

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #63

VERMAZEN, BRUCE (1940 -) AB 1961, MA 1962

At U of C: 1957 - 1962

Interviewed: August 19th, 2013

Interviewer: Molly Liu

Transcript by: Molly Liu

Length: 1:20:47

Interview (August 19th, 2013) by phone:

[00:00:00]

ML: So, first question: What brought you to the University of Chicago?

BV: I had a friend a year ahead of me in high school named Sue Fisher. And this was in Phoenix, Arizona. She went to the University of Chicago. I'm not sure exactly why, and she came back at Christmas time and told me I had to go to the University of Chicago. So I did apply to a couple of other schools. I applied to Caltech and, um, I don't know, one other school. I got into all three and I decided I would go to Chicago because she said that—she convinced me, rather, that I shouldn't be choosing a career path at age 16. I shouldn't be determined to be an engineer or architect or whatever I was going to be, I should go to the University of Chicago and find out where I should go. So that's what I did.

ML: Yeah. Did you think you were going to be an engineer at the time?

BV: That seemed the most promising thing for me, because I was really good at math in high school. I only had a vague idea of what people did in the world at that point. I knew I didn't want to be in business, and I wanted to use whatever skills I had, but the only skill I knew about was mathematics. Although at that point I was sophisticated enough to know that my music skills were at too low a level to make a living off of it except as a high school teacher, and I was horrified by my music teachers in high school. They seemed so unhappy. I didn't want to be one of them.

ML: What else did your friend tell you about the University of Chicago that made you want to come here?

BV: Well, let's see. That's a really complex question. I think she knew that I was gay, although that was never said between us at that point. I think she thought that I would—that it

would be good for me to go to a place where it wasn't such a scandal to be gay. But I don't think that was at the top of her mind. I think what was at the top of her mind was the idea that she thought that I had a lot of potential and she thought I could develop there, and that I could learn everything that a UC student was supposed to learn in those days, about literature and art and life and so on, and just be among people who were smart and not focused on their future jobs. I think it was that. She didn't talk about, for example, the cultural life in Chicago, which is something I was really crazy about when I got there, and which Phoenix didn't have at all. I think her main idea was that this was the kind of intellectual atmosphere that would be good for my development.

ML: Right. So I guess if those were your expectations when you came to the University of Chicago, do you think that those academic expectations were met?

BV: Oh yes. I had a wonderful experience there.

ML: Yeah. Can you talk about the parts of your experience that you particularly enjoyed? Or disliked?

BV: Well...five years with lots of things happening. Let's see. I loved the approach to teaching that Chicago had in those days, which was what are now called the core courses and what were in those days called the College. There would be in most classes, not all of them, but for example in the Humanities classes, in the History class, and so on, there would be a lecture given every week by a professor whose specialty was in that subject, and it would be given to everyone who was taking the course, and they were fabulous lectures for me. I had never heard anything like that before. Then the class would break down into small discussion groups, again with professors, but it was luck of the draw which professor you got. Some of them that I got were wonderful, some of them were not so wonderful, but they were all way above the level I had been acquainted with in Phoenix. I don't think I was much of a discussant in those classes. But just hearing other people talk with the professor was a great way to learn about the things that we were studying. And I also liked the idea of a comprehensive exam at the end of the whole year instead of the kind of exam situation that's conventional at other institutions. But of course that ended when I got out of the College and started taking upper—whatever they were called. Non-College courses. But I had some terrific professors. I had mostly terrific professors. I found that what they had to teach me was just the most interesting thing in the world. That really set me on my intellectual path in life.

Then there were auxiliary things, like going to the Chicago Symphony, going to the Art Institute, hearing concerts in Mandel Hall. What else? Going to theater—I hardly go to theater at all anymore, but I used to go to the one upstairs in Reynolds Club. I guess it was called University Theater. They put on fairly ambitious plays and they had good actors and good directors. They had, what was his name, the guy who founded Steppenwolf later. He was working there at the time. Well, I just had a very rich cultural experience.

ML: Yeah. That's really wonderful to hear. So I guess, since you were a Philosophy professor,

my guess is that you studied philosophy in college?

BV: I actually majored in General Studies in the Humanities. I don't know if that program is still around. But in that program you had to pick a principal subject and then I forget, two or—at the undergraduate level you had to pick three subsidiary subjects, and then at the master's level just one or two. Philosophy was my lead subject both as a bachelor's and master's level. But I didn't really get the kind of philosophical background that I would have gotten had I been a Philosophy major.

ML: Right. What attracted you to the General Humanities program?

