

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #12

VAN DER WAL, DENA (1974-) AB 1996 STAFF

Dates at U of C: 1992-1996, 2005-present

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Interviewer: Molly Liu

Transcript by: Molly Liu

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Interview February 6, 2013 at University of Chicago.

[00:00:00]

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

DV: Sure. I was actually looking at colleges that were in specific cities more so than for an academic experience. Though I wanted to go somewhere very difficult, since I knew that I could do it. I was thinking maybe art school, and then I figured that if I don't do the hard academic thing first, I'd never do it. So my rough plan was to do something that really kicked my ass and then see where I wanted to go for grad school after that. So coming from Grand Rapids, Michigan, I was looking at New York City and Chicago. It was more of a location-based search, and the schools I was looking at in Chicago that I got to visit—because of my family's financial situation, I couldn't get to New York to see those schools—and so the schools I saw in Chicago, this one was the most beautiful in terms of the architecture. I say I got seduced by the campus's architecture, and that's how I ended up here. In a lot of ways, that was true. [chuckles] I didn't fully unpack the baggage of the academic experience before I just decided to come here, and I wasn't anticipating just how fully intellectually motivated and oriented this campus was. Obviously I did well here, but I wanted something that had a better balance with social life. In 1992—I think they've made steps since then, but when I came it was pretty bad.

ML: So...a lot of things: First of all, you mention looking at cities rather at academics. What in particular drew you to cities?

DV: Some of it had to do that I identified that there were stronger gay and lesbian communities in cities. I was out in high school, and I went to Grand Rapids Christian High. That environment—I identified that it was something that I wanted to get away from. My strong academics in high school gave me the opportunity to get the hell out of Dodge.

ML: [laughs] Almost literally out of Dodge.

DV: Yes, exactly! Grand Rapids now is actually a pretty nice city, they're doing a lot with craft brews, I don't mind going back to visit my parents. But being in that really closed-circuit environment—I went to Christian school since before preschool. I got out of that Christian school system just once—there's this more selective high school in Grand Rapids called City High, where the more academic kids went and applied. After going there for a semester and realizing that the experience there was not as good as the Christian high school, I actually went back there. [laughs] But met a lot of cool people in the process. The path was very much oriented towards out of Grand Rapids to get to a city where there would be more to do as well as a stronger gay and lesbian community.

ML: So you did actually know that you were out in high school. Can you describe—where the people around you accepting or not accepting?

DV: It was kind of a group of people that found each other. It was an intersection and overlap with the artistic kids, the gay kids, and the weird kids. So it's the ones who were hanging out smoking in the back of the parking lot, going around to this underage dance club in Grand Rapids. It was a funny collection of people, I still have contact with those I was closest with at the time. And the two guys that I dated in high school are flamingly gay now. On reflection it makes sense—you find the prettiest-looking boy and they find the—not masculine, but less gendered of a woman, and you kind of find each other. There's a meeting in the middle, there's a commonality, this queer bonding that happens before there's a full comprehension of identity politics. Yeah! So it was an okay experience even in the circumstances, and there's been a lot of time. There was a high school teacher—Mrs. Pott, the art high school teacher—so we spent a lot of time in the art room. Made things out of clay. We created a community even within this more conservative culture. Still being forced to go to chapel across the parking lot during high school [chuckles]. I actually met my first girlfriend on a road trip from Grand Rapids to Chicago. When I was at City High, a friend was driving—he wanted to go to Medusa's, which was this underage dance club, and it was just a car full of friends, and Jennifer, my first girlfriend, just happened to be one of the people along for the trip because someone else canceled. So it's kind of this circumstantial thing. She actually wasn't at Christian High at the time, but she transferred back. She was a year behind me. There's a lot of strange school-switching happening in high school. But it was fortunate that I met the people I did meet—a lot of good, open-minded people even within the circumstance of a conservative Christian town.

ML: Can you tell me about how you first became aware of your sexuality?

DV: I think it was a slow unfolding. I did a lot of reading when I was growing up, I was a total bookworm, no surprise. [laughs] And I think just at the public library I came upon this Rita Mae Brown novel, and I was curious about a lot of things. Just like, what does it mean that I liked this narrative? I think that *Rubyfruit Jungle* was the first one I came across, most people go through these lesbian reading cycles. I watched a lot of sports, I had two brothers, and making the connection that Martina Navratilova was involved in a relationship with Rita Mae Brown the author—that was literary, abstract lesbianism made

real life. Like oh, this is happening, this is an option. I was probably pretty precocious in terms of my sexual curiosity interest. At an age where some kids were not even paying attention, I was actively seeking out information and figuring things out.

ML: What age range are you talking about?

DV: I think I was probably...it was definitely pre-adolescent, on the edge, maybe 11 or 12. Yeah, I read a lot. [chuckles] I wish I had a time-stamp for you, but that's it. When people start to be curious about relationships and sexuality, how things are working, and my own official sexual education was—my parents are great, this is gonna make them sound like they're more conservative than they are because they're actually awesome now, but they threw a book written by Dr. James Dobson, who is an asshole of the highest degree. Focus on the Family. *Evil* incarnate, he's just a *fucker*. That book, with that message about how sexuality works, I knew even then that this isn't right. Maybe it was the people I was exposed to in other areas of life, I don't even know, just soaking up information that was not the spoon-fed information. Which was probably just an intellectual bend from the get-go. It's not this accepted, it's that this probably isn't all there is to life and relationships. Yep, the Dobson book was quickly discarded.

ML: They threw it at you and you threw it right back. [laughs]

DV: They're from farming communities in Northern Michigan. They did what they knew, and now they're PFLAG members and very supportive, and they've been awesome. But that was the initial conundrum: what do we do to teach our kids about sexuality? We didn't have any sexual education. There was this God-framed narrative and this handy book is here, we don't have to talk about anything. Even now my parents and my family will not explicitly talk about sexual stuff, really. It's out on the table in terms of relationships, but if we go to a movie and there's a lot of sexually explicit stuff, it's still awkward! It's mom and dad! That line was well-defined.

