

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW #43
KLEINEDLER, STEVE (1966 -) ABD**

At U of C: 1993 - 1997

Interviewed: July 5, 2013

Interviewer: Molly Liu

Transcript by: Molly Liu

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Interview (July 5th, 2013) by phone.

[00:00:00]

ML: Could you tell me how you came to the University of Chicago?

SK: Certainly. It's kind of roundabout, but I grew up in Michigan and went to Michigan State for a couple of years in the '80s. Dropped out after my sophomore year and decided to move to Michigan—sorry, Chicago, when I was 19. After a year I decided to finish my undergraduate, and I transferred into Northwestern. Got a degree in linguistics from Northwestern. Took a few years off, and I decided that I wanted to go to grad school, and also I wanted to stay in Chicago. Since I had done my undergraduate at Northwestern, it made sense to look into the University of Chicago. I applied and got in.

ML: Can you talk about—why did you decide to drop out of Michigan State?

SK: There were a variety of reasons. One, this was the mid-'80s, and the economy of Michigan was really awful, and I didn't think it was going to get any better. History has shown that it hasn't really gotten any better. Also, I had just recently come out. “Coming out” is the wrong word, “clued in” would be a better word. You know, the '70s and '80s being what they were, without a lot of media identification things, it didn't dawn on me I was gay until my freshman year of college. Once I realized that I was, I was out right away. I wasn't ever actually in the closet. Anyhow, I clued in at the end of my freshman year of college, and I stayed in Michigan State for my sophomore year. Just being gay and young in kind of rural Michigan in the mid-'80s, I felt more comfortable not being there. That was part of my decision to leave. I packed up my stuff the summer after my sophomore year, and I moved to Chicago.

ML: Can you talk about what drew you to Chicago as a city?

SK: What drew me to Chicago as a city? Definitely the theater scene. I had actually—at

Michigan State I studied theater, I was involved in an improv troupe there, and we had gone to Chicago for a workshop. I thought the city was great. It was big and vibrant, and it just had a really good theater scene. I remember that summer I was debating between New York and Chicago, but Chicago was a little closer, it was in the Midwest. New York seemed and probably was more expensive. And I didn't deliberate very long. I pretty much decided on Chicago. Saved up some money that summer, and took off.

ML: What the atmosphere pretty—pretty accepting when you came out to the people around you? What was it like?

SK: You mean back in Michigan?

ML: Both in Michigan and in Chicago.

SK: Although—Michigan was... I mean, it was the mid-'80s. One of my closest friends, who is also very Catholic, didn't take it too well. I wasn't—I was only at school, like I said, it didn't dawn on me until—well no. Even though I was out to myself, it wasn't like, it wasn't like I was going around telling people about it, but if they asked, I told them. So it was not like today. The people who did know knew—jeez, I don't know how to answer that question. It was a strange time.

Some of the people in the theater of course didn't care. It turned out my sophomore—my first roommate was gay, and I didn't know it until after I left. I don't know if he knew. But then I moved into a dorm closer to the theater, and I moved in with an openly gay roommate, and so that was cool. My mom was fine. My dad has come a long, long, long, long way. At the time, he was very Catholic about it. When I moved to Chicago, I was pretty open about it, and it didn't—I didn't really have any issues with it, but that's mostly because I was hanging around theater people and that kind of thing. By the time I started at Northwestern, it was completely a part of my identity and I didn't care who knew, and it kind of was never an issue.

ML: Right. It's really nice that the theater seems to have been a safe space for you in the initial stages of coming out.

SK: Yes. It was, and I think...this is going back 20 years. There was a gay student group on campus, and I met some friends through that. It was just—in my mind, it wasn't a big deal. The only thing I knew was that I would absolutely not live in the closet, and once I made my mind up on that, it was relatively easy because my attitude was, “if you can't deal with it, it's not my problem, it's yours.”

ML: Right. Yeah. So you've mentioned, when choosing to go to that PhD program, you mentioned wanting to stay in Chicago. But were there any other features about the University of Chicago that appealed to you?

