harbor and they started calling up reserves. So one of my best friends who was in a different department was in the reserves. Oh, back up, so my senior year in college, '70 was the year of the draft. The first year of the lottery for the draft, I should say. And my number came up 5, I saw my number on the front page of the Portland Oregonian on my way home from the shrink one day, and I remember thinking to myself, 'Fuck these assholes, wanna send me off to Vietnam and turn me into hamburger.' Anyway, I got a letter from my shrink that I had some personality disorder. 3.145. I don't even remember what number it was, it was a wishy-washy letter, and I don't think the number that he referred to in the disease guide was homosexuality. I don't know, because I didn't look it up, and I don't have the letter, but I know that at that time, homosexuality was a disease, right? In fact, here's what happened. So, I take the bus, go down to the draft board downtown, and we all sit there in our underwear. At one point, we fill out this written form, which has a whole list of diseases that will disqualify you from the army; cancer, tuberculosis, kidney disease, homosexuality,... It was one of the diseases! Like all the others. I came to it and I thought, 'What am I going to do?' I don't wanna go to Vietnam. I didn't have the nerve to check yes, but I was afraid that if I checked no, they might take me and send me to Vietnam, so I put the X between the yes and the no, that's what I did. Alright, they do the rest of the exam, they weigh you, if you're skinny they add ten pounds, if you're fat, they take off 10 pounds, so that you in fact have to lose or gain 20 pounds to get out by being over or underweight. One friend of mine who actually ended up giving me a lift home, he got out because he took speed to lose weight because he was skinny, and they just, added ten pounds to his weight, but then he developed a glandular disfunction on account of the speed and that got him out [laughs]. You know, he was happy. So we're sitting there waiting for the psychiatric exam. There's a bunch of guys on a bench, doctor sitting in his office behind the desk with the door open. Everybody goes in, talks to him for a few minutes, they go out. Go in, talk, go out. So, I go in, he sits down, and he's got the form I filled in. And he's got this letter that I've got from the shrink, and he says to me, 'This letter's not good enough, it's not gonna get you out of the army.' So I got up, took the letter from him and said, 'OK, I'll go get another letter.' And he pulls out the form that I filled out, with the checkbox between the yes and the no, and he said, 'Wait a minute' he says, 'What about this homosexuality?' I mean, I'm 'Oh shiiit. What am I gonna do?' I thought, 'Well, it's either this or get sent to Vietnam and turned

into hamburger,' so I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Close the door.' So I close the door, which he hadn't been saying to the others, right, and he asked me. I forget, what did he ask me. 'Had I ever had sex with a woman?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'But it was scary, wasn't it?' I said, 'Oh, yeah yeah yeah, sure.' You know. It was some silly little questions like that, and then, at the end of this interview, what I remember, I remember this part, he said, 'Don't worry,' he said, 'Nobody's ever gonna see this record.' And I thought to myself, 'Bullshit. This is gonna ruin any kind of government job I'm ever gonna wanna have, but fuck it, I don't want a government job if it's gonna mean goin'...' You know what I'm talking about, right?

[00:20:33]

KR: Right.

VF: Besides, at this point, I already had my special humanities fellowship to come here, that was the old best thing humanities division had to offer in those days, was 3000 dollars a year. For three years, guaranteed. That was great. Plus full tuition. That was, 1970, that was a lot of money. 750 dollars a quarter, you could pay your rent, you know, and live! That's inflation. Anyway. So, the doc says, don't worry, it's not gonna go on any record. I think to myself, 'Bullshit.' And I say to him, 'Kennahara,' which in Yiddish means 'No evil eye.' You know, like, knock on wood. He gets up, I get up, he says to me, 'Kennahara,' he shakes my hand, he says, 'Mazel tov,' he says, 'Tell your old man you beat the draft.' So, you know, he didn't necessarily take me seriously, but, you know, he was letting me out, so. I got the classification 1-Y, which they used to call 'commies and queers.' It was a classification that meant mentally unfit, but it wasn't 4-F. 4-F meant you couldn't serve under any circumstances. 1-Y meant you'd be the last to be called up in an emergency. And I had an exit interview, and I remember the guy at the exit interview says, 'You realize you've been disqualified from the United States armed services.' 'Yeah.' He said, 'Oh, what are you going to do now?' Said, 'Oh, I have a fellowship to go to the University of Chicago, gonna study Slavic linguistics,' and then he goes, 'Oh, I guess you know.' I said, 'Yep!' And that was it, out of the draft. So, that was the background to '72. My friend who was, as it turned out, gay, got out of the draft by being in the reserves, but he was afraid of being called up when Nixon mined Haiphong Harbor. And so he started to pressure me, 'cause I told everybody that I got out of the draft with a letter from my shrink. That was my story. And he kept pressuring me, how did I really get out. And so I finally, with great fear, I admitted to him that I was gay, afraid that he wouldn't want to talk to me anymore, and then of course, it turned out he was gay, but he wouldn't sleep with me. I had a crush on him. Eh. That was the beginning of my leading a double life.

The two years in psychoanalysis made it very easy to me to accept being gay the minute I came out just like that. All I had to do was just sort of meet one reasonably normal-type person and I realized, you know, that there was another world out there. Although, you know, in those days especially, it was a world of bars and closeted. There was a guy in the anthro department named Manning Nash who was a real homophobe. And the first guy I went home with from Jimmy's—Jimmy's was the place where everybody went, you know, in those days especially. This was before they opened the Pub. They opened the

Pub—you know, the one in Ida Noyes. That was opened later because so many students were getting beaten up and robbed and so on and so forth. But anyway, in my day, it was only Jimmy's. And it was, you know, for everybody. So there were certain, the way it worked was that once you knew one person who was gay, you could through that person meet all the other people who were gay, and then there would be whole tables full of gay people, and you would just be part of that scene, right? And so, through this friend of mine in the other department, I met [redacted], who was a grad student in Anthropology at the time, went home with him, and that was my first honest-to-God as it were gay experience. And from then, basically, well, from then until '75, but really until '80, I led a double life. I was already married, but I still, especially in the '70s, thought that, um, I had to stay married. That there was no future for me in the gay world, right? Stable relationships wasn't a model that I saw, especially in those days. Especially when you're young. Anyway, so that was the beginning of my association with Gay Lib here at Chicago. [Redacted] was in the organization, which organization was tiny. Jim McDaniel [Interview #23] was another one. [Redacted], who was a grad student in Economics, which in those days, used to admit a huge entering class and then flunk half of them out at the end of the first year, and they created such bad morale in their department that they changed the system. But [redacted] was in that system.

[00:25:43]

[Redacted], I'm not directly in touch with, but indirectly I'm in touch with him. Jim, I'm still in touch with. He is very active in the alumni association here; he lives up over, you know, in Howard Brown's old building, apartment. And, [redacted], I stayed in touch with for a number of years, he moved to New York, and I was going to New York frequently on committees, you know, faculty business. And there was another guy, Richard White [Interview #62], who I actually, he was in Chicago not too long ago and I told him about this project, and he got in touch with you folks and got interviewed. He's the other friend from that group. He was in English. So, yeah, so I had this circle of friends in Jimmy's, some of whom I had sex with, some of whom I didn't. Just because I wasn't interested or they weren't interested—there was no trauma there. And there was Hannah, Hannah Frisch [Interview #24], whom I'm sure you've talked to, or you should if you haven't. She was older, than the rest of us, I think she was 30, you know, we were in our early 20s. Yeah, so we hung around in Jimmy's and, on weekends, we'd take the IC and go up north. And we'd go to the Gold Coast, which was the closest bar you could walk to from the IC, and in those days especially, I mean it was basically a leather bar, but it wasn't hardcore. And we'd go to the Bistro, which was a disco. Those were the two main—Those were the two gay bars closest to the IC—that's the Metra, you know, Illinois Central. And we'd have to rush to catch the last train, which was 12:20 or 1:50, and once or twice, we ended up having to take the Cottage Grove, the number 1, which ran all night, and throughout this double life period, I told my wife when I was doing things like staying out all night that I was doing lots of drugs. And she just accepted it as something I did, because when I was in college, I did lots of drugs, and, you know, I still got my homework done. You know, I was getting drunk with guys, or whatever, people. Yeah, guys, 'cause she wasn't very interested in smoking dope, but she accepted it. There was one guy that I had a crush on before I met [redacted], who when he found out I was

married, he refused to have anything more to do with me. That was.... disheartening. Wasn't very nice. Wasn't a very nice person anyway. But, everyone else was really supportive, really accepting. People would even say, 'Wow, I admire that you can do it, you know, I couldn't do it,' 'cause in those days, there were people, you know, who would've—you know, the role models aren't what they are today. So, that was gay life at Chicago as I experienced it in the '70s. You have any questions at this point?

[00:29:05]

KR: Yeah, so, this group you were with was involved with Gay Lib, so did you do any activism things with them, too, because that would be more, like, public, right?

VF: Right. And there was very, very little activism. We had a meeting, I remember—I only went to one meeting that I recall. I think it was in Ida Noyes. In, what I recall, it's like a high ceilinged room, a hallway with some chairs. There were so few people, I mean it was nothing. There was one demonstration that involved the Bistro that was accused of turning away black customers. This was still Civil Rights Era stuff as well, so I remember going to that. There were a bunch of people from Hyde Park who went to join in that demonstration, and I did participate in that one. Gay Pride Parades had started. I did not have anything to do with them, and neither I think did Howie Aronson. I should mention Howie. So, Howie Aronson was a professor here in the Slavic department and in the Linguistics department, at various times, he chaired Slavic, he chaired Linguistics. Already in college, I knew about him from a friend of mine, folk dancing friend who was in grad school here at the time. She told me that he was a fag. And I must, I had some frightened look on my face, and she says, 'Don't worry, he won't hit on you.' She didn't say 'hit on you,' 'put the make on you' is probably what she said. 'Hit on' wasn't used in those days. So, I actually knew that Howie was gay. Not only that, but [redacted] had gone home with Howie once, although I think nothing actually happened, but you know, they both knew that the other was gay. So I knew Howie was gay, but I said nothing to him while I was his student, and he was one of my major advisors. I was very lucky I had three major advisors. Three people who each had major input into my dissertation and my formation as a scholar.


So, I didn't come out to Howie until... I got the job at North Carolina in '75. I went straight from my dissertation defense in March to the job in July, very nice. And, that November, there was a big Slavic national meeting in Atlanta, and I found the address of a gay bar and I said, 'Hey Howie, let's go out for a drink,' and we went to this place and we walk in and there's a drag show going on, right, and I said, 'Surprise!' [laughs] And he said he'd suspected when, you know, when he saw where I was takin' him, he was beginning to suspect. And so then, from that moment on, we were out to each other, and he has been, like, an uncle to me. Especially during the period when I was leading the double life, living in North Carolina. I'd come to Chicago, stay at his house, he'd give me the key, set up the guest bed in his study. He had a partner that he'd been with since 1970, I think—no, he moved up north in 1970, I think it was with the partner... Maybe that's when he moved, they moved... Anyway, they'd been together a long time. Yeah, he lived at 5555 Dorchester and was going, and, as he put it, he was going up north to go to the

gay bars and getting drunk and coming back to Hyde Park at night, and this was dangerous and he said, why shouldn't he go up and live near the bars and come down in the daytime when he's sober to work? Right? So he moved up north. And I think that might be when he and Ed moved in together, that's his partner, they're still together. Anyway, so, Howie would give me a key, give me a room, and just let me do my thing. I came and went as I pleased, you know. I had my own, I mean, I used the guest bathroom, his partner had had all this collection of colognes, I loved him. And, you know, and we hung out and talked, and Howie and I would hang out and talk Slavic linguistics and Balkan linguistics, too, so it was just great. Does that answer something? You asked me a question, I just started rambling.

[00:33:34]

KR: Oh, I was asking about the Gay Lib stuff, but you talked about that.

VF: Oh, Gay Lib, was I an activist. Oh, that was the point. It was, I think, after, the year after I came out to Howie that for the first time, the Gay Lib parade was walking down whatever street it was walking down in those days, and Howie was watching and got out of the crowd and joined the parade, as did a number of other people. That's what the parade was like in those days. And that's what the atmosphere was like. So, that was a very outing kind of experience for Howie. I mean, everybody knew about it, but nobody talked about it. There was another colleague of Howie's, Ken Naylor, who was also like an uncle to me. He was at the Ohio State University, professor, South Slavic, Chicago PhD. And I met him when I first went to Macedonia, 1971, in the summer language seminar. And I remember suspecting that he was gay, because I saw the way he looked at this guy in red swimtrunks. You know, but we didn't talk about it. And Ken didn't come out to me until '76. Yeah, when we were both gonna be in Macedonia and he was gonna be there with a student with whom he was having an affair. Just as a side note, I ended up being assigned to the hotel room with the student, because we were both students, well, I was not a student anymore. I was a professor, but I was as young as a student, I was 26, alright, and Ken was 13 years older or something. And that student and I had a fling at that point. But, you know, this faculty-student thing is not appropriate, but anyway, that's another matter. So, Ken and Howie didn't come out to each other until I made them [laughs], you know. I remember Ken was at Howie's, Howie told a story of leaving *The Advocate* out on the coffee table when Ken was over visiting and Ken just didn't say—they didn't talk about it.

But, precisely when I came out to Howie, there were a bunch of us Slavists, there was Henry Cooper at Indiana, Bill Derbyshire who I think might have been at Seattle at the time, so a bunch of people, and we formed a gay Slavist association. And Howie knew a silversmith, a gay guy, and we all had silver charms made in the shape of the Glagolitic letter ljudi. The Glagolitic alphabet is the oldest Slavic alphabet, it's a funny-looking alphabet. And the letters have names from, it's based on uncial Greek, but you know, doesn't matter. And it has names, az, buki, vidi, glagole, and so on, and the name letter L is ljudi. So, we had these ljudi, which looks kinda like, uh, can I draw on something here? On this thing? So, this is what a Glagolitic L looks like [Ed.: ] Yeah, if you look at

that icon, that was painted by one of my other professors, who did this as a hobby, and the scroll that he's holding is in Glagolitic. So, anyway, nothing much came of it, but I still have the little silver pin. It's, yeah, hanging on a chain. We would wear them when we went to Slavic meetings for a while, but it was Kevin Moss, I think, who really got gay Slavist stuff going on a much more open basis, email lists and all. The explosion that was brought about by the internet, I think, did a lot. Well, that and AIDS, of course. AIDS made a lot of people come out, and it also made being gay more acceptable. You know that story already, I'm sure. But, thinking back, I think the internet was really responsible for a lot of connections being made, that sort of thing.

[00:38:04]

KR: Um, so when was the gay Slavics association started?

VF: Yeah, that's a good question. When did we start it? I... It might have been, it couldn't have been '76 because I only came out to Howie. It might have been at a meeting that was held in Columbus at Ohio State. I mean, if you want I can look on my CV and see if I can reconstruct it.

KR: Not...

VF: You can email me! If you want.

KR: Yeah, I'll email you.

VF: Email me, email me and I'll try to reconstruct when it was.

KR: OK.

VF: And it wasn't really an association. It was just sort of a social group with a silver charm.

KR: So can you talk a little bit about your time at, um, when you were in North Carolina?

VF: Yeah. So, my last year in graduate school here, which is when this part of the story starts, my wife got suspicious and discovered my stash of porn, which I kept in a locked briefcase. She picked the lock. She got very upset, of course. 'What's she doing in this marriage?' and so on. At that time, I was not ready to get divorced. I remember thinking to myself that the whole world had turned to ashes in my mouth. I just felt a terrible defeat. So, knowing Freudian psychology as I did, I suggested that we go and see a Freudian marriage counselor. Who basically gave the orthodox line that, you know, I'm basically straight, and just have these problems and so it was like, OK, we'll work it out. Of course I had to promise not to lead this double life anymore, right? And I actually tried. I actually did try. I remember the last, there was another guy in the Linguistics department, Joseph Pentheroudakis, that was one of our circle, and there was Tony Bruck in the linguist—there were a bunch of linguists, actually, at that time. And I saw Joseph one last time, as it were, and then I was, you know. And I managed that. And so we

moved to North Carolina in a U-Haul, and moved into an apartment. The kind that, you know, junior faculty and grad students with rich parents live in. It didn't last. I started leading a double life again. I was very young-looking, a very young-looking and young-acting 26, and I hung out mostly with students. Undergrads and graduate. There was one bar called 'He's Not Here' that was very much like Jimmy's. It was popular, all kinds of people, college hangout, and there was sort of a gay vibe in one part of it. Which the owner didn't particularly like, but you know, didn't.... I would go there and pick up people. The nearest gay bar, there was one called Electric Company that had originally been in Chapel Hill, but I think they moved just after I got there. Anyway, it was very hard for me to do bars, especially because now I had to be extra careful.

So, I was having, I mean, my sex life was mostly out of town. At conferences, colleagues, whatever. So it was in 1979 at the major Slavic language and literature meeting, which was in New York, that I met up with and seduced the guy who had been the leader of the group that I studied with in Russia in 1969 the summer of my junior year in college. Summer of my junior year, I went abroad for the summer, I studied Russian, there was this young professor from Seattle, you know, we meet up again this many years later, at this point, I'm in my late 20s and he's in his 40s and, you know we're drinking and then I give him a hug and don't let go and one thing leads to another, and that was the first time I actually fell in love, and it was reciprocated. Everything else before, up until then, had either been unreciprocated love or very pleasant, but not love. So, we carried on an affair for a year. He was teaching, by then, at Arizona. And I just, you know, we were working on a textbook project together, I found all kinds of excuses to go to Arizona, or we would go to a workshop together or a conference together and that sort of thing. Exactly a year later, at the next big Slavic meeting, which was held I think at San Francisco. We got together. Now, that November, at the big interdisciplinary Slavic meeting, which was in New Haven at Yale that year. That's November of '80. We shared a room and one afternoon, there was some miscommunication and, you know, one of us was late, and the other one got mad, and we had our first fight. And, you know, that was very unpleasant, and the thing is, by this time, in my marriage, my wife knew that I was living a double life, but she didn't wanna get divorced. She wanted to somehow... So she resented me enormously, and so it got to the point where she was picking a fight every weekend morning. I just knew that she would pick a fight with me, so you know, we, and I didn't need this. So, I had this fight with Roger, but we made up. So after AATSEEL we flew to Phoenix, where he picked up his car and drove to Tucson, where the University of Arizona is. I was gonna spend the New Year with him, and we stopped for a bite to eat. And we were sharing an appetizer, we shared it, and we split the lettuce, and we're sitting there talking, and I ask him if he's gonna eat his lettuce, and he says to me, 'You pig!' And I thought to myself. And that was the moment that it dawned on me, 'I don't want any more part of this.' This was a guy who himself had been married, raised two kids, got divorced when the kids were grown, and had, he had been through the whole double life thing, but and he had had a whole marriage in which he fought all the time, and so he was used to fighting. And I didn't want any part of this. I just, you know, so, we stayed civil enough to last out the visit, the last night he cried saying, 'I'm not gonna see you again.' And, said, 'Well, you know, we'll see.' Whatever.

But it was an enormous, I mean, I still look back on the whole relationship as very positive. And, I got back in touch with him, we stayed in touch to some extent for a while. Actually, for quite a while. He found a partner that suited him. Ended up leaving academia altogether and moving to New York, living in a lovely penthouse in Greenwich Village. And I'd visit them, I'd stay with them, you know. And then they ended up in Los Angeles, that's where they are now. I'm not in touch with them anymore, but, you know, I explained to him that I looked back on our affair as a very positive experience, because it really was. But at the time that I broke up with him, I felt like I'd lost something I never had, and my suicidal thoughts came back with a vengeance. And I decided to buy a gun and shoot myself. So, this would have been January of 1980. Now, I'm trying to think how to tell this next part of the story.

[00:47:42]

Well let's just follow this narrative thread and then I'll have to double back at some point. So, I got a permit. You had to get a permit, and then somebody had to sign it, so I had to get a friend, I had a friend who was actually straight, but you know, gay-curious enough to let me seduce him once, only once. Faculty member. And I got him to sign the thing, but he was suspicious, I mean, 'What do you want a gun for?' I said, 'Well, I need to, you know, defend the house. It's not safe.' And I put the permit in a drawer, and what happened next, which was in May, changed my life and I completely forgot about that whole suicide, gun permit incident till one day, probably in 1993, when I was cleaning out my desk to move here, having been living with Paul, my current partner, for 10 years, I discovered that permit in the desk and it brought it all back to me. I'd forgotten completely that I even went through that. But, I remember it now, because that happened, and so that's part of the narrative.

So, how do I meet Paul. Now we go back to 1979. This is while I'm still going with Roger. But I was in Chicago for a conference, CLS, Chicago Linguistics Society. And Paul was one of the CLS officers that year. And a bunch of us went out to Jimmy's, and I sat next to him. And Paul liked playing jokes on people, and he played jokes, well, he played a joke on me. He was taking Georgian at the time, which I had taken with Howie Aronson, and he started talking about a verb in Georgian that means 'to read Shakespeare' and there's no such verb, I mean, it was a joke, I didn't get the joke, and I felt really stupid, and I was upset. And he saw that he had hurt my feelings, and I could tell by the look on his face that he was upset that I was upset, that he was just making a joke and hadn't meant to hurt my feelings. End of story. Come back in May of 1980, again for CLS, or the Second Biennial Conference on Balkan and South Slavic Linguistics, one of the linguistics conferences. And, this was May, and Paul is at the Linguistics department tea, which by this time was being held exactly where it is now, Captive Languages. Linguistics department when I started, was in Foster Hall. While I was a grad student, it moved to Goodspeed, and then they moved to where they are now, Classics. Anyway, so there was a department tea during the conference, and I'd heard rumors that Paul, this guy was gay, so I decided I'd seduce him, get back at him. So, we're drinking, we're drinking, and we're walking home, it was still light out, I remember, and I had to pee desperately. And we were walking down 57th street, and

when I was 9, my parents bought the house on the corner, on the northwest corner of 57th and Kimbark, it's now Chabad House, the blue wood frame, I grew up in that house.