[0:09:55]

BV: What happened was I started out as a Math major. Again, following my strong suit. I found out that it was just—college math was a little above my level. I got poor grades in algebra, calculus. I think just those. I realized that that wasn't going to be possible for me. I picked up the catalog, the general catalog, and went through it. Ran into General Studies in the Humanities and that sounded just right for me because it was a continuation of the kind of program that you got in the College, except of course it was just the humanities, none of the social sciences. You could take a big variety of courses. You didn't have to follow any particular set of content requirements. You didn't have to take, for example, Aristotle and Plato and medieval philosophy and modern philosophy and so on to get some acquaintance with philosophy, you could just take courses you were interested in antecedently. I'm not sure that was a great idea for me, but I enjoyed it at the time a lot. So I went to General Studies in the Humanities. I think I had to talk to somebody about getting into the program, it wasn't just automatic. I got in and had a great time.

ML: Right. You've talked a little bit already about the cultural life that you had at the University of Chicago. Could you talk about that a little bit more? Did you get to go out into the city of Chicago a lot, or did you mostly stay around the university?

BV: I didn't have very much money, so most of my cultural life was on the campus. As I said, concerts in Mandel Hall and so on. Once in a while I would save up my pennies and go downtown. Literally my allowance from my parents the first couple of years, it was \$6 a week. Which is something like, I don't know, probably \$50 a week in today's money. But it still didn't go very far. In particular it didn't go very far for restaurant meals or concerts at the symphony. I tended to choose low-cost alternatives. I remember for example that while I was in Chicago, Louis Armstrong brought an orchestra to some club on the near North Side, on the North Side, and I couldn't go, partly because I wasn't sure if you could get in if you weren't 21, but partly the thought of paying nightclub prices was forbidding to me. Also, who else played in Chicago? I think Lester Young played there when I was in college, and I didn't go to that for that reason. And then there was a jazz band in Berwyn, Illinois, which is out west near Cicero, and I wanted to hear them, but again, the cost of traveling there and paying to go to a nightclub was just daunting to me. There were lots of things I didn't take advantage of. But I did get to hear the Chicago Symphony several times. What else? Yeah, I don't actually remember too many other cultural events

that were off campus. But there was so much on offer on campus that it was okay.

ML: To go back to a much earlier point, it was really interesting to me that when you were talking about what your friend was saying about UChicago, you mentioned that she kind of had the idea that you might be gay, and UChicago was considered to be a gay-friendly place. What do you think led to that perception? And were you aware that you were gay at the time? Was that a factor for you at all when choosing UChicago?

BV: Oh, yeah, I'm sure. Let's start with, did I know I was gay? I knew I was sort of gay. Because I had been attracted to other boys for many years at that point, and I'd been sexually active for many years, but all very very very closeted. I had been raised on the *Readers' Digest*. And that was my source of psychological wisdom at the time. *Readers' Digest* took this kind of diluted—that's with a 't,' not with a 'd'—Freudian view that homosexuality was a natural stage in sexual development, and that sooner or later you'd get over it. So I kept waiting to get over it. But I never did. At that point, in college, I was still waiting to get over it. Not that I had—not that I believed that I would get over it, but I thought, well, maybe it's true, maybe you do get over it. But I never was attracted to women, really. Later on I did have—I did have a period where I tried to be heterosexual, had girlfriends, even got married for a few years. And I enjoyed sex with women, but I didn't really want a woman, if you know what I mean. I wouldn't walk down the street and see someone and think, “Oh, I want her,” but I had the thought, “I want him,” all the time. On any street. Yeah, in that sense, I knew I was gay to—well, that I was somewhat gay, maybe not all gay, maybe not 99% gay.

And so that made the University of Chicago attractive to me even though I didn't know anything very specific about attitudes towards homosexuality at the University. I just knew it was better than Phoenix. As it turns out, it was really a very closeted place from 1957 to 1962. I hardly knew anybody who was gay. I don't think I came out to anybody. I don't think—I'm sure that nobody came out to me. So it was all still these suppressed passions on both parts. I realized later when I got a little more sophisticated about sexuality that there were two or three boys who were attracted to me and who were probably trying to signal me, but the signal never got through. But it was easier to deal with being gay there than it was in high school in Arizona. Of course I was older as well.

This is just one thing I remember—I don't know when I heard this joke, but either before I went to Chicago or early in the years I was in Chicago. It had to do with two guys standing on the Midway, and a tour bus drove past and stopped right in front of them. A woman leaned out the window and said, “Excuse me,”—she knew that it was the University of Chicago, that was the idea, it was stopping at the University of Chicago. She leaned out the window and said, “Excuse me, are you boys Communists?” One of them said, “No,” and then he put his arm around the other one and said, “But we're homosexuals.”