SK: Oh yeah. I say I wanted to stay in Chicago and also, since I got my undergrad at Northwestern, in my mind there was only one other school that came close to comparing.

And that's obviously the U of C. Not to denigrate the other schools in the area, but I kind of wanted to, since I had gone to Northwestern, I felt like I needed to go to a school of greater or equal value for my graduate program. I knew one of the, I had met one of the professors in the Linguistics department, so I had that connection. I just knew it was an outstanding school, and it would be rigorous, and in fact was, and it would be challenging in a way that most schools wouldn't be. It was—I applied to three grad schools there, the Ohio State University and Urbana-Champaign, and I actually got, for the U of C I got a tuition waiver, which was great, but at Ohio I actually got a tuition waiver plus a healthy stipend, but I chose the U of C over Ohio anyway because I wanted to stay in Chicago.

ML: What drew you to studying linguistics?

SK: The year after—the years between my sophomore and junior years, the years that I was living in Chicago, I was already doing theater in the city, working with troupes, doing shows, that kind of thing. So when I decided to go back to school, I decided that studying theater would be kind of redundant, since I had studied it at Michigan State and I was actually doing it. So I thought I would get a BA in something else. After I was accepted, I basically had—since I transferred in as a junior—I basically had, I had to choose a major right away. I went between linguistics and geography, I've always been interested in languages, I've always been interested in maps. And I had just—I decided on linguistics. I had been exposed to different languages as a kid. My parents both speak Czech, I'm from a very—I grew up in an area that was very Czech at the time. I studied Spanish in high school. I just had a thing for languages. So I chose linguistics.

ML: Right. What was the background that you grew up in, actually? [SK: The background?] Where did you grow up?

SK: I grew up—I was born in Flint, Michigan, although I was raised about 17 miles outside of Flint. At the time, in the late '60s and early '70s, though it's not that far from Flint, it was a complete other world. I would say that my upbringing was really rural. I went to a small elementary school in the middle of a cornfield. And by small I mean there were two grades of each—two classes in each grade, so that's sixty-six students times five plus kindergarten, plus it was way out in the middle of nowhere. It was almost like being in the '50s. I'm the oldest of four kids. My dad worked for General Motors. Pretty much everyone there worked on farms or for General Motors. And so it was a pretty rural, you know, grew up out in the country, biked all over, grew up right next to a farm, my grandparents had farms and that kind of thing.

[00:10:13]

ML: Right. Was it common for people from those backgrounds to go get college degrees?

SK: I would say—my dad had gone to college. And so had my mom, my mom was a teacher. In my family there's a fair amount of educators. Even though my family had only come over from Europe in the nineteen-teens, education was pretty important. My grandma graduated from high school, which in the 1930s was not entirely common at the time.

And interestingly, my siblings and all of my cousins had gone to college.

I would say that in the school district I went to—I mean, I graduated with 400 people. It... I don't know, I would assume half went on to college. I know very few of us went out of state. But most people went to the University of Michigan-Flint, which was the local college. It certainly wasn't uncommon. I would say in my family that it was expected. Like I said, both my parents had gone to school, and there was a high value placed on education in my family.

ML: Immigrant families value education, right? But yeah, about the University of Chicago, what sorts of classes did you take when you were here? What was being in the PhD program like?

SK: It was really rigorous. I breezed through high school, and frankly I kind of breezed through Northwestern too. I remember my first week it was the first time I ever really had to study and do work. It was very rigorous. Almost all of my courses were in the Linguistics department. So you know, your first year you're taking your basic semantics and syntax, phonology, that type of thing. Then I, because I was focusing on lexicography, I had to arrange a lot of my own courses through independent study, because there wasn't really a lexicography course offered. So did a lot of independent reading, met with my advisers, that kind of thing. Outside of the department I took Czech classes from the Slavic department, because even though my parents spoke Czech they never actually taught it to me, so I wanted to learn that. I also took...what else did I take outside the department? Trying to think. Because it was a graduate program, I was pretty much in my department. I think other than Czech, I think all my classes in the department.

