

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

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW #11**

**GLOWACKI, VICTOR (1978-) AB '00, MA '00**

*At U of C:* September 1996 – June 2000

*Interviewed:* 2013 (1 session)

*Interviewer:* Molly Liu

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**Interview (February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013) with Victor Glowacki in the lobby of his office, Chicago, IL.**

[00:00:00]

ML: Tell me about the path that you took to come to the University of Chicago.

VG: Well, I went on a college tour with my parents after my junior year of high school. We visited a number of campuses on the east coast, ranging from Washington and Lee University in rural Virginia all the way up to Harvard. And Duke, Wake Forest, Northwestern, University of Chicago. When I took a tour of campus, I fell in the love with the place because I felt that it was life of the mind was first and foremost. In contrast with Harvard, where academics seemed to be downplayed. Or Yale. I really felt that was an atmosphere where I could feel most comfortable.

ML: So you felt most comfortable in a very academic environment?

VG: Yes, definitely.

ML: Were your expectations for the life of the mind fulfilled when you were at U of C?

VG: Most definitely. In terms of non-academic experiences, I feel like they could have been much richer, when I compare my experience to those of other people. But in terms of academic experience, the U of C really did turn out exactly as I'd hoped. So my expectations were totally fulfilled in that regard.

ML: Where did you live when you were at the University of Chicago?

VG: All four years I was in Hitchcock Hall, right on campus on the quad.

ML: Haha, I'm not from Hitchcock myself, but I have a lot of friends in Snitchcock and they speak very fondly of it. Can you tell me about the social life that you did have at the

University of Chicago?

VG: Well, I was very much involved in a lot of recognized student organizations. I was heavily involved in Model United Nations at the University of Chicago, and in fact in fourth year I was elected Secretary General. It was amazing. And that year was the first year that there was an openly gay Secretary General, myself, and an openly gay Member-at-Large, Brian Richardson, and both of those positions were elected by the membership at large. So that was a tremendous achievement. It wasn't just that we were the first LGBT Secretary General and Member-at-Large, we were also the first non-fraternity people to be elected to that position. Because for eleven years before, the Secretary General was member of one of two fraternities, either Dekes [Ed.: Delta Kappa Epsilon] or SigEp [Ed.: Sigma Phi Epsilon], and we were the first non-fraternity people to have that position.

ML: It seems that you started a trend! Now the overlap between Model UN and the fraternities seems quite low. One of my best friends is actually the Chief Operating Officer of Model UN, so I know a lot—I know too much!--about the incredibly arduous process that it takes to get elected. What was it like to run the organization during your fourth year?

[00:03:09]

VG: It was an extremely rewarding experience. I would say to this day that it was the greatest leadership experience I've ever had because I was responsible for nearly 3,000 high school students and 200 University of Chicago students who volunteered to staff the conference. So I've never had to speak before a crowd of almost 3500 people before. And not since then, either! So it really helped me banish any remaining fear of public speaking I may have had. And it was great to be able to work with all these different groups of high-schoolers because I really do enjoy teaching, although my mom made it clear that if I decided to pursue that as my primary career my parents would not pay for my college. That was made very clear to me. So that's an avocation and something I really enjoy doing, so I was able to do a little bit of that through Model UN, connect with high-schoolers, and I really appreciate that experience. And I'd been involved in Model UN since my freshman year of high school, and I went to high school in Hong Kong. It was a great experience. So I had eight years of Model UN experience under my belt. And I was also involved in the Model United Nations traveling team at the University of Chicago, which would travel to the various conferences and compete at Harvard, Yale, different conferences, and we were always very successful at competitions.

And I was also treasurer of Hitchcock Hall. I was briefly in Student Government—I may have been only an alternate, I don't quite recall what capacity—it's been almost fifteen years, so I don't remember all of the details. I was also involved in a student publication called the Chicago Criterion, which does not exist anymore. It was a journal of conservative thought, not to be confused with the Divinity School publication, which is also called the Chicago Criterion. But this Criterion is no longer in existence. I was also, somewhat atypically for an LGBT person, a member of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and was also a member of the College Republicans. I was vice president of that

organization for a while. Again, my membership in InterVarsity and the College Republicans was all prior to my coming out.

ML: Do you think that being in those organizations played a role in you not coming out? I imagine there weren't too many LGBT people in those organizations.

VG: That is correct. And especially in the Criterion as well as in the College Republicans there were some anti-LGBT comments made. I don't think that was my primary motivation for waiting until my fourth year to come out. I think my primary motivation again was fear that my parents would cut off my funding for my studies. And in fact, when I did eventually come out to my parents, it was the beginning of winter quarter at my fourth and final year at the University of Chicago. And my mom subsequently confirmed that yes, indeed, she and my dad would have cut off my funding had they known earlier.

ML: That's incredibly frightening.

VG: So my fears were not groundless. [laughs] That was the primary motivation for the delay in the time. And because of the way they raised me, I could not imagine living a dual life, being out in college but not at home. I felt that when I came out I would need to come out to my family, friends, college, all at the same time.