ML: I've never heard that joke before! That's pretty funny!

[0:20:00]

BV: It's a good one. You'll hear it from other people my age if you ask. So anyway, that—the idea that you could make a joke about being gay that wasn't a hostile horrible joke appealed to me.

ML: So UChicago had this reputation of being this hotbed for, like, homosexual communism or something like that?

BV: In those days, yeah. I know why the communist part, because there were a lot of communists there, but I don't know how it got the homosexual reputation. I guess before I got there, there must have been a nascent gay liberation movement going on, but I wasn't aware of any such thing going on while I was there.

ML: What was it like to be closeted at UChicago at the time?

BV: Very frustrating. Very frustrating. I wanted to—I spent all five years trying to figure out how to ascertain without asking whether someone was gay or not. I never got the answer. In fact I don't have the answer now but people aren't as closeted now, so it's no longer of importance to me. I got lots and lots of crushes on lots and lots of other young men, and never figured out how to say, “Oh! I have a crush on you. Are you gay?” Because I always feared some kind of retaliation, shunning, exclusion from social circles, et cetera.

ML: That sounds really difficult. You mention when talking about your background that you had been sexually active for some time. Did you have sexual relationships at all when you were at—when you were in college?

BV: No, not—well, not at school. I had a boyfriend, sort of a boyfriend, back in Phoenix, and sometimes when I was back in town during vacation we would get together. But that was a very, what, tragic relationship, as it turned out. I didn't have any fulfilling sexual contact at all during those years. [ML: That's really sad.] Yeah, tell me.

ML: Were you involved in—you did mention the communist leanings of Chicago at the time. Were you involved in any sort of political issues when you were in college?

BV: Very peripherally. I was in student government for I think just one year as a member of the—I think it was—hm. Now I've forgotten. I think it was a political party called Polit. It was left, of course everything in Chicago was left, but it was left of the left. They asked me to run because I had some name recognition as the head guy at the radio station, I don't even remember what the name of my office was. Chairman? Probably not chairman. Anyway I was the station manager) at the radio station and they thought I would bring them some votes. They had two or three other candidates on their slate that were similarly situated, that is, people who weren't politically active before that but whom they thought might draw a few votes. So I sat through a lot of student council meetings without too much interest in what was going on. I was asked to join—I remember, a guy came up to me once and said, “Bruce, you're kind of a young Dem type, and we're starting a new movement called Students for a Democratic Society, and we were wondering if you'd like

to join.” I said, “No, I really didn't have time to be active in that.” So I missed my chance to be part of history.

ML: I guess not a great part of history though, getting shut out of the administrative building.

BV: Yeah, but you know. It would have been, “Yeah, I was SDS, I had a peace flag,” or something. But I didn't.

ML: Yeah, it seems that you were really involved in music from a pretty young age. You mentioned to going all of these classical music and jazz events, and you were head of the radio station.

BV: Yeah, I had a jazz radio show on the station also. That's actually how I got hooked up with them in the first place. I think I was a second-year student.

ML: What instrument did you or do you still play?

BV: I play cornet, principally. For a while I was playing saxophone also, but I never got good enough at it to want to continue.

ML: Right. Did you do a lot of music stuff when you were at UChicago?

BV: No! It was just as much of a musical desert for me as it was a sexual desert. [ML: Aw.] Yeah! The Music Department in those days was, maybe even now, I don't know, strictly musicology. And there was no university orchestra, no university band. I think there might have been a chorus. There were no established groups for me to join and I wasn't enterprising enough to start my own. I never met anybody else who was interested in playing the older kinds of jazz, so that was—that had to be put on the shelf for five years. I couldn't play—there were some people playing modern jazz, as I remember some fairly good people, but I didn't understand how to do that, so I didn't do that either. The only musical organization was the one connected to radio station, which was called the Pro Nausea Musica, and they did improvised parodies of classical music. Once a year, there was no regular musical schedule, but once a year, the musical station, which in those days was called WUCB, would put on a marathon, fundraising marathon. I don't know if the current radio station does that. We would take over the north lounge in Reynolds Club and broadcast from there for 24 hours. And Pro Nausea Musica would always be one of those features. I don't know how long that went, probably 10 years or so before I got into it. But that obviously was not a musical organization, it was just another kind of college fun.

ML: What did you end up doing after you got your BA and your master's at UChicago?

BV: I went to—I looked for a job. Because I wanted to go to graduate school but I didn't have any money saved to go right away. And also I needed some time to think about what exactly I wanted to narrow my focus to. I knew there wasn't a PhD in General Studies in the Humanities! So I looked around for jobs, and with a masters degree in those days, you

could teach English composition, but not much else. So I looked—I don't know how I found that out, maybe I had some counseling. Anyway I went to the employment service, it was in Reynolds Club at the time, and applied for three jobs. University of Kentucky, some awful little school up near Wilmette, Illinois, and Northern Illinois University. Got the best deal from the University of Kentucky, so I went there for two years. And decided to go on into graduate school in philosophy, and saved myself enough money to get myself through a year or two of school. And that was it.

[0:30:30]

ML: Right. What was it like going to Kentucky? I imagine the shift from Chicago to the south was—

BV: It was a different world. The students as you can imagine were not as smart or as well-prepared as University of Chicago students by a long shot. And the—I didn't have any training in teaching at all. So I didn't know that there were—that you had to accommodate the different skills of a whole different layer of students. I ended up teaching at way too high a level. I don't think my students loved me at all. They didn't hate me, but they thought that I was teaching inappropriately. It was kind of slave labor. The wages were very low, the hours were very long, the course load was heavy. The only—I didn't have a car. I lived—first I lived in kind of a slum, then I moved to university housing. My social life was just with other young faculty members and graduate students.

ML: Were you—I guess, did you feel free to be more open about your sexuality after?

BV: Oh no, much less. Kentucky, even though it was a liberal state for a southern state, it was very...what? Primitive. It was very primitive. It wasn't Alabama or Mississippi or Georgia, but it wasn't the University of Chicago. So there I did get to know one gay guy fairly well, but not well enough to tell him I was gay. Or him, for that matter, to tell me that he was gay, although it somehow got known. So I learned a little bit there, but again, I didn't have any sexual contacts at all. At least the one thing that I experienced in Kentucky that I hadn't experienced in Chicago was a gay bar. Actually two gay bars that I went to in Lexington. But nothing happened. Nobody picked me up, and I wasn't capable of picking somebody else up. It was just two more years of unrequited crushes, unrequited and unspoken crushes.

ML: When in your life did this sexual desert end? What was the process like of finally—when did you feel like you could be free about your sexual orientation?

BV: Sorry, when did I feel that I could?

ML: Yeah. What was that process like?

BV: You're asking when did I start telling people that I was gay or opening up to people, or what?

ML: Yes.

BV: That started happening when I went to graduate school at the University of—at Stanford, rather. '64 to '67. And of course the atmosphere in the San Francisco Bay Area was quite open at that time. Well, not quite open, but much more open than anything I had experienced before. So I felt emboldened to tell a few people. But then that was the point at which I decided that, since all men were so crazy about women, that I should try to become crazy about women. But didn't really pursue my gay feelings at the time. I tried to discover in myself heterosexual feelings that were barely perceptible.

ML: The 1%, I guess. Was that all right? You did mention being married to a woman for a couple of years.

BV: I learned a lot about myself from having girlfriends and having sex with women. Trying to see how—what percentage, to use the old *Readers' Digest* Freudian image, what percentage of heterosexuality there was in my makeup. I think I overestimated it at the time, just because I did have a good time with several women. But I still was yearning for a male connection. So that didn't happen until I started teaching at Berkeley. Berkeley had a, I think maybe, not sure exactly when it started, but 1969, it had a gay student union. I went to their events and then just by being in the room, I was saying that I'm gay, and the other people in the room were saying, I'm gay, so that problem was solved.

ML: It must have been a really exciting time, to be gay in the Bay Area, in the late '60s and the '70s.

BV: Yeah, it was. Even though gay life was still harassed and marginalized and so on. But things were starting to happen. Bars in San Francisco were starting to allow their patrons to dance. I guess they had some tacit understanding with the cop on the beat that they wouldn't get busted for it even though it was still completely illegal. That made a big difference. Made it easier to talk to people. And it was more fun than just sitting around. The gay bars in Kentucky, for example, one of them was a San Francisco-style bar founded by someone who just moved from San Francisco, but I only went there once. The other was a traditional Southern gay bar, and how it worked was, you went there wearing a suit and tie, and you sat at a table as if it were a restaurant with your friends, and you could discreetly circulate to the other tables to say hello, but you couldn't really gather in standing groups in the place. That would create a scandal. That would be cruising. And that wasn't allowed. So I think I only went to that one once, also. But in San Francisco, no suits, no ties. You could talk to people freely. You could dance with people. It was really a different world. It was just like a heterosexual bar. Except that you had more likelihood of ending up in bed than you did at a heterosexual bar. [ML: That's funny though—] Virtually 100%. Sorry.