We moved there when I was 9. Um, and I'm gonna diverge just for a minute to tell you something about the house, it's interesting. That house was owned by a professor here at the University, a Dutchman named Vanderbilt. And his son Jimmy was a friend of mine, one of my best friends in third grade, so I played in that house before my parents bought it. And it wasn't until after I was a grown-up, in fact relatively recently, my mother told me two things about the house. One, every bank in Chicago, this was 1959, had redlined Hyde Park. Redlining means they wouldn't lend money for mortgages because they thought the property values would go down. The only place that would lend my parents the money for the mortgage was Talman Federal Savings at 55th and Kedzie, and the whole time I was growing up, we schlepped all the way up to 55th and Kedzie to do all our banking, never banked anywhere else. Course, then, urban renewal came along and—the other thing I'll tell you and this is something that, my parents hid this from me very well when I was growing up, I had no sense that I or my parents were any different from these faculty kids, but my mother told me after I was a grown-up that Vanderbilt didn't wanna sell the house to my parents because they weren't faculty. He wanted to sell it to somebody on the faculty, but nobody would buy it because everybody thought the neighborhood was gonna turn. They all thought my parents were crazy to stay in Hyde Park, but they just didn't want to leave. And, of course, things happened as they did. They did not know that things were gonna turn out as they did. The other thing that I remember. I had a friend named Joe Bakan, whose father was a professor of Psychology. He moved to Canada during the Vietnam War so his kids wouldn't get drafted. He had a lot, he had six kids, one for each million killed in the Holocaust, a lot of Jews did that. The parents of my generation. And my mother, I remember her once saying something. I said something about Mr. Bakan, and my mother said, 'Dr. Bakan' or 'Professor Bakan.' She corrected my use of the title, and at the time, it didn't register as anything much, but, you know, it was a class thing. And in fact, here at Chicago, people were going by Mr. actually, but not in their relationships with the outside, the townies. Like I say, I was not aware of this growing up. I became aware of this only after I grew up. So, that was the digression about the house. So that's the house. I was staying with my parents at the time. I was in town, staying there, sleeping in my old room.

[00:54:37]

We got there and I had to pee, and I said to Paul, 'You wanna come in? Just for a minute, it doesn't have to take very long,' and what I meant was, 'Come in just for a minute while I pee.' He thought that I was inviting him in for quick sex. And he said, 'No, thank you.' I said, 'OK.' So, he walks away, I pee, I get out my little black book and I'm about to call on the telephone somebody else, up north. Doorbell rings. It's Paul. He says, 'Well, I changed my mind.' It's exactly the sort of thing I would have done, you know, gotten scared, run away, and then tried to come back. So, I thought, 'OK, this is good.' So we sat around the house, we drank, my parents came home, we drank some more, and then eventually, Paul and I walked, I said I was gonna walk him home. My parents didn't like the idea, but tough. And, so, at this point, I was 30 and he was 25, he was a graduate

student here in Linguistics. And we, first we walked to Nichols Park, over by St. Thomas Aquinas and then we went out to the Point, to the rocks, which is where I seduced him, which he still wasn't sure he wanted, but you know, he went along with it and then he reciprocated because he felt it was the polite thing to do. And then, OK, it's a story.

So the friend of mine that had been responsible for my coming out, who was in another department as a grad student. He got screwed by that department. He had fellowship money that they were supposed to hold while he was in Reserves and they said they would hold it and then they gave it to somebody else, and he came back and he had no support, so he had to go work. But we stayed in touch. He is still in Chicago and he's pissed off at this university. Anyway. At that time, I was actually carrying on another long distance affair with a guy who lived in Keokuk, Iowa. He would drive to Chicago, we would stay at the Lawson Y and have mad passionate sex and it was great, but the thing was, he was a very sweet guy, good-looking and ... not bright at all. So, it was kind of like, once you're done, you want to get out of bed and get away as quickly as possible, you know, there's nothing to talk about, you're just bored, ew. So, this guy that was responsible for my coming out, the guy I was having the affair with and I all met to have lunch at Genesee Depot, a restaurant that used to be up on the north side. And while the guy from Iowa was in the bathroom, I told my friend about this grad student that I had just seduced, who was straight. And he said, 'Oh,' he said, 'He'll fall in love with you. They always do when they're straight. Call him, call him.' I wasn't sure I was gonna call him again, so it was a friend of mine made me make the call from Genesee Depot on a payphone and, indeed, he really wanted to see me again. So I shortened my visit with the guy from Iowa and that was the end of that, unfortunately – I mean, you know, he was a nice guy, but. And I went back and Paul and I had a mad, passionate and intellectual time for the rest of that particular visit. And then I made up an excuse to come back in July. Well, then we did the long distance thing for a while. I would come to Chicago, he came once to Chapel Hill, I think, when my wife was visiting her family in Seattle.

And then, our versions of the story diverge. In 1982, yeah, spring probably of '82, he had finished all his coursework, but he had nine incompletes. Nine incompletes, that's a whole year's-worth of incompletes, right. He was studying for his MA exams, but he was also birding a lot, sort of work avoidance kind of thing. He had also taken a job at the Chalet, what used to be the Chalet, it's Binny's now, on the corner of 53rd and Lake Park. Running the – working in the cheese section. 'Cause he came from a working class family. In fact, his father and my father were at the same steel mill at one point. They didn't know each other; it's coincidence, yeah, Acme Steel. So, my version of the story is, he said, if I got divorced, he would move down to live with my in North Carolina because there was no reason for him to stay in Chicago. He could finish up his papers. He was still thinking of finishing his degree, but he had nothing to do except his papers. I don't know if he took the MA exam or not. He might have taken the MA exam but he didn't, you know, he had all these papers to do. Nine. And, his version of the story is, he never said any such thing. Doesn't matter, I needed to get divorced anyway, but what really pushed it over the edge – while all this is going on, I'm having a little fling with a grad student in another department at UNC, not in my department, so there's no impropriety there. And he gave me the crabs. Embarrassing, right? And I have to tell my

wife, I said it was from a toilet seat and she didn't believe me, of course. So, you know, I bought the stuff, and she didn't catch them. It shows you how much sex we weren't having at this point, and then this guy gave me the crabs a second time!

And it was that second time just pushed everything over the edge. Alright, I gotta do this now, I've gotta get divorced. Cuz it was really scary, really scary. So, we went to, I think we tried, yeah, we tried going to a couple of therapists. We went to one who was a psychiatric social worker. At that point, I was, 'I want to get out of this somehow.' And she was, 'I don't.' The psychiatric social worker met with us together and then at one point met with each of us individually, and she said to me, she said, 'I normally never, you know, break out of my role and give advice to people or tell 'em what they should do, but I'm gonna tell you, just keep putting one foot in front of the other. You're doing the right thing.' Good for her. It was the most useful advice – that and the fact that we were still sleeping in the same bed at this point. She was the one who gave us the advice that I should physically move out of the bedroom.

