

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE
LGBTQ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of
Stephen Parahus '84
Conducted by
Mary Armstrong
March 24, 2017

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Lafayette College

2018

Parahus

MARY ARMSTRONG: Running now, and that will be running as well. Okay, so, this is Mary Armstrong. I am professor of Women's and Gender Studies and English, and chair of Women's and Gender Studies at Lafayette College. It's March 24th, 2017, and I'm sitting here with Stephen Parahus. We're going to go through the usual procedure; I'm going to ask him to state his name and confirm, Stephen, if you would, that your participation is voluntary and you've given your informed consent.

STEPHEN PARAHUS: So, yes. This is Stephen Parahus. My participation is voluntary; I have given my consent.

MA: Thank you. A few things we like to put at the beginning of every oral history interview. Please remember you can decline to answer any question you don't want to. You should, and we hope you will, elaborate on questions that seem particularly resonant to you, contribute any additional thoughts. And, if you're like I am and get home and realize that you forgot to say that really important thing, if you want to write it down and send us something, [00:01:00] or you think of something -- oh, I have something at home, I'd like to say-- all that is fine. It's not an ironclad interview, right? It's a beginning,

hopefully, of talking about these things. So, some personal information is what we start with. Personal pronouns and name you prefer me to use during the interview?

SP: He, him.

MA: Excellent. And, if you would briefly describe your relationship to Lafayette, so how you define yourself as a member of the Lafayette community?

SP: I would define myself as a member of the Lafayette community; so, there are the basic name, rank, and serial number. I went to Lafayette College in the early '80s. I graduated in 1984 with a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics. When I think about my identity at Lafayette, or how I identify with the college historically, the brightest aspects of that in my memory are my [00:02:00] residence at McKelvy House for two years, and my participation in that program, whether as a resident or not, almost from my arrival at the college, just circumstantially.

And I also think, one of many things that really binds me with affection to the college is the personal relationships, not just with classmates, but even as much with faculty and staff, that I've maintained over the

years. So, when I think of Lafayette College, I think of June Schlueter, or Tom Hill, or Jim Lusardi, or Diane Ahl, or Ellis Finger, or Jean Anne Shafferman, or just people who were really, really important to me, and that's just the beginning of a much longer list. And, to this, I know [00:03:00] I could go upstairs, assuming math is still in this building, right now and if I peeked my head in Tom Hill's door, he'd say, "Hi Stephen." Though I know we haven't seen one another in several years, I know it would happen because it happened the last time I did that. So, I think of my relationship with the college a lot in terms of the people that have continued to connect me to the college.

My residential experience, in particular of McKelvy House, certain very specific friendships that I've maintained, Harlan Levinson being one of them. I met Harlan, actually, he might technically be the first person I ever met, because I came to the college in the spring of my senior year with my life-longest friend who was preparing to do a coin toss between Lafayette and Union College, and Lafayette lost the toss, but we came to pre-freshman day together and wandered, I'm sure without permission, and I'm sure we weren't supposed to do this -- we wandered into

Hogg Hall, [00:04:00] and I don't know if the radio station is still downstairs there, but it was, and we walked into WJRH and Harlan was doing his Danger Radio Show, and we walked in and met, and that's when I met Harlan. And we didn't even realize that it happened until some months into my freshman year when we re-met and remembered we had met once before, and then we became fraternity brothers and he's become really, one of my longest and closest friends. And actually, he's not unrelated to the connection between my sexual identity and Lafayette. There's no specific connection with Harlan as much as he was part of a community of people for whom our sexual identity, I would say, was 100 percent masked when we were at college, but we turned out later -- what was it that brought us into orbit with each other? Where this was zero part of our vocabulary while we were here and turned out to be something profoundly important about each of us [00:05:00] that we discovered later, in some cases many years later.

MA: And how do you identify as a member of the LGBT community, in a way you just said the gay community, but that's --

SP: The LGBTQ community, yeah. I actually, myself, sti-- as a gay man, yeah, yeah, without reservation and without qualification; it's that simple.

MA: And how do you professionally describe yourself?

Employment, work life, vocation, you know, just sort of professionally.

SP: Oh, yeah. That's interesting because I can describe myself by my credential, I'm an actuary; I can describe myself by my work function, as a consultant, and that's usually how I do describe myself or -- no, I don't call myself a consultant, because that's what people who don't have a job describe themselves as. (laughs) I describe myself as an employee of a consulting firm, so it's got a little bit more legitimacy.

MA: (laughs) That's a world of difference.

SP: So, I work as a consultant for a consulting firm, [00:06:00] and I make, I would say, tangential use of my math degree. Actually, I'm in a career and a job that has features that I think are uniquely well-aligned with my particular set of aptitudes, because it's not easy to find a job where a data junkie can also play a very interpersonal consultative role with clients. Often those are very segregated functions, and if you're an actuary and a consultant you get to do both.

MA: How nice. Well, it sounds perfect for you.

SP: It's good; it's worked out really well for me, yeah.

MA: That's nice. Well, I'm glad. So, that's a good description. The generic question we typically start with is what was the situation like on campus for people who are LGBTQ-identified? So, there's different ways you can go at it: was the campus safe? Was the community even visible? You can imagine these answers change from decade-to-decade, wildly, depending on who's answering them. Were people out? Were there pockets of LGBTQ [00:07:00] life? So, anything that would sort of describe you -- imagine yourself, you're on campus in 1982, or whatever, what was it like to be that person on campus?

SP: That's a very rich question, and it's a very big question as well, and it's easy to answer in a simple way that's misleadingly incomplete. So, my knee-jerk reaction is to say that the LGBTQ population at Lafayette, between 1980 and 1984, which were the years I was an undergraduate, were zero; it was invisible, there was nothing to be seen. And here I am as a young, gay man who grew up in a very heteronormative household in a, sort of, atomic family, you know, [00:08:00] a brother, two parents -- still, 56 years later they're still married to each other; they still live in the same house; it's in suburban New Jersey; it's just all perfect. I went to a school, a public high school, whose diversity was defined by the presence of one Mulatto

family, period, and this was just the reality of what I knew, and I never thought of it as having any judgment attached to it or anything wrong with it.

