

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #18

MICHEL, BILL (1970-) AB '92, MBA '08 STAFF

At U of C: 1988-present

Interviewed: March 15th, 2013

Interviewer: Lauren Stokes

Transcript by: Molly Liu

Length: 34:02

Interview (March 15th, 2013) in Bill Michel's office:

[00:06]

LS: So, tell me how you got to the University of Chicago.

BM: So, I came as an undergraduate student, applied because of friends of mine who had gone here and graduated before me. And got really excited about the possibility of being in a city and in a liberal arts college and being in a place where I could engage—could be a part of the arts scene without actually studying the arts, and got involved and was excited by university theater. Ultimately I studied politics, economics, rhetoric, and law. That's what brought me here.

LS: So your expectations were that you were going to really be able to be involved in an artistic community without actually being a theater major, and that sounds like it was fulfilled while you were here.

BM: That's true. I was also excited about being in an urban setting, and in a city. Really interested in how one is both at the time the arts and the law to effect social change. And then after spending four years taking lots of courses decided that I would focus on the arts, and not go become a lawyer.

LS: What was your main social life like when you were an undergraduate?

BM: I was really active in University Theater as an undergraduate, both as a student staff member and someone who worked on lots of shows, and I found a lot of my social life there. Also stayed fairly active in house life. I was in fact a resident assistant my fourth year. So found community—really sort of had three communities that occasionally overlapped. My house community, my fellow folks taking the classes I was taking through the PERL major, and then UT.

LS: Were you out at the time?

BM: So I was not. And in fact didn't, although I had lots of friends who were gay, though some of them are not out, did not self-identify as gay until my mid-twenties. Dated women while I was in college, happily. And then came to this realization after college.

LS: When you were an undergraduate, I know that in that '88 to '92 period there was a lot of concern around this Great White Brotherhood of the Iron Fist and gay harassment issues. Do you have any memory of what that was like?

BM: I do for a couple of reasons. One, some of the students who were particularly active in that movement were involved in University Theater. Active on the side of the LGBTQ community, were involved in theater. I actually—the second or third show I did in University Theater as a producer was Torch Song Trilogy, and that show was being put up and directed by someone who... I actually don't remember if they were directly involved or indirectly involved in those incidents, but was very concerned about that, and that's one of the reasons why he wanted to do Torch Song Trilogy on campus. I actually then sat on one of the committees that was created around those incidents by the university to think about overall harassment policies. So was aware of the situation because—as a student representative. It was so long ago that I can't exactly remember what it was, since I was an RA or UT or for whatever reason, but one of the committees that really grappled with university policies on harassment.

LS: Do you remember what eventually came out of that committee?

BM: We did some work on education, sort of across the university, that came out of that committee. Actually, for me, it's hard to remember because I was a student administrator for a long time, so I have to admit historically things get turned around in my brain. And so exactly what came out of that committee or future work that I did could easily merge. So I wouldn't pretend to have historically accurate memory.

LS: We'd check it.

BM: As I recall that committee started to do—as I recall, that committee lay the groundwork. But one of the things that has occurred over the 25 years that I've been here is the interesting transition from a university that from a student affairs perspective, for many good reasons, really believed in celebrating the individual. And there are real positives about having a culture that focuses on meritocracy and the individual. Including being one of the first universities to actually recognize same-sex benefits. If you were getting a PhD and married a woman—that because we cared about you as an individual and your ability to think of good ideas, not the communities and identities that you fell in, unlike other universities we were much more open to a wide variety of people.

However, we were also really committed to supporting individuals, and not focusing on support of separate communities. So we—for all sorts of reasons. So we didn't have theme housing. We for a very long time did not have a diversity center. We had a

coordinating council on minority issues, not an office of multicultural student affairs. We didn't have a women's center. I've been fortunate over the twenty years that I've been here to be able to work with colleagues, faculty, students, and staff across the university to see a transition from a recognition that we still fundamentally believe in individual meritocracy, but there are also benefits in terms of creating the kind of intellectual community that we want to create for the entire campus, in recognizing and supporting individuals' identity. So you saw this—I've seen this transition over the last 25 years in a way that also allowed me to witness evolution in how we looked at things like harassment. Not a fundamental revolution. I think in a good way we've stayed core to our values. But there's certainly over the last 25 years, a more active engagement in education in what we do in making sure that we are respecting and supporting the communities that people are in, and certainly we've seen—both we can be proud of our history in terms of our willingness to take steps like recognizing same-sex benefits—same-sex partner benefits before others, but also that the university has over time really embraced across—across a variety of areas. The multiple communities we are all a part of and support ourselves with.

LS: It's funny because you came almost at the beginning of that change, and just stuck it out here ever since. Can you talk about that? You graduated in '92, right, with your BA, how you ended up staying on, and how your career has continued to be here?

BM: I've been lucky, fortunate, that I've been able to work on lots of interesting projects for the university that I've cared about, and every time I've been interested in doing something new, the university and I have figured out something new for me to do. I'm lucky to have been here at a time when the issues that I was interested in, cared about, were important to the university and could help advance. So it went from happily working with University Theater, to moving over and helping work with student activities, and then more broadly student life for fifteen years with students, faculty, and staff colleagues, really thinking about advancing the student experience and recognizing that students are here 24 hours a day. We've always done that in housing, and continue to do that in our housing system, but there are other ways we can do that. And was just fortunate to be here when we were growing and changing in those areas, creating those new areas, creating 5710.

[10:30]

LS: Can you speak more to that? We've spoken to someone else who said they were on your advisory committee on LGBTQ issues. Can you speak about that committee and how it came to be set up?

BM: Sure. I think change happens at the university because lots of things happen simultaneously, and my guess is that different people have different views of the paths of these things. As I've already mentioned, I think you were beginning to see a recognition on the part of the university that we were going to pay attention to the whole student, particularly the undergraduate, in all areas, and recognize the needs that different students had. At the same time, we...the university—trying to remember, depends on which

committee it was. At the same time, the university was still working through how we would talk about diversity. And I've been fortunate to work with great faculty, students, and staff on working to support students of color and the LGBTQ student community leaders. The university issued a diversity statement that focused primarily on issues of race. And while it mentioned other issues, the LGBTQ community felt unrecognized.

LS: Do you remember around when that was? No problem.

BM: My files are now in Special Collections, I'm sure you'll find them. Boxes and boxes. You can Google the university's first diversity statement. And I don't remember whether or not there were any other campus incidents that resulted in—but it became clear at the time that one of the things we should do is bring together a group of LGBTQ students and talk about their needs, and what we could do to better support them. It was at a time when the president and the provost and the vice president of the university were really interested in these questions of diversity, and there were faculty that were really supportive. And so we had in fact almost simultaneously a significant group working on what we could do to better support communities of color, students of color, and LGBTQ students. And I happened to work with both of those committees. Worked with students and faculty to look at better ways that we could support students, better enhance the life of the entire university by making sure that this was an institution that could attract and retain spectacular students of color and spectacular LGBTQ students. And there was of course an overlap in those communities. The other interesting—set of conversations that I had while we were looking to create what is now the Office of LGBTQ Student Affairs, looking to revitalize the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, and looked to create 5710, the diversity center that would house both of those offices, was the questions around should we house these two centers in the same space—where was there similarity and where was there difference in those communities. Ultimately we decided to do that, and I believe it was the right decision.

LS: Do you remember what the sorts of arguments were against that at the time?

BM: There were some that were concerned that if we put—well, first there were arguments about what it would mean to create a building very close to the student center for these communities rather than create space in the student center with all the other student offices are you going to in quotes “ghettoize” these communities, are you creating separation rather than encouraging collaboration across all students. The other was particularly around the location of the LGBTQ center. What does it mean to—there were two competing theories about where to put resources for LGBTQ students. One was that you put them in a building clearly not labeled as being for LGBTQ students, because you wanted students who were not out to feel comfortable going there without feeling that they would be labeled by being in the building. The other was some concern among LGBTQ students of color about how, whether they would feel comfortable because of some concern of how accepting they were or were not about being in their own communities of color, their own friends who were black or Latino, what it would mean to acknowledge that you were in both spaces, in both communities. In the end it worked out really well. I think the other argument against it was that we both needed a lot, and does it

mean that we're compromising by coming together, does that mean we'll get fewer resources by being in one place. That was interesting, we had interesting conversations about where there were similarities and differences. And that's a conversation that's not just happening at the University of Chicago, but nationally, internationally. [LS: Everywhere.] Minority groups—are you for their rights, where and how does one think about their similarities. We've seen a great deal of evolution in that question over the years.

LS: So in your memory there wasn't necessarily a specific impetus in setting up this—it was part of a bigger trend in thinking about diversity needs, community needs. Or was the diversity statement—?

BM: I think it was a combination of the bigger trends and students feeling a lack of inclusion. I would feel really embarrassed if you went back and found out that I'm wrong, that there's a big incident that I'm not remembering. And look, there were...as with all these communities, there were stories about feeling accepted and not accepted, and there were other pieces of this. So in the course of these conversations is when we started to see some trans students being visible on campus, and feeling like when they were going into a restroom that they were being identified in terms of gender, and stigmatization and being harassed by someone for going into the wrong restroom. Those kinds of—and I don't want to call them minor because they're important and meant a lot to the people impacted, but I don't recall one significant incident, but a series of concerns about climate, that as we were looking in general at the overall student experience. I also think, and again now this is going to be very biased, as the person who's the associate dean of student life, I do think that as we invested more and more in the overall student experience, and as we worked to raise support and resources for all students outside the classroom, once you raise that overall level, it then became appropriate to focus on communities within the student body.

LS: Sure. The overall kind of transition towards thinking more about the undergraduate experience as a whole experience, that makes a lot of sense. To go back for a second to something that you mentioned before, you said that you didn't identify as gay when you were an undergrad. Can you speak a little bit more on when that started to happen, and why?

BM: I was attracted to men and not women anymore, in a good way. For a while I dated both men and women, and then I decided to only date men.

LS: And that was in your mid-twenties, after you graduated?

BM: There was no grand realization, there was no traumatic event. That's just how it happened.

LS: Cool.

BM: Why, who knows, I've not investigated.

LS: You don't have to be invested in the why question, of course. I'm curious that as an out gay man in this position, in the sort of dean of student life office, did you ever experience yourself as a mentor for younger students?

[20:28]

BM: I did decide pretty quickly, fairly quickly, that once I recognized I was gay, I'm gay, it was important for me to be out publicly on campus. And I will say, I'm—in terms of the senior administration, it became in a great way—not a non-issue, but there have been several vice presidents who have been gay. Certainly my partner, now husband, has always been well invited and welcomed to every event, and there's never been an institutional outcry about that. So that was not hard for me in this environment to come out publicly and professionally. In fact it was very easy. Because I knew of the university's commitment to us as individuals, I didn't, I wasn't worried about it. And have been fortunate that I have never felt any, any problems here because of it. I've mentored lots of students who have not always felt as welcomed here. But yes, I've mentored students, over many years.

LS: Have you been involved in the specific programs?

BM: Yes, I'm one of the LGBTQ mentors first lead by the College and then by the LGBTQ student affairs office. I was pretty active for a long time, I took a few years off, and just started again this year.

LS: Okay. All right.

BM: Just met one of my students who's now in New York, enjoying life, and doing great. One of the things that I did that was particularly, that was interesting to me when I was in the dean of students office, is that there was also a period when that program was mostly focused on undergraduates, and there's been this interesting period over the last eight years, eight to ten years, where it is more and more acceptable for students to be queer or gay, coming out of high schools where it is more accepting, there was this period where it was actually graduate students who felt more closeted. Not than all, but than a lot of undergraduates. There were a lot of visible, out gay undergraduates. And I was also beginning to see, particularly graduate students from the medical center and the Booth school, quietly coming out, and the university thinking about what it meant to be out in those schools. For a set of reasons, including that they were older, including the professions they were going in, I think there was a period of time where students perceived that it was easier to be out in undergraduate than in certain graduate programs and departments. I think that's shifted over the last few years, but there's an interesting overlap. Older students who when younger it was harder to be out publicly in the world, were still grappling with that, whereas younger students who grew up—I don't mean to be stereotypical, but—watching Will and Grace and seeing all their friends and having GSAs in their high school because they happened to be in an urban environment and not

somewhere else. That doesn't mean that we don't have students who originate from places all around the country, but—

LS: So there was a period where you say it was mostly the professional schools, the students having these concerns?

BM: I think mostly. It doesn't mean there weren't out faculty and staff in those schools. But there have been a growing number now.

LS: So do you have a sense at all from your experience as somebody of your age and who came out when you did, that it's a typical experience, or a sense that you've had differing thoughts about your experience in some ways?

BM: I'm actually not sure. I have gay friends who come out late, I have lots of friends who've known since the day they were a young child. So I'm not sure how helpful it is to think about a typical experience. Mine has certainly been personally not a bad one. I don't know what it would have been if I recognized that I was gay in 1988. But certainly by the time, I don't know when it was, but when it was, this campus was very accepting. This campus was a different place.

LS: Have you lived in Hyde Park the whole time?

BM: No. So I lived in Hyde Park for the first—basically lived in Hyde Park for 9 years. Then I lived in Lincoln Square, and then Ravenswood, and then the South Loop. And now I'm in Uptown. I lived a lot in the South Loop because it was halfway between the university and Lakeview.

LS: Here's another question which may or may not be useful, but in being here in 1988 and then continuously, have your perceptions of what it means to be an undergraduate changed at all over the years? Or have you started to think about it in a different way?

BM: Not really. And part of it is hard because I've spent so much time working on the student experience.

LS: Yeah, and as you said it all sort of blurs together. We talked to some people who have very sharp Hyde Park parts of your life, and for you it's been—a long and happy time.

BM: The university has been a very important part of the last 25 years, it's hard for me to distinguish.

LS: Great. If I can ask one more question—you don't have to answer if you don't want to—but you mentioned that you have a husband. Where did you meet your partner?

BM: We met on the steps of the Reynolds Club. Although he says that he saw me earlier on campus. He was working at the time for University Theater / TAPS, and he was coming down the stairs talking to a good friend of both of ours, and I was coming up the stairs.

She introduced us and then married us in the Logan Center Performance Hall last September. The rest is history.

LS: Congratulations! How long were you together before you got married?

BM: Just around ten years.

LS: Does he still work for University Theater?

BM: He does not. He worked for the university two different times—he used to work for Court Theater. Left, and came back, but he has not worked here for the last four to five years.

LS: All right. Why did you decide to be interviewed for this project?

BM: Because I do think...(A) because I think it's important, as someone who's a relatively senior administrator at the University to participate in projects like this, for knowledge of members of the community play in the life of the university. And also I do think, and it'll be interesting to see what you hear, but the university is over the years worked hard to really both be at the forefront in many ways of making sure that everyone feels an important part of this community. By the end of the last decade, has also recognized the need to support LGBTQ students. A lot of people who came before me deserve credit for that, including Kathy Forde, the center was built. There was a lot of positive change that's happened over the past decade, at the university and nationally, and it's important for us to remember that and understand how that happened so that we can move forward.

LS: I know that you were in charge of the group that recommended to set up 5710. Do you have any memories of what that was like when it opened?

[30:11]

BM: For me, that project was really important for a set of reasons. One, it really is an example of the power of positive activism on the part of our students and faculty colleagues, and there are many now-alumni who I hope feel very good about the role they played in first convincing and then partnering with the university to create that space. Two, I do believe that there are members of our communities who—for whom having a space like that to support them and provide an opportunity to support their success is very important, and it's important for us to have created it. And three, there were so many people who made that possible. It was great to be in the rooms. Those people came together and felt like they had accomplished something together, and I was one of those people. I was only one of those people. So, celebrating everyone who made that possible.

LS: Yeah, we're trying to track down as many people as possible, obviously. So you'd mentioned that your papers from your time when you were a student, they're over in Special Collections but locked, right?

BM: They're probably locked. All papers from administrators are locked.

LS: Do you know of any materials, like photographs or anything, that you might have in your personal collection?

BM: So, some of that stuff I would have given to Elly Daurehty, who took my place as Associate Dean of the College and Assistant Vice President of Student Life. I don't know which files went to Special Collections and which ones didn't. Unfortunately I did not have many photos or other memorabilia. But other people have probably kept stuff.

LS: No problem. Is there anything else I've forgotten to ask about or things that are important to tell us?

BM: Well, we touched on it a little bit, and it will be interesting to—some of this came after. But in addition to creating 5710 and creating the LGBTQ Student Life office, I think there have been movements to, for example, add gender identity to our non-discrimination clause. If you haven't talked to Jesse Ehrenfeld, who was our student liaison to the board of trustees and is now faculty at Vanderbilt, he in that role really pushed for the gender identity clause and would be worth talking to. I also think there has been important activism both while I was associate dean and assistant vice president and since I left that role around trans issues and the decisions to do gender-neutral housing and the decisions to do gender-neutral bathrooms. I was certainly not unhappy when Rush Limbaugh went after us for creating gender-neutral bathrooms and started pointing at the administrators who made that happen.

LS: It was a point of pride.

BM: Yeah. But I think there are—I think it's important to recognize the diversity of the LGBTQ community in doing all these projects and creating all these places.

LS: Thank you!

[34:02]

End of Interview