

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #15

LEQUERICA, ANUAR ANDRES (1983-) MPP 2012

At U of C: 2008-2012

Interviewed: February 15, 2013

Interviewer: Ash Mayo

Transcript by: Molly Liu

Length: 00:52:40

Interview (February 15, 2013) at the University of Chicago:

[00:00:00]

AM: Okay, the first question: Why did you decide to come to the University?

AL: The reason I decided to come to the University of Chicago is because—I was doing my undergrad at Purdue, and I...I was tired of rural Indiana. There was a LGBT kind of office at Purdue. It was run by students. I'm from Colombia, so when I went to Purdue I expected—you know, I was coming to the U.S., liberal, urban, but I ended up in rural Indiana. I was really disappointed, but of course I was studying engineering so Purdue was a good place to be.

I ended up doing a summer at Columbia [University]. And at Columbia, I took a number of economics classes which really interested me. This man, my professor, mentioned a woman named Deirdre McCloskey [Interview #60]. This economist—I looked her up, and I was fascinated to find that she was a transgender woman. And so I ended up reading one academic book of hers, and then a memoir on her transition. It was actually published by the University of Chicago Press. Forward one or two years, I graduated and went to work as an engineer. I wasn't happy working as an engineer. I decided to write McCloskey an email, saying, "I'd like to meet you, I'm interested in grad school in economics. I would love if we could talk." She was—so I met her. And she recommended the University of Chicago, along with five other schools for graduate school in economics. That's how I ended up here. I kind of—this is the place that took me, accepted me.

AM: Yeah. Why the Graham School first?

AL: The Graham School, I actually ended up not applying to the PhD program in Economics directly. But [I applied] to the Graham School because I was convinced that the PhD in economics wouldn't accept me.

I had good grades, and somehow I even considered—I ended up in the honors society for industrial engineering at Purdue. But I definitely did not have UChicago PhD Economics grades. My strategy was that I would take the PhD classes, and do really well, and then apply. So the Graham School has this program called Graduate Student-At-Large. I was admitted to that program. I convinced my parents to bankroll this whole—this whole cockamamie strategy of mine. They were pretty enthusiastic about it. Six months before that, I had told them that I wanted to move to Miami and become a filmmaker. So—they were horrified by that idea, and so when I told them this idea, they were thrilled. And more than willing to throw money at it.

And so I came here, and I did—I took the classes, I did well in the classes, but what I noticed was that most of the students in my classes, all economics PhDs, had a Master's before they applied. At least the few that I ended up meeting and talking with. So I said, "Oh well, I need a Master's before I actually apply to this." So I ended up applying to the Public Policy MPP program, and after a few quarters, I said, "you know, what am I thinking? I have no interest in studying theoretical economics." And so I ended up completing the Master's, focusing on education policy. And now I help schools incorporate video games into their curricula.

AM: Nice! Did you get that job while you were at the Harris School, or afterward?

AL: Afterward. The Harris School has one professor named Susan Mayer, who's really enthusiastic about technology and education. But I, I've always been a big fan of video games. At Harris School I took standard education research classes. But I kind of trained myself in this field by going to conferences, by finding out the right books to read on the educational games field.

AM: Cool! What was the social life like at Harris? Was there one? I'm never sure with the graduate schools, what it's like.

AL: So, it was... So Harris does have kind of a social life that's kind of, I would say, a combination of SSA and Booth. That would kind of be my impression. Booth is kind of almost fraternity-like, party people, you know, grad school version. And SSA being kind of volunteer, social justice, right. What we are going to do for fun is help homeless people and fundraise, right? Harris is a little bit of the fratty partying with a little bit of the social justice/humanitarian. Yeah.

AM: Were you out there?

AL: Yes. I was...I was the head of the LGBT Harris group. My impression was that—I was surprised by the few number of LGBT people there were at Harris, student-wise. And faculty-wise, also. What I noticed—and so, I joked that we needed to talk to the admissions office so that they could increase the quota for LGBT students, because we would have these meetings. There were 300 Master's students at Harris, and there were 5 LGBT out people. The numbers just didn't add up. I was under the impression—gay people love politics, and love policy! Where are they? Maybe they're all at SSA, I don't

know. It's possible. But what I then noticed was that a lot of people that were LGBT were maybe kind of only out to the people they really trusted at Harris. Or it was just—it wasn't that they were in the closet, it was just something that they didn't discuss much, and they didn't come to the LGBT group because they had other policy interests. They were more focused on health policy or educational policy. And I'm sure that if I would have turned on my Grindr, they would have been there, but they were just not going to come out to the LGBT group to organize events related to LGBT policy.

[00:10:10]

AM: Academically, how was it there? Did you enjoy a lot of the professors?

AL: I think I did. I think—I think the professors were great researchers. I think the Harris program—the department was pretty LGBT-friendly. And so I took over—one of the interesting things is that I took over...Right before I took over the LGBT group, the group had died. In fact, it hadn't died, but it was close to dying, and the person who saved the group was a straight man who essentially, to prevent the LGBT group from dying, became its leader and only member. And it was just an incredible act of solidarity, you know? Even the gays didn't put themselves forward, and this guy, he's an incredible ally. I'm friends with him on Facebook, and he's really kind of outspoken about LGBT rights, LGBT rights in sports. He's this married straight guy. He ended up winning—the university gave him an award for that. Which I referred to the award he got as the UChicago equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize. But right when he was about to graduate, when he was leaving, I was coming in, me and this other girl. Yeah.

AM: What sort of things did the group do?

AL: So, really we had—we had meetings and about five people would show up. The purpose of the group, the stated purpose, was to raise awareness of LGBT public policy issues. The other active member, this girl called Angel, she focused on—she ended up organizing events. I have to tell you, so—when I first arrived at Harris, I...I saw her. And I had this kind of amazing kind of punk lesbian hairdo. And she had the same exact hairdo. It probably looked much better on her than on me. Where one side of—this side of my head were shaved off, and I had this bizarre comb-over lock of hair thing going on. And I saw her, and I somehow approached her and we started talking. And then this other girl saw both of us and also started talking, and all three of us became good friends, and in fact the other girl was gay. A while later, I asked her, you know—because that other girl came up and immediately invited us to an LGBT event. And so, a while later, I was like, “How did you know we were gay?” And she was like, “Please.” I mean, you know, she was like, “You guys were like the gayest things that ever walked into Harris. Like, just screamed homosexual, the two of you just standing there.”

Anyway, so, Angel ended up organizing an event on gay marriage, an event on LGBT immigration policy, and an event on trans people in prison. I ended up organizing a number of more general sexuality events. Because one, I was kind of interested in those topics—I ended up organizing the two Christopher Ryan events. Christopher Ryan—

AM: Did he write—?

AL: *Sex at Dawn*, right.

AM: Yeah, I went to one of them!

AL: Oh good! Thank you for coming. Which one, the one at Rockefeller?

AM: 5710.

AL: 5710, yeah. And I ended up organizing the Tim Dean event. [See Appendix] Tim Dean wrote *Unlimited Intimacy: The History of Barebacking*. Also published by the University of Chicago Press, of course. And so one—the reason why I organized these is—these events had little to do with policy, but one, I was really interested in them. And two, I thought they would make our group prominent on campus, because we would bring a lot of people. And these events brought a lot of people! The second Christopher Ryan event, it brought 400 people. The first brought 200 people, I think it was the biggest event ever at 5710. Tim Dean brought 150 people. While our policy events ended up bringing 5 or 10 people. And so—you know. Both serve their purpose. Not that these 5 or 10 people—that this was a bad event. Just the people who are interested in LGBT immigration policy. Yeah.

AM: So the next set of questions is about, essentially, when you started to identify as gay. Or bi—I'm not supposed to put any label on you. So LGBTQ.

AL: Okay. Is there going to be any more questions about UChicago?

AM: Yeah, there can be. I might ask more about if you took any classes that were LGBT policy focused.