ML: Wow, it seems like you faced a lot of pressure at college and at home. How do you think that affected you?

VG: I think perhaps it...It was very difficult, especially at home, because prior to coming out I had in fact been extremely close to my parents. Until about 8<sup>th</sup> grade or so I would have, without joking, characterized my mother as my best friend. We were incredibly close. I was an only child, and we had a very good relationship. And it was extremely jarring to me to realize that they had talked all along about love being unconditional to find that love was extremely conditional upon me following a certain path. And it did make me depressed and I suffered from serious depression. In fact, shortly before coming out, I seriously contemplated committing suicide. It was a very difficult time for me.

ML: I'm glad that you made it through. Congratulations.

VG: Thank you. I'm glad that I did too. And, you know, all the talk about Dan Savage and the It Gets Better videos? It does get better. I haven't made one yet. That's something that I have considering doing once, since I do have a little bit of experience to share. My experience was somewhat atypical: I was not at all involved in theater or any of these other stereotypical LGBT pursuits, so I do have somewhat of a slightly different perspective that I could provide. Maybe one day I will do one of those.

ML: And that would be really valuable. Not being the stereotypical theater—doing a video like that. So, since you were not out, was it very different being out vs. not being out? Can you talk about some of the changes you faced?

VG: For me it was incredibly changed because I had this reputation of being a very conservative, buttoned-down individual, thanks to my membership in the College Republicans and the Criterion and InterVarsity. That was an identity that people associated with me initially, and this seemed very dissonant and jarring to them. And in fact, it really complicated my relationship with my Resident Advisors. They were Mormons and they really liked how I was before I came out. After I came out, they didn't appreciate that too much. They didn't do anything overtly discriminatory or exclusionary, but I could tell that they were considerably less warm and friendly than they had been in the past. It was more subtle. And it was—I did lose a lot of friends, including my best friend at the time, who was the first person I came out to and who initially was supportive. But as time went on, he became less so, partially because I think he may have had some unresolved issues of his own. And that's not just my speculation—his girlfriend, who was also a friend of mine, indicated that to me as well. And also I think that the straw that broke the camel's back was that one day we were walking down the street and someone completely innocently came up to him and said “Oh congratulations, I heard about you and Victor,” assuming that we were a couple. And that just did it. He became, as time went on, virulently homophobic to the point where his peers would try to mock him and make fun of him with that. So someone as a prank—at that point he was working in a university-affiliated laboratory—put a gay website on his computer and he became so angry that he reported those people to the president of the university and had them removed from their position at the laboratory.

[00:11:26]

ML: Oh wow.

VG: So—yeah, it was definitely a conflicted situation. I've seen him maybe once or twice after graduation, but as much as I would have liked to maintain a relationship, there has—we have not had any contact for probably about eight years now.

ML: That's really tragic—that he feels that way. Yeah, a lot of the incidents that you describe, like getting the lab member taken off his job and your resident heads, it seems that the atmosphere on campus was not entirely gay-friendly. Could you talk more about the campus attitude towards LGBT groups?

VG: Oh, I would say that the vast, vast majority of students were LGBT-friendly, and I never had any inclination from any professor of mine that they were—that they would ever make any comment that could even be minimally offensive to LGBT students. They knew that they had LGBT students in their classroom. Institutionally, I felt that the institution too was very supportive in terms of any kind of public pronouncements, in terms of the very prominent office space given to Queers and Associates, the LGBT student organization. And at the time MUNUC and Q&A, as it was known, were the only two RSOs that had reserved space in the Reynolds Club, and that was at a premium. That really showed the extent to which the institution was LGBT-friendly. My experiences again related more to my peer groups. The only quasi-institutional experience I had with an RA, and even that was overt—covert—well, not covert, but it was not something that

better legislation or policies really could have addressed. It was more of a personal and subtle change, rather than anything that a non-discrimination act could have addressed. I was aware of the existence of non-discrimination policies while I was on campus and also that domestic partnership benefits were offered to employees and faculty, so I was aware of all those institutional connections that were in place. Interestingly enough, the dean of student services at the time, Bill Michel [Interview #18], was not out, and he didn't come out until years later. And now we've gotten a lot closer since he came out. We're friends. And I do think that it's interesting to note that at my time at the U of C, he, as an up and coming junior administrator, did not feel comfortable enough to be open about his sexuality, and it was only a couple of years later that he felt comfortable enough to come out with no adverse consequences to his career. And he's been doing very well in both his personal and his professional life. He has a partner and is married as well. It's a real success story.

ML: That's really great. So it seems that you were really busy with others things, too busy to be involved with Q&A? Were you cognizant of other gay organizations on campus, and how much were you aware of them?

VG: I think Q&A had a relatively high profile, thanks to their office and fliers and things of that nature. And they were very heavily involved too with orientation, also providing materials in the orientation packages. I didn't join the organization until after I came out and as soon as I came out I joined, but by then it was too late to be involved in a formal leadership role. But I did attend meetings and screenings of LGBT films and any kinds of discussions I could work into my busy schedule.

