

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #7

SOTOMAYOR, BORJA (1980-) SM '07, PhD 2010, STAFF

At U of C: 2004 – present

Interviewed: November 12th, 2012 (1 session)

Interviewer: Kelsey Ganser

Transcript by: Kelsey Ganser

Length: 1:09:08

Interview (November 12th, 2012) in Ryerson Hall at the University of Chicago

[00:00:00]

[Borja answers the questions on the demographics sheet]

[00:03:01]

KG: Ok we can just begin then. Maybe we can start by, you can give me a little bit of your background and how you ended up at UChicago?

BS: So I, I studied computer engineering in Spain. I was born there; I was raised there. I was actually, as you can probably tell from my English, I was raised bilingually, so I went to an American school in Spain so I was sort of exposed to American culture from pretty early on. I experienced Spanish culture at home obviously by living there but at school we were sort of exposed to all the American kind of traditions: Thanksgiving and Halloween and American history and all the kind of stuff. And the, so I had been to the US many times and I had always, I don't know how to describe it, I guess the idea of studying in the US had always appealed to me just because I felt this sort of connection to US culture. And so I got my engineering degree in Spain, I worked there for a year, and then as part of my, when you do an engineering degree in Spain it's a five year, or it used to be a five year, degree. And you have to a sort of engineering thesis at the end, which is a sort of an applied thesis and an applied project. And I wanted to do something, like a lot of examples, like projects people will write an application to manage a shop or a website or stuff like that and I wanted to do something a little more research-y so I called my engineering adviser and asked, "What are topics that you think might be good?"

And there was this one topic at the time called grid computing which was like all the, I mean back then, this was like 2003, was like all the rage. It was like the big buzzword and so on and so forth so actually, you can see I have the book *The Grid 2* and stuff like

that, so that was written by one of our faculty members, by Ian Foster who is a professor here. And he's like, you know, he's the Father of the Grid and all that stuff. So back then that was like all the hype, was all about grid computing. So I did my engineering thesis on some software that is used in grid computing systems, basically these very, very large distributed computing systems. Came in touch with researchers here at University of Chicago and Argonne National Lab as part of my engineering project. And they, we sort of like stayed in touch even after I graduated and at a certain point they invited me over to just come and visit the lab, to visit campus. There was actually, there was a conference downtown and that was the main reason I was there. But I met Foster, I met a whole bunch of people that I had been in touch with for a long time and Ian just sort of made the offhand comment of, "Oh, you know, what are you doing next year?" "Like, I don't know, I have a job in Spain. I'm working at, actually, the University of Deusto, where I got my engineering degree, but I don't have any, sort of like, long term prospects." And he said, "Well, have you thought about getting a PhD." Like, "Well it's been on my radar but I haven't really pursued it too aggressively." And he was like, "Oh well you should maybe think about coming to Chicago." And I suspect because of all that he probably championed my case.

So I applied, I only applied to the University of Chicago, which when I got here I didn't realize that, you know people always apply to multiple schools and they try to diversify and so on and I just applied to UChicago because this one professor said, "Oh you know, apply and maybe we'll get you, maybe we'll accept you." So then people would ask me, "Where else did you apply?" and I would say, "Oh I only applied here." And people would be like, "Wow! You're really ballsy." But I guess, so, all of this is to say that I was, I took a slightly atypical path to the PhD because I was kind of recruited into the PhD program but coming here to UChicago I knew surprisingly little about the history of UChicago. I just knew it was the university where this one professor that I had worked with was at and it was really fun over the years to get steeped in the history of the institution and everything. And now, as you can probably see given that I work here, I'm completely head over heels in love with the University of Chicago.

KG: So you really came in kind of as a blank slate to Chicago.

BS: Yeah.

KG: Except for your background in American culture.

BS: And actually the funny thing is, growing up, my parents would take me and my brothers on trips to the US every maybe two years or so. And we would maybe spend a few weeks here in the US in August. And so my parents, actually, my parents are both Spaniards, they don't, they dabble in English but they're not bilingual and we visited all the usual places like New York and Washington D.C. and Los Angeles and San Francisco and a couple of other places around the, a couple of national parks and so on, and we never ever hit Chicago. Because surprisingly, Chicago is not one of the cities that a lot of Spanish tourists think about when they think about visiting the US. They think about,

“Oh! The Statue of Liberty, and the Capitol, and the White House” and all that stuff and then they think Chicago, like, “Oh, that’s just a big city. Why would I want to go there?” So I had, surprisingly, I had never even been to Chicago when I came here. So I was a blank slate not just university-wise but city-wise. So I didn’t really know what to expect from the city.

KG: Yeah that was going to be my next question, if you had any expectations coming here. I guess once you first arrived did you sort of begin to create an idea of what UChicago was? And how has that changed?

BS: I think, actually, you know, I think, now, nowadays I sort of associate UChicago very much with this very quirky kind of culture, very uncommon personalities, sort of nerd Valhalla, but it’s funny, I didn’t come to that realization until maybe my second or third year here. And I think mostly because I started TA-ing during my second year here and that’s when I came in touch, or starting interacting more with undergrads here at the institution, which I think is where a lot of that, when you’re hanging around graduate students all the time, I think you don’t get that sense, that cultural sense of the institution, graduate students tend to be so focused on their research and their... and they don’t actually participate that much in the day to day activities on campus.