ML: Oh no, it's fine. I had never heard of a Southern gay bar being—

BV: I hope they don't exist anymore.

[0:39:17]

ML: Right. So yeah, what was the political climate in San Francisco like at the time?

BV: When I got there, let's see...I think Pat Brown was governor, and he was a very progressive guy. Gave money to the university also. Let's see...San Francisco, of course I wasn't in San Francisco, I was in Stanford. I don't know anything about what was going on there, except that there were leftish groups. Let's see, was there any kind of gay agitation at Stanford at the time? I don't think so. I don't think there was any kind of organized gay stuff at Stanford. But when I got to Berkeley in '67, as I said there was—I don't know when the gay student union got going, it was already going by 1969. But even in 1967, it was understood that you wouldn't necessarily get beat up for being gay. Trying to think if I knew anybody in the first year of so whom I knew to be gay and who knew me to be gay. I don't think so, I actually don't think so. I think that it was probably my second year there, 1968, that that started being a possibility. It was really a different world. I don't know how old you are, but you would be shocked to be thrust back there.

ML: I was born in 1991, so...

BV: '91! Oh my god! Yeah, no, you wouldn't recognize it. You'd probably think you were on another planet.

ML: Why so? What are some of the differences that you see? I'm sure that it was very different, but if you could talk about exactly what some of those differences were, that would be fantastic.

BV: We're talking about the Bay Area now?

ML: Yeah, sure.

BV: Well, when I...the first gay bar that I went to in the Bay Area was probably in 1966 or so. Maybe a year earlier. And it was in East Palo Alto because there was a law in California at the time that you couldn't serve alcohol within a mile of a university campus. There's a difference! Certainly not on the campus. And East Palo Alto was just a mile from the edge of the Stanford campus. There was a gay bar there called, I don't know, the Sportman's Club, something like that. I went there once, just to check it out, just to see if I could fit in, if I felt comfortable being there. I went by myself, and I didn't feel comfortable at all. I felt that it was an alien culture. People in tight t-shirts and older men who were obviously looking to pick up younger men. Actually, I think that was pretty much the sum of my impression of the place. I left very quickly. I felt very out of place. And then, trying to think if I can think of anything on campus. Hm. No, actually, I can't—again, there were lots of silent crushes, and that was about it. I remember once during my Stanford days, going over to Berkeley to sit in with a jazz band, and someone trying to pick me up in the men's room of the bar where the music was going on. He was very direct, but I didn't—well, I didn't want to have sex with him anyway, but I didn't even say

no politely, I just ignored him and he went away.

ML: So it sounds like the gay outlets when you were at Stanford were skeezy and not great?

BV: The gay what?

ML: The gay outlets that you had—the one gay bar and the guy who tried to pick you up.

BV: Yeah, yeah. I'm trying to think if I heard reports of other gay places. Sportsman was it, as far as my meager knowledge of the scene. I'm sure there was a gay scene on campus, there must have been. I'm still in touch with some people who were in school there at the same time as I was, and they assure me that there was a little gay scene, but I never was asked to join it.

ML: It's one of those things that you need permission to enter, that kind of thing?

BV: Yeah. The things I heard subsequently were, for example, students who had an ongoing social circle that would—a gay social circle that would get together for parties and so on. But I never got tapped, as they say in the fraternity world.

ML: It does sound like when you moved to Berkeley, things were better, like with the gay student union.

BV: Yeah, definitely. I don't even know who founded it. But I'm very grateful to him or her or them for getting something going.

ML: Did you stay on as a professor at Berkeley?

BV: Did I stay on? Yeah. I taught there from 1967 to—my official retirement date of 2000, but I stayed around and taught one course in the spring of 2001. But after that I moved to San Diego and didn't have much contact with Berkeley anymore.

ML: That's a really long time. [BV: Yeah, tell me.] I guess, how did you see gay life change and evolve over the decades that you were in the Berkeley area?

BV: Well, of course it got much better. In 1981, I think, I started coming out to my classes. I would give a little speech towards the end of the quarter or semester, whatever we were on the time, in which I would tell them that whatever their attitudes towards gay people were, they were probably based on misinformation and prejudice, so I wanted them to know that I was gay because I'd been dealing with them for almost a quarter or almost a semester, and they knew a little bit about who I was, so there it is. This is beginning of your real information about gay things.