ML: Did you feel free to be open about your sexuality while you were there?

SK: Totally.

ML: Oh, that's great. What was the campus atmosphere for it like?

SK: While at Northwestern there was definitely a north campus – south campus divide between the more liberal and the more conservative students, at the U of C I really felt like it was much more progressive. People were either openly supportive or else just didn't care. At this point, it's already the early '90s, so I suspect—by that time in big cities, Chicago included, it was definitely, I think more open than things even 10 years prior.

ML: Were there any—did you participate in any campus organizations around LGBTQ stuff?

SK: I attempted—I wasn't involved directly, but I remember going to a few functions. My first year that I was in U of C, I was still involved in Queer Nation, the local Queer Nation chapter, which met up on the North Side. I was still pretty heavily involved in that.

ML: That sounds really cool. Can you talk about what it was like to be involved in Queer Nation?

SK: Sure, yeah. It was actually really exciting. Queer Nation in Chicago had actually started...let's see, I moved to Wicker Park in 1990. I'd say it started in early 1991, maybe late '90. I was looking for something to do in that regard, and there was ACT UP, and there was Queer Nation. I think because Queer Nation met really close to where I was living in Wicker Park—and I have to say, in the early '90s, Wicker Park is not what it is today. [ML: Right, it's totally changed.] I lived in quite the shithole. It was a two-bedroom apartment, it was \$400 a month. There was heat in the kitchen and nowhere else. It was an interesting—it was interesting.

At any rate, all of the chapters around the country were completely separate from each other. The Queer Nations in New York and LA got a lot of notoriety for a lot of the direct action things that they did. In Chicago we did a lot of direct action too, but we made sure that whenever we did something in public there were people passing out fliers on what we were doing, why we were doing a certain thing, some numbers that you could call for calling representatives, that kind of thing. What I found great about it was that there were different organizations at the time. There was IMPACT—there was an organization on the North Side called IMPACT at the time, the quote-unquote “good guys,” who talked to the politicians and tried to make policy change, except no one was listening to them. So when the rabble-rousers like QN would go in to protest and shut down meetings, it caused the politicians to view IMPACT more positively because they could hold more constructive—you know?

ML: Almost like good cop, bad cop, in a way?

SK: It was very much good cop, bad cop! To IMPACT's credit, they realized, and we realized, though we didn't talk about it, that this is what was going on. So we had a very symbiotic relationship, because we soon discovered that politicians would go running into their arms. One of the first things we did that had lasting impact and something I'm very proud of, back in '92, '93, Cook County was debating whether or not to have a human rights ordinance, which would prevent discrimination on the job against GLBT folks. And one of the things that they were discussing was that “well, we could make this happen in just unincorporated Cook County,” and if you know Cook County geography, you know that everything is part of some city or town. So if it had just been unincorporated parts, that would have affected only like 5% of the county or something. Anyway, the Cook County board president at the time was a Republican, but he had campaigned on helping get this passed, and then when he was in office—I can't remember his name for the life of me—but once he got into office it kind of just didn't go anywhere. So Queer Nation would go to his meetings. One time we handcuffed ourselves. One of the more fun things is we put—everyone came with little Eggo waffles, and during the, during his speech we were lobbing Eggo waffles at the podium, saying that he was waffling on his promise. [ML: [laughs] That's pretty great.] Yeah. And there were certain commissioners, Maria Pappas was one of them, who were kind of a thorn in his side. She got a kick out of our antics.

Anyhow, because we weren't really there to have discourse, what we did do was raise awareness of the issues, and it caused the county to meet with IMPACT and other groups, you know, the Rick Garcias and the Art Johnstons of the time, and they would—and it got passed! The Cook County Human Rights Ordinance passed, which at the time was a huge, huge, huge success. It was the second-largest population county in the country, and I know that we had a direct impact on that by being there, keeping politicians accountable for their words, and getting them to negotiate with GLBT group who actually had the ability to get them through the process of whatever it takes to get a bill into a law on the county law.

