

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #26

GOMEZ, DANIEL (1979-) AM 2007, MBA 2011, PhD 2012

At U of C: 2005 – 2012

Interviewed: April 24, 2013

Interviewer: Amanda Bennett

Transcript by: Amanda Bennett

Length: 41:53

Interview April 24, 2013 with Daniel Gomez over Skype.

AB: How many years did you spend in Chicago?

DG: Seven.

AB: And what degrees did you get while you were here?

DG: I got an MA in Economics in 2007, an MBA in 2011, and a PhD in Business Economics from Booth in 2012.

AB: Okay. And your current occupation?

DG: I'm a researcher with Fedesarrollo, the main public policy think tank in Colombia.

AB: And your sexual orientation?

DG: Gay.

AB: Your relationship status?

DG: Single, dating.

AB: Sorry, these are kind of awkward questions to hit you with right at the beginning! And are you affiliated with any organizations?

DG: I also teach! I'm a lecturer at the University here.

AB: I guess we can start on the good questions now then. So we usually start with why you decided to come to the University of Chicago.

DG: Sure. So before going to Chicago I was working in Brussels, in economic consulting, and I had always planned to get a PhD. That was part of the plan; I had that very, very clear in my mind. When I was in Brussels I applied to PhD programs, and the PhD program at Chicago was the best offer I got, in terms of the reputation of the place, of the economics department, and the business school, the whole economic research environment. It was definitely the best-ranked place. I went over for campus day, the day that you can go and visit for prospective students. I visited Chicago and I immediately felt completely at home, I loved the city as well. So I decided to go to Chicago.

AB: Awesome! And were your expectations of getting the best economics degree fulfilled?

DG: Yes, definitely. It was a lot tougher than I thought it would be. I knew it was going to be tough, but it was a LOT tougher. It was really, really tough. It was very humbling, I guess that's a good word...Economics in particular has been very, very innovative, and you take courses, and you do research with people who have really transformed the field, and that sets expectations really, really high, right? You kind of feel like you're supposed to be the torch-bearer, the next one to do something like this, and that's very tough I think on a lot of us. But it was a great experience. It was very, very hard, but it was great.

AB: Can you tell me a little bit about your social life here? You mentioned you liked the city, so did you spend a lot of time in Hyde Park, were you out and about a lot?

DG: I lived the full seven years in Hyde Park, at International House. That was the other thing that I'd visited on the campus day, I thought, I'm going to look at a living situation, so I stopped by International House. I thought it was perfectly fine, so I said that for the first year, that'll be okay. And then, I just loved it and I loved living right on campus, and being part of the academic life of the place full-time, I really loved that. It was a good combination of social life, plus you could be part of it or not be part of it if you wanted to. So I was pretty happy at I-House, and I lived there the full seven years.

AB: I have to ask, so I'm really involved with the Ballroom and Latin Dance Association on campus, and we do Latin dance, and there's a lot of people from I-House who take our salsa lessons and come to our salsa dances, and now you live in Colombia, so do you dance at all? This is just a personal question!

DG: Yes, I love dancing. I love it, love it, love it. I do like dancing a lot. I never went to the dancing things [on campus] because I think my schedule didn't work with it. I was part of the University Chorus for three years, so that was three years then I decided to leave the chorus in theory to concentrate on my dissertation. I think that conflicted at the time with the dancing. But I love it!

AB: We would have met if you came to dance events! So, where are you from?

DG: I'm from Colombia. Born and raised in Colombia. I started my undergrad in Colombia, in economics, but then I moved to Switzerland and I finished my degree in Switzerland. I got a Masters degree there as well, in la Romandie, which is the French-speaking region

of Switzerland, before moving to Brussels, and then Chicago. But yeah, I'm a Colombian, 100%.

AB: And where along this path did you start thinking about your sexuality, thinking about coming out?

DG: Okay, now the good questions. Definitely I knew I was gay...my first remembrance of same-sex attraction of some sort, I can date it to when I was five or six years old, obviously in the context of a five or six year old kid. But I definitely knew from that time.