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ML: So could you tell me a little more about the classes that you took at the University of Chicago? Or the "life of the mind" sort of thing that you were mentioning before?

VG: I didn't have too much of an opportunity to take electives because of my very compressed program, trying to complete all of my undergraduate requirements in three years and the master's in one year. Even so I had almost enough courses to get a second major if they had offered a second major at the time in Russian Studies. So I was very busy with that. I did not take a single gender studies course at the time, partially because I didn't have enough flexibility in my schedule and partially because I wasn't out and I feared that taking such a course would lead people to start asking questions especially because it was so dissonant with my prior persona as this rather conservative individual. So I thought it might create some issues there.

ML: You mentioned that you weren't out until your fourth year, but—if you don't mind me asking—when did you yourself become aware that you were gay?

VG: Well, I think my first inclination came at about the age of 12, when most kids go through puberty. My friends and I were watching our first PG-13 movie, and they were pointing at the girl and saying how hot she was, and my eyes were drawn towards the guy. And I

didn't say anything because in elementary school there was a lot of homophobic banter and stuff like that, some of which my friends engaged in, and so I knew to keep silent. But I knew from that moment that there was something a little bit different about me.

And at first in fact I considered the priesthood because as a practicing Roman Catholic I was taught that there were two options: either you could get married or become a priest. But I realized the more and more I thought about it that I would not be able to handle celibacy. I decided that I would just end up being a single individual, and it was still not—not exactly a wonderful solution, but I buried myself in my academic work.

And I was heavily involved in extracurriculars. And I did have a very active social life in high school, I had a lot of good friends. But again, no one was out in my high school. No students and no faculty. So I was there from '92 to '96, and my high school's incredibly diverse, with about 36 different nationalities represented at Hong Kong International School. Ethnic Asians formed a majority of the population. I was a minority in high school and I loved that experience, and I wish that more people could have that experience, because it really changes your perspective on a lot of things. So it was a wonderful, wonderful experience, but as diverse as the school was ethnically, there was no socioeconomic or sexual orientation diversity. Everyone was rich and straight. [laughs] Subsequently some of my friends did come out, and they regretted that they did not come out in high school. But I didn't, because I knew that it would have made my life much more difficult. Instead I really focused on academics, I was one of three valedictorians in a very very competitive high school.

ML: Congratulations—your entire record is like stellar achievements all the way! It's very impressive.

VG: And in fact I think that was what threw my parents when I first came out. They said, you were a perfect child, basically, in terms of academics and discipline all along, and this threw us for a loop. In their mind it was almost like a disciplinary issue or something like that, as if I'd been arrested or as if I'd gotten a girlfriend pregnant out of wedlock or something like that—that's how they viewed my coming out.

ML: Can you tell me more about your background, actually? It's quite remarkable that you went to Hong Kong International School. Where did you grow up, and how did you manage to get such an interesting background?

VG: I moved around a lot because of my dad's work. He worked for Dana Corporation, which is a manufacturer of automotive components, and he worked for them for basically his entire working life. He and my mom were both born in Poland and they immigrated to the United States. They met here. And my dad worked his way up from the assembly line to corporate VP. So it was a traditional American success story—fulfilled the American dream.

ML: Rags to riches, coming up.

VG: Yes, and I'm very proud of him for that. But I do think that my parents' cultural background had a large role in how they reacted to my coming out. More so the cultural background than the religious background. Yes, they were Catholics, but so are my partner's parents, and they did not have nearly the same reaction. They were very accepting. They did not feel their faith to be incompatible with their child's sexuality. And my parents would usually couch their arguments not in religious duty, but rather filial duty. Almost Confucianism, if you will, you know? It was very interesting to see. And I've heard similar experiences from LGBT with Latino backgrounds as well—your obligation is to your family, to have children, to carry on the family name, etc. I think that was part of their background. Because of my father's job, I was born in Paris, and then we moved to London, California, Toledo, Ohio, which was boring compared to all the other places. But it was Dana's headquarters, so that's why we were in Toledo. When I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade—actually 7<sup>th</sup> grade—my dad came home one day from work and said, “What do you think about moving to Hong Kong?” I said yes! I was really anxious to get out of Toledo, I hated living in Toledo, so I jumped at the opportunity.

ML: I lived in Columbus for eight years, so I can definitely sympathize with wanting to get out of Ohio. [laughs] But wow, Hong Kong! That's some escape.

VG: It was truly a wonderful experience, maybe the best five years of my life. Really, a wonderful experience.

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ML: To go back to an earlier point, it's remarkable that during your time at Model UN, there was not only you but the Member-at-large, you said? Who was also openly gay.

VG: Yes. I actually have an interesting story about him.

ML: Oh, please.