AL: Okay. So I...I realized I was gay probably when I was 13 or 14. I grew up on the north coast of Colombia, a city called Cartagena. It was just this big tourist city, beautiful, you can see the Caribbean, it's always warm. Of course, growing up in a Third World country, the biggest problem besides the country being, you know, in a horrible drug war, was the—the big concern was if you don't have any money. Third World country, there's no social safety net. My parents were quite well-off. I really didn't have that many worries.

I was in the closet. There was really no visible LGBT community. And something... when I was 16, I kind of got over the shock of figuring out that I was gay pretty quickly. But then I became pretty extroverted, actually, and pretty social. I kind of decided that my mission in life was to help people. I just became very likable. I did! That kind of went away after a while. But what was interesting was that that kind of—anyway, I think I... One night when I was 16, I came home from hanging out with my friends, and I turned on Showtime. And I saw something that kind of was, you know, the best thing I could have ever seen for a gay kid who, you know, was okay with being gay, but it was still—I

didn't see the path forward.

But what I saw on Showtime was *Queer as Folk*. And it was just so incredible, and so eye-opening, and I'd never seen something like this. I had seen gay pornography, I had seen—you know, read a little bit about gay things in the news. The little that showed up in the late '90s about gay issues. It was mostly bad, bad, forget it. But then, *Queer as Folk* came on. I...I think from then on, I was happy. Even though I kind of didn't really come out, but I wasn't really in the closet anymore, after that. It was almost—I had never really dated women, but this idea that I would date women, or that society was right on this issue—any notion of society being right went away.

[00:21:43]

AM: When did you first come out?

AL: I came out when I was 19. I sent my friend this book of these pictures, my friends back in Colombia, these pictures of me around...you know, the US. They were kind of these bizarre kind of art pictures. My attempt at—almost like, graphic art, but almost like, done with your art, kind of...I'm terrible at—I'm designing these posters for an event, a video game event that I'm organizing. When I emailed the guy the posters, I'm like, "I know these are hideous but I'm not a graphic designer." I essentially wrote there that I was gay, and they essentially wrote back that they were supportive. They were there for me.

AM: Were you out at Purdue too?

AL: Yeah, I was out at Purdue. Yeah, I was out at Purdue. I was kind of in the closet in the first semester, but I was also in the closet in the sense of when I came out to my friends, that's when I came out at Purdue. I felt like the first people I needed to come out to were my friends back in Colombia. And so that happened after my first semester at Purdue, and then I was out at Purdue too.

AM: Did you do any LGBTQ things there, in terms of curriculum?

AL: So at Purdue, I took a language, an English composition class, and I met a woman who was essentially like the second coming of *Queer as Folk* for me. If *Queer as Folk* put me on the path, this woman was just liberation, this woman got me ten miles forward. She was this lesbian who was finishing her PhD in philosophy. She was teaching this English composition class. A lot of the things that she exposed to us were LGBTQ-related. But I clicked with her right away, and she became a close friend throughout college. She's still a close friend. But I—I think I was suffering from depression at Purdue. I don't think it was LGBT-related. I think it was winter-related, for someone who grew up in the Caribbean, like 100 degree weather. I think when I—the winters were too much, so I was suffering from seasonal depression. Just trying to make sense. I was starting engineering, which is incredibly hard at Purdue. Half of the people, from what I remember, half of the people in engineering at Purdue didn't make it past their first year. And I was coming from South America, and my city, the academic culture was like—the equivalent of the

academic culture in New Orleans. The academic culture is like, forget about homework, just dance, party, drink, beach. You know. So I was coming behind, and this was like a freight train, it slammed into me. She kind of—I don't know why she had mercy on me. And became my friend. Exposed me—she exposed me to Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, all this LGBT literature, film. I was also involved somewhat, to a lesser extent, I was part of the undergraduate LGBT group. I didn't really do many events. Yeah.

AM: Are you still in touch with any of the people you met at Purdue?

AL: Yes. So, one of the things, one of the interesting things, my kind of weird amazing story at Purdue is I ended up falling in love with this kid at a computer lab. I think partly because of my seasonal depression, I wasn't really stable. This kid was in a fraternity. So I ended up joining this fraternity to, like, stalk this kid! Which I do not recommend! Do not do it! Not the right way to go about anything! So I joined this fraternity, which...I joined this fraternity which kind of put me back in some ways in the closet. So I joined this fraternity to pursue this guy. I think he was kind of, kind of onto me. Just because it's kind of obvious when someone is totally—if someone is willing to join a fraternity to kind of be around you, it's probably hard for that person to not drool all over you when he's in front of you.

So, nothing actually ended up happening with this guy. In fact, I saw him very few times, even though I spent like a year or two, really two years involved in that fraternity. He was never kind of my friend, and I never had that much kind of to do with him, even though I tried. Even though the whole purpose of me being there was to be around this guy! Nothing ever happened between us. I tried kind of propositioning him once, and I tried...I tried to get something going, but—I don't even know what his sexual orientation was. A few people thought he was gay, but I was, I was convinced he was gay. But I don't know. Even if he was gay, his brother was also in the fraternity, so I don't know if that would make him hesitant. To kind of come out. Anyway. What a mess.

AM: Did you date when you were here?

AL: At Purdue, or here at UChicago?

AM: UChicago.

[00:30:06]

AL: I did not. In fact, I've... At Purdue, I think part of this depression kind of, that hit me when I—kind of at the beginning of Purdue, and I think my second semester...my personality, I said that I had become really social in high school, I was actually voted the Most Likeable Guy in my high school class. Which is also kind of like the Nobel Peace Prize. How many times can I say the Nobel Peace Prize, kind of bring that topic... At Purdue, essentially I flipped. I think it was the whole thing, studying engineering, was so hard for me, the winter, everything, my personality just flipped. I became actually kind of... I was convinced I wasn't going to make it. Somehow I ended up nuking my

personality just to be able to rebuild myself as a more intellectual person, a more disciplined person. But I kind of destroyed that part of me whose mission was to help people and to be nice to people. I was no kind of state to be able to date anybody. Even if I wanted, I was kind of undateable, because I was so disagreeable and so in my head. I managed to make a few great friends, people who I think just had such mercy for me, who managed to stand me. And maybe they also found me interesting. But I didn't date at Purdue. But. But. I did take a meditation class at Purdue, and that kind of planted the seed for almost like me recovering, in a sense, mentally and emotionally.

When I came to UChicago—I graduated from Purdue, I went to Florida to work as an engineer, and I came to UChicago. When I came to Chicago I started meditating again. At Purdue I did a little bit of it but not much of it. At Purdue I didn't really date. I fooled around with one or two people a couple of times, that was it. And when I was working, I didn't really date. When I came to UChicago, I didn't really date either. I feel like because I—I've only recently gained my ability to be able to, developed an ability to really sustain a relationship. And so, through—I've done, really, in the past two to four years, I've done a lot of meditation, and I've done a lot of volunteering. I started one of the meditation groups here, and that has helped me become a lot more agreeable as a person. And my sexual history is almost nonexistent, I've never had anal sex, I've had oral a few times and that's about it. But a few months ago I joined match.com, OKCupid, Grindr, Manhunt, Adam for Adam, and Craigslist.

AM: Well done!

AL: Yeah. And I've gone on ten dates. I don't filter anybody, so anyone who approaches me, I'll—I try not to be superficial, so anyone who approaches me, I'll go out with. I've gone on ten dates. I've met really amazing people, but it hasn't really developed into a romance. And none of them I've found immediately attractive, so I couldn't start a no-strings-attached sexual relationship.

AM: Where did you live when you came to school here?

AL: Downtown. I've always lived downtown.

AM: And you said you did some volunteer work? Like, meditation? What sort of work is that?

AL: Yeah. When I was working in Orlando, that part of me that had always—that had gone away at Purdue, wanting to help people, started, fetus-like, to be reborn. And so Orlando, when I was in Orlando, I tried volunteering once a week on Saturdays for a few hours with ACORN. That kind of organization—

AM: Democratic, kind of—

AL: Really it was a nonprofit organization that had all these programs for low-income people. And it has this huge voter-registration—Republicans made this huge scandal about it, then it went away. The problem is that it was Saturday, and it was downtown where their

office was. And I would get into my car and try driving there, and somehow I'd end up at brunch, not ACORN. When I got to Chicago—oh, and so I came up with this plan where I would volunteer two hours a day. For two hours, even if it wasn't volunteering, for two hours, I was going to do something selfless. This was when I was in Orlando. The two hours I chose were 10pm to midnight. When of course there wasn't anyone to do anything for. What I ended up doing was—I would just end up saving all the drudgery that I didn't want to do during the day, I ended up saving it for my selfless, supposedly charitable time. I would go to the gym, I would take out the trash—I didn't even recycle! So it wouldn't count as being good for the world to take out the trash.

But when I got here, a friend of mine recommended that I just pick one day instead of having two hours every day. So I picked Saturday as my volunteering day, and I started doing Chicago Cares. Most of what I've done is volunteer for an organization called the Chicago Recovery Alliance. Which is the big needle exchange in the city. I give out clean needles to heroin addicts. Clean needles, condoms, do STD tests for them, give them information if they're interested in rehabilitation clinics, at 58th and Halsted. 68th and Halsted.

AM: Did you keep in touch with your friends from UChicago—from Harris?

AL: I have, yeah. I have one good friend from Harris. And then I keep in touch with, for the group, they're all over the US.

AM: I'm just going to take a look real quick so we can keep track...

AL: Definitely. Tell me if I'm talking too much.

AM: You're not talking too much. I just have an interview at 12:30 for a summer job! So we have approximately 20 minutes more. We've actually covered most of the stuff. Do you want to talk more about what you do at your job and the process that got you there?

AL: I... When I was at Harris, I took this class with this professor Susan Mayer. She was a big proponent of technology and education. I started doing what's called an independent study course on technology and education. I would propose, I proposed the topic of technology and education, and she would guide me along, and then I would have to present a paper to her and do a presentation. I started researching technology and education, and then I ended up focusing on using games and simulations in education.

I had a history with games and simulations because right before I became that social 16 year-old that wanted to help people, I had spent, probably between the ages of 8 and 16, I had a gaming addiction. A pretty serious one. I was probably playing 10 hours a day. The typical sociopathic addiction patterns. I was kind of neglecting my friends. I was not eating. When I was not gaming, all I could think about was gaming. I had social anxiety. I—I stole to kind of feed my gaming habit. Shoplifted games. And so when I doing this research with Susan Mayer, for Susan Mayer, I got really interested in games. Academically interested—how do games and simulations affect learning, and I ended up

focusing on that field.

Okay, this is—I have a history with this, and even though I haven't played games because I had this addiction—when I was 16, I actually stopped playing games because I was waiting for this video card, this really high-end graphics card. I waited for like a month because I was in Colombia and my dad had to travel to the US for business trip and he would buy it then. In that month my life totally changed, so I never went back to games. But when I—when I decided at Harris that I would focus on video game education policy, I had to figure out, ok, what kind of addict am I? I haven't played games in 10 years. Am I an addict who can go back and in a manageable way play games? Or can I just never go back? I figured out that I can—I can actually play games with very little effect, addictive effect, if I play them an hour a day. There are certain kinds of games, roleplaying games, really elaborate roleplaying games, with a much bigger effect. Like Skyrim, if I started playing Skyrim an hour a day, I would wake up, and the first thing I would think was, “Oh, today's going to be a good day, because I'm going to play Skyrim.” So I stopped.

That, kind of...and I think meditation really helped me figure out what I wanted. To clear the mess in my head, and sort my thoughts, and sort my tastes, and what my talents are, and align all those. This way forward, and stick with it. Because entering into the video games field, it's a relatively new field and there's not that many jobs. There's probably maybe 10, 5 or 10 educational games policy jobs in the country. And most of the people who have these jobs have PhDs, or are really senior people who have been in the field. So without the peace of mind that meditation has brought me, I would have just—I would have just gotten frustrated and gotten some educational analyst position in some think tank or whatever.

AM: Last question—are you out with your family?