Growing up in Colombia in the 80s, 90s, no one spoke about sexual orientation, it was really, really taboo, it was worse than other places, I guess. It just wasn't anything that would ever cross your mind, it shouldn't. So I grew up dating girls all through my high school years, I had girlfriends, and then in my college years I dated a girl again. It was always, I knew, but my thought process was oh, this is something I can change if I want to, and it's just a matter of setting my mind to it and working towards that goal. That was the mindset, which is very troubling and really horrible, so that was always on my mind.

Then I came to Switzerland, and you start growing up, too, and you have a template. I hadn't had any type of completely fulfilling relationships, let's put it that way. I had relationships, but with girls that I thought were great and that I liked a lot but it wasn't entirely what I was looking for. That started to come up more frequently in my mind. I was living alone in Switzerland and Brussels, and I kind of focused on work a little too much, to avoid the need to think about the social part. When I moved to Chicago I thought, oh, I'm moving to Chicago, it's a liberal city and everything, so this is my chance! A liberal arts place, so I thought this is the chance! I opened this online profile somewhere on one of those dating sites, before moving, like a month before moving to Chicago when I was in Brussels. I thought, I'm going to start chatting with guys and meet someone. The funny thing is that I did chat a little with another guy who was also a first-year PhD student in Chemistry, and we both said, this is fantastic, we're going to meet as soon as we both arrive in Chicago, we're both PhD students at the University, fantastic. But I arrived to Chicago and I completely freaked out, and we never met.

I completely freaked out, and I thought, I shouldn't be thinking about these things, I'm starting a really demanding PhD program, I should focus on my studies, right? So I started focusing on my studies, and the first year in the econ department is really, really tough – at the end of the first year we have core exams and a lot of people fail them, it's a stressful year. So I thought oh, I'm going to focus, and I focused. But then at the end of the first year I thought, gosh, this is so, so tough that I should have all my emotional and social life in order, so that I can actually focus on these things. The summer after my first year I actually came out, finally.

AB: Did you find the University of Chicago a comfortable environment for coming out and being out?

DG: Oh yes, definitely. I have lots to say about Chicago in that respect. I'm a big fan of the University, I love it. On the coming out part, the first summer, I set up again an online profile on some dating site, and I met this working guy up in Boystown. Yeah, this first summer, I decided, there's some place here in Chicago called Boystown. I have to go see what this is all about. So I went up there and it was this revelation. I had never seen anything like that in my life. That was really shocking and really exciting. I said I have to meet someone.

So I met this guy and that was the first time I had ever been with a guy, and of course I again completely freaked out that summer, after I had that first experience. It was like too much. It was driving me nuts, I was going crazy, but with completely paranoid things like now I'm going to have AIDS and everyone's going to hate me but it was entirely fabricated and completely in my mind. The first thing I did, I had the good sense to – it was the summer quarter – so I just called the student counseling and said, oh, I just need to come in to talk to someone, right, and I had never, ever talked to a therapist before in my life. So they set up an appointment for that same day. I was working as an intern downtown, with a consulting firm, and I just told them I was feeling sick, which wasn't a complete lie, it wasn't a *sickness* sickness, but I was sick.

So I left work, and I went down to Hyde Park to student counseling. I came in and I found at the entrance all these pamphlets with things about STDs and sexual orientation and I thought oh great, I came to the right place. So I grabbed the little things and one of the therapists came out – it was Anne Brody, actually she's still there, I think – and she said come in, let's go up, and she said okay, what's up, how can I help you, what's going on? And I just handed over the two pamphlets and said "I need to talk about these things." And I started telling her about my whole thing and I thought I was going to be sick and how I was out of my mind about this thing, and she was absolutely great. She said exactly the right things. I could tell she had a lot of experience with people going through that. Now it's really funny but at the time, it was really stressful.

AB: Yeah, I can understand.

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DG: So on that side, student counseling, I think they are absolutely fantastic. I think they are really, really great. And then I started getting more involved with the LGBTQ student life on campus. I started going to the events at the center when they opened, meeting people through the conversation groups.

AB: The Q Groups? Were they around then?

DG: Exactly, yes, I went to the Q Groups, and I started going to the events at the beginning of the year, I remember one, Queer 101.