VG: He came out way before I did. In fact I think he's been out since high school, or at least for the entirety of his university career. He was definitely a very flamboyant and openly out individual, involved in Q&A and political activism, College Democrats and all that. And when I was ready to come out, I chose to come out—I first came out to my best friend. And a couple of other people I knew. But when I was really ready to come out publicly—this was all in the space of a week, this all happened very quickly. Because I already knew that I wanted to be totally open about my life. I didn't want to have pockets of knowledge, pockets of secrecy. So I told him knowing full well that when I told him, because of the rumor mill, everyone would know within days. What I did not realize what he would do is that he would get up on a dining table in the middle of Burton-Judson, and he--

ML: Wait, really? [starts laughing]

VG: --he'd shout at the top of his lungs to all, “Guess what everybody, Victor Glowacki is

gay!”

ML: [still laughing] What was your reaction to all of that?

VG: I was surprised but I wasn't offended or upset. I knew that by telling him that everyone would find out, but I thought that it would be through the rumor mill rather than from shouting from a table top. But the effect was the same.

ML: Shouting from the mountaintop!

VG: Yeah, exactly!

ML: That's such a funny way to go public!

VG: Yep! So it was a good experience. And he was very much a trailblazer and I appreciated his friendship. We recently reconnected—he was in New Orleans and DC for a while, but now he's back in Chicago and lives only a couple of blocks away, so we've reconnected and it's been very cool.

ML: Sorry, did you mention his name?

VG: Brian Richardson?

ML: Brian Richardson. Okay.

VG: He worked for a while for the Center on Halsted and now he works for the City of Chicago Department of Public Health as one of the outreach people.

ML: While you were at the University, did you pursue any relationships?

VG: Yes, I did. My first relationship was actually a wonderful experience. It was with a man named Ted Boles, who was involved in theater. But again he wasn't exactly your stereotypical theater guy because he was pre-med and he was involved in a lot of other student organizations. He was very heavily involved in the prospective students group, so getting the prospective students involved, and very highly regarded by the university administration. I believe he got the Maroon key award and that was a very highly coveted award.

ML: [laughs] So you were like the power couple of the gay community.

VG: Yeah, we were! It didn't last long, but we remain friends to this day.

ML: That's remarkable.

VG: And in a strange twist, my partner is an attorney who is 18 years older than I am, and we've been together for about 12 years. And his partner is an attorney who's about 13

years old than he is, and they've been together for about 10 years. So we've led very interesting parallel lives.

ML: That's pretty funny. [laughs] So you've talked about the university a lot, and I'm sure you were very busy with the university, but did you ever get a chance to go out into Chicago at all? And if so, what sorts of things did you do in the city?

VG: I always joke that I only went downtown half a dozen times in four years. I think that's an exaggeration. I did go downtown occasionally to watch movies, things like that, or go to dinner. On occasion to study at the Borders at Michigan Avenue, which unfortunately no longer exists but was right across from Water Tower Place. Now it's the Top Shop. But it used to be a Borders, and I have many fond memories of going there with my best friend and working on my masters thesis with my laptop and my books on cold winter days. It was very nice. But by and large I didn't go out much. Shortly after I came out I was introduced by some friends to the gay scene on Halsted Street, but I went only a few times when I was still in college. But immediately after graduation, I was going out every weekend in Halsted. Even though I lived downtown, I was basically spending all of my time there.

[00:27:53]

ML: Can you tell me more about the gay scene on Halsted? It would have been around 2000, right?

VG: Not much has changed except back then smoking was allowed in bars, and most people smoked. It wasn't just that smoking was allowed, but a much greater percentage of people smoked. After smoking was banned, really a lot of people quit. So I guess the smoking ban had its intended consequence. I was only a social smoker, never really got into it except when I was drinking occasionally, and now I don't smoke at all.

ML: That's probably why the ban worked. [laughs]

VG: Yeah. But so I think that things were pretty similar. The only thing is that you didn't have mobile applications like Grindr and Scruff to meet people. Those did not exist. And I always met people the old-fashioned way, never online. That was starting to become available but I never took advantage of it. I always like to meet people in person at bars. So that was my preferred MO. I found by comparing notes with my friends that a lot of online profiles were deceptive, to put it mildly. And then you showed up and met the person—"is this person really you? You don't look like the person in your profile..."

ML: "That photo's not..."

VG: Yeah, exactly! So I always like to do things in person.

ML: So is that how you got involved with the gay community? Just going to bars on Halsted?

VG: Yes, and I joined the Human Rights Campaign very quickly. My partner and I no longer belong. We had a quite ancillary incident at one of the galas that convinced us that we did not want to belong to that organization. But instead we are proud members of Equality Illinois, which we think has done a tremendous job and that it's thanks to Equality Illinois that we have civil unions in the state of Illinois. Without their tireless advocacy and lobbying—and thanks to Equality Illinois and not Human Rights Campaign that we have rights in this state. I think that generally, HRC has participated in a lot of self-aggrandizement, and I think they have focused excessively on fundraising and lobbying at the national level, and they suffer from what I call a bi-coastal mentality. If it doesn't happen in New York or LA they don't care about it. So I'm really supportive and we are financially involved significant donors to Equality Illinois.