So, you come to Lafayette, or to go to college, and I think the four years of college are probably -- surely for me, but I think this is probably really part of coming of age for, well, yes, for kids, period, though I think what it means to be 18 to 22 in terms of sexual awareness and maturity and experience now is frankly vastly different from what it was 35 years ago. [00:09:00] I know that's true. So, you kind of get that you're gay, but you don't really know what to do with it, because there's no one to talk to about it, and I'm not even sure that I ever felt safe or unsafe; if I were much more assertively committed to the idea of being gay and out, I might have felt unsafe, but I avoided -- was I a wimp to have behaviors that avoided that? I don't know; it doesn't really matter because it wasn't even in the wind on campus.

But, I started to suggest something about this before: I don't know how the mind and body are able to read things under the surface, I mean, really, way below the surface of consciousness, that bring you into the orbit of people who

have common interests, including common [00:10:00] experiences of things they do and don't talk about, do and don't do, right? And McKelvy House became a very -- was in a certain sense a safe place -- on, off, depending on your perspective, campus -- and not because there was anything in particular about it thematically. I don't know if anybody else in McKelvy House was, say, "gay" -- oh, I take that back; I do know that. I didn't then. I didn't then; I sure do now. And it wasn't the house that was the land of misfit toys, either, but it was people who had a little bit more of a distanced, and maybe even a little bit more nuanced view of their relationship to the college, and what they had in common in McKelvy House was the fact -- was not something they necessarily had in common -- I don't know how to say this correctly. It's not like we know each other because we played basketball together. [00:11:00] It's the fact that we have differences about us that helps us come together.

MA: But they're not the same differences.

SP: They're not the same differences. Yeah, that's what I'm trying to say. Exactly. So, continuing to answer the question then, and just to put a little bit of factual context on it, I had zero sexual experiences as an undergraduate, with anyone of either gender when I was an

undergraduate, and I'm sure many of my classmates did, and I'm actually sure many of them didn't either, and there were probably more that didn't than would admit it, right, (laughs) but maybe that's an answer to a different question. But, there's something, I think, so deep in human nature that says, I'm pretty confident, or I'm self-aware and confident enough, and let's face it, I'm an actuary, right, so I'm a professional statistician, [00:12:00] statistically I'm not the only one; I can't be. And so, the question is -- and it's not like I grew up in Manhattan. It's not like I was taking the bus into New York and going out to gay bars in Greenwich Village when I was 18, so I didn't understand any of the conventional codes. I was really, I would say, honestly, innocent about a lot of this.

And so, you're searching for clues, signs, and you can fall into traps doing that as well. So, if you listened carefully enough, I had some sense that on campus there was some small gay community. I never found it; I'm guessing it was very, very cleverly tucked away in the safest of all hiding places, which is the fraternity house, right? But it wasn't my fraternity house, right? But it was nothing I was ever able to validate or confirm. I might be able

[00:13:00] to do that now, I mean, to the extent that people, years after, people in my class; of my generation; of my era; to the extent that they live or, sort of, come to terms with their sexuality and are more out and so forth now, it's possible that you could statistically map back to what they had in common when they were on campus. (laughs) Maybe you'll find that out in this project, I don't know. (laughs) I never found it though, yeah.

MA: Interesting. So, your point is a very sophisticated one. It's not that there was no community, it's that --

SP: I think there was.

MA: There was a complex arrangement of people who, in many ways, felt some different relationship to the college that may have signaled a larger difference in some generic sense.

SP: I think fear is an important word here. I do think there was fear, but not fear in the sense of trepidation. I wasn't afraid I was going to get beat up. [00:14:00] But there was this fear, because Lafayette, I think, was also, I'm guessing, it had much more, at least external, sense of homogeneity, right? I think that's part of the fraternity culture; I think it was part of the college's history; I think it was just a feature of the times. So, all of this, kind of, detective work -- who else on the campus might be

like me? – was done with such a sense of caution, because the last thing you wanted to do was make a mistake.

Because if you were out, you might be the only one. That's worth being afraid of. So, again, I'm not saying it's trepidation; I wasn't afraid to walk across campus --

MA: It's fear of isolation.

SP: That's correct; that's right, for sure.

MA: Okay, okay. So, it's more like a sort of loss of your social group than that something violent would happen to you -- ostracization, or being the odd person out.

SP: Precisely. And so maybe, in a certain sense, McKelvy became almost like the general safe haven, you know?

MA: Yeah, right. [00:15:00] For any different sort of thought or, yeah.

SP: Any difference, yeah. And yet, the community -- I hope it's the same way -- there was a very strong sense of community within that house, understanding and appreciating the differences, and frankly the physicality of walking down High Street to go back home, I actually think that was also a -- there's something symbolic about the fact that you were leaving this physical reality and going to your other --

MA: Yeah, was it liberatory, do you think, or?

SP: I think so -- well, I probably never thought about it in that advanced a way, but there was something very -- and also, now, I lived in Easton Hall my freshman year, the basement of Easton Hall, you might not even have known there was one, the rooms are only in the back because of the way the hill goes down -- with my roommate Doug Firth, a super nice guy, he was an engineering student, and the room next to me had three or four African-American students, [00:16:00] which may well have been a quarter or a third of the whole African-American population at that time on the campus and, I'm not making this up, I'm pretty sure they were all football players or something like that. But, I lived there. I joined Kirby House, and then I withdrew fr-- which my parents weren't very happy about -- then I withdrew from Kirby House because it just didn't feel right, and I didn't, and I still don't know why. And I joined a fraternity, believe it or not, but it was the fraternity that, in a sense, was the proto McKelvy House for me; it was Pi Lambda Phi, it was the Lafayette Inn; it was off campus. It was a little bit run-down, it was a little bit different. Ah, and guess who I was living with there, was Harlan, right? So, that's where I spent my sophomore year, so three of my four years I was right here,

but not on the campus, living, and I think that made a difference.