[01:02:12]

Camp in my study. That was her. Nobody else came up with anything as sensible. Then we got a mediation lawyer who ended up becoming a very famous expensive divorce lawyer in Chapel Hill, but at the time, she was young and just starting out. I think I already knew that she was a lesbian. My wife did not know that. The point is, when you're getting divorced, if you each hire your own lawyer, then the lawyers, there's an adversarial relationship and the lawyers have to spend as much of the other person's money as possible, right? If you get a mediation lawyer, all you're doing is paying them for advice on how to divide the stuff up yourselves. And that's what we did. We sat at a kitchen table, no, a dining table, very much like this, and she would drink and I would smoke hashish and we just went through every item that we owned. And I was, I was 30, she was 29. We didn't have a lot. It wasn't very difficult. And we agreed on almost everything. It was clear whose stuff was whose. The only things we argued about were a pair of brand new flowered bed sheets, a rhodium-plated candy dish, and a really nice space heater. [laughs] She kept the candy dish, I got the space heater and the flower sheets. The space heater broke eventually, I still have the sheets. And I got my own candy dish eventually, you know. It was sort of symbolic, you know. At one point, at one point, she – oh, and I agreed to split all our cash, you know, the value of our house and all that. I agreed to split it 60-40, with her taking 60 because I wanted out of the marriage, you know, and I agreed that she was entitled to compensation, but that, you know, still I'd suffered, too, and I wasn't gonna just walk away and not take anything. I'd worked. We both worked, we both had jobs, we made about the same amount of money, so there was none of this, you know, 'Who's gonna support whom?' kinda thing. And they already had no-fault divorce. At one point, she got annoyed and said that she was mad at me for leaving her because I was gay and she threatened to, you know, seek more. I said, 'Look,' I said, 'I can't help the fact that I'm gay. You know, I'm sorry for what happened, but I suffered, too. If you're gonna persecute me like this, okay, we'll each hire lawyers and I'll make sure that neither one of us gets anything. Just back off.' She did. I was outraged at that. Being treated that way. Even though in many respects, I'd done her wrong. So, I

got divorced. And then, that was July 13th, 1983. I remember clearly because it was also the day that my best student defended her dissertation. And I was joking, we had a big party, her boyfriend came down from Washington. This was in Chapel Hill. Paul came in from Chicago, I had my own apartment by this time. We had to live apart for a year, right, so July 13th, '82, I moved out. July 13th, '83, the divorce became legal. It cost about a thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. Anyway, I had a big party, and I remember joking that I got two women off my back on the same day. [laughs]

And then the question was, was Paul going to move in to live with me or not. And, he wasn't so sure. And I thought he'd said he would. Although we had both agreed that I should get divorced regardless of whether he moved down to live with me or not and if things didn't work out and he didn't move down to live with me, I was better off divorced anyway. We were agreed on that. So, we went back and forth for a couple of months and I guess in September of that same year, he sent me a postcard with the measurements of his bookcases... and his penis. This was his way of saying, you know, I'm moving down. These are my bookcases — make the space. That was how he did it. It was the kind of thing he would do. So, he moved down to live with me. Then I had to explain, now I'm divorced and living with a man, and, you know, I was publicly married in North Carolina, and, at first, he was just my friend who was living with me, and the older, more conservative faculty would say things like -- to their colleagues, it got back to me, not to me -- 'Do you think Victor's a homosexual?' But then, what really ended up making it OK for us was -- this must have been '84. I had a colleague who was one of the stars of the department. He's passed away. And, he must have been around 50 at that point, and he had a midlife crisis and he ran off with a student, left his wife. And the student was one of his students and he had signed her up for all courses with him, and there's another good colleague who was the chair at the time and had to take him one side and tell him, 'You can't do this.' And his wife was coming over and talking to me, and Paul and I ended up looking normal by comparison, right? That's how we came out. He ended up going back to his wife; they patched it up and ended up living out their lives together, which is the way it was ... that was good.

And then, oh yeah, so. Ten years in North Carolina with Paul, and my main advisor in Slavic, he's a big name in Slavic Linguistics— he's the one who got me into Macedonian. Gołąb retired. And I knew he was going to retire, I knew when he was turning 70 and this was back in the day when you had to retire at age 70. And I said to Howie Aronson, I said, "Howie," at one of these conferences, "I wanna come home." and he said, "I don't know, I don't think we'll be able to hire you. There's a hiring freeze on...." The next time I saw him, at another conference, not long after that, I think it was in Washington, D.C., he said, "Good news," he said, "The dean didn't laugh in my face." In fact, it was Phil Gossett, who was dean at the time and although there was a hiring freeze, this being Chicago, there are no rules, and Howie had made the case sufficiently, convinced Phil, and I had the record, so I came, and I did the interview. Everybody here knew me already. I never really left in a sense, I was coming back every year for conference talks, and so on. Plus, you know, I was good at what I did.

So, but then there was the question of health insurance. Paul, when he moved down to North Carolina, got a job working at a place called A Southern Season, managing their deli, and he had health insurance through his place of work. We move back to Chicago, what do we do about that? Well, that was the year, the year that we were doing the negotiation, that there was a faculty group trying to pressure the University into granting same sex partnership benefits. You've probably heard about the history of this group from other people. They used to meet up on the north side. We benefited from that. And so, I was the first person to move to Chicago with a same-sex partner and have that partner immediately covered under my health insurance, which was crucial, because it meant that for a whole year, Paul didn't have to work, he could do all the unpacking, while I could be busy, and I was busy as crazy, that was during the war in Yugoslavia. I worked for the UN one summer, you know, I was doing all kinds of, you know, going to Washington, going to Yugoslavia, and we had so much stuff. We had fourteen tons, 28,000 pounds. You know those vans that move four families at a time? We filled one of those. Mostly books. Almost none of it furniture. [laughs] But, anyway, that was in '93.