ML: Moving on to the University of Chicago: you've mentioned being attracted to academic rigor in a lot of ways, but you also mentioned the academic baggage?

DV: Oh, you're picking that up perfectly. That was exactly—I have this conflict, I'm so ambivalent about this place. It's like this love-hate relationship from the beginning. I really respect it, but I was really angry a lot of the time when I was here because this whole part of life I was looking for and interested in exploring—and there was nothing here. On reflection, there were awesome people I met, but what I was anticipating as far as having this community and meeting a bunch of possible women to date—there was just no one here. The gay and lesbian group was called GALA at the time, Gay And Lesbian Alliance—what is it now? Queers and Associates?

ML: Yeah, it's Q&A. It changes names all the time.

DV: It was all guys. Like, these nerdy little skinny dudes. Which—I am in solidarity politically, obviously. But as far as being motivated to find somebody to date or hook up

with, it's just not the environment. And I really hope it's better now for the undergrads. It seems like it's a little better.

ML: Not too much...

DV: Not too much has changed? [laughs] That kind of played out true with being more of an intellectual place and less of a social place. But on reflection I think about the people I met and the people I still have relationships with and they're awesome people, so it's kind of like a bonding through adversity and struggle. Again, if it had been too easy, if it had been like here's this whole roomful of people you can date--

ML: --a cornucopia!

DV: [laughs] Exactly! This idea of city—and University of Chicago isn't Chicago. It's its own little island, and in some ways it's awesome, and in some ways it's really isolating and really discouraging if you came in this school for the city, if that's part of your framework for what your attraction was. I can't get there—like, the number 6 bus stops running or whatever, cuts you off from the experience of the rest of the city.

[00:10:37]

ML: So, the people that you did meet—if you didn't meet them through GALA, how did you meet them?

DV: I actually did think about this while thinking about this interview—who was the first person I met? It was Cathleen [redacted]. We spotted each other on move-in day. We were both in Burton-Judson. She was in Salisbury and I was in Mathews, which are across the courtyard from each other. So I had a single, which was part of the point, looking at dorms and thinking that I'd rather not have a roommate. I had my own room growing up with two brothers, so I got used to that, and the view across the Midway... but anyway, back to Cathleen. She was wearing a softball t-shirt, short hair, and so it was like, eye contact, gotcha, yep. We're probably going to be friends. It was that look of recognition. So we hung out constantly. She had a jeep, so she was like the escape to the city. Yeah, it was great. We were never formally involved, there was some typical messing around, but we were more like buddies. So it made it nice to navigate and bond about the stuff that was going on. She lives in San Diego now, so it's more like Facebook contact. So there was that first person identified among the group.

ML: Did you guys manage to go out to the city a lot?

DV: On the weekends. Yeah, it's hard with the amount of work here, and I joined the crew team. I guess I was just hellbent on making my life absolutely miserable. I was not a morning person. It's like I wanted to put myself through boot camp in some ways and I don't know why that was. Maybe it's some kind of residual, like, growing up religious kind of punishment and hardship narrative. I don't know what this was. I need to be absolutely flayed here or something. It's like physically and intellectually as well, and

emotionally that comes on its own just because of growing up. [laughs] So getting up at five in the morning...This is a tangent, but the person who was the cox in the boat I was rowing in is my boss right now. [laughs] Upstairs, yeah. So I work for Lynn, and I rowed for Lynn when I was in college, so that's another ongoing relationship. In some ways I see my time here as an employee as making peace with the university. When I graduated I was just so full of angst. I maybe have a little bit of an angry streak in general, but I find that's part of my energy and part of my motivation. If you're not mad about something you don't want to change anything, that's part of the problem. Now that I see what this university stands for and what it's done for the people that are here, it's much more appreciation than when I was this angry teenager.

ML: Can you talk more about that? How has your perception of your undergraduate time here changed as you've moved away from it?

DV: Some of it is inevitable with the nostalgia and the reflection that happens with memories of all types, and a lot of it is just the perspective of figuring out. I think almost everyone says this when they talk about their experience because this place teaches you how to think. And in an abstract way you can apply that to almost everything. If you have this internal confidence—if I don't know this, I can figure it out and learn how to do it. That's pretty much a turnkey for most everything. When you're 18 you don't realize that. And just seeing in contrast what other people were doing with their other undergrad careers...I'm in a graduate program right now for landscape architecture—it's totally fun. I'm more into plants than I'm into websites, and after ten years of making websites, some little up-and-coming nerdlet who's in love with the web needs my job. [laughs] This is a great place to work, it's a good field, but I just have more interest in designing outside spaces, and things that have tangible physicality. Yeah, that was another problem about going to school here, is that things were very intellectual, not physical. And there wasn't enough of an art program. And they're fixing that with the Logan Center. The first iteration of the website of the Logan Center I was working closely with that project. It feels like coming back around, helping build and encourage the stuff that was missing when I was here. It's nice to see that recognition of these holes which exist in the undergraduate experience, rather than celebrating this academic monk life. There should be more of a balance. Back around to the difference in perspective, on what the academic experience actually did. And—this will probably come back later—I got out of here for a while. I had a similar pattern with undergrad that I did with high school, since I went to a different high school for a little bit. Third year, I went abroad.

ML: Where did you go?

DV: I went to Amsterdam, which had a gay and lesbian studies program.

ML: Oh wow. Was it through the University of Chicago?

DV: Nope. I was getting mail—my second year, my friend Troy Parker and I decided that we'd co-lead the GALA group. My agenda was to get more women coming. I tried really hard. It's hard to recruit people if they're not there, or if they're not out. So I was getting mail—

the office was in Ida Noyes at the time, the second floor probably, there are other offices there now. Getting the mail and going through what was available, I'm not sure how GALA got on the list for the School for International Training, but it was just some kind of blanket list that had all the gay groups around the country, so it was a mailing that just explained, yes, Amsterdam. Yeah, it was perfect. Someone that I was really attached to left the university, and then I asked myself, do I really want to be here? And I didn't. So doing a study abroad program at the time was just perfect. School for International Training, which was a school in Vermont, and the University of Amsterdam put that together. It was the first year that it had happened. Things that happened on my timeline... it happened in 1994. Autumn of 1994. I was looking at my transcript and there's a chunk of time that I wasn't in classes here because I was in classes there.

