

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW #66
STURMAN, RACHEL (1969-) AB 1991**

At U of C: 1987-1991

Interviewed: September 3, 2013 (1 session)

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Interview (September 3, 2013) over the phone.

[00:00:00-00:06:35: KG and RS fill out paperwork.]

KG: So let's maybe just start from the beginning, and discuss why you decided to go to college, and why you decided specifically to go to the University of Chicago.

RS: Okay, so the decision to go to college, from the background that I came from, was almost not a decision in the sense that it was sort of, unquestioned that I would go to college, and it was seen as sort of an intrinsically desirable thing to do, so I came from a sort of middle-to-upper-middle class Jewish family, very high focus on education, and yeah, you know, it was – the intellectual life was highly valued, and so there was no question, and I don't mean that in a negative sense, going to college was seen as something very positive that you get to do, and the University of Chicago for me, to be honest, was actually a second choice – I knew I wanted to attend a school that was sort of like a small liberal arts college within a larger university, and I knew that I wanted to go to school in a large city, and my first choice, I grew up in Upstate New York, my first choice was actually Columbia, where I was waitlisted, and given my needs for financial aid, which, you know, I got a very good financial aid package from Chicago and so it made that decision very easy, and so in some ways my decision to go to Chicago was actually an uneducated one, in the sense that I sort of imagined it would be similar to Columbia, maybe slightly less of a big city, slightly less of a kind of... dynamic urban environment or whatever, but sort of along those lines, and I had some images of the intellectual rigor of the place, but I think I really got more of a sense of it after I got there, and ultimately in many ways I think U of C turned out to be a good fit for me, which is not to say that it was ultimately a happy experience, all the time, and I think, from what I hear, U of C has sort of made

efforts to make the undergraduate experience less painful, but I definitely was there at the time when that was not the case. So both the intellectual intensity and the social scene were very, sort of made you feel beaten down, that was definitely my experience, but...

KG: So you didn't go in knowing as much about the beating down, though?

RS: No [laughs]. Yeah, I think I was a little clueless, and I knew it had a reputation for being a highly intellectual place, but I saw that as a positive thing, and that was what I was looking for, and I was inspired by the commitment to intellectual pursuits, and the life of the mind, and so the fact that that might take a very negative form hadn't really occurred to me until I got there.

KG: Did you find that the life of the mind that you expected existed there, just with this characterization of negativity, or was it totally different than what you thought was going to happen?

RS: No, I think that the life of the mind really exists there, and that you're held to a very high standard in a way that is, that can be very positive, but I think some of the way that that, at least in the past, happened at the U of C involved a model of total destruction of every idea in order to replace it with the next idea, and so that model of trying to show how everyone else's ideas are worthless, that aspect of it I think was the negative piece, but I do think the positive part of that is that it does force you to really think critically about your own presuppositions, your own ideas, all of the sort of things that you come in taking for granted, it really does force a questioning there, that I think the life of the mind is about, so I did appreciate that.

KG: Is that really different from the high school environment that you were used to?

RS: To some extent. I went to a private school for high school, although not a super prep-school oriented one. You know, it was certainly more intellectually oriented than my high school, but there were commonalities, both places valued small class sizes, personal relationship with your teachers, and I would say actually, in both places, both in high school and in college, developing writing, and developing thinking through writing was highly valorized, so there were certain kinds of continuities between the two. But I think, for most people, unless you're in a really special kind of prep school situation, college is inevitably quite different than high school, you know?

KD: Right, yeah. Where did you live when you first got to college?

RS: Okay wait, I'm gonna get this wrong [laughs]. Okay so I lived in... oh my God I think it begins with an F... is that possible? I lived in... Flint, is there a Flint?

KG: Yup. Flint does exist.

RS: I lived in lower Flint.

KG: And is that in Max?

RS: It is – okay so the place that I lived, I can picture it, it was sort of like a mod-ish 1960s-esque building, that was between, I think it was like between Kimbark and Kendall and 5... I wanna say like 59th or 58th, or that sort of... somewhere between 57th and 59th, so that gives some sense of it...

KG: Okay.

RS: Right, as I say this is like 20+ years ago, so I'm definitely like "where was that place?"

KG: Right. I think Flint is in Max now but I'm not sure when they actually built Max.

RS: When they moved, okay, uh-huh.

KG: Oh okay it says... it says it opened in 2001 so it must have been a different building.

RS: It must have been in a different building, yeah. Yeah. I mean I suppose it's possible that they've decommissioned the building or turned it to a different purpose, you know the building that it was once in.

KG: Yeah, that's probably true.

RS: But I was in a coed dorm, and I think I was actually on a coed floor, in this coed floor.

KG: Mm-hmm. And how did you find dorm life to be?

RS: You know in some ways it was great, just... there's just something about that first kind of independence, and, combined with the intimacy of dorm life, that's intrinsically fun, and the friends that I made in that dorm experience are, some of them friends that I still have to this day, like some of them are still my closest friends, period, and so I think in some ways that was an amazing experience, in other ways you're sort of thrown together with all sorts of unpleasant people who you wouldn't necessarily choose to be around, so

there's that too, you know certainly my roommate situation was bizarre, to say the least, like basically my roommate, at some point, she ended up I think, actually, I don't know if she withdrew, but I think she didn't finish her first year, actually, I think she had a drinking problem, and she just disappeared... from like Wednesday night to I think Sunday night, I just wouldn't see her, and, yeah, I think she'd just be off on drinking, partying binges, and... yeah, so, a very different version of the U of C lifestyle, than the one that so many of us lived, so, yeah, so that was pretty unusual, but you always have all sorts of funny, strange, desirable and undesirable experiences in the dorm. I think that it was a measure of my ambivalence about that situation that my next year, so I eventually moved out of the dorms entirely, after my second year, but my second year I actually moved to Breckinridge, where I had a single, and sort of being in, I think I was on an all-woman floor, and I had a single, and it was a much more quiet and controlled environment, in a certain way, and I think that was a better situation for me in some ways, although it was almost too austere, and nun-like, or something [laughs], so yeah.

KG: So for your first two years, was your social life mostly centered around the dorm, or did you find friends through classes and organizations more often?

RS: So, I would say... to a significant extent through the dorm, and then in some ways through the friends that I made in the dorm, that was also sort of how I ended up coming out in college, and then I was really involved in GALA, and that sort of – the dorm then led to that, and that was also kind of a second social scene, such as it was, which was at that time a really small, kind of... yeah, it wasn't very. And it was a very diverse organization, on the other hand, yeah, this really kind of hodge-podgery, very unusual scene.

KG: And when – so you weren't out when you got to college?

RS: Right, yeah.

KG: And when did you come out?

RS: Sort of over the course of my freshman year. And in some ways I would say my coming out experience was, I suppose it was unusual at least at that time in the sense that, like, part of what I was trying to come to terms with was more a set of gender issues and part of it was sexual orientation, so, like I had always sort of identified as a boy, and so, which I don't currently, but I did at that time, and really into my 20s, and so trying to figure out, how much of this is about gender, and how much of it is sexuality, and what – so just trying to figure out what was actually going on, for me that was a long process, and kind of very much shifting sands, I think at one stage I felt one way, at another point in time I

felt another way, so it wasn't like I had this kind of... okay, so, I think we're all encouraged to have this moment of discovery, or moment of realization about the truth about yourself kind of thing, and that's it, but that was not quite my experience, like I had that moment to some extent, but then I had other moments too, so, yeah.

KG: So did you have any assistance at all, in this journey? Like did GALA help you with this, or did you have mentors, or anything like that?

RS: Yeah, I had a really close friend, through the dorm, actually, he was a gay man, and he was an older student in the college, and by older, he wasn't actually that much older, but I think he started at age... he must have started at age 21 or 23, he started basically at the age when most people were graduating or had graduated, and was kind of at a different point in his life, and he had come out like at 15 or something, and so, just... he was in a different place in his life, and much more together, and was really... I would say instrumental in kind of helping me see things in a way that I wasn't necessarily... it's not that I wasn't inclined to see them in that way, but I think I hadn't thought of it, and so... yeah, so he played a major role, and kind of made a queer lifestyle seem fun, so it didn't seem like, you know, you're being resigned to a life of misery, or whatever, so he became a very close friend, so that was key.

And then the organization itself, it was a certain kind of support framework, especially I'd say in my last couple of years there, in the sense that I had reached a point where I could make use of it also. I would say early on the organization itself was very fragile, and it also wasn't really set up to do anything... it had, I think – okay my memory could be faulty, and it probably is, but early on, first of all it was very largely male, and there weren't a lot of women, and then it was just a very disparate scene, early on, and even over the course of the time that I was there it felt like it just sort of became more... kind of congealed as something that was real and had a presence and had things that it was doing, and it became something, I think, over that period of time. But it definitely, when I got there, it was very sad... that's all I have to say [laughing].

KG: What did you see the goals of GALA being over the course of the years that you were involved with it?

RS: So I think when I first started there, and when I first attended meetings, so it was probably... 1988, I think, that I first started attending meetings, and I think early on it was mostly, you know, mostly a social scene. They would have a dance... I can't remember if it was once a quarter, or... maybe it was even less frequently than that, but they would have these dances every once in a while, also very... depressing and lame, but that was sort of supposed to create some kind of social scene, and then I think it was

supposed to be a place for people to meet and chat and feel like they had some sort of companionship, or people who they could share some experiences with, but as I say early on it was very male, and even, even I think the men, there was this quality about it of like, okay here's a collection of men that like, what do they have in common, other than being gay, was really hard to figure out, and I think, even if you looked at that room, it was a very painful looking room.

Over the course of time that I was there, definitely more women started coming, and I don't know if it was just a question of, did there have to be this critical mass of out women, or that the school itself brought in more people who were willing to identify with the group, or what the cause was, it definitely felt like there was this deepening, just the creation of this critical mass, and I would say the women themselves, there would be these group meetings that were men and women together, but the women also started meeting separately, and again, you know, there would be these sort of potlucks, you know your typical lesbian potlucks, I think it was... there was something of a diverse group of people, but there was also the creation of a shared culture and a kind of recognition that there is a lesbian culture, outside of this place, that we're tapping into, and that we're part of, that I think made a difference. And I think just in general, it was a moment when lesbian culture, visibility, and just queer cultures in general were becoming more... I don't know like, visible and richer, in the sense that like, you know more bookstores, coffeehouses, clubs, and that kind of created this broader world to imagine yourself in.

KG: What was the lesbian community like within GALA? You said that it was sort of solidifying as a community, what were the [firetruck goes by] sorry, there's a siren. What were the qualities of that community?

RS: Um, so it was – so I would say there were several couples who were kind of anchoring... I don't know that they necessarily intended themselves to serve that purpose, but I think their relationships had this sort of anchoring quality to the group, I would say that was one feature of it – I mean there was definitely some drama, and some shifting around of relationships and stuff like that, but I think in general it felt like a slightly wry, ironic group of women who were basically down to earth and open to... open, I guess, open about their relationships, open to people joining the group, welcoming, and tried... wanted to create something that felt like a community, and I think that made a difference. Which is not to say, I can definitely think of individuals who were sort of on the outskirts of that, so it's not to say that it was equally welcoming or desirable as a community to everybody, but I think they definitely sought to create something. And for myself, I think I was definitely a part of that group, but my closest friends weren't in that group, so you know, I had this sort of inside-outside relationship to them, in that I enjoyed being a part

of that group, and felt like it really made a difference in my life and experience there, but I was never in a relationship with somebody who was in that group, and I was never in the center of that group, or finding my closest friendships in that group.

KG: Mm-hmm. Were your closest friends straight or was there a separate LGBT social group that existed outside of GALA?

[00:31:46]

RS: It was a combination, so I had this one gay male friend, he was a very close friend, and then I had a couple other close friends who were straight, and then I would say my broader social circle -- like that was probably my closer social circle, and then I would say my broader social circle was this group and a group of people from the dorm, and yeah, you know, so kind of cross-cutting several different groups.

KG: Did you feel comfortable in general being open about your sexuality and gender while at the university?

RS: I would say yes and no. I was very out, I would say once I came out, I was very out, and very active in GALA, and we would have these various protests on campus, and I was always there, so in that sense open, but at the same time, the college was not -- like, it felt like a homophobic place to me. It felt like we were in battle there, and that the University itself was kind of conservative and uncool, and that the broader mood within GALA and especially -- I don't wanna malign the men, as I said I had really good friends among men, but there was something about these dances, that you would go to these dances and it was just so depressing, and like, sometimes you could have fun, but like, you would just look around the room and think, "oh my god, this is my social scene here," and there was something about the way that everybody seemed like their own, like in their own weird world, and there was something about that that was very isolating, or alienating and so it was almost like the queer scene itself had this kind of quality of making you feel alienated, and then the university itself had that quality of making you feel alienated, so yeah. So I would say, I guess I was both out and open, and also self-beleaguered and just sort of... oppressed.

KG: Were there specific incidents that made you feel like the university was homophobic or was it just a feeling you got from the administration?

RS: You know, there were specific incidents, I just cannot remember what they were any more, which is horrible, but I do remember us protesting specific things, and so I remember that it wasn't just this general feeling of "why aren't you cooler" kind of thing,

there were very specific incidents, and you can probably talk to people who can say what they were, but I don't actually remember -- I think, my vague recollection, I feel like one of these things where the men are always more visible, so something having to do more with gay men, I think, that the way of characterizing the situation was more male-focused, it was more targeted towards gay men, but that was also a measure of the degree of lesbian invisibility, not to mention basically everyone else, you know, in that stage, in that era, there was basically no trans presence at all, so it was definitely a different moment, but I think it definitely -- we would have these protests in front of the administration building, and these -- they'd be queer, GALA protests, and in theory it was supposed to be drawing upon a broader population of supporters, but I remember the most people we would ever have at these so-called demonstrations would be like... thirty? Twenty or thirty, out of the whole university? It just was so pathetic, you know. Yeah, so just to give you some sense.

KG: Mm-hmm. Speaking of trans visibility, or lack thereof, were you identifying as trans during this time, or were you just struggling with ideas of gender in regards to your own identity?

RS: So, I did identify largely as, or I should say, I did identify to a significant extent as male, but not in a way that -- seeking to undergo physical change. So it was more just that I felt like... underneath this body, there's my real body, or underneath this self there's my real self. So yeah, it was more like a kind of crypto-trans identity than -- you know, I would do certain things once in a while but it was almost -- so sometimes I would kind of dress as male, and do a kind of breast-binding thing and stuff like that, but I never sought any sort of surgical intervention, or hormones, or anything like that, and it was much more about a kind of internal sense of who I was than seeking external recognition of that.

KG: Were there other people like you involved in GALA at the time?

RS: So there was a guy who would go in drag sometimes, he had like long hair down to his waist, and sometimes I would see him in drag, but among the women, actually no, and it's interesting to me what's happened with the whole trans movement, and the way that actually it's come to -- you know in terms of actual visibility it's come to focus so much on FTM trans people, and I would say at that time it was -- it wasn't that you didn't know it existed, but it was very -- you know, there were boyish dykes, but nobody who seemed like they were trans, I guess that's what I would say... and you know who doesn't like boyish dykes, right? [laughter]

- KG: So was GALA able to support you in your -- I don't know I guess you were involved in the lesbian community but you had this different identity than the rest of the group, it sounds like to me, correct me if I'm wrong.
- RS: Yeah, I think that's true, and that may actually be part of why I was sort of -- that I felt partially in it and partially not, and I think to some extent I wasn't totally open about that, I think I didn't have a language to really talk about it either, and I think partially, there was sort of a sense that what it was to be a lesbian was to be a woman who loved women, and there was something that was -- there was something about that that worked for me and there was something about that that was always jarring for me, and so yeah, I think I sort of tried to find some place within that that could exist, but I didn't push up against it and try and make them accommodate me in my me-ness, if that makes sense.
- KG: Right. Were you involved in any -- actually maybe a better way to say it -- were you going to other parts of Chicago or connected to other LGBT communities in Chicago?
- RS: Yeah, definitely, in some ways that was actually part of what saved me -- I would usually go with friends on the weekends up to the North Side and access that whole queer part of town, and the women's bar scene up there, and you know, just like bookstore, cafe, kind of culture. And that -- seeing that bigger world was, I think, crucial for me. And also let me see other ways in which I fit within a bigger definition of community than the way that community existed at U of C.
- KG: Were you involved in activism in other parts of Chicago or was it just a social thing?
- RS: At the time it was pretty much just social, so I got more activist -- well, okay, so that's not entirely true. So in Chicago itself I wasn't involved particularly in any larger activist scene, I didn't get involved with any national while I was in college, so like I interned at NGLTF one summer and then, basically when I graduated I moved to San Francisco and then became much more involved in the queer activist scene in San Francisco and the bay area, but yeah in Chicago itself I wasn't.
- KG: Is that when you became involved with Queer Nation? When you were in San Francisco?
- RS: Hello?
- KG: Sorry can you hear me still?
- RS: Yeah, I'm sorry, you said is that when I was involved in...?

KG: In Queer Nation?

RS: Yeah, that was pretty much right after I graduated. I think, the other thing, I was also in - - yeah it was summers, I had one summer in DC and then another one in New York, and I think I had a summer in Seattle, so in other cities I was involved more in the activist scene... yeah.

KG: Were people using queer at all in Chicago at the time or was that specifically associated with the group Queer Nation?

RS: I didn't hear it in Chicago at all, pretty much, except for as a self -- as a humorous self-appellation, but not as a politicized appellation, beyond just sort of personal humor kind of thing.

KG: When you were at UChicago did you do any non-LGBT activism or political organizing?

RS: I did, so I was involved in -- I can't remember the group now, I think it was called CASA or something like that? It was a Latin American -- so when I came to U of C, in high school I had been very involved in US out of Central America kind of activism, because the US had been very involved in supporting various dictatorships in Central America in the 1980s, and so I was really involved in that, and then -- so I continued that, and it's sort of shocking and horrifying, but there were big immigration debates at that time as well, the whole question of what US immigration policy should be, I was very invested in that -- activism around those issues. And then I think, if I'm not mistaken, that the first Iraq war started when I was there... I could be totally making this up but I think that's right, so then I was involved in that, sort of anti-war stuff.

KG: Oh I actually -- I never asked you what your major was, did that correspond with the activism you were doing?

RS: Sort of yes and no. So when I came to Chicago I thought I would be -- I thought I, was always interested in history, I thought I would study US-Latin American relations kind of thing, but I ended up getting disillusioned with Latin American studies there, and pursuing South Asian history instead, and part of that was actually there was a kind of commonality that I was interested in histories of colonialism and post-coloniality, but I shifted from looking at US quasi-imperial relations with Latin America to looking at longer histories of imperialism, so focusing on the British Empire in India, so that's what I ended up majoring in, I majored in South Asian history, and that's actually what I've ended up doing period. I now teach South Asian history at Bowdoin College.

KG: And you're in India right now, right?

RS: Yeah, right.

KG: So did you ever -- were there classes available on sexuality or gender at the time when you were at UofC?

RS: Let me think about that... so there were, there were definitely classes available on gender, but not in the way that it would probably be taught now -- it was more like, sort of the moment of Joan Scott, early Judith Butler, that kind of moment of thinking about gender as a relation to or relationality between people who get designated male and female, so it was very much that point, I think both binaristic in a certain way -- I think it was actually very theoretically sophisticated, but not with the same kind of sense of, I don't know, the undoing of gender, I think in the way that it was -- the sort of undoing and redoing and whatever that I think has happened in the last 10-15 years or so, and in terms of sexuality, there were courses where I would say queer issues maybe came up, like I think in film studies, film studies was one of those places where you would get these kind of, thinking through gender and sexuality in a way that was much more playful than in other fields at that time, so there, and maybe some of the more arty fields, there was some of that -- I think I remember reading sections of *Epistemology of the Closet*, but not entire courses. At least not that I remember, there weren't entire courses around sexuality issues, no. And even faculty who we all knew were gay were not out, and part of what felt oppressive and homophobic about the institution had to do also with the fact that there were so few out faculty at that time, this was pre-David Halperin, pre... very early... pre-*Gay New York*, all of that.

KG: Yeah I was gonna ask you if you had other professor mentors but it sounds like that wasn't available.

RS: No, not really. There were a couple of professors who I would say were very supportive, you know Leora Auslander, who was just an amazing person, and I always had just tremendous respect for her, and yeah I think I've always felt like she was on the money, so she was great, and then there was this professor in film studies, I wanna say Miriam Hansen, who always felt kind of clue-y, but these weren't people who seemed like they identified [as lesbian or queer] themselves, per se. And Lauren Berlant was there, and she seemed obviously kind of... okay she gets it [laughs], but yeah, she didn't seem, at that time at least, she didn't seem invested in the community, in the University Community itself, particularly, I think she had broader vistas she was looking at, so it didn't feel like that was where she was putting her energies.

[00:53:06]

KG: Let's see -- sorry I covered a bunch of sections out of order so I'm just looking back at the questions that we have.

RS: Sure. [laughs]

KG: So how did you decide to go to San Francisco after you graduated from U of C?

RS: Um, that was sort of a no brainer. So yeah, I think after my experience at Chicago I really wanted to be in a place that felt like it was kind of queer dominated culture, and that felt like it was either New York or San Francisco and I'd never been to San Francisco, you know, I grew up near New York so I sort of felt like that was a familiar scene, also a scene that I loved, but San Francisco felt like it was something new and in some ways because it's a smaller community the queer presence there is more palpable or more dominant in a certain sense, and it seems like, okay after being freezing cold and miserable for four years in my life, San Francisco seemed like a very desirable option. Which it was, and I think also the activism scene there was really appealing, being able to work in queer organizations, and it felt like a very... kind of... an appealing life to move into after the U of C.

KG: And when did you go back to school to become a professor?

RS: So I actually -- so I went to San Francisco right after I graduated but then I ended up doing a language program in India shortly thereafter, so I came into India, essentially the first time in India, after I graduated, and spent time in India -- about a year - and it was during that period of time when I was in India and kind of travelling around and avoiding making life decisions that I sort of started thinking about grad school, so I applied from India, and basically -- I mean in some ways my decision about grad school was very closely tied to this larger lifestyle issue, because -- so I decided to go to grad school but I only applied places where I could live in a really queer place, and so basically I ended up... so I ended up going to University of California Davis, I could have gone to Berkeley, but the people who I -- the faculty who I wanted to work with were at Davis so... but I sort of had this condition to go to Davis, which was that I had to be able to live in the Bay Area, so everybody sort of signed off on this, at Davis, so I commuted up to Davis a couple of times a week and lived in Oakland for the entirety of my Grad School life, and had a very enjoyable, very diverse, queer, and also non-queer kind of scene there. It definitely... it was a period where I felt like I had access to a much... just a sort of broader, deeper, happier queer world.

KG: And how did your self identification change over the time from UChicago until now?

RS: Um, sure, yeah, I should say that -- you know, because it's funny when you asked me this question, at the beginning of this interview, which may have actually been before the formal interview, I realized that I haven't asked myself that question in years, so it sort of took me off guard, like "oh, yeah what is my identification?", so I was very much kind of both... I would say boy lesbian identified into my mid twenties, and in some ways I think some of what was happening both in kind of theory, scholarship, and in queer communities in terms of questioning gender, the kind of gender as performativity stuff, had this sort of strange impact on me ultimately, in that I think I started out identifying very much as boy, then starting in my mid twenties, I think there's something about the [idea of gender] performativity that I could pretend to be a girl, and that was really funny, and fun, and I think I started identifying as increasingly femme, and I should say like most people probably would not have seen me as butch, even when I identified as a boy, there was just something about my look that didn't look butch, and then I think there was something about being able to play at this kind of femme identity that was sort of delightful in a certain way, and then eventually sort of felt like I could claim that, so that was one sort of trajectory over the course of my twenties, so that I could say that by the time I was in my late twenties for sure, mid to late twenties, I definitely would have identified as femme, and then the boy identification also sort of fell away through that process, which is interesting and I don't really know how that happened, because seeing myself as a boy is something that I'd carried with me from relatively early childhood, some... probably like age four or five, and I wish I could say that somehow it was beaten out of me or something like that, but actually it just sort of disappeared, it wasn't anything I wanted to get rid of, but it just sort of left, and...

Yeah, so that was sort of a process that happened over the course of my twenties, and then, but I was actually very much lesbian identified in my twenties, and had relationships pretty exclusively with women except for one important exception in my twenties, but I would say like... lesbian identified until my early thirties, until around thirty, thirty-one, and I think I started to feel like somehow things weren't -- it felt like all the things weren't clicking for me any more quite the same way, I felt like somehow I really, like I wasn't as emotionally invested in my relationships, or... I don't know, something felt like something was not quite right, and so then I started thinking about dating men, and I think, to put it in the most crass terms, I think what started to happen is I started to feel like an asshole with women, that I was just not treating people well, there was just some lack of emotional connection or something that was happening, that somehow the sexual connection and the emotional connection didn't quite gel completely, or at least they weren't at that time, I think they had previously but they had

sort of stopped doing so, so I started thinking about pursuing men, and that was kind of its own process, trying to come to terms with that, because I'd been very out, like *very* out, for more than a dozen years, so suddenly to come to terms with myself seeing men was very embarrassing, but mentally I did, and I also finished graduate school and moved away from the Bay Area, which was in some ways totally heart rending, leaving the life that I had there, but I basically had to because I finished grad school, and had got a post doc, but that process of leaving in some ways -- I had made the decision that I kind of wanted to start seeing men before I left, but I didn't do it really until after I left, so I think that process of leaving made it easier, and then I ended up meeting somebody where I did my post doc, and getting into a long term relationship with this guy, who I now have two kids with, and was definitely just like, how horrifying, I would never have wanted this to happen to myself, you know the different version of me would have never wanted this to happen to me, but I couldn't deny that that was what I wanted at that kind of later stage in my life, so I guess that's sort of my trajectory.

And I think probably my story is not your classic story, and probably not an ideal story, and certainly not a story of finding the truth and having this kind of fixity that you -- or I don't know what you'd even call it, like a kind of lodestar that you kind of can then return to in a permanent way, but for whatever reason I've been able to live with this shift that I felt over time, and in some ways I would say the hardest thing for me now is negotiating how to deal with the past lives that I've had with the present life that I have now, because I feel like right now my life looks very normative, it is very heteronormative, I have a guy who, I mean we married for visa purposes two months ago, although we've had these two kids for six years now, but so okay, how much more normative do you get? And I think I'm still very wary about trying to claim something that I'm not living, particularly with a marginalized, or, still somewhat oppressed existence, like I don't want to claim that, and I don't want to feel like I'm claiming that as mine, because I'm not living it, but I also don't wanna be closeted, or pretend like that's not part of who I am and my past, so just trying to negotiate that has been tricky, for me, and it's something that I wouldn't say that I have found an adequate answer to, but it's definitely something I think about.

KG: Yeah, yeah. Usually I ask around this time in the interview how typical an experience you had, but it sounds like yours was actually really unique. But I do think, in that sense it is sort of ideal for this project even though you didn't think that it was. I think for us to document stories that aren't necessarily a really palatable life history of self-discovery of a permanent truth at a really young age, for this project, so that's why I was really happy that you wanted me to interview you even though you didn't think that I should.

RS: [laughing] I'm a bad subject?

KG: No you're a great subject! And actually like people tell me that all the time, "oh my story's not right for your project," but often those people have stories that are the most right, because they're not necessarily gonna be represented by someone else.

RS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

KG: I have a couple of sort of wrapping up questions that I can ask you, unless you wanna return to anything that we talked about.

RS: No, um nothing I can think of really.

KG: Okay, so has your perception of the U of C changed since you've been gone?

RS: I suppose so in a couple of ways, I mean I think that the university has made major efforts to kind of change its reputation, change aspects of its, kind of, I don't know, mode of being, that are about improving student life, improving student experience, you know this actually started while I was there in a way, but I would say in a very ham-handed way at the time, although maybe you're a product of this, I don't know. I remember there was this moment where there was some outreach to try to get a broader student body, and the way that some admissions officer described what they were looking for, maybe it was even some other administrator in the college, that they were looking for a "better looking, better dressed" student body. [laughing]

KG: That's so sad. [laughing]

RS: You know, there were these kind of early attempts, in a way, to change things, but I think those efforts, my sense at least is that those efforts have paid off, maybe it's just that they've put more money into their marketing of that, but at least I get a sense that there is some effort to create a richer student life, and I think also, you know I haven't followed what's happened with the LGBT scene there in recent years, but I'm just sort of guessing, or my sense of it is that just because the society itself has changed so much in terms of visibility, or what gets talked about, or how things get talked about, and just kind of how many out people there are of all sorts, my sense is that it's probably better, and so I think in that sense my feelings about -- or my sense of what the school is like now I think is probably different than what it was like at the time I was there.

And then the second way that my feelings about it have changed, is I think in some ways over the passage of time I'm able to sort of separate myself a little bit more from the intensity of your feelings of misery that you have when you're in the moment, so I think,

I don't know how many years out alums start giving to their alma mater, I have yet to actually give, donate, I don't give, so I think that is a measure of how much I felt traumatized by the experience of being there, but I've thought about it in recent years in a way that I haven't, for years and years there was no way that I considered giving, and I think there is something with the passage of time, you sort of, you get all nostalgic about, "oh, my wonderful friends," and you're able to sort of look past some of the more intense feelings that you may have had at the time, so.

KG: Yeah.

[01:13:25]

KG: Yeah that's great because it answers both of the questions I was just gonna ask you

RS: Okay. [laughs]

KG: Can I just ask why you decided to be interviewed for the project after all?

RS: Yeah that's a good question -- I mean I guess in part I suppose I'm just happy that this is happening and so I wanted to support the work that you're doing, and you know I think I like the idea of being able to be a part of something that I think is important and interesting, I don't know how many schools are actually doing this, and like I know Chicago has a really checkered past of dealing with queer issues and I just think it's really kind of -- there's something almost poignant about being able to be a part of that. And to be honest, had you said "Actually you're not the kind of person we're looking for," I would have been fine with that, too, but yeah I think that there's something nice about being able to kind of put my voice into the mix, so yeah.

KG: Well that's pretty much everything that I have unless there's anything else that you wanna talk about during the interview...

RS: Not per se, I am sort of curious about how you got into the project and where you see it going, just out of my own curiosity, but that doesn't have to be part of the interview, per se.

KG: Yeah, I can answer that. So I was -- I just graduated in June, as an undergrad.

RS: Congratulations!

KG: Thank you! So during the spring quarter of my third year I took a class on LGBT oral histories that was -- I guess maybe like kind of a laboratory or experiment for this project, where Monica -- or I don't know if you've interacted with Monica at all, but she's like the projects fellow for this project.

RS: No, I haven't, yeah.

KG: Okay, so she's like the grad student at the helm of it, so she was teaching it and it was fifteen undergrads who were doing kind of unofficial interviews with U of C alums to see what the interest level would be. And also to teach undergrads about oral history, and so I really enjoyed that class and Monica was like "we're gonna be hiring some interns" so I emailed her and I was their first and thus far longest intern, I guess, but I have to stop working on the project at the end of the month because they can't pay me anymore.

RS: Oh no. What are you moving on to?

KG: I'm looking for jobs right now, I have an internship at a museum and that might turn into work but...

RS: Okay that's cool. Yeah. How many people has the project been able to interview at this point?

KG: So I've interviewed... when I'm done with all the interviews I've currently scheduled I'll have interviewed almost 25 people, I think like 23?

RS: Wow, that's great.

KG: Yeah, and, I think, we're close to like 65, now.

RS: Wow, that's great.

KG: Yeah, it's awesome, because I think our original goal was like 75 and then be done with the project, but now we can interview so many more people because the -- it's anticipated to go until 2015, so...

RS: Wow, wow.

KG: Yeah we've had more of a response --

RS: How have you identified people?

KG: So we originally emailed the LGBT alumni interest group, I'm not really sure if that's exactly what they're called, but whatever that alumni group is called we emailed them, they emailed people on their list, and so that was when we initially started hearing from people, and since then we've started kind of... gleaning names from interviews and then contacting those people kind of cold, and then some of them wanna do it and some of them never get back to me [laughs], but we've a -- I would say a very encouraging amount of interest in the project, even from people who are being cold emailed by random undergraduates.

[laughter]

RS: Yeah, I think I was in that category, so...

KG: Yeah, I'm not really sure who we got your name from because I kind of took you from the other interviewer who just went to graduate school in New York...

RS: Okay, uh-huh.

KG: So I don't even know where some of my interviews are coming from right now. [laughs]

RS: Right, right, right. That sounds really great, and I'm glad that there's been such a positive response.

KG: Yeah, I think a lot of people, like you were saying, are just really happy that it's happening... and I think there are a lot of people who sort of feel like the University didn't do the best that it could have done, dealing with LGBTQ issues, but they're happy to have kind of a platform to talk about it at least. And I'm glad that we can provide that, definitely.

RS: Yeah, yeah that's great. Will the material -- so I know the material's gonna be available to UofC people who are doing research projects, and stuff like that, are you planning to make things publicly available in some -- will we have access to see what other people have said in their interviews, or is it basically gonna be largely internal to UofC?

KG: Well we are having an exhibition in special collections in 2015, so that will be open to anyone who goes into the Reg, I guess [laughter] and I think it's... I think it's gonna be public in the sense that like, if you can access special collections through whatever university you're associated with then you should be able to access these things, but I'm not totally clear on that...

RS: It's not like it's posted on the web, or whatever?

KG: Right, I don't think that's the... I don't think that's the plan right now, but I could always ask and email you about that.

RS: I mean I'd be curious, but, yeah. Even what I said, I actually -- you know, I'm looking forward to reviewing it and making the decision about anonymity, and it's really something I kind of need to think through, you know I definitely -- because I was really out, the idea of being anonymous is kind of weird, but also given my current living situation, then I sort of feel like... yeah I'm just not sure, so...

KG: Yeah, that's fine.

RS: So yeah, I'll definitely review the transcript and know based on that, there may be either places that I take out something, or I make a decision to be anonymous.

KG: Yeah, and that'll definitely be fine. It'll probably be a couple of months before you get your transcript because I will not be able to transcribe it most likely before I leave.

RS: Okay, sure, yeah.

KG: So a new intern will probably take over transcribing your interview.

RS: Okay.

KG: But they will send it to you and then you can kind of just indicate anything that you want redacted, or changed to seem more anonymous, or anything like that.

RS: Sure, okay. Sounds good. Well thank you very much, it was lovely chatting with you, Kelsey.

KG: Great! Thank you so much for taking the time to call me, I hope you enjoy your research in India.

RS: Oh, thanks, and good luck with your internships and job search, etc.

KG: Thanks so much!

RS: Alright, take care.

KG: Thanks, you too! Bye.

RS: Bye!

[01:22:17]

End of Interview