MA: Yeah, yeah. So, one of the things we think about in terms of campus life [00:17:00] is -- and some of these are anachronisms, the questions. But in terms of, sort of, wellness or resources, because the gay community, for lack of a better term, isn't a visible community that understands itself as a community; there's no particular resources at this point, right? There's nothing, because there's no community to serve, that the college is recognizing, or?

SP: That's correct. That I know of.

MA: Right. So, there's a, sort of, you forming other communities; in a way, you form your own communities.

SP: I think there's a really, probably, subtle, kind of sublimation that happens, that allows you to channel things into other areas that are actually, maybe, perfectly healthy things. It turns out they may have really enriched my college experience here, I don't know.

MA: Alternative communities one step out from being the gay community, yeah, it's interesting. Did people talk about gayness at all? Were there words used? Names used? [00:18:00] Or was it just mostly silence?

SP: I would say it's mostly silence. I remember in high school -- now, high school, that would be the late seventies, right, when what I'll call "gen one" of the classic derogatory terms, queer, fag, things like that, and the last thing you wanted was some kid on the football or basketball team to call you a fag, that kind of thing. I'm not sure how I feel about wearing those things as a badge of honor now. I'm kind of getting my head around the concept of queer as an accepted definition, and I can share with you now, or at some other time, how I came to understand and appreciate that. But that would have been even further steps removed from -- I think it was enough of a stretch to go from heterosexual to homosexual, much less to explore anything else on the larger, what we now understand to be, spectrum of experience and attraction.

MA: And that really, in that time, wasn't really --

SP: Much more binary. Yeah, I'd say.

MA: Yeah, so there was more of a silence than a --

SP: So, you know, where are the resources? [00:19:00] I suppose it's possible. For sure, if somebody doing their snooping around found somebody else and connection was made, then you could cre-- I'm sure there's an E. M. Forster novel on this or something, right? (laughs) But, you could try to create your own little secret community of

two, but at least you have one other, which is a lot more than zero other. And I suppose -- in fact, not only do I suppose, I'm quite sure -- that if a sexually self-aware gay or lesbian undergraduate, while I was there, had the bravery to go to a faculty member and talk to them, I'm going to guess there'd be a 90 or better percent chance that it would have been a good experience, and they'd have found a safe space before we thought about calling them things like "safe spaces," but I don't know that that happened.

MA: Okay, yeah. The intersection, then, of that gayness, or what we're sort of discussing as a kind of -- a comfortable outsidersness, or a comfortable difference, in many ways, [00:20:00] cutting across lines of race or religious identity or any of those intersectional -- were those lines in places that sort of resonate with you when you think about your experience?

SP: No, which I think is a good thing. I never knew the word heteronormative until the dean of students here taught it to me a couple of years ago. Maybe it was my own personal experience. Apart from being gay, I'm otherwise astonishingly normal; I'm white, I'm Christian, I'm not too tall or short. I'm sort of a normalish person, right? One of the many, many things I would credit my parents with --

I never felt that, when I would meet somebody, that I would run them down my checklist of, you know, are they a Jew, are they black, are they an athlete, are they -- that just never was in my own [00:21:00] experience about the way -- listen, we all have unconscious bias, period. We understand that, but I -- and maybe McKelvy House helped that, too, because McKelvy House had a lot of --

MA: Was that very mixed, in terms of different identities?

SP: It was, yeah. I mean, that's where I met Berris Boothe, that's how I got to know Arthur Lewis, and those are just a couple of, in the two years that I was there, there must be 30 to 40 different people between the two years there, which overlap -- it's 24, maybe 25 students, and, maybe, from any given year to the next year, half continue, and half either leave or graduate. So, you think about it, there's a big mix over those couple of years.

MA: So, you mentioned Greek life, and you were in a fraternity. That was a big part of your experience of being on campus; it sounds like an unusual fraternity.

SP: Well, in the early eighties, it was a big part of everyone's life on campus. It was called pub night, and I believe it was seven nights a week, [00:22:00] and this fraternity was Monday, and that fraternity was Tuesday, and that fraternity was -- every single night. And that

doesn't mean you went out every single night, but it was there, and it was -- I don't know, maybe it's hard to even imagine now. I think this is something I have no expertise in, except to appreciate the fact that it's really difficult to understand how the social reality of Greek life gets successfully supplanted by something else. As my classmate Monica Van Aken told me at our twenty-fifth reunion, she said, at least when we were undergraduates, people were out in public drinking.

MA: Yeah, it matters.

SP: It's not that it isn't happening now, and the fact that you can't see it is far more dangerous than the fact that you can.

MA: Absolutely, agreed. That's why there's more damage --

SP: From a social perspective, from a health perspective, from an everything perspective, right? So, something I hadn't thought about before -- and the coming of age is the coming of age. It's going to happen; people are going to make their mistakes, [00:23:00] people are going to get sick, whatever -- that rite of passage happens. You want to get to the other side of it safely and in one piece, and frankly the social fabric of the campus helps you do that. And then the fraternity system, with all its flaws, did create a very powerful and protective social fabric, I

thought. I never felt unwelcome in any particular fraternity, for example. I wasn't palming around with people from this, that, and the other fraternity, but I never felt unwelcome.

MA: It felt welcoming, generally. And athletics is something that a lot of people mention as important, and some people say not at all. As either being an athlete, or just being involved in that as a way of being on campus.