A lot of them, here in Hyde Park, a lot of them don’t feel... I’ve heard this from several grad students and it was also part of my experience and we can come back to this later if you want but, as a graduate student it felt like, “Oh there’s a lot of events on campus and they’re for the undergrads. Like, I don’t really want to go to those events because it’s mostly gonna be undergrads and I’m not going to fit in.” And that, when I came to campus, I did go to lots of events that were maybe a little undergrad focused because I was fresh out of undergrad, I didn’t feel that uncomfortable but then like as you progress in years, it becomes almost borderline creepy in some cases. But I think that it was, when I came, my first year I was so focused on my classes, on getting the hang of this whole being grad school thing, that I didn’t really have a chance to immerse myself in the culture of the institution.

The second year, once I started, it wasn’t that I just started teaching to undergrads, it was that the undergrads, I’m also, now, I’m very involved in student activities in terms of the department, in terms of counseling student organizations, and running events, and I also coach the University’s computer programming teams and so on. And by way of my interacting with the students via teaching, they sort of approached me about, “Hey you know, are you interested in maybe helping out with student activities, and maybe interested in coaching the teams?” And so on and so forth. And by being more in contact with the undergrads, I think I got a better sense of what the culture of the institution was. And it’s, working with UChicago students is just a real pleasure. Because they’re, not only are they very motivated, they just have this sort of, I mean, as a lifelong geek and nerd and dork and whatever other synonyms we can think of, you just kind of feel at home. When you’re surrounded by that kind of people.

KG: Yeah. But it took you a couple of years to get to that feeling?

BS: Yeah I think, I think definitely it started my second year, it was probably more apparent starting my third year. Kind of like, as I became involved not just more in teaching but also in helping out with student activities and being, and I think that that was a relationship with the undergrads that I was more comfortable with, where I was sort of like more of an adviser/mentor, than someone who just shows up at student events and like, “Hey guys let’s hang out.” And I think that that helped me form an even stronger bond with the community.

[00:12:22]

KG: Do you live in the neighborhood?

BS: Yes.

KG: Have you, the entire time?

BS: I actually just moved out of the tiny little apartment that I moved into eight years ago.

KG: Oh, wow.

BS: I got, uh, when I moved here I got a one bedroom apartment, a rental from I think back then it was a different name but I think whatever the graduate housing office is called nowadays and it’s funny because when I moved there, a lot of the more senior grad students would say, “oh well, in two or three years you’ll probably move up north or move somewhere else because Hyde Park is terrible” and yada yada yada, all the usual sort of stereotypes and the thing is, the thought would cross my mind occasionally but giving up that ten minute walking commute was just too, too far of a bridge to cross for me. And so I ended up living there up until I finished my PhD.

And then after my PhD, so this position that I’m in I started in July, this is sort of like, essentially, I mean it’s not faculty, it’s not tenure track, but it’s essentially a long-term position. But after graduation I didn’t really want to do the whole tenure track rigmarole. I felt a little bit burnt out by the six years of getting a PhD and I wanted to spend one or two years doing something a little bit more low key before finally deciding, “OK what do I want to do long term?” To get a better sense of what I enjoyed and what I didn’t enjoy. So I ended up working for my adviser, for Ian Foster, for two years in the computation institute, just doing basic, I was sort of um, I was essentially a software developer but I was working with a lot of research kind of people. So it was sort of like research programming and I was also lecturing in the department. So because I didn’t know how long I was going to be here I sort of like said, “Well even though it’s the office that manages graduate housing or that manages staff housing at the university, so I just asked them could you just convert my lease contract to a staff contract.” “Yeah sure we can do that.”

So I just stayed in that place and finally when this position came up, which I thought was completely up my alley because it sort of, I kind of came to realize that I like research but I'm not in love with research, I'm not, I genuinely like doing research but I don't see myself selling my soul to research, just like spending my entire, all my energies and getting grants and papers and so on and so forth and this came up and I really enjoy teaching, I really, really enjoy teaching. And I seem to have a knack for administration, which I guess is uncommon in academia, by way of helping out different organizations and coaching the team, the programming teams, and doing all sorts of other stuff, and then this position comes along which is basically, you know, at the intersection of administration and education because I'm sort of an administrator of this program but I'm also the person that has to decide on curriculum matters, you know like what classes do we teach and in what order do we teach them, who teaches them, and stuff like that. And I still keep, get to lecture in the department in college classes. So it was sort of like a perfect position. And it was essentially a long term position so that's when I sort of figured, well ok I'm going to move into a grownup place finally. So I bought a condo just a few blocks away from the main quad, here in Hyde Park. But that was, again, that decision, like "Oh maybe I should move like somewhere else in the city." And it came down to like that I spent so much time on campus that I'd rather commute to dining and movies and other stuff than have to commute every day back and forth from my place to work.

KG: How do you find the culture of the neighborhood?

BS: I frequently wonder whether the student population has conditioned the neighborhood or vice versa. Because it's a very, you know, it is changing a little bit, but in all the time I've been here it's always been a very quiet neighborhood. And I think that's good or bad depending on your personality but I think for example for people, either grad students or undergrads who come here and they want to focus very intensely on their studies, I think it's a very nice distraction free environment. And I kind of like that. I like that it's a nice calm neighborhood where there's not that much going on and the way I see it, whenever I get bored of the neighborhood I can just get in my car and I can go somewhere else. So I don't, I don't sort of buy into the whole "oh Hyde Park is this terrible sort of hellhole of..." I think it is what it is and some people are attuned to it and others are not. I seem to be pretty well attuned to it. And I think it has just enough stuff in terms of dining options and entertainment options. And I like that we're finally getting a movie theater and I really, really like going to the movies and so, stuff like that I think is changing for the best. Without making the neighborhood too hip, I guess for lack of a better term.

KG: So do you participate in gay life in the city as a whole?

BS: Not really. I mean I, when I moved here I sort of made the mandatory pilgrimage to Boystown a couple of times. Especially as you start to meet people a lot of times they're like "Oh! Let's go to Boystown." Actually when I have gay friends visiting from out of town, whether from Spain or here in the US, I'll frequently just like take them there, usually during the day just to kind of show like, "Oh look! It's Boystown." I don't think that I, I'm trying to think if there's instances, aside from the occasional, you know I think

I've been to the Pride Parade a few times, but other than that, like I don't think I'd consider myself active in gay life in the city.

[00:18:29]

KG: Do you consider yourself active in gay life here at the University?

BS: I sort of went down that path when I first came here. I actually, so when I came here to the university, so I moved here in 2004, and so first of all I went to a Jesuit University in Spain. And even though the Jesuits are sort of like the cool Catholics, like they're not, they don't push religion all that much, it was still a Catholic university. So there was no LGBTQ clubs, there was no sort of, there was no outlet, basically. And even though, I was, back in Spain, I was out to family, out to my friends, and even though that was the year 2004, it might have been the year 2005 I might be getting the dates wrong, but that's around the time that Spain legalized gay marriage. Even though Spain had made that huge leap, Spanish culture was still, I would say not actively anti-gay or homophobic, it was this kind of culture where we acknowledge that it exists but please don't talk about it. You all go to your places and leave us alone. And so I had been raised in this culture of, you know, LGBTQ folks being accepted and tolerated but not, you didn't really feel integrated with general society. You would go out with your gay friends and you would go to the gay bars and so on and so forth but it always felt like you were going to this other parallel world. And especially at the university where there was no, zero acknowledgement of LGBTQ affairs, you know, I'm pretty sure that they don't even now have an LGBTQ club. But even, I'm trying to think, even one of the biggest universities in Spain, University at Madrid... I think they, they only started an LGBT club like a few years ago, and it was met with like huge resistance.

KG: Oh wow.

BS: From basically, basically just like rampant homophobia from students at the university. So it's this weird dissonance of like, this is one of the first countries to like legalize gay marriage and yet the culture is kind of very, you know, is not as embracing of LGBTQ culture as others. So I came here, and suddenly I come to the University of Chicago and again, I didn't know that much about the university, and when I came here I was told, "Oh this is one of the first universities to offer, sort of, equal benefits to LGBTQ couples for housing and employment and all that kind of stuff." And there's all these LGBTQ clubs and so on, and I was, I almost felt like a kid in a candy store? Like, wow I didn't realize, now I can finally be part of gay culture.

And so I think my first two years or so, I would go to meet ups and I would go to talks and what is now called, because I still get the emails, what is now called the graduate professional mixer, back then was called the LGBTQ Pub Night or Graduate Pub Night, or something like that and it was always in Ida Noyes. So I went to a couple of those and I even, when I was, I think it was my first year, they were starting this sort of, peer counseling sort of service, which is distinct from the student counseling service. The idea, there was something in LGBTQ peer counseling service, the idea being that these would

be students that would be generally available, to just sort of talk with other LGBTQ students, and act as a first line of defense, where they could like talk with them and so on. And if necessary, maybe encourage them to go into student counseling if it was a really big issue, or maybe they just needed someone to talk to, and it's enough to talk to a student and they don't have to go through, you know, need to talk to a counselor or a psychiatrist or what not. And I did that for like two years. I think the program itself didn't fully get off the ground. Like they even, so like we had a couple of training sessions and so on, so I've always felt like I wanted to give back to the LGBTQ community and it felt like a way in which I could contribute. And I did meet like with two or three students, one of which, you know, was very deeply closeted, and just like, there was a listing on the, I forget what the address was back then but there was a website that had a listing of all of us there. And one of these students just contacted me out of the blue and said, you know, "I think you're the only one in the Sciences, could we maybe talk?" and so on.

And we chatted a couple of times and maybe helped and then he kind of like came out of his shell. So it was kind of like really encouraging to see the effect of just, seeing them with someone and being able to talk with someone who shares your own, a similar background, similar anxieties, similar preoccupations, how helpful that can be. So I did all that, so like my first two years and I think what kind of happened was that as I started building more of a social network here in Chicago, not just amongst LGBTQ folks but just in general, I think the, I felt less of a need to go to, to participate in that kind of events. Because I think one of the things that those events allowed me to do was to actually get to know other people, coming, I mean I come from Spain and literally knew no one here other than you know my adviser, which is kind of like, it's a very, it's very abrupt. Like you go from having all these friends and all these, and not just that I mean there was also just the, from an LGBTQ perspective, I had come from a place where everyone knew I was gay, and everyone, I had either explicitly come out to everyone who was close to me and everyone else either had found out through other people or it was just generally known and so on. And suddenly I come here and suddenly again, this presumption of heterosexuality, and I feel like, "Holy crap, I have to come out all over again!"

It was obviously easier the second time around but it was still really annoying that everyone just kind of like presumed, like, "Oh you must be straight. If you're single, it's just because you're a grad student. You don't have a social life." So, so that was, so yeah I think I was kind of like active in, nowadays there will be the occasional talk, I mean I'm still on all the list hosts so I'll occasionally get out and there will be the occasional talk like, "Oh that's interesting! I think I'll go see that." But other than showing up and listening to the talk... Actually, I had completely forgotten about this. I think this was maybe three years ago. Three years ago, and I can probably dig up the exact date, I think, I forgot what the name of this organization, there's an organization that's specifically for people in STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math – I think it might just be called "Out in Science." It has a name. They have chapters all around the US and there was an effort to create a chapter here at UChicago. And I went to a couple of meetings, there was a graduate student who wanted to get this started and an undergrad in math who wanted to get this started. And that was like a moment when I felt like, "Oh this is

something I can get really excited about!” Because I do sort of like acknowledge that in the sciences, or at least in computer science, there doesn’t seem to be much of a... That’s another thing, whenever I would go to these events they would be so humanities and social sciences dominated that I felt kind of like everyone was talking with, everyone had a vocabulary that I totally did not sort of like control. And sometimes I felt out of place, not just because I was new or because I was a grad student and most people there were undergrads but because I sort of like came from a very, very scientific background and all the people there were very clearly interested in very different topics.

There was this effort to like, “Oh let’s start one of these STEM LGBTQ, and I think it’s Out in Science, chapters and that was like a moment where I kind of like, you know, my excitement at my beginning of my year was here and then it went down because I didn’t go to events and then it peaked briefly when this came up but then that whole effort like fizzled. Like the two students who wanted to get this going ended up not having time for it and I think it was three years ago because I think I was working on my dissertation, it was my last year, so I’m like, “Well, I’m not taking care of it.” I’m like, I was already advising the, one of the big computer science organizations so I was kind of like, well I can’t, you need to find other people to do this. And this it sort of like fizzled and never came up ever again. And that’s like one area where like if someone suddenly decided to do that again like I would probably be the first in the door. Because I do think that LGBTQ has just had very little visibility within the scientific community, within STEM in general.

And it’s funny because even though it hasn’t been my personal experiences, I do know a lot of people who see that as a barrier to getting into the sciences, the same way that, when some women consider going into the sciences or into STEM disciplines, the fact that it’s very much a boys’ club is very off-putting. They feel like they’re walking into this boys’ club where everyone is talking in very, you know, I’m sure there’s an academic term for this, but very masculine I guess, seeing everything from a very masculine perspective. It’s off-putting to women, it’s not been my experience but I know, I have gay friends who have found it off putting because they were gay and they found it very off putting to go into this you know, into these disciplines that were so male dominated but not just male dominated but heterosexual male dominated, where there’s always the cracking of jokes about women and yada yada yada and they find that kind of off putting. I think that, you know, anything that we can do to push back on that is a good thing.

[00:29:22]

KG: So you find that like STEM people just don’t come out because it’s not a very comfortable environment?

BS: I think, I don’t think it keeps people in the closet. I think people are just not, they maybe don’t see the point in coming out. Or being sort of like, you know, I, I think there’s like, well actually there’s another grad student who joined two years ago who’s gay but before him, as far as I know, I mean statistically there has to be more than me in this department,

but there's not that many, no one was openly gay other than me. And even I don't go around sort of like pronouncing it. I mean I have my little rainbow flag but that's pretty much about it. And even when people see that they just think that I support gay rights, they don't maybe make the leap that maybe I am gay myself. But I think it's more an issue of some people not, like not wanting to get into, like they might come to like, if a student from, let's say you have an undergrad who is still trying to figure out what major he or she wants to do, they come to a meet up, you know we have student organizations here in the department, they come to a weekly meet up or pizza night or whatever and they come here and it's just like this male dominated, and you know I've sort of tried to clamp down when other people make comments that are sort of inappropriate. And they still happen.

Like you will have, we have a Facebook group and someone the other day, well a while back, this was actually a few months ago, a while back you know said, there was this group in Chicago of women in computing who were setting up this workshop for women to get into computer programming and it was open only to women. And the idea was that it was going to provide a safer environment to kind of like get into computer programming. And someone made like, I forget the exact comment, it was something along the lines of: "Oh great now I'll be able to talk with my girlfriend about computer programming." And I'm like, no! That's totally not how... So I try to be as much as I can the voice of reason in those cases but I can see how people who might be thinking about getting into computer science, who might be gay or lesbian, might come to one of these meet ups and be like, whoa, this is very off-putting. This is like very, very male dominated, very heteronormative etc., etc. So I think that that's something that we could definitely improve. In the same way that we could improve our outreach to women and minorities and so on and so forth. Because it is, I mean, computer science is still pretty white male dominated.

KG: So it sounds like you do a lot of mentoring for LGBT students and comp sci students. But you don't do the mentoring program anymore right?

BS: Right. I mean I wouldn't say now I do mentoring to LGBT students. It was definitely something that I did awhile back. But it is, but mentoring undergraduates is sort of a big part of my job nowadays.

So I'm, so we have two student organizations here on campus that are sort of technology related: the association for computing machinery, which is, the ACM is the oldest and largest professional and scientific organization for computer scientists in the world. I think it's more than 50 years old. So they have chapters in a lot of universities and I'm sort of the faculty adviser to the University of Chicago's chapter. And that's also the organization the sort of does the programming contests and we participate in those and we've made it to the world finals several times. And then there's Hack@UChicago that organizes weekly hack nights and so on, so I'm sort of the, I'm basically the adviser to those groups, and because of that and because of my teaching in the college for computer sciences courses, a substantial number of students come to me whenever they need, "hey

I'm thinking of applying to Google; what should I do?" "hey I'm thinking about a PhD program; what should I do?" and stuff like that.

So I do formal mentoring in the sense of I'm the adviser to these groups and I'm very, so I'm not, I wouldn't consider myself a token adviser like the kind who just says, "Oh yeah I'll be your adviser for this group" but then it just goes off and runs itself; I'm like very, I like to be very actively involved in helping the groups be successful and grow and figure out how to connect with the various resources that the University provides. So I'm involved with mentoring formally in that regard and informally in the sense that, just by virtue of my position, a lot of students kind of like end up talking to me whenever they need advice about various things.

KG: Let's see. I sort of forgot about the script. But that's ok. Let's see. So how did you find graduate programming for gay students. I don't think 5710 was here when you got here...

BS: It was here, well it wasn't here when I got here. I think it started towards the end of my sort of graduate years. I think, when I have been to 5710 I thought it has been great. I think it's a very welcoming space. And whenever they've had mixers, whenever they've had talks and so on, I think it's been great. When I got here, I think, you know, there was that graduate pub night. And I think that was about it. Because whenever I went to, all the other events, like there was this, I'm going to date myself but does Queer and Associates still exist?

KG: Yeah.

BS: With that name?

KG: Yeah.

BS: So, QA I think was the big, sort of like, gay group, LGBTQ group on campus at the time. And it seemed to be very undergrad dominated. So I went to a few meetings and I just felt kind of like out of place. Like, because I wasn't part of the undergrad, I didn't have the shared experience with all the other students there. They've all gone through all these things on campus, and I sort of had not and it was kind of hard to. And sometimes you even, when you introduce yourself like, "Oh I'm a graduate student" you even saw kind of like recoil. Like, "Oh... Graduate student." And even when I went to talks on campus, like some of them struck me as very academic. And I don't come from a liberal arts education so a lot of that stuff was sort of like lost on me. And that's the thing, I come from a very – in Spain we don't have liberal arts education in college. When I did five years of engineering, it was five years of engineering from day one. So the stuff that I would get excited about was when people were like, "Oh let's make an Out in Science chapter." Like, "Oh yes! I'm totally for that."

When I came here, I think the graduate pub night was about it. And you know it was, it was a good way to meet some people, but the thing is the graduate pub night also had a bit of a vibe of a meat market, which is a little bit off putting at times. So I'm trying to

think if there were any other events specifically for graduate students. Yeah I don't think so. But once 5710 opened, the times I've been there for events, it seems like a much nicer, and I think that they actually moved the mixers from the pub to 5710. I haven't been to any of the mixers at 5710 but it did sound like the right move. Because have this graduate mixer in a dark pub at night, I think just had, again, this very odd vibe to it. And I think that a place like 5710 which is so nice and so welcoming is much nicer for that.

KG: So in your involvement with your LGBT community here, did you get a pretty good sense of what it was like for the undergraduates? And how did that compare with your experience?

BS: Hmm. That's interesting. Because despite the fact that starting my second or third year I became a lot more involved in undergraduate student affairs and student activities, I wasn't that specifically involved with LGBTQ undergrads. So I don't, I don't, I guess the only sense that I got that their experience was different than mine was that they seemed to be much more intense and much more on the activist side than I was. Like, I was just content to hang out with people who were also LGBTQ. Whereas whenever I went to all these meetings and so on, there was more of this, let's do something about it, let's go. I mean this was 2004, this was the reelection of George Bush and all that, all the various state constitution amendments to ban gay marriage and same-sex marriage and so on and I think that they experience it more from an activist perspective where I was experiencing it more from a, you know, oh it's great that I finally have, that I'm in an environment where I can grow socially in that regard and I wasn't, at the time I wasn't really that interested in changing the world or anything. I had just come from Spain and didn't know anyone and I was sort of like you know, I just want to meet people.

KG: So that was sort of more of a launching of a social group area for you then.

BS: Yeah.

KG: Rather than changing the law or anything like that. Did that ever change for you or are you still kind of more of a social...

BS: I have, as the years have passed, I have tried to... I mean I've always felt this, I've always felt like I haven't been giving back enough to the community because I think that even if from a certain perspective I've gotten an easy ride, in the sense of, you know, none of my friends rejected me when I came out, parents were completely nonplussed, I told them I was gay. And once I came to the US, like yes I have to come out all over again but everyone that I told was like perfectly, like "pfft we don't care." So, even so, well one of the things, I guess one of the things that did strike me was, I think this was my first year here, there was a coming out panel. I forget which group organized it but I know that the counseling service was involved. And it was basically just come and share, sort of like, I think we met in a meeting room down in the Reynolds Club and it's just all like, let's all share our coming out stories. And it was so eye opening to, even though obviously I knew that a lot of people, maybe even most people had not had the same experience I had in terms of the coming out process, and I even had a friend back in

Spain who had to sort of leave home because his family environment was really, really terrible and he had to move to a different city and so on. But it was really eye-opening to go around the room and see the huge variety of experiences and how, and I was even sort of like even at a midpoint because there were people for whom the issue of sexuality had not even been... I guess in my case once I got to the point where I was ready to come out, it was kind of smooth sailing at that point? But I didn't, I didn't fit into the category of someone who questioned it for like a really long time before I was ready to admit it to myself that I was gay. And there were people there at the coming out panel like, "Oh I always knew and it was always clear and I didn't have a problem." To the people who were like, literally like, "My father kicked me out of home the very same night I told him I was gay and he won't speak to me anymore and blah blah blah." And I think that as a community, we in general, even though it hasn't been necessarily my experience as much, we obviously have a harder time at this whole navigating through life thing, than other sections of society. And I've always felt like I haven't supported the community as much as I probably could. So I've always kind of like, I've wanted as a nagging thing, you know, I really should be doing more. And as I've started to gain sort of like more... Well first of all, I guess what started to set me more on the path of actually doing something was when the, when the It Gets Better Project had like huge visibility, like I don't know why but when I read all those stories of like just, like kids being driven to suicide, somehow that hit a nerve. Like, up to that point, this notion of some people have it hard was almost an abstract concept of, I've heard people tell these stories, I've heard, but when you talk to them they always seem to be fine. Like, "oh, you survived it so the bad part is over, now you get to go on with your life." But all these stories of all these people just like, it was so unbearable that they were driven to suicide. Like, I was like sometimes I was reading these articles on the verge of tears, and I really like, that's when it really hit me, I'm not doing enough. I'm in a position of privilege, I'm a PhD at the University of Chicago, especially after I graduated, when I actually started to make more than a graduate stipend...

First of all I recorded an "It Gets Better" video, which if I were to talk to me from eight years in the past and told him, "You are going to record a video where you just are openly going to acknowledge that you're gay and you're going to post it for the entire internet to see," it would have given me a heart attack. Because even though I have no problem admitting who I am and who I like, I tend to be more of a private person in that regard. Like if it comes up I have no problem saying it but I'm not the kind of person who just sort of puts it on his business card. And so recording an It Gets Better video, even though the theme of the video wasn't me coming out, it's obviously an acknowledgement that I'm an out gay man was basically like, I'd come out to all of my close friends by virtue of doing that. Like now, everyone, especially like everyone back in Spain because now they can point to a video like, "Holy crap look at this video that he recorded!" And but I felt that that was sort of a necessary, that I was willing to go through that because I really felt like this kind of message had to go out and then I really felt like I want to, now that I had more means, if I didn't have my own time to give to causes like this, I would at least like start giving to causes like that. So what I started doing two years ago was on my birthday, which was actually recently, November 4, I started, whenever, I usually have like a big dinner party for my birthday, and you know

sometimes some friends show up with gifts and others don't and like there's no clear kind of like gift policy. And the people who don't bring gifts, and the people who did bring gifts feel awkward and so on.

KG: Yeah.

BS: So two years ago I sort of like said, "OK, if you feel compelled to give me a gift, instead of doing that, why don't you donate to the Trevor Project. And that, so that was two years ago. And I was surprised that just by saying that, there was like \$100 in donations to the Trevor Project.

KG: Wow.

[00:46:00]

BS: So then last year I said ok, let's make this a little more interesting. Not only did I tell this to the people who were coming to my party, I just sort of like broadcast it on Facebook, on various social networks, and say, "Today's my birthday." And most people, on my birthday, I get this flood of messages on my Facebook wall and I responded to all of them, basically saying, "If you really want to wish me a happy birthday, please make a donation to the Trevor Project and I will match your donations up to \$500." And we ended up raising \$2500 for the Trevor Project last year.

KG: Wow!

BS: And this year, I upped the ante and said, "I'm going to match donations up to \$2500." So, and I think it's close to \$4000 dollars now? I sort of like set the goal, I want to get to \$5000. I'm hoping, I'm leaving the matching donation open until December 4th and that's when I'm sort of like sending the money off to the Trevor Project. But I think like, you know, it felt like I was putting some of my skills of being an organizer, being someone who, I do have to do some amount of fundraising for the department and I do have like some fundraising skills and I put them to good use. I kind of like want to stay in that trajectory, because I kind of feel like, I kind of feel like I've gotten a free pass while others haven't, and I would really like to help others who are not... Like even when I think back to when I was questioning myself, how useful it would have been to have some sort of form of support, someone to talk to, etc., etc. And I made it through but others don't. And I'd like to contribute to changing that in whatever way I can. So.

KG: Yeah, that's amazing.

BS: Well, I'm amazed that just by basically poking people on Facebook and saying, "Hey you wished me a happy birthday, why not give money to a charity? And I will match your donation up to some amount." People are like more than happy to donate, like, and I'm surprised that some of my friends will give like \$250, and I'm like, "Wow! Ok, thank you!"

KG: That's amazing. Maybe they just needed a reminder.

BS: Yeah, I think, I mean, I was amazed last year when we like, I honestly, I set that \$500 figure, the matching donation, because I thought that, in my wildest dreams, it wouldn't get to \$1000. I thought it would be like a few \$10, \$15 donations and actually I wake up the day of my birthday and this friend of mine has donated \$250 and I'm like, holy crap, we're already halfway to my \$500 goal! So I was mostly touched that my friends felt as strongly about this as I did. And all of them are pretty much straight, so they feel this sort of like kinship with helping out LGBTQ youth in trouble.

KG: Yeah that sounds really affirming.

BS: Yeah. Exactly, exactly. It really feels like they, unlike my experience growing up in Spain where people were like, you know, "You people go and do whatever you want. We acknowledge that you're free to do so, but please don't, don't tell us about it. Don't make us a party to your troubles." And to see that here people will come together and help in that way I think is, yeah, very, very affirming.

KG: That's great. What age did you come out? You mentioned it a couple times but I wasn't sure.

BS: So, ok let me, let me think... It was the summer before my third year in college so it was '99, 2000, the summer of 2000. So I was 19 -

KG: Oh, ok.

BS : - when I came out. And I came out to my best friend, and it's funny because I mean I had, at that point I had a very small group of gay friends who I was obviously out to, but I wasn't sort of out to my, I guess, my straight friends. And that was, the first person I came out to was this friend of mine, and it's funny because in retrospect I got, it seemed like such a huge deal at the time. Like it was this, sitting her down, you know, and "I have something to tell you." And like this big drama and this big build up and so on and how, as time went by, it became less and less of a big deal.

Until nowadays when it's just been basically like, you know, if it comes up I have no trouble saying. I'm pretty sure that the last time I had to sit someone down and do the whole "I have something to tell you" speech was probably like my first year here in Chicago because I was still, you know, kind of suddenly gone from fully out to being kind of essentially in the closet? Because no one had any way, no one knew my history, no one could have imagined that I was, that I was gay. I mean I guess they could have imagined it. But there's always this sort of like, the default is to presume heterosexuality. So I was, so I was I came out, I came out to a select group of friends, I think probably less than ten people knew it for about three or four years. And I came out to my parents in the summer of 2003. And actually I had been very, the reason I had been careful about who I told I was gay, and I really only told my closest friends, because it really, I think the turning point was that I really felt like when I was doing stuff with them, you know,

any time that we touched on topics that, I mean not sexual topics, but topics that, that your response to those topics is influenced by what your sexuality is, whether it be “hey look at that cute girl walking down the street” or whether it be what do you think about this issue regarding same sex marriage or gay rights or yada yada yada, like I kept having to pretend that I was someone that I was, that was kind of like the tipping, when it became unbearable, when it really felt like, when it felt like I was having a bad time with my friends more than a good time, I think that became the tipping point of, even though coming out is a huge deal, I think it’s going to be better in the long run.

So I told this to that group of friends and I didn’t take it beyond that because I wanted my parents to find out from me. Like I didn’t want this to become one of those deals when it becomes an open secret and suddenly my parents find out through, like, a friend of a friend. And so then once I told my parents then the flood gates were open, like I just didn’t care who knew or who told who. Because like, when I told a friend, before I told my parents when I told a friend, I kind of like imposed a gag rule, like, “You can’t tell this to – and I will give you a list of people who know this and with whom you can discuss this with.” So yeah there was sort of there was a three year period between coming out to friends and coming out to my parents. And my parents basically didn’t care at all. Like my mother’s response was basically, “Oh, I knew.” And mothers always know. And my father was just like, he was completely nonplussed. Like, “Oh, so that’s why you’re not dating!” So like, he felt it was like some missing piece of information like “Oh stuff makes sense now!”

KG: Everything’s falling into place.

BS: Yeah. Exactly.

KG: And then when you had to come out here again it was less anxiety-producing than the first time?

BS: Yeah, I think it was, the first, there was one classmate here at the university who sort of became kind of like my best friend here in Chicago. So there was a little bit of anxiety with him because I just couldn’t find a way to say it and not feel like it was... I don’t know. I couldn’t, any way I tried to tell him, it was going to be awkward no matter what. So it was one of those, it wasn’t anxiety producing but it was just trying to figure out, like how can I make him know this. This was, this was before, I mean Facebook was just starting at the time so it wasn’t like I could just silently put, ‘oh! Interested in men.’ And like let him figure it out. Or like post the kind of stuff that just makes it clear that you are either very pro gay rights or just gay yourself. Telling him was just, I guess it wasn’t so much anxiety producing as awkward. I actually had to, I actually had to sit down with him, like, “Ok so I need to tell you something about me. Just so you know.” And then for everyone else it was just basically, in one case one of my friends here found out because we were going to, I was dating someone at the time and said, you know we want to go to this concert, “Can I bring my boyfriend like with me?” and that’s how he found out, like, “Oh, yeah, sure.” Then it became completely like, non stress inducing.

KG: I'm just going to check and make sure I didn't miss anything super important.

BS: Yeah.

KG: So aside from I guess what you've mentioned about sort of the awkwardness in the STEM community, did you have any other problems with your sexual identity and being at the university?

BS: I don't think so. I've never really felt any sort of animosity or any sort of, even like being discriminated upon in any way here at the university. I think that that, I think the problem with the STEM disciplines is just that, it's not that people are in the closet, it's just that, you know, they just don't bother coming out of the closet. Or they see it as a nonissue.

So even if I were to, sort of like, announce somehow to the entire faculty and to the entire department that I was gay, like people would just be like, "OK." It would be like, anything where, I mean by policy obviously they're required the same way but I don't think even personally anyone would be like, "Oh I'm not going to say hi to him ever again" or "I'm not going to speak to him ever again." So yeah I haven't really like, I'm trying to think... I mean back when I was in Spain, sometimes you'd be, again Spanish culture being what it is and especially being this culture that's sort of, is very steeped in this image of the Spanish macho, it's a very, I don't know what the word is. But you'd be having conversations where people would just be saying...

Ok, now I remember what I was, I had like this nagging feeling in the back of my head. I've been back to Spain for summer internships in 2008 and 2009 I was there for four months at a time. And it was the longest period of time I was in Spain since moving here to Chicago, and it was a bit of a culture shock to, when I'm, it's funny because when I'm here in the US, not only is the fact that I'm gay a nonissue, it doesn't even – like when I'm talking with friends or when I'm talking with colleagues, when I'm in most settings, the default is for people to be sort of respectful of the fact that there are other orientations, that there are, that there are people out there who might not share their view of the world or might not share their orientation. And in Spain, whenever I had lunch with my colleagues there, it was just, sometimes it was really uncomfortable in the sense of, just people talking, just talking like, "Oh you should go with this guy to the swimming pool because all the women are there and their boobs are great and blah blah." And it's just like this uncomfortable like, you're talking as if everyone at this table is a horny heterosexual and without acknowledging that there might be at the table, even though you are, like these conversations were only amongst men, but there's just such a strong presumption of heterosexuality that you don't realize that you might be making people uncomfortable by just talking about, just flaunting your heterosexuality and assuming that all these heterosexual activities are going to be enjoyable and yada yada yada. So I guess, that really falls more into discomfort than feeling threatened or discriminated, or feeling that, when it came to the professional side of things people couldn't care less in Spain either but culturally it was kind of, it was a very interesting contrast. Like when I go out to lunch here with colleagues and friends and when I go out to lunch in Spain, it's like vastly different.

[00:59:50]

KG: Did you date while you were here? I think you mentioned you had a boyfriend.

BS: I've had a three, sort of like, long-term, I mean longer than a year, relationships. The, I'm trying to think, so, actually none of them, I didn't meet any of them here at the university now that I think about it. One of them was an alum but we sort of like, he had graduated, I met him when he was like one year out of college but he was still living here in Hyde Park, but yeah I've had three sort of long-term, longer than one year relationships, and a string of one-two month quote unquote "relationships."

KG: But the LGBT pub night was not the place to meet people? I guess based on what you said that you didn't meet the three guys –

BS: No, no, no. Yeah, I kind of like, I made friends at the LGBTQ pub night, but I think my issue with that pub night was more of like the vibe that it had. And I also met like a few hookups at pub night. But yeah, I'm trying to, so, one of them I met through match.com. And the other two, actually the other two I met through OKCupid. I'm a very big proponent of, obviously, online dating so.

KG: I'm always happy to hear when that works for someone.

BS: Yeah. I mean, ultimately it didn't.

KG: Well, kind of.

BS: I mean it did, at the time it did.

KG: Let's see. So do you think your experience is typical of graduate students here in most senses?

BS: From what sort of perspective?

KG: I guess, so we've talked at length about sort of the science community and I guess I kind of got your idea on that but I guess as far as LGBT students go, did you get the sense that lot of them felt fairly accepted but not a lot of programming for them or...?

BS: I think, I mean, at least based, obviously I can't speak for the entire graduate community but just based on my interactions with other LGBTQ graduate students that I know, I think that they, what I've heard, what I've mostly heard is that they feel like a lot of the programming is very geared toward the undergrads, but that the lack of graduate options isn't such that it makes them feel completely left out.

It's just, but I think part of it is that the graduate students, the undergraduate students spend a lot of time together in various other contexts in classes and so on and the

graduate students are a little bit different, because even though we do spend some time together in classes, the first year or year and a half that you're working on a PhD, it's usually only with students in your discipline and once you're done with that, you don't have that much of an opportunity to connect with students, especially not with other departments and divisions. So I think that it's partly a consequence of what the graduate student occupation is like, and so I think that most of the other LGBTQ graduate students that I know mostly keep to themselves, in terms of, they just build up their own social networks and once they establish those, I guess they just don't feel the need to participate in campus life that much. And I think that was kind of my experience. Like I really only felt compelled to participate in this because I really had no other outlet to connect socially to other LGBTQ folks, but once I started to make other friends and started to meet other people, there was less of a need for that, and the only time that I was briefly drawn back in was because it was a topic that I was interested in, which was LGBTQ issues in STEM.

KG: Yeah that makes sense. Have you perceived any sort of change over the eight years that you've been here?

BS: I think that this, I think that the fact that the, I don't know that formally the Office of LGBTQ, what is it called? It has a specific name. Within OMSA there's a specific something... LGBTQ.

KG: Yeah...

BS: Anyway I don't know if that formally existed while I was here or if did exist but it just wasn't as active or as influential but I think that the establishment of that office has definitely been a good thing, because now there's a central resource, where if you, if you want to know about events, if you want to know about resources, if you want to know about, if you're new to the university, like you have this one place to go to.

Whereas when I came here it was really, I went, the way I found out about QA, I went to the RSO fair at the beginning of the school year and I saw the table and I'm like, "Oh, well, I'll take a flyer. I'll go to your meeting and I guess I'll find out what you guys are about." But otherwise I guess I really, there wasn't really like any visible resource for me to connect with whereas now there's a specific unit, in the general but also LGBTQ office in particularly that is there, and you have a much more welcoming space because you know you have a specific space that you can go to and you can kind of like feel like you can use and there will be events there and there will be people there and stuff like that. So I think that things have definitely gotten better over the years. They were already pretty good to begin with. It's not like we've gone from, oh my goodness UChicago had complete disregard for LGBTQ issues and now they do. It's really more of a, we were doing a pretty good job and now we're doing a much better job.

KG: I know that undergraduates sort of hang out in the building and do work there. Do graduates use it in that capacity or is it more just for events?

BS: I really wouldn't know because, you know, once the building opened, I've really only been there for the occasional event that's been there so I don't really know how graduate students use that space. I can talk from my experience that I only go there if there's like a specific reason for me to be there.

KG: Yeah. Can I ask you why you decided to be interviewed for the project?

BS: It kind of like fits into this, what's the word I'm looking for, I guess desire to help the community. And I think that this is only like an hour or an hour and a half of my time and I can talk about stuff that I obviously already know about and that if that can be you know, in any way helpful to researchers or helpful to LGBTQ folks here, I'm more than happy to do it.

And I'm also, I'm a pretty open person, I have a weird dichotomy because there's certain things that I've always considered very off limits and I don't like to discuss, like I'm very active on Facebook, I'm very active on Google Plus, and before Facebook and Google Plus were a really big thing, I had a very active blog that I wrote in Spanish and I talked about a lot of stuff but stuff like my relationships, my family, my friends, and all of that stuff was off limits but other than that I have no problem putting a lot of stuff out there in public, whereas I have friends who don't want to be on Facebook, don't want to have any kind of like online presence. So I kind of like figured that doing an interview like this wasn't going to involve like, revealing any dark secrets that no one else hadn't already read somewhere or heard about directly from me. I'm also really amused about the possibility that someone a million years from now will dig up the transcript and be like, "Oh! That's interesting."

KG: "And here's how it was."

BS: Yeah.

KG: Is there anything else that you'd like to add, or that I didn't sufficiently cover that you feel is important?

BS: I don't know. I think we've covered a lot of stuff. Unless you think there's any other topics that we can sort of flesh out in more detail.

KG: Yeah I can't think of anything off the top of my head. I'm going to obviously transcribe everything and I'll send that to you, so if you read it and you're like, "Oh my gosh, this doesn't make any sense because I didn't tell this back story" or whatever, I'll just follow up with you on that. Ok so I think I'm just going to call it, if that's ok with you.

[1:09:08]

End of Interview.