[00:18:04]

ML: It's remarkable how involved you were on campus, both academically and it seems politically with organizations on campus. Monica mentioned to me that you had the gender studies major before it was actually a major through tutorial studies?

DV: Yeah, I did it with Lauren Berlant. And I like to think that they used that major in some way to make the case that this should be a concentration, since there are enough people who are interested in it. It was what I wanted to do—what in other universities is typically called “Women's Studies” but is now probably under a bigger umbrella, which is good, because it's more that you have the study of sexuality and gender in general. And Lauren was just the person on campus I knew who would be a good adviser. So I just made a proposal and it got accepted. I don't know if they still have tutorial studies now.

ML: They do.

DV: So just a proposal that had to do with the representation of lesbians in comic art.

ML: Oh! That's really awesome!

DV: Yeah, it was fun. Do you know Gina Olson?

ML: Yeah, she's one of the directors for the Center of Gender and Sexuality. But I don't think I've actually met her.

DV: Yeah, she at one point told me that my BA thesis—it was a two-parter, an academic paper and a comic—it's on file somewhere. And I can provide copies of it too.

ML: You made a comic for your BA?? That's amazing! I happen to really like comics, so—this is really cool.

DV: Yeah, so we can bring the stuff out later...I brought just the visual—this is a project, this is another paper...So this is the BA comic, and this is a zine that I made when I was angry.

ML: Wow, these are amazing!! So what sort of comics did you look at? I know that Allison Bechdel does--

DV: Yep! Definitely Allison Bechdel. It's funny, way back to George Herriman's Krazy Kat—it's one of the first narratives where there's this interruption and non-gender specificity happening with the cat and the mouse. Lauren was the one who pointed me in that direction, thinking about representations of sexuality and transgression bigger than “this is specifically a queer comic”—those were a little easier to come by, but she gave me a larger historical framework of looking at comic art and looking at what was happening. Hothead Paisan—yeah, I took my BA project to concentrate on something that I really enjoyed, and I love this art form, just this combination. I'm still really into comics, I'm not one of those people who goes out every weekend and buys a bunch of stuff, but there's a line that's been going on forever and ever called “Love and Rockets.”

ML: Yeah, I've heard of that! I've been meaning to read it for a really long time.

DV: It's so beautiful. Visually just stunning. They had a couple of main characters that had a lesbian storyline going, but it's set in this larger context, so get lost in that world if you have a chance, go buy some stuff. There were a couple of little other comic-type projects. This is actually a panel from “Love and Rockets,” and I did this project—I'm not sure the order in which to talk about this, but I actually ended up having to take this class pass/fail because I was in a relationship with the person teaching the class. Which was an interesting situation. Yeah, what was this called? “Sexing the Text.” That's the class. That was second year? Yeah, Beth Freeman. [Interview #84] I was over 18, it was a completely legal relationship, but she was a grad student, English grad student, which was—there was kind of this pocket of queer activism with the English grad students, I'm not sure if that's still the case here. There was a nice little group of very active grad students, and they were pushing on campus to get the domestic—not domestic, but partnership benefits for employees of the university, and that happened the first year I was on campus in '92. So it brought a visibility to that group of people, and there was a gay and lesbian studies workshop, so even if technically—you know with these core classes, you get sucked into this line of “Oh, I have to take Power, I have to take this, like, Civ class” but there were posters up and identifiable gay and lesbian events, even though as I said GALA was mostly all guys, there was political organizing around getting partnership benefits passed. You could see people on campus, you know, visually you're like, you're probably queer. I don't know how I met Beth initially, maybe I just went up and talked to her. But I had to convince her over a period of time that she wasn't going to lose her intellectual—her academic standing by dating an undergrad. I think about it on reflection, and if I were her age, and there's this little shit undergrad, I would be like “Hell. No. This is not worth it.”

ML: [laughing] But apparently you were.

DV: Yeah, I was very charming. But the level I approached her at—she could tell that I wasn't a newbie to be taken advantage of, I knew what was going on. It wasn't my first experience so I think that had something to do with the fact that she considered the

relationship. And she was very, very realistic about where I was in life, and my inability to be in a monogamous relationship at that time was completely fine for her. Which I think was awesome on her part. She was like, "Okay, this kid's like 18, 19 years old, this is not going to be someone I'm going to staple down and say that this is a one-on-one relationship and that's it." There were some rules to our relationship, but she was very open about—since she's a queer English grad student, that's the stuff that they're into. She's teaching at UC Davis. She's definitely someone who you should interview. You need to look her up.

ML: Can you say her full name on record?

DV: Elizabeth Freeman. She had a lot to do with a lot of the activism on campus during that period, and she was working with Lauren Berlant as well. Dana [redacted] is another English grad student. I haven't brought up my friend Ada, but Ada was another gay undergrad who was a year ahead of me, and Ada was dating Dana at the same time that I was dating Beth, so we both had our respective English grad student girlfriend. It was very entertaining. And I think that dating the grad student was actually more where I was socially, in terms of coming out time. It wouldn't have been good for me to date someone who was just coming out of the closet, since I'd already done that. I did my balancing on who I was talking to in high school, a little kind of survival strategy reality check—you know, I'm not going to talk to the pastor on campus at the high school about what's going on, because they're completely unable to deal with that in their framework of religion. Um...I'm trying to think about where we were trying to segue into here...

ML: ...yeah, I'm not sure either. But I saw that impressive timeline that you had—do you just want to go through your time?