SP: Yeah, I was never involved in athletics on campus; I was never interested in them. I'm sure they're on the long list of stereotypic gay traits; I'm sure I get my fair number of boxes checked, right? And that's okay, [00:24:00] I mean, it is okay. I think of myself, for example, and if this is steering off someplace just stop me. I think of myself, to this day, as being socially very awkward. I feel very uncomfortable in general social spaces, which might come as a surprise to you. And it comes as a surprise to a lot of people, because they say, but well, for example, I was in the theater throughout my time here at Lafayette --

MA: Okay, because the next thing we ask is how about clubs, how about things like that, so, feel free.

SP: I, to this day, love public speaking, and I think actually, having a very conspicuous public persona is a damn good way

to hide your private life. I mean, really. Are you familiar with the work of Kenji Yoshino?

MA: No.

SP: You should be. He's a really brilliant attorney; he's at NYU now. He does a lot of research work with Deloitte -- on *covering*.

MA: Yes, on *covering*. Absolutely, yes.

SP: With Sylvia Hewlett. [00:25:00] So, there's a very soft spot in my heart for Kenji. I really, really, really like Kenji, and I really respect his work, and the first time I met him he was giving a talk about his research on *covering*. Actually, I have to say, that speech, which was only maybe four or five years ago, I could safely say it was one of the saddest days of my life. I remember coming out of that -- so, I was already, whatever I was at the time, plus or minus 50 years old -- it really saddened me because he taught me something profoundly important, which is that being out, and *covering*, are two totally different things; or being out, and not being out and *covering*, are two totally di-- and actually, in a certain sense, being out, like at the office, is the ultimate cover, because the moment you're out, people just stop asking you all the questions you don't want to have asked of you anyway. And that was a really difficult day for me, I must say.

[00:26:00] So, I have a pretty big public persona, and I think often about all the other things about who I am really, deep down, as a person, that covers or hides or shields.

MA: When you were a student here -- so, it was theater, were you in other clubs that, sort of, built this -- I mean, it's almost like you're describing a protective persona that lets you have this other persona behind it. So, it was theater --

SP: Yeah, I think that's true and fair. Minott Coombs and the Little Theatre, which was upstairs at Hogg Hall at the time --

MA: You were in plays, or?

SP: Yes, for sure. Always in them, meaning on the stage. My brother was the stagehand and set builder -- I was on the stage, yeah. So, athletics aside -- I wasn't an athlete, [00:27:00] I wasn't interested in being an athlete.

McKelvy House is an activity; it's not just a residential -

MA: Yeah, that's a good point. That's a good point. They have their meetings and they have their talks and clubs and themes, yeah.

SP: Themes, yeah. Yeah, that was an important part of it. One of my closest friends when I was here was a fellow named

John Halecky, who was a class ahead of me most of the time I was here, and he was fascinating to me. He was larger than life, and not only was he one of the few people on campus who had a car, but it was a Park Avenue, it was an ocean liner of a car, and he smoked expensive cigarettes, and we'd go out to a very expensive dinners at the Riegelsville Inn or someplace, something no other undergraduate did. And it was my opportunity to, sort of, channel my inner Sebastian Flyte or Charles Ryder, right, you know? Or, though it hadn't come out yet as a movie, to channel [00:28:00] my inner *Another Country*, if you saw the film *Another Country*. And my parents are children of the Depression. They're magnificent people: humble, simple, practical, realistic. Where did I come from, right? And in college you play out all this stuff, and things like the Waugh novel had seminal importance to me, coming of age. So, in terms of that extracurricular life, it was often bound up with individual people, as opposed to clubs or things like that.

MA: Oh, how interesting. Wow, so it's almost like a version of what you described before, where there's a sort of, not painful outsider difference, but finding this resonance that's a little off the massively normative, that it's resonating, and this is --

SP: But it's self-contained; it's complete. It's got everything in it, right? But, the other thing is, [00:29:00] maybe I'm making this up as I'm saying it, but if you connect with individual people, you have a lot more control over how that little community of two forms than -- and I think there's something gained and something lost. I also always sang in the choir when I was here, with Jean Anne Shafferman. She and I were very close.

MA: Well, that is important, because that's another group, and --

SP: It is important, and, you do things actually, maybe if I knew then what I know now, I would have mapped out my path at Lafayette a little bit differently, I don't know. But, it was what it was, and by definition is good because it made me who I am today, right? So, all these things are important; you can't rewind and redo. But, I do remember, some years later, I was travelling with a colleague to a meeting, and he asked me about sports, and it's just such a dreaded question. He was a super butch kind of guy talking about -- I thought, oh shit, where's this going to go? And it turns out he wanted to talk about was another colleague that he had [00:30:00] some issues with, and he said something so extraordinary to me. He said, "The difference between me and him is, I played football and he played

tennis." And what he was describing was a team sport versus an individual sport, and at that moment I realized - - and I didn't want to say this because I'd look like the gay kid in the passenger seat who was like, I sang in the chorus, which is really a team sport --

MA: (laughs) A team sport.

SP: Yeah, exactly, and something just clicked right at that moment.

MA: Yeah, and you were part of that community.

SP: I had a colleague once who -- I used to manage her. I had a lot of difficulty with her, and one day I said to her -- I was just, kind of, feeling her out, because there was just something about her social behavior that did not resonate for me with the fact that I knew she had played field hockey at college, which is really a team sport. And I said something to her about it, and she said, "No, I didn't play field hockey. I was a fencer," and I said, okay, [00:31:00] everything just clicked back in place. It's the exact parallel, right?

MA: Right. Fascinating.

SP: I know. Isn't that something?

MA: Yeah, it is something. I mean, is it fair to say that so much of what you were describing -- I mean, you, sort of dismissingly and jokingly, said you were the stereotypical,

or whatever, but, in many ways, you've naturally and healthily found, at Lafayette, places where you could be with others and be yourself and thrive and follow your interests and one step out. I mean, was there a loneliness behind that, as a gay student?