AB: Yeah, I went to that too!

DG: They were fantastic, I went to one of those, and started meeting people, and it started becoming more normal. It started normalizing. I felt kind of strange. It took me a while to completely come out on campus, but of course the first thing that student counseling and Anne Brody told me was, “If you want to have a really fulfilling personal life, it’s a lot easier if you’re out, and people know you’re out, because you can match easier, right?” How can you match if no one knows? So that was great advice. And the health services at the University, I know that from conversations later that a lot of LGBTQ people on campus think that maybe they could be better with LGBTQ issues, but I really have no complaints. One of the first things that Anne also told me was, “I’m sure that health-wise you’re absolutely fine, it’s all in your mind, but for peace of mind, why don’t you just go to the health center, and just tell them, see what they say, get your STD screening.” So I went over, and the same thing, I told them I did this and this and this, and I’m freaking out, what should I do? But I also have really good things to say about them. They were completely not awkward about anything, very professional. So yeah, on the official things of the University, I think they are really good. My experience was very good. And with the Office of Minority Student Affairs (OMSA), I think they did a great job too, organizing events, providing spaces for discussion and meeting people. It’s great.

AB: Great! So you made other LGBTQ friends while you were at the University – did you find that after coming out your social circle became more LGBTQ, that you had more LGBTQ friends?

DG: No, I mean, I met people, of course, but I didn’t hang out with LGBTQ people all the time, definitely not. I kept going out with my friends from my program, the PhD program, from I-House. I’ve never been too much of a group person, like “Let’s go all in groups!”, so the Q Groups were good at the beginning but I wasn’t that interested in every single week, meeting with a group of gay men. But I’ve never been too much of a going out with a group type of person.

AB: Yeah.

DG: Oh and another thing, at the end of that summer I started dating this guy who wasn’t related with the University, he worked in Chicago, so I dated him for a year, and that was the first year after coming out, so that occupied my social life to a certain extent. I met his friends, and went out with his friends, and his friends were all Chicago people, so that kind of took over the social part. Maybe that’s why I didn’t go out more with LGBTQ people on campus. But I went to the events, but I wasn’t that tight with them.

AB: So you did spend time in other parts of Chicago a lot?

DG: Oh yeah. That year was fun because I started really exploring that part of Chicago, the gay life in Chicago, and that was exciting. I saw what a big city with a big gay life is like. I met a lot of people who were gay, and that was great.

AB: Are you still in touch with Chicago people?

DG: Definitely, definitely. I do have lots of friends still in Chicago, well I just left. I graduated in December, so I just left. I definitely keep in touch. The funny thing is that once I came out, other people in my program started coming out, I don't know why we all coincided at the time. At Booth, during my time, the queer group at the business school started becoming a lot more active too. So I met people from there as well. And I still keep in touch with a lot of them.

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AB: I know that the econ department here is often characterized as rather conservative, so did you feel comfortable with your professors, your classes, and your classmates?

DG: The economics department, you can call it very conservative in economics issues, but definitely not in social issues, I don't think so. It's perfectly fine – for example, if you wanted to work on a research project that has to do with LGBTQ issues, there's absolutely no problem. I don't think it's a hostile environment for LGBTQ people at all.

AB: So did any of your classes or research involve sexuality or gender?

DG: Actually I did think about a project, and I started working on it, but then I stopped it at some point because I spoke with a professor actually. I had two ideas, one was very LGBTQ oriented and the other was more traditional econ, and her advice – she was perfectly fine with the LGBTQ project and thought it was kind of interesting, but she said this is your dissertation, I think your other idea has more potential. It was very practical advice. But I still have it at the back of my mind and I've been contacting some LGBTQ organizations here in Colombia to maybe do some work more on the economic lives of LGBTQ families in Colombia, because no one has any idea about where they live, how much they earn, what kinds of jobs they have, no one knows anything about this community. There is a professor at the Harris School, Dan Black, I spoke with him because he has some published papers on the economics of gay families in the US so I spoke to him about it and I would love to do something of that type in Colombia. It's really – we have no idea. No idea whatsoever on any of those things, so that is on my to-do list.

