

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #48

TRUMBOWER, JEFFREY (1960 -) MA 1984, PhD 1989

At U of C: 1983 - 1989

Interviewed: July 19th, 2013

Interviewer: Molly Liu

Transcript by: Molly Liu

Length: 1:24:45

Interview (July 19th, 2013) by phone:

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ML: To start off, can you tell us how you came to the University of Chicago?

JT: Well, I was—I was an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. I graduated in 1982 with a degree in political science and Spanish. But along the way I took some religious studies courses, and found that that was more of a passion than any of the other subjects. And so I took a year out, I was doing volunteer work for a year in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with a Jesuit group. Although I was not and never have been Catholic, that was a well-organized program, and I really enjoyed that year. I knew I wanted to go to graduate school, and the study of religion was the thing that compelled me most.

And so I—so Chicago had—one of the appeals of Chicago is that it had a good masters degree program that was kind of concentrated—you could do it in a year or a year and a half, maybe two years at the most—that really covered the bases of what I was missing. So they had these certifying exams, and just the structure of the program at Chicago was really good to get me up to speed that I was lacking in undergrad. Because I wanted to study a field that I really hadn't focused on as an undergrad. That was one of the main appeals of the program at Chicago.

And also, it was not religious. I was raised Episcopalian, and I had some notion that maybe I wanted to think of ordination, but I quickly abandoned that. I didn't want to go to a divinity school even at Yale or Harvard, where the real focus is on training ministers. Chicago, they did have some of that, they had a few ministerial candidates in the divinity school, but for the most part it's a graduate department of religion. Even though that's not what it's called. So that appealed to me, the way that Chicago was set up appealed to me.

I will also say that another factor was that another good friend of mine from Vanderbilt had gone to Chicago the year before and really liked it. His presence in Chicago was

another factor that led me to pick the divinity school.

ML: Right. Is there any particular reason why you were drawn to religious studies, but—and likewise, any particular reason why you didn't want to go into the priesthood?

JT: Yes. I would say—it was kind of a combination between the historical and existential. I loved history, have a passion for that. And I'm also very good at languages, that was the other thing. I had studied Spanish extensively, I was eager—the year that I was in Albuquerque, I studied German, and this, this, and so on. And I knew I would be doing Greek and Hebrew and other languages. So the notion of language study was very exciting.

But also, I think, raised religious but not overtly so—I was raised in the south, I'm from Orlando, Florida. We kind of prided ourselves, in our social circle and being raised Episcopalian in the south, you kind of had this sense of “Oh, we know that there are all those evangelical types out there, but that's not us.” So that was kind of my background. Especially when I went to Nashville, the overwhelming pervasive presence of Christianity there was much more than I had experienced in Orlando growing up. I just became fascinated by it, knew that it was not where I was, personally, but just wanted to understand it. So I think I took a course in Old Testament as an undergraduate that had a lot of ah-ha moments and just was so exciting, intellectually.

And I think also being gay, and totally closeted, there was a big aspect to that. I knew what the religious viewpoints on that were, and I knew I didn't agree with that, but I didn't know why I shouldn't, or I didn't have the tools yet—so studying religion kind of helped me gain the tools to put all that in context, and it helped me. I wouldn't say that I was tortured by religious feelings or anything, it wasn't that kind of story, but I think it was a factor in compelling me to learn more about this tradition and heritage.

ML: Right. Were you closeted when you came to the University of Chicago?

JT: Yes.

ML: What was that process like? Being in the closet, so on.

JT: Well, you just—you just suppress that part of yourself. And then you just focus on other things. That's the—I've often said that because I didn't come out until very shortly before my PhD qualifying exams—I came out in the spring of '87, and my qualifying exams were that fall—so during that whole time, the three and a half years that I was closeted at the Chicago, doing all my coursework and studying the languages and doing all that, I often say, and I think it's probably true, being closeted helped me move through the program in record time. So many people I know, and I know some people still there working on those PhDs that were there when I was. Chicago's notorious for people arriving and never leaving and never finishing their degrees. That didn't happen to me, partly because I was so focused and driven. I was like, well, I'm not going to deal with that—I kind of had in the back of my mind, someday I'm going to deal with that. But

now, I'm just going to move through my academic program and just focus on that, so I think that was partly a factor. That's kind of what it was like to be closeted. You become one of those driven graduate students, of which there are so many at Chicago.

ML: Yeah. If you don't mind me asking, when did you first become aware of your sexual orientation?

JT: Oh, much, much earlier. 11, 12, 13 years old. Certain—it was just always, there was never any question. I was totally clear on it. Though I don't think I fully understood what it all meant until later, but certainly all my earliest thoughts, feelings, dreams, everything, were all same-sex oriented for as far as I can remember.

ML: What particular factors led you to the closet for such a while?

JT: Well, that was a different era. I was growing up in the south, and there were no out role models, there was nothing. It just was all also—you couldn't even wrap your head around what it meant to tell anybody, that's the thing. And it was so funny, I definitely remember—my grandmother was a big fan of Liberace. She took me to see him when he came to Orlando one time. But I don't think I connected that with what I was. I didn't understand, “oh, he's gay and I am,” no. It didn't really include any kind of notions of effeminacy for me. I mean, I might have been a little effeminate, probably still am, but it was never the thought that oh, men who are effeminate also have sexual feelings towards other men. I don't think that ever computed with me. I just knew, yes, I had crushes on the boys in junior high, and all my sexual thoughts were about that. But I don't know how I connected it to any sort of larger thing. But I definitely knew it. There was starting to be certain things on TV. I remember famously the 60 Minutes thing, the way that they did a documentary on it. I was probably 12 or 13, and I remember watching it with one of my sisters, and kind of getting the sense of “ah, they're talking about me.” Obviously I didn't say anything. But I'd occasionally have little hints that things were—my grandmother said something that I'll never forget. I was probably 13 or 14. Something came on TV about homosexuality, and I remember, she was probably saying this very pointedly because she knew, she said, “Well, I don't think it matters at all what you do in the privacy of your own bedroom. I think people just shouldn't worry about that.” I remember her saying that, and it was just so different. She was much more free-spirited than my mother, who was her daughter, and I think my mother's way of rebelling against her mother was to become more conservative. Anyway, I have memories like that. But it didn't—it just was easier to live life in the closet. That was the whole point, that was the way—and if I thought about it, I should have gone to college somewhere in the Northeast, or somewhere in California. I could have done any of those things. But it just—I stayed in the South, those things just didn't dawn on me that they were options.

[0:11:05]

ML: Right. I mean, it does seem like if you don't have any role models and don't see yourself in any that are around, it's hard, right?

JT: Yeah, you just don't envision—you don't envision what those possibilities might be.

ML: To switch gears a little bit, can you talk about your academic experience at the University of Chicago?

JT: Sure. It was very fine in many ways. That masters program did live up to its potential, and I think I did fill in a lot of gaps and get a lot of grounding. When it came time to apply to PhD programs, I was also accepted at Yale. I applied to several other places and was accepted at Yale, and went and interviewed there and met a lot of people, strongly considered going there instead of staying at the University of Chicago. Chicago countered with a nicer financial offer to stay in the PhD program. So I stayed. I was quite—I was very happy with the whole educational experience at Chicago, I think they did a very good job. And it certainly was good rigor, there was a lot of opportunities. I did a lot of work in the Oriental Institute with languages, so those connections were important. I ended up settling on the biblical field and early Christianity as my specialty, and that's what I've been teaching in since then. It was great. I think that for the most part, I don't have any complaints.

ML: Right. And you did mention that you came out of the closet while you were at the University of Chicago. [JT: Yes.] What was that process like for you?

JT: Well, it was like a tornado. And there was a proximate cause. Things had been building up. I was 26 years old, and I was thinking, "Okay, now's about the time to deal with it." I had had one or two furtive sexual experiences, and I thought, "This is no—I need to deal with this more clearly." Still, it took a catalyst to make me do it. The catalyst was a woman who was a very good friend of mine. We used to play tennis once a week, and she was the wife of a grad student in the medical school, he was doing an MD/PhD kind of deal. She was his wife, and she was just working, thinking about going back to school herself. She had aspirations to be an opera singer, so she was looking into a program at Northwestern. Anyway, we had met. We both went to this Episcopal Church named St. Paul and the Redeemer, which is in northern Hyde Park. I was very good friends with her.

One day, in 1987, I got a phone call from a mutual friend of ours who said that she was in the hospital at U of C for attempted suicide. It was such a shock. It was just so—I couldn't fathom. Because I just thought there was no sign, I had no idea where that was coming from, no hint why she would have done that. It had nothing to do with her sexual orientation or anything like that. I went and saw her, and then we didn't talk about this until months later, but that very afternoon, after I came home from the hospital after having visited her with these mutual friends, I decided, "That's it. I'm coming out today." It was—because I thought, I don't know what led her to that, and I—I never ever, ever had suicidal thoughts, ever, but I just said, "Whatever it was that led her to that, I don't want me to ever get to that point. So I'm just going to deal with this today."

My first stop was the mutual friends that we had discussed. I called them up, I said—they had just gotten back from the hospital too. Interestingly, they were also friends from this church, and they lived in Hyde Park but they weren't U of C. They were a black couple,

both lawyers who worked downtown. So I went to see them. They were the first people I came out to. And I remember telling them, I remember saying, “Gosh, I feel like I'm putting myself in an oppressed minority group.” And they said, “Well, don't worry, you'll get used to it.” And so then, then I had to speed out to the suburbs where that old friend from Vanderbilt was living at the time, and I met—so I met him and told him, and then I had to—it was like within a week, I told everybody that I knew. It was just this wild whirlwind, except for—let me say this, I told everyone in Chicago. Then a couple months later in June, on the pretext of going down for my birthday, I went down to Florida where my parents were still living and my one sister. So I went down there and I came out to them at that point. It was a couple of months later. So I did all this very fast. It wasn't like I was in a relationship or anything like that, I just had to tell 'em all, and I had to tell them as fast as possible. So that's the way it all happened. And I had to tell them in person. Of course this was the days before email and Facebook, so you had to say things in person. So that was how that all unfolded.

At Chicago, there was a coming out group that I joined very quickly in April, just a week after I started coming out, that used to meet—it was on Woodlawn. Yeah, it was on Woodlawn. It may have been—was it a Quaker meeting house? I don't remember where it was. I definitely remember that it was right on, right on Woodlawn, the main thoroughfare. We would meet in the evening, on the first floor, and the lights would be on, so anybody walking by could see this group as we were talking. I remember this freaked me out a little bit, although nobody would know what the group was. It could have been anything. I remember being a little spooked by that the first time I went. But I got over that and met a couple of people there in the process of coming out. That was helpful. I would say that the university did provide some kind of resource, even in 1987, that I took advantage of as I was coming out.

ML: Right. What was the reception like among your friends in Chicago and among your family when you came out?

JT: Well, the Chicago people were all fine. I remember this one woman, she thought she was saying something great, but it was a little weird. She was also from the South, so in her southern accent, she said, “Oh, I knew you were gay the first time I met you.” What the hell are you saying? So much for my wonderful—

ML: “What does that even mean??”

JT: So I learned of another couple people who were that I didn't know about. I was like, “Really?” That was the kind of thing where there was a couple, I definitely remember a couple of episodes like that. There was certainly no negative baggage, I didn't lose any friends or anything. There was one professor I came out to pretty early on, and he said, “Oh, it's quite a tradition in academia, so it's not a problem.” So no, I don't remember any negative consequences. I remained a member of that church, and I told the priest, Sam Lloyd, who is now the big honcho at the—for a time he was the curating priest at the National Cathedral in Washington. He's definitely moved up in Episcopal Church circles, and I've kept in touch with him as he's moved from Chicago. Anyway, he's great, a very

good—we had very good, a couple of very good counseling sessions, and he was always really accepting, and that was a good experience. So I never had a beef with organized religion. Since I moved to Vermont, I have since become a Unitarian Universalist, but that was all for theological reasons, not for somehow, the Episcopal Church done me wrong on gay issues, it's all been great. So the Chicago experience was fine.

Florida, my father was wonderful, my sisters—it took them a little while, but they've been fine. My mother was another story. Her whole thing was very much country club Republican, kind of Barbara Bush type of person. So not any kind of fundamentalist kind of person, but just obsessed with what other people think. That was her thing, that was everything. What are the neighbors going to think, what are these people going to think? So she was just deeply ashamed and embarrassed. Never any question of rejection or anything like that. Just didn't want other people to know. That was her obsession.

[0:22:20]

That eventually got—that came to a head in the year 2000. So it took a long time to resolve all that. The irony is that all her friends in the country club, they all have gay kids that I know about, it's a very common thing. But they just don't talk about it, and it's just—so that's the kind of Southern country club culture part of that. That all came to a head in the year 2000, when my niece got married. And I'm very close to my niece and nephew who grew up around the corner from me in high school. I have two much older sisters, so anyway, I'm very close to this niece, and she's getting married, and the whole question is, is my partner going to get invited to the wedding or not? So—and she wanted him, but she didn't want to cross my mother, and blah blah. Eventually I told my mother that if he wasn't invited I wouldn't come. That broke the logjam, so yes, he came. We had this bizarre scheme, where we thought we solved—because again, all of my mother's friends were going to be there in the church. This was such a public thing, and she was freaking out about it. We devised a scheme where I was going to do a reading, because I'm a biblical scholar, and what better thing is there than the biblical scholar do a reading? My mother thought that that meant that I would be sitting up with the dais party, so I wouldn't be in the family box, and that my partner could be in the family box, but everyone would just wonder, “Oh, who's that? Just some cousin,” they wouldn't know who he was. She thought that was going to be the way it was. But when we got to the rehearsal—this was in the Methodist Church—the Methodist minister just said, “Oh, oh no, you just sit with the family and when you do the reading you come on up. My mother's face just—ugh. So by then it too late. So we sat together, and then I introduced him. It's so funny, I introduced him to her friends as my partner. A couple of them thought business partner, but the others got it, who were smart. And from that point on then it was fine. That kind of barrier was broken and she lived for seven more years. I went to my nephew's wedding without any problem, we both did, and so things got better. But that was about 15 years to get through that.

ML: Right. Yeah. To go back to Chicago, were there other gay people you knew? How was the—were there other visible gay or lesbian role models for you to have?

JT: What did you say? At union? Other gay people at what?

ML: Oh, at the university.

JT: Oh, at the university, oh. Well, let me think. Not among any professors I knew at that time. Later there were, I know there are some now. This was before Kathryn Tanner arrived. Not that I knew among the professoriate. And among friends and colleagues, just a couple. I think, I do remember in the couple months before I came out, it seemed like there was a lot more articles about gay and lesbian stuff in *The Maroon*. A lot more visibility. I don't know if there's a period you can say that things became a lot more visible. But there were—I do remember just seeing articles about, and seeing certain names of certain student leaders, or certain people, that I knew who they were. “Oh, okay, I know who that one is.” And so I—that may have helped, in that when it came time to have the big whirlwind come out, it was...There was stuff going on. There was some visibility. I think they had already started those gay and lesbian fortnights. I'm not sure what the first night of that was, I think I was around then. I think I knew that that existed. You know, just that the increasing visibility helped enable me to do it, because I knew that that would be safe. There will be resources, there will be people I can turn to, et cetera.

Of course this is also the height of AIDS. And the height of the—that's the other thing. Being in the closet might have saved my life. The fact that I was celibate from 1983 to 1987 meant that I was not involved in all that, whereas if I had had the courage to come out earlier, who knows what would have happened. So there's some irony there, perhaps. 1987 was the height of all—and of course AIDS was still a death sentence at that point. And so I remember, I remember I had some very irrational, just over-the-top fears, the first sexual experiences I had. I was sure, I was just sure that I had contracted AIDS, even though there was no way that I did. I remember going to the U of C clinic and getting tested. The whole thing was really bizarre. But I had some good conversations with some medical people over there about the risks. And about coming out, and I do remember going over there once and having a good conversation with, I don't know, some doctor or nurse, I don't know who it was. Male. All about my situation and so that was also helpful. So that was a very turbulent time, to be just starting to experiment sexually. And suddenly you have to be so careful, and you can't do this, and you can't do that—that was rough, that was a rough part of it as well.

ML: It is good though, that it seems like the university as a whole was pretty supportive. Do you think that there was like a gay community on campus, and did you feel a part of the gay community at all?

JT: Well, eventually, once I figured where it was and how to access it, yes. There certainly was. There was GALA and I know you talked to Bert Harrill [Interview #45], who was later president, I don't remember what year it was. It may have been that fall, that Bert arrived on campus. He was a, he was a much more out guy by the time he got there, and he's much younger than I. At that time, I remember now—I was at a GALA event. I remember they were very sparsely attended. We'd have these things and they'd be like

five or six, and a lot of them were very strange. Because a lot of people at Chicago anywhere are strange, that goes with the territory. But anyway, I remember being at one of these things and overhearing him tell someone that he was in this program, this very obscure program called ECL, which was under the humanities division, a program in early Christian literature. It was so funny, I remember that when I first got to Chicago in '83, I found out this program existed, and I thought, "Oh wow, a whole new set of professors!" Well, no, they were all the same professors, they just had double appointments. And it was just this weird thing, vestige from the 1890s, when the divinity school was supposed to be more spiritual and ECL was supposed to be more secular. It was a very—it's since gone away, ECL no longer exists. But anyway, Bert's telling this person that he's in this ECL program that no one's ever heard of, and I turn around and say, "Oh my gosh, I've heard of it! I'm in the divinity school and studying the bible, so I know all about ECL!" We started talking then and we've been friends ever since. So yes, there was, that was an occasion to meet some people, and there was some networking. The other big place that had a lot of stuff going on for GLBT was Sam Portaro and the Episcopal campus ministry. The name of it, I can't remember, it's called something house. It's on Woodlawn also, and it's still there. Oh gosh, what was it called?

ML: I think it's called Brent House? That's what I've been hearing.

[0:31:35]

JT: Yes, Brent House, that's what it was called. So at the time, the head of Brent House was someone named Sam Portaro [Interview #65], an Episcopal priest, who was—I don't know what point he became openly out. It may have been by then, but if it wasn't it certainly was shortly thereafter. Anyway he ran all sorts of programming out of Brent House. Now some of it was just regular programming, but he also had a GLBT arm. I remember going to a number of things there. He'd have movie showings and speakers. I remember he brought in Chris Boswell—no, John Boswell, the Yale scholar who was doing all that stuff about same-sex unions. He was a big hot scholar in the early '80s. The divinity school didn't bring him in, but Sam Portaro did. I remember a great, all-day workshop with him that was just fantastic. So there's—Brent House was also the locus of a lot of programming and networking for GLBT people back then.

ML: That's really great! Yeah, you mention the GALA events being kind of sparsely attended. Do you remember how many people came, what sorts of events they were?

JT: Mostly it was just kind of get-togethers. Stand around and eat chips and drink soda or whatever. They weren't, as I recall they weren't all that compelling. But it was a good place to initially meet people. But they weren't—they weren't thriving parties with pulsing music, anything like that. They were just kind of typical U of C kind of, you know, meet and greet kind of stuff. As I recall. There may have been stuff that I just don't remember or that I just wasn't involved in. That's what I remember. I do remember a dance or two. I have a vague memory of a couple of dances in Ida Noyes that were gay. This might have been '87, '89. I remember as I went along, there was more stuff. I just have a vague memory of it.

The other thing is that when you're in Chicago and you come out, well, you instantly zip to the North Side. You don't hang around Hyde Park. And so that was a lot of—there was just a whole big city to explore. So it wasn't like, oh, I've got to have all the stuff going at Chicago. You get a few friends and you get into a car or you get into a cab or whatever, you go up North and go to Sidetrack and Roscoe's and all those places.

ML: Did you guys get to go out to the city of Chicago a lot?

JT: Oh yeah, definitely. It was a—it's never easy from Hyde Park, especially coming back. Getting up there's not a problem, but if it's 2am and you're trying to get back, there's really no option except a cab. So—although I had a car. So I would drive up. But okay, so you'd drive up there, but then there's no where to park. So that's the other problem. But I got pretty good at knowing. And you'd never go on Wrigley nights, the baseball games, because then parking was impossible. So you'd look at the baseball schedule, make sure that there was no game, and then you'd go and then you'd find certain side streets which would often have something if you went at the right time. So I learned to do that. And sometimes I'd go on public transportation up and just take a cab back. Or you'd go with a group of people and come back. So I pretty quickly met a circle of friends, we'd go up there and we'd hang out and do stuff. I probably went up there at least once a week, I'd say.

And I remember, I toyed with the idea of living up there, because a lot of people I knew did that. They were like, okay, they're still grad students in Chicago, but they're going to go up and live in the gay section because they want to really experience that life. I thought about that. I had a really great coach house behind a house on 48th St that I had secured my second year. My first year I lived in International House, which I enjoyed, and that was great. My second year that friend of mine from Vanderbilt and I, he found it for me when I was away for the summer, found this coach house behind a house up in—it was very leafy, and it had a yard, and it was very easy for me to park. And it was in Kenwood, so it was an easy walk to church and the tennis courts and all that. Really liked living up there. So I thought—and the bus came around, so I'd often take the bus to campus. Or I'd walk. It was about a half-hour walk, but that was good exercise. So I asked myself, “Do I want to live up on the North Side and have to commute five days a week? Or do I want to live in the university and commute up one day a week?”

And so that was my calculus, so I stayed. My friend left, he got a job out in the suburbs, and I had other roommates. I had one gay roommate in '88. Some mutual friends, he's still a good friend, John [redacted], who was in the law school. And so that was, that was really fun. He and I palled around and did a lot of stuff up on the North Side together. And then the final year, I decided to just live there by myself. I was ready for the adult experience of just living by myself. So anyway, I kept that, I stuck with that coach house for five years. The owner of the house, the ownership passed in the middle of my tenancy, the big house, it was just this enormous mansion, was sold to Fred Donner, who was a professor at the Oriental Institute, professor of Islamic studies. So that was good. He inherited me as a tenant. It was great, I got to know him, and that's been a good

association. In fact, last year I had him come speak, give a lecture here at St. Michael's on his latest book, *At the Origins of Islam*. So that's been a good association ever since. So anyway, it worked out for me to stay there. But yes, I did go to the North Side.

ML: Did your—did your map of the city change at all from when you were closeted to when you were out of the closet?

JT: Oh definitely. It got—when I was closeted I did go up to the North Side sometimes. I'd go to blues clubs, I did explore the city when I was still closeted. But afterwards, after I came out, yeah, a whole new world opened up. Chicago is just an incredible place to be young and gay. Although again, AIDS cast a pall over the whole thing. You were just very careful, and you had—it was—no, but definitely my mental map of the city shifted and now I was, I understood all kinds of different neighborhoods that I didn't know before.

[0:40:03]

ML: Right. Yeah. Like, as for your social circles, did they also change from when you were closeted to when you were out?

JT: Yes, definitely. I mean, I still, I'll say that I retained all the straight friends that I had before. That wasn't any kind of issue. But I just had a whole big new circle that was totally, that was very different.

ML: Yeah, this is kind of an off-the-wall question, but it's interesting that the first people you came out to, that African-American couple, you said, “Oh, it's crazy being part of this oppressed minority group,” and they said, “Oh, you get used to it.” Like kind of a parallel between African-Americans and gay people. Do you see that as being—do you see that as being a parallel, and what do you think is—?

JT: Well, there are a few things that are parallel. Mostly it's not parallel, I would say. One thing is that I would say that if you're African-American and you're growing up in an oppressive culture, at least you've always got your family. Your family's in it with you, because they're African-American too. So if you run into some problem or discrimination out in the big bad world, well, you can tell your mama, your grandmama, they have the same experience. We gay people have for the most part been spawned by straight people. So we don't have—our parents, or our family don't get it. There's no solidarity there. It's a very different kind of experience. The other thing is that we have the option of hiding it. Except for that woman who said to me, “oh I knew from the day I met you,” I'd walk into a store and who knows what I am? It's not the same kind of thing. I'm not going to be followed—I'm not going to be stopped on the highway, and I'm not going to be followed in the store or anything like that, because I look totally white-bread Southern gentleman. It's a very different kind of experience, a very different kind of discrimination. I think the parallels are more dissimilar than they are similar. But there is that sense of being the, not the mainstream, not the dominant thing in the culture, all those kinds of things. There are some similarities. But for the most part I don't think it's very similar. They were just trying to reassure me and make a joke. It's funny, when they said that I was caught aback. They

were such successful high-powered lawyers downtown, I never even thought of them as being an oppressed minority group. I knew they were African-American, but I didn't think of them as—that just caught me. It's like, “oh, yeah, right, you guys are black.”

ML: “I forgot!”

JT: Yeah!

ML: Yeah. Yeah, did your association with GALA and the other gay groups on campus, did that continue throughout the rest of your time at UChicago?

JT: Yes, yes it did.

ML: Did those groups change at all while you were there? Or did you see any sort of shifts at all?

JT: Well, it was only two and a half years, so it wasn't a long, long time. Not really. I don't—I can't pinpoint anything that would have been different.

ML: Sure. So what did you do after getting your PhD from UChicago?

JT: Well, I got this job at St Michael's College. I came right here and started teaching, and I've been here ever since. That was interesting in the sense that I was not out in my job application or anything. Nothing I had written or done would lead anyone to think—I hadn't done queer studies or anything like that. So my CV that I submitted to job applications had no hint on it that I'm a gay man, et cetera. So—and again, this is where the discrimination piece is different for an African-American. Once they go into the interview, it's like, oh, ah, now we know. Me, I don't have any sense that they thought anything about it. So I got the job on my own merits, which is great. And I think I had—again, it's a Catholic institution, but it's on I would say very much the left wing of the Catholic spectrum. Even back then it was. So for example, St Michael's has had domestic partner benefits since '96. It was the first Catholic college in the country to do so. There's always been—and once you get here, it's like oh my gosh, how many gay people are running things? And so that's—but coming here, I wasn't sure. I didn't know that that would be the case. So there was a little trepidation, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to stay here. But you know, a job is a job. And it was the only tenure-track offer I had.

I had a couple of non-tenure-track offers, but this is the one that had stability and a future, so I thought, well—and Burlington, it's right outside Burlington, Vermont. Which is a great town. And so, that was important. I wasn't going to go to the middle of Nebraska. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but being a single gay guy, there's no way that I was—I wanted to have some kind of social life. And of course we're only an hour and a half from Montreal, and there's a lot of pluses to Burlington. So it was a great location. Still it was tough coming from Chicago. I had developed this very urban life, and Burlington is a nice little town but it's not Chicago. So that was—I had a little trepidation about that too.

Anyway, but I, once I got here, I made no attempt to hide things. Pretty early on, in the fall of my first semester here, there was actually a hate crime in Burlington where a gay guy was beat up behind the gay bar by somebody. He didn't die, but he was in the hospital. There was a vigil in the Unitarian Church, and I went. There was one of my colleagues and his wife, from my department in religious studies, very liberal, very everything. I saw them at this service, and so I took that opportunity to come out to him. I said to them, I said to him, "You increased the diversity of the department last year and you didn't even know it." So they laughed, ha ha ha. Not only was I the first non-Catholic hired in the religious studies department, now I was the first openly gay person too. So anyway, but the experience at St Michael's has been fantastic.

There has been no—I will say when I was named the academic dean in 2005, the local—we used to have a little newspaper in Vermont that was called *Out in the Mountains*, that was a gay newspaper. It's now defunct. But they, in 2005 they did a story on me. Kind of like, local boy does good, appointed dean of Catholic college. Of course it went viral on the internet, and there are a lot of Catholic people trolling the internet for things like that. For about a week, the college was bombarded by flames and hate mail, the president and me, stuff like that. But the college stood by me the entire time, didn't shrink or rescind the offer of dean-ship or anything. That was the only blip in otherwise a very fine experience. My partner comes to events and everyone knows him. It's just been—we've got, I'd say we've probably got 10 to 15—10 to 12 openly gay faculty members out of a total of 130. And lots of staff. So it's not—and it's in Vermont, I think that's a key factor, Vermont has always had this kind of attitude about it.

ML: That's really good to hear. How did you meet your partner?

JT: It was in 1994, and it was an event here. We have an organization called Vermont Gay Social Alternatives. It was supposed to be an alternative to the gay bar. We had one. Burlington always had one gay bar. That has—that closed about five years ago. We're so mainstream. All the mainstream bars have gay nights. It just couldn't make it financially, there was no way to run a gay bar. Anyway, we have this thing, and it still exists, it's called Vermont Gay Social Alternatives. They do all sorts of things, hikes and events and all kinds of stuff. So it was at one of those events. He had gone out on one date with a good friend of mine. It was clear that wasn't going to go anywhere. I was standing on the deck of boathouse on Lake Champlain, looking towards the deck. And of course by that time I had lived here for five years, and I thought I knew everybody, I thought I knew every gay guy in Northern Vermont. And here he comes walking up the plank, and I was just, "Oh my gosh, who is that?" He says, "Oh, that's Chris, I went out with him but you know, blah blah blah," and so I made sure I schmoozed my way over to him to meet him at the event. And we start going out, et cetera, et cetera. Now we are married after 19 years.

ML: That's really lovely! But yeah, I guess as the dean of the college, I'm sure you see a lot of students passing through. I'm wondering, what are the differences that you see between your experience as a college student vs. their experience, the gay and lesbian students,

their experiences?

[0:51:08]

JT: Oh my gosh, it's like night and day. It's so—we have a very active group here on campus. And it's called Common Ground. Part of it—one of the things about being in the Catholic world is sometimes you have to create little bits of legal fiction to not get, to not get people's too much knickers in a twist. So our—we've had gay student groups for a long time, but they've always had names that have connoted a wider circle. They're not just for gay students. Actually that's been kind of good. It used to be called Ally, now it's called Common Ground. Very active student leadership.

Now we've had a little mini-rush, a mini-boomlet of transgender students these days. I've had two in my classes just recently. Especially female-to-male. We have several students transitioning. We just built, we're just finishing a new dorm specifically with spaces, rooms with private baths, if a student like that really wants to have that kind of privacy. They built—not just for those students, but other special needs. They built it with that in mind. We've created a lot of gender-neutral bathrooms on campus. That's been a new phenomenon. That was just completely beyond my ken. I don't think I knew any in Chicago in the '80s. I'm sure they existed, but that was just not on the radar. So it's kind of expanded to include that. And of course for the out gay students, they're very active, they're planning programs, they're doing this and doing that. We've had a number of student leaders, like the president of the students' association. Maybe two of the last five have been gay, and they get elected to those posts.

Now, having said that, I also have learned, and I learned this from certain friends of mine who are kind of into the Grindr scene, all that stuff, the places where you find instant sex partners, I have learned via that route that there are closeted students too. Which is very interesting. There are some students that—I only know about men. But I don't know their names, I don't know who they are. But just, I've had a friend or two tell me, oh. And of course I don't want to hear about this because I'm the academic dean. But they'll tell me, they'll say, “Oh, I hooked up with a St Michael's guy the other day, and he's closeted, et cetera et cetera.” That is fascinating. I don't have the resources to do a sociological study of it, and I don't even want to think about that because god, I'm the dean. But it is happening. So what's going on in the heads of those young men I have no idea. So there is also a population, the famous men who have sex with men, but who don't necessarily identify as gay, and who aren't participating in gay social events. And so I don't know, that I—it's a phenomenon that's very difficult to get a handle on, because who knows what they're thinking. Or who knows if they will later come out as gay, or maybe they're bi and just experimenting and will later be with a woman, I don't know what the story is. But it is a phenomenon that I have learned about, but I don't want to learn any more about it. Because it's too dangerous!

ML: What do you think—for you, what does “gay” as an identifier versus as a behavior, what does that mean to you?

JT: That's a good question. For me, it's so clear-cut, there's no ambiguity at all. On a Kinsey scale I'm a pure 6 or whatever. I've never had a heterosexual thought in my life. It's just so, such a complete part of every fiber of my being, I don't even know what it would mean not to be. I think for other people it's different. I think for other people there is more ambiguity, there is more possibility of going back and forth. So I don't think it's necessarily one size fits all. I don't believe in essentialist labels, like, "Okay, I've now figured out your essence." I think kind of the culture has moved towards—any non-conventional kind of sexual or gender identity thing is being seen in a similar light, and then there's the other thing is the fluidity among people who might call themselves straight has also increased. People who—the big change I seem to have noticed, and it's partly cultural because I'm in the Northeast or because I'm in a college setting, there's so much more openness among straight men to—do you mind if I take a call?—

[0:57:13 – 0:59:56: Call dropped]

JT: The big change in my experience and this was a big shift. I noticed it, this was the big thing I noticed when I moved North from the South, is that the greater comfort of straight men around gay stuff, and about being around gay people, and it not being such a big deal. My experience being in the South, both in Nashville and in Orlando, straight men just wanted to avoid any hint or any notion having to do with being gay. It was just such a horrible thing. Whether it was another gay person or about some trait in themselves, whatever it was. I kind of first got a hint that things could be different on that score after my freshman year of college, I took this job at a YMCA camp in Western Massachusetts. That's kind of the first time I ever got to know New England, long before I knew I'd end up in Vermont. And there, it was a revelation to meet these guys, they were just less bigoted, they were more comfortable with themselves, it was just a different experience with other men. That continued somewhat when I was in Chicago, but especially back here. There's one reason I like New England a lot. It's just a much easier atmosphere. Maybe it's because the North won in the Civil War, I don't know what it is, but they're just more comfortable with themselves. And they don't have anything to prove. The Southern men all have something prove. And that creates all kinds of distortions. I even see it in my own family, somewhat. So there's, that's one reason why I was really glad to be able to come back to New England. I see that among the students here. And it's only increased. You see that the guys will put their arms around each other and it's not a big deal. It's just a different atmosphere than the other places in the country that I've experienced.

ML: Right. Yeah, you mention differences between New England and the South. But do you see differences between Chicago and New England?

JT: Yes, in the sense that Chicago, in all its—it's a big city and it's got total diversity and it's got everything you could possibility imagine. But especially in the circles that you move in when you're a divinity student, Chicago still is Midwestern and has that kind of Midwestern religious ethos as well. The influence of the Lutheran Church as the kind of traditional sturdy, very American—open and tolerant, I'm not saying that it's fundamentalist and awful, but the religious aspect—people take religion seriously in

Chicago. Just like they do in the South. Whereas in New England they don't. New England is the most secular region of the country by far, and Vermont is even more so in that. Teaching religious studies is very different. Because one of the challenges is just to convince the student that this is even worth paying any attention to at all. That's the challenge. Not teaching them to be—to disabuse them of all their earlier notions, no no, that's not the challenge. The challenge is why should we study this at all? You don't encounter that in Chicago. Chicago they understand why religion is important to study. So that's—I think that's a difference.

ML: This question's actually more—points more towards my ignorance about the div school on campus. But how linked up is the divinity school with the rest of the University of Chicago?

JT: I think it's pretty plugged in. I'll say I'll put it this way: I think divinity school people feel themselves to be connected, and they're proud of those connections. They like it if they have joint appointments in South Asian studies or the Oriental Institute or whatever. They prize their connections to the rest of the university. I'm not sure the rest of the university prizes their connection to the divinity school. I think it's an underappreciated resource, actually, and I think the rest of the university has no concept—like, what are they doing over there?

It is a strange beast. Because it's not like the divinity schools at Harvard and Yale, which have—or Vanderbilt or Duke or any of those places. Those divinity schools, their primary mission is the training of ministers, and they have a study of religion, an academic study of religion, it's always housed in the humanities or in a Near Eastern languages—it's housed in some secular department. Or it might be housed in the religion department. Yale and Duke both have a religion department, and a divinity school. The divinity school is for the graduate training of ministers, and the religion department is for undergrads and for graduate students who are getting PhDs. That divide is very clear at other schools.

Chicago is unique. I don't think there's anything like it in the country, where—maybe there's something like it in Europe, I don't know. But in the US, it's a very unique setup where it is mostly a graduate department of religion that also has a divinity arm, a ministerial training arm, and has some undergraduate programming, which they didn't back in my day, but they've developed it since. And it does it all under the aegis of a thing called a divinity school. Which is just not usual. They know—I'm very, very good friends with the dean, Margaret Mitchell. She and I, she was a couple of years ahead of me in the PhD program. She and I see each other a couple of times a year and compare notes about being dean, what it's like. And she's terrific. Oh my god, what a powerhouse. They're all fully aware of this odd place. But I think it's the oddness that makes it attractive. It really is unique. And I think the rest of the university doesn't understand it very well. I'm sure the provost and president do. But in terms of the average faculty member or the average person who's in another area, it's not like anything else. And it's not a professional school like the business school or the law school, although it has a tiny arm of it that is. But mostly it isn't. I think people don't know what to make of it.

ML: And you did say its uniqueness was part of what drew you to the div school here, right?

JT: Yes. It definitely—because it enabled me to do an academic program while still entertaining the thought that I might do the ministry thing, because when I first arrived I wasn't sure. I thought, “Well, I might go that route.” It kept that option. Whereas if I had gone to any other place, I would have had to choose. You're either in this, or you're in that. So there's no back and forth. That's one thing that attracted me. I think I too didn't understand it until after I was there, and then I got how different it was. But it's very good. The way Margy always puts it, and kind of how the official literature puts it, it's a place that takes religion seriously. You don't have to be a believer, but it's okay if you are. That's another thing at these other schools, a divide between the believers and the nonbelievers, and sometimes they don't want anything to do with each other. At Chicago, that gap is bridged a lot, and the kind of conversation that's going on. But I think that's a real strength of the place. It helps me here, in a Catholic institution, a gay Unitarian and the dean of a Catholic institution, I think I learned how to speak that language and how to bridge that gap better at Chicago than I would have at another kind of place.

ML: Yeah. So one thing that I might have just missed or didn't hear in your account—I notice that a lot of the people you talk about are gay men. Were there a lot of gay women as well in the organizations you were in, in Chicago?

JT: Good—good question. I don't remember them very much. I had one good friend at the divinity school. I forget when she—I think she arrived at the time that I was coming out. She was a lesbian. She did a degree in Old Testament and is now teaching somewhere, so she's had a good academic career. And she was a lesbian. I definitely remember that. But I just don't remember that many. And I don't remember them being as active in things like GALA. My memory of GALA stuff is mostly men. And my memory of that coming out group too was also men. Maybe they had a separate one for women. I don't know. But you're right. Even going to Brent House, the programming there, my memory is just all being about men. That's a good—I could have faulty memory. They could have been there, and I was just so gaga over the men that I don't remember them. This could be totally inaccurate. But this is my recollection. I just don't remember there being a lot of female voices or presence in the things that I was doing.

ML: Do you think that that's still true in what you see as the dean of a college?

[1:11:10]

JT: It's certainly not true at St Michael's. Partly it's because we're such a small place, so they have to cling to each other. But the student programming, the student groups here, basically that group called Common Ground consists of gay men, lesbians, the transgender type, and a goodly number of straight women allies. I'd say that's the general makeup of that crowd. So, yes. That's the—kind of the way that works. I'd say that I don't see the segregation at all on our campus. Now we're only five minutes from the University of Vermont, and there's a lot of programming that goes on there, and I know some people who are involved in what goes on there. Because it's a bigger school, you

might have a little more separation. But still, I think they're pretty well integrated too. I have no idea what it's like in Chicago. I have no idea what the students are doing there.

ML: So I guess, looking back, do you think your perception of Chicago has changed over the years?

JT: No. I think I always had a fairly high estimation of it, and I think I still do. I think it's an excellent, excellent university. The great—I say this to everyone I meet about it. Chicago is such a great place for pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. It certainly was in my day, maybe it's still true—it may be a bit easier to get in, for the graduate program in the divinity school, than it is to get into the really rarefied—the thing in Harvard where they take only 8 students a year in the study of religion or at Yale, where they—they take many fewer grad students. The traditional programs in religion take very few grad students.

Chicago, because it's got that big MA thing and it draws from that, it has a significantly higher number of grad students that enter the program each year than those schools. It may be a bit easier to get in. But it's a lot harder to get out. The thing is that Chicago, you—there's a lot of value-added. They put you through the wringer—you work like a dog. And when you emerge, if you're able to emerge from it, you're really something. That's my view of it. And of course a lot of people drop out on the way. They don't make it. Or they end up living in Hyde Park for the rest of their lives and working at the UC Press or some job like that. Which is fine, it's a wonderful career. But they don't ever finish those PhDs. And those other schools really try to avoid that strongly. But there's something about that which enables Chicago to polish and produce diamonds in the rough that others might overlook. Here I'm only talking about the graduate school. I think there's been a change in the undergrad. The undergrad, from what I can tell by reading the alumni magazine and stuff, has become this very highly selective thing. And I'm not saying the grad programs aren't selective. But there's a little bit of a different attitude where Chicago's willing to take a chance on somebody who shows potential but hasn't achieved it all yet. Whereas some of these other schools are looking for people who have already achieved it all. And so what do they need the school for? So I think Chicago's a lot of value-added.

It's true for faculty too. There's countless faculty I know who start their careers in Chicago, make their name, do their huge big research thing, and then they are about 50 or 40 years old, and then Harvard or Princeton snatch them up, they take them away from Chicago, this is a constant pattern. But then once they get to those new places, do they do any more exciting cutting-edge...? Well, sometimes now. They've made it, they've done their thing. But where they did their real, seminal work was at Chicago. You tend to be working with the most exciting people at Chicago, I think.

ML: Harvard is where people go to retire, or something.

JT: Go to rest on their laurels.

ML: Yeah. Where does Chicago fit in in the narrative of your own life?

JT: Well, it's—gosh, it was pivotal. It was where I learned my trade, it's where I learned to be a scholar, it's where I came out—everything. I have much more affection for it than I have for my undergraduate institution, Vanderbilt, which was just when I look back truly an ill fit for me. Educationally it was great. I had a good educational preparation and foundation there. But socially it was just horrible. And I would—so now it's changed a lot too. It's no longer the provincial southern institution that it was back in the '80s. But still—if I were 20 years old again, I would think very differently about which kind of education I would pursue.

And of course since I've been in St Michael's, I've become a huge fan of liberal arts colleges. I think for undergraduate that's the best you can possibly do. And then after that I'd put a place like Chicago for the really serious students. But the liberal arts college where you get a lot of individual attention and you forge really strong ties with faculty. I think that's the way to go. And I advise anybody who can afford it that that's what they ought to do.

But no, Chicago's been pivotal for me. I'm usually in Chicago at least once a year, because there's an annual conference in early Christian studies that meets every May in Chicago. I didn't go this year, but I go almost every year, and I always go down to Hyde Park, I take a nostalgic walk around the neighborhood. I don't know too many people there anymore, but I'll—certainly some of the faculty at the divinity school I'm still in touch with. And I go to the Seminary Co-op bookstore, all that stuff. So no, I think about it very fondly.

ML: The Seminary Co-op has changed its location. It's very sad. It used to be so—

JT: I've heard, I've heard. I was there among its—they were announcing that it was going to change. I haven't been to its new location. I haven't seen it, don't know what it's like. I will miss the old one. But I will say, every time I would be in there, I always felt, if there's a fire we're all dead.

ML: Yeah, that's definitely true!

JT: I was always so nervous in those nooks and crannies, thinking, if there's a fire, we're never making it out of there. I'm amazed that they allowed it to be like that. So anyway, for safety reasons I think it's a good idea that they got out of that basement.

ML: Fair! So there's a question that we like to ask at these interviews, which is, why did you decide to be interviewed for this project?

JT: Oh, well, first, Bert recommended it. That's a good call. I like—I don't know, some of this history is interesting to me. Gosh, if someone wants to look at this later—gosh, there's going to be a little bit of immortality, all these experiences that I had at the University of Chicago are going to live on forever and somebody a hundred years from now is going to

read this stuff and use it as some kind of archive—and since I'm a historian myself and I'm so thrilled when somebody from the 2nd century did this, left behind a record of their experiences, I was like, okay, I'll do that for someone in a future century.

ML: Yeah. And the transcript of this, and the recording, will be in the Regenstein forever.

[1:20:11]

JT: Yeah, well, that's very exciting.

ML: So we're always on the lookout for more people to interview or any memorabilia from people's times at UChicago. Do you have any artifacts from your time? Or alternatively, do you know of anybody else who might be interested in being interviewed for the project?

JT: Artifacts? Like physical remainders of a GALA event or something like that?

ML: Like flyers, or—some people have flyers or things like that.

JT: I probably don't. I have a lot of stuff from right before the period I went to Chicago. But Chicago itself, I don't think so. I'll give a look, and if I find anything I'll let you know. As far as people, well gosh, I could name a whole slew of people. I might have trouble remembering some of their names. There are some I can picture right now. And gosh, I can't remember... So for instance, the lesbian I was talking about was named [redacted]. But she, she transferred to Harvard because her mentor, John Levenson went from Chicago to Harvard, so she only spent maybe a year and a half at Chicago, tops, and she got a degree from Harvard. So I don't know if she ever even got a degree from Chicago, or even a masters, I'm not sure. There was a guy, who—he went to Minnesota. I can picture him, but...he was an important kind of person in those early days. And he was out a little bit before me. He's been very out in his career. I've seen stuff when I went to the United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities for a job, but then he went—I think he ended up somewhere else now. That one's totally escaping me [Ed. note: Paul Capetz].

ML: I think Bert might have mentioned a theology student who went to Minnesota, so they might be the same person.

JT: I'm sure it's the same person because Bert knew him very well.

ML: So I can ask Bert too what the name of that guy is.

JT: Yeah, because he probably would want to be interviewed, I would bet. And obviously, are you in touch with, do you know at all Sam Portaro?

ML: His name has come up a lot. I don't know if—

JT: He's certainly still alive because I get a Christmas card from him every year. He's retired

from Brent House, but I think he's still in Chicago. But he would be—I would think a very important person to interview, because he was just so instrumental to all kinds of stuff that went on in the '80s. So although—he may not have been officially affiliated with the university. I think he was an employee of the diocese that ran the Brent House. I don't think he ever got a paycheck from the university. But he was certainly very important to gay and lesbian people at the university in those years.

[JT and ML briefly discuss spelling]

ML: That's all the questions I can think of. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

JT: I think I'm all set. You've covered all the bases, I've covered most of the bases. Most of it was about non-Chicago stuff, obviously.

ML: I mean, most of your life has been non-Chicago.

JT: But no, it was very good. So yeah. I enjoyed talking to you.

ML: Yeah, thanks so much for talking to us, Jeff! We really appreciate it.

JT: Okay. All right. Have a good rest of the day.

ML: You too. Bye!

[01:24:45]

End of Interview