

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW #94
STEARNS, ESTHER (1960-) AB 1981**

At U of C: 1978-1981

Interviewed: January 6, 2015

Interviewer: Lauren Stokes

Transcript by: Skylar Liam

Length: 01:04:29

Interview (January 6, 2015) over the phone:

[00:00:00]

LS: Okay so I got your consent form, so did you have any questions or concerns about that?

ES: No, that was fine.

LS: Okay great, alright then, I'll start with a couple of demographic questions. So first off, your date of birth.

ES: June 11th, 1960.

LS: That's my birthday! Not the 1960 part, but the June 11th part!

ES: Really?

LS: Yeah, I'm also June 11th.

ES: That's awesome! It's the perfect birthday, I think.

LS: I think so too, it's nice 'cause it's right at the beginning of the summer, but people are kind of still around if you're in school or something like that.

ES: Cool.

LS: Very cool... your sexual orientation?

ES: What year?

LS: Sorry?

ES: What year were you born?

LS: I'm 1987, so...

ES: Wow... 27 years later.

LS: 27 years later, but it's still a good birthday.

ES: Oh gosh, that's great.

LS: Your sexual orientation?

[laughing]

ES: That's funny... Oh, oh I'm a lesbian.

LS: Okay. Your years at Chicago.

ES: I was there from 1978, from the fall of 1978 until I graduated in December of 1981.

LS: Okay. Is your degree then a Bachelor's in 1981?

ES: Correct.

LS: Your current occupation?

ES: I'm retired.

LS: Great. Your relationship status.

ES: I am married.

- LS: And your affiliations -- and by this we mean any like... groups you're part of or were part of when you were at the University. Things like... Gay and Lesbian Alliance, or something like that.
- ES: Right, well as you know I was part of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance, I think it was called, and I played softball, for a couple of years, very badly... very badly... and those were my two things really at school. I'm an Episcopalian, and very active in the Episcopal Diocese in California now.
- LS: Okay... [whispers while writing] Episcopalian... alright, Gay and Lesbian Alliance, Softball, great, alright then, um... good. I will start the questions [laughs]. So we actually like to start these interviews by asking how you ended up at the University of Chicago.
- ES: Well I was -- I grew up in a town in Massachusetts, and I wanted to go to the best college I could get into and far away from New England as my parents would let me go.
- LS: [laughs] Okay.
- ES: At some level I thought I wanted to go to Stanford but I didn't think I would get in and I didn't think my parents would let me come to California, but Chicago seemed like a manageable distance and actually I had a good friend in high school, I had a friend in high school whose sister was a couple of years older than us and she was a sophomore at the University of Chicago and my friend told me that her sister liked it, but there were an awful lot of gay people, and I thought "Great!" [laughing], and the University of Chicago was the only college that I applied to... I applied early admission and got in in September... so it really became the place I wanted to go more than anyplace else, really, I didn't... and I liked the urban environment, too. I wanted to go to school in the city.
- LS: So what did you expect, when you... what did you expect?
- ES: That's a great question 'cause I didn't even visit the campus... I... gosh I don't know what I expected, really... but I think I certainly expected that there'd be a lot of stuff to do, that there'd be a diverse -- a lot of different students. I knew it'd be hard, I expected to work hard... and yeah I guess... that's funny, I never really thought about that, I don't know that I knew what to expect in college.
- LS: No, that sounds pretty accurate. I don't know that I knew what to expect, either. Then another question we like to ask is, was it common for people in your family to go to college and get degrees, or were you one of the first people?

ES: I was one of the first... my parents did not go to college, and they didn't really see the value of it, they didn't understand -- my parents are kind of old, relative to others in my generation, my father was 50 when I was born, which was *really* old in my generation, nobody had children at that age in 1960, so they were really from another generation, and they didn't understand how important college was to your success, so they -- my brother had gotten a BS and my sister had a teaching degree, so I wasn't the first one, but I was certainly the first one to go to a peak liberal arts school and get a degree that nobody could figure out what I was gonna do with.

LS: What did you study at the university?

ES: I majored in economics.

LS: Okay. And what was that -- how did you end up deciding to major in economics?

ES: Well, I thought it was easy...

LS: Okay. Not everyone says that. [laughs]

ES: I know, I had... I was kind of aggressive academically, I took a lot of courses that I didn't do well in, and I learned what I was sort of good at and what I wasn't, and I was just very good at economics, also I kind of wanted to major in classical languages, which I had a great interest in, but I didn't think I was quite talented enough, and I really didn't think I'd get a decent job out of it, and economics felt like something that was not hard, that would help me -- it would make sense in the job market, I was pretty practical about it.

LS: Where did you live while you were there?

ES: So my freshman year I lived in Pierce Tower -- I'm not even sure that's still there

LS: They demolished it this past summer, actually, so...

ES: Okay, so that's gone.

LS: That's gone, but I still remember it, so...

ES: That's funny... and the other dorm I was in, what was it called... it was on 59th right by the IC station, and it was in -- or what was then called the Illinois Center, I think now it

has a different name, like Metro or something, and it was an old dorm, I think that one's still there...

LS: Was it... not Shoreland, Breckinridge, or...

ES: It might have been Breckinridge... that sounds familiar, I think it was Breckinridge. And then I lived off campus in a couple of apartments like... I think at 57th and something that started with a B... oh, I lived, you know that used book store, also by the IC station on 57th, like Powell's or something like that?

LS: Oh yeah, Powell's is still there.

ES: I lived right over that bookstore. That was my coolest apartment.

LS: And so how did you -- did you like living in the dorms?

ES: Well no, I mean... Pierce was pretty bad, it's fine they tore it down.

LS: Yeah.

ES: You know it had that -- it was a little like a nursing home, it had that industrial, or institutional feel to it. That was a dreary thought, I didn't like it very much. Breckinridge wasn't that bad, it was okay, but it was really better being in an apartment, I didn't like -- you know, I liked to cook for myself better, and... it was better to live in an apartment.

LS: What was your social life centered around while you were there?

ES: Well, there were a lot of lesbians and it was really fun, Chicago was a kind of lesbian feminist hotbed in those days.

LS: Oh really? Okay.

ES: And there was within the city -- throughout -- so you know how there's sort of, there are women who become gay who are very associated with being gay, and women who are very associated with feminism?

LS: Mm-hmm.

ES: I was more of a feminist lesbian. I more tended to go to women's marches and stuff like that, and because of the graduate population, which was so much bigger than the

undergraduate, there tended to be a lot of women in their 20s, which was kind of better in those days, because... people didn't come out as young, and so... yeah there was just a lot of us, and we'd do the Take Back the Night March or... I was pretty politically oriented, I was pretty politically oriented, I guess I would say, that was probably most of my focus.

LS: Okay so what were the sort of issues that people most cared about, at that point -- feminists?

ES: Well there was -- that part of Chicago was pretty unsafe, so there was a lot of focus on violence against women and how to protect yourself and making the city safer for women... I remember one night my friend Sidney and I went around to spots where women had been attacked and painted pictures of bodies on them, you know what I mean? To make a point about locations in the area that were dangerous. And it was really -- it really was a very strong time of feminism in the sense of, you know, we'd talk about media exploitation of women, that was big, and we had Alix Dobkin come to campus, and she gave a presentation--- are you familiar with her?

LS: Yes, yes.

ES: And she came and did a presentation on media exploitation or the exploitation of women in music... it was, yeah, we were kind of gung ho.

LS: Yeah okay... Huh. I saw something when I was reading the back issues of the *Maroon* about some kind of action where women went around and spray-painted "a woman was raped here". Was that you?

ES: Um, yeah.

[00:11:57]

LS: Oh great!

ES: And Sidney, that was... I have to say, my friend Sidney was more the instigator, like she was the brains of the operation, but yeah that's actually what we were doing, we had a little stencil of "a woman was raped here" and we'd go to a spot and we'd spray paint it.

LS: What was the reaction to that?

- ES: [laughing] I don't think there really was any. I'd like to think somebody cared. You know, what we hoped to do also was to get women to be more conscious of their own safety. So the real hope was that women would see that and think "huh, maybe I'd better take a self defense course. Maybe I ought to get a whistle. Maybe I'd better think about my own safety." So that's what we hoped we would achieve.
- LS: Okay. And then, I also notice that you said already when I asked you about how you ended up at Chicago that you liked the fact that somebody said there were lots of gay people there, had you kind of come out before you even got to college or when did that happen?
- ES: Yes, I did, I came out when I was thirteen.
- LS: Thirteen?! Okay.
- ES: And it was not a great experience in 1973 or 1974. You know, I was in the Boston area so it wasn't exactly a backwards part of the country but it might as well have been. The reaction wasn't very good. And it was tough. You know it was very hard being a 13 year old gay person in that time, and I really... I met a few other lesbians in various ways but I really didn't know anybody my own age. And it didn't go over well at my high school, you know I basically kind of got totally ostracized. From that point forward I really had no friends in high school. So I was really looking forward to college, and a chance to get away from that kind of bigotry, or isolation. It was really important to me.
- LS: Did you know anyone else in your high school who was kind of either gay or lesbian?
- ES: At that time I did not, no. Now of course I've found a few.
- LS: Right, right.
- ES: But at that time I didn't know anyone else in my high school. I did go sometimes into Boston to a group for gay teenagers that had 2 or 3 people in it who lived lives really different than mine, you know, and as I said I knew some adults, I met some women who lived in the town I grew up in, but nobody else in my high school at that time.
- LS: That sounds tough.
- ES: Yeah it really was. It really was. And you know I think, I was talking to an old friend of mine, who I grew up near and I've known my whole life, she's a very nice woman, and she was like "God I wish I'd known you were going through that, I wish I could have

helped you in some way,” and I said, “You know the truth is, I really do think a different person could have handled it differently than I did,” I was kind of shy, and so that didn’t help, but it really focused me on college, it made me think... I didn’t work as hard in school as I could, although I’m a good student, I was pretty good at school, but I didn’t give it much effort. And I thought to myself, “You know what, I’d better focus, because, I’ve gotta get to college and get out of here,” so it was a very motivating thing in that way.

LS: And then at college how did you meet other -- I assume you met other lesbians which must have been amazing, how did that happen? Like where did they hang out?

ES: It really wasn’t too hard.

LS: Okay. That’s good to hear.

ES: There were... people were pretty out, and so let’s see, how did I meet? Well, my first girlfriend was my roommate.

LS: Oh! [laughs]

ES: That was sort of an interesting story, but... [laughs]

LS: This is your freshman year roommate?

ES: My freshman year roommate. And she was not out, but she was curious. I think she’d been thinking quite a bit about it, and when she met me she just was like.... but she wasn’t too involved in things, but mostly -- and then I joined this gay group, but that was mostly men, and the way I became the president is they needed to have a man and a woman be the president, and I was the only woman who would do it, and I said “okay, I’ll do that.” But then through that I met a graduate student, I actually remember her name, I met a graduate student who was also involved in that group and then she hooked me in to the whole community. So that was sort of like -- you had to make the right social connection, and then you sort of met everyone through... and there were these two women who were graduate students also who live in an apartment who would hold brunches, and you’d go and, you know, so then once I’d made that one key social connection with Jane Tuma then I met sort of everyone, if that makes sense.

LS: That definitely makes sense. You said there weren’t a lot of women in the GALA group at that time, which I’ve also heard from -- I’ve talked to a few of the men who were in it and they’ve said the same thing -- were there any tensions between the men and women

or sort of conflicts, or is your sense that all of the women who were lesbians might just have been hanging out in feminist spaces instead?

ES: Yeah, and I think... I didn't personally experience what I would call tension, but I do think that most of the women were feminist oriented, and just kind of -- and I also think that, you know, this was before AIDS, and AIDS politicized the gay male community in a way that hadn't happened in 1978, and so this was this very politicized group of women, who were very into feminism, and, you know, I would call myself a lesbian separatist in college, and I don't know if I was, but that's what I thought I was, and then you had men who just weren't as politically oriented, and it just didn't seem to matter as much, with my experiences of it, getting along, we didn't have anything in common.

LS: Right, and then women were more politically oriented about things like rape, and the media and women, and all the things that are still problems, right.

ES: And you know, career opportunities.

LS: Yeah definitely.

ES: I mean we were still fighting to be -- I mean we were fighting... yeah, it was really... equal pay wasn't even a principle people even thought should apply, never mind actually occur, and women didn't need careers because men were gonna support them, I mean that was really a long time ago [laughs]

LS: Was... did that... I also know that at that point certainly less than half the students at the university were women, was being a woman at the university at that point difficult, like did you feel like there was sexism in your classes -- I mean how did it feel in your classes and in the academic context?

ES: You know that's a great question and it's always hard 'cause I'm only one data point

LS: Right, that's why we're doing a lot of oral histories. [laughs]

ES: But yeah you never know what's you and what's society, but I certainly always felt that the academic world was very biased, that there were... you had to fit in in a way I never understood, and I -- it seemed to me it was easier for, a guy I'd gone to high school with, and he went to the same school, which wasn't that common, you know, there were only the two of us, and he also majored in economics, and he seemed to have all these friends, you know he seemed to have a rapport with his professors that I didn't know how to

create. And had mentors that I never had. So I -- yeah I don't think it was a level playing field, was my experience.

LS: Were there female professors in the department at that point?

ES: In economics?

LS: Yeah.

ES: Can't think of one I ever had.

LS: Okay.

ES: I had female professors of course, but in economics? Not that I recall. That's funny I didn't even ever think about that, but in math and economics and science all my professors were men.

LS: Yeah. Were there any professors who were particularly influential? In any way?

ES: You know for me, not really, no.

LS: Okay.

ES: I really wouldn't point to anybody and say "wow." I mean there's professors I remember. But I don't have really a -- I don't feel like I was personally shaped by anyone in particular.

LS: What was the question I was going to ask... Oh, yes, going back to something we were at a moment ago, you said you would have described yourself as a lesbian separatist at that time. Were you the only -- were there other people who were describing themselves that way, or... was that common?

ES: It was not common. There were... as I say, my friend Sidney, who was the brains of the operation, she definitely did, and she was hooked into a north side community of women who sort of thought of themselves that way and were sort of... who we were... learning from. I don't think any other women on campus... you know there was a range of political beliefs, I think we were the most along that line of any of the women on campus at that time that I knew.

- LS: Sure. Where was the -- were you connected to other -- you said Sydney was connected to this North Side community of women, were you also hooked into that community?
- ES: Yeah, I'd go with her, she had a car, I did not, I'd go with her to events and things like that, I didn't know them as well as she did, but we'd go to events, there was Mountain Moving Coffeehouse, are you familiar with that?
- LS: Yeah I've heard of it. Can you tell me a little bit about it?
- ES: Every Saturday night in the basement of some church on Belmont on the north side, I think it's on Belmont or something like that, there would be a lesbian feminist singer, and Sydney sang so she'd perform there, and there were all sorts of other women who would, and it was run by the Mountain Moving Coffeehouse collective, and it was like the thing to do if you were a politically oriented lesbian in Chicago. And I saw -- there were two women I knew pretty well who were very involved in it, one of them I just saw was named to the Chicago Gay Hall of Fame or something, you know 'cause she worked... she's older than me, Kathy Munzer is her name, she didn't go to the University of Chicago she's a north side lesbian, and she's older, she must be in her 60s now, and she did this for like 40 years, I mean, you know, it was amazing, really. And then we'd all go out to some bar and I forget the name of it.
- LS: Yeah it makes sense that it would have been held in that area around Belmont, so... I also have seen that at that point there were two feminist organizations at the University, which were called the Women's Union, and then the University Feminist Organization. Do you have a sense of -- was one of those more lesbian than the other one, or?
- ES: I don't -- I remember the Women's Union, and it was mostly straight women but the kind who are probably out by now. [laughing] If I still kept in touch with them you'd know. There was a pretty tough one. I don't remember the University Feminists, that doesn't ring a bell at all, so I would say the Women's Union was probably -- if I don't know that one at all, the Women's Union was pretty political and I went to Women's Union meetings and we -- there were mostly good relationships between the heterosexual women in that group and political lesbians, it's pretty okay, but I don't know that I would have said I was a member.
- LS: Okay, yeah, sure. Yeah I talked to Read Weaver [Interview #69], who I think was also -- do you remember Reed, I think he was there at about the same time you were, and he remembered that there was one organization that lesbians were in and one that they weren't in, so maybe the UFO, the University Feminist Organization, was the one that no one went to.

ES: That's what I think, I knew Read very well. Read was Sidney's roommate

LS: Oh really? Okay.

ES: And he was the radical fairy guy, so they, you know she used to say, "it's very embarrassing being a lesbian separatist who has a male roommate," but Read was different, and so yeah I remember Read -- he's a couple years older than me but he was a big presence, and he's probably right then, the University Feminist Organization was probably, I don't know what, more conservative than the Women's Union, that would have been the more political one.

LS: Right, right.

[00:28:18]

LS: And so were you out as a lesbian to more people than just that -- were you out in a very general way?

ES: I was out in a very general way, I don't know how many people cared, but I was.

LS: So it didn't cause any problems for you?

ES: I don't -- well by that time I was probably kind of oblivious as to whether it was a problem for me or not, maybe it's part of the reason I didn't feel terribly connected to the university, or whatever, but I couldn't really point to that and say anybody ever cared, really.

LS: And then you mentioned that your first girlfriend had been your roommate -- did you meet other partners after that?

ES: Oh yeah. Yeah. So, let's see, while I was in school... you know I probably dated four, five, six women over the course of the three and a half years that I was there... so, it was a lot of fun. [laughter]

LS: And they were mostly also students at the university?

ES: Yes, until I met a woman through the graduate students that I knew, and she ended up working at the bookstore and she and I were together for several years, but up until that point it was mostly other undergraduates who I went to school with.

- LS: And you would kind of meet at these brunches and the Coffeehouse and things like that?
- ES: Yeah, yeah. And, you know I can say, it was just a small enough community that everybody kind of knew who everybody was, and you'd get invited, and then you'd just be part of things, and it'd be, you know when someone new came, "Ohhhh, oh."
- LS: Yeah. Great. Is there anything else I should be asking about, about your time at the university?
- ES: I'm just trying to think.
- LS: Were there other non-feminist political or social issues that people were concerned with that you remember?
- ES: Well, I remember that while I was there Robert McNamara spoke, and he had dropped all the bombs on Vietnam, which wasn't that long before, this was like, 1980, so it created a huge pushback, and the guy that the movie Born on the Fourth of July was made about who was a wounded Vietnam veteran who became politicized and very anti-war, and he showed up on campus and there was a big protest, and there was a lot of belief that this was gonna spawn some new -- it would spark us out of the apathy, there were a lot of people still living in the 60s and thinking to themselves, you know, we've gotta get out of the apathy that the 70s has created. I won't say it did, but for one night everyone was on the street, there were arrests, I did not get arrested, but there was still that hope in those days that somehow he'd rekindle the fervor of political dissent that the 70s had kind of squashed, I can't really say that that happened at all and as we know the 80s sort of squashed it even more, but that was, that night really stood out. He spoke at that club on the corner of the quadrangle that faces, across from the Regenstein, or at some sort of faculty club or something like that, he spoke there, and I remember the protestors on the street that runs parallel to Regenstein, not along the front, but on the side
- LS: Right, the Reynolds club or the Quad club?
- ES: Yeah the Reynolds club, that was it
- LS: Reynolds club, okay. And then you said you graduated in December 1981, was that, then -- did you just do three and a half years?
- ES: Yeah I did -- I went to summer school. I did two summer schools and then I packed my schedule my junior year to graduate, because I didn't really enjoy being at the University

of Chicago. I had a lot of interesting experiences and I certainly got what I wanted in terms of a diverse urban environment, but I just... I didn't like academics at all, I never got a graduate degree, I probably... I mean most people coming out of the University of Chicago even in my day got graduate degrees, but I just was done with school, and I thought it was political, I mean I thought it was not political in a good way, you had to suck up in a way I didn't understand, so I really just wanted to graduate and get a job and experience that, so.... so I finished that winter and I was glad to be done.

LS: And so what happened next? Did you get a job immediately?

ES: Pretty soon. I will say the first time after I graduated when I woke up in my off-campus apartment and I realized I had nothing to do was really shocking. I remember waking up thinking, just worrying that day, because for 16 years I had been focused on my education and now it was done, uh, so that was January -- or December, actually, and I got a job by April...

I was working at a pizza place by campus, Eduardo's, but I quit that after a like two months, doing that job was keeping me from getting a real job, so I quit and lived off my savings, which my Aunt had given me some money she had saved, which was really generous of her, and I got my first job at Allstate Insurance company in Northbrook, Illinois, and I moved to the North Side with my partner at the time and we moved to School and Belmont, and got a little apartment that was actually a very nice apartment, and bought a Toyota Tercel, because you had to have a car to get to Northbrook, and I went to work in the investments department in Allstate Insurance company. I was fired four months later and I was made ineligible for rehire and told I would never fit in at Allstate, so I'm pretty sure I was fired for being gay, which wasn't illegal in 1981, I mean there was -- they could have told me outright, "we're firing you because you're gay." It might have also been because I bought a foreign car. I think they thought the two things were related -- "foreign car driving lesbians, we can't have them here." Of course in retrospect I realized they were right, I would never have fit in at Allstate Insurance Company, but it was really devastating.

It was really rough so I decided to move to San Francisco. I had -- my partner had grown up here, her mother lived here, so we could stay in her mother's porch, and I just thought, "you know, I'm gonna go to San Francisco," so that's what we did, and I looked for a job here for quite a while thinking I would never get another job in the corporate world, you know, I'd been told I wouldn't fit in and that's what I assumed the story was, and the same weekend I was offered a job at Round Table Pizza, because I'd made pizzas, I'd done that in high school too, and at Schwab, and the Round Table Pizza job paid more, but I thought I'd give the corporate world one more chance, and I went to work for

Schwab when it was a teeny little company, I was the 250th employee, and that worked out really well for me, and it was an entirely different environment and one in which being different wasn't an issue, it was a true meritocracy in those days, it was really "what can you do?" So I stayed there for 15 years, and it was a whole different experience, but it was very intense, kind of year and a half after I got out of college.

[00:38:35]

LS: And so when you decided to move to San Francisco, was that very deliberately like, "I've just been fired for being a lesbian driving a Toyota, in San Francisco that won't happen"?

ES: Yeah, San Francisco was then, and I had been out here in February, so I graduated in December, didn't get my job until April, in between I came out here and visited with my partner at the time, who grew up here, and when you come from Chicago to San Francisco in February, it's pretty hard not to want to move.

LS: That makes -- I absolutely understand that.

ES: It seemed like a no-brainer actually.

LS: Oh, so your partner had grown up in the Bay Area, she was from San Francisco.

ES: Yes. Her mother had a house right in the city, so it was just kind of obvious. It was really a no brainer.

LS: That's great, and then you got that job, so that worked out well.

ES: Yes.

LS: One thing that I just re-remembered is you said you were part of the softball team when you were at UChicago... do you have any thoughts about that? Was that a place where lesbians hung out like they still do today, or...?

ES: Ohhh, yeah. [laughs] Yeah. In fact that was the only reason I was on that team. I don't even like softball! And I sure wasn't any good. That was a whole diff -- I should mention, that's a great point, that was a whole different group of lesbians. There was one other woman I knew who kind of bridged the gap between the political lesbian feminists and the softball dykes, but mostly there was this whole group of women -- the entire team, practically -- and they were both really paranoid about anybody knowing, and they were completely obvious. And the coach -- the coach! -- was their burly, I mean you

know, she was like the gym teacher that Meg Christian sang about [Ed.: Meg Christian's 1974 song "Ode to a Gym Teacher"], she was this tough old broad and she lived with one of the other coaches, and they were "friends," so yeah the whole team was -- I honestly probably never felt -- I was never really socially all that active with the team because I wasn't closeted enough, and I probably thought... I probably judged them for not being more out, but they were a fun group o' gals! [Laughter] It was a good team, they were really fun, I hope that they've all gotten into places in life that they can all be more comfortable with themselves, because it was... they were so defensive, "Don't tell anyone, don't ever say the word, ever say the word lesbian here." "Really? Okay."

LS: Interesting. Okay. And so was that the kind of main distinction you saw between the scenes, the, you couldn't say the word lesbian on the team but the political feminists were saying the word a lot?

ES: Yes. The political feminists, we were screaming it from the rooftops, and you couldn't say it -- if they had said anything I think they would have probably said they were gay, with the political, lesbian feminists, well we never said we were gay. That just wasn't how we saw ourselves, but on the team mostly people just never said anything, they just moved in with their friends. And went to different bars. Like there was some bar we always went to, if I hadn't played softball I would have told you it was the only lesbian bar in Chicago, but it wasn't. There was another one that softball players went to, and a whole different world.

LS: Interesting. You said you would have always used the word lesbian and not gay, do you have a sense of what the reason for that was?

ES: Well for me, I guess it's that I really think of myself as a, especially in those days, I mean I haven't changed that much, but like everyone who turns 50-something I'm a lot less strident than I used to be, but it's about my relationship with women, that was... and that being... well, I think gay culture especially in the 70s was very drug oriented, it was sort of... it seemed more personal and hedonistic than political... now I do think that's shifted a lot in my lifetime, but again I think AIDS and a lot of other things have really -- and the political backlash... have politicized and there are probably more politically active gay men, you know Read sort of stood out like a sore thumb among gay men, he was not in the mainstream of gay men, because they just... there just wasn't much politics associated, there was more partying, and it just wasn't how I saw myself.

LS: That makes a lot of sense, and then just in terms of like... maybe just personal style, were the softball women and political women different in that sense?

ES: Yeah. I think... yeah, I don't think they... in all fairness, of course now we're just getting my opinion of them, right? What I don't know about them is huge, but my perception, my belief, was that they just -- you know, they weren't gonna come to the take back the night really, or they just didn't seem to care about that or really wanna get involved in that, or even -- there are plenty of things you could make fun of lesbian feminists about, believe me, the list goes on and on, but there's a sort of... lesbian feminists, especially in my day, had a tendency to process things to death, every meeting we'd have what we called "crit and self-crit," where everybody goes around the meeting and criticizes those - found flaws in everything we did and then themselves, and it was kind of a rugged group, and I don't know that other people thought good thoughts... crit and self crit, most ridiculous thing, really, but... I told you there was one other woman who sort of crossed that boundary and she was a friend of mine, and she had grown up -- her sister was a lesbian - - and she had grown up in a little town in Minnesota, and so she really had kind of known a lot of small-town lesbians who had to hide, and so she really understood both sides of it, and she just made so much fun of crit and self-crit, she just thought it was the most ridiculous thing, and in retrospect I see her point on that.

[00:47:20]

LS: Great. I think we've covered a lot, and you did mention that you're married... I assume that's happened in the last ten years?

ES: Yeah.

LS: Is there a story behind that?

ES: Well yes, we -- well I've been with my part -- my current wife -- my wife Jan, since 1992

LS: Okay.

ES: And we've adopted three children, so we have three teenagers, and almost 16 year old and then twins who are 13, and then we... we got married -- we wanted to wait until it was either okay in our church or it was legal, and then in 2008, when the California Supreme Court -- I was -- out of the blue. I had no idea. All of a sudden we were listening to the radio, and they were like "Yes, the California Supreme Court has determined that same sex couples can get married," I was like "oh shit now we're gonna have to do it!" [laughs]. 'Cause I'd always considered not having to get married one of the great things about being gay.

LS: [laughing] Sure.

ES: You know, not having to... it just felt too public to me, but we do have three kids, and it ended up being a beautiful, beautiful day, and you know we're -- I mean it really was a very happy day. It was crushing when Proposition 8 passed, crushing. I'm not a person... you know over the years I've been very successful, and I was very successful in Schwab and then I went to another company in San Diego and I became the president, and I was one of the most powerful women in financial services, and I became sort of insulated from all the things that had -- like, you get enough money, and enough social status, and enough work power, and you can ignore the prejudice of other people. It doesn't mean it's not there and it doesn't mean it doesn't affect you, but you can sort of protect yourself from it. And that's what had happened in my life, and when Proposition 8 passed, and we lost the right to get married, it was one of the most devastating moments in my adult life, realizing "yeah I can insulate myself, but I can't -- you can't insulate yourself completely from prejudice and bias," so it was really a sad moment, so even though marriage was never as important to me maybe as it was to other people, winning this fight is important.

And people having the right to make that decision is really important, and you know, whatever you choose is your business, but you should have as much choice as anybody else, so that's when I really got it, like, that was a big moment for me. So we're back now, same sex people can get married in California, you know we're over that, and that's all good, and people who've worked so hard, and I've got so much respect and appreciation for the lawyers and activists who've made this happen, because it really does make a difference in our lives, I think, so now we kinda look at people all the time and we've got wedding rings and they're like "we're married." 'Cause we'd like to say like anyone else, "Oh, we don't affect anyone else," but that's just a lie, it's a big deal that we could get married. And it really does, mean, you just have to deal with us, because we're married. And so that's... I'm sorry I got a little excited about that, but that's...

LS: Oh no, that's great. Where did you meet your wife?

ES: Let's see. We met in -- so as I say I came to California, I worked for Schwab, that went well, but I wasn't... I dunno, I thought maybe I needed another job, or something, and I went -- I did sort of a meditation based workshop that was sort of about... it was spiritually oriented, and realized, oh, the job isn't the problem. My job's fine. So I got very involved in developing my inner life, and through that I met Jan. She was doing a similar thing and so it's something we share that's been very rewarding and very helpful through the trials and tribulations of raising three teenagers. Meditation is sometimes the only thing you've got when you have three teenagers. [laughs]

- LS: [laughing] I'll keep that in mind. That sounds great. So you've adopted three children, and did you adopt them before you were married, or how did that work out? Because I know sometimes that's different when you're a same sex couple.
- ES: Yeah, and we did adopt them before we were married, and we were very -- timing wise, my life has been somewhat charmed. If I were ten years older, adoption would have been a closed rug to me, so I've been very grateful for that. When Joseph was born, we adopted him at birth in a private adoption, his birth mother is bisexual and she really wanted him raised in a family where they wouldn't judge her choices, and so she picked us, and we adopted him in San Diego, we were only the second same sex couple in San Diego County to do a two parent adoption. Prior to that what people would do is, one of the parents would do a single person adoption, and then the other person would have to come in a year or two later and become a second parent.
- LS: Right, I've had some friends who've had to do that.
- ES: Yeah, and that was changing... Joseph was born in 1999 and the boy who was adopted just before him by two men is just a few months older than him, and that law had just changed. We said to -- I said to our lawyer, when she told us that, I had lived in the bubble of San Francisco then I moved down to San Diego, I lived in the bubble of San Francisco where lesbians ruled, and I didn't realize the law had just changed, and I said to our lawyer "You should have told us we're only the second people to do this!" and she said "Don't worry, don't worry, your rights are protected, it's gonna go smoothly," and it did, the judge was great, I have the best memories of his adoption. And then two years later we adopted the twins from foster care, they were in foster care, and by then they were required to treat us totally like any other couple, they could not make any distinction, and that's how we were treated. We took the classes together, we were licensed together, we adopted them together, and... we were domestic partners by that time, I think... no, no I guess we weren't, 'cause I don't think domestic partnership was until the 2000s, I forget when that happened, but basically they were legally required -- in some ways, doing the foster care adoption was the best thing we could have done, because they were legally required to treat us fairly. If we had tried to adopt through some catholic organization or something like that we would have had a different experience I think.
- LS: Well that's great, it's so great that you were able to do the two parent adoption in all those cases, that's just such a great thing.
- ES: You know we really wanted the kids to be in the same relationship to both of us.

LS: Right, I mean I completely understand that.

ES: And they're a blast. They're great kids. They're an active bunch of kids but they really are good kids, and being a parent -- you know I never thought I'd get married and I never thought I'd have children. When I was 13 and I came out I just thought those doors were closed to me, and so I don't take either one of those things for granted. Which is -- I think a lot of gay parents are great parents, honestly, because we don't do it by accident.

LS: Right.

ES: And I'm not saying we're great parents, but a lot of people I know are great parents and I think it's just not an accident in our lives.

LS: Oh, one more thing that I have written down here, you said you are an Episcopalian -- were you raised Episcopalian?

ES: I was not, no. I was raised, really without religion, by disaffected Catholics, and I really was very drawn to the church and was very drawn to the Episcopal church actually, but it took me until Joseph was born to join because that was when I realized, I had always felt left out of that church because I wasn't raised in it, so the only way for my son, so now I'm gonna raise my son the way I want to, and so now we're very active Episcopalians, and the Episcopalian church has made a lot of progress in our lifetime on gay issues, not perfect, there are still a lot of voices of dissent, but it's a pretty good church.

LS: Yeah I kind of picked up, my ears perked up when I heard that too, because the Episcopalian campus minister at the university for many years was a gay man and was very active in the late 80s around AIDS activism and things like that, so interestingly the Episcopalian campus ministry here was for a really long time a safe place for gay and lesbian students, so I was like "Oh that's interesting."

ES: Well you know what, that's actually -- like, we're doing this work with -- I'm very focused on kids in foster care, that's sort of my passion, and we're developing a ministry around -- and a mission around helping kids in foster care in the Episcopal church here, and I was pretty nervous about going around and telling people, oh, the church, the church, the church, but I found that, even in San Francisco where churches are not too highly thought of, the Episcopal church gets respect because of its response to AIDS, that is, in fact the gay community in general has a tendency to, if they're familiar with that, look at the Episcopal church and think they're maybe not as bad as all the others -- you know as a gay Christian, I see both ways. You know, I love the Christian church, it

means a lot to me, and it's often awful to gay people. And so the Episcopal church really stepped up around AIDs and that made a big difference, I think.

LS: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, when I started this project if you had told me that I was gonna go to the Episcopalian archives to track down something for the exhibit, I would have said "WHAT?", and indeed we have some Episcopalian archives documents in the exhibit, so that's interesting to hear. Somebody should do some more work on that. Alright, I think - oh, finally you mentioned you're retired now, how's retirement been? How long have you been retired for?

ES: I've been retired for, let's see, a little over a year. It's great. I did not actually choose to retire, I -- the company I worked for, that I was the president of, I took a job, I stepped out of the presidency to run a subsidiary related to changing the financial service paradigm to support middle class families. The company pulled the plug on it six months in, because the financial services industry is not all that interested in helping middle class families, is the conclusion I drew, and I really had no interest in pursuing financial services if I couldn't do that, you know what I mean? So I -- with the kids -- but I love having the time to work on my foster care, and I cook for my kids, I take them to school, I'm really kinda being a mom, and I never had time to do that while I worked, so I don't know if I'll work again after the kids grow up, but I was thinking, "Man I'd be a fool to take a job now just because I feel like I should work, when I'm spending all this time with the kids." And I'm finding I have no problem filling the hours, you know, between - you know I would never have done this when I was working, I didn't have time... and I'm meeting so many more interesting people doing so many more interesting things, retirement is great. We're back in San Francisco, so I like living downtown and in the city. I think if I were retired and we were living back in our San Diego suburban house, I might feel differently. But being in the city -- if you're gonna retire, be someplace exciting.

LS: Okay, I'll keep that in mind.

ES: That's my -- when the kids grow up I might go to Paris, I think that'd be a pretty fun place to be retired.

LS: That'd be fun. That would be wonderful -- alright, great. I can't think of any more questions, I guess one thing we sometimes ask at the end is why did you decide to be interviewed for this project.

ES: You know I think that it is... that's a good question, I was wondering that too, 'cause I never would have done stuff like this, but I think I -- first of all I thought your credentials

were incredible, but I think -- so much of our history is lost. I have a great aunt I'm pretty sure was gay, but I don't have any real proof, and I just think that it is great that you are seeking to really, in a credible, professional way, document this history, and I applaud -- so that's why I decided, I thought "you know what, it is actually important." So anyway I hope it's been helpful.

LS: It's been immensely helpful, so thank you so much, and I like to hear praise [laughs], and this has been immensely helpful, it has actually connected a lot of dots for me, so thank you so much. So is there anything else you'd like to tell us, anything else you'd like on the historic record?

ES: No, I think I'm good, and if there's anything else you need or any other questions you have, feel free to let me know.

LS: I will do that! So look out for a transcript from us and then you will sort of have a chance to correct and amend anything in the transcript you want, and yes, thanks again, so much, this has been really useful.

ES: Okay great, thanks, it was great talking to you.

LS: You too!

ES: Okay, bye.

LS: Bye-bye!

[01:04:29]

End of Interview