ML: How was that speech usually received?

BV: I would say, with overwhelming support. And usually with a little bit of dissent that

would come out in the student evaluations at the end of the semester. The most disapproving people were I think closeted gay boys who just didn't want the subject mentioned because then someone would figure out that they were gay. But those were only two or three responses over a period of 20 years. And once, this was really a big surprise, I was teaching the biggest class I'd ever taught, 300 people in one of the biggest auditoriums on campus. It was a class in...what was it? I think it was Introduction to Political Philosophy. I gave my little speech, and they burst into applause.

[0:50:17]

ML: That's fantastic, actually!

BV: Yeah! I can't remember—I should try to remember what year it was. Because for me that marked a huge watershed moment in how students—how people that age were feeling about gay issues.

ML: Yeah, that's quite remarkable. What was it like to be in the Bay Area around the '80s into the '90s?

BV: Well, by that time I was pretty...aside from my teaching, I was involved in gay things a lot. My marriage ended in—really ended in 1976, so I started being much more active, sexually, with other men, going to bars in San Francisco and going to the one bar in Berkeley. Actually it was in Oakland because it was a mile from campus! And I was involved in music things. In 1978, I was asked to participate in a musical organization that was campaigning for Harvey Milk and George Moscone, playing fundraisers. And so I knew infinitesimally—no, not infinitesimally, exponentially. I knew a lot more gay people than I had ever known in my life at that point through these musical organizations, and I really felt like a part of gay San Francisco or gay Berkeley. So I was having a great time from 1978 'til the early '80s, and suddenly AIDS happened, and people that I knew...

ML: ...Hello?

BV: Hold on.Sorry, ah. That was unexpected.

ML: No, I'm sorry—are you all right?

BV: That was an unexpected reaction. Ah. Anyway, people that I knew started getting sick and dying. That changed everything. Sorry.

ML: No, I'm sorry for—bringing it up.

BV: Anyway, go ahead. After that...well, I continued with the music activities and I continued looking for the ideal husband, whom I finally found in 1986. And—but it was much harder to audition people, so to speak, because of the sexual restrictions and the fear of getting sick and dying yourself. So, it was a big transition.

ML: Yeah. How did you meet your partner?

BV: Some mutual friends of ours set us up, I think. He denies it. But I think it was true. He is—or he was a graduate student at UC Riverside, University of California Riverside. One of his old friends was a professor there, and the old friend, George, was also an old friend of mine and was the partner of a professor at Berkeley, Phil Brett, music professor. So at one point, Phillip and George had a dinner party at their house in Berkeley, when George was up from Riverside, and George brought Juan Miguel, my husband, with him. And invited me to the dinner party, along with a number of prospective matches for Juan Miguel. I was just one.

ML: The dinner party was like an episode of “The Bachelor” or something?

BV: Yeah, exactly, that's what it was like! But since Juan Miguel didn't speak much English, it was not a very effective thing. But anyway, that's how we met. Then a year later, Juan Miguel started his PhD studies at Berkeley, so we met again. And I started courting him. And it led to marriage, legal marriage, both in Spain and in California.

ML: That's so exciting! [BV: Yeah!] Did you two get married when—when was it, 200...4?

BV: 2008. We'd been working on getting married in Spain for a couple of years. It's very complicated for a foreigner to marry a Spanish national. A lot of paperwork, a lot of...I don't know. And since we weren't living there, that meant that the appointments that we could make with officials, with the police and the Civil Registry and so on, had to be at the intervals where we could be there. So it took a long time and a lot of effort. Just as we were about to leave for Spain to finally get married, the California Supreme Court said, “Oh yeah! You have a constitutional right to get married here!” So we didn't have time—or maybe even...no, I think that the decision came down but the open window for getting married hadn't opened yet. So we went to Spain, we got married, the window in California opened, and a week after we got back to California we got married here. [ML: That's great!] Oh yeah, now I'm remembering the details. The first day that a same-sex couple could get married in California was the day that our plane from Spain arrived in San Diego.

ML: Did you get married on that day? The moment your plane touched the tarmac...

BV: No, we were jetlagged. We were still jetlagged. So we got married I think a week to the day from landing.

ML: Right. That's really lovely!

BV: Yeah! And the whole Prop 8 thing happened. I was very active in the phone banks to try to defeat it, and then it won! And that was horrible. I'd never been involved in anything—well, no, I'd been involved in unsuccessful Democratic party campaigns before. But this really touched my heart, I was extremely disappointed. And puzzled as to why the Supreme Court while interpreting Prop 8 decided that our marriage was still valid, even

though there couldn't be any subsequent marriages. It still seems to me wildly inconsistent. But I was happy we were still married. And now we're even more married with the overturn of Prop 8. [ML: Yeah. Super married!] Super married! Now we can file jointly.

[1:00:24]

ML: Right. That's great! What have you been up to since retirement?

BV: Since retirement. Well, right after I retired I left Berkeley and moved to San Diego because Juan Miguel is teaching at San Diego State, it's the only job he could get in California. He's still several years from retirement, so we couldn't—well, I had to go where he was. And so I did. Down here, well, San Diego's another cultural desert, like Phoenix. Not quite as bad as Phoenix but on its way. Well, I've just been adjusting to San Diego, trying to get involved in music here, successfully. Building a dwelling place and a family and so on down here. That's mostly been what's going on. And spending lots of time in Spain. We've gone to Spain at least once a year for almost the last twenty years. And sometimes twice a year.

ML: I guess, what is it like being a binational gay couple? Is it really difficult? I don't know what the situation in Spain is like at all.

BV: Well, I don't know. I don't know what it's like to not be a binational gay couple. [ML: Right, that's true.] I think—well, it's funny, because of the overturning of DOMA, I thought, oh, instead of filling out two separate customs forms when arriving in the US, we can fill out one, as a family. And then I thought about all the ramifications of that and we ended up filling out two, again. But this time it didn't feel like an insult. That was the gain. And also they've added a new restriction to the filling out a single form, which is that you have to have the same surname. And we don't.

ML: That's strange. That seems to work against heterosexual couples as well, who—

BV: I think they just wanted to make it seem impartial, so saying, “You can only do it now if you're a mixed-sex couple” they're saying “you can only do it if you have the same surname,” so it does affect some mixed-sex couples also. But serves them right.

ML: Sure! Yeah. So I guess, looking back, where does the University of Chicago fit into the narrative that you have in your life?

BV: Well, I don't know how to put it in a few words. It was the gateway into—[ML: You can use many words.] It was the gateway into being...a real person. It taught me about what—well, it began to teach me about what there is in the world, and it gave me—this sounds like an advertisement. It gave me the tools to explore further. And I never had thought in high school that I would be excited about art and literature and film and culture in general. I thought I would just go on being excited about jazz. Chicago created that excitement. The education I got at Chicago created that kind of excitement. I learned that

there weren't just two or three intelligent people in the world, but thousands. I learned about...well, what life was, a little bit about what life was like in other parts of the United States. There were in those days, I don't know if it's still the case, there were a lot of kids from the East Coast who went to Chicago either because they were out of it and wanted to go to the University of Chicago or because they didn't get into Harvard or Princeton. Partly because of the anti-Jewish quotas they used to have on the East Coast. Suddenly I was surrounded by both Jewish kids and non-Jewish kids from the East Coast. That opened a door to a part of the United States that I had never touched on before. Had no idea that people actually liked Broadway musicals, for example. To me they were just annoying! Or that—I don't know, the idea of—sorry?

ML: I like that that's what you think of when you think of East Coast culture: Broadway musicals.

BV: That was the most startling thing to me. I knew there were people who liked symphony orchestras and ballets, but I didn't think that any person—any young person liked Broadway musicals. Yeah. It was the beginning of my...what? I want to say my adulthood, but that's kind of vanilla. It was the beginning of my development as a person. Or the beginning of my development as the person I am now. It's all really pretty much continuous from there. Even the sexual part is continuous from there, even though unfortunately nothing happened. It was still quite different from high school, because in high school my whole framework was “This is something I shouldn't be doing, I'm taking a chance, it's illegal, in some states it's still punished with death, and I know I'm going to get over this because *Readers' Digest* says I am.” And then at Chicago, I learned, well, it's okay to be skeptical not only of the *Readers' Digest* but even of Freud. Maybe he's wrong! So that was a big step forward in sexuality. Unfortunately, here's one bad feature of the University of Chicago—I'm joking, of course. In those days the College consisted of 14 courses. 14 year-long courses.

ML: Wait, year-long courses? 14 year-long courses? That's crazy!

BV: Yeah. It was crazy. This was a transitional phase for the College. At one point, maybe 5 years before that, if you either passed or passed out of all 14 courses you got your BA, and there were stories of people who came in, took their—what did they call them? Entrance exams, but that wasn't the expression. Placement exams. And placed out of all 14 courses, and immediately got the BA. They could just go home after taking the placement exams. I don't know if that was a true story or not, but it supposedly had happened. So by this time, you couldn't do that anymore, but you took the placement exams, and you could get credit for a course just by passing the placement exam, but all that meant practically was that you didn't have to take that course. You just took the other courses and you filled in the rest of your four years with electives from the—I don't know if they called it the upper division? I think that's a Berkeley expression. But non-College courses. Real courses! My great misfortune was that I placed out of the psych course! Social Sciences 2, SOSOC 2. So I never actually studied psychology, so I didn't have any sophisticated understanding of sexuality at all. Just *Readers' Digest*. So that was a real misfortune. But I was happy at the time that I didn't have to take the course.

ML: I guess it makes sense that psychology would have been where people would have had to look for stuff on sexuality back then. Now we have sexuality studies and everything.

[1:11:24]

BV: Right. But that's really a recent development. That—when did we fight those wars? I guess in the '80s.

ML: Things have changed a lot. [BV: A lot.] So you've seen a ton of students passing through, and you mentioned a little bit about the different receptions you've gotten to you coming out to your classes. What are some of the historical changes you've seen in these academic generations of college students?

BV: You mean, with respect to sexuality? Or in general.

ML: With respect to sexuality. But if you have stuff to say about in general.

BV: I started seeing really noticeable changes in the late '70s. And the most striking thing for me was that the incoming graduate students, with which I had more to do than with undergraduate students, starting not having to avoid behaviors that could be construed as gay, the way that they always had to do before. The most striking thing was dancing, men dancing together at parties. And hugging when they met each other. Things of that sort. I guess that was all part of the late hippie thing. But still it was a striking development to me. Hm. But I never—I retired too early to see the era that is supposedly happening now, where people don't care about whether you're gay or not. I don't know if that's true. I hope it's true. But I guess you could tell me that.

ML: It's getting to be pretty passé nowadays. Which is nice! It's nice to be boring.

BV: Yeah. But when I started coming out to my classes, it really shocked some people that it was being done. I know one of the campus newsletters interviewed me about it. I told them that I thought, well, you gotta start somewhere, this seems like a good place to start. And of course I was starting the Harvey Milk idea where the ideal thing would be that if everyone who was gay just came out and said, “Look, I'm gay. Get used to it.” And of course nobody—that ideal will never happen, but the closer we get to it, the better it is for everybody.

ML: For sure. Yeah. I think that's all the questions I can think of for now. We're always on the lookout for memorabilia from the University of Chicago, or other alumni from the University of Chicago who you think you know and who might be interested in being interviewed for this project. Can you think of anyone or anything that you might have access to?

BV: Specifically gay stuff. [ML: Yeah.] I have no gay memorabilia except that one joke. [ML: It's a pretty good joke!] Yeah, it's a good joke. Let's see, let's see, let's see...do I know

anybody who was gay and who's still alive and who might be interested in contributing? Well, let me think about it. The only person—the single person who's in that category, who meets those criteria, the first two criteria, would I think not be interested at all. Would be very nervous about it. But I'll try to think if I know—I can think of one other gay person. But I haven't been in touch with him for—yikes, when did I run into him? 20 years ago? I have no idea whether he's still alive. But he's actually the one person I knew at the University who admitted to being gay.

ML: If you remember his name, we can try tracking him down.

BV: Oh, I remember his name. [redacted]. The last I knew of him, he was living in either Sacramento or San Francisco.

ML: Yeah, that would be really fantastic! Our earliest respondents are from your age range, the '50s and the '60s. An openly gay person from back then seems very, very rare.

BV: Yeah, they really were. One other guy, slightly older than me, called [redacted], that everybody thought was gay, but I don't know whether he was or not. And that's about it. It was so sad that I never got to—oh, and one other person I later found out was gay, and who was my roommate! I had no idea at the time that he was gay. He kind of teased me as if he were trying to find out if I was or not, but I believe he's dead. Pretty sure he's gone.

ML: Do you think your experience was pretty typical of gay people back then?

BV: Yeah. Yeah, I do.

ML: Right. Yeah, thank you so much for contributing to this project. We really appreciate your story.

BV: Well, I hope it turns out to be a good resource for somebody. I do historical research myself in popular music, and I often wish that the people I'm writing about had given interviews or kept journals or written letters or things of that sort. But they didn't. So.

ML: This is really really great. It is so rare to find a gay person from the 1950s who went to UChicago. Thank you so much!

BV: Okay. And if you want to follow up on anything, please feel free to do so. I look forward to looking at the transcript!

[1:20:00]

End of Interview