AB: How did you end up back in Colombia?

DG: I had been abroad for twelve years, and finishing the PhD I had to think: do I want to stay abroad? If I stay abroad now, it's harder to go back eventually. This is a good moment to go back if I want to go back. I got a good offer here, job-wise, and I also had a fellowship here from the Central Bank and if I didn't come back I would have to pay back the entire fellowship, basically, so that was another factor, so those were the three factors. It was a good decision point, I had good offers, and I had this additional financial constraint. So I decided to come back.

AB: Looking back at your experience at Booth and the University of Chicago, do you think your experience was typical?

DG: Typical for an LGBTQ student?

AB: Yeah.

DG: Hmm for someone who was closeted before arriving there, I think it was. I know several people who had similar experiences. I think mine was very, very good. But from the other people I know who also came out during PhD programs, I think they also had great experiences, it's a very welcoming place, people just don't care, they think it's totally fine. I never encountered anyone having any issues so I don't know if it's typical, but I know it isn't unique. A lot of people have had a similar experience, or I know several who have. And as you say, maybe I was in the econ department and Booth which are more conservative and it was perfectly fine. So I can only imagine that it's easier if you're in the more liberal part of the university. I wouldn't imagine anyone having any serious trouble coming out with peers, professors, faculty, I wouldn't imagine anyone having trouble. All the trouble is with yourself, and with your own psyche, and at the student counseling, one of the therapists also started organizing a coming out group – I never went to those but that started when I was in my third year. I spoke with him once, because I was a little paranoid for a while, with STDs and those things, it was completely irrational but so I went back after six to seven months and said, "I need to talk to someone again," and I spoke with him. And he told me, by the way, I'm starting these groups, you might be past that but if you want a group environment that's an option. So I think there's a lot of support, institutionalized support, and really all fears in friends who also came out were also unwarranted.

AB: Good. You also mentioned the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, were you also involved with them at all?

DG: I did go to a lot of the organized events at 5710, I went to the graduate student mixers, that was great, I met lots of nice people there as well. I wasn't a regular, every-single-day there, some people get really into it and are there every day which I think is great, but I went to the mixers, to the conferences, I enjoyed a lot of them – they invited speakers to talk about books, authors, more academic conferences on LGBTQ stuff, I always tried to go to those, I'm a big supporter.

AB: Did you also feel like you had an identity as an international student?

DG: Yes, definitely. I loved my international student identity, that was important, that was part of the way that I tried to contribute a different point of view. Both in my program, at I-House, there's a lot of emphasis at I-House with international identity and they also organize a lot of events. We had this thing called I-Focus, and I-Focus was an event we held on Sunday nights, where residents would give a presentation about their country. So I did that two or three times. I also presented something at the Lab Schools, a teacher there was coaching a group for mock United Nations, and they had to represent Colombia.

So he was finding out with the Center for Latin American Studies if they had someone who could give them a talk about Colombia, and a friend of mine was working at CLAS at the time and she told me, would you be interested in going and talking about Colombia? And I said yeah, sure. So I went and talked to these tenth graders about Colombia. So definitely, my Colombian identity was an important part of my experience at Chicago.

What else do you have there?

AB: Yeah, we answered a lot of things in conversation....How are things different in Colombia and after graduating? It sounds like the University provided a lot of support, so was it difficult leaving?

DG: Yes, I think it was. I was very happy at the University. It was very tough and finishing the PhD was very hard for me, it was hard to focus, to grind through it and get it done at the end, I think that's not uncommon for many PhD students with their dissertation. But on top of that I did have a very good personal experience not only with the University but also with the city as well, all of my associations with Chicago are very positive. It's the place where I got a PhD but also where I came out, started dating, it's very positive.

So coming back to Colombia was a little tough, it still...we're making a lot of progress, but it's still a little harder to be out in Colombia. It can still be a little dangerous actually. So that's hard too. But actually we are having discussions today voting on same-sex marriage law in congress, so that's big progress. Socially it's hard, meeting people has also been sometimes harder because I was used to the more anonymous, to being more anonymous. Here it's a little more visible, it's smaller social circles, more people know you, online dating is a lot less developed here, so in Chicago I would have just set up a profile, chat with someone, and say let's meet for coffee, and take it from there. It was very simple. That's harder, you have to go more through friends, introduce me to someone, so that's harder. But I'm happy.

AB: Were you involved with activism at all, in Chicago, or now?

DG: Activism...not very formally. I am pretty vocal on social networks, Facebook, twitter, social media things. I also used to write a column in a magazine here in Colombia, while I was in Chicago, and I wrote about some of these things. So I'm vocal, I'm out, I support activism but I'm not very involved yet. That's something I'd like to get more involved in. I'm very vocal about it and very out about it in all these social things, and when I write about it in newspapers and things I can be vocal about it, but I'm not very involved with formal activism. But there's a good organization here called Colombia Diversa, Diverse Colombia, and they are one of the best places advocating for LGBTQ rights, so yeah, I need to get in touch with them and see how I can volunteer. That's in my mind.

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

DG: Yeah, I saw your email, and I like supporting these research initiatives, anything with research at the University of Chicago is something I would always support, there aren't that many LGBTQ students at the University, it's still a minority, so if you can help out and contribute with your story and your experience that will help us better understand issues on campus and with campus life and with LGBTQ people, I think it's a worthy cause!

AB: Do you know anyone else from your time who might be interested?

DG: Yeah, I could ask them and then send you emails...The LGBTQ part of the Alumni Office is also really active now, that's really recent, in the past 2 or 3 years, not more. I went to a lot of their events as well, that's a good network. A lot of people there are just like me, they loved their time at the University, they want to keep in touch and go to these events, and they think the LGBTQ part was an important part of their life at U of C, so that's a good place to start.

AB: Yeah, we've definitely been working with them too. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

DG: I've told you a lot of things...

AB: Yeah, this has been a lot of fun to listen to.

DG: Actually, at the [Office of Minority Student Affairs] – 5710 – they did one project too about coming out stories, and I also contributed to that thing, so on the third floor there is a poster with my story also there.

AB: I remember that, I think that was during my first year.

DG: I did that thing – I was in the middle of some heated conversation, something happened with LGBTQ rights and I was fired up, and I got this email from the director of LGBTQ [Jeff Howard, Interview #30]. So he emailed and said we're looking for people who would like to tell their coming out story for a project, we'd like to have the history of coming out stories at the university, so I said of course I'll do it, I did it, I wrote the thing, I went to have my picture taken, and a year later I went up there for something – for HIV testing – I went for the testing and I saw my poster there with my whole story and my picture and I thought this is a little embarrassing, to have my picture and my full story there on the wall all the time.

AB: I'm going to look for it today.

DG: Yeah, go and check it out. You can see if my story has changed at all since then. I don't think so, I'm pretty consistent.

AB: Alright. Do you have any questions for me or about the project?

DG: I took a look at the project, so you recorded the whole thing, and you'll have a transcript – can I get to see the transcript? Or hear the recording?

AB: I think you can see the transcript – I think if you want to hear it, you probably can.

DG: So at the end of the day you're going to have a bunch of interviews like this one and tell me more...

AB: They're going to all be archived in Special Collections in the [Regenstein] Library so they'll go on file so future researchers can access them, and the end goal of this project too is to have an exhibition at Special Collections on LGBTQ student life at the University. A lot of people we interviewed graduated in the late 60s, early 70s, we've had more trouble finding people from the 80s because that was a harder time to be gay at the university, so we've got a lot of really interesting stuff, to see how gay life has changed here, and how institutionally the views towards gay life has changed here over time.

DG: Interesting! The fact that it's hard to get people from the 80s is in itself very telling, right?

AB: Right.

DG: Great, fantastic – I look forward to seeing what smart people have to say about all these things.

AB: Yeah – the goal for the exhibit is 2015, maybe spring, so if you're in Chicago at that time you should definitely stop by. Thanks so much for all your time today, we'll be in touch with any follow-up stuff we need to do.

DG: Thank you!

[41:53]

End of Interview