ML: So you've mentioned a few connections that you've kept up from the University of Chicago. In general, do you have a lot of friends from that period, and do you think that's typical?

VG: I'm involved in the LGBT alumni network, and that's how I found out about this project. I think it was Timothy Stewart-Winter [Interview #2], events like that I really enjoy attending. And I'm looking forward to an event next Monday at the Center on Halsted discussing Lawrence vs. Texas. I'm excited about that. I enjoy participating in events like that and also social events that the alumni group organizes—a couple of holiday events at the Downtown Bar on State Street, and other such events I really enjoy participating in those. Ironically most of my friends in that organization were not my contemporaries at the U of C. They were either before or after my time. It just so happens that my U of C friends are younger or older than I am. I have no idea why that happened, it's just how it is.

ML: So no reason, it just happened?

VG: Yeah.

ML: Have you stayed in Chicago for your entire time after graduating from the U of C?

VG: Yes. I tell people I came to Chicago for college and I never left. I really fell in love with the city. Even though my parents spent many years here, that was way before I was born. They didn't speak of it too fondly. They didn't enjoy their experience in Chicago. Partially because the city was different in the '50s and '60s than it is now. Even my dad, who's a notorious curmudgeon and thinks that the '50s were the best time in American history, even he admits that Chicago now is much prettier and cleaner and safer than it was in the '50s. It is very much a different city. The reason why I enjoy Chicago and really imagine spending the rest of my life here is that it combines what I think is best about having a cosmopolitan city with what is quintessentially American. And I don't find that so much in New York. I found New Yorkers to be rude and inconsiderate and in Chicago, you'll see tourists poring over their maps and people coming up to and saying, can I help you? can I point you in the right direction? I've never seen that in New York. Maybe it happens, but it's not part of the ethos of the city, at least as far as I've experienced it.

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ML: Yeah, that's definitely true... Can you expand on what “quintessentially American” means to you?

VG: Well, part of that: courtesy, I would say. Courtesy and respect. Civic-mindedness. I believe our polity is based on shared values. We don't have shared ethnicity or religion or to some degree not even a shared language, although that's a little bit more debatable—I do think that shared language is an important aspect of our identity. But I think it's this common set of civic values that we are all a part of the civic polity, that we're responsible for each other and each other's welfare that I think really constitutes what's special about this nation. And I see that more in evidence in Chicago than on the coasts. I do much prefer the California mentality to the New York mentality, but I think that some of California too is more inward-looking. Overly so. Not in a selfish way, but in that people are very preoccupied with their inner spiritual growth and all of this, and not as much in an outward-looking mentality as the Midwest captures and Chicago distills. I don't think the Midwest is the be-all and end-all, because there are definitely at least in the small-town Midwest certain very unpleasant nativist attitudes, if you will. And being less than accepting of others, including LGBT folks. Some of my friends are from rural southern Illinois, and they did not have very supportive experiences. But I think that Chicago is cosmopolitan enough to capture the values of tolerance and diversity while maintaining the Midwestern friendliness that I like so much about this region.

ML: That makes sense. It has this friendliness, but it's because it's cosmopolitan that that friendliness extends to others that it wouldn't otherwise. That's a really beautiful description of Chicago. Looking back at your time at the University of Chicago, do you think that your experience there was typical of LGBT people at the time?

VG: Not at all. I think that a majority came out early in their college careers, and many, many were out throughout their college career—they came out in high school. And I'd say that majority of them had the support of their parents. Not all, there was a significant minority of people like me who did not. But I'd say that by and large the majority did have the support of parents. Partially because I think the University is somewhat self-selecting in the applicant pool such that it tends to come from a more liberal background than perhaps might be the case at Washington and Lee University, another institution I looked at during my college tour but did not end up applying to.

ML: So you mention a couple of times your non-typicality, and I remember you talking about making a video for the It Gets Better project because your non-typicality. Do you think that has affected your coming out process or the way that you think about your sexuality, that you're not the gay theater stereotype?

VG: I think it has in the sense that politically, I don't subscribe to the notion that there is this progressive agenda that should necessarily be linked. That GLBT rights somewhat should be in connection to, say, opposition to the Iraq War, things of that nature. There seems to

be this perception of a progressive agenda, progressive causes which are linked together. I can see there being a more direct relation, say, to the rights of African-Americans or women, or other oppressed minorities—or majority, as the case is for women. I don't necessarily think that for instance being a gay rights advocate necessarily means being pro-choice. It does mean being in favor of equal pay for equal work.

ML: So you're drawing a distinction between civil-rights-related causes, which are linked to gay rights, and non-civil-rights-related causes?