ML: That's really exciting, that you were involved in that! Do you remember any other issues that you were involved in, as a part of Queer Nation or otherwise?

[00:20:05]

SK: Yes. We did a lot of different—this is back when Amendment 2 had passed in Colorado, which made it legal to discriminate against GLBT people. So we were involved with boycotts, not necessarily that it was that successful. I remember that when Basic Instinct came out, there was a protest and then we realized that we were being gamed by a studio department to get more publicity. We learned early on that boycotts weren't terribly effective. In that case we were clearly being played. We were active in anti-violence marches. We worked with other groups whose names I can't remember, but they were women's groups, people of color groups, kind of your “Take Back the Night” things with anti-violence march, the Pink Panthers—they couldn't call themselves the Pink Panthers, they called themselves something else, they were starting up at the time.

We were—after the Cook County, probably the most major thing that happened to me—it was pretty, it had a very lasting impact on me. After the Cook County ordinance passed, a bunch of us went out to this bar in Harwood Heights, just outside the city limits, to celebrate. It had been a bar where two of our people had been kicked out the previous year. We went there and we were dancing. There were two male couples, and I believe two female couples. And the bar owner came over and told us to stop dancing. Keep in mind, we weren't even dirty dancing. We weren't even touching. We were literally dancing, you know, I was dancing opposite a guy. Next thing I know, the cops have been called, they storm the dance floor, they threw me down to the ground, four of us guys were arrested, they didn't even notice the lesbians. I spent the night in jail. They had trumped up all these charges. I was being charged with a felony and three misdemeanors. [ML: What?] Oh yeah. It was a big deal. It was like a year of my life that was just insane. They said that I had assaulted a cop, which is a felony, and which is insane because I—you know, I was face down on the floor. I have pictures of the boot mark on my back and stuff.

Anyhow, so—the People's something-or-other defended our case, and then we went back and sued the bar, and in the civil lawsuit, it turned out that the bar owner perjured himself because in the testimony for the civil trial—I was defended by Lambda Legal, who were great. Lambda Legal, they were asking him about the night...and in his testimony it came

out that he never wrote the complaints, that the police wrote it for him and he signed it. The judge just stopped the trial right there and said, "Excuse me? What did you say?" He repeated it, and the judge said, "You realize that what you just did was perjury, right?" He was like, "What?" The case ended right there in our favor and everything was voided. But from when it happened to when that happened took like a year and a half. Yeah. But during the initial court case, I theoretically could have faced up to seven years in prison, and I will say, at the trial, I'm a white male going to the University of Chicago as a graduate student...my lawyer played all the privilege cards, and I ended up getting thirty days of probation.

ML: Yeah. Wow. Wait, so you were doing all of this, and you were also in school at the same time?

SK: Yes. That dance incident happened the second quarter of my first year.

ML: Wow. Was it difficult to balance all the activism you were doing in the city with the University?

SK: The—on top of that I was doing theater too. The first year I actually lived in the Loop and commuted down to school. And then the next three years I moved to Hyde Park just because it was more convenient. So because that first year I was kind of halfway between the North Side and the South Side, it was easier in the evenings to stay on top of that. I'll say that the whole arrest thing—well, two things were going on. By that point, we're talking about early 1994, the hardcore activism started to die down when Clinton took office, because a lot of people thought that the Reagan-Bush years were over, and there was less need to protest. Just the whole face of activism changed now that there was a Democrat in the White House. That was dwindling down some. Also, the whole arrest and court everything really just—I was just like, done. I was just, you know. It was really hard to get myself invested in it because I had been—you know.

ML: You had done your part. Getting arrested...

SK: It was just—it really affected me at the time. But yeah, everyone at school knew. If you go—you can probably find information on this from my UChicago account on USENET if you do the appropriate Google search, because I was posting on certain places on USENET about the incident.