It was in '99 I guess when the *Chronicle of Higher Education* did the article on partnership benefits, and that's when they called Howie, who sent them to me, and I was chatting with them on this very phone and the young woman doing the interview says, 'Could we use a picture of you and your partner for the article?' and I thought to myself, 'Shit, I'm out, but am I that out?' It's *Chronicle of Higher Education*, you know. And I said, 'Oh, I have to ask my partner.' So I call Paul and he said, 'I don't care! It's up to you. Your career.' So, I thought, what the hell, so I said yeah. So I got lots of good feedback from that. People emailing me and telling me how happy they were to see that — straight people. Macedonia, which is where I do most of my fieldwork, it's a society that's many decades behind the U.S. in this, and the current government is homophobic. They're this kind of nationalist, authoritarian. I don't want to say fascist, but it borders on that to some extent, which pains me deeply. So, it's the kind of society where you just don't talk about these things. So long as you don't get obnoxious, they leave you alone. Pretty much, everybody knows, but nobody talks. And, actually, a few people do talk. And I know some gay people in Macedonia. For a long time, I didn't know any gay people. And there were no places to go. There was a park, which is dangerous. Or, you know, you go and have sex with somebody then the rumor goes all over town. It's a small town, you know. That's that side of it.

[01:13:21]

KR: So, how have things — what do you notice in things changing between when you came back to the University and when you were here as a grad student, like, atmosphere-wise?

VF: Well. It's totally different, right? When I was here as a grad student, it was still basically in the closet, liberation was just getting started. And, you know, AIDS had not yet happened, Gay Lib had not yet particularly gotten very much coverage. Basically, closety. And then, when I came back of course, I came back as an openly gay professor. And I felt it, I also made a point, at times, of talking about my partner, Paul, in the same way that other professors would talk routinely about their husbands or wives. I felt it was

important for me to give a positive message to gay young people who might be in the class. And to straight people, too. And, it's never been a problem. I mean, there are some homophobes. There's one in the Slavic department. He's not open about it, but it's clear that's what's going on. He's also an anti-Semite. And he's kind of paranoid psychotic, so it's really a bad situation. But that's the kind of personal ickiness that can happen anywhere.

KR: So, what about your role now as a faculty member — you just mentioned that you're trying to be a good role model and sort of ...

VF: Yeah. Informally. I'm not an activist. You know, the one place where activism would be really important would be Macedonia. If I get drawn into that, I might have to do something. But I wouldn't want to get drawn into it unless I could do something constructive and not simply be written off. You see what I mean? So I have had contacts with gay liberation-type organizations in Skopje, and as is so often the case among these kinds of organizations, there's in-fighting, and this one doesn't cooperate with that one, and you know. And, I had more connections, one of my best undergrads a few years ago, Eric Prendergast, turned out to be gay. In fact, he met his partner, now of many years, at a party at my house. And, he was in Skopje for a year on a Fulbright between college and grad school, while I was in Skopje. So I went — by that time, there was a bar that had a gay night [laughs] — that's what it's like there, they have gay nights. So I went to a bar with him just to go and see it was like. A bar, hey, just like any other. Until a fag kinda came out [laughs]. But yeah, so, here on campus, you know, when I was approached about this project, I was like, 'Yeah, sure.' You know, I don't go out of my way. Just, if there's something that comes up, then, yeah, I'm here.

KR: It seems like from what we were talking about when you were here in the seventies, that sort of the gay social group was very, like, mixed between the faculty and the students.

[01:17:37]

VF: No. No. No. No. It was all students.

KR: All students?

VF: That's not quite true. Howard Brown, professor of music, he was very close with Jim McDaniel and was open and he had a New Year's party that was famous. But he didn't hang out at Jimmy's, OK, so I went to that New Year's party I think once, and had a good time. But, and I knew about Howie, but I was not out to him, right, so... Howie, Howard, I don't think I knew of any other gay faculty when I was a grad student. No, it was, and it was very much, you know, students did their thing and whatever the faculty did, we were no part of it, except for Jim was good friends with Howard and there might have been some other people who were friends in Howard's circle, but I wasn't in that circle.

KR: OK, so I think I just got that from you talking about Howie, then.

VF: Yeah, and all that came after graduate school. After graduate school, when I was a colleague with Howie, then, but that was already as a colleague, not as a student.

KR: OK, so, how do you think things have changed since you've been back here as a faculty member from 1993 to now?

VF: I guess I would – the word 'normalization' pops into my head. I mean, the gay faculty group that got together to push through the same sex partnership benefits continued to meet afterwards, for about a year or two, but eventually just sort of dissolved because, this one's busy, that one's busy. The actual issue had been solved, we have different interests. So, being gay isn't an organizing principle of my social life. I mean, I have people over for dinner. Although, I have to say, that on a couple of occasions, I've had gay faculty with their partners over for dinner as kind of reaching out and they never invited me back, so I guess they weren't interested. Pfft. Eh. Yeah, so that's like, being gay is just, you know, and now that they've passed the marriage law, prob—well, I've been putting it off, because I wanted—I just didn't want to schlep and take the time and, besides, what's in it for me? When the Supreme Court made that decision, 'cause I'd always said, when the Feds recognize it, we'll get married, 'cause then it'll mean something real from an economic point of view. Otherwise, it's just symbolic and I'm not interested in symbolism. I don't wanna spend money on symbolism. So, with what the Supreme Court did, then I started looking in marriage laws in Massachusetts and New York and places where I have friends and relatives and I might go to. Canada, I even considered at one point. And, now with Illinois having done it, although it doesn't go into effect until next year, I suspect we'll just wait till sometime when it's convenient, so we can just take the train downtown. [VF Note: We did. We married August 10, 2014.]