VG: Yes. Yes. And I think that similarly, my still somewhat inwardly conservative bent, I don't care for the term queer. I know—I understand the rationalization for using it, that the GLBT movement has adopted it in order to appropriate it, to change its meaning from a pejorative to a positive one. And I can understand and appreciate it, but I still do not identify myself as such. Just the rationale for using the term to be more broad stance, but I think sometimes it can turn off some of an older generation of GLBTs, who sometimes have a real issue with it, and some sets of my generation who do not identify with the progressive movement, all of what it stands for. Progressive is their term, I would like to say the radical left, because I think it's a little bit of a misnomer. So I do draw a distinction. And if you look at the history of progressivism and what it stood for in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it's very different from what it stands for today. So I think that's the self-label that's been used, but I'm not entirely comfortable with that label either. I just like leaving it as LGBT or gay. I have a cousin who's a lesbian and she likes to use the term gay generically, rather than using LGBT to include lesbians. But I can understand too why there would be objections to that. The issue of biphobia, which I don't gloss over, is real and sometimes they get the worst of both worlds—discrimination from straight and the GLBT communities—I mean the GLT communities, whatever.

ML: [laughs] It's hard to get the acronyms straight.

VG: So I'm not glossing over that these are real issues, but I guess that's where my background slightly differs. It's weird, I get all these mailings from the ACLU and from NOW and all these progressive organizations, I suspect because HRC shares its mailing lists. [laughs]

ML: [laughs] Another slightly unethical thing.

[00:41:26]

VG: Yes. Otherwise I never would have volunteered or signed up for these organizations. Not to say that what they do isn't good, but I think that I in particular don't feel strongly or necessarily support their missions.

ML: Looking back at your college experience, do you think your perception of it has changed over the years?

VG: Only insofar that I really wish that I had had a fuller social life and had more opportunities to take advantage of what downtown has to offer. But I recognize that life is

about trade-offs, and I don't regret having achieved all I achieved within four years. When it comes to dollars and cents, my parents did offer to pay for four years of education and said to get as many degrees as you can. And I'd much rather have forgone the experiences of socializing in the city than to have come up with an extra \$120,000 in college loans to pay off, especially given my current career is not terribly lucrative. It allows me to live comfortably, but working in a public service occupation, I would never make the large sums of money that some of my friends who went into private equity have. I'm very glad not to have that student debt hanging over my head like the Sword of Damocles. Because of my parents' financial situation I would not have gotten any need-based aid of any kind, so it would have been the whole cost of education on my head.

ML: Tell me more about your life after graduation. Did you get a job right after you graduated?

VG: As matter of fact, I graduated on Saturday, and I started working with Social Security on Monday. So two days later. And for me it was particularly important to get a job immediately after graduation because my parents made it clear that I was not welcome to move back home. And I did not want to move back home even if I was welcome to do so because I wanted to experience the social life that I had been missing for four years and, as someone who had newly come out, to experience the gay community. I was particularly anxious to live on my own, and I knew that I would have to be financially self-sufficient. So getting a job quickly was the most important. At the time, my goal was to simultaneously pursue a career with the State Department, because I did have a Masters in International Relations, and at least since high school I had aspired to be a diplomat. Thanks to Model UN and all of that and to my experiences living abroad, I really wanted to be a diplomat. I did take the Foreign Service Exam, which is a very lengthy process that takes several years. By the time I passed, which was on my second try, I was given a conditional offer of employment and the Iraq War had broken out. At that point I decided, can I in conscience live with myself in being an aider and abettor of a policy that I feel is deeply morally wrong and is against our national interests? And I decided that I could not. So I abandoned my career aspirations for the State Department and decided to stay with Social Security.

ML: Wow. That's a remarkable choice.

VG: I've always had a heart for public service, so I always envisioned myself working for the government in some capacity. But the reason why I chose the SSA is because they had a booth at the career fair that I went to during my fourth year, and that was really the first job offer I got that was firm and not iffy, and I jumped at it. I thought that if I really do end up going to the State Department, at least I'll be able to carry over my seniority and my benefits from SSA, just a smooth transition. Is it my dream job? No. Is it something I derive intense personal satisfaction from? Yes. And most importantly, I have never lost a moment of sleep over what I do. I have never had to make a morally compromising choice in my twelve years of working where I work. Ultimately I think that's what makes my job most worthwhile.

[00:46:13]

ML: Can you tell me more about how you met your current partner?

VG: Yes! We met on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Almost exactly three months after I graduated from the U of C. I had been dating a lot in the summer, and I hadn't really found many lasting relationships, so I decided that I'd give up, I was just going to have fun, I wasn't really looking for a relationship.

ML: [laughs] And of course, that's always when...

VG: And surprise, surprise, that's when one came along! [laughs] It was a wonderful experience. We were in fact both casually seeing other people at the time but obviously we were not happy where we were at. We were both of us by ourselves. I met him at Sidetrack, and one thing led to another. He in fact lied about his age when we first met because he was 40 at the time and I was 22, he told me he was 35 since he assumed that if I knew his real age I would not be interested in him, and he was shocked when I called back the next day. And he didn't know how to deal with this little web of lies that he'd gotten himself into. Because he was so anxious to continue the relationship, he actually got his whole family on board, making up fake graduation dates and all that stuff.

ML: Whoa! [laughs] That's extremely elaborate!

VG: And finally, a year into our relationship, I found his ID lying on the kitchen counter. And then the truth all came out.

ML: I like that that's the careless error that made everything fall apart.

VG: Yeah. He says that he did it with intention, I think that it was accidental. But needless to say, I was very upset, not because he was actually 41, but because he had lied to me.

ML: Yeah, that's a long time to keep up such an elaborate lie.

VG: Indeed. We ended up clicking really well because we were both of us very much interested in history and politics. Not that we saw eye-to-eye politically. He's very much dyed-in-the-wool lifelong Democrat, and I started out as a Republican, and then I became an Independent, and now I would say that I'm more of a moderate Democrat. So I have evolved slightly. But I am still much more independent than he is. Basically, in his mind, if a Democrat says it, it's good, no matter what it is. So we have some lively political debates still to this day, even though I've moved more to his side of the political spectrum over the years. We both really, really love history and politics and international relations, so we have a lot in common. We love to travel, although we haven't been able to do as much of it now that we have our very large mortgage. But it's a trade-off I do not regret making. We moved in together 18 months after we first met. We rented for about a year and a half, then we bought our first condo together. We lived there for five years, and then four years ago we moved into our current condo, where we've been ever since.

[00:49:44]

ML: Which neighborhood do you guys live in?

VG: We live in Lakeview, right off Lake Shore Drive. We're about four blocks from Wrigley Field and two blocks from Boystown.

ML: That's a good location!

VG: It's a great location.

ML: Comparing your experience to the experience of the current generation, what do you think has changed and what do you think has stayed the same?

VG: I think the most important change is that the average age for kids to come out has decreased so substantially. I read somewhere that it's 13 to 14. Unfortunately I can't cite my source for the record, but I read that and it really surprised me. But I thought about it some more and I thought that it's really a sign of increasing acceptance, and it makes sense naturally because that's around the age that any child, gay or straight, really starts coming to terms with his or her sexuality. So it should be the time when someone comes out.

ML: That's true. And you did mention that you were 12 when you first realized. So that does make sense.

VG: I think that's the main change. The second big change is social media. I'm a very late convert to Facebook. I reluctantly, reluctantly signed up only six months ago. Probably one of the last people in the world, it seems! And I've spent very little time on it.

ML: It's good to not be enmeshed—I wish I relied on it less.

VG: I've never used Twitter or any of the other services, so I guess in some respects I'm a little bit of a dinosaur. But I see how very important this is to the lives—I think one example: one of our gay friends who was a law student at DePaul came over for dinner once, and he thought nothing of updating his status on Facebook in the middle of dinner, and my partner became extremely upset. Saying, you are showing lack of respect for me by having your phone at the table, and he just went off on him. And my friend just didn't seem to realize or think that it would be a big deal to be on your cell phone at any time in the middle of anything. So this is the kind of culture shift that has occurred.

ML: “My hand is actually surgically attached to my phone.”

VG: [laughs] Exactly. And if you leave it somewhere it's like leaving a right arm or something. I think it's good that we've managed to stay connected but I feel like we've lost a lot of the face-to-face contact and human touch. That's my pet peeve with texting. It really

narrows your capacity for communication and expression. It reduces communication to very staccato bites and bursts of information. It reduces the ability for give and take. My mom once told me, "I don't want you to email me. I want you to call. Because when you call, I know based on your voice how you're really feeling. I can't get that out of an email."

ML: And comparing email to text is even worse.

VG: Exactly. It was a struggle getting my parents on email—texting I've given up on. I don't think I'll ever get them to that point! Even my partner sent his first text only about a year ago. He knows how to read them, but getting him to respond is a different story. [laughs] So I guess we're atypical in that we're dinosaurs, even more so than most people in my age group.

ML: Actually, come to think of it, your partner is of a different generation than you, right? What are the generation gaps that you've witnessed between the two of you?

VG: Most importantly, music. We have very different musical tastes. The only thing we can agree on is classical. Otherwise he loves classic rock, which I despise, and I love '90s and 2000s dance music, which he despises. So the only thing we can agree on is classical. But that aside, the definitive experience of his generation was the AIDS crisis. And he did not come out until 1993, when he was already 33 years old. So he came out very late in life. And he often credits the fact that he's still alive to the fact that he came out so late. He says that if he had come out at 18, that would have been at the very beginning or immediately prior to the breakout of the AIDS crisis. He's firmly convinced that he would not be around today if he had come out earlier. He has two gay brothers, a total of fourteen siblings. Ten sisters, four brothers.

ML: Oh wow. Family gatherings must be crazy! [laughs]

VG: Yeah, we have a reunion every three years, and that's enough for me. [laughs] But it's a very interesting family. In the 2004 elections, 8 Kerry 7 Bush, so it's a very evenly divided family ideologically. He has two gay brothers, a younger as well as an older, and he was the last of the three to come out. His parents, by the time he came out, were very accepting. The first one was a little bit rough. His younger brother and him, they were totally accepted. In fact, his mom was mad that he had waited so long. She said, "you should have told me years ago!" And they're both very accepting of me. That was not an issue at all. But yeah, that I think is a large part of the generational gap. He thinks that a lot of the current generation of 20-somethings thinks that AIDS is a chronic illness like diabetes for instance, and whenever I hear that it upsets me greatly. As a disability examiner for Social Security—I'm not currently, but I used to be that—I saw so many cases of individuals who were diagnosed with AIDS, or actually just HIV technically speaking, in the '90s just when the anti-retrovirals were becoming available, the infancy of AZT and all those, and they were able to have a normal life for maybe about a decade or fifteen years, and all of a sudden would progress to full-blown AIDS, and they'd be dead by the time they were 50. That was not just one or two cases—it seemed to be very

common. I can't say that I'm a scientist, I haven't done the full measure of research. I think even to this day, we don't know the long-term effects of taking these medications on a long-term basis. So I'm really concerned. I think it has become a much less serious aspect and because of that, safe sex has become much less prevalent. And I think that's a huge problem because it's leading to an increase in the incidence of syphilis and other STDs. There have been documented cases of recent outbreaks in large population centers, as well as new strains of various STDs and I think this more lackadaisical attitude towards HIV has had an extremely negative public health consequence for the population as a whole.

[00:58:08]

ML: Why did you decide to be interviewed for this project?

VG: I've wanted to tell my story because I think it is somewhat atypical and I think it's important for researchers to know that there were many different narratives and experiences. Especially for individuals who came out relatively later in their college careers. Maybe it will be perhaps an inspiration to someone who is in my shoes, who is doing research and going through the oral archives and comes across this. They may be in the closet, they may be questioning, they may be having doubts, and they may be having fears about how their family and maybe their friends would react if they were to come out. I would hope that my story would provide a little bit of reassurance to them. And I have to put in a final plug for the Student Counseling and Resource Center at the U of C, which is much derided by most students. I have to say that I had an exceptionally positive experience. After I came out to my parents, they said, "You need psychological help." So I decided that I was willing to go to Student Counseling and Resources Services to see a mental health professional.

ML: Why did you decide to go?

VG: Because I wanted to show them that I wasn't afraid of a mental health professional. While I did not believe, consistent with the APA, that homosexuality was a mental disorder, I did probably have some underlying issues, considering the impact, emotionally, the toll that coming out to my parents took on me, along with the stress of finishing up my masters thesis, and just generally the fact that I had almost committed suicide. Just all of those things, I think I needed to talk about. And I had an absolutely wonderful experience there. In fact, I think the psychologist was not at all convinced that I needed to be there because he thought I had a very good grasp of what was going on, but I think it was very, very helpful. A decade later, I looked him up and realized that he was still working at SCRS and I sent him a brief email of thanks. He responded and said that it was extremely gratifying that he had been able to be of assistance to someone. He said that it was so rare to hear from a former patient, and especially to hear a positive story from a former patient. So I highly encourage anyone who's listening to really consider that as an available resource out there, because my experience was extremely positive.

ML: So this is a community project. Is there anything you want us to keep in mind as we're

doing more interviews, or things we should be on the lookout for as we collect these interviews?

VG: I'm really impressed with the preparation, the organization, the consent, how it's done. I really think that it's a well-designed study. The questions are excellent. You've made me feel very comfortable.

ML: Thank you.

VG: You know me, I'm not someone who's shy about making my opinions known. I really have nothing to add. It's really a great process.

ML: Sure! And you know we're always scavenging around for more names and things, so are there alumni that you think we should try to talk to, or any other things, like pictures from the era, that you might like to scan and donate to us?

VG: Unfortunately I don't have any pictures. In fact I have extremely few pictures from my U of C career. Back then we didn't have smartphones with picture capability. And I think for a significant part of my time on campus I didn't even have a camera with me. The only pictures I ever had were from MUNUC, and they're not even in a digital form. So unfortunately... In terms of people to talk to, I'd say [list of names redacted]. I think those are the names that readily come to mind.

ML: Yeah, thanks so much. That's a great list. We have the weird gap from around the '90s to the 2000s, so we're trying to fill it up. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

VG: It would be interesting to see if at all the College Republicans have changed over time. I have absolutely no contact with them. But how they feel about LGBT members. There are obviously the Log Cabin Republicans and GOP Proud. There are gay Republican organizations now which were not around at the time. Although Log Cabin was around, it was not well known. Just to see how it's changed. That interests me too to see how the non-typical, non-progressive-Democrat elements of the LGBT community—whether that's evolved at all. Also to see what happened with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in that regard. Just generally the intersection between nondiscrimination and religious freedom in Recognized Student Organizations. Because one of my friends was on track to become a bible study leader in my dorm for IVCF, and when it was found out that he was gay—he was open about it, but I don't think the organization's leadership knew about it—all of a sudden someone else was selected for the role, even though he'd been the front-runner. And situations like that—how do you prove that there was overt discrimination? And even if it was, to what extent does a religiously-affiliated RSO's rights to live out their beliefs or adhere to their beliefs conflict with nondiscrimination provisions? I think it creates some interesting legal and ethical issues there.

[01:06:52]

***End of Interview***