ML: Yeah. That would be really cool to dig up, actually.

SK: Yeah. I'll see—yeah. So yeah, that was during my first year. Everyone on campus who I had told was obviously very sympathetic. Kind of like, what the fuck? Because it was...

ML: Not a thing that should have happened.

SK: Exactly.

- ML: Yeah. So you lived in a couple of different places in Chicago, it seems like. What was it like to live in, you know, Wicker Park vs. the Loop vs. Hyde Park?
- SK: Well, man. It was just a different time. Even Hyde Park when I lived there was a little different from what it is now. Hutch Commons hadn't been renovated yet so it was just this cold sterile place. The University was still in that mode of actively keeping people on campus and encouraging them not to go north of 47th. There weren't a lot of shuttle buses, so you either had to take the Jeffrey or else take the Gar—the 55 to the train and then take the subway in. I mean, you really had to go out of your way to go off-campus. But I lived on the North Side for so long, so I was like, “There's more to Chicago than Hyde Park!” So I tried not to, you know. It was difficult to get around but I did it. I lived everywhere from Lincoln Park to Rogers Park to Lincoln Square, Ukrainian Village. But Wicker Park was really fun. I lived there for two years in the early '90s with—nowadays everyone would call them hipsters, but at the time we were slackers. It was super cheap, and pretty subversive, and it was a lot of fun.
- ML: I'm sure that hipsters, or “hipsters,” in Wicker Park in the early '90s are incredibly different from the hipsters nowadays in that area, right?
- SK: Yeah, it was just a different time.
- ML: Do you know if there was a particular reason why the University of Chicago was discouraging people from leaving campus?
- SK: I think—I don't know how much you know about University history, but you know in the '50s and '60s, when the college was debating moving to Colorado, they ended up staying, they shut down almost all the bars on 55th St except for Jimmy's, and a couple others. I mean, it's—it's so heavily tied to racism and classism. They basically created a wall on 49th or 47th, 49th I believe, and 61st or whatever, and then Cottage Grove and the lake. They basically said, “This is the University,” and they let everything else to the north and the south and the west, gradually got more and more dilapidated.

There was just—there was kind of this siege mentality, we have to protect the students because they will be murdered if they go east, north, or west. And rather than try to integrate themselves with the rest of the city, I feel like the University really, really separated itself. Around the time I was finishing up there, that had started to change a lot. They were getting new bus lines and stuff and encouraging people to go up north. But throughout the '70s and '80s, I feel like I just, I think there was this concerted effort to sanitize Hyde Park by getting rid of all the bars.

I remember in '93 or '94, right when I started there, there was this major effort to get rid of all the pay phones, which now is not a big deal because everyone has cell phones, but at the time it was seen as kind of a pretty classist thing to do, because before everyone had cell phones, a lot of people really relied on pay phones. They did it in the name of drug stuff, but I think it was still a pretty shitty thing to do.

ML: Right, to stop people from coming in from elsewhere to try to use the pay phones? Yeah. [SK: I'm sorry?] Like, they were afraid of people coming in from poorer neighborhoods to use the pay phones, or something like that?

SK: Yeah, I mean, yeah, not just, it was under the guise of getting people to not sell drugs by pay phone. The whole thing was—in the old days drug dealers would have pagers and they would use pay phones to call them.

[00:31:30]

ML: Yeah. It's crazy that that siege mentality was still in force 30, 40 years after urban renewal happened. [SK: Mm-hm.] You say that you went out into the city a lot. When you went out, where would you usually go?

SK: I worked with a theater company up on the North Side, so that's where I would go. Shattered Globe Theater, it was called, and it's still actually in existence.

ML: Did you have that theater job all throughout your time at Chicago?

SK: Yes.

ML: What was it like to work in the theater?

SK: It was great. I had done a bunch of shows, I think I was even in a show or two in my first year. But as school got more rigorous, I ended up doing more house managing, that kind of thing.