Plus, I've got a lot of relatives – it sort of makes it easier. I have one cousin that I'm very close to. All my relatives are straight and I came out to them gradually. Actually, Paul knew—a lot of them lived in Hyde Park. My cousins are all in the suburbs now. Or even out in, you know, other cities. Paul knew most of my family before he knew me because they were customers at the Chalet, and they all liked him. So, getting started with him was easy. One more story about the coming out, how did I come out to my parents. The way I came out to my parents was because of AIDS, and what happened was, well. Paul moved down to Chapel Hill to live with me, I got tenure, just before that, I guess. I got tenure when I was 29, he moved down to live with me when I was 30. We had a house, I was happy. And, my mother called one night and I'd been drinking and I invited them to come visit. Which I had not done since 1975. And, I remember, when I invited my mother, she was speechless, which is very unusual for her. Anyway, the next day I wake up and I was like, 'Oh, *shit*, what am I gonna do?' And, I said, 'Well, I'll give them 2 and 2 and they can make 4. They can make 22.' You know, I took all the porn down off the walls and I put a sleeping bag in the bedroom to pretend that Paul was sleeping in that. The guest room became his. We had a whole guest apartment in the house; the basement was finished, like they call a mother-in-law apartment. So, it was a very plausible set-up. It was also a good one because Paul liked his own space. And, so my parents came, stayed, brought my sister, and I was helping them pack the night before they left. They had to leave early in the morning and my mother says to me, 'Victor,' she says, 'Is there

something you want to tell us?’ I look at her and I say, ‘No.’ It’s like, I’m not gonna tell you. After all I’ve been through, you figure it out. So, that was incident one. Then, a couple of years later, I was in Chicago visiting my parents, went out for dinner with them, and was asking about various relatives who live in other places. And when I say none of my relatives are gay, that’s not true. One of my father’s first cousins, so he’s my second cousin, I have a second cousin who was gay. And I asked about various people and how’s Peter. My mom goes, ‘Why do you ask?’ I say, ‘I was just asking!’ You know. ‘Why, what’s wrong?’ ‘Oh, nothing, nothing.’ Literally like that. So, I didn’t know what she was getting at, so. You know, finished dinner and I was staying at the hotel that night for this conference. And I’d forgotten my computer in their trunk, so they had to drive downtown to bring the computer for me to pick it up, and as I’m kissing my mom goodbye in the front seat, she says, ‘Oh, by the way, you asked about Peter last night, the thing is that he has AIDS. And his mother’s been on the phone with me nonstop because of you.’ And I said, ‘Why? Why because of me?’ And she says, ‘Well, well, ‘cause you’re gay.’ Oh, OK. [laughs] I made her tell me. And then I said, ‘Just so you know, I’m negative.’ She said, ‘I’m not worried about you. You’re in a stable relationship with Paul.’ [laughs] She gets like that. So, that was how I came out to my parents—my mother. My father was in the car. According to my mother, he had a hard time accepting it, but we never talked about it, just was there.

[01:24:53]

KR: So do you feel like their opinions changed about homosexuality? I remember the story very early on.

VF: Yeah, exactly. They thought it was a fate worse than death. And, you know, they wanted their two kids to marry nice Jewish children and give them nice Jewish grandchildren. That’s what they wanted. They, I mean, the next worst thing to being homosexual would be marrying a goy. You know [laughs], that’s the way I grew up. And they, all of the cousins that I’m close with, the ones on my father’s side, first cousins. All the ones that got married, married Christians, except me. I married a Jew and look what happened. [laughs] So they just got over it. They got old, they had to get used to it. My sister married very late in life; she married a Jew, but she’s never going to have kids. And, that’s it. So, my mom, every so often, she used to every so often say, ‘I’m happy.’ She’s quite happy at Montgomery’s. ‘I’m happy, the one thing is I wish I had grandchildren.’ Said, sorry! You know. It’s not just me, it’s Adele. And my mother once told me the story of a kid that she had known in first grade who had pulled her hair so she thought he liked her and she sort of kept up with him for a while, and it turned out he was gay. And his partner, and she read about him in the newspaper, his partner murdered him. She doesn’t remember – she told me this story several times, but she never remembered exactly when it happened or what. She remembered the guy’s name, which I don’t remember now. A Jewish name. But, she did have that story, and who knows what that might have had her thinking back in the day. Because by the time she told the story, she already knew that I was gay and was at peace with it.

[01:26:52]

KR: Do you have any pictures or artifacts or anything for us? I know one thing I'd be interested in is if you could take a picture at some point of that charm, if you know.

VF: The ljudi, oh sure. Look, send me an email and I will certainly send you a picture of the charm. I do, I don't think I have. I have one photograph that would be of interest. It was at the party that my parents threw for me upon my actually getting the PhD. I marched, June of that 1970. I wanna say June 13th, it might have been, I think it was. Friday. In that picture, I'm in my robes, and several other gay guys who were in the linguistics department at the time are in that picture. I don't think I have any other pictures from that time. I wish I did. I have pictures now. Later in my life, I wanted to have pictures from back then, just to remember, but I don't. I've got a scan of the old Gold Coast t-shirt. Would that be interesting?

KR: Oh, that would be interesting.

VF: Good. I can send you that. Make a note to remind me, OK? So, ljudi, spelled l-j-u-d-i. Gold Coast t-shirt. Graduation picture. And I'll try to think of some other stuff.

KR: And I'll send you that email. Yeah, that would be great. So, do you have anything else to add?

VF: I think I've done a pretty good job of covering everything that should be covered.

KR: Thank you so much.

VF: You're welcome!

[1:29:16]

End of Interview