[00:26:30]

DV: At the bottom, it's just the courses that I took that were related to my major, and I think those were the most important courses that I took here. When I arrived here, I mentioned Cathleen was the first person I identified that was gay in Burton-Judson. The first academic advisor I had—I don't even remember her name—but then I caught wind of the fact that everyone went to Kathy Forde, all the gay kids. She still works here and she's still active with the organizing, the mentor program. I don't know how many students are still involved with that now. LGBTQ website, they talk about that. They identify faculty, staff that are a little bit older and more established in their queerness and linking them up undergrads to help them through the process. Yeah, it's nice. I've done it a couple times; I haven't had time since I started grad school to participate, but it's a great program. I don't know if I would have done it when I was an undergrad. I probably would have been a bit snarky about it, but it's a great resource for people. Do you know if Kathy Forde's participated in this interview? [Interview #9]

ML: If she's on campus, she probably has.

DV: Yeah, someone should definitely get her to participate. And I have a couple of pictures

that I can scan and give to you. We took a road trip my second year. I mentioned my friend Troy Parker, who was the co-leader of GALA my second year—he was a year ahead of me, so it was his third year, my second year. There was a march on Washington in '93 for gay and lesbian rights—they're bad pictures because I had a bad camera, but we piled into his yellow car and drove to DC for the march.

ML: That's really cool!

DV: Definitely, on reflection it was. At the time it was just like, “Yep, we're going! Of course we're going! Someone has a car, we're definitely going.” Yeah, that was my second time to DC but my first time as a part of a large gay group. I'm not sure if I'd been to Chicago pride before that trip or not, but that was definitely one of those awakening moments. This is the awakening of a national movement and identity. It was a very good time, lots of good fun was had, that's for sure. And I mentioned that when I was abroad in '94. Just took a leave of absence and did that program in Amsterdam. I actually graduated on time; they took my credits from the School for International Training, which was very, very nice—and also made sense, since my major was on that topic. I just took the Civ class during the summer after I got back and was right on track with enough credits to graduate. With Lauren, the actual title of my paper was “Beyond Tits and Ass: Sexual Representation in Lesbian Comics.”

ML: That's an amazing title.

DV: Yeah, she let me go. It was perfect. If you want to get someone engaged in their project, let them do what they're interested in. She took me through the rigorous stuff, she made me read hard stuff and concentrate on things that weren't just about explicit sexuality. A background in comic art, modes of representation. It was good.

ML: Can you tell me a little bit more about GALA, the time that you were involved in it? You were already the leader of it by second year, which is remarkable.

DV: Yeah, it was more this agenda of change, like I can't find anyone that I'm interested in—I don't know where, like I was involved in dating and in relationships, and sort of hooking up with people the whole time, but I have this narrative, especially in this little zine, which is basically just me bitching about the fact that there's no one here to date. Maybe my real complaint was that there weren't enough choices. Technically there wasn't like a drought, there were people I was involved with, it wasn't as if there wasn't anyone here. But the GALA effort was me thinking that I'm going to find where these women are, try to better organize and have a social space where there's a space of possibility. That's what I thought was really missing—there's nowhere to go. There were little spaces that just unofficially created themselves. I was a work-study student, just to balance out my financial aid package, and I was shelving books in the library, and the only pleasure about that job was the...I think it was HQ and a number range where all the sex books got shelved, and so I'd go to the cage and be like, “Okay, where's the HQ whatever list” and that would be interesting, just seeing this historical range of titles that had something to do with sexuality. And I was going crazy. I think I'm more of an introvert in terms of

personality type, but I do actually like talking to people every now and then. So I said, screw this work-study job, I'm just going to work in the Med. And that turned out to be a little cluster of queerness and interaction, since all the theater kids would go to table 20, that big round table. And just friends, since when someone knows that you're working and you're on shift, they'll just come in and hang out. That was the best decision I ever made in terms of working while I was in school, since it was a social job that made a lot more money per hour, and you got shift meals.

ML: Can you talk more about the other lesbian spaces on campus? Were they distinct from the other queer gay spaces?

DV: Yeah, to circle back to what it was at these GALA meetings, I have this picture in my head of this cavernous—you know if you go up in Ida Noyes to the second floor, you're heading towards the lake so you're heading east, at least there was this big room with these folding chairs, so you'd set up this semi-circle and be like, hopefully someone will come. And there'd usually be some older guys, I don't even know what their affiliation with the university was, if they were adjunct professors, what their deal was, but kind of a handful of older guys and maybe two women. I was pretty much gutting it out in some ways, like this is not what I want, but this is a structure that's in place. And so I tried to work within that group and that framework to try to change things a little bit. We had a couple of dances in the basement of Ida Noyes that were actually pretty fun. I think it was the Halloween one, since I have a bunch of photos of people in costume at these dances. For me it was kind of anxiety-producing, since we were organizing these dances as opposed to just going to them, so trying to get bodies to actually attend. Not my forte, I'm not a social organizer, but I felt like I had to be involved in some way.

The people I met obviously were people that were important, and the intersection between specifically UChicago gay and lesbian groups and meetings and social activities and the things that we would do that were more out in Chicago, like Women's Obsession night at Berlin, I think it was a twice-a-month party, and we'd head up to the North Side for that. And Homocore, which were gay and lesbian punk rock shows, and that was in Wicker Park before it got completely gentrified. There was a bar called the Czar Bar that was on Division, and I met a lot of other gay and lesbian, more queer-identified political activists in that circle. Someone I hooked up with on that march in Washington was a photographer that I had met at Homocore shows, and she was a bit older. Not old-old, but that was more what I was gravitating towards with out-ness and comfortableness with queerness—it ended up being people who were a little bit older than me, by the time I got here.

ML: Can you describe the gay political milieu on campus? And why do you think that there weren't as many women who were attracted to that milieu?

DV: I think a lot of people come to UChicago as people who are looking for an intellectual community rather than a sexual community, or the identity category is stronger I think with that. That's one of the things that makes me the most happy sometimes, when I walk around and see a group of, like, straight-up nerds, and they're so happy. And there's of

course the depressing shoegazing and no one's making eye contact moments as well, but when you see that these people found each other—I think that there's a parallel with queers finding each other and the nerds finding each other. I think the UChicago happy nerd is a lot more about nerds finding each other and finding intellectual peers. I think it's a matter of priorities. Kids who choose UChicago as where they want to go for undergrad, they're choosing an experience that isn't like frat party or social central. And most of them—and I don't know how I didn't get that before I got here—

ML: Well, it seems that you made your social--

DV: And that was probably a better experience for me. If it had been handed to me, then that appreciation wouldn't have been there. And that's pretty true about everything. So that's my musings about why that is. This place is self-selecting. Their line with outreach and marketing used to be “Oh, we don't need to do that. People find us.” They've changed gears a lot.

ML: Yeah, we're being a lot more aggressive, it seems like. More aggressive than our squirrels.

DV: [laughs] Yeah, making sure that people don't kill themselves. That's pretty bleak, but that's what that festival, Kuvia—do you know how to say that?

ML: Yeah, Kuvia/Kangeiko.

DV: Yeah, that was called the anti-suicide festival. There's a dark humor here, and I appreciate that. The rigor and the dark humor and the smartness is all very appreciated. It's funny, I'd like to ask people who were here at the same time what their thoughts would be on why this place didn't feel like a particularly active or strong lesbian social scene. But it felt politically pretty engaged. But some of that might just be my taste in women—there were people here, but not people that I'd want to date, that kind of thing too. And people did find each other. The couples...I think about who was dating who in the narrative of what I was coming through in the four years or three and a half years I was here, given the time that I was abroad. There wasn't anyone I can identify who was just never dating someone. People found each other in some way.

[00:37:49]

ML: The stuff that you mentioned about the self-selecting pool of undergraduates at UChicago makes sense, but that's also stuff that would probably apply equally to men as well as women, right? And you also seem to highlight the lack of women compared to men. So I'm wondering what you think about that.

DV: I would tie that in with just stereotypical gender roles. I think that men are assumed to have to have sexual agency and to think of themselves as someone who can approach someone else. And that's not just a complaint with UChicago, but women in general. They're thinking of themselves as the receptor. They're taught from day one that

traditional gender stuff—that you are the thing that is pursued rather than you are someone who can make something happen. So some of that is just initiation of contact and prioritization of that kind of part of your life. So I think some of that soaks in and affects how you operate in the world of dating and making relationships.

ML: It is interesting that you speak of a separation between sexuality and politics about sexuality.

DV: That's an interesting thought. Because there is sometimes a difference between what you're thinking about and the politics, the separation between intellectual topics and what's actually playing out in your own personal life. I think that someone can believe fully and while they're writing a thesis and a statement about “yes, women have sexual agency and find relationships and do what they want,” but when they're out and about, or meeting people, there's a reticence or a hesitance. I don't know how it is because I've been in a relationship for ten years now, I'm not sure how the scene has changed or how people are approaching identity politics. It was a lot of queer labels getting put on things when I was in undergrad. You'd say that everything was gay, lesbian, bi, and then more terms started getting tagged on and queer was just easier and sounded a little more transgressive, so I always liked that as a label and as a way of thinking about things politically, since it doesn't really say “this is who I sleep with,” and a whole lot about a specific practice. It's just an approach.

ML: That's really interesting. Could you talk more about what those labels mean to you? I notice that you identified yourself as lesbian but not queer.

DV: I write lesbian down on things where I think it's going to get categorized as a statistic, since I think about it as database categories rather than person-to-person categories. Normally I see forms like that and I think, yeah, there's a checkbox, and I'm either going to get put into that category or this category. I don't see forms like that as a place to extrapolate about how I feel about identity categories. In some ways it's a “be counted” type moment, with what's currently happening—I've never had that kind of “I want to be married, I want to be a bride,” it's just never been me, but I'll be the first person to say that, yes, we need marriage equality. I think about a lot of people for whom that's a really important step for them, and their families would support them and their children much more fully if they had that mapping to a traditional experience. So I've internalized some of that categorization for forms like that and those sorts of statements. I'm completely willing to say—if someone says, “are you a lesbian?” Yes. “Are you queer?” Yes. I'm not struggling with trying to come to terms with “what's my label?” I could be that. If it makes more sense with the issue at the time, then it's fine. And it's not one of those things where I'm like—there's no question about who I'm going to date next. You never know what's going to happen in life, but for all practical purposes, I'm with my partner and she's awesome, and that's our life. [laughs] Another nerd, which is good. She actually would have done really well here, but she grew up in Chicago and went to Cornell. She also wanted to get out of her version of Dodge.

ML: Chicago makes for a strange Dodge.

DV: Yeah, not Dodge at all. But I guess when your parents are in it, it turns into a sort of Dodge.

[00:43:35]

ML: Can you tell me about how you met your partner?

DV: We played soccer together. We would have met in some way somehow, since we had a lot of mutual friends. But I couldn't even hope to get through my dating history—

ML: There's just too much! [laughs]

DV: [laughs] There are just too many people! Suffice to say, I love women, and I've had an opportunity to get to know a lot of them, and I'm glad that that's out of my system. There's no questions about “Oh, what if I'd had more experimentation time in my youth?” It's like, I've done that. Yeah, no regrets. It was perfect. I was actually single when I met her. She was kind of in the last throes of a really horrible relationship, and my friend Heidi needed a sub for a co-ed team that Spin, a bar on the North side, was sponsoring, and so she took me along and we were just playing. The team was gay men and lesbians, I forget if the whole league was gay, sometimes they are and sometimes they aren't. Poonam, we were both on the sidelines at the same time, and her version of it was that I just started giving her a massage, which doesn't sound unlike me, but maybe a little bit forward. Apparently that was the right move. After we played the soccer game, the little inquiries were put out, I think she might have asked Heidi who I was, that kind of thing. We already went to the same gym in Andersonville, the Cheetah gym, which is this mecca of gayness. You spend any time in Andersonville?

ML: I've been there a couple of times. I wish I could spend more time there, but it's so far away. Yeah, it's a really awesome place.

DV: It's a wonderful community. I'd actually had it tagged as a destination my first year, since Women and Children First is like a hub. There's something going on on the North side and I need to move there eventually. Which is what happened. So anyway, Poonam and I would see each other at the gym and then started to make TV-watching dates to watch Queer as Folk with other people, and she would stay longer than anyone else. At some point I laid down an ultimatum, like “you gotta break up with your girlfriend if we're going to see each other.” And that sparked action. I was actually really thinking, “oh, they'll go through one or two more breakups, and then maybe I'll consider it,” but once they broke up, that was it. That rarely happens. Yeah, the beginning of our relationship, she was still in med school at the time. Got through the med school, got through the fellowship, and now we have a house together up in Andersonville. So hopefully happy ending. [laughs]

ML: Could you talk more about the path you took after graduation? Did you start working here immediately?

DV: No, no. No. When I graduated, it was like double middle finger, thank you for the degree, I gotta go. I was definitely ready to get up to the North side. When I was dating Beth, I actually took a job up in Wicker Park at a cafe called Urbus Orbis, which was another awesome outlet. Do you watch Saturday Night Live at all? This is kind of a tangent.

ML: Uh, not really, no.

DV: Oh, well, Fred Armisen, who's also in Portlandia--

ML: Oh yeah! Yeah, he's so great.

DV: He was also working at the cafe at the time.

ML: Wait, really? Wait, you know Fred Armisen?

DV: Yeah, yeah! He was my manager at the time.

ML: Whoa, that's so cool!

DV: Yeah, a little bit of Chicago trivia. He bumped from being cafe manager to, I think his band was called Trenchmouth, and then he worked for Blue Man Group, and then he was on tour with Trenchmouth and on a lark discovered that he was more into acting and auditioned. He didn't take the typical Second City path at all to SNL. He was a launched star almost immediately. He deserves all the attention he's getting, he's a great guy. I don't even know what that space is now. Urbus Orbis, it went from—when they did Real World Chicago, they used that building for that set, and now I think strangely it might be a Cheetah gym, if it is still a Cheetah gym. Another iteration of the Cheetah gym where I kind of continued my relationship.

ML: Hard to scrub the gay from a space.

DV: Always gay all over the place. The job trajectory had already launched the North side when I was still an undergrad. Beth lived in Wicker Park. I got the job at the cafe so that I could just hang out with her on the weekends and get out of Hyde Park, so it was a good excuse. Building up barista/waitressing skills, so when I graduated, I was like, “I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm not going to go to grad school, but Kathy”—you know Kathy Forde--“do you know anybody that needs anybody?” Kathy Forde was not only my academic advisor but she was also my career placement office. She had a friend, a lesbian friend in community, Jean Fishbeck, who owned a software company, and they just needed someone to do admin work. And that was in Andersonville, on the corner of Foster and Clark, above the bank that's there. It's actually still a company there called Booklog, software which does book inventory systems for bookstores. Jean had created the system for her ex, Ann Christopherson, who is one of the owners of Women and Children First bookstore. So it was kind of this fun old-school lesbian feminist community, that bond there, so Jean gave me a job and gave me a chance. While I was

working for her, packing up software and working the mailroom, I started to teach myself desktop publishing, graphic design, which segued into learning some web design stuff. When I graduated in '96, Troy, way back to the GALA co-leader, he was the one who taught me the very first things about email and internet and connecting, since it was definitely dial-up. Everything on campus at that time was mostly all Macs, like the university was into all those little crazy square Macs. I didn't have a computer when I was here.

ML: Oh yeah...I vaguely remember those from when I was like five years old.

DV: Yeah, you can probably look them up. Those crazy little cubes. Burton-Judson had a couple of them in top floor in this tiny little computer room. The computer skills started with Troy, I actually was pretty anti-computer for a pretty long time, since I was tired of sitting in front of a computer writing papers. I don't know why I did this, I wrote all of my papers—is it still called USITE now? It was like one of the computing places, it was in Harper.

ML: Oh yeah, yeah. It's still around. It's still called USITE.

DV: Yeah, I'd have these handwritten pieces of paper, but I'd write all of my papers in one kind of marathon setting, and then print them out, and mostly never saved anything. [laughs] Which is kind of a really bad approach. With the longer papers I'd have some of the stupid floppy disk things. But I was very cavalier about saving stuff and computing stuff because I just kind of didn't care. [laughs] I was like, ah, I've got my printout, I'll be okay. It's funny how the computing did come back around with my career and ended up really important and was the entry point for what I would end up doing for a living and still do. Although I'm transitioning to landscape architecture now, the web design was right time, right place. I ended up getting my first official web design job with someone who was looking for a University of Chicago graduate. It was one of those job posting through the CAPS office where someone had graduated from the University of Chicago, knew that he wanted to hire a really nerdy person, so that was the ad that I answered. I've had a sequence of web design jobs, but my very first job was from a UofC grad.

ML: During the sequence of jobs, how did you end up coming back to the University of Chicago, and what led to the decision to come back?

DV: Do you remember how things got really horrible? The dot com kind of era? The huge crash of start-ups. The company I was working for downsized by about 50%. This was actually really close to the start—it was the start of my relationship with Poonam, I'd just had knee surgery and ACL reconstruction from a soccer injury, and I just lost my job. So it was like, something's definitely changing now. Something is happening. So during the time of the knee surgery and recovery and further relationship cement—since there's nothing better than a health crisis to make things obvious about if this relationship is happening or not? Yes, definitely happening. You're taking care of me, you're helping me get something to eat, yeah. We didn't need that test, but it was one of those moments where, yep, it's good. During that time of disillusionment with the market and the field

and what's happening in web design that could be a little more stable, I started thinking about how higher ed would be a better path than all of these volatile companies that just sort of come-and-go, come-and-go. So I specifically targeted universities to see if there were any web design opportunities, and found one at Loyola University first. I kind of wanted initially just to get to the University of Chicago, maybe had an urge to make peace with the place. I wanted to work here, after that many years of not wanting to work here or live down here, and it was like, you know what? It would be a good place to work. So I worked for Loyola, and of course right when I started working there UChicago started knocking on my door, and their hiring timing wasn't synced up with when I was looking. I put it on the backburner, said, "Look, I just took this other position, I'll check back in later." It was only a year and a half later, I did this whole redesign for Loyola, worked with their web presence and got to the point where I was like, okay, I've fulfilled my commitment here, I've done what I wanted to do, and contacted UChicago, and they were like, "Yep, we're looking, come on in." It was a really good decision in terms of the market as well as the type of work that's here. I'm unable to just crank stuff out that has no meaning, because here it feels like it's contributing to an intellectual community and helping people communicate and a system that I really support.

ML: Yeah, that's become so important. IT has become so important to higher education.

DV: It's how people share and get work done. It's been wonderfully satisfying. I hope to have the same kind of level of engagement with whatever I'll be doing with landscape architecture in the future. I am definitely more passionate about plants than I am now about websites. I think I will continue to use the computer, I don't think that skill is going to go unused.

ML: You like apple the plant better than Apple the computer...

DV: [laughs] Yeah, exactly. I'm hoping my apple tree will produce apples this year, we'll see.

ML: Oh, you have an apple tree?

[00:55:14]

DV: Oh yeah. I have as many plants packed into my yard as I possibly can.

ML: Do you still live up in Andersonville?

DV: Yeah. Pretty close to where Foster hits Damen. We live along Berwyn. It's a cute little two-story house. It was a matter of timing too—Poonam and I both had condos over in the Andersonville area, and we were just like "Okay, why don't we get a house?" This was just before the housing market crashed, so we just got stupidly lucky and were able to sell both our condos and get a house.

ML: Nice! ...I don't know, I feel that you have so much to say...

- DV: Yeah, what's the best target for the type of information that you want to collect? More stuff that is specifically UChicago, or...?
- ML: So the end goal—there two kind of end goals to this project. The first one, the immediate one, is that we're going to put up an exhibit in the Special Collections.
- DV: Yeah, yeah, at UChicago? Those are great exhibits.
- ML: Yeah, exactly. So that's going up in 2015. And that's going to be about gay life at the University of Chicago. The second goal is just to build up an archive of gay life on campus. That's more generalized, because that's envisioned as just being this resource for historians who are interested in learning about various periods of gay history in Chicago and at the University of Chicago. Yeah. One question: Since you've been around the university and you've mentioned mentoring undergraduates, what differences do you see between your experience at the University of Chicago and current undergrad experience at the University?
- DV: For one thing, they have an actual space. That building, I think it's at 5710?
- ML: Yeah, yeah, the Center for Gender and Sexuality.
- DV: Both the building where is the Center for Gender and Sexuality is located, which I think is one block away from 5710—I think it's on 57th and Woodlawn, where there's this nicely renovated building, the Multicultural Student Affairs office, that's there, as well as the gay and lesbian office where they have meetings and drop-ins and so on. I did a tour of that building when it opened—but when they have their kickoff when the school year is starting, the gay and lesbians have a kickoff social in that new space in the building. I think that's hugely important, that there's somewhere where you can go and be and meet people that have a commonality. I think that really helps people find each other because they have a designated place as opposed to one meeting that they go to every other week or something like that. I think physical space has a lot to do with it. I'm pretty sure the arts building is going to be a little queer hangout too, at least with the performing arts with the guys. You find new people engaged in ways that aren't just in the lab or in the classroom, those spaces where there's a looser purpose. Because socializing at the library? I know that a lot of people hang out there, but it's not the same thing. And when they turned the Reynolds Club into more of a purposefully social space, that was great to see too. Because that building is just packed with memories for me, even though it wasn't that sort of cool cafe student social area, the student mail room was always in the basement with the barbershop and whatever the hell else is down there now. I vaguely mentioned this earlier in the interview: someone who was a second-year when I was a first-year, that Reynolds Club the first time I met her was definitely right there. There's a theater, there was a show that was going on, and I'd met her, I'd made contact with her roommate to join a vegetarian group on campus—I think I joined the vegetarian group before I joined the gay group, but there's some overlap there. And so she wasn't in that group but her roommate was. That space has a nice carry-over from student center space, from how it used to function with the C-Shop, which used to be crazy. Like, it's all like

corporate now, it's like Bagel-land now...

ML: Yeah, the Einstein's Bagel Brothers or something. What was it like before?

DV: Um, awesome. And like filled with crazy people. The shake day has gone on forever and ever, but I remember packed tables. There weren't any corporate logos. I don't remember who was running the food service, but it just felt more like it belonged to the University of Chicago rather than something with a logo slapped up on it. I would prefer the earlier iterations of the C-Shop than what it is now, but I understand what with finance and how they get things sponsored why it is that way now.

ML: That is too bad though. I have never thought of the C-Shop as potentially being a really cool place.

DV: It was nicer then. Or it was more active. Or I belonged to that space when I was that age, so my experience now is filtered through being tons older than kids now.

ML: Kids these days!

DV: Kids these days—they're nutty! But I think now physically more spread out because of the way they renovated that area—I don't know what it called, that cafe with the pool tables.

ML: Oh yeah, Hallowed Grounds.

DV: Hallowed Grounds, yeah. Perfect.

ML: That's a really nice place to be, still.

DV: Yeah, when I'm thinking about spaces where we spent our time and where the queer kids found each other, it's definitely the Cobb coffee shop, probably still is. And the Reynolds Club, just with the C-Shop. Jimmy's.

ML: Jimmy's will always be around.

DV: Yeah, Jimmy's is disgusting! We go there with our work team now and I look around and go, "Wow, this place is awful." But it's still awesome.

ML: Yeah, it walks that beautiful line between awful and awesome.

DV: Exactly. And the Med, definitely. And Ada, my very good friend from undergrad, she worked at the Florian. There was this pizza strip on 57th. It's now closed, but it was further east than the Medici.

ML: Why did you decide to be interviewed for this project?

[01:02:37]

DV: I just have an ongoing interest in the success of the Center for Gender Studies, and encourage the projects that come out of there. Gina Olson, I know her socially. She didn't tell me to do this, but I'm on the mailing list. I think it was originally the mailing list for the Gay and Lesbian Alumni Association, put a call out or mentioned that this is happening. Because I edit the Gender Studies website sometimes when they need some help, I end up seeing things and going "Oh, that's interesting." Just thought it would be a good contribution. I have a lot of stuff that's happened here that's of interest. It would be one thing to be gay while I was here, but I kind of made a career out of being gay while I was here in terms of what I was looking at with my projects and who I was hanging out with.

ML: No, this has been incredibly valuable. We are missing both a lot of people from the '90s and a lot of women. We're missing a lot of women for the interviews.

DV: Yeah, in terms of follow-up, I can definitely keep on answering questions, if there's a different kind of line that you're missing. Or information, like "Oh, I wanted to know about some other specific thing," since it's hard this many years later to dial it back completely and figure out what was important then and what's just important on reflection. The layered haze of nostalgia over everything. I definitely didn't want to portray it as too awful or too perfect.

ML: But I mean, the frustration that you felt was real, and that's valuable to know. Also, all of the stuff that you have is really amazing. Could we have copies of that?

DV: Yeah! Would it be more useful digitally or...? As objects?

ML: Objects would actually be really nice.

DV: Because these [the zines] are actually multiple copies, and you can have those.

ML: Oh, that's wonderful!

DV: Yeah, I just checked that I have around three more of these because I just did a bunch of photocopies when I creating them. And this is the original of this—it's funny, it still has the feedback note from Beth when I made her this project. I read this last night and it's hysterical. Because it's "pass"—she knows that she can't grade me. It's adorable. I'm trying to think about what else I have. I wrote an old article for The Maroon when I got back from the gay and lesbian studies program, I can just scan that. This was just me in between homework last night, trying to bring a couple of things that would be interesting.

ML: Yeah, these are amazing!

DV: And I can show you some things...these aren't all UChicago, some of them are...I'll just find a funny picture of Beth. This is actually one of my favorite pictures of all time

because it's so adorable. [Gets out picture of Dena and Beth kissing on the quad on a sunny day.] This is Beth, and that's me, when I had a much different haircut, and that's Cobb. This is definitely during—I think this was right after an event that had something to do with getting the benefits, domestic partnership benefits, for employees on campus.

ML: This is a beautiful picture.

DV: I love that picture. I was flipping through and was like, this is just a great shot! So I have this digitally because I scanned it and sent it to Beth because I thought that she'd think it was funny. She definitely did think it was funny. Yeah. This actually at one point was in The Maroon, but I don't remember the issue. It was probably around that time in '92. That was definitely taken in '92. It was a '92 haircut.

ML: '92 overalls.

DV: Yeah, exactly. Oh, this is my friend Ada sleeping in Harper before Harper was—yeah, all of these pictures are a mix of stuff from what I took abroad, some pictures, highlight pictures, some are UChicago. Let me know if you want scanned UChicago stuff.

ML: Oh, please!

DV: Or other stuff.

ML: Yeah, give us everything that you're comfortable with giving us! This is so fantastic.

DV: Oh, yeah, sure. Yeah, I've got a big portfolio of artwork, stuff that I've done, and on the side pockets of it I've stashed different articles. I know that this is one.

ML: That's so cool...

DV: Yeah, we can dig up the archives and I can scan in more stuff. [pointing to photo] First girlfriend. That's my parents' kitchen in Grand Rapids. That was actually probably right before I left for college.

ML: Oh wow...So also, besides memorabilia, you've mentioned a few names of people we should talk to, and we're always hunting for more names. Anyone else?

DV: [Redacted] is someone who was a really good friend of mine in undergrad, and she went and got her PhD at Duke in English, and now she's in veterinary school at Cornell. She would be a good person to talk to, and I definitely have her contact information if you want me to put you in contact. I mentioned Elizabeth Freeman? English grad student, and of course. I've lost touch with Troy Parker, he was the co-leader of GALA. I'd like to find him, I just don't know where he is. [Redacted], that was the very first little gay friend I made at BJ, and she's probably be willing to do it. And I'm just assuming that you've already gotten Kathy Forde on board. [Redacted], she was Beth Freeman's—also an English grad student at the time. [Redacted], who is also in Chicago, she was also another

English grad student. Have you ever heard of the sex toy store Early to Bed?

ML: Oh yes, I have.

DV: She is actually in a relationship with the owner of that shop. She's pretty easy to track down. She has kind of an interesting take on queerness at the university at that time, since she has a perspective on the cliquishness of the English grad students at the time. I didn't see that as much. Yeah, I've got a bunch of other names socially who you could talk to whose names will probably pop up, and I can email you their names if you want to track them down and get them to participate. There are definitely more.

ML: Sure, that would be fantastic! Yeah. Is there anything more that you want to tell us?

DV: It'll occur to me when we turn the mic off. It's hard—I know collectively as narratives, people's experiences build to create this collective knowledge. It's hard for me to see things that happened to me as an individual as being important in a wider scheme, so I think—I hope some of the themes that I've mentioned come through. Some of my tangents and narratives have more to do with how even though this place was not particularly welcoming in terms of being explicitly open to lesbian identity formation, it was intellectually open in that you could almost do it yourself, which was probably a stronger experience than having this identity package laid out for you with all these resources. I probably would have loved to have more resources and to meet more people, but then it would have been a different path and it would have been less of struggle. You appreciate it when it gets less difficult. I wouldn't wish my experience on any newly coming out person, but I think because I knew who I was and what I wanted before I got here, I wasn't as daunted or as depressed by the lack of possibility in terms of relationships or socializing.

ML: Do you think the atmosphere put off some people who were struggling with their sexuality?

DV: I think so. Yeah. Or if they were less confident, they would have been less able to figure things out. It might have been a harder environment for that. Sadly. There were a lot—I forget the name, a feminist publication that came out yearly, I can't remember the name of it. But there was a cool little group of punk rock leaning straight girls—you know, there were other alternative little pockets.

ML: Oh yeah, riot grrl was then.

DV: Mhm, it was that era. And so there are ways of being, other categories of being, that were spaces of possibility too, so even if it wasn't explicitly gay it was something that was open.

[01:13:47]

End of Interview