ML: Right. You mentioned before being involved with a lot of the gay politics in the city of Chicago, but do you remember—what was the political atmosphere in Hyde Park at the time? Do you remember getting involved in any issues at the University of Chicago?

SK: I remember when—especially my first year, it just seemed—the undergraduates are so focused on school. It just seems, everything is so academic-based, that I feel like a bunch of people don't see much beyond their books. I mean, obviously that's not the case because I'm thinking—I'm trying to think—it's funny, when I think of Northwestern, I can think of actions, specific protests and whatnot, and at the U of C it just all seemed so studious and busy. I know that there must have been things, but I just can't think of any.

ML: Were there protests—what were the protests at Northwestern?

SK: I remember when I started, there was a woman who was denied tenure. [Ed.: Barbara C. Foley.] There was the whole Reagan in Nicaragua, I think it had to do with the Sandinistas. It was either Nicaragua or El Salvador, the whole thing about guns going from—you know, this was a long time ago. Anyhow, this woman who was really supportive of the people was denied tenure. And it created this huge, huge—the belief that she was denied tenure for political reasons, which was probably the case. It just set

off a lot of protests. I think this was tied in with something called the Peace Project. And I just remember, I would go to a couple of Peace Project rallies, and there would be the Young Republicans taking pictures—it was all pretty ridiculous. But I remember that people would just take stands on things. So...

ML: Whereas people at UChicago didn't do that—so much.

SK: Yeah. And I think in the four years in between Northwestern and the University of Chicago, it was the Gulf War, for example. Which I protested against. But I think by the time you get to '93, there's kind of this protest fatigue. And again, Clinton was in the White House. For a lot of people, they were like, “Oh, our guy is in, we can let our guide down.” I think activism in the '90s was just not as pronounced because of various political realities. In part it was more of a timing thing.

ML: Yeah. So you mentioned that you moved to Boston after a little while. Can you talk about—why did you decide to do that?

SK: Why I moved to Boston? Oh, because when I was at the U of C, you know, we—the internet, I had access to the internet, and at that time not many people did. It was mostly military and educational. I met this guy online through this group that I hung out with, what was it, alt.society.generation-x. And the—he and I hit it off, and I went out there to meet him, and it was like, hey, this is it—this is the guy I married eventually, down the line. And so my second and third years, I spent a lot of time going back and forth between Boston and Chicago during the breaks. And he'd come out. In the middle of my fourth year I moved out there. I went to Boston because of Peter.

ML: Why did you decide to leave the PhD program?

SK: I started the PhD program, and I even put this in my admissions statement—my goal is to get a job with a dictionary company. And I got hired by the American Heritage Dictionary in 1997, which was the very thing I wanted by going to grad school. I don't think I would have gotten a job had I not spent the time I did studying what I did. But for a little bit I tried to do both the job and start working on my dissertation, but it was just too big and too involved, so I just withdrew. I essentially withdrew because I got what I wanted. The very reason why I went had come to pass.

ML: Right, exactly. Yeah. Your story about Peter is pretty great. Online dating before anyone had the internet, in a way.

SK: Yeah, yeah. It was—people at the time were like, “you're meeting someone online?” ...but it was really a, it was really a, people were like, how could you do this?

ML: I think you said that you and Peter got married. Was that something that you did right when it became legal in Massachusetts? What was—?

SK: Yeah. It was legalized in, what, May 2004? We were married in October of 2004.

ML: So that was something that both of you saw as kind of a goal to have?

SK: Sorry, what was the goal?

ML: Both of you wanted to get married?

SK: At the time it became legal, we had already been together 10 years, and we were like, we should do this, especially since there was the thought that it might be taken away. So I think—I don't think we ever thought it would happen, but it did, so we took advantage of it.

ML: Yeah. What did it mean to you, the act of getting married?

SK: It was very affirming. It was...It was so hard, it had seemed so incomprehensible. So it was very affirming and very special, and...yeah.

ML: What have you been up to since leaving Chicago? You were in Boston for a bit, and now you're in...Columbus, I think you mentioned?

SK: Philadelphia.

ML: Philadelphia. Sorry, I must have gotten mixed up...

SK: So in Boston, I worked. I worked my way up. I'm now the Executive Editor of the American Heritage Dictionary. I did a lot of theater stuff. I did ImprovBoston. Peter died in 2009, and that's part of the reason why I moved to Philadelphia. I was just—to get away from Boston. But mostly just work and theater stuff.

[00:40:10]

ML: Looking back, has your perception of your time at UChicago changed at all?

SK: Oh no! It was an excellent place to study, I'm so glad I went there. All of my colleagues did very well. I've been back a couple times. There was a Dictionary Society of North America meeting there a few years ago, so I got to go back to campus, which was really nice. I stay in touch with the people I studied with. It was absolutely an excellent, excellent experience.

ML: Right. Do you think your experience was pretty typical?

SK: I think so. Especially from the queer perspective—I think that when I was there, people could be pretty open. It just wasn't a big deal. Now, I wasn't in economics or the business school, who knows what it was like there, but at least in the liberal arts area, it was not an issue.

ML: Right. That's really nice to hear! Yeah. What are the people that you've kept in touch with? What are they doing? Were their experiences pretty similar to yours?

SK: In terms of being queer?

ML: Either one—whichever one you want to talk about.

SK: Well, all the people in my department who have wanted jobs have landed them. One of my colleagues is tenured at Virginia Tech, another one is at Purdue. Especially in linguistics the job openings are very few and far between, and the University of Chicago is a strong enough institution that people tend to get jobs.

ML: Yeah. So looking at your personal experience and what's changed over time, do you think that things are different for this generation?

SK: Oh, I think they're much, much, much easier. I've always said that straight people my age, in their 40s, could be tolerant. I think kids today in their 20s and teens, it's not even an issue of tolerance. I think it's just—I think your average 21-year-old, someone being gay is no different than them being left-handed or blue-eyed. I really have come to believe that. That it's completely irrelevant. Obviously there are parts of the country where it still sucks, but generally I think everything is moving in the right direction.

ML: Things are progressing, it seems like.

SK: Oh, absolutely.

ML: Yeah. So there's a question we like to ask for this project—why did you decide to be interviewed?

SK: Someone—I don't remember how I found out about it. Someone I kind of knew then got in touch with me, I think, saying that it was happening? I think I got an email. I'm a big believer in oral histories, and I've read a lot of—what's fascinating is reading a lot of the accounts of people who were growing up in the '50s and '60s, the shit they went through, I just think it's important for kids to—know what went on before. I'm a huge fan of these projects.

ML: That's really great to hear! We're also on the lookout for any materials or any people you might know who might be interested in being interviewed. Can you think of anyone else that might be good for us to talk to?

SK: I'm trying to think. My department was pretty straight. I—and because I was in grad school, I didn't see too many outside my group. I'm trying to think—obviously I had gay friends. I can't at the moment—we're going back twenty years. But I will definitely, if I think of any, let you know. You've seen my—I don't know if you've Googled me much, but have you seen my *Advocate* articles and stuff on defining marriage and whatnot?

ML: Oh, I actually have not. I should definitely look into that.

SK: Yeah.

ML: Sorry, what is *The Advocate*? Was it, like, a campus newspaper?

SK: No, like, it was *The Advocate*, the national magazine.

ML: Oh! Oh wow.

SK: I'll send you—I get a fair amount of...I get a fair amount of—because of my job, I do a lot of publicity and stuff, so I think you'd be interested in this article that I'm forwarding to you now...there we go. [Appendix 1]

And if you get—yeah. Yeah. I just think that things are in a trajectory, and Chicago being what it is and where it is, I hope that it's easier. I think things get easier and easier for queer youth each year.

ML: Yeah. I'm looking forward to reading the article. Thanks for everything. Yeah, this was actually a pretty quick interview. I can't think of any other questions. Is there anything that you want to tell us?

SK: Well, I wish I had more direct things to say about queer life in Hyde Park. It...all the gay bars on the North Side. When I was on campus I was just really focused on school, which I think is the case with most people who go to U of C. By that point in my life it was just an integrated part of my life, and it didn't raise eyebrows, and no one really cared. Certainly when I was arrested, people were legitimately freaked out by it, because it's such a strange thing, even now, to think about. It was supportive, and—yeah. It was a very positive experience.

ML: And that's really reassuring, right? That it didn't have to be—it was tolerant enough that it didn't have to be a super big deal when you were on campus.

SK: Mm-hm.

ML: Yeah. So anyway, thank you so much for being interviewed for this project.

SK: You're welcome. And if you have any follow-up just let me know.

ML: Sure. We'll be sending you the transcript pretty soon. So you can make changes if you want. It was great to talk to you!

SK: Likewise.

[00:47:57]

APPENDIX 1

“The Semantics of Marriage Equality,”

The Advocate, November 24, 2009 [www.advocate.com/news/news-features/2009/11/24/semantics-marriage-equality]

So often in the struggle for civil rights, gays and lesbians face criticisms from social conservatives regarding tradition. When asserting that marriage has always been solely a union between one man and one woman, our adversaries trot out old dictionary definitions to support their claims. But just because some dictionaries in the past defined marriage in this way does not mean that the word is used in the same way today. The job of dictionaries is primarily to describe how language *is* used, not to dictate how it *should be* used.

I'm the supervising editor for The American Heritage Dictionary and a lexicographer. In January the other dictionary editors and I revised several definitions relating to the word *marriage* to reflect the changes in legal status that have occurred over the past few years. For example, the definition of *widower* formerly read "A man whose wife has died and who has not remarried." I revised this definition to "A man whose spouse has died and who has not remarried."

Just two months later my own husband died unexpectedly and accidentally. We had been together almost 15 years. Because we were residents of Massachusetts, we had been able to marry in the fall of 2004. Suddenly I found myself to be a widower, and when our 2009 printing came off the presses in the spring, it included the updated definition of *widower* — a word that now applied to me. In the shattered aftermath of profound loss, an obsolete or incomplete definition of *widower* would seem an insignificant detail, but all such trivial details viewed together coalesce into a constant reminder of a two-tiered, unequal system. Therefore, having had the ability to revise the definitions that appear in a major American dictionary took on an important resonance for me.

Many sociological terms have undergone shifts in the past 150 years as society changes. The words *family* (no longer limited to stereotypical nuclear units) and *gay* (with the traditional “merry” sense becoming secondary) provide prime examples. Marriage, because of its legally institutionalized status, presents a significantly important development. Seven countries and five U.S. states have codified marriage equality, regardless of sexual orientation. This altered reality of the institution led us to revise the definition of the word as follows: “The legal union of a man and woman as husband and wife, and in some jurisdictions, between two persons of the same sex, usually entailing legal obligations of each person to the other.” This definition is straightforward and indisputable. Even the most ardent marriage equality foe cannot dispute the fact that in some jurisdictions two people of the same sex can get married to each other. And so there it is, in the first sense of *marriage*, which appears in our online and print reference works from spring 2009 onward.

In Massachusetts, five years after marriage equality was realized, the issue of what marriage ought to be has become irrelevant to most residents. (Shortly after my spouse’s death, I wrote an op-ed for *Americablog* that examines this issue.) Attitudes elsewhere are changing slowly, but

they are changing. Each time I examine this semantic cluster around the word *marriage* as we update our other dictionary titles, I become surreally aware that I am the one who is literally changing the definition of words like *widower*. The loss of one's spouse is a wrenching experience, but I am fortunate to have been in a position to implement this change so that the dictionary accurately reflects the reality of today's language use. The next time you're discussing marriage equality and an opponent brandishes an obsolete dictionary definition, don't be dismayed. You can counter with a truly up-to-date definition from an authoritative source.