SP: Sure, there was.

MA: Because, clearly you thrived, and did well, and had friends, and --

SP: Well, I think I get this from my father, which is, if it isn't perfect, make do with what you've got, you know, or find the good -- I don't mean to make it sound like a platitude, but the fact is, there was a lot to love, and would my experience have been profoundly different if, say, I had been more out, or if I could have been more out, or if I had found a person [00:32:00] that I connected with, something like that, whether on a friendship basis or a more intimate basis. Maybe, I don't know if it would have been better or worse. It sure would have been different, and something probably would have been gained, but maybe something else would have been lost. And, actually, just for the record, because I have a huge amount of affection for my alma mater, as an alumnus, it wasn't a four-year love fest when I was here. And I sometimes try to step out of myself and look back, because sometimes you get so

caught up in what you're processing emotionally that you steer off a reasonable course. There were times when I was at Lafayette that I was really unhappy, and stepping outside of myself and looking back and reminding myself of how whatever was making me unhappy figured into the larger scheme of my relationship with the college, kind of saved it, right? [00:33:00] And, actually, in all humility, I think I did a decent job of making the best of what I had.

MA: It seems so.

SP: Yeah, it could have been a very different experience. I remember, and I'm sure I'm not making this up -- sometimes something happens and it's so extraordinary and so singular, that years later you're like, that could have been a really vivid dream, or maybe it was real. But I remember -- my brother is one year younger than me and went to Penn State, and was in an authentic five-year program, okay, it was a five-year degree program. So, he was in college two years after me; he started one year behind and it was a five-year program. I remember at some point -- was I still an undergraduate visiting him, or was it after I graduated? I don't remember, but I went out and, Penn State is -- just that one campus is ten times, twenty times the size of this school. It's got its own zip code and post office. It's huge, right?

But, I'm quite sure [00:34:00] this story is true, but I will qualify it by saying this is all coming out of my memory; it's pure experience. We went to a party, to a fraternity party, and I'm sure I went with my brother, and it was to my fraternity house on that campus. And, at some point when you're at a fraternity house drinking a lot of cheap beer out of a keg, you need to use the bathroom, which I did, and imagine my surprise when I turned on the light, and I felt like I was in the bathroom of a gay bar. Not that I had ever been to one at that point, but -- and I remember thinking, is this the gay fraternity at Penn State? Could it be? And, let's just say I learned a lot that evening, okay. (laughs)

MA: (laughs)

SP: About myself; I'm not sure what my brother may have learned about me on that night either, as well, rather. But, that was actually a very authentic sexual, kind of, awakening that night. And, but also it had this really stunning [00:35:00] sense of validation, like I'm now in a space where it's okay -- because I had never been in a space like that before.

Can I tell you a different kind of a story? So, I used to go -- maybe I was still in high school -- I used to go into New York to Central Park, when they would have concerts in Central Park in the summer, because at the time that was the only way you would experience such a thing; it wasn't simulcast. And, I camped out and I was in a very crowded field, and there were a bunch of guys at the blanket next to me or something, and they were very friendly, and I remember one of them gave me their phone number to call. And there was a vibe there, but I was also still super innocent. And I remember talking to that person on the phone once afterwards, in our suburban house that only had one telephone in it, right? You weren't on your cell phone in your room. And I remember my mother being very unhappy about the phone call. "You never know what kind of person that might be," [00:36:00] I remember her saying. And I think she said it honestly and seriously, but also innocently. But, I'll tell you, a simple comment like that, if you're just trying to take a little teeny tiny peek out of your shell, that will retract you right back into it.

So, this party, then, whenever I went to it, had a little bit of a sense of redux, a sense where I was in a community

that I knew the people around me were gay like me. I don't know exactly where I was going with that, to finish that off, but I guess maybe the thing about that -- no, there was a point to that -- the thing about that is, it had something in common with my Lafayette experience, in the sense that I was on a college campus, and nothing like that existed at Lafayette. So, it almost had a fantasy dimension to it.

MA: Yeah, parallel universe, kind of?

SP: [00:37:00] Yeah, like, there isn't one of these at Lafayette that I just happened to miss, was there?
(laughs)

MA: (laughs) Yeah, so you learned something about Lafayette, that it's not that, when you --

SP: Right. That's right. That's right. I mean, somebody had even made an off-handed comment to me, because again, Penn State was so big -- I don't know if it was progressive, but when you have 50 thousand kids on campus, whatever's in society is there, and in numbers, you know, this was the place where the gay kids "hung out", that kind of thing. And you can view it as almost a spectator event, or you could view it as ah-ha, there's my haven, or there's my go-to space.

MA: Yeah, but it was present, and that's your point, as opposed to --

SP: But it was present and known. Not here; not at all.

MA: Yeah. So, academics, right, I mean, this is making me think sort of parallel to that. It seems uniform that you talk to folks and, academically, Lafayette was challenging, exciting, all kinds of things. Often, you mention faculty and staff that you remain close to with these affectionate, meaningful relationships. Your academic experience here [00:38:00] as a gay student, or as you, or however you want to describe it. How was that a piece of the puzzle, certainly, to this, for you?

SP: Yes. Was that a question or a confirmation? (laughs)

MA: Yeah, no a question. A question, and did these issues come up in class? Did they come up --

SP: Never. Never. Never ever that I can remember, ever. Remember, my degree is in math; I had one degree in math, so I didn't have a minor or a second degree or anything like that. As a bachelor of science -- at the time, it was almost like a quadrant. You could be bachelor of science or bachelor of arts, or you could study, I think at the time it was either pure math or applied math. And I wanted a bachelor of science in pure math, which was probably the least --

MA: Popular? (laughs)

SP: -- popular quadrant, because it had a lot of requirements. And, I guess my feeling was, I just love the topic and I'm pretty sure I'm not going to spend my life in academia, so let me enjoy it as much as I can now [00:39:00] because the rest of my life after that is not going to be quite like this. So, it had a lot of requirements, and then I did what I wanted with the rest of my requirements. And I made mistakes -- I'm the first in my family to go to college, okay, so my parents I consider to be very bright, very thoughtful people, but they don't have a college education or degree. Extremely supportive, incredibly committed to the idea that their children should be well educated. They viewed that as the ticket to success, and actually, to this day, they have no reason to believe they were wrong. I mean, it's all come out well, right? But you have your curriculum --

Oh, another tiny side story. My mother didn't want me to be a mathematician; she wanted me to be an engineer. Because I think if you're the first in your family to go to college and your mom is a homemaker and your dad's a carpenter, there's not a lot of room in your head for understanding what it means to get a liberal arts degree

from college and do something with it. All [00:40:00]
navigable roads lead to something with a vocational
dimension.

MA: Called a job. Yes, sure.

SP: Right, yeah. Engineering can become an engineer; those
dots are easy to connect. But where does math go? And so,
I made a deal with my mother that I would take engineering
courses my freshman year, and at the end of my freshman
year I'd either continue it, but if I decided I wanted to
continue with math, my mother agreed that that would be
okay. And throughout my freshman year, she sent me
articles about opportunities for engineers, and this, and
that, and the other thing, and at the end of the year I
said, "I really want to stick with it," and amazingly,
beginning in my sophomore year, amazingly, she started
finding articles about opportunities for mathematicians,
right? (laughs)

MA: (laughs) Yay, mom.

SP: Isn't that great?

MA: She's something. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's great.

SP: But, so here are the mistakes I made. I never studied
another language; that was a big, big mistake, and I'm sure
there are requirements now, as well there should be. But I
gravitated to things I loved, so that's how I got into the

orbits of people like June Schlueter and Jim Lusardi in the English department and drama and so forth. So, there's on the stage, and then there's also the dramaturgical [00:41:00] part of it. Modern theater with June, Shakespeare with Jim, that sort of thing. And those people were very important to me. Jim Lusardi, no one who knew him doesn't have a story about him.

MA: Yeah, I hear wonderful things.

SP: Did you not ever know him?

MA: No, no.

SP: And there's a reason for that, because all those stories are true. I mean, his relationship to the college and his relationship to his students, going back to the '50s when he came on campus, were just really extraordinary. And it's hard to describe how important that relationship was if you didn't experience it. And it's not like he was cuddly, and it's not like he was easy, by any means, and you had to be able to endure constant cigarette smoke, (laughs) constant. But those people were really important [00:42:00] to me, those few in particular. Oh, and Lynn Van Dyke was very, very important to me. She was actually one of the kindest people I knew at Lafayette.

MA: She remains so.

SP: To this day -- yeah, remains so to this day, for sure, yeah.

MA: Yeah, she's so wonderful. Yeah, so academics were part of your thriving here, it sounds like.

SP: Yes, but you know what's interesting? I mean, I wasn't a 4.0 student, and I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

MA: Sometimes it means you're stretching yourself and it's a really good thing.

SP: Good thing, and also, without wanting to sound too cynical, I went to school before the age of negotiating your grades with your teachers. (laughs)

MA: Oh yeah, it's changed.

SP: Really, it did not happen. I was thinking about this just the other day; one of the best things Jim Lusardi ever did for me was tell me that a paper I had written was a piece of shit. And he was busting me, busting me because I hadn't read the material and I hadn't given thoughtful [00:43:00] consideration to the topic I was writing on.

MA: It's important to have that experience.

SP: And, let's put it this way, over thirty years later, I remember it, and I'm probably -- because I'm considered a very good writer, that's what I'm considered, I don't know if it's true or not -- I bet a lot of that maps back to

that very -- I have everything I ever wrote at college, and one day I'll burn it, because it's all very bad -- but that one event probably played as large a role as any in just waking me up and reorienting, whether it was driven by my sense of pride, I'm never going to let that happen to me again, or my sense of self-worth, like I'm better than that, or whatever, it really was a turnaround moment for me, that's for sure.

MA: Wow, interesting. Yeah, well, academics were challenging, and yeah, marvelous. So, anything else about the classroom, or classmates, or -- connected?

SP: Not -- I don't -- yeah, I guess not now.

MA: [00:44:00] So, campus life and public moments. Were there any public moments about the LGBT community on campus? Did anyone speak? Did anything happen? Was there an article in the newspaper?

SP: To the best of my knowledge, the answer to all those questions is "no". I have no recollection of any such thing.

MA: Alright, okay. So, as we come towards the end of my questions, although I eagerly would like to hear anything you'd like to add -- thinking back now, you have been a generous, engaged, I think, as you describe yourself, affectionate alum for the college, and that means that you

have a sense of the college that has been ongoing, so I think your perspective is particularly valuable in this regard, which is, how do you think it's changed from your moment here, forward? What are the big, shape-shifting moments? [00:45:00] Obviously, culture has changed, so it's a given that it's changed because we've all changed, but what do you see as the really resonant changes at the college?

SP: Let me do that in a couple of different categories.

MA: You can also say what hasn't changed, I mean, we could leave the options open.

SP: Okay, no, that's fine. I'd like to give that some more thought, but let's do this in a couple of different categories. I think the most important physical changes to the college, and I think physical changes are not unimportant, because it's the public face of the school are -- remember, the Williams Center for the Arts opened in the fall of my senior year, which means that the so-called "arts campus" was Hogg Hall, and I don't know where the plastic arts were. They must have been someplace, I don't know where.

MA: I'm not sure either. [00:46:00] So, is this a change tied to the LGBTQ community, or just more generally?

SP: No, it's just general. But I think, actually, bringing arts onto the campus created a very conspicuous validation of the arts, which was an important pendant to that monstrously disproportionately oversized sports center at the bottom of the hill. (laughs) It just makes no sense in my mind, physically, on the campus. I'm not saying we shouldn't have a great sports center or anything, but it's overtly out of scale. But this brought something onto the campus, and then you see what's happening down at the bottom of the hill now, which is fantastic.

And then the other physical thing, which, I think, is related to the culture of the college, was the college's, I think, near brilliant decision to reimagine its library. Because if you want a centerpiece of a school, and you want to create an extraordinary sense of the presence of academic [00:47:00] and intellectual validity, you do it with a library. And it was just done right. And it was done twice, right? After I left, the old library was balanced out, because it was not symmetrical when I was here, and then it was stripped down and rebuilt into the genius thing that it is now. So, I think that has, in point of fact, been reflective of the way Lafayette has been able to successfully continue to really improve and

increase the intellectual and academic caliber of its students, its extraordinary faculty. I think Arthur Rothkopf was the right person at the right time, I think Dan Weiss was the right person at the right time, and I think Alison Byerly is the right person at the right time, and I think they've really helped keep the college on this extraordinary trajectory.

Then, let's map that to the LGBT experience, right? So, a couple, or a few years ago, there was a big -- [00:48:00] the college, I must say, I think, made the mistake of trying to gild the lily by decorating the lobby of the Kirby government building, which should remain decorated just as it was built, with maybe a couple of canvases hanging on it or something. But, there was a big history timeline, there was a big archival presentation, and I forget what monumental anniversary of what monumental event it was attached to, but it doesn't matter.

MA: I remember. I had just arrived on campus, I remember that, yeah.

SP: But, if you looked along that timeline, there were references to the LGBT community. And I found this in my own job, you know, we've talked before about our inclusion networks and what they mean and my role in them, and so

forth, and one thing I've learned is that if you want to make a place safe, sometimes all you need to do is just -- you don't even have to confront the stereotypes, you don't even have to confront what you think the problems are, you just start talking about it out loud. And what people realized [00:49:00] very quickly is that it's just okay, it's just okay. So, I remember reading -- this is a few years ago, but many, many years after I graduated -- the "I'm gay. It's okay," or whatever it was called --

MA: Yeah, yeah. "Gay? Fine by me."

SP: "Fine by me," something like that. And, to me, it was a real eye-roller. Except it was, as opposed to was not, right? It actually did exist if you go into the student center now and you walk down the steps, there is a big montage picture that includes a giant scene of a huge number of kids standing in front of the library in color-coordinated tee shirts. So, it's there. So, I think we had some bright-lined moments where we made it present on the campus, and then, I think, part of it is we were also just riding the cultural coattails of society, right?

And, I think maybe this was on purpose, or maybe it was just a happy accident, but you wind up [00:50:00] spawning a virtuous cycle. You say it, so it becomes okay. It

becomes okay, so it becomes more present. It becomes more present, so it's more okay. It's more okay, so more things start happening, and it just cycles up. So, I would perceive that as a very big change that I've seen, and not in the last thirty years, like in the last ten. Much more recently. People talk now about things that -- I remember having a conversation a couple of years, or a few years ago, with Chris Vinales ['13] I think was his name --

MA: I remember Chris very well, yeah.

SP: -- and I probably gave him my lecture on why I hate the name "Quest" for the group, and I have a lot of thoughts on that. And I was just talking about stepping outside yourself and looking back, having a conversation with him, and one of the other eight tracks of the, kind of, eight-track tape of my brain, stepping outside and looking at the conversation [00:51:00] and thinking, the fact that this conversation is happening is actually making me happy, separate and apart from anything we're actually talking about. So, that's been a big change that I've seen.

MA: Yeah, so, I mean, tell me if I've got this right, but there's been a cultural change, but the college has made decisions that have been really important in the last ten years. There's the timeline, there's the gay flag in

Kirby, there's a gender and sexuality program coordinator where there never was before, there's --

SP: There's you.

MA: Oh. (laughs)

SP: You weren't here ten years -- I mean, you, your role, it didn't exist. I don't think it was even imagined.

MA: This is true. Right. So, there was no faculty in women's and gender studies, nobody's teaching LGBTQ studies, right? All these mounting, as you say, virtuous cycle of --

SP: I'm still of a generation or, I am of a generation where -- we were talking before about anachronisms -- if you and your courses had existed in 1982, would anyone have signed up for them?

MA: (laughs)

SP: Seriously.

MA: Absolutely.

SP: Because the kids who are in the classroom now are the children of people my [00:52:00] age, right? And our experience is different, and our relationship with children and what their experience in college should look like is just simply different from what it was.

MA: No, it's a great point. And, in fact, the field of academia is like any other cultural dynamic, which is, it has grown to include research and thinking and writing

about LGBTQ communities and peoples and issues and all that stuff, and so it has become part of the curriculum, as opposed to part of the cultural and the social and -- now it's part of the academic curriculum and it couldn't have existed that way. It needed to be born and written and thought of and become part of academics, and people needed to be ready to take it.

SP: Right, yes. Yes, it's important to make sure that you're in the right place, ready to engage, when the moment is there. That's right. So, the two things, though, that I -- fret is the wrong word -- the two things that I think about, though, just continuing what we've been talking about, one is at more the macro [00:53:00] level, and one is more at the specific alumni level. Let's do the second one first.

So, we're having this conversation and that's great. And there are, probably, a lot more people like me out there that you don't know about. Well, either that's the case, or there aren't, which is even worse, right? The worst thing you could have is a school that's genuinely heteronormative, because anything that would add diversity to your campus self-selects out. That's a much worse problem, right? So, I'm glad I was here, because if me and

nobody like me was ever here, this college would still be someplace else.

But, when you think about alumni -- and this was my whole point as we were forming the alumni at the Lafayette Pride Network, and one of the issues that I have with the Pride Network being presented as an alumni network is it was never intended to be that. The whole point of calling it a network [00:54:00] was to stitch or weave together students, faculty, staff, and alumni, partly because if you're going to do it late, make sure you do it right, and second, the whole point is we want to create community, and how do you create a community with a college that's not connected to what is essential at the college now, and if the common thread is LGBT, then that network, by definition, wants to connect those things. But I understand there's a distinctive challenge in tapping into the alumni part of the network because, we see this even in business, what do you do with your LGBT community at the office? It's the one community that's not self-presenting. I know who the women in the office are, I know who the Asian American -- by and large. The LGBT population is different. So, how do you either find them or convince

them that it's time to raise their hands, it's the right thing to do.

MA: Yeah, the visibility issue.

SP: And every one more [00:55:00] that raises their hand dramatically increases the whole richness of the network, which is why it's so important to find them. So, that relatively narrow level I think and care about how we continue to try to find and develop that part of our network or community.

On a more macro level, I'm told it was Bernard Shaw who, in referring to the colosseum, said, "Thank God, a ruin," right? Part of me longs for the day when being gay means absolutely nothing. My fear is that people will think that day came before it did, or that people -- in the current presidential administration we have stopped taking for granted the rights that people have worked hard to earn, but there was a time within just the last few months where people could, not so much laurel resting, but take a kind of an implicit comfort that things are just way better [00:56:00] now, which they are, or were, or might still be, or we now need to work hard to make sure remain so.

So, I want to know that the LGBTQ community is highly integrated and comfortable within the campus community, but I also still believe it has differentiated value as a community, and I don't want to lose that, for two reasons. One, because I think as a community itself, there's value associated with the particular common interests, the LGBTQ community. But, second, at work when we say LGBTQ, we mean queer. I think on a campus -- a campus is a place where, in particular, you even need a different Q or another Q, which is for "questioning," because I think so much of the process of growing into adulthood happens in these [00:57:00] extraordinary years, and as part of this extraordinary experience, and questioning doesn't mean delaying admitting, it means questioning, and the question might have this answer or that answer, and the only thing I don't want you to do is not explore the possibilities if you feel them. And you have to have a community that you can actually see and know is valid and affirmed and welcome and safe and celebrated, in order for someone who's questioning to know that, if that is where they go, they'll be in a good place.

MA: So, if the answer to your question is "yes" --

SP: You're okay, right? And questioning is something that, in a certain sense, I think the college's obligation to

students questioning anything about what their adult person will be, is a profoundly important responsibility of the academy, and I think a present and differentiated LGBTQ community [00:58:00] on the campus is part of how you serve that really vitally important -- shepherd them through the questioning process that, to some degree, all undergraduates must go through.

MA: You're identifying a particular obligation and responsibility of the college, right?

SP: I think so; I think so. I was extremely pleased to read Alison Byerly's letter just a couple of weeks ago saying, "You know what, we're on a great course, and please know, I'm saying it out loud so you can hear me, we're staying the course." That was so -- it had no news except the fact that it was said, and that was newsworthy.

MA: Yes, absolutely, right. To proactively say that, it's a game changer at a place like Lafayette.

SP: I agree.

MA: So, if you're questioning and you see something like that, you say, well, whatever happens to me, this is a place where I know if I explore it and it goes in this direction or that direction, I'm safe here. This is a place where I can be fully myself.

SP: Yeah, and I think the other part of that is -- and I think there's always [00:59:00] the question of, we were talking about alumni before, and we were talking about finding the LGBT alumni, there are also probably a very fair share of alumni who would still have attached to them their generational homophobia, okay? And I'm sure the college, before it had made any major forward progress with respect to the support of the LGBT community, has, probably as a combination of the Provost and Development and other key departments, said, what might be the potential implications among our alumni, with respect to our relationship to them, whether that's a personal relationship or a financial relationship or other things, and we don't want to get too businesslike about it, but it's all part of the reality of being a thriving institution. The machine needs fuel, and a lot of that fuel comes from alumni gifts. [01:00:00] And I think that was a bump we went over and every school probably did, and I think we're on the other side of it. And Alison -- I think one of the many things I love about Alison is that she's just telling it like it is, and alumni will snap into place, and those that don't are welcome to go their own way, because there's a bigger and better force driving things. I feel really good about that.

MA: Yeah, wonderful. That's great to hear. It says something really profound about the direction of the institution, not just relative to the LGBTQ community, but more generally towards excellence, inclusivity, and this broader commitment.

SP: Well, and I think it gets even bigger than that, which is - - and this is a totally different conversation, obviously, and I know that the college has been thinking about this, as all colleges like this must, which is just the concept of relevance.

MA: Absolutely, agreed.

SP: And you have to find a new way to create differentiated value associated with the experience of coming here to college.

MA: This has been a great [01:01:00] interview.

SP: I've liked it.

MA: (laughs)

SP: It was easier than I thought it was going to be. (laughs)

MA: I promised it wouldn't hurt. It's important to say, on the record, your generosity in making time for it and sharing your thoughts and just generally being a supporter, particularly of the community, is deeply appreciated by me, and all the people who need you that you may never know about.

SP: Oh, that's actually a very nice thing to say. Thank you.

MA: It means a great deal.

SP: But I'd like for us to work more together; us, you and me; us, college and me; you know, to make this work. And I know there's been some bumps in that road as we try to figure out the right way to establish roles and relationships and -- (pause) period. That's worth continuing to work on, though.

MA: We'll make a pact as part of your interview, and I'll be signatory to it, that we will work together. It's on the record.

SP: (laughs) Good, good.

MA: Thank you, Stephen.

SP: Thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE