

Michael C. Venuti '75
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
SpeakOut
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

KARALIS: My name is Despina [B.] Karalis, and I am currently in Hanover, New Hampshire. It's March 1st, and the time is 12:47 p.m. And I'm interviewing Michael [C.] Venuti.

VENUTI: My name is—my name is Michael Venuti. I'm in San Francisco, March the 1st. It's a pleasure to be able to do this. I'm a Dartmouth Class of '75.

KARALIS: Wonderful. Thank you so much for volunteering and being willing to share your story with us.

We'll begin way back, but if you can tell me where you're from, what home was like—what was home—what did you consider home when you were a child?

VENUTI: Yeah. I had a really good home life. I grew up in East Boston, the part of Boston that's near the airport. And I was a second-generation Italian-American family, a large family on both [recording glitch] fathers' sides, with a total of about twenty aunts and uncles, siblings of my parents, and many, many, many cousins. I grew up as one of two kids in the household. I have a younger brother, three years younger than me, who is still in the Boston area and who's married with kids.

My background in terms of growing up was pretty much just located in East Boston. We didn't do much traveling. We didn't really have many outside connections other than the family, the extended family. We didn't even own a car. That's how long ago this was.

I went to parochial school for—for grade school up through the eighth grade, and then I moved into the Boston Public School[s] system, going to Boston Latin School for four years for my high school education. And that was a—Boston Latin School is a competitive academic school with admission standards and high attrition rates, and I survived

that and finished sixth in my—sixth in my class out of about 300 kids.

It was an all-boys school at that time. It's no longer all boys, but it was at that time, and I—I—I think, looking back, that that had a little bit of influence on me choosing Dartmouth [College] out of my options for college. Dartmouth was the last of the all-boys Ivy League schools at that time.

Moved into co-ed within my freshman or sophomore year, through exchange students, and then went fully co-ed by the time I was a senior. But there was—I think I was more comfortable in that environment, having been in high school in that environment, and it—it wasn't driven by anything else except academic competitiveness and—and understanding what —what—what that kind of environment would mean to me in my—in my studies.

When I went to Dartmouth, I—I—in my first year, I actually roomed with one of my high school buddies, and—and that was—was interesting for a while but we soon found out that we didn't have very much in common, so you know, I was—for four years I was in French Hall down near the Connecticut River. They used to call it the Wigs [the Wigwams, now the River Cluster]. I'm sure they don't call it that any longer. But I'm not even sure that the buildings are there any longer because they were—they were very cinderblock, temporary-looking things.

But we stayed there—a group of us stayed there for four years, people who were not interested in fraternity life, not interested in sort of big social scenes, although there were a lot of people into sports. One of my roommates was on the—the ski team. There was a guy down the hall on the Olympic ski team. There were a lot of football players, and a lot of—a lot of us people who were really into sports at Dartmouth. So—so there—there was that kind of group there, but not a big frats kind of presence. We were mostly people who did not join frats.

I majored in chemistry at Dartmouth. I knew that I wanted to do that right from the start, because I had a really good chemistry teacher in high school and was interested in the science. I also—in education at Dartmouth, because when I

started, I thought I was going to be some kind of high school teacher or—or college, you know, instructor in chemistry.

But I worked in—the chemistry department at Dartmouth was really good for me because it was small enough where I could know all of the professors across all of the different disciplines within chemistry. And I worked for Professor Gordon [W.] Gribble in an independent undergraduate research projects for a couple of years. I also did a lot of TA'ing [teaching assistant work] for chemistry labs, while [recording glitch] and a couple of other jobs within the chemistry department.

So it was—it was a good exposure to the science, and it—it formed the basis for my proceeding on to grad school I chemistry at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] after Dartmouth, where I got my Ph.D. in 1979.

So Dartmouth was—was a—formative years for me. I still have a lot of fond feelings for the place. I haven't been back in quite a long time, through my fault, not their fault [chuckles], not anybody's fault up there. And so I consider it a really pivotal point in—in—in sort of my career growth.

After leaving MIT, I've been in bio[recording glitch] research and the early stages of drug discovery up until when drug enters clinical trials for now forty years as of this year. I started at a company here in Palo Alto, California, that was called Syntex [Corporation]. Syntex was a company that had lots of success in early steroid research, and they were the company that was known for inventing the birth control pill in the 1960s. They also went on to the drug that is now known as Aleve, which is a big seller.

I moved from there after eight years of career growth within Syntex —I moved to Genentech, which, for the San Francisco area, was really the first large biotech company, and I got in on the—basically the first round of growth that Genentech—I became head of medicinal chemistry at Genentech, and it really did put my career on a different track because working in biotech is high risk and moves very fast all the time, and it prepared me for subsequent—subsequent jobs in—in smaller biotech companies.

I stayed at Genentech for about six years and moved on to a number of companies that were related to Genentech projects. I eventually became chief scientific officer and chief executive officer of one of these companies for a number of years and then after that moved on to a series of other companies, venture-backed companies that —where I was also either CSO [chief scientific officer] or CEO [chief executive officer].

That went—took me—for full-time employment, it took me up until 2013, and since then, I've been sort of semi-retired, self-employed doing consulting work for biotech companies, and right now I'm working for three companies, two in the [San Francisco] Bay Area and one in Boston, where I helped them out on specific issues where they need some outside perspective.

So I—I intend to stay [chuckles] pretty busy with my career. I have been, and I've always looked at that as, you know, kind of an important part of my life but also the part of my life that would enable, you know, having a—a decent outside life and a decent sort of home life in—in a way that was, you know, something that I could enjoy and something that I could be proud of at the end of the day.

KARALIS: I'm going to ask—I'm going to go way back and ask some questions about—

VENUTI: Sure.

KARALIS: —the childhood and then, like move forward, because there's—there's so much I want to ask.

VENUTI: Okay.

KARALIS: To begin, what was it like growing up in Boston?

VENUTI: Well, I—I—I—I think we were very insulated. I look back at it. Not only is Boston a—a small town, in a way, every neighborhood is different, and back when I was growing up, every neighborhood was defined ethnically or—or—and Boston had a horrible history of being divided up that way, not only because of the neighborhoods but because there were physical divides between these parts of the city, either

the river or train tracks or the harbor, whatever. People tended to stay in their own neighborhoods.

And we were—we were even more isolated, in a way, because we didn't have a car. We didn't go very many places, and I didn't know much about outside of Boston until I started to think about going to college.

So—so it was quite a long period there. I was quite lucky. I had a really good home life. My parents were wonderful, and they lived well into their nineties, so—so they were with me for quite a long time. You know, my brother [recording glitch] direction from me, even though we were in the same household. He went off into sort of business and financial services and eventually became treasurer of Cambridge Savings Bank in Harvard Square, where he worked for twenty-five years. And now he's comptroller of the town of Littleton in Massachusetts. So it's—we diverged paths in more than a few ways many, many years ago.

KARALIS: What—what was it like, growing up as the son of immigrants for you and your brother? Did you have to learn a lot of Italian? Was there—was the family very Italian to you?

VENUTI: Well, so we were second-generation. My parents were both born in the States. My grandparents came over from Italy around 1910, and so—so I knew my grandparents. My parents would speak to them in Italian, but they learned English when they were kids, my parents, spoke only English to us at home. It was good and bad, because I feel like I missed out on a little bit of my background and culture to the extent that, you know, I don't—I've—I've never really been able to relate to Italy as—as anything more than a place to be a tourist.

It's true, I really regret that part. But part of their assimilation—and, you know, they—they were—they spoke English. They were all named with American names, not Italian names. There was—there was a lot of push to assimilate back then, especially with big families like that.

My grandparents all worked very hard. One was a plumber, and the other one was a barber, so [chuckles]—so they

were—they didn't have anything in terms of jobs that were—were—were too fancy or—or advanced in any way.

My parents both also worked their whole lives. Neither of them graduated high school. I don't think my mother even graduated elementary school, to be honest. But they had their own, you know, wise ways about them from—from, you know, just—just being in the world, and that, I always respected.

They always gave me an awful lot of room to grow, and making decisions, like where to go to high school and where to go to college, were completely mine, and I look back on that versus the way kids are raised today, and I'm just stunned that—you know, kids today are so controlled and so channeled into various things by their parents. I had none of that. My parents were very, very understanding.

And, in fact, when I finally went out and went to grad school and then when I had my career, they really didn't understand what I was doing, but they—they—they knew that I was doing what [recording glitch], that I was happy with it, so that was—that was—that was a good way to—for them to deal with it. But, you know, that was—that was kind of the—they didn't understand it, but they respected it.

KARALIS: They must have been—they must have been very proud of you and your brother.

VENUTI: Yeah, I mean, I—I—I think we had the old-fashioned kind of ethnic family, where a lot of that went unspoken. But, you know, they—they understood. They also understood that each of us had, you know, different training and—and—and things like that.

They relied on my brother, who was—you know, for the last four decades, my brother was in proximity much closer to them, because he lived just outside of Boston, and so [recording glitch] wife and—and the kids that my brother had for a lot of support as they got older, for financial services and things like that. Since my brother was in banking, he started to take over most of their sort of financial things to a point—

And when my parents each got sick, when they were very close—in their—in their early nineties, they just both got sick pretty much at the same time, and my brother and his wife took on that burden. Amazing job, dealing with all of that—you know. And also dealing with the aftermath of both of them passing within six weeks of each other. There was a lot to clean up, and they—they—they really did a—a—quite a—quite a heroic job at that.

And, you know, what we didn't know at the end of the day, after we looked at what was in the bank [chuckles], what the house was worth and everything else was that my parents, for all of their sort of manual labor jobs over the years in retail and In factory work for my father, they had saved an enormous amount of money. I don't know how they did it, but they did.

And they never—we never talked about money, so it was a surprise to us when all of that happened also. It was, you know, for—for—for—for somebody who grew up like that, you know, there was a tidy sum that was more than enough to—you know, to—to be—to be a good legacy for them and to be sure that, you know, all the grandkids go to college, et cetera, so—so that was good.

KARALIS: It must have been a very difficult time to have them pass both around the same time, or so soon after each other.

VENUTI: Yeah, they were quite dependent on each other. Even though they were both mobile when they—when they each got sick, in their own ways, they—they literally, you know, just became—they had to go into the hospital. And when that happened for each of them, they passed away within two or three days of being in the hospital.

It was partly because they didn't like going to doctors their whole lives, but they really—living until each of them was ninety-four was a pretty good [chuckles]—a pretty good accomplishment when they were, you know, kind of not—you know, they weren't running to the doctor every time for—for little things. It was just the way they were brought up.

I can only remember two times when they were really very sick my whole life. My mother had meningitis at one point,

and my father had symptoms of congestive heart failure when he got older, but that was it.

KARALIS: I wanted to go back to—[sound of ringing phone]—hello? Can you hear me?

VENUTI: Yes.

KARALIS: Okay. Sorry, the—the sound kind of did something odd—

I want to ask more about—since they—they gave you so much freedom to make your own decisions, what was it like—why choose to go from a parochial school to Boston's Latin School? What was that change like?

VENUTI: Well, you know, I had basically three options when I went from eighth grade in parochial school after eight years, you know, with the nuns—and there was nothing wrong with that. It was a good education.

So I had three choices. I could go to the parochial high school, which was small and would continue to be in kind of the same place. I could go to the local public high school, which was East Boston High, where everybody in my neighborhood would normally go, or I could go to this, you know, academic college prep kind of high school for admissions. And I was encouraged to do the last thing, you know, because I had done—had made good grades in—in—in—in grammar school. [recording glitch].

You know, it's the competitive situation, and I had never—I had never kind of seen where I might rank in—in academics against people outside of my little school. And I got into the school. I had no idea where I ranked at that time, but it was pretty clear to me once I got to Boston Latin School that not only [recording glitch] have the discipline to—you know, to follow all these things, but I also—the—the school prepared you in other ways to be—to kind of face challenges.

So at that time, Boston Latin School—you basically had—for admissions—there could have been almost 750 people who could have graduated with me, but only about 300 did. And that's because if you got C's and D's two marking periods in a row, you were let go, sent home. It was that tough of a

[recording glitch], and, you know, the kids who were—who left Boston Latin School would then go to their neighborhood public school. So, you know, that was always there.

You know, there was discipline in terms of learning foreign languages. I had essentially two—two choices for electives in my whole high school career. Two. Chemistry or physics, German or French. Oh, and—and one more: Latin or Greek. That was it. And [chuckles] there weren't any other choices. The curriculum as pretty much set in stone otherwise.

So everybody was being evaluated on a very consistent basis. There were nine marking periods per year, so you could not escape this—this kind of intensity. And a lot of people would just disappear from—from month to month because they didn't make the cut. And it was just accepted that that's the way it happened.

It certainly prepared me for Dartmouth in terms of, you know, discipline to—to—to get through courses and to understand how to balance all that. I—I certainly survived at Dartmouth in the very same way.

KARALIS: Did it stress you out that the—the dread of being let go was always—

VENUTI: Uh-uh.

KARALIS: —looming? No?

VENUTI: No, no. I—I knew that I—I never came close to that. [Laughs.] It—it sounds like a brag, but I never did, even in that tough of a high school situation, I never—I always got A's and B's. And as I said, I finished sixth in the class, so it—it was competitive. There were people at the top who were definitely geniuses. I never counted myself amongst them. They were—there was a math genius in my class in high school who, you know, was one of these precocious kids who went off to—to Harvard [University] for math in our, like, junior year in high school. And, I don't know, I have a feeling he got hired by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] or something right away. [Laughs.] He was that—that good.

And there were other people who were just as talented in other areas at the top of the class. And so it was competitive. There were—you know, and—but—but we all wound up being very, you know, helpful to each other also, because we all—we all knew that, you know, there—there was—there was, you know, ways to study and ways to—to do things.

You didn't really socialize at Boston Latin School because the school was centrally located. It was—it's still in the same building in the Fenway [parkway], in the midst of where Harvard Medical School is all around it now, and all the hospitals there. But the building is—is still there. It's been expanded a few times.

But since everybody came from different parts of Boston on a daily basis to go to school there, there were really—there were—there were some athletic teams and things like that, but there wasn't a lot of high school socializing. There wasn't—there were a couple of clubs and stuff, but it was—it was not a place where people would hang out at the end of the day, because they had to get back on—on the MBTA [Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority] and get home.

So—so that being the way everybody traveled—and I mean everybody jumping on trolley cars and stuff at the end of the school day, it was—it was—I don't think it was typical high school for America at all. But it was definitely different. But it was—it was—it suited me pretty well because I—I have never been a very social person, so I didn't miss any of that kind of activity.

KARALIS: How were—how was making friends, then? Or was that not a thing?

VENUTI: Yeah. Well, no, it was a thing. It was. It as a thing. And it's—it's a good—it's a good place to start to talk about my sexuality, too. You know, being a well-read high school person, I—I kind of was awakened to, you know, some options that—[chuckles]—in my life that, you know, I had inklings about. And, you know, I would seek out those kinds of—of books to read and things like [recording glitch] of friends.

We had mostly the—the homeroom kind of unit, and every year, you were put into a homeroom unit that—that kind of traveled as a pack all day long. So there wasn't a whole lot of, you know, cross-talk between groups. There was some, but not a lot. But basically the homeroom unit provided, you know, opportunities for getting to know people better and for—for—you know, for anything that—that might be social away from school.

So, you know, I had a—I had a number of—of those sorts of friendships in high school. One of them in particular was a friend of mine who lived in Dorchester [a neighborhood in Boston], and, you know, we would spend time after school, you know, doing things, going places or—or just hanging out.

And I only found out after we were long done with high school and I was even long done with college and grad school that he was gay. We never talked about it. Never! You know, I don't know whether we were just sort of—you know, whether there was a kinship there because of that underneath or not, but there was never anything that happened or that was spoken between us.

And then, after I was out of grad school, I found out he was living in San Francisco, and I came out to visit him, and I was introduced to his boyfriend. [Laughs.] So, you know, that was just—just—that was the first time I really found out that—that, you know, we had that in common.

So within high school, you know, I was aware of my own sexuality, I—I think I was a bit precocious, sort of hanging out in the wrong places at the wrong time, looking for opportunities. And—and [chuckles] there were plenty of instances of me, you know, trying to do silly things when I was a kid, including following someone who I thought was a man, who as actually a lesbian, into a gay bar [laughs] when I was about fifteen.

So who knew? [Laughs.] But in Boston, you know, there were places to go and cruise and kind of get—to—to see that sort of thing, and I think I was—I was introduced to actual sexual activity when I was fifteen, with—with somebody that I—I got picked up on the sub[recording

glitch]. [Laughs.] That was my first—my first sexual encounter. [Laughs.] I wasn't afraid of that part. [Chuckles.]

KARALIS: What part were you afraid of then? [Laughs].

VENUTI: Oh, you know, at that time, I—I certainly knew that I had to keep that hidden. I certainly didn't talk about it at home. And when I went away to Dartmouth, I certainly didn't talk about it. I had a few encounters at Dartmouth, and the one that I—that I remember the most—when I was a freshman—you know, the—the—the dorm life at Dartmouth—I don't know how it's changed—at least when I was there, I was in the—the dorms, as I said, down by the Connecticut River, and that was a completely different lifestyle from what was going on at—versus the big old dorms up campus.

And I knew sort of just from seeing people around that there were—you could tell if there were obviously some gay people around. And they were not treated very well by the community. There were two guys who lived—I forget the name of the dorm; I could point it out, but—but they lived together on the first floor of this dorm, up campus, right across—right across from the library.

And they were—they were pretty—pretty out there in terms of their hanging out together, kind of being—being on the, you know, sort of more feminine side back then. It set them really apart at Dartmouth. I have no idea why they were there, but they were. And their room actually got trashed by frat boys.

And when I was in my freshman year, their room was, like, people threw bricks through their dorm window and trashed their room, just a way to make a statement. And back then at Dartmouth, something that I still—you know, you still see nowadays in some—in some situations, but back then, everything was always excused as “boys will be boys.”

So whether it was harassment of this obviously gay couple—boyfriends, at least—or whether it was, you know, something that was done on campus when people were drunk or something that was done when women visited the campus for—for weekends or—or when co-eds and exchange students started to come, and there were—there were

incidents with—with guys—it was always excused all the way up and down the administration as “boys will be boys.”

I never heard the president of the [recording glitch], but I did hear a couple of the deans say it. And I—I thought that was—I—I never, ever condoned that as an excuse. You know, you still hear it when—when people behave poorly nowadays, and I think—I learned—I learned definitely an in-person lesson my freshman year at Dartmouth when I saw this—this happen to these guys.

I actually had a sexual encounter with one of them at one point, not in their—not in their room or anything like that, but after I saw that they were attacked, I was terrified. And I—I actually made it a point—I never had another—another sexual encounter at Dartmouth for the rest of my college career. [Recording glitch] people around. I did not seek them out. If—you know, as a fellow student or as a—as a—as a friend, but that was it.

And I think more and more, as I stayed at Dartmouth and moved forward and, you know, became part of the group of—of people in my dorm, so it was an all-male dorm—you know, people would have noticed if I had been hanging out with sort of people outside that circle, first of all. But if people were known to be gay, it would have been really frightening for me, terrifying, the results.

And I found this out, you know,—I—I knew it when I was there, but I also confirmed it af- —long after I left Dartmouth, when I [recording glitch]ually at different times, saw two of my roommates—so I had—after my high school buddy, I had two other roommates. One of them was from Long Island [New York], and the other one was from New Jersey. Good guys. Hang out all the time. You know, go places—

KARALIS: Do you remember names?

VENUTI: What’s that? No, I’d rather not. But when I met each of them after my—my college days and even after grad school, and they found out I was gay and living with a man, they dropped me. I never heard from either of them again. So—so that confirmed for me that if I had—if I had been at all out in college, I would have been quite isolated and—and

ostracized, because I thought these people were people of the world after we got out of school. They both went to grad school.

One of them has gone on to an illustrious career in artificial intelligence and a Ph.D. in math, et cetera, and was part of some very important high-tech companies. And the other guy went to work in engineering, you know, and I would have thought that they'd have been a little bit more—I won't say accepting, but not—not have such a—such a definitively negative reaction when they found out that I was gay.

And neither of them were put in awkward situations or—or anything like that. It—it—by that time, I was living in San Francisco and it was pretty obvious, you know, from *my* living situation, that I was. But it—it—it—it [recording glitch] with me. It has for my whole life, that these two people that I spend a lot of time with in college just basically walked away and never—never—never came back or anything.

One of them—the wife would always want to talk to me, and the old girlfriend would always want to talk to me [chuckles], but not—not—not these guys. So, you know, I don't—I don't know what that's about, either. [Chuckles.] But it did—it did, you know, kind of confirm to me that if I had been out in the—you know, in the early seventies at Dartmouth College, I would have been ostracized if not—not survived, because it was—it was a pretty jock place, you know?

I had football players all around me in the dorm, and they were the greatest guys. You know, they were just wonderful. I have a feeling that if they knew I was gay, they wouldn't have given me the time of day. I know that some of them suspected this, but they weren't—they weren't overtly violent or anything like that.

So, you know, that was the extent of my—my—my sort of existence at Dartmouth there. I had, you know, you know, kind of part of my being suppressed the whole time. I would—when I would come home for summers, I was—I always had a—I had a steady summer job at Harvard Medical School in the—in the main library there. And, you know, even today professional librarians are mostly gay, for some reason—the men. And they always treated me very

well there. they—they wanted me to go to library school instead of [recording glitch]. Didn't succumb to that.

But it was—coming back to Boston every summer was, you know, a time where I could be a bit more relaxed and—and not be so worried about things, even though I wasn't out at home at all, not at all. I was living there, but I wasn't out to them.

And when I started grad school [recording glitch] that, you know, I still had this—this sort of—I won't say closeted attitude but careful attitude about that.

But coming back to live in Boston and to—and to be at MIT, in Cambridge [Massachusetts], I soon realized that there were—you know, in the—in the craziest places there were gay bars. And, you know, I started getting introduced to people and had a whole circle of—of friends [recording glitch] that were, you know, people in the Harvard, MIT sort of area, who were gay. And so that's when I started to really socialize, was when I was in grad school.

You know, there was a whole group of people from Harvard and Harvard Divinity School and MIT that would hang out at a little dive bar right near MIT, and that—that's kind of where I learned the etiquette of—of being gay in polite—polite crowd. [Laughs.]

KARALIS: That must have been—that sounds so difficult, trying to survive Dartmouth and having to hide, like, most of your identity.

VENUTI: Yeah. Difficult? Difficult? I don't know. Yeah, I lived with it. And once I realized that I had to—I had to kind of have that—that sort of mask on all the time, I just did it. I didn't feel like I was—I didn't have an urge at Dartmouth to try to break out of that. I'm sure it's very different now, but back then, I—I knew that if I stepped out of bounds, that, you know, something [chuckles]—something terrible could happen.

And it all—it all came from that incident of seeing these two guys attacked in their dorm room [chuckles], with bricks—literally, bricks! You know, —

KARALIS: That must have been—

VENUTI: —it—it was—it was—it was something that I always look back on as—as a warning sign for me that—that, you know,—and really until I moved to San Francisco, I was [recording glitch]—probably the best word—it wasn't, you know, anything more than that.

When in grad school, I was careful about it, and people—my fellow grad students in my—in chemistry and in the lab group that I was in didn't care. They kind of knew but didn't care. So that was the first exposure I had to people who were at least, you know,—they—they—they either didn't want to know, or they didn't want to talk about it, or they didn't—they didn't see it as a problem. And I've actually stayed in touch with all of those people from grad school and almost none of the people from Dartmouth, for—for that very reason.

KARALIS: Were the professors in Dartmouth more supportive, I guess in different ways, since they didn't know that part of your identity?

VENUTI: Well, in the chemistry department, I think they all thought was just a nerd. [Chuckles.] You know, I was always taking all the classes and, you know, working hard on my major. And—and I had, you know, a good not only professor relationship with Gordon Gribble but he was—he was a great instructor, and he was a great researcher, and he taught me you know, how to [recording glitch] stuff in my very first, you know, sort of lab experiments. Once you break away from the text books, you have to start to, you know, think outside the box, and he was really good at that. I always admired him.

And then the—the other one—I—and—and all the other organic professors—[Thomas A.] Spencer and [David M] Lemal and—and then [Walter H.] Stockmayer in physical chemistry—they were just—they were bigger than life to me. They really were. They were superstars. They were great teachers and inspirational.

And then from—from, you know, sort of within chemistry, I had a quantum chemist, so, you know, quantum mechanics

chemist who was my actual major adviser. And—and he was also—you know, we couldn't—we were at kind of polar opposite ends of the chemistry spectrum. I was an organic chemist, and he's thinking about, you know, the—the—the sort of quantum chemistry and physics and stuff like that.

And—and he was actually great to have as —as an adviser. When I took his course,—so this was the defining moment for me in—in understanding, like, how to grow in science and how to make a career.

I took his course in quantum chemistry. I understood it. I was good at math, always got A's in math. I couldn't do a problem today if you put a gun to my head, but I was good at math in a contemporaneous way, and so the math was never a stumbling block for me in quantum chemistry.

But I got to a certain concept in—in—in his course, and I—I went to him, and I said, "From this page on in the textbook, [recording glitch] deal with it."

KARALIS: Could you repeat that? Sorry.

VENUTI: And up until that point I got everything.

KARALIS: I'm sorry. The phone kind of made a noise. If you can repeat what you said about going with the textbook.

VENUTI: Yeah. I went up to a certain point in the textbook, and I could understand, comprehend everything, and there was a certain page in that textbook after which I couldn't get a concept again. And it—it taught me a good lesson about, you know, how people are trained in science. And when I've hired hundreds of people over my career—is that you have to know what you know, but you also have to know what you don't know. [Chuckles.]

And—and I went to him, and I said, "You know, I—no matter how much you talk about this in class, I don't get it." And he goes, "Don't worry, you don't have to [recording glitch] a B." [Laughs.] So—so—so that was—that was—not that I asked for it, but he understood what that meant, that, you know, my brain was wired in a very different way for chemistry.

You know, I see—I see chemical structures as—as images and as—as a second language, and quantum chemistry has none of that. It's all numbers. And so that's where—that's where my [recording glitch] for things on the visual side versus things on the logic side started to diverge. And—and it's very true—you know, I've taken multiple personality tests over the years for various jobs, and I'm definitely on the image side. [Laughs.] So—so there's—you know, it was—that was an actual life realization moment, if you can call it that.

And then I always respected, you know, Dr. [Charles L.] Braun for—for—for realizing that I had hit that point and that it was okay. [Chuckles.]

So—so I had a—you know, I had a lot of—a lot of good interactions with—with that—that group within the chemistry department. I also had side jobs at the medical school up there, because they knew that I was working at Harvard Medical during the summertime, so there were—there were good,—you know, good connections up there. It wasn't anything really scientific, but, again, it was—it was working in the library and knowing—knowing, you know, sort of scientific literature and—and—and understanding, you know, sort of the big pic- —bigger picture, where I could—I could help them out. So I—I always look back on that as a real positive for—from my days in Hanover.

KARALIS: What—you said that in high school you had a wonderful chemistry teacher.

VENUTI: Yeah.

KARALIS: And what—what really attracted you to chemistry? Why—how did that teacher help you like it? Why was he wonderful?

VENUTI: Well, I got—you know, I kind of backed into it, in a way. So my homeroom—the physical location of it was right next to a chemistry lab, and my home [recording glitch] my freshman year was in charge of the lab setup and the—the, you know, sort of—I—I guess—I guess we were paid, but, you know, eventually he recruited me and another—and another guy

from that class to—to be the assistants, the lab assistants. I guess that was what we were called.

And [recording glitch] the experiments for the day in the lab. So there would be, you know, buckets of things where you'd put the chemicals and the glassware and the kinds of things that—that, you know, the class would need for that day to do their lab work.

And—and I—I don't know, I just started to—to get a good feeling for that. I understood chemistry through that because it was a hands-on thing for me, and by the time I left Boston Latin School, I was—I was all in for it. I had AP [Advanced Placement] chemistry in high school by—by the end of, you know, my senior year and went to Dartmouth with—straight into organic chemistry, with Dave Lemal. [Laughs.] So, you know, my first day of my freshman year, I was sitting with all the pre-meds in Lemal's class. [Laughs.]

KARALIS: That must have been fun.

VENUTI: Yeah, it was eye-opening. Yeah. I—I survived that, but it taught me how to do that. And I got my revenge on pre-meds later, at MIT, when I—when I was the teaching assistant. And on the first day of—of organic chemistry at MIT for all of these freshmen, they walked in, and there were—there was a—a very well-known professor, so—George [M.] Whitesides. I think he's retired from Harvard now, but he was a real character.

And he stood up in the MIT class and said, "I just want you to know that we run this course like the Catholic Church. That every one of you is going to have a teaching assistant; that's your parish priest. And if you have a problem, your teaching assistant will bring it up to the head teaching assistant, and that's—that's the bishop." And then he would point at me and say, "That's Mike Venuti. You have to go to him first." And then after they all scribbled down my name, he would look at the class and go, "The problem never gets to the Pope." [Chuckles.]

And the enrollment in that class on the—from day one to day two of the course went from 650 to 200, so [chuckles]—so—

so he cleared out all the dabblers in organic chemistry just by that little life lesson. [Laughs.]

KARALIS: Did you enjoy being a teaching assistant with that professor?

VENUTI: I did. I did. Oh, yeah. There were—there were some crazy things, too, but I enjoyed working with these guys, who were characters, and I certainly met—met a lot of them. And once you get into grad school, all the—all the professors at MIT and Harvard like that—they're all characters. They—they all have their own views [recording glitch] their position in the academic world first of all.

But they all—they all understood kind of, you know, what it was like—MIT had its particular undergrad challenges, so—I didn't go there as an undergrad, but I immediately grasped, when I got there, that undergrads at MIT were under tremendous pressure to succeed.

And the way that they would be told this, in a kind of a—an—an analogy is “I—I know that all of you are the best student that ever came out of New Rochelle High [School], but some of you are going to get D's.” And that was terrifying to these kids, because they were all—you know, they all thought they were super geniuses.

And, you know, some of them—that they would find their—their areas of expertise quickly. There was lots of opportunity for independent research at MIT. [Recording glitch] go off into their areas pretty quickly, but some kids never, ever got over the fact that they might be disappointing their parents.

And MIT, unfortunately,—I don't know whether it's today, but at that time, MIT had a significant undergraduate suicide rate. It was really bad. And I—I saw it first hand from one of these kids in organic chemistry, who, you know, two-thirds of the way through the term handed me a—a twenty-page, single-spaced diatribe about how the professors and the teaching assistants in the course were conspiring against him to keep him out of medical school and how they weren't teaching him the things that were in the books, that the teachers were purposefully misleading the—the students because what they were saying didn't match what was in the textbooks.

And by—by, you know, page fifteen or so of this diatribe, it was drifting into—well, first of all, it was: “My father has already gotten me into medical school. I just need to get a B out of this course, so you have to give me a B or I’ll be a disappointment to my family.”

But by the end of this—this—this twenty-page [recording glitch], this—this kid was drifting into psychosexual kinds of things and talking about all kinds of porn- —pornog- — pornographic situations.

And so I brought it to this professor. I had a regular meeting with him every—every morning at seven a.m.. and handed him this document. He took one look at it and said, “You call the campus police. You call the kid’s advisor. You put this kid on suicide watch. They have to—they have to get control of him.” I never saw the kid again.

And so MIT can be a—was a scary place for some people in that—in that respect, because they were going to let down their parents. And we had to be—we had to be aware of that as—as—as teaching assistants.

It was always fun to [recording glitch] because there were hundreds of kids, and they were all just coming from such varied backgrounds. I never—even at Dartmouth I hadn’t seen such, you know, a variety of backgrounds: lots of international students, lots of kids from ethnic groups I had never, ever, you know, been exposed to in high school or at Dartmouth. So—so it as another sort of way to open up my own horizons, too.

KARALIS: While you were at Dartmouth,—you said that it started—women started being allowed through exchange and that sort of thing.

VENUTI: Yeah.

KARALIS: What was that like, and how—how did that affect your world view, I guess? [Chuckles.]

VENUTI: Well, you know, I—I look back on it, and it was so—it was done so awfully. You know, we—the physical plant at Dartmouth and the number of student beds per quarter was

a problem. So for—for full admission of women at that time, by the time I was in my junior year, basically the school—the student body was asked to vote on whether we could go to the year-round calendar and have a summer term. And there was no such thing when I got there. So there were three terms a year, and there was no summer term. Summer, Dartmouth was closed.

[Recording glitch] and all the beds were there, at most, to be able to admit women and not—not significantly cut back the overall enrollment, we had to go along with summer term. So we did. That was in my third year.

My—my second year, when they started doing the exchange student stuff, it was with, like, Mount Holyoke [College] and Wellesley [College] and—I don't know if there was really any more. It was like—and the—and the women would come for one term or two terms. Some of them came for a whole year, but not many, and very few of the—when we went full co-ed by my senior year—very few of the exchange students actually switched into being graduate—you know, into a—a Dartmouth class, to graduate with a Dartmouth degree.

There were people who were—women who were admitted into the later classes, and I think the first—don't hold me to the number, but the first year where women were fully admitted for four years was in '74 or something like that. So—so the Class of '78 or '79, something like that.

But—but it took a long time. There was a lot of resistance. The frats [fraternities] were [recording glitch]—you know, the frats liked the fact that women would come up for football weekends and that the guys would get in a car and do a road trip to—to Wellesley or to—or to Mount Holyoke. But it was surprising how much, like, resistance there was from these jocks and obviously straight people [chuckles] to having women around. They really saw it as a threat to their—their—their closed society and their well-being.

KARALIS: How—

VENUTI: You know, had the kind of—

KARALIS: Sorry, the phone cut—the—the call kind of broke. If you could repeat what you had just said.

VENUTI: Okay. So, I mean, it was a surprise to me that—that there was so much resistance from, you know, the—the frats and the—and the athletic teams and things like that [recording glitch], you know. But it was there. I think they—you know, the—the old lore—I still see it used some—you know, every once in a while is that—is that girls are faster learners than boys and all this.

And I think—I think this—this—the group that was there at the time saw it as a big threat, because there was a lot of resistance until, you know, the sort of final vote was taken to do—do full admission.

Certainly, the trustees wanted to do it and all that, but the fact that they let the student body vote on this was astounding to me, and—and the fact that it happened—you know, the vote was not overwhelming, because it caused everybody who was still there to have to take one summer term between now and their—their graduation to make this—to make the—the capacity numbers work without—without immediately building new dorms and stuff.

And so it was—it was just—that wasn't the reason for the resistance, but it was there. People didn't like the idea of giving up a summer. So it was complicated. The—the women who showed up [recording glitch]—they were exchanged students. We used to see them walking around in high heels and fur coats. Okay, if you can imagine that. They—they were definitely fish out of water. [Laughs.] Especially the girls who came from Wellesley.

And there was—they definitely—they had a dorm to themselves, so it was no co-ed—still no co-ed dorms. Eventually, it got to be floors were unisex. Floors of certain dorms were. When we started out, there was no cohabitation.

And, you know, even—even through my senior year, there was still not a whole lot of—you know, there was socializing, but there wasn't a whole lot of sort of that feeling like Dartmouth had fully gone co-ed. By the time I left, it still

wasn't there. I'm sure it's there now, but that's four decades ago.

It was—it was—it was a strange transition for Dartmouth. The isolation, you know, the fact that we were kind of all alone up in the woods was—was definitely a factor there; the fact that, you know, people had to go anywhere to—to—to socialize outside of Hanover was a thing, and the fact that the frats were the—really the—the only social outlet. They—they liked their beer parties, and they liked their—you know, it's—it's—just watch [*National Lampoon's*] *Animal House*, and you'll see what I saw. It's true. [Chuckles.] I—my—one of my roommates was a member of what was *Animal House*. [Laughs.] So that's what happened every weekend.

KARALIS: It was not your thing. You did not want to be part of that.

VENUTI: No, no. No, no, no, no, no. No, I went—I went—I went to a few parties and regretted it the next day. [Laughs.] But not very many. It's—it's—they—it was a different kind of—kind of life. I've run into some of, you know, my—my classmates who were frat people, who I didn't know at all at Dartmouth, that—literally. There were people who graduated with me, who were in frats that [recording glitch] subsequently because they've come up to me and said, "Oh, we're in—we were in the same class at Dartmouth."

Because they're, you know, raising money or they're—you know, I met one who was a venture capitalist, and, you know, I never met the guy before in my whole life. [Chuckles.] That's how sequestered everything was up there at that time.

KARALIS: How did you spend your—your time?

VENUTI: Well,—so our dorm was—was—was sort of an enforced social group. I mean, to walk up campus from French Hall was a commitment, especially in wintertime. And—and so, you know, when we went back there after class, we socialized in the common room most of the time, or in individual rooms. And—and that was a pretty tight group for four years. That—that—that group was so tight and—and so—I think there were probably twenty-five of us who, you

know, sort of graduated at the same time, who—who stuck together the whole four years in that dorm.

And—and there were people in that group that I knew for four years that—who never, ever bragged about who they were or, you know, who their father was or anything like that. Come to find out, within this group of twenty-five, one guy's father was [recording glitch] for Harley-Davidson [Motor Company]. Another guy's father was the CEO of Tenneco Oil, and we did not know that until graduation day.

KARALIS: That is—

VENUTI: It was—it was an interesting group, because nobody was looking to, you know, kind of be [recording glitch], you know, the—the—the—a—the head of any kind of—of frat or social group or anything like that. Everybody was kind of of the same mind, that we were just there to enjoy ourselves, you know, within—within the—you know, the framework of being at college.

I—a couple of Thanksgivings—since I lived in Boston, or was from Boston,—a couple of Thanksgivings, I actually brought, you know, five or six of them down to my house with my parents for—for Thanksgiving. They—they loved it. You know, they—they thought that all the Italian food and the way, you know, that they celebrated Thanksgiving was just crazy. They always talked about it. And—and they would always, you know, sort of have a good time about it.

So that was—I mean, we were a tight group like that. But obviously, you know, the same way this one guy didn't tell me that his—his father was CEO of Harley-Davidson, I never told them I was gay. [Laughs.] So, you know, there were—there were kind of, you know, sort of barriers there, still,

But I think living—living in that dorm so far away from campus was kind a—a uniting thing. We had—you know, we had a tragedy, where one of the—one of the people went out on the Connecticut River in a—in a—in a boat in the middle of the night, drunk, and drowned. You know, we—we had a bunch of stuff that was very different going on out there. It wasn't—it wasn't like the main campus, in—in a way. Kept us together.

KARALIS: Do you—I don't know—do you miss that, or them?

VENUTI: Yeah, I stayed in touch with a few of them over the years, people who, you know, were—were sort of acquaintances—within that group. I tell you, I'm shocked that a number of them are dead, more than, you know, what I think of sixty-five-year-olds in terms of mortality should be. But, yeah, there's a—there's a bunch of them who are gone already, in their forties and fifties. And—and—and it's always sad to hear that, you know, through the—through—through, you know, various connections.

But do I—do I miss it? It was different. I think it was part of, you know, the way we all coped—of being away from home and being in such an isolated spot. There was only one—one guy who had a car. That's, you know, in our freshman year. He had a giant Pontiac GTO, and we would all pile into that and, you know, go for McDonald's in White River Junction or something. And that was—that was a night out, huh? [Chuckles.]

But—but, you know, other than that, there wasn't a whole lot of—you know, and the—the few trips down to Boston to—you know, to—for holidays with my parents. There—there really wasn't a whole lot of socializing outside of the college.

KARALIS: Did your parents or your brother come visit you up at Dartmouth?

VENUTI: Once in a while. Yeah, they did. I mean,—you know, that was the good—the good thing about Dartmouth when I finally made my choice. You know, I had a couple of other options: Princeton [University] and—and—and—and things like that. I opted for Dartmouth for a few reasons.

But one of them was that I was just far enough away from Boston [chuckles] that—that I wouldn't—I wouldn't be expected to, like, go home every weekend or [recording glitch] was definitely out for me.

And they would come up once in a while, but not—not more—I—I would say they were probably there three or four times my whole—my whole career there. And they had to

get a ride, because they didn't have a car, so it would always be, like, with one of my cousins or something like that, yeah. Most of the time, it was to either bring me stuff or to take stuff home. [Chuckles.] So there was a practical reason for it. It wasn't social.

KARALIS: Earlier, you said you did some research in undergrad. What kind of research did you do?

VENUTI: That was synthetic organic chemistry, in a—in a chem lab in Steele Hall that was poorly ventilated, with—with chemicals that nobody can use now because they're carcinogens. [Laughs.] You know, it was a long time ago. But, you know, it—it was—it was interesting stuff.

Gordon Gribble had a grant from the Tobacco Institute, believe it or not, and he may still have it, where he was methodically synthesizing all of the potential—I'll use a technical term here: polyaromatic hydrocarbons, or fused benzene ring compounds in different orientations, where there would be the possibility of it turning into a carcinogen.

And so he was—that was part of his—his long-term project. He had a few other ones that—that—that I worked on also, but that was the main one. And I got an early—I got a publication out of it, a little—a little paper out of it that, you know, was—was a good thing when I got to grad school. So it was—it was fun.

It was work that—you know, it was work that was prescribed by him. He laid it out. But it was good experience for me in terms of how to manage my lab time and how to look at goals and how to, you know, kind of formulate a—a—a path to getting to, you know, what he wanted.

KARALIS: And—so you said over the summers you went back to Boston and you worked at Harvard medical school, at the library.

VENUTI: Yeah.

KARALIS: Can you tell me more about that and how that was?

VENUTI: Yeah, it was—it was fun. You know, it was—the—the—the Countway Library (of Medicine) at Harvard Medical School serves the whole complex around Harvard, in—you know, around Huntington Avenue, around the Fenway [Park] area for all the hospitals. You know, so for the Brigham [and Women's] Hospital and [Boston] Children's Hospital and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

And—and—and so there were all these famous scientists walking in and out of this building. Always. And there were always—and on the top floor of this building is actually the editorial offices of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

So—so I was meeting a lot of scientists—you know, just—just people coming through just day to day. And I was always somebody who was doing odd jobs around the library—you know, kind of wherever they needed help during the summer, when people took vacations, so I got a lot of exposure to not only the—the technical side, literature searching, but also, you know, sort of buying the books, literally, and—and—and doing—

I had responsibility one summer for maintaining the rare book room there, which was an amazing collection of things, and so it was always—it was always interesting. And it—it also—you know, exposing me to this really high-powered scientific community and medical school.

Now, I never wanted to go to medical school, but—but the science part of it appealed to me a lot. You know, my first job at—at Countway Library was, you know, an eye opener, as—as things are. I was given a—a piece of paper with a concordance cable of old Chinese numbers to—you know, regular Roman—well, current numbers, so—because they had inherited a collection of Chinese medical journals from the thirties, forties and fifties before China had switched over to using regular numbers, our regular numbers.

So I was thrown in with thousands and thousands of issues of these Chinese medical journals and had to literally search for what the date and the volume number and all this was in Chinese and then put them all in order. [Chuckles.] That was my—[Chuckles.]

So—so that was, like, my, first introduction, but the surreal part of it was over—next to this closed area of the library, there was this nice older woman, who was sitting there, and she was taking phone calls all day long. And they were always the same thing. The phone would ring, and she would say hello, and she would ask them what they wanted, and then her response was always the same: “No, we don’t pay for bodies.”

KARALIS: [A muffled chuckle.]

VENUTI: “No, you [recording glitch] can’t give us your body in advance and get money.” [Laughs.] And literally this was going on all day long. She was in charge of finding cadavers for the medical school. [Laughs.]

KARALIS: That must have been a fun job for her.

VENUTI: It was—it was—you know, it was just happening. It was, you know, like one of those scenes in a movie, where something surreal is happening off to the side and—yeah, that was it. Things—things were, you know, always interesting there, having—move around to different departments. I learned a lot. It was—it was really, really good training.

KARALIS: Socialization. Like, having friends; finding, carefully partners and that sort of thing. Was—was it easier over the summer in Boston and Harvard area?

VENUTI: Yeah. I mean, I was—when I was still an undergrad, I was still—during the summertime, I would be carefully exploring my options, but I wasn’t—you know, I think Dartmouth put me in the—put me into my shell pretty well. So I wasn’t very active during those years at all, although I had an early introduction, and I knew what I wanted, sort of lifestyle commitments and things. I think those summers were relatively quiet.

But once I went back to Boston full time in grad school, that’s when I got introduced to these—you know, this—this sort of broader group of people in Boston and Cambridge, just starting out almost by accident, but then, you know, the way groups form and people sort of—

I—was sort of adopted as a—as a—you know, I was what? Nineteen? Twenty? So I was kind of adopted as a young mascot for the crew. [Laughs.] They weren't—they weren't older, by any means. They were all at Harvard, you know, kind of—or Harvard Divinity School, a lot of them, or a little bit—just a little bit older than me. And then there were, you know, kind of the professors and people like that who—who—who intersected with this group also.

But that was kind of when, you know, I got—I got much more involved with people and had my first real boyfriend and—you know, we never settled down in any place, but I saw him a lot. And he—he eventually was ordained in the Episcopal Church.

But, you know, there were—it was a varied group of people in that group. I always like to tell people that, you know, I—as part of that group, I met John Adams VIII, and I'm not sure there was a John Adams IX [laughs], because he was as gay as they come [chuckles], so—God knows where he is now. But maybe there's a—maybe there's a—maybe there's an heir, but at least at that time, it was pretty—pretty funny.

And then, I, you know, through—through that group I met people [recording glitch]. There was one—one guy in that group who used to house-sit all the time for Julia [C.] Child [née McWilliams] when she would go off on her cooking tours and go to France. He would—he was the designated house-sitter, and that was always interesting to hear about, you know, especially during the holidays. when people would call the house and ask what Julia was making for dinner. [Chuckles.]

His—his standard answer was, “[recording glitch],” just to throw them off.

KARALIS: I didn't hear that.

VENUTI: I said his—his standard answer to what Julia was cooking for holidays was—was always, “Hamburgers.”

KARALIS: [Chuckles.] Amazing.

VENUTI: Just—just—just to mess with them. [Chuckles.]

KARALIS: They sound like really great people.

VENUTI: Yeah. Oh, and I definitely. My circle sort of widened around in Boston. Yeah, I met a lot of really great people and, you know, it was—it was also a very social group. We'd go out to the bars and go to some of the dance places, too. I was—I was certainly schooled by some of these people in, you know, kind of elements of gay etiquette. [Chuckles.] "Don't point in a bar" was one of them [laughs] that I—that I definitely remember. "Don't point." [Laughs.]

But—but, yeah, over all, it was good. By that time, I—my high school friend that I mentioned had already moved to California, and so I didn't see him at that time. I didn't know where he was or anything and didn't get in touch with him again until I was almost done with MIT.

So—so there was—there were—there were big, like, gaps. I—I sort of look at, you know, high school to college and college to grad school and grad school as—as almost three different phases, and they're almost mutually exclusive in terms of socialization and friends. There—there wasn't a whole lot of carryover at all.

KARALIS: Were you happy that you decided to stay in Boston then and go to MIT?

VENUTI: Yeah. I wanted to go to MIT for—for a bunch of reasons. You know, it—there were—there were other—other places to go. I got into Stanford [University] for grad school, and I came out for a—a visit. At that time—you know, I love California now. California was frightening to me the first time I came out here in 1975, because—well, put it in perspective: Grad students' stipends at that time were in the area of about \$3,000 a year, so I could live at home with my parents on \$3,000 a year, but I couldn't live in Palo Alto, California, for \$3,000 a year.

And I had no savings. I had nothing, right? I just—that was it. So if I had come to Stanford [recording glitch] been working a lot outside of grad school, which is, like, crazy because in grad school you, like, work eighty or a hundred hours a week in a lab. So how to hold down a job and do that, I just—I did

the arithmetic, and I said, *Look, I'm gonna go to MIT or Harvard*, and I went to MIT because I can live at home.

And my parents were more than happy to welcome me back after four years in Hanover. I lived there, but I wasn't home every night, but I lived there. And that—that, you know, kind of relieved me of an awful lot of, you know, kind of the financial burden that I would have had in—in grad school, which was good.

I mean, other grad students were doing it at stipend, but they were also supplementing it with money from their parents, and my parents had no money at that time to—to dish out for me to stay in grad school. So—so it worked out pretty well.

KARALIS: And you did a Ph.D. in organic chemistry.

VENUTI: Yeah. Yep. It was an in- —and in— you know, very intense kind of research projects. I worked for a—a professor who had just been added to the MIT faculty, so he was brand new. He had went—had gone—gone there as an undergraduate, so they knew him very well as a—you know, as a superstar. He [Recording glitch] his degree at Harvard for one of the Nobel Prize winners on the faculty there, so he was—he was a superstar, at least when he started.

He—he really had no—by the time we were—we were all done at the end of four years there at MIT with him, he really lost his urge to be a professor. He wanted to go out and make money [recording glitch] going into biotech. He's now a venture capitalist and has done incredibly well with his life in terms of financials. Made—made a ton of money doing—he was a CEO of a company that merged with Biogen [Inc.] there in Cambridge and became the chairman of the board. He—he lost touch with all of his grad students. He doesn't—he didn't want to socialize with us any more once he made his [recording glitch].

KARALIS: I had a question. I'm trying to remember it.

VENUTI: [Chuckles.]

KARALIS: [Pause.] I'll—I'll think of it again. It'll come to me. But—so being—what—how was it different—like, in what other ways was MIT different than Dartmouth?

VENUTI: Well, first of all, it was an urban environment, so there was a lot more things to do. And—and, you know, there were, you know, plenty of different, you know, places to hang out. Some of the grad students had—had, you know, graduate housing. One of my—one of my lab mates had an apartment in—in—in the Back Bay, where we would go hang out. So that—that was all good.

And I'm still in touch with all of them. The grad students that I—that I was in the same group with, we are still very close, still talk all the time. One of them has now got cancer. The other two are very successful in biotech, so [recording glitch] in the same business the whole time and have stayed in touch for that reason.

And we've all gone our separate ways. You know, one of my buddies came out with his wife and—and—and finished his degree at [the University of California,] Berkeley, and—and he—he and I worked together at a couple of companies. He's now gone off and founded a few companies.

A few of my friends are still back there in Boston, [recording glitch] entrepreneurs back there. And I'm still on the board of directors of one of those companies. So, you know, we're—we're still very much in contact.

KARALIS: What was it like, I don't know, I guess living at home? And did you have a dating life?

VENUTI: Yeah. Well, I mean, it was—I—I—I can confess to being a little bit lazy about—you know, my mother was still [chuckles] taking care of me like I was in sixth grade. There would be a meal there if I wanted. She was still doing my laundry. I'm not proud of that, but yeah, she was. It made it easy. It made it easy for me to spend a lot of time in the lab. You know, I would go back and forth on the subway to MIT at all hours of the day and night, nights and weekends. [Recording glitch] devote time to my work.

I finished my degree in three years and nine months, and I— and I said the only reason why I can do that is because I lived at home. That was fast. [Chuckles.]

KARALIS: That is quick.

VENUTI: Yeah. If I didn't—if I wasn't spending—I mean—literally, I was there eighty hours a week, on average. I mean, you know, I would go in to MIT at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning and stay all day. It was—you know. And there would be other people there. I wasn't unique [recording glitch]. We had a very good group of hard-working people, and, you know, their success is proof of how hard they worked there and how—how much that—that formed them.

Every one of us learned the hard way how to manage people and how to deal with problems and, you know, [recording glitch] done when—when we had to be part of a team. It definitely set us up. You know, like I said, [recording glitch] many of us came out, and we were either company founders or managers.

One of them was a tenured professor at Colorado State [University], running a group of twenty graduate students himself. I mean, these are all people who learned the right way about how to do science and—and—and manage people at the same time to do good stuff. So that was—that's—that's the real positive of that experience.

KARALIS: What was it, trying—what was it like, trying to have a dating life alongside all of that?

VENUTI: Well, I would—well, from—from my friends' perspective, I would disappear for days at a time. [Laughs.] "Where were you?" "Well, I was someplace else." And I would go to my—my boyfriend's room at Harvard Divinity School and stay there for the weekend or something. So, you know, that—that was only, you know, kind of my later couple of years, when I was getting more serious.

But I—I—by that time, I had—I was pretty much—you know, we were—we were together [recording glitch]. It was—it was still separate. They—they were aware that I was gay. I wasn't hiding it from them. But I also didn't put my social life

in front of them and—or include them in any of it. That was just—that was a line I didn't cross.

So it was still sort of having two—two sides, parts. You know, it got easier when I got to San Francisco after grad school. You know, moving to San Francisco, first of all, was, you know, liberating. And having a job in California—I tell you, even in 1979, I found out right away that people out here are so mellow. They didn't care. They really didn't care. [Recording glitch] having a good home life and having social time to themselves and everything else. But if I said—now, if I talked about my boyfriend, they'd—they—they wouldn't care.

And that was very different from Boston. [Chuckles.] Very different, you know. And San Francisco had been through, you know,—I got here the year after Harvey Milk was assassinated. So people were already very out here. It was—you know, the community, both the gay community around Castro Street [in San Francisco], [recording glitch] around Valencia Street [in San Francisco] at that time—was very much in the forefront.

And, you know, San Francisco politics was there, and so I did everything I could, as I was, you know, going up through the ranks at various jobs and getting better and better jobs—I did everything I could to be sure that first of all, I lived in San Francisco and not in—not in Palo Alto or some suburb, and [recording glitch] had space to myself and that if I wanted to socialize, that was my business and nobody else's.

And, you know, so I—I— my first six years, I lived right in the Castro [District of San Francisco], and my father would always ask me—you know, he asked me once, “Well, you know, I saw this thing on TV about the homosexuals in San Francisco and how they're taking over the politics of the city.” And I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Do you live anywhere near that street?” I said, “Well, kinda.” [Chuckles.] That was as far as I ever got with him, you know? It was—that was it. That's as far as he ever got, asking me if I was gay or not. [Chuckles.] It was the end of the conversation.

And, you know, my [recording glitch] post doc at a company, so that was—that was an interesting thing to do, an industrial post doc. But my—my salary for the year was still only \$5,500, so thinking about how to socialize and live in San Francisco in 1979 on \$5,500 and take, you know, the train back and forth to Palo Alto, which is a commuter train; it's not a subway—and—and to be able to keep things together, and live in an apartment—that was—it took all of my discipline, all of the skills to be able to manage that.

Now, luckily, in a year or two, by the end of year one and year two, my salary was five times that, for a real job, and—and, you know, relieved that kind of—of financial pressure, but I was that—I was that motivated to stay in San Francisco that I would have taken [recording glitch] and not go back to the East Coast.

And I always told people that. I had offers to go back and work in the chemistry—chemical industry in New Jersey and go do stuff in Boston again, and I—I always refused it. I always have.

KARALIS: What brought you to San Francisco initially?

VENUTI: So—so the summer before I took my job—so here's the connection back to my high school buddy. The summer before I took my first job here, I came out and visited him. And that's when I was introduced to his boyfriend, and it opened my eyes because he was living in an—in an apartment with his boyfriend right on Market Street [in San Francisco], a block away from Castro Street. And it was Castro [Street] Fair weekend. [Chuckles.]

So there were about a 100,000 gay [recording glitch].

KARALIS: I'm sorry, I—I couldn't hear you.

VENUTI: That was an eye opener.

KARALIS: Sorry, I didn't hear—

VENUTI: There were about 100,000 people—

KARALIS: Yeah.

VENUTI: —on the streets, and it was an eye opener, I'll tell you. It really was. I'd never seen anything like that in Boston ever. You know, there are Gay Pride celebrations everywhere now, but just seeing Castro Street Fair one Sunday in October 1978 was—was an eye opener.

And I knew that I wanted to move back here, so that's—that was part of my motivation for looking for something out here when I was done with grad school. And then I found this—this position in Palo Alto and applied for it, and I turned down a lot of stuff in Boston, even—even one offer to stay at MIT as a post doc, and I—and I said, “No, I'm gonna go take a chance in this pharmaceutical company job out in California.” And I—I've never left.

KARALIS: And you're happy in California.

VENUTI: [Laughs.] Yeah. I mean, I go back to Boston four times a year to see—for a board—for a board that I'm [on] back there that, you know, allows me to see my brother and his wife and their kids and their grandkids when I go back, so that's good, I—I—and I—and I always enjoy that. It's not a chore for me at all.

And they know my whole story, and they know my medical condition, and they know, you know, where all my [recording glitch] finances are in case something happens to me. It's—so it's all—it's now all out in the open with the family. It always was with my brother after I left Boston, but not with my parents.

KARALIS: Did your—did your parents ever find out?

VENUTI: Well, I—I mean, I—I don't know—I'm sure they suspected [recording glitch] my brother was married and having, you know, kids. And they would ask me every once in a while if I was going to get married, and I would always laugh it off or, you know, talk about career or something like that. But it never—it never got to be anything contentious or accusatory. I just think they know.

I mean, I actually brought—brought one of my—well, he was my partner at the time. I brought him home with me for one

vacation, and, you know, they didn't blink an eye. They didn't ask who this was. It was, you know, sort of sitting right there [chuckles], but, you know, we just—we just dealt with it. And then we went off to Provincetown [Massachusetts], you know, in a car and had—had a weekend out there. You know, my parents didn't understand why we were going there, either. [Chuckles.]

So—so it was [recording glitch]. They were—they were, you know, old-fashioned people, and even though my—my—my—my parents never wanted to discuss it, my uncles would ask me questions about it, and—but my aunts would always defend me when my uncles would ask probing questions. So the women always know, as I told you before. The women always know. [Chuckles.] No doubt about it.

KARALIS: I'm glad that you had supportive aunts.

VENUTI: But here in Cal- —yeah. Well, I was—they—you know, they were, you know, four packs a day Camel smokers who would sit around with their deep voices and tell their husbands to mind their own business. [Laughs.] So that was—that—[recording glitch] good. I always appreciated that.

And they're—they're all gone now, too so—but, you know, out here, I had one long-term, serious relationship for ten years, and my—my partner, who was, like, five years younger than me and completely different sort of background in terms of his career and his work, was in- —he was employed out here in retail. He—he died of AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome] in 1994.

So I've been kind of on my own since then and just dealing with my own HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] status. Still staying healthy and taking all of my pills all the time, but it—you know, it's sort of—it's a serious thing with me to be sure that I'm on the right meds and following the—you know, you kind of need to switch drugs.

And, you know, unlike my partner, who—who passed away within nine months of finding out he was HIV positive, I found out after he found out. Who brought it home, we don't know. But whatever happened, happened. I don't have any—any—

anything begrudging one way or the other. But he passed away within nine months of being diagnosed, and—and I've lasted for twenty-five years.

So I don't—I don't know what that's due to. I know that I don't have the—the immunity mutant that, you know, allows me to be immune to HIV. I don't have that, so it's—I have no idea why he passed away so quickly. He had—had a really rough time. And I had to take—you know, luckily, I was kind of in between jobs at the time. I took time off to—to be able to stay with him and—but he deteriorated very fast.

I'm still in touch with his family. His—his twin sister [recording glitch], and now—now that it's twenty-five years later, I still—I still have fond feelings for—for—for him and for them. It's a sad thing, to look back.

KARALIS: It must have been very hard during that time to just—

VENUTI: Yeah. Well, I mean, social services were kind of coming up to speed, especially here in San Francisco. Certainly, when we went to the doctor and—we were—we were on a vacation in Santa Fe [New Mexico], and I am sure that it was on this vacation where he seroconverted, because all of a sudden he had, like, 105 temperature, and we—we were in some motel down in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the middle of winter, trying to have, like, a little Christmas vacation, and he was sick, sick, sick.

And it lasted for a couple of days, and the year after that—I think it was the year after that, like, six or nine months after that is when he found out that he was positive. And then I went in and found out I was. Like I say, I don't know what the sequence was here at all. But he certainly had—he had all the—almost all of the rotten, opportunistic infections that you could have, really quickly.

On IV meds at home. And he had delusions, and he had—his—his people in work—he worked for a company here in San Francisco that's very different now, but he worked for The Sharper Image, and he had a very good job there. He was one of the—one of the buyers, and the minute they found out that he was HIV positive and that he was having to take time off from work, he was—he was nearly fired. And

they knew they couldn't do that, but they—they essentially cut him off from everything.

And his boss, who was—you know, seemed to me to be a young, nice family woman who was very forward-thinking in San Francisco—she—she knew that she had all these gay employees, would go out for drinks with them, et cetera, et cetera. And the minute he started getting sick, she cut him off. She wouldn't talk to him anymore.

So there were—there were, you know, weird things happening, even in San Francisco at that time. The strangest thing that happened was right before he passed away. His medical condition was getting so bad that I was having trouble coping with it during the day, basically full time. And I went to—I don't know, I guess it was his insurance company or maybe—I forget whether it was that or one of the—one of the city services here, and they sent over a visiting nurse to interview him, to see how he was doing.

And, you know, as all sicknesses go, ebb and flow, he was having a fairly lucid day and was ambulatory that day, and she interviewed him and, you know, went away. I didn't hear anything for—for a week. Well, in between her visit and the week when she got back to me, he passed away. Just like that.

And she called me up after he was gone, days after he was gone, and said, "Well, you know, we've evaluated his—his situation, and we don't think he needs in-home care." And I went, "Well, you're a little too late, because he died. So you're wrong."

The nurse on the other end freaked out. I said, "You're really wrong. You looked at him for, like fifteen minutes and made an assessment, and you didn't listen to me at all about all the things that have happened and how uncomfortable he's been and how he's needed all this—this assistance. And it's not that I'm trying to duck my responsibility, because he went off a cliff a couple of days after you were here. He just literally died in bed."

And she freaked out. She—she started asking me if I wanted to go to support groups and stuff, and I said, “No, why would I—why would I even listen to you? You have no judgment at all.” And I just hung up.

So it taught me a lesson about, you know, kind of—kind of that—that—that sort of, you know, well-meaning support that has no teeth behind it at all. And I’ve become—at least in my own HIV management, I’ve become very self-reliant. I sought out the best doctors and, you know, had no—no qualms taking the right drugs and staying on them to be sure that I didn’t get sick. And I’ve never been sick, the whole twenty-five years.

So I think—yeah, my doctor thinks it’s a miracle, and I do, too. You know, there are a lot of ancillary problems that go with being HIV positive for twenty-five years, like having—I have all the—all the genetic disease-y kind of things that my parents had when they were eighty. So I have my mother’s osteoarthritis and my father’s congestive heart failure, except it’s all early. I’m sixty-five, and I’m getting it all early because that’s what the disease—the long-term maintenance of this disease does.

So when they say that, you know, it’s become a chronic disease, yeah, it’s a chronic disease, but it also accelerates an awful lot of other things in a bad way. So, it’s—I still—I still manage to, you know, consult and do consulting work and work. I’m still active in that, but, you know, I—I have—it’s a good thing I have good doctors. [Both chuckle.]

KARALIS: Yeah. Has working ever been difficult, or have employers been like your partner’s in, like, their negativity, or—

VENUTI: Yeah. So—so I have—so I—so I heard about one thing. Nobody’s ever done it to my face, because I wouldn’t stand for it and they would know it, but I heard—when I was moving from a big company into a smaller venture-backed company, and the venture-backed company—I was going in as a—almost as a mediator between two warring factions in this science company. And I was being hired to go in there and be—be kind of a referee.

And I eventually took the whole company over, because everybody just sort of went to their corners and then—and then fell away. But it was—it—I was told years after that when my—when my recruitment was being discussed at the board of directors, that the guy who was my boss for a couple of years there, who had been my boss at another company, and this is why he knew what was going on—he told the board of directors, “Oh, well, he’s probably HIV positive because his partner died last year.”

Now, I never heard a peep from anybody, not the management, not the board of directors or nothing. I forget who told me this, that this was said at the board meeting considering my candidacy to be, you know, vice president at this time. But apparently other people him to shut his mouth and mind his own business, which [chuckles] was a good thing.

And I never heard anything else after that. I mean, people have known my story in various places. You know, the—the—all the venture capital people that I’ve worked for out here in doing, you know, company evaluations and investment evaluations—you know, they—they know it, and they take it in stride. It’s just not addressed. It’s not like people come up to me and go, “How ya feelin’?”

But nobody’s—nobody’s also holding it against me in terms of jobs or—or anything that I do out here, and I think—I think that’s another—one of the reasons why I’ve stayed out here for jobs, because it’s—it’s—I , and I think—I think that’s another—one of the reasons why I’ve stayed out here for jobs, because it’s—it’s—I think it’s just kind of the whole California “live and let live” sort of spirit that I *never* found on the East Coast. I never found it there.

KARALIS: I’m glad that California has been positive in that, that it has offered you a place where—that’s more comfortable and more accepting because of the culture, compared to the East Coast.

VENUTI: Well, certainly in—San Francisco is even—you know, even more special in that regard. It’s—it’s—you know, “diversity” is an overused word here, but I’ll tell you that, you know, just within—you know, within a mile of my house you’ve got the

Mission District, you've got Chinatown, you've got everything. And those are the old neighborhoods.

And now the new neighborhoods, you know, are—are really—the tech workers, who are just from everywhere in the world, and you see them out at restaurants, and you see them on the street, and you see them in the Castro. There are just as many tech workers who are gay than are not. [Chuckles.] And—and I really—I really like that.

I also like the fact that San Francisco is kind of this self-renewing society. People come here to be on their own and to be—and sort of their—their—their first time away from college or home, so there are always lots of young people around. They may—you know, they may go off and do other things or go to other places, but it's—it's sort of always renewing itself in a way that keeps it—keeps it fresh and interesting.

There's never a dull moment in San Francisco in terms of just—just things to do and places to go. And that's—that's another big change for me from Boston, where I was much more insulated from everything and had—had partitioned my life into various sections.

KARALIS: Have you traveled a lot more since leaving home?

VENUTI: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, my jobs have been—have involved a lot of travel, and I always tried to make time for—you know, vacation time in addition, so—so besides doing car road trips here in the western United States, which was an eye opener for a—for a kid from Boston, you know, I've been to Japan and China a lot, to England, Germany, France—you know, most of Europe, most of western Europe.

I had lots of visits to Sweden and Denmark and some to Italy—you know, the kind of places where academics or pharmaceutical industry sorts of things were happening, but I always enjoyed that and—and always, at least when going to places like London [England] or Germany, always tried to have, you know, additional time off to hunt down the—the gay bars and—and other kinds of—of things to do. And that's always fun, to see a different culture that way.

KARALIS: How had—how has it been, traveling and looking at all the different, you know, gay scenes?

VENUTI: Well, you know, I mean, now the internet tells you where to go and, you know, what to do and when everything is scheduled. You know, years—when I first started traveling, there used to be these tiny little guidebooks that you would buy, you know, that would—that—that were updated annually, and they would tell you, like, where all the bars are and—and what parks are good for cruising, and what restaurants are gay friendly and stuff like that. And, you know, that’s—that’s all online now. But you used to have to have one of these—these little pocket guides around to know, you know, kind of where to go.

Don’t forget, you know, when I went—went—you know, back in the seventies and eighties, you go to a gay bar outside of San Francisco, it was most likely didn’t even have a sign on the street. It would just be, like, a light bulb hanging there in the doorway. And more than once, that’s how you—that’s how I found places.

I can remember being taken to—you know, taking a cab in London [England], and I had an address in London, and I took a cab from central London. Said, “I want to go to this address,” which was very far out in East London, which is now all fixed up because of the Olympics [Olympic Games] and everything. But in that general area, where the Olympics happened, there was a gay bar.

And, you know, there was a certain thing going on that night and everything, and the cab driver takes me there, and literally it’s one of these bars with just a light bulb hanging over the door. And it looks like—it—it looks like it’s somebody’s—the entrance to somebody’s, you know, back—the—the back side of a house or something. Well, literally, the name of the bar was The Backstreet. And the cab driver was nervous for me. He said, “Are you sure you want me to leave you here?” [Laughs.] “Oh, yeah. Yeah, you can leave me here. I’m good.” [Laughs.] “This is—this is the right place. I can tell, yeah.”

So, you know—but that’s the way a lot of places were. The only other city that was comparable to San Francisco in

terms of social opportunities was—was Berlin [Germany]. Berlin was very—especially before the [Berlin] Wall came down, I went there many times. That—Berlin was very, very wide open, and the bars were very visible. The—the gay culture was right out there on the street because it was one of the—one of the groups that had survived in Berlin. You know, everybody else had head to West Germany. They didn't want to be there in case a war started, and the gay community in West Berlin was—“Well, so what? We're just gonna have fun.” And it—it's still like that in all of Berlin, but before the Wall came down, that was—that was quite a thing to go and visit.

KARALIS: How has, I guess, Pride changed in San Francisco since that first time that you saw—

VENUTI: [Laughs.] Yeah. Well, you know, it—it—so it started out as a celebration in the seventies, and I came in—since I moved here in '79, I saw kind of the—the end of just the raw celebration part of it. And, as I said, it was the year after—I moved after the year after Harvey Milk was killed, and so, you know, people—it—it—it had a little bit more anger, to it—after that—I mean, I've seen before that on film and heard about it, but from—from, like, in the early eighties there was—there was anger, you know, for gay rights rather than gay pride.

And, you know, it was still California. California in the eighties was still over all a very conservative state. San Francisco may have been a little bubble, but California was still, you know,—it was still a Republican state. You know, Ronald [W.] Reagan had been presi- —had been governor not ten years before, and there were still Republicans governing this state.

So it—you know, things were inching along, but people were angry. And then—and then it became hyper-political. Not only it was for gay rights and—and legal rights and a little bit here and there about gay marriage, but not—not back then, really. People thought that was a bridge too far.

But—and then Gay Pride San Francisco became, you know, very politicized about things that had nothing to do with being gay. And it was unfortunate, because it was such a—it

had been such a joyous thing, and all of a sudden, it was, like, “Get out of Nicaragua” and, you know, “Don’t do this” and “Support this—this political thing” and “this socialist cause” and—and the rest of it. And it oversh- —it literally overshadowed, you know, the original intent of that—of that—of Pride.

It eventually, you know, came back to where it is today, which is one giant party. [Chuckles.] But—you know, they take over all of [San Francisco] City Hall Plaza for three days in a row with—with entertainment. And, you know, then—then the parade happens on Sunday. It’s amazing how many people come from out of town and are really moved by what they see.

So, yeah, it has changed over the years. I mean, it’s—it—the—the days of it being, you know, “Who is going to be the grand marshal?” and “What are we trying to say to the world by who we pick for the grand marshal?” and “Should we pick Diane Feinstein [née Goldman] or not? She never comes to our parade.”

Or, you know, the mayors in San Francisco—even though she was mayor, right?—after Harvey Milk and—and George [R.] Moscone were killed, she became mayor, and she was reelected twice. She was very popular, but she always was careful, like the way she still is careful about going too far about anything. She’s been good for California, but, even when she was mayor, she wouldn’t walk or ride in the parade. But every mayor since her knows, “I have to show up.” [Chuckles.]

KARALIS: And you go each year?

VENUTI: Yeah. I mean, I participate in some aspects of it every year, so, I mean, it’s hard—it’s—first of all, it’s hard to avoid because, you know, like, there’s—there’s—there’s the—you know, they have the—the Trans Night, which is—I don’t know whether it’s Friday or Saturday. And then they have the Dyke Night, which is the other night, so it’s, like,—I think it’s, like, Pink Saturday, which is the Dyke Night, and then Trans Night is now Friday night. So there’s stuff always going on.

And Castro Street gets blocked off, and [Mission] Dolores Park gets taken over by these massive crowds of people, and then the day of the parade—the parade goes on for, like, four hours. So, you know, it's—I think—I think, you know, we get—and—and we have it on the same day as New York [City, New York]. And it's done on the—you know, the—the Sunday closest to [the anniversary of the] Stonewall [riots].

And then L.A. [Los Angeles, California] has their Gay Pride either a week before or a week after so that people can come up from L.A. and have a good time here.

KARALIS: That's really nice. I like the coordination.

VENUTI: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And—and it's not just because of the—you know, the—the—the formal social groups, it's because people do, you know, travel up and down the coast, and so there's no—there's no overlap. There's no competition between the dates for that.

You know, and then there—there are certainly other giant gatherings out here. There's Folsom Street Fair, which is kind of the kinky alternative lifestyle one, which is *always* fun. You know, that's—that's—that has grown—when I moved here, Folsom Street Fair was two blocks long. It's now, like, ten blocks long, so set up along—literally along Folsom Street and—and just having, you know, all kinds of entertainment and, you know, food vendors and stuff. But it's definitely the kinky side. You could see pictures online, I'm sure [chuckles] of what Folsom Street Fair is like.

And then there's—there's a smaller event for the—for the—the—the—the really—what Folsom Street Fair started out being was for the leather—leather crowd, because that area down on Folsom Street was always—all the leather bars. But they almost all closed down. And then when there was kind of a resurgence, there started up what's called the Dory Alley Fair [Up Your Alley Fair], which is a smaller version of Folsom Street, which happens in July.

And—and that—both of those events get a lot of people coming from out of town—I mean, to the—to the point where Folsom Street Fair is so large that they have to coordinate it

with Oracle's global meeting in San Francisco. They can't overlap because they—each—each group needs the hotel rooms, so they can't—they can't have them the same weekend. [Chuckles.]

And hotel rates—you know, for people coming in, hotel rates go up to five or six hundred dollars a night, even in the cheap places. So it's become quite a big deal for those weekends.

KARALIS: What do you think your Dartmouth younger self would think of, like, your living situation now in San Francisco?

VENUTI: [Laughs.] I don't know. You know, I don't know what I expected back then, but I think if I plopped down in this environment, I think I was a kid in a candy store. Really. So many options that I never knew existed. I think that's the simplest way to put it, you know? I had a very parochial view of—of what the, first of all, living on the East Coast and then what being gay in that kind of a—you know, in that kind of social environment would mean.

And I had—and the only role models I had when I was living in Boston, even at MIT, you know, on the gay side were these—these Harvard and Harvard Divinity people, who—you know, they were kind of out, but they kind of weren't. And they kind of lived this—this—this sort of semi-elegant life, sort of out in the open but not really, and, you know,—and I thought if—if I had thought back then that that was what it was going to be, well, you know, fine, it would be like looking back at the Victorian era, as far as I'm concerned.

You know, living here in San Francisco, even from the start, was very, very different. You know, just meeting my high school buddy and his boyfriend (who, by the way, are both—have both passed away)—he moved to L.A. He became a— a production executive at Paramount Studios. But, you know, af- —you know, the number of people that I've known over the years who are gone is probably the saddest thing out here.

The happiest thing is really, you know, being in an environment where everybody is so supportive, and there are so many, you know, different people around, just—and

everybody is free to be who they are out here. I'll tell you, there's [chuckles]—there's—it's—there really aren't any barriers left in San Francisco in terms of, you know, gender fluidity and, you know, kind of just being who you want to be today. [Laughs.]

KARALIS: It sounds—it sounds really great and very different from Dartmouth, even now.

VENUTI: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I'm—I'm sure. You know, I mean, Dart- —Dartmouth has the—still be within, you know, some kind of, you know, constrained view of, you know, respectability, even with—with, you know, gay groups on campus and things like that. It's—it's not—you know, just—just walking down the street here in San Francisco and—you could look at a line of the tech workers lined up to catch, like, a bus to go work at Google or to go work at Genentech or, you know, Facebook or whatever. They all have their—their luxurious buses that come pick them up on the street corners.

And if you—if you go out and one of these lines in the morning, of these—these young, almost kids waiting in line, they all have—they're all plugged in. They've all got their headphones on. They're all looking at their phones. And every one of them is different. [Laughs.] They're all different.

And, you know, my perspective from Boston would have been: Oh, they're all white. Or they're—you know, there might be an Asian in there somewhere. Or there might be a black person in there somewhere. But out here, are you kidding? It's like it's—it's—it's like the United Nations at every bus stop for the—for the young people who have come to San Francisco.

And they're completely liberated in this environment. They—they—you know, they—it's not like they're being—you know, that they're doing disgusting things on the street. They're actually being liberated to be anything they want, to go anywhere they want and—and kind of socialize however they want, which I—I look at, and I say—I say that's really—you know, it's—it's—it just reaffirms for me why I've been here for forty years this year, that—that it was a good choice for me.

KARALIS: Have you met up with any Dartmouth students or classmates that might live in San Francisco?

VENUTI: Not—not really. I—I—I haven't been to, like, any of the—there—there are sometimes alumni events out here. But, like, I said, I've bumped in- —I've bumped into a few people from, like, my class or something like that, and they're so different from me.

You know, I have this—I have this one venture capitalist that I mentioned. You know, he and I have zero in common. Zero. I mean, I'm sure he knew my story from, you know, other people in business or whatever, and he didn't hold *that* against me, but socially, he tried—so—so you go online and look up the Bohemian Club, or do you know what it is?

KARALIS: I do not know what it is.

VENUTI: Okay, so the Bohemian Club is—is a bunch of all-white guys who gather at this place up in wine country every summer, and it's in the middle of the forest, and it's called Bohemian Grove. And they do silly frat—fraternity style stuff, like put on skits and play music. But it's—it's the people who go. It's like—it's all the Republican—it used to be all the Republican establishment, and it's definitely an older crowd. It would be like people my age. When I say "older," you know, it would—it would be people in their sixties and older.

And it was famous for being the place where, you know, all the movers and shakers would go for a couple of weeks during the summer, and it was all men, and they would let their hair down in the middle of the woods, and, you know, there were all these rumors about, you know, skinny-dipping in the river and all the rest of this stuff so they could let their hair down.

But this—this fellow Dartmouth alumnus from my class actually—so they have a clubhouse in San Francisco. So it's all men again. There's no women. And he brought me to one of their gigantic extravaganzas, where they were, you know, playing skits for an all-male audience. And none of it was off-color; I just found it so fricking foreign to, you know, anything. And it's—it's these guys trying to be, you know, hip

and cool and talking about, you know, their music and what plays that they see.

And the Bohemian Club in San Francisco is a giant building, and the old-guard society here—they all belonged there. You know, nowadays it's kind of being replaced by Burning Man, in a way, where people—people who go to Burning Man—you know, they take their private planes and their—their Airstream trailers and their air conditioned tents and stuff like that, and they go have, you know, a week out on the desert in—in—over Labor Day.

That's taken the place of the Bohemian Club, in a way, for the—for the—you know, for the younger tech people. But even that, I find repulsive, because it's so exclusionary. You know, it costs money to go to Burning Man, to—to go be there. Even the people that I know in my neighborhood who used to go for the art and who used to go for the—the sort of hedonism of it—they stopped going years ago because they said the whole thing has changed into this, you know, deluxe, “how much money do you have” experience, you know, where you can go and get high in the desert and take drugs, and it's all self-contained.

You know, there's actually a [Boeing] 747 out in the desert now because of last year's Burning Man, as an art installation. [Chuckles.] I mean, I can't relate to any of that. I just can't. [Laughs.] It doesn't appeal to me. It never did. My—my Dartmouth buddy here asked me if I wanted to join the Bohemian Club, and I didn't even answer him. [Both chuckle.]

KARALIS: It must have been hard—like, I—I guess maybe I'm projecting in this case, but it must have been hard being at Dartmouth, coming from a family that doesn't have the means, being first-gen[eration] and just seeing the amount of money that's around here.

VENUTI: Yeah. Yeah. Well, you know, it wasn't as extreme. So, my tuition for—you know, I think averaged about \$4,500 a year tuition. And then room and board was maybe \$1,500 a year, so for three terms, if you call that a year, that's what it would be. That was, for me—and I had—I had a chemistry scholarship from my second year onwards. I had a named

scholarship, which paid about half my tuition. And then I worked for the rest. I worked in the library, the medical school at Dartmouth, or my freshman year I worked in Thayer Hall [now Class of 1953 Commons], in the cafeteria.

So, you know, I worked, and I—and I made—yeah, I have no idea what—what the numbers were. There were rich people around me. There's no doubt. No—no doubt about it. When I was at Dartmouth, one of my roommates—well, I told you people who never told us they were sons of CEOs. But one of my roommates—his father was a mayor of a town, and my roommate would drive up to school in a Mercedes[-Benz].

And sometimes he would even come to Boston and pick me up on the way. And, you know, that was always nice. I would go down to his—his—his house, and I would hear his father talk about “Oh, yeah, you know, I was—I built the telephone system in Saudi Arabia, and the—and the king of Saudi Arabia gave me this solid gold watch when I was going away. And then I was head of AT&T [Inc.] in Philadelphia [Pennsylvania].”

And, you know, I had no way to relate to stuff like that. No way! My father was working in a factory. [Chuckles.] But they didn't hold it against me. They thought—you know, they would tease me a lot about whether my father was in the Mafia. [Both chuckle.] But—but there was—it was—you know, it was good-natured teasing. It wasn't—wasn't anything really, you know, in an anti-ethnic kind of way. But—but it was always funny because that—that was the only image of Italians that they could relate to, you know? [Laughs.]

KARALIS: What was it like, working at the Food Court?

VENUTI: Oh, you mean in the dining hall?

KARALIS: Yeah, the dining hall. We call it FoCo [Food Court; Class of 1953 Commons] now.

VENUTI: Oh, yeah. Well, it was Thayer Hall back then, and there were—there were—you know, it opened up like a stampede at five p.m., and everybody had to be done eating by seven, you know? And as a freshman, you had to eat there. You

couldn't—you couldn't not have meals at Thayer Hall. So when I worked there, first I was assigned—you know, you're there either—they didn't have any students, like, washing dishes; they had machines for that. But they—they did have students, like, moving food around and serving on the food lines.

So you'd go in, and whatever they were serving that night, you may have had two choices, on a good night, and—and, you know, and you just put the food in whatever—you know, whatever plates. Well, after my first term there—I guess I was good at this, too. I don't know, but I guess I was good at this because somebody came to me and said, "We want you to be—to go to this private dining room, and we want you to start at four p.m. instead of five."

I had no idea why they were asking me this. Well, I found out it was the football team's private dining room. [Laughs.] So they would come in after practice, all hungry and sweaty and everything, after taking a shower but still—you know. And all these big guys are coming in front of me [chuckles], and I'm serving them food, and they would tease me like crazy. You know, like, "Why don't you come out for football?"—you know?

So that was—that was my last experience working in the dining hall, was actually working the football team's dining room, which was different—you know, it was—it was separated from the main—the main groups, the main—you know, the main rooms. I mean, I have no idea what Thayer Hall might be today. I don't think that people would put up with this.

KARALIS: No, it's—it's different than that, although students now wash dishes.

VENUTI: And there was—you know, we had meal tickets, right? And you had to go in line to get them punched, and God help you if—if it wasn't your meal ticket or you lost your meal tickets. The meal tickets, I think, were more valuable than any piece of paper on campus.

KARALIS: And that was your only way to get food on campus.

VENUTI: As a freshman, yeah. I mean, I think—I think I stayed with—with the dining hall system my whole time there, because downtown—you know, we would get food once in a while downtown. There was a pizza place on one of the side streets, you know, but there—there wasn't a whole lot of choice in Hanover back then. There were certainly no food courts or—or, you know, anything where—where students would be regularly. We couldn't afford it.

KARALIS: Are you planning on coming back and visiting Dartmouth to see how it has changed?

VENUTI: I don't—you know, I've—I've been a couple of times over the—over the decades. It's sad to say, but, you know, I went back and I saw Gordon Gribble once, and I gave a—I gave a seminar in the chemistry department and, you know, talked about one of my companies and what the technology was. You know, I've done that in other settings, here at UCSF [University of California, San Francisco]. I was an adjunct professor for a couple of years. And also—you know, sort of to give people a flavor for what it's like to—to work in industry. And the students are always hungry to hear those stories about, you know, "What am I gonna do with this education when I get outta here?" So that—that was good.

But I haven't been—I haven't been since the last time I was up there, is probably—let's see. I can tell by what job I had. It was probably 2007, so twelve years ago.

And one time, I was invited up—I forget what it was for, but I was invited up, and I stayed at the Hanover Inn. I felt like royalty. [Chuckles.] They paid—they paid my way to stay there for one night. [Chuckles.]

KARALIS: It's the only way to get to stay in the Hanover Inn.

VENUTI: Yeah. Well, you know, I'm sure—I'm sure I could book it at some point now, but—but—but that was—it was—it was just—you know, I'd always walk by the Hanover Inn. I'd never even been inside, I don't think, when I was a student. It was kind of off limits.

KARALIS: I—I'm curious, because you said you worked as an adjunct professor and you've given a couple of lectures here and there, and that—

VENUTI: Yeah.

KARALIS: —initially you were very interested in education. What changed?

VENUTI: Well, I think—I think—the idea was I saw—I—I never lost my enthusiasm for—for, like, getting people excited about science, but I—I really got into—you know, right when I was finishing my graduate career, I had one project, so—it was—it was one slice of my thesis that had to do with making a potential drug for a disease where people have iron overload. I don't know. You know, so it's—it's a disease of Mediterranean [Sea] cultures, where they have too much iron in their blood and it becomes poison.

So one of the things that—that we looked at, as part of my project, was could you—could you make a drug that would be administered to people that would leach all the iron out of their blood, or the excess iron out of their blood. And there are drugs like this now. But back then it was kind of theoretical.

So I made one. I made this compound, and it was—it was good. I don't think it ever became a real candidate, but that kind of got me excited about thinking about the application of organic chemistry to looking for drugs. And I think that was my—my light bulb moment to switch over to going into the pharmaceutical industry.

KARALIS: And you've worked in a lot of different areas of drug development.

VENUTI: Yeah. Well, so what I like to tell people in—you know, in—in companies—you know, I've done a lot of hiring over the years, and I've managed chemists, biologists, molecular biologists, pharmacologists, clinicians, but—you know, but what I always have told people is that of all of those disciplines, chemists are the ones that are kind of promiscuous, right? They don't really—they—they apply the chemistry, but it's not associated with any particular disease

or any particular organ or particular biology; it's kind of independent of all of those things.

So chemists become kind of, you know, the—the—the utility player in a pharmaceutical company. They—they get to work on all kinds of projects. So when I look back at all the things that I've done—you know, there are no thematics with regard to kind of drug or the area of treatment or the kind of patient. It all has to do with how to make a new one.

And, you know, it's—it's been all over the board, from, you know, blood coagulation and platelet aggregation to neuropsychiatry to epilepsy. Right now, I'm working in a—we're helping a little company here work on Alzheimer's disease, another one that's working on Rett syndrome, another company in Boston that's doing cancer. You know, chemists—chemistry can hit all of those areas equally as well.

So it—it allowed me to—to impact a lot of areas of research and get a pretty broad exposure. So—so when—when—when people ask me, you know, “What's your career been like?”, I say, “Well, it's been pretty non-standard,” because most—most chemists stay just with chemistry, right? They—they stick to the bench, they make new compounds, they work on synthetic methods—you know, scale things up for production, et cetera.

But I veered off that track very early because what I learned from putting a couple of—of my own drug candidates into the clinic very early in my career was that there was a whole area of science around the chemistry that made it worthwhile and that I should learn those things too.

So that's how I was able to become, you know, chief scientific officer of a bunch of companies and CEO of a bunch of companies, because I—I knew not how to do everything. I never knew how to do everything. But I knew *why* we did everything, and I knew how to hire the right people to do everything.

So—so there were—there are pieces of the training that go all the way back to, you know, my grad school experience that say, “Know what you know, and know what you don't

know, and put it all together in- —into a—you know, into a team that gets to—to, you know, look at a particular problem based on, you know, where things are in the clinic and what's needed by patients.

And, you know, things have been added on over the years, like what's the genetics of the disease. I worked for Celera [Corporation] for a couple of years, which was one of the—company that deciphered the human genome. I mean, that's—that's pretty far out there for a person who just worked bench chemistry. But—but for where I was sitting, I was looking at the kinds of things—this was twelve years ago—no, more than that now, eighteen years ago. But now a lot of the things we were looking at back then are common, like,—like genetic testing for cancer. You know, which— which mutants do you have? Which— which kind of cancer do you have, based on the—the genetics of the tumor?

Those sorts of things were all theoretical back then, but now they're commonly used. And—and so, you know, knowing where to apply those sorts of forward-thinking technologies is—I—I—I—maybe it's because I don't have a family and I don't have kids that I've been able to take big risks in my career. You know, maybe that's a rationalization, I don't know, but all I know is that I've taken major risks in my careers, with little companies, up and down. And I get excited by the new stuff.

KARALIS: San Francisco has a lot of that to offer, a lot of new—a lot of start-ups.

VENUTI: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. And—and part of what I've done over the years for the people with the—on the money side of, you know, funding these companies is—is to be able to sit there and to listen to their stories and know or at least make a recommendation about which ones have potential and which ones need more work and which ones are losers. You know, it's—you know, some things come out of academics way too early, and some of them are ready to go tomorrow into, you know, advanced testing.

And I tell you, from my frank evaluations of some of these academic projects, who are looking for their—you know, their own \$25 million in funding, you know, I've—I've—I've—I've been the person that has shot a lot of them down because they're either too early or off the mark. And unfortunately, some of the academics have such hubris that they won't adjust their course.

You know, not having been in companies for—for some of the—some of the academic investigators is a—even though they've been consultants to big companies or they've given plenary lectures to, you know, big scientific meetings and stuff, they don't understand what needs to get done between Point A and Point Z, to actually make a drug. And it's not easy, and lots of things can fail, you know. The statistics are awful. It's why drugs cost so much money. You know, one in ten projects that starts maybe makes it to the—the stage where you can propose something for the clinic.

One in one hundred projects makes it into phase one clinical trials, one in one hundred. And I can attest to you, from all the things that I've seen, that the number is right. So when somebody says it costs \$5 billion to develop a drug, you better believe him because for every one that works, ninety-nine failed. And it costs a lot to get—to figure out which one's going to work.

People have to understand that—you know, when they talk about drug pricing in the U.S., by the way, we happen to support the whole world in that. That's—that's our problem, that we don't spread the cost around the world, that we take it on all here in the U.S., because other countries have mandatory pricing restrictions. But if we didn't have the innovation in the U.S., in the pharma companies, the whole industry would be generics. There wouldn't be any new drugs for cancer. There wouldn't be any new drugs for hepatitis C or HIV or, you know, blood pressure control or anything like that. You—you'd have—you'd have basically old things only.

And so it's—it's an interesting debate that's going on. When I look at it from, you know, my perspective, drug companies certainly inflate their prices artificially once they get on the market, but when they get to the market, they have to

somehow pay for all the failures. You can't—you can't absorb that. There's no amount of profit in the world that can absorb 99 percent failures and still be a company that's viable, let alone profitable.

So that's—that's—that's the side of biotech from the finance side that you have to look at, is how—what's the chance of it working, and know what those risk discounts are that you have to take when you see something new, to know how much money you have to put in and when it might fail and how much money you might lose up to that point. And most biotech companies fail. They do. So at \$25 million a shot—that's a pretty expensive business.

KARALIS: That is a lot—a lot of money.

VENUTI: It's a lot of money. You know, I mean, everybody knows how much we pay for drugs, and it's obscene. It *is* obscene to—to try to get a poor person who has barely enough insurance to pay tens of thousands of dollars a drug for a drug to save their lives. That's the obscene part. The government should be taking care of that part.

But in terms of the pricing of the drugs and how much it costs to come up with a new drug, people have to realize that, you know, there are a lot of failures. No matter how many—how you try to twist the numbers, it still comes out a losing proposition on every project. And the one winner that comes out every once in a while is—is rare, to say the least.

So, you know, that's—that's kind of—if I—if I look at where my impact has been with—you know, with—with biotech companies and investment, I have to look at that as kind of—it's been one of the things that I've given a lot of lectures about, actually, in terms of the value in the industry and where is the value created and what are the risks along the way. And, you know, a lot of academics don't—don't understand it.

KARALIS: No. I—our time is coming to an end.

VENUTI: Okay.

KARALIS: So one last question, and then after we finish recording, we can—I would like to just say bye after that too.

VENUTI: Okay.

KARALIS: But why volunteer and do this and share your story and do this SpeakOut?

VENUTI: Well, I—I think people now—I mean, young people coming up now have to—have to know that somebody came before them and broke down some doors. [Chuckles.] It wasn't easy! Even moving—even moving—even moving to San Francisco and living in this sort of easier environment, you know, took—took a lot of work for people here. And, you know, I—I just hope that people don't take the—take the past generations as, you know, kind of for granted.

I mean, when I go around the Castro and I see the people who are—the gay couples who are eighty and ninety years old—[pause]—I mean, those really are the people who stood up to an awful lot of discrimination over the years. There are a lot of them who—you know, you can still see them. You know, like, when I go out to lunch on a Saturday, there'll be a couple of these—there are always a couple of these old couples, these guys.

And there are a couple of—of—of old lesbian couples, too, who—who are there, and they're just as feisty as they always have been, you know? And they know how much they had to fight to—to kind of even carve out a little piece of—of, you know, freedom for them and—for themselves.

So I respect—I respect that generation, and I'm hoping that when people hear this story they'll at least understand that it wasn't easy and that it wasn't as open as it is today and that—and that—you know, that they have to be a similar vanguard for the people behind *them*. They have to fight some battles, too.

KARALIS: Thank you so much for—for sharing your story and for talking to me and sharing your thoughts and everything. I really appreciate it. We all really appreciate it.

VENUTI: Well, it was my pleasure, and the time flew by, so it was—it was amazing. I've said things to you that I haven't said to many people. I'll tell you that.

KARALIS: Appreciate it. Thank you so much.

[End of interview.]