AL: Yes, oh yes. I've been out on Facebook forever. I think since I started Facebook in 2000 or 2003, I've always said that I'm interested in men. Kind of as a political statement. But yeah, I'm out to my family. My extended family in Colombia, I'm kind of out but I haven't really seen them that much since I left 10 years ago. And when I—usually when I go visit, I haven't really made an effort to bring it up. But I think they know I'm gay. I'll bring it up the next time I go down there. Because they're all on my Facebook, when there's big political news about gay rights I post it. My Facebook wall is essentially a propaganda page for gay rights and ending the war on drugs.

The other thing I wanted to tell you about UChicago is—if this is the last question—

AM: It's not. I'm realizing that it's why you decided you wanted to be interviewed for the project. But tell me anything that you want.

AL: Well, it's kind of related. UChicago—my impression was that it was incredibly supportive of all my LGBT events. They gave me thousands of dollars for these events. These were my ideas, they—I did very, I don't think I—you know, Jeff Howard [Interview #30], Gina Olson at Gender Studies, Jeff Howard being the head of the LGBT programming office.

For when our descendants find this, you know who Jeff Howard is. They were incredibly supportive. They backed my events, even the Tim Dean event, which was kind of a really challenging event, because the title of that event was “Towards a Theory of Consensual Rape in Bareback Culture.” The title of the talk was kind of scandalous in a sense. They backed us. A little bit more cautiously than my other talks, but the university—and I want to praise student government for being so supportive. Funding so much LGBT programming, and a lot of—funding my weird scandalous, you know, talks. I feel like that goes with the spirit of this university of free inquiry. Let a person—free exchange of ideas, not being taboo about topics. Yeah. So. Yeah.

AM: So, was that the why you chose to be interviewed, or was that the other thing you wanted to tell me?

AL: That was the other thing. Why I chose to be interviewed was that—I thought it was a good project. I felt like volunteering, right? So I...

AM: You can put it as your volunteer day!

AL: Yeah. Well, what I've noticed is that the first few years I've been in Chicago, volunteering and meditating, I would only volunteer on Saturdays. So if you asked me to do anything on a day that wasn't Saturday, I wasn't going to do it. But now it's spilled over. It's almost like volunteering is a habit, a muscle. Now—before, I was like, ugh. Doing anything took a lot of effort. But now it's like, yeah, sure, I'll volunteer!

AM: Cool. Do you know any other alums that might be interested in volunteering for the project? If not, it's no problem.

AL: So definitely Deirdre McCloskey. She was a professor here. Angel, but she's in LA. I think Angel, you should maybe talk to her—I don't know what her experience was, but maybe not too good, because she hasn't answered me or her friends—the people she met at Harris, she hasn't been getting back to us. So I—we're convinced that she kind of wanted to get as far away from Harris as possible. She might be interesting to talk with. LGBT... Obviously Antonia Clifford. [Interview #27] Who else?

AM: Also, do you have any of the materials for any of your events? Because we would love to use them. Those or even reproductions of those, if you wanted to keep them.

AL: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. In fact, there's a video of the first Tim Dean talk. Actually there's a video of both his talks. There's no video—actually there's video for Christopher Ryan's talks, there's no video of Tim Dean's talk. That was one of the agreements. No video! This cannot end up in Fox News. Or even the evening Chicago news. Yeah. I have that, that should be...that should be interesting, yeah.

AM: Would it be okay if I contacted you, probably through email, on how to see those?

AL: Yeah, yeah. I could definitely send those to you. And if I don't send them to you, just

email me because it's because I'll have forgotten. And I'll think about anybody else who comes to mind. Because I've been here for four years and I've gotten to know the rulers—even though for a while I've been describing myself as this most powerful homosexual in UChicago, I was probably the second or third most powerful homosexual in UChicago.

AM: I know a lot of people who go through that phase.

AL: Yeah. The megalomaniacal phase. But if I think about anybody else in the last four years who seemed really prominent... Oh, and, what's his name? The guy who took over, if you'd be interested in interviewing him, the guy who saved Out in Public Policy.

AM: Yeah, that'd be great.

AL: He lives in Chicago, actually. Well, great.

AM: This was great!

[52:40]

End of Interview

Appendix
Tim Dean Event Publicity (2011)