

Charles R. Wilson II '87
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
SpeakOut
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

[NICHOLAS X.]

WOO: Thank you so much for your—for your time spending with—with me and with the project. To begin, I'm just going to ask you to state your full name, your year and where you are at right now.

WILSON: Sure. My name is Charles Richard Wilson [II]. My year is 1987. And I am currently in Sonoma, California.

WOO: And this is Nicholas Woo, Class of 2020. I'm in the Ticknor Room of Rauner [Special Collections] Library, and it is 12:08 p.m., June 5th, Wednesday, 2019.

So the way we like to begin these interviews is to kind of—is if you could just kind of tell me about your—tell me about your childhood and some—and how you kind of grew up.

WILSON: Okay. So I was born in Amarillo, Texas, in my grandmother's house. We were raised as Christian Scientists, so we didn't have a lot of—well, we didn't go to doctors and things like that, so that explains why I was born—not in a hospital.

My mom had—my father actually died eight months before I was born—

WOO: Oh!

WILSON: —so my mother came to term with me with a lot of, you know, really sad stuff going on, so she had a little girl, my sister, who was about eighteen months old then.

So I was named after my father. He was Charles Richard Wilson. At Dartmouth I had to distinguish myself as Charles Richard Wilson II because there was another Charles Wilson in the same class, Charles Wilson Jr.—

WOO: Really! Wow.

WILSON: Yeah, Charles E. Wilson Jr. [Class of 1987].

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: And he—he was—he was a bit of a troublemaker at Dartmouth, and I constantly got called into the provost and dean's office to answer to why I—I had smashed windows, but it wasn't me, so when you get on the records, you may see my name, which says Charles R. Wilson II.

WOO: Uh-huh.

WILSON: So I did that in honor of my father, because I wanted to. I'm not really officially "the second," but at Dartmouth I am.

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Yeah. So he was—he actually was—worked for McDonnell Douglas in Texas, an aircraft company. He was project manager on the—building fighter jets. And he and his friend were pilots, and they had built a small plane, and they went up for a joyride on a Saturday, and the plane crashed, and they both were killed.

WOO: [Sharp intake of breath.]

WILSON: Yeah. So, you know, I—I was—I mention that because (1) I didn't have a lot of male influences in my family. My mother never really remarried. I mean, she briefly remarried, but then it was annulled. I—spent a lot of time moving around as a kid because I think my mom was trying to find a place to have her own. She wanted to kind of get away from everything that had happened. There were a lot of people kind of pressuring her to remarry. It was not—in the sixties in Texas, it wasn't real cool to be a mom without a—without a husband, so that was kind of—blew people's mind.

So we kept moving around. We moved to St. Louis, Missouri, for a while. I went to a—actually a Christian Science private school there called Principia [School], which was actually a really nice school. And it was—it was really just—exposed me to be okay with pursuing my intellectual curiosity about things. I was a very curious child. I mean, my mom one Christmas bought me—well, one Christmas my

grandparents bought me, like, every piece of sports equipment in the world because I think they were a little worried about me because I wasn't really very athletically oriented or male—typical male oriented, right?

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: Simultaneously, my mom bought me the complete *World Book Encyclopedia*, which back in the day was—it was like a kids' encyclopedia, but it was really cool. It had pictures. I started at A, and I worked my way through Z, so I read every single page of the entire set. It was, like, twenty, thirty volumes or something like that.

WOO: What were some other things that you enjoyed doing as a child?

WILSON: I was a very unusual child.

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: I got—I got into magic.

WOO: Oh!

WILSON: And I wanted to be a magician, professional magician.

WOO: Okay.

WILSON: So I learned—I was never very good, so I learned, but I was obsessed with it.

I wanted to be a scientist, so I used to concoct chemical experiments in the house, and my mom put a stop to that.

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: She was afraid I was either going to poison myself or blow the place up.

And then I really, really got into puppetry, and [chuckles] I taught myself how to sew, and I built, like, rag-doll marionettes and filled them—you know, like little cloth puppets—

WOO: Uh-huh. Yeah. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —and I filled them with sand, and I [unintelligible]. And I studied—read the *World Book*, and I learned about marionettes, and I got books at the library, and I taught myself to make and use marionettes. Again, I wasn't very good.

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: But—so that kind of—all of this, I think—magic and the puppetry—the chemistry was just—I think I was curious as to how things operated.

WOO: Uh-huh.

WILSON: It was, like,—magic and puppetry—was, like, my first introduction to theater. I didn't go to the theater a lot, but—

WOO: Uh-huh.

WILSON: —like, pretending, creating worlds that were different than this one. I—you know, I was obsessed with reading. I was really into—

WOO: For sure.

WILSON: —*The Hardy Boys*. It was, like,—it was, like, mysteries,—

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: —you know, and I actually got in trouble—I got in trouble once because I went to the library when I was about twelve, and I tried to check out a book from the adult section.

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: [unintelligible] this author [unintelligible]. I don't remember what it was, but they were really upset at the desk when I tried to check it out. [Chuckles.] They were, like, “You know this is inappropriate for you.” And I'm, like, “No, I don't. I would like to read it and find out if it's inappropriate.”

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: I was just—kind of developed this attitude of just, like, *Okay, most people are really dumb.*

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: *And they really don't have any creativity. And I will endure them, but I'm gonna get my way.* So that's been a thing all through my life. So my mom, my family, my friends, my husband, my workmates—they—when they see me get an idea in my head,—

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: —they either get—they either get very scared or very excited—

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —because they know that idea is going to come—is going to come to fruition.

So after St. Louis, we moved to Hawaii. My mom, you know, just kept kind of moving us around. And I spent most of my childhood growing up on the Big Island of Hawaii.

WOO: Okay. Would you—did your—would you say your—your sister was curious, as curious as you were too, and would she play along with you?

WILSON: In the early days, yes. We did—yeah, we played, and she kind of got into the puppet stuff. When she got into adolescence, you know, she got around a group of girls in the neighborhoods in St. Louis that were more precocious. They were smoking cigarettes. They were drinking,—

WOO: I see. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: They were thirteen or fourteen. So she—she embraced that life completely, and she really became, like, a bad girl,—

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —so that's when we stopped hanging out. Yeah.

WOO: So not reading books in the library. [Laughs.]

WILSON: No, not really. She—she actually—you know, she's extraordinary intelligent. She didn't finish high school. She had to get her GED [General Educational Development] later. She got kicked out of this private school we went to in Hawaii.

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: Expelled from a couple of schools for drug use, and then she hasn't finished—you know, she's almost sixty now. She hasn't finished her college, bachelor's degree yet, so she's still working on that. So she's had some focus issues. I think she may have screwed herself up a little bit early on, when she was playing around with drugs and stuff. I don't know.

WOO: Uh-huh. Well, how about with you? What—what friend groups, or how did you make friends when you were younger?

WILSON: Yeah. I probably could number my friends, childhood friends, like, on one hand. I didn't have friends. I really didn't. I was very much a loner. St. Louis, I—I—I didn't—the things that the other boys wanted to do, I didn't want to do. I mean, like, they really wanted to play, like, football and wrestle and—

WOO: Yeah, you mentioned. [Laughs.]

WILSON: Yeah. Tear stuff up, and—yeah, all the stuff my grandparents kind of wished I would do, [Woo laughs; unintelligible]. Yeah.

Later on, I'd become—I'd become—I became athletic, but I'd do solitary things, like cross-country, track or things like that. Swimming. I'm not really good on a team. I don't really follow orders very well.

So, no, I don't—friends? Let's see. I can't really name anybody in St. Louis. In Hawaii my friends were all school based, so a lot of my friends—so the school I went to was called Hawaii Preparatory Academy. It's—it's—it's a great

school. It's beautiful. And so my mom—I don't know how she afforded it. I think she—I think she—we got scholarships or something. But she was a single mom. She didn't have a lot of money.

So all my friends were school based. So a lot of the kids at this school—it was a boarding school, and I was a day student. So that was kind of—there were a only few of us who were day students, who lived in the area. So most of my friends were, like, from crazy places, like I grew up with friends from—Bahrain and Abu Dhabi [United Arab Emirates]—

WOO: Oh, wow!

WILSON: Back in those days—yeah, there was a company called Aramco, the Arab[ian]-American Oil Company [now Saudi Aramco]. And those—I think high school and middle school was not offered in those countries, like in Abu Dhabi and Bahrain at that time. At least for foreigners it wasn't offered. So the company paid these families to send their kids off to international boarding schools, so—it's kind of weird. I mean, like, I had friends from Abu—I had friends from Switzerland and Germany, Tahiti—a lot of Tahitians at my school. Japanese. A lot of Japanese kids.

And so we had, like, really long vacations. Like, Christmas was, like, a month. Christmas vacation was, like, a month. I mean, we went to school on Sat- —we went to school on Saturdays, so—and we kind of made—that's how we made up the time.

WOO: I see.

WILSON: A super-intense environment. Six—school six days a week. Athletics—mandatory athletics six days a week—

WOO: Mandatory! Wow! [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] for about two hours. Oh, yeah, no, you couldn't—you couldn't not—if you didn't want to be on a team, you could do, you know, intramurals, but those kids were, like, playing kickball and stuff in high school, I'm like,

That's kinda stupid. I joined the track team, and I tried—I did cross-country a lot.

But anyway, so I didn't have friends. It was hard because my friends would be gone on these really long vacations, so then I started making local friends, and I had one, just one friend. His name was Steve Barbol [spelling unconfirmed], and we just spent a lot, a lot of time together.

Back then in Hawaii you could get your driver's license when you were fourteen, and so—both of us lived very, very far from school. I think my one-way commute was, like, twenty-five or thirty miles, so it was, like, a sixty-mile round trip for school for me.

So my mom, on my fourteenth birthday, was, like, "You're getting your driver's license, and here's a car that I bought for you." it was, like, a \$200 Toyota. It was barely running. Because she was, like, "I am not driving you any longer. I—I can't keep a job and drive a sixty-mile round trip to drop you off at school."

So I mention that because Steve lived even further, and we both had cars very young, and so on the weekends and in the evenings we would drive in our respective cars to very isolated places in the island. And I remember laying on the trunk of our cars and windshields and looking up at the stars and you can only imagine what the sky looks like at night on the Big Island of Hawaii, it's a very isolated place. It's just like—you can see the galaxy. I mean, you really can see the Milky Way, and you can see such incredible details.

So I think I kind of fell in love with Steve, but that probably had been my trouble, is I don't have friends because I tend to fall in love with them, so—no. And it's not really appropriate always

WOO: And were most of the friends, the ones that you did have—were they generally boys as well?

WILSON: Yeah, they were. I had a few female friends from, like, theater and stuff like that. I was really an odd person.

WOO: No I'm—I'm—can you tell me more about theater and how—how you got started with it?

WILSON: Well, so I was a drama major at Dartmouth, and I don't regret it, even though I probably should have spent more time in more academic areas. I—I—I didn't—so I think my connection to theater first was through literature when I got to high school. So I went to the middle school, to this private school, and then—you know, it was great.

And then when I got to high school, they kind of looked at me, and they were, like, "You are not—you can't take regular freshman classes.—"

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] you know. "You need to start taking AP [advanced placement] classes right now." So, like, fall of my freshman year, that ninth-grade year, I was taking, like, two AP classes: AP literature and AP composition. And so that was really my exposure, was just, like,—you know, I was fourteen, and I was digging in really deep to literature, dramatic literature. So that was that.

But I came to Dartmouth with like a really, really solid footing in—in those fields. And so then I think—I think that—so Dartmouth—I think a lot of it stayed the same, but I think things have changed radically. It's a much more accepting place now, from what I perceive. And that might be hard to hear—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] for people who don't feel accepted there.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: But later we'll talk about my experience at Dartmouth. It was actually a physically dangerous place to be a gay person, and I personally think it was a physically dangerous and emotionally dangerous place to be a sensitive person. So when I started looking at the English department—you know, like, *I want to be an English major*—and the other students were, like, real assholes. They were super-privileged kids

that didn't understand—didn't and wouldn't understand how other people's lives were. And I met a few—you know, a few people from that.

But then when I went—I don't know. You know, I walked by the theater department or the—you know, in—I don't know if they still have it in the—what's the main hall, where the mailboxes are?

WOO: The Hop? The Hopkins Center [for the Arts]?

WILSON: Yeah. So when I would go to the Hopkins Center to get my mail and stuff like that—I don't know if they still have—there were big windows that looked into the shop, the theater shop?

WOO: Yes, there are.

WILSON: Yeah, so—and I was, like, *What the hell is that?* It was this huge—you know, it was like a warehouse space. And they had this—they had this painting frame that goes up and down so they can paint these huge canvases that they use as scrims in the back of the theater, [unintelligible] a new scene or make something look good. Or curtains. They would build, like, full-size sets in there and roll them onstage.

I was, like, *Whoa! That is so cool! That is just amazing!* So I actually got started in theater by just knocking on that door, literally, and like, “What are you guys *doing?*” And they were, like, “Come on in.” And they were really nice people, and they were real accepting, and they have, like, a mechanical—you know, they—it really fit into, like, building—my building puppets. I used to build—

WOO: Mm-hm. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —kites. I used to build model airplanes and all kinds of stuff. So it really fit into that.

And then when I—it was, like, “Hey, would you like to sit and watch us with rehearsal?” And, you know, they were doing, like, [Henrik] Ibsen and [August] Strindberg—you know, they were doing things that I had read but I had never seen staged. And I was, like, *Whoa! This is so cool!* It's, like, an

area I love, which is literature, my basic free-time—you know, pastime activities, which is building things and building—you know, sewing things. Actually, I found my way down to the costume department, and I learned to sew even better. And I was, like, *This is—this is heaven*.

And then I also realized—and first of all, it was, like,—it was very safe. I mean,—

WOO: It was very safe?

WILSON: I don't know if you've worked in theaters before or worked on a production, but they're super time consuming.

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: I mean, and the hours are insane, so, you know, to go in there and spend eighteen hours was not unusual. In fact, we would live there. I—I—I remember doing, like, a forty-eight-hour stint in that area.

So, you know, in retrospect, now that I'm, you know, super old, I realized what was going on was the theater was a very safe place for me. It was—it was like a bubble. And it truly was a bubble. In fact, it was so much of a bubble it had, like, windows where people could look in.

But it was super protective. People were very nice. The work was hard. It was creative. And I basically hid in the theater to hide from the atrocities that I was seeing happening at Dartmouth.

WOO: Can you tell me a little bit of the atrocities that you saw?

WILSON: Yeah. So I don't know if you've interviewed in this project anybody from my class or period.

WOO: I—I—do you know [Robert A.] “Rob” Martin [Class of 1987]?

WILSON: Yeah. Oh, yeah, Rob. Actually, Rob was—

WOO: He was in the drama department as well.

WILSON: Yeah, we were, like, competitors in the drama department. [Chuckles.]

WOO: Really! Tell me more!

WILSON: Yeah. Well, there's, like, —we—we were always, you know, up for the same parts, and, you know, he was more successful than I. He's a better—he's a much better actor than I am. And he was also just—you know, we didn't ever discuss sexuality or—I knew he was gay, but I never really discussed it with him.

So there's an award that comes at the end. There's this thing called the David Birney Award for Excellence in Theater [Arts]. And, you know, it's, like, a silver bowl, but I ended up using it as an ash tray. [Chuckles.] But I got that award, and I know that Rob either got the same award or he got the other drama award, so that's—you know, we were kind of—they were paying—paying for us all the work that we put into the theater department, because neither of us were, like, stars on stage. We were never, like, the people like David—David [J.] Beach [Class of 1986]. You know, we were not—neither of us were destined to go on and have, like, a career on Broadway [sic; in Broadway theater]. I don't think he did. I certainly didn't. Anyway, yeah, so I knew Rob.

So the atrocities at Dartmouth. Okay. So it was—you know, it starts in August of 1983. AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome] didn't have name yet. It wasn't called AIDS. In May of 1983 I remember *Time* magazine—I think—I think I'm wrong—maybe I'm wrong. But *Time* magazine had a cover story about this thing called—I think they were calling it GRID, which was gay-related immune deficiency.

And, you know, the cover story about this strange cancer, this strange disease that was taking out gay men. And then, you know, they were talking to, like, religious authorities, like, “Why do *you* think this is happening?” “Well, it's God's curse, of course.” They were talking to scientists, and, like, “We don't know. It's too gross for us to even think about.” So, there was just a lot of fear.

So AIDS was very, very, very new as a public phenomenon. It probably started much earlier in places like New York [City,

New York] and San Francisco [California], but for little kids from isolated places like where I came from, it was—

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: So there was that.

My freshman year, —well, of course, okay, so some of the things that happened.

WOO: Yes. Walk me through it.

WILSON: So two friends I had in the theater department, Joel [O. Thayer, Class of 1985] and—I can't remember his name. I think it was Jeff. Both in the theater department. And they were members of Kappa Kappa Kappa.

WOO: Tri-Kap, yes.

WILSON: Tri-Kap, which—you know, KKK is—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible] way of thinking of it.

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: They—you know, I was a freshman, and they weren't really supposed to have me come to their frat parties or their parties in their house, but I came anyway. And so—and I as just hanging out. Nothing big.

And Dinesh [J.] D'Souza [class of 1983], who just got pardoned by President [Donald J.] Trump, was the president of Tri-Kap at that time. And he basic- —and then he was also the editor of *The [Dartmouth] Review*.

WOO: Yes.

WILSON: He basically organized a purge of the house, of Tri-Kap, of all of the gay or perceived gay people, and Joel and—who I think was Jeff—were basically called up in front of the panel that they put together, like this inquisition panel, and, you

know, “Here’s the accusations against you. We’re—you know, to revoke your membership. And here’s the evidence we have.” And they actually had, like, a slide show—

WOO: [Giggles.]

WILSON: —sort of things, and so one was a picture—my picture from the freshman picture book, whatever that was called, the face book thing. Do they still have that? Like, a little book with everyone’s face and name and where they live and what dorm room and all that?

WOO: They—they don’t have that, but I think only the yearbooks is what we have with everyone’s faces.

WILSON: So, you know, Facebook[, Inc.] was called that because that was what it was called. That’s what it was in Harvard [University] before it was—

WOO: Uh-huh. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk; unintelligible]. You know—and so it was really important because you kind of went through, and you either were, like, “Oh, he’s so cute!” or, you know, “Oh, that’s my friend” or—“I didn’t know they lived downstairs from me.” But anyway, that’s how a lot of us made friends.

So they took a picture of—my picture in the face book, and it was one of the slides, you know, that they were—

WOO: [Chuckles.]—

WILSON: —“These two guys were recruiting known homosexuals to the house.”

WOO: Oh!! I see.

WILSON: Yeah.

WOO: That’s like an underground or undercover, like, outing?

WILSON: Yeah. I mean,—

WOO: I see.

WILSON: —yes, it was. It was.

WOO: So they weren't queer themselves.

WILSON: I realized—yeah.

WOO: I see.

WILSON: Exactly.

WOO: Sorry.

WILSON: I was—I think that—and I almost know that I was the only out gay member of my class of '87 at that time. I don't recall ever—and I'd go to Gay Student Association [GSA] meetings, and there was never anybody from my class. I was the only freshman and then for years the only—I think the only person from '87 that was actually out.

Of course, there's, like, so many members of my class now that have come out. Like, really important people, like Keith—Keith [O.] Boykin [Class of 1987] and all these other people. But I think I was just sort of naïve, and I don't think I really understood the cultural biases that had just been drilled into people and—and—more—you know, because—I [unintelligible] grew up on Hawaii, in the middle of the ocean. I didn't have a lot of contact with typical American society.

So anyway, I was kind of known—I wasn't, like, flamboyant, but, you know, I—I dressed like David Bowie. You know, I—I—

WOO: Yeah!

WILSON: —I really was into alternative stuff, and, you know, I bleached my hair (when I had hair). You know, I just—I—I thought it was cute, so—evidently I was really fruity, so—so they used that—so that was one. And so—you know, so that was part one.

And then later, in the fall, I think Laura [A.] Ingraham [Class of 1985] is—you know, that witch that's on the—

- WOO: [Laughs.]
- WILSON: —got her own show now.
- WOO: [Laughs.] Yeah!
- WILSON: Yeah. So she was the editor or co-editor with Dinesh of *The Review* at the time.
- WOO: Yes.
- WILSON: And they subsequently created—I don't know if you've heard of this. It was an undercover investigation of the Gay Students Association.
- WOO: Mm-hm. Yeah.
- WILSON: So they sent one of their, quote, “reporters,” unquote, in—Teresa Polenz [Teresa A. Delany (née Polenz) Class of 1987]— into the Gay Students Association meeting. And I physically didn't got that night, I—I tell you, Nick, I—
- WOO: But you had been regularly going?
- WILSON: Yeah, I went every time it met. But I—I don't know what it is, but I—I credit a lot of my success in life to—whatever that success has been to a sense of intuition that I have. I just—I can sometimes sense what's about to happen. [Chuckles.]
- WOO: [Laughs.]
- WILSON: And—you know, and I back away from it. Like, if it's going to be a bad thing, I just quietly back away. So literally laid in the grass in the Commons—what's the Commons, the square thing called, the grass in the middle, of Dartmouth?
- WOO: The [Dartmouth] Green?
- WILSON: The Green. So, yeah, sorry. It's been a really long time. I've only been back to Dartmouth one time in about [cross-talk] thirty-five years.
- WOO: I totally understand. [Chuckles.]

- WILSON: Yeah, yeah. So I laid in the grass, you know, the whole night, and I watched all of the other guys and women walk into the meeting. But something just told me, like, *Don't go. Don't go.* Because going to the meeting was actually kind of scary, because you have to walk past people, and you had to walk to that floor, and you had to walk to that room, and everyone—because there were other people in the building for other reasons. [cross-talk] And so it was very scary.
- WOO: Which floor and the room was it, again?
- WILSON: So it's next to Collins [sic; Collis]. It's where the [Dartmouth] Outing Club was. [cross-talk; unintelligible]
- WOO: Yes, the DOC Outing Club. The Outing Club. [Chuckles.]
- WILSON: [cross-talk] Yeah, so that same building. Yeah, right?
- So I didn't go. But then later, what I found out was that—and so you probably know—that Teresa Polenz actually was there, tape recording inside the meeting.
- WOO: Mm-hm. Yeah.
- WILSON: And, you know, the next day or next—whatever the next was, they published the transcript with our—with everybody's room numbers and pictures from the face book. They loved that book. And, you know, it was not a safe thing—
- WOO: No.
- WILSON: —to be openly gay. It physically wasn't safe. So, you know, my friends that year spent part of their time testifying to the New Hampshire grand jury, New Hampshire state grand jury, because the—you know, they were going to pursue wiretapping charges against—against *The Review*.
- WOO: Yes.
- WILSON: And the rumor is that William F. Buckley Jr.—you know, was a big funder of these kinds—these kinds of papers all across Ivy League—stepped in and paid for a high-powered

attorney to come to their defense, so they were never prosecuted. So that's—let's see, that's part two.

I'm going do a Google search while we—

WOO: Well, before you move onto that, could you tell me—did you have—did you—about, like, how the GSA operated? What would you do during the meetings? And how—and how you remember joining it as a freshman, or—yeah, it was freshman year, correct, '84?

WILSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I joined because, you know, it was Joel and Jay, Joel and Jay went. And it was just the only place to be around, you know, people and be known as gay and have conversations, so it was—it was part therapy. It was part, you know, planning outreach to people so other people would know that there's, you know, that resource.

It was part, you know, coming to terms with AIDS and supporting each other, because a lot of people were losing friends very quickly, people [cross-talk; unintelligible].

WOO: For sure.

WILSON: You know, so these young people were losing perhaps lovers and friends, and it's very unusual, I think, for eighteen-, nineteen-, twenty-year-olds to start racking up deaths in their—in their circle of friends. [cross-talk] I don't know many—

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: *That* was actually, basically, a very big, controlling theme of my young adulthood, was everybody I knew, including me, had been to more funerals than anybody you would ever think, or had lost more friends, and there was no way to talk about it, and there was no way to—you couldn't talk about it with family. You couldn't talk about it outside this circle. This circle was getting progressively smaller. People were having—so we talked about that a lot.

There was one young guy—oh, I can't remember his name. Scipio [Garling] is his name now. David [C.] Garling [Class of 1986]. He's a good guy. He was—God, he was weird.

There was—there was occasionally on, like, public TV or on [unintelligible] movies, you'd see, like, representations of, like, with—a [W.] Somerset Maugham novel would be made into a movie or something. But he kind of would take on these different characters from history, and he would dress like them. He walked with a cane. He didn't need the cane; he just walked with a cane because it was stylish for him.

We all were weird people. So he was kind of weird. He was very controlling. So a lot of us stopped going to the meetings, because David Garling was kind of like a little too controlling.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: Yeah. I mean, he's a nice guy, but, again, he was just responding to—trying to exist and trying to—you know, "exist" doesn't just mean drawing breath; exist means being happy and being—feeling like there's potential in your life.

WOO: For sure.

WILSON: And a lot of us were—having that robbed from us very, very quickly. And so some of the eccentricities that we developed—[Begins to weep.] I'm sorry, Nick.

WOO: No, it's okay.

WILSON: [Speaks while crying.] These are things I haven't thought about in a long time.

WOO: This is why we're having the project. This is—take your time.

WILSON: Okay, I'll get it together. [Proceeds, but his voice is full of emotion.] A lot of the eccentricities that we developed were, I think, a response to basically being told on every front that we were going to be dead very quickly.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: None of us—none of us imagined ourselves living past—into our thirties. I actually was shocked when I turned thirty. I was actually completely shocked that I'd lived that long.

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: And so to have that be basically forced into your DNA by society—so the way we behaved—you know, his cane. You know, the stylish cane and his little scarfs that he wore. And I—you know, I was, like, got to Dartmouth, and it's cold as shit. You know, I'm from Hawaii, and everybody's wearing parkas, obviously, and I'm, like, *Mmm, I don't think I could wear a parka.* [Chuckles.]

So I went to a used clothing store there. It was called Rosey Jekes. I used to spend a lot of time there. And I bought a wool—black wool Chesterfield [coat]. I don't know if you know. Chesterfield was like a very heavy wool knit jacket that goes down to your knees. Like, if you look at—if you go look at, like,—movies like, *The Great Gatsby*—like, that's what guys wore—you know, rich people wore outside. It had a velvet collar. So I wore that. I wore that through the winter at Dartmouth.

And I had a silk scarf from the twenties that I bought. It was like a—I wore a wool scarf probably as a muffler, but I covered it with this white silk with red polka dots scarf. So, you know, I'm trudging through the snow in a black wool Chesterfield with polka dot red—red polka dot scarf.

But I—and I was, like, *This is who I am.* I had to broadcast to people that I was different in some way. Like, there's a Walt Whitman and "Calamas" [a cluster of poems in his *Leaves of Grass*]. You know, there's a section that—basically, he asks—I can't remember the lines, but it's, like, "Do you know who I am? Do you think I am just another person?" You know, he's speaking to some unknown lover that's approaching him or an unknown—

And I—I needed people to know that I was different and I was special and that I was a good person.

WOO: For sure. I'd argue it's a very brave thing as well, especially back then.

WILSON: Yeah. And so, you know,—

WOO: Very brave.

WILSON: Keith Boykin. I don't know if you know who Keith Boykin is, but he was a speechwriter for [President William J.] "Bill" Clinton, and he was a big—big member of the Democratic Party. I don't know what he does now. But I think he works for the Democratic Party and is in politics. He's African-American. So that set him apart—there weren't a lot of African-Americans at Dartmouth at that time.

And he was the editor of *The Dartmouth*, the newspaper. And, you know, at this time, Michael Jackson was around and about. He used to wear a white, sparkled glove, just one, like Michael Jackson used to wear. I was like, *That is so gay! You are so gay!*

WOO: [Giggles.] Mm-hm.

WILSON: But, you know, he wasn't—he wasn't out; he was, like, "No, I'm the editor of *The Dartmouth*, you know?"

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: "Nn-nn. Not gay. Not gay here." And I'm, like, *Okay, either take the glove off or embrace it*. But, you know, so there were people that—like I said, the eccentricities were a way of naming ourselves and—and—and naming that we're special.

So one thing that the GSA did—because we did have, you know, older members who were seniors and people who'd graduated and were community members, and they were either living in, like, New York or—New York or Los Angeles [California] or San Francisco, mostly New York— and coming back.

But ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power] was becoming very much a thing in New York as a response, so Larry Kramer and all those people here were organizing this, which was, like: No, there's total resistance [unintelligible]. *You have to pay attention to this. You have to. You cannot ignore this any longer.*

And so they would bring that sort of activism to this little group sitting in Collins Hall or whatever the name was. And then we started planning some activist activities, and that also kind of put us in connection with other activist groups. You know, I joined—you know, Venn diagram joined—with like, the anti-apartheid movement—

WOO: The shanties. Yes.

WILSON: —that was happening. The shanties. Like, you know, my friends were living in the shanties, although I didn't participate in that, but anyway, that became, then, a new thing that we were doing at Dartmouth. And I don't think Dartmouth had ever seen activists who weren't wanting to sit at a table. You know, we needed to take over whatever the—this administrative building we did.

So we planned a lot of these activities in the G A because we were, like, "Fuck this. If *The Review* and everybody else is going to pin those villainous labels on us, okay, I'm gonna embrace that. And you don't even know what kind of shit I can bring to—to—to your life."

WOO: For sure.

WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible].

So—let's see. My junior year, just to jump forward—this is, I believe, emblematic of—

WOO: Of course.

WILSON: —the way that was happening at Dartmouth. Rock Hudson died—I just looked it up on Wikipedia [The Free Encyclopedia (<https://www.wikipedia.org/>)] —he died in October—October 2nd of 1985. And so Rock Hudson obviously—now we know he was completely gay—

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] and he admitted that he had many lovers and all that. But no one—he wasn't known as gay. And so the fact that he died and it was announced that he died of AIDS, and his friends around him—Elizabeth Taylor and Doris Day

were supporting him—was big news. It was on the cover of *Time* magazine. “Rock Hudson Is Dead. Died of AIDS.”

So one of these asshole fraternities from Frat Row [Webster Avenue in Hanover, New Hampshire] decided to have a party, and it was basically a party to celebrate that Rock Hudson was dead, that another fag had died of AIDS. That was the theme of the party.

WOO: Oh, my goodness! Which one was it?

WILSON: It was two down from Tri-Kap, I think. It’s on the same side of the street as Tri-Kap.

WOO: All right.

WILSON: I don’t know the name.

WOO: That’s fine. Continue. I don’t know the frats either. [Laughs.] I don’t go to the frats.

WILSON: Yeah, I mean—so we were, like, “What the fuck? I mean,—

WOO: Absolutely.

WILSON: —it’s just—it’s outrageous!” It’s—it’s not that I even cared or knew that much about Rock Hudson, but my Lord, you’re going to celebrate somebody’s death? I mean, it’s not like he was [Adolf] Hitler. I mean, it was—so, we were like “We’re goin’ to this party.”

We went to this party, and, you know, we got in the door, and they were going, “Oh, never seen you here before.” We’re, like, “Oh, no, we love this place. We’ll go down and drink beer.” And then we got to where there was music playing. There was dancing, and we—we were all men, you know. Just took over the dance floor, and we danced, you know, not in celebration of the death of Rock Hudson but I think we were dancing to celebrate Rock Hudson.

WOO: A reclaiming of space almost.

WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible].

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: Reclaiming the space. I was—we were physically—physically beaten up and forced out of the house. I'm six foot two, probably weigh what I weighed then—which is about 220. I'm not a small person, in other words.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: They were bigger, and there were more of them. I have never had this happen. I was picked up by the scruff of my neck, which, you know, like, pulled—pulled me by all of my clothing. Several of them picked me up, held me, you know, horizontal to the floor, walked to the front door of the frat and physically threw me out the door, into the grass.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: And I don't know how I didn't break my neck. I don't—I'm not a confrontational person. I don't—I don't—I've never—violence is—is not part of my life. And it's not part of the way I respond to things. And so I was, like, *You don't*—

WOO: For dancing?

WILSON: For dancing. For dancing, yeah. And so that was just—that was—those were the atrocities. Those were the kind of atrocities, so those were the macro atrocities. But there were lots of micro atrocities day to day. Just day to day.

And so I—I insulated myself in the theater department. I basically lived my entire life in the Hop. My freshman year, I was—oh, God, my dorm was, like,—those buildings down by the river, the ones that are—

WOO: The River [Cluster]? Yeah, Judge [Hall] and French [Hall].

WILSON: Yeah. So they were horrible dorms at that time. I think they've upgraded them since. But they were horrible. They're basically just cinderblock prison cells. There were just no—there weren't—they had no character. That wasn't like, you know, the [Massachusetts] Row [Cluster] or anything like that, the Gold Coast [Cluster] or whatever they called it.

Anyway, I—you know, basically I just moved off from there to the Hop, which is basically walking the length of the entire Dartmouth campus.

WOO: Basically.

WILSON: It's what I did. Which I liked. I mean, it was isolated. I walked through the cemetery. Lots of ways to kind of not have to walk with people. Lots of pathways. I'd cut through the Orozco Room [of the Baker-Berry Library]. Sometimes if it was cold we'd warm-up because we'd finished the trek, you know, the downstairs in the library.

I spent a lot of time in the library. I spent a lot of time in the stacks, not doing what people were doing—were having sex in the stacks, I found out later. But I wasn't. I was actually just living in the stacks.

So, you know, so I went into my freshman—summer after my freshman year with that—some of these experiences and some of this attitude towards life that had kind of been created. I don't think it was there before I started.

I spent the summer of that—between freshman and sophomore year with a family member, an aunt in Virginia, and I had, like, an internship in [Washington] D.C., in the Watergate [Office] Building, actually. You know, I—I was, like, *Okay, I need to know what this whole, you know, urban gay thing is.* There was actually a pretty active—active gay culture in D.C. at that time. There were bookstores and bars and restaurants that were considered gay, and I would just tell my aunt that, you know, like, "I'm gonna go into D.C. I'll see you later."

"Hey, I met—I found a friend from Dartmouth." Total lie. It's just someone that picked me up, you know. "I met a friend from Dartmouth here, and I'm going to hang out with them. I'll spend the night. I'll see you later."

So basically, my aunt then told my mom, "I think Charles is gay." [Both chuckle.]

WOO: This is freshman summer. Wow.

WILSON: Yeah. And so I was confronted with that. I'm, like, "Yeah, I am. Fuck you all." I went back to Dart- —I went back to Dartmouth early, before the fall term started, and I didn't— hadn't applied for a dorm house. I didn't know where I would live. I don't know, maybe they assigned me a place.

And then through the theater, I met people that lived at Phi [Sigma] Psi—Panarchy, I guess it's called now.

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: And they let me crash there for the rest of the summer and live in that crazy building. So then I ended up living the rest of my—all of my years at Dartmouth at—at Phi Psi, becoming, you know, a member and all of that.

One thing just kind of as I reflect back on this. It's hard to put everything in chronological order.

WOO: Of course. Go ahead.

WILSON: So my freshman year Christmas vacation, so—it's only, like, four months since I'd gotten there, three months. I did go home to Hawaii for Christmas break. And it's a loooong fucking trek from Hanover to—

WOO: It is.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] the Big Island of Hawaii. I mean really long. And so jets were not as fast, and so I went back to Hawaii, you know, had a vacation there and—okay, this is weird.

WOO: No, go ahead.

WILSON: There was a—there was a guy—there was a family that had moved in, I don't know, near us or they were friends of my mom's, and they had hired—they had hired a nanny. The family had some money, but it wasn't a female nanny. It was—you know, there used to be a thing where you could hire, like, European kids to come and be nannies and au pairs and stuff.

WOO: Uh-huh. [Chuckles.]

- WILSON: So they had hired a nanny, but they hired a man! And so I was, like, this little town in Hawaii. Now there's, like, this Swiss god—you know, blond hair, blue eye—like, *Holy shit! Who are you?*
- WOO: [Laughs.]
- WILSON: And, you know,— anyway, I totally developed a crush on him.
- WOO: And he—
- WILSON: Go ahead.
- WOO: He was *your* nanny.
- WILSON: Yeah, he was my nanny. He was my nanny. I *wish* he was my nanny.
- WOO: Nanny. [Laughs.]
- WILSON: Yeah. And I think the way I knew him was my mom—my mom at that point was working in a big resort hotel—
- WOO: Oh, I see.
- WILSON: —from the Big Island, and that's how we knew these friends. And actually, I worked, and I ran the—some of these big resorts, during, like, big holidays they have, like, childcare programs because that's why you go on vacation, is because you don't really want to be spending time with your kids. So I actually ran, during my Christmas break, this childcare program. That's how I knew him.
- He would come and help take care of the kids he was in charge of. That was—
- WOO: I see.
- WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible].
- WOO: [Laughs.]
- WILSON: And interestingly, that Christmas, in that group, Henry Winkler and his family—he was an actor in Hollywood,

played The Fonz, “Fonzie,” on *Happy Days*. [unintelligible]. He was sort of an iconic character. He had this thing where, you know, walk in, threw his thumbs up and go, “Heyyy!” You know, “Be cool” or something like that.

Anyway, so his kids—his kids were in the group too, and I was taking care of it. His kids were complete assholes. Anyway, the kids would get out of control, and I remember Henry Winkler when I went to pick up their kids and was, like, “How’s it going? Are the kids behaving themselves?” And, like, “Well, Mr. Winkler, actually not really.” He was, like, “Oh, maybe I can come and help.”

So he—the kids were assembled in, like, the crafts room with the “manny” over there. And so Henry Winkler walked into this room of kids and went, “Heyyy! Be cool, guys! Mr. Wilson says you’re not.” And “Charles says you’re not behaving yourselves. The Fonz wants you to behave.” The kids were, like, “Wow, the Fonzie is here!” And so we got about thirty minutes of peace out of—out of that. But anyway, that was funny.

So that’s how I met the “manny”. And so all this was—I’m—there’s a point to all of this—is—okay, so we didn’t have e-mail in those days. We actually had to write letters to each other.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: And so I had written a letter to a friend at Dartmouth, my friend, Eileen, