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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #91
KWONG, ANN (1958 -) **BA 1980, PhD 1986**

At U of C: 1976 - 1986
Interviewed: November 21, 2014
Interviewer: Molly Liu
Transcript by: Molly Liu
Length: 1:15:45

Interview November 21, 2014 by phone:

[00:00:00]

ML: So tell me, how did you come to the University of Chicago?

AK: I grew up outside of Chicago, in a town called Wheaton. My guidance counselor told me that I should apply there. I had never heard that UChicago had an undergraduate program.

ML: Was there anything in particular that they thought made you well-suited for the school?

AK: They didn't tell me, but I think it's probably because I was doing these crazy science projects. Probably that--that was probably it. That's actually why I went to the University of Chicago.

ML: That sounds pretty great. What sorts of crazy science projects?

AK: I spent--I was really interested in animal behavior when I was in high school. We had a college-level course and we did a lot of experiments. Then I had this study where I spent the entire spring of my senior year out in a marsh, watching red-winged blackbirds set up their territory. The question was, what was the behavioral sequence they used to signal to each other that "this is my territory, stay out," whatever. It was so interesting because we found that as a function of time, there was a distribution, actually. There's a sequence of behaviors that occur—can occur over time and are stable. The frequency of the songs you see goes from A to lower B to C, basically, if that makes sense. So what happened is that actually, as the season goes on, you see the early part, the early behavioral part of the whole change, drop out. The whole frequency of the range--the frequency narrows over time, it would change over time. I don't know what it's triggered by, but it seems like something that would be very interesting to follow up on.

ML: Yeah, that's super interesting. That's really old-school ethology experiments. It's so cool that you were doing that in high school.

AK: It was straight observation, like Konrad Lorenz type stuff. I think it's kind of dying for a neurobiology-type follow-up experiment.

ML: Right. I study neurobiology of behavior, so that stuff is right up my alley.

AK: Oh really! So that's really interesting. Yeah, it's really dramatic, and you know, I was wondering--it would be interesting, I think, to look at animals, but if you could, for example--the light is changing, the temperature is changing. The question that I had was that if there were changes that you could detect in the blood, and if you could find it, if you could induce the change in behavior. [ML: Huh!] You know what I'm saying? If there's a biochemical correlate--

ML: Yeah, if there's a change in physiology. Yeah, that's really cool! How did you go from your interest in--did you continue to study animal behavior when you went to college?

AK: Chicago actually had a really good program. But I had this thing where I was sitting there, thinking, I really like animal behavior, but I can't—I don't know why, I just couldn't--and I don't think it's a problem with it. But with myself, I didn't want to go on with it, and I couldn't tell you exactly why. I was being pushed into medicine a lot by my parents. I did not go into medicine, but that's another story.

ML: Did you get a lot of pressure from your parents about that?

AK: About going into medicine? [ML: Yeah.] Oh yeah. You know--well, first of all, they would say they were going to disown me whenever I thought about doing something else other than medicine. And the other thing was that--I think the best story to illustrate this is--and this wasn't unusual for typical Chinese parenting, I don't know if your parents are like that at all--

ML: Yeah, my parents are the same way.

AK: Yeah. Yeah, so when I graduated with my PhD from Chicago, my parents came to graduation, and the first thing my parents said to me after I graduated was, "So, when are you going to get your medical degree?" What was I going to say? That really summarizes it. I should mention, my daughter went to Columbia and she studies the behavior of frog song. From a neural standpoint. *Xenopus* calls. So you have this overlapping interest.

ML: Yeah, that is really cool. But yeah, I can sympathize with that. I think my parents will always be disappointed that I won't be getting an MD. [laughs]

AK: Oh yeah, yours too, huh? Yeah. Yeah. You're gonna be okay. [laughs]

ML: Thanks. But yeah, was it pretty common--like, did your parents go to college? Was it pretty common for people in your family to get college degrees?

AK: So, I was the oldest of four kids. Three of the kids when to Chicago and one of them went to MIT. So we all got college degrees. My youngest brother is a really famous scientist. In the field he's very very well known. And he went to Chicago also. Three of us went at the same time. The other brother went to MIT. You know, typical Asian family.

ML: Very academic family. Did you have any--being the eldest kid, I guess, did you have any expectations of UChicago?

AK: Yes, I expected that I was going to fail the first quarter. That they would realize that they had made a mistake and that I wasn't going to be able to make it. That's what I expected. But what made me want to come--you know those days when you visit the campus? And I sat in on some classes where the professors were actually teaching. They were science classes. Really blown away that science--that you could get into research pretty early and not just memorize a bunch of the equations. Because I was really terrible at that, actually. I was really bad at physics and chemistry and all that.

ML: Right. Although it seemed that in your high school you had done some experiments too, right? Was doing experimentation pretty well-supported in your high school?

AK: Yeah. But you know, I actually--my daughter runs into this a lot, and when I give talks in universities--so many people equate being good at science with being good in math. And that's not...science. Something that--something that separates science from other disciplines is wider variety. You can get very very good at physics and chemistry, and kind of work in chemistry, and not encounter anything in my field, which is virology. Science is more than that. I just thought that those courses were really godawful. You can do badly in math courses and still do very well in science.

ML: Can you talk more about those courses?

AK: The ones I did? There were courses on developmental biology. I had a lab course. And sometimes we actually did experiments. Like in my intro developmental biology class. There were all these classes that I think accidentally, almost--so I ended up in virology almost by accident. I had some pre-med--there's some--virology as a class was pretty pre-med-y. And I wasn't interested that much in that. So I was waiting around for some friends and we were going to go to a movie. And I was outside the class, which was on the 11th floor of Cummings, and I thought, why don't I listen in instead of sitting out in the hall? So I sat in on the class and was completely blown away. I just--the teachers were really really good. They had a really philosophical approach. And there was no textbook. Everything

was just scientific papers. And I was really blown away. I really liked it. But I had worked in other labs before and I knew that there were a few differences between sitting in on a class and liking to do research. At that time in developmental biology there weren't that many ways to really dive into the pathways. In virology, it was really a good field--a lot of basic biology was done in it.

My professor asked if I wanted to work in a lab because they saw that I was interested. I wasn't sure if I wanted to be doing virology. So I said, "Well, I don't really--I know that I like the class, but I don't know if I'll like the labwork." So they said, "Well, come to lab and see." Well, okay! So what happened was that the final--I aced the midterm, but the final--I blew the final. Because I had stayed up two nights in a row the day before the final. Because I was working in another lab. By the time I got to the final, there was one question that was, "Talk about the paper"--I could not remember that paper for the life of me. I could not remember it! So I blew the whole final. So I sneak into the lab and try to get my exam, and of course I get caught by the professor. She said, "So, when are you going to come work in the lab?" I said, "What do you mean?" She said," So when are you going to work in the lab? When are you coming?" "Well, why do you want me? I just failed an exam!" She said, "I just assumed--I assume you can answer it, you just didn't remember, or that you didn't read the paper. You were too busy and you didn't read the paper." So basically they gave me a good grade. So that's how I ended up working in the lab.

[0:11:35]

Yeah. So I did a senior thesis where I worked 30 to 40 hours a week, literally. It was great. I was really really working hard. And I, you know, did a senior thesis kind of thing. About three quarters through that spring, a professor in the department came up to me and said, "Here, sign this." I'm looking at it--what is it? And he said, "It's an application for graduate school. Everything is paid for, you just have to sign this." So I signed, and that's how I ended up in virology. I basically wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but they could see that I was going to--that I had a gift for it and that I had potential. Only in Chicago could something like that happen.

ML: Yeah. Was it--did you make any--what was the decision process like, to go to grad school? Was it just, "Well, I signed this piece of paper, I guess I'm going!" Or was it more complicated?

AK: It's one of those things that you can always change. I was thinking about going and teaching high school in the Philippines, actually. I wasn't sure. I was really burned out. And I had worked in a lab that was quite disillusioning sophomore and junior year. So yeah, I just--I kind of slid into it, but when I started publishing and all that, I just really really enjoyed it. That was fun. But it can be really tough. But I really do like virology, and I'm pretty good at it. I actually think that they were great for seeing that, and encouraging me.

ML: Yeah! So it seemed like you worked a ton while you were at UChicago. What was your social life like while you were there?

AK: I lived in a dorm my first year, my first two years. I played in the orchestra, so I had that. But I didn't really hang out that much. My family had moved to Hong Kong five days before I moved to Chicago, so it was a little difficult. I didn't have any place to go during break or stuff like that. [ML: That sounds really hard.] It was. Later on, when I was in graduate school, I was involved in karate. Which is how I met my girlfriend, my first girlfriend. And then mostly at that time--believe it or not, there were very few Asian students on campus. There were probably less than 20 that we knew of. Just a handful of undergraduates and graduate students. So we would also socialize together. We would have parties together. At the time I was semi-religious and I would go to a Chinese bible study. That was the kind of stuff I did.

ML: How did the Asians find each other? Through bible study or karate?

AK: We just saw each other on campus and we'd talk to each other. It was really actually--we were definitely a minority. Not a major minority, a minor minority.

ML: Yeah. Was that difficult? Did you feel that made--did it feel strange to be part of such a small minority on campus?

AK: I grew up in Wheaton where we were an even smaller minority. It was fine. One thing was that people came from all over. There were a bunch of students from Hawai'i. Some people from Hong Kong, Taiwan. This was before mainland China opened. Before Bush opened up and allowed foreign students to come. So it was really really different. There were a lot of debates between pro-Chinese communists and the pro-Taiwan movement, things like that.

ML: Huh. What was that like--the conflicts between those two--?

AK: Mostly I think the grad students did that. When I was an undergrad, it was mostly the grad students--people talking about, people getting in fights or spying on other people, things like that. I'm sure it wasn't trivial, but it was a little bit distant from me.

ML: Are your parents originally from Hong Kong?

AK: They're actually from mainland China, from southern China. They immigrated right after World War II. That time period--the country, the United States, was not very hospitable to Asian immigrants. There was a lot of discrimination that my parents--saw. You know, you have capped stats and your parents, people calling them names, that sort of thing. [ML: That sounds really rough.] Oh you know, it was interesting, because--it had something to do with being gay. When I moved to New York and I was a postdoc, I got involved with Asian Lesbians of the East

Coast, which was a group. And we ended up doing a lot with the gay male Asian groups at a time when that was very very unusual, because it was very very separatist. The women were always doing one thing and the guys were always doing another thing. They didn't interact much at all. When I was in Chicago, the gay women who were obviously out didn't want to have anything to do with guys. And I didn't identify with that all. One of the things that was most interesting things was that in New York, we would actually march as a community, as an Asian community, not as a lesbian Chinese community separate from a gay Asian community, gay male community. We actually worked together. We had floats together, we did all kinds of crazy things together. We didn't do everything together, but in a situation where it was a really public show, like gay pride or March on Washington, we actually did it together.

When I talk to people, the whole thing about being out or being gay is that when you've been different--if you come up where you've been different all your life and have gotten into fights about it and all that kind of thing, you've never felt like you belong--it's not actually a big shift. Whereas with my first girlfriend, who was white as white can be, American, for her it was a really traumatic shift, to go into a minority category. It wasn't, you know, that that she was perceived as, you know, how other people thought of her. I guess I have seen that it's very very different for Asians. Of course there's a whole 'nother category of people who were coming out who were from overseas, coming from very very traditional families, and that sort of--I mean, all Asian families are pretty traditional. But that was another difficulty, if you're coming from overseas.

[0:19:59]

ML: Yeah. If you don't mind me asking, when did you first become aware of your sexuality?

AK: Um...I think it's better--it's probably easier to say when I became aware that I was initially--when I realized that my whole problem was that, was that I was actually attracted--it wasn't actually a problem, but that I wasn't really attracted to men. And I didn't really realize that, until I was--until quite late. And then it all kind of made sense. I was actually married for many years. I met my ex-husband through a physics class at the U of C. He thought that I was gay way before I figured out that I was gay, and he didn't tell me. [ML: And I guess married you anyway.] He had a lot of women friends who were gay. I don't know why--I think the thing was that he really was quote-unquote in love with me, and he was one of those people who thinks that love can overcome anything. And I really had no idea because I had no--I had no comparison. It was really like lightning. I just wasn't really in love with him. And I didn't know that I could feel differently. Basically I didn't figure that out until, I don't know, I was about 27.

ML: Wow. What was that process like, to be married to a man and then come to terms with your sexuality?

AK: Well, I mean, it was quite difficult, because--we were friends and I didn't want to hurt him. On the other hand I felt like I was being torn in two. And I was pregnant. So it was very very difficult. I just couldn't--I didn't know what I was going to do. I was afraid of losing the baby, that he would take it away. On the other hand he was would be very supportive sometimes, and others he'd be unfriendly. It was very very difficult. I don't recommend it to anybody. But basically I think that being pregnant forced me to be very careful about what I was doing with my life. So it all kind of came out that way.

ML: Yeah. That sounds--that sounds very difficult. I'm glad that you made it through.

AK: There's actually a story about this that's published, in a book. If you want to look at it. It's called--the book is called *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Wife,* or something like that, I can't remember. It was a whole series of chapters of women who are married who then came out. It's called *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Wife.*

ML: Is it a book about the phenomenon or is your story in the book?

AK: They're all individual stories? *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Wife.* I keep that in my bookshelf, it still has some influence. It's a bunch of different people all telling their stories, from all different angles.

ML: Yeah. So you said before that you met your first girlfriend in a karate class. What's the story behind that?

AK: Well, I don't know. We just...I think it was just pure lust, I don't know. [laughs] So Carolyn went to U of C, she had graduated. She was working in a lab, she was in a class. A whole bunch of us would take classes on campus and in a dojo uptown. And, um...I just--we just started being very attracted to each other. One thing led to another, and then...and then, you know, when you learn something you can't unlearn it. And I had to figure out what to do with myself. What to do with everything. So in the end, Steve and I--Steve was my ex-husband--I had the baby, Steve and I got divorced, and we both moved to New York. I had stayed in Chicago for him. And he moved to New York to be near his kid. We shared joint custody. Carolyn and I went out, and she moved out to New York, and I started at Sloan-Kettering, which you know is right across the street from Rockefeller. So we lived in New York, on 81st St, for a long time. And I started working in New Jersey and commuting. Carolyn and I broke up, and I got together with Daša, who is another scientist. I met her in New Jersey, and we moved to Cambridge together.

ML: Nice. From your perspective, what was it like to be a lesbian woman in science?

AK: You know, I think there's a huge advantage. [ML: Oh yeah?] Yes, I do. ...So, let's see. What was my perspective? I remember when I was going to work, when I got a job in a company, which was a big pharma company, called Schering-Plough, I was

trying to decide whether to be out or not. This was 1991. A lot of people I talked to ended up not being out. But I talked to a lot of people and I ended up deciding that I was just going to be out. There wasn't anything really wrong with it. And I was very matter-of-fact about it. Keep in mind that there were very few women. In the company either. And even fewer Asians. And here I was, gay. I think that being gay was the least of the challenges. In fact, there was an advantage. If you're gay and you're out, the guys really generally, most of them, they don't tend to be sexist. In a way you're like a third sex.

And I think that I--the other issue was, like, how do you dress. I was not going to wear a business suit or a dress. I just don't. So I ended up--it was really kind of a butch style. But it was basically a take on business science company dress. So for example, the guys in the company always had to wear a jacket and a tie. They wanted to--I thought that was hilarious. So I ended up hanging a jacket in my office. And I would go to a meeting wearing a jacket and a bolo. Or a jacket and a very colorful tie. In one way I was making fun of them and in another way I was being respectful. There was another woman, very straight woman, who kept telling me that I needed to dress differently and wear very feminine dresses. In fact, she would tell other people to talk to me, like technicians who were working with me. You know, a few years after that, the head of the department--who actually turns out was gay, but he wasn't out about it--he was walking down the hallway, it was dark, you know, Christmas shut down, and he said, "Oh, I talked to so-and-so, and he said something, you've finally got a woman who knows how to dress." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes!" He--and I was like so shocked. He said, well, the first time that Randy, this straight woman, who kept on telling me how to dress, she went from wearing blue jeans and torn t-shirts, just really the other way. To these other feminine dresses, very high skirts and very high heels. And everyone thought that she looked like a prostitute. And you know, she worked so hard but she gave exactly the wrong impression. So he thought that the way that I was dressing, pants and jacket and bolo or tie, was fine. And I think what it is that the guys at work saw that and it made sense, it computed. It wasn't sexual, and they didn't think about it. That was it. And I think that's an advantage that, because I was gay, I could dress that way. It was comfortable for me. And it had a big advantage.

I would see women get up and give talks in the company, and--you know, in Chicago, it's very difficult for them to figure out something to wear that won't make the guys think of something other than what they're talking about. And I just don't think that was happening with me.

[0:30:09]

ML: Yeah. It is an awkward position, I guess, where if we co-opt expressions of masculinity, we end up getting ahead of more feminine people. But yeah, that's so interesting, that that was your experience.

AK: Well you know what's interesting is that partly you work depending on what position of power you're in. One thing that was very interesting was that everyone in the group who was in virology had to give a talk about once a year. And I noticed after a while that all the women were getting up and wearing ties or bolos when they gave the talk. All straight women! It's just trying to find a way to dress that would be taken seriously and wasn't too sexualized.

ML: Maybe you started a trend! Butch women in science.

AK: Do you see a difference in how women are taken seriously depending on how they dress?

ML: It's sort of hard for me to say. At Rockefeller the gender ratio is still super biased. I think only 15% of our tenured faculty are women, or faculty at all. Most of the women here are extremely well-dressed, extremely feminine. But there aren't any counterexamples of more masculine-looking women or, well, less polished-looking feminine women. Just because the sample size here is so small that we don't get a good...

AK: Yeah. Companies can also be more sort of formal. The university is a little different.

ML: Yes, that's true. But I guess, going back to something that you said a little while ago, you mentioned that you were involved in an Asian lesbian organization in New York? [AK: Yes.] Was that the first time you had been involved in any sort of gay organization, or had you started back when you were in Chicago?

AK: No, it was started in New York City. A woman named June Chan, who I think actually works in Rockefeller. But anyhow, in Chicago, I was part of--there was a Gay and Lesbian Center, I don't know if it's still there, it was up north? [ML: Yeah, yeah!] I used to go to a group, a discussion group, for parents who were gay and had kids. Or who had been married. I felt that Chicago, I didn't feel like there was quite a place for me. Number one I didn't feel all that hostile towards guys in general. Number two it was almost all white. It was all white. The gay and lesbian groups. And I had also--I had been married, and--all these things that people think of as forbidden. I was married and I had a kid. I really--I didn't feel like there was a place on campus within those groups. But the parents' group I went to for quite a while. I actually marched in the Chicago Gay Pride with that group.

ML: Nice! How did you hear about that group [Asian Lesbians of the East Coast]?

AK: How did I hear? Wow, I can't--I probably...I'm not sure, actually. I think what I did was that I called the phone number. How did I find the phone number? Maybe I saw it advertised at the Gay and Lesbian Center. But the way we actually, that people would--there would actually be a phone number, so there would be something about this group and people would call the phone number. And then it--we would

tell them about it and they would come to us for meetings, and we would get together and talk. We had a newsletter also. For a long time I was actually the contact person. That phone number was my phone number. And we had--it was a real mixture of women from overseas, from the US, all different ages. It was really great. I really really liked it. We would actually meet as Asian women only once a month. Then it was very interesting, because there's also--there's an Asian guys association, and that association, Asian men were not allowed to go out with each other. They were not. I don't know where they are now. The whole idea of having space to ourselves, without our partners, was very controversial. Not so much in New York, but in general.

There's also a group called Asian Pacific Lesbian Network, which is a nationwide network, and we met in California a couple of times. I remember that in some of those meetings, people would be crying because they would come to this meeting because they really wanted to meet other Asian women who were gay, and their partners said to them, "If you go, you may as well move out." At that time, it was not at that time accepted. We had all kinds of things. We had a party at the Gay and Lesbian Center. We had a cross-dressing party. Cross-dressing would me wearing a Chinese dress. [ML: That's so funny!] Yeah! You would have liked it.

ML: Yeah, I'm sure I would have. Was the Gay and Lesbian Center still on Halstead at that time?

AK: In Chicago, yeah. The Gay and Lesbian Center in NYC for these cross-dressing parties was on 14th St. We would go on retreats in upstate New York. All of these people would go to some small town in upstate New York where this guy had a farmhouse and we'd just go there for the weekend and have snowball fights. Of course we would cook. It was amazing. [ML: That sounds so fun.] I actually miss that. A community like that.

ML: Oh, are you involved in anything like that in Boston right now?

AK: No, and actually it's interesting. I moved up here in 1997. And the last few years in New York, we were adjusting to less and less need. I mean, for the group. And basically it seems like being out or being gay is such a non-issue, to some extent, is that there was really less of a need. Does that make sense?

ML: Yeah, no, it's something that I've heard a lot about. Gay neighborhoods or gay organizations are dwindling because it's pretty accepted for gay people to just live wherever and do whatever they want. What do you think of that phenomenon? Do you think it's a good thing, that they're dwindling?

AK: I think it's great that people are more accepted. But I think there's something really wonderful about--I think it's sad that the groups are dwindling. I don't miss the discrimination that drove people together, but I think that it's a mistake--we're not all the same. And when we get together with someone like--Daša and I have been

since ‘97, and when we get together with other people who are gay, it’s different. There’s a whole different level of...I don’t know. It’s different. I would hate to see that wonderful difference--I think difference is good. I would hate for that difference to be lost.

ML: I guess--you talking about discrimination bringing people together makes me think of what you said before about how the Asian gay and Asian lesbian associations in New York, unlike most other gay and lesbian associations, would do things together. I guess, was the Asian gay community very large? Or how do you--do you think that being Asian played into the unity between those two groups?

[0:40:23]

AK: Oh absolutely. Absolutely. This was with other gay Asian men, gay Asian organizations that we would get together with. They weren’t white and gay. They were Asian. Am I answering your question? I’m not sure.

ML: Oh--yeah, of course. I’m just curious about how you see being gay and being Asian playing together.

AK: You know, it’s...it’s interesting. I can’t exactly figure it out, but somehow...being with other Asians who are gay or lesbian is different from being with other gays and lesbians. It feels really different. And maybe it’s only different for people who--I’m going to take that back. I think it will always be different so long as we are different. I don’t care how many hundreds of years you live here, if you look Asian and the majority population is white, you’ll never be taken at first glance as being one of quote-unquote us. You’ll always be one of the other. And this is a problem that people have with being gay is that all of a sudden they’re in the other category.

ML: Yeah. Yeah, it’s true. I remember--at from my perspective, it seems that there are so few representations of Asian gay people that it took me until I was 20 years old to meet another Chinese lesbian. I was like, oh my god! This is amazing! I can’t believe that we exist! So it is a very nice feeling.

AK: Yeah! And you know, having another group, where there are 20 other people, where your representation isn’t just--I should have said, I really didn’t think I was gay when I was in Chicago because how I felt was so far from the white lesbians that I saw. I just couldn’t identify, in so many ways, with them. That’s why--one of the reasons I was involved with Asian Lesbians of the East Coast. Not just because I had fun, but because I think it’s really important to provide another view. That kind of driving thing between being Asian and being gay which powered Asian Lesbians of the East Coast—June Chan wanted people to know that there were more of us out there.

ML: Yeah. Was there a big lesbian or gay presence in UChicago while you were there? What were the images of white lesbians that you saw?

AK: Yeah, you know. I'm--I'm going to do them an injustice, but this was my biased view. Very angry people who kind of hated men. All white women in the social sciences, with short hair. I just--it was so stereotypical. I felt like, okay, if that's gay, then I'm not. I don't know about you, but I could not--until it became very personal, that I fell in love with this woman. I just--I had no clue. Which was really bad because if you look at me now, it's like, how could you have no clue?

ML: Yeah. No, yeah, that's what it was like for me too when I was first coming out, kind of. Yeah. So I can sympathize with that, for sure.

AK: Yeah, I think representation is so important. What you see helps to order your world. And so actually, one other thing is that my partner now, to whom I'm married, she's actually from Slovenia. She's from Yugoslavia. And one of the things that I really noticed, being with Steve my ex-husband, who's Caucasian, and my first girlfriend, who's also Caucasian, is that I felt this incredible difference between us, between me being Asian and them not being Asian. And with Daša, I think it's different because she's other, she's not American. And she doesn't act in certain ways that many Americans do. I guess I notice especially because white men occupy a completely different space than Asian women. I remember feeling quite...what do you call it? You're not connected. Quite separate, I guess, from Steve and Carolyn and being tortured by it. I felt so estranged, basically.

So one example of this is that I started a workshop on biracial couples. It was called "Interracial Couples: What Difference Does it Make?" And the first one we had--I did this with Carolyn. We set it up because her attitude was, "well, what difference does it make?" I was like, "what do you mean? It's so obvious!" We went to this lesbian music festival in Indiana, I think, and we had this workshop. Almost everybody at the workshop was one black woman and one white woman. So we separated the white women from the non-white women and we went into separate rooms. The thing that was almost uniform was that the white women all said, "what difference does it make?" And all the women on the other side were like, "oh my god, this is such a relief to talk about." You know? There is such a difference! And then when we moved to New York City, in the Gay and Lesbian Center in New York City, we did the workshop there as well, and the same thing there happened. We had a facilitator, which was an older couple--I think one was a psychologist--and they went home and had a fight over it too.

So--how do you explain that? We live with this not being part of dominant society at all times, and if you--it's hard, it's very hard, I don't think you can possibly--you can't understand what it's like. [ML: Yeah. You'll always be detached.] Yeah. And that difference is almost bigger than being gay versus lesbian, to some extent. Sorry, gay/lesbian versus not.

ML: Yeah. You mentioned that before, I guess, how coming out was less traumatic for you than it was for your girlfriend at the time. [AK: Yeah.] Yeah, this is--I don't

think you've actually mentioned--did you ever come out to your family? What was that reaction like?

AK: Oh, yeah, my family. [laughs] Yeah, I came out to my family. I'm the eldest, and my mother was always threatening that I was going to hell, so...I grew up in a very religious household, no movies, no going out to parties, that whole thing. So I would tell my mother that I didn't want to go to heaven if that's the way people were going to be. So my mother was very very negative. But what happened was that she actually--she couldn't really disown me because she wanted to see her granddaughter. So that changed things. In the end we'd all go visit my family and my mother was very good to my girlfriend, both girlfriends. What's interesting is that my youngest brother is also gay. He's seven years younger than me, and he came out, and his boyfriend is not someone that you could ever hide. He's a gorgeous black guy, just--he is like, a model. So Dion and I and my brother Peter and my family would go traveling in China, and my mother got to the point where she would say to me, "I don't know what is wrong with those people"--she'd be talking about this church--"why don't they care? Why do they care about who people love?" And I thought, that's a really good example of why you should come out. Because eventually they come around. [ML: I'm so happy that that happened!] Yeah. It's so funny though. Did you come out to your parents?

[50:47]

ML: Oh, yeah, I did. I think in the middle of college. It was sort of the same thing, where my family's not very religious, which I think made the initial impact not as bad, but it did take them a couple of years. But I'm also curious--with both you and your brother being in interracial couples, did your parents have any reaction to that too?

AK: I think that they would have a reaction if I brought home an Asian partner. I'm not sure what that would be. But I haven't heard anything specifically with Carolyn or Daša, my two girlfriends. With Steve, my mother threatened to disown me. [ML: Ugh, that's rough.] It was much worse for me. But I brought him home to visit during a big holiday and there were people over visiting me so she couldn't disown me then.

ML: Ugh, yeah. And also, what was it--you had your daughter along all this time. What was it like to kind of navigate these new gay and lesbian spaces with a small child?

AK: That's a good question. I think these days there are a lot of kids, but in the early days there were very few. And people never seemed to think about what kids would need, that sort of stuff. So it could be very off-putting. But on the other hand, one of the reasons why I went to this gay and lesbian Church in New York City was I really wanted Ursula to see other gay and lesbian people who were not just our family. There were older people in different situations. That sort of church community was very warm and welcoming of us having kids. And that was really--and the Asian Lesbians of the East Coast, they were great with Ursula. It's

so interesting, there was actually another woman in the group, June, and her parents came from the same province in China. We actually are similar in a lot of ways, but I never realized that I was not that unique, that there was someone else that was similar. And she's also a scientist, she's a neuroscientist. I remember seeing her at a party once. Ursula was going over to her, her name was June, and holding her leg, like June was me. [laughs] Ursula, she realizes that June is not me, and she's like, "Oh, my goodness!" That Ursula thought that June was me. It's interesting.

ML: Which province are your parents from, by the way?

AK: Guangdong.

ML: Ah, okay. My grandmother on my mother's side is from there.

AK: Oh really? Cool.

ML: My dad is also from Hubei, so I was wondering if that was another southern province that--but, anyway.

AK: I asked my dad once, why are there so many people here from your province? He said, Oh, no food. Really poor.

ML: "Eat anything that walks, flies, or swims," right? Or whatever the saying is.

AK: Pardon?

ML: Isn't there a saying about Cantonese people that they'll eat anything that walks, flies, or swims?

AK: Oh, yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

ML: But yeah, it's great that you found a welcoming community for your family while you were in New York.

AK: Yeah. Yeah. I don't think this group is operating anymore, which is too bad that it's not. But yeah. It was great. I was very very lucky.

ML: Yeah. So...what else? Oh yeah. How did you meet your current partner, Daša?

AK: I met her--she came into my company that I was working at in New Jersey. She was introduced to me as someone who was going to work on this project that I was working on. She was in a different department. According to her, when we met we got into a fight, but I had no idea we were getting a fight. Apparently I said something like, "Well, I'm glad that you're working on this, but if you don't, I will," which she thought was incredibly rude. [laughs] I was having trouble with her boss doing it. Anyway we started hanging out together. We worked together

writing--she's a writer. And so what actually happened is that, you know, you kind of realize--when I was with Steve I didn't realize that what was wrong with me was that I really wasn't attracted to guys. I mean, it was really difficult for me to really be attracted. And I didn't realize that there was a situation that I could be. With Carolyn and Steve, I'm a pretty intense scientist, and I'm always getting in trouble for working in the lab. People just don't understand why I'm working, and take it personally that I'm neglecting them or something. And I didn't realize until I met Daša what it big difference it made to have someone you could talk to about your work. I didn't realize that was important. Not so different from coming out in a way.

ML: How so?

AK: It's--it can be a value that you didn't realize you had. It was something that was missing from my previous life, and when it clicked, it was like, oh my god--

ML: "This is what was missing!" For sure. Was it difficult, I guess--getting a PhD and working in a lab I'm sure took up a lot of your time. Was it difficult to balance the work part of your life and your relationships?

AK: It--with Steve it was difficult until he started being busy. So he was in medical school and when he started being on rounds and being on call and basically being as busy as I was in the lab, that was okay. But before that he would get very very jealous. It was pretty bad.

ML: Jealous of your viruses. Aw.

AK: Yeah! And you know, Carolyn it was a little bit similar. I haven't had that problem with Daša. It's not that she doesn't care that I'm not around, but she doesn't take it personally.

ML: Yeah, that sounds really good. And...working on virology, I'm wondering--since you went to school around the same time that the AIDS crisis hit, did you have any contact with--was the department talking about HIV at all? Did that impact your life at all?

AK: Actually, so, I graduated in '86. It was coming forward just as I was graduating. I remember having arguments with people, gay men, about whether it could be an infectious agent. I said that it had to be, no question about it. But they thought that it was all a plot to distract them or something. [ML: Wait, what?] It was like that. I never worked in HIV myself but my brother does. He's working on an HIV vaccine. He was one of the first--he was the first to crystallize the structure of the AIDS virus acting with its receptor.

[0:59:56]

ML: That's amazing! Did you--did you see any of the effects of the epidemic when you were in Chicago or New York? [AK: Pardon? Did I see any of the...] Effects? When you were in Chicago or New York?

AK: Not in the laboratory. And in New York--for example, the community church where I went in New York, so many gay men died. We had...we made quilts for them. People made quilts. They just covered the walls. I became the power of attorney for two guys. And both of them died. Just watching them waste away--it's completely--it makes me so angry that guys will try to get HIV these days. I think it's--but lots of people died. Lots of people in the church died.

ML: Yeah. That's--that's very sad. Yeah. So I guess we only have a couple of questions left. I guess, just thinking about your personal experience and your experiences now, do you think that things have changed a lot, from when you came out, to the current generation?

AK: I think so. My daughter is, I think she would probably call herself bi. She's had relationships with girls and boys or men and women, whatever you'd call them. It doesn't seem to be a big deal. So I think--there's just a huge change in that way. And the way that people view you. So you're gay, okay, fine. It just seems more relaxed.

ML: Yeah. Actually, I'm kind of curious--what was it like to raise a bi child? It seems that so many of our narratives--the narratives that I hear about coming out are always with straight parents, so I'm curious about how that changes when your parents are a lesbian couple.

AK: You should interview Ursula! [laughs] So I mean, I will say that Ursula has probably been with more women than with men, as far as I know. But what I always said to her was that it's a very personal thing. You always want to care for and love the person you're with. Otherwise don't be with them. I guess it's probably different for her because she could actually talk to me about it. Not that I wanted to talk to her about it, but it... Yes.

ML: Okay. So yeah, looking back at your experience at the University of Chicago, what sort of role does it play in your life, do you think?

AK: I actually have great affection for Chicago. I really liked the--at the time, the emphasis on quirky academic endeavors. The lack of emphasis on sororities and fraternities and football players and football--I think it was there but it wasn't serious. I just loved that a lot of the athletes were women, a lot of the really good teams were women. And I feel very lucky, to feel that I ended up there for my PhD. There were a lot of women in this field. My professor was a woman. Four professors in the department, two of them were women. When I would go to conferences, it would be women, when I would go to do these international talks. The department really trained people, and I was very very lucky to have that. When

I went to look over to the biochemistry field at Sloan-Kettering, that was a shock for me. There were no women. I was literally--I asked someone how many women were presenting, and less than 10%. When it gets like that, it feels very much like an exclusive boys' club. I'm not saying that it should be all women, just that--Chicago made me feel like you could find the things that you loved and do that. It might not be standard in any way, but--I'll tell you one more story.

When I was a freshman in college, the dean of the college, the dean of biology, his name was Charles Oxnard. Tall guy, like 6'5", ridiculously tall and big, from Oxford University. I went to dinner with him with a bunch of other students and I asked, "How do you decide what you're going to go into? Because I like a lot of things." I couldn't decide between this and that and the other. And he was laughing. I said, "Why are you laughing at me?" He said, "Don't worry about it. One day you'll take a class, and you're going to sit in that class and you're going to fall in love with it and say, oh my god, this is so exciting! And you're going to work in that class and finish and say, this is so exciting. That's how it's going to end up. And in the meantime, don't worry about it. It's just a matter of what you fall in love with." And I thought, that was so interesting, because that was exactly what happened. And I think Chicago was somewhat unique, at least then, that that could happen. So many random encounters with professors and grad students who are very very intense about what they're doing. Because they're intense, you get a glimpse of it. And you get to be brought into it, if that's what you want, if you know what I mean?

ML: Yeah. Yeah. So why did you decide to be interviewed?

AK: You know I don't feel like being gay had a lot to do with my time in Chicago, but I'm--I really like Chicago. I feel part of the larger community. If I was asked to go teach at Chicago, I would definitely go. I was actually asked back there recently for a symposium at a professor's birthday, something like that. So I don't know. So that's why. What is it like to interview these people?

ML: Oh, it's great. I just get to hear people talk about their lives. Yeah. All of your stories are wonderful to listen to.

AK: Are you--is there any one narrative that you're trying to pull out, or is that not part of it at all?

ML: Basically the point is to get as many people as possible. There's actually going to be a museum exhibit about all of these interviews in half a year or so, spring of 2015. So the graduate student at the head of this project is, I suppose, trying to tease out a greater narrative. But for each individual interview, you know, we're just trying to get people to talk about themselves.

AK: Yeah, that's really cool. You know, Chicago, there's actually a professor there who taught history of religion, and gays and lesbians, I forgot his name. But at the time,

and this was quite a few years ago, that was a really big deal. It legitimized it from a scholarship standpoint, I guess.

ML: Yeah. But yeah, it's been really great. As you said before, just your story being super interesting, nowadays there are so many Asians at UChicago, but definitely back, as you said, back in the '70s and '80s there were very few. So it's interesting to hear from your perspective.

AK: Yeah. So I have to ask you, do you think there is a need at all for Asian lesbians and gays to get together? Or do you think it's just hog wash?

[1:09:53]

ML: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

AK: So you actually feel that, right?

ML: Yeah. Like I said, it took so long for me to realize that there were other gay Asians. Like you said, for me at least, it was one of those things where you don't really realize that you're missing it until you have it. [AK: Yes, yes, yes. I agree.] So yeah. I definitely feel that way. Yeah. Now that I have more--go on.

AK: I wonder, so, I guess the Asian lesbian group isn't running anymore in New York City, is it?

ML: Not that I know of. But I also haven't looked specifically for it, so who knows. But yeah, maybe I will now. So thank you for the heads up! [laughs]

AK: Oh, you're very very welcome.

ML: All right. Before we go, are there any other people who you think would be good to be interviewed for this project?

AK: Yeah... There's a woman who graduated from the medical school from Chicago. Her name is Ellen. And I don't remember her last name, but she graduated in 1984. And I think she went into psychiatry.

ML: Sure. Any particular reason--or was she just a lesbian at--

AK: She was a friend of my ex-husband, so she was at least out to him. I don't know if she was out to the entire medical school or anything like that. But that was an era where people were hiding.

ML: Yeah. I don't think we have any interviews from med school students from that era, so that would be great. So yeah--

AK: You could interview my first girlfriend. She's from Chicago also.

ML: Sure. Carolyn...do you remember her last name?

AK: Yeah. Carolyn Rundquist. She was an undergraduate. Chicago was where I came out, so I owe a lot to Chicago!

ML: I'm glad to hear that. So yeah, I can't think of anything else to ask. Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us?

AK: Hm. I think--there's a couple of things. I think the common theme is that people caring about each other, people caring about family in the end, that's what matters, and not all the differences. On the other hand, being really, those differences are real, and it's also good to celebrate differences. It's important to do that, and it's important to not just say, well, I'm gay, and it's all the same. It's not. In the same way, it's not the same way to be gay and Asian. I think it's really important to tell those things, but not necessarily to generalize it. Not to go to one extreme or the other. But I think time alone, with each other, without having our girlfriends, who often weren't Asian, was really critical. And I think you could say that about--take out the Asian thing, talk about gays and lesbians. Everyone now is assimilating so much, it's as if it doesn't matter. But it does.

ML: Yeah, it's true. Yeah, it's a hard balance to strike between, I guess, respecting difference, and not penalizing people for those differences. But hopefully we're moving--moving in a good direction.

AK: I think the way to do it is to celebrate the differences. And allow that space for difference to exist, and obviously not to penalize it. And not to segregate it either. Anyhow I actually miss that community. Talking to you has been really nice, and I wish I had that kind of community. I should try to look for something.

ML: [laughs] Yeah, same for me, actually. This has been awesome!

AK: So you have any questions, feel free to call back, give me a call.

ML: Yeah. We'll definitely mail you the transcript, with all the forms and everything. So yeah, and if I have anything more, I will be sure to ask.

AK: Well, take care. Good luck with your studies.

ML: Thanks! Bye, Ann.

[01:15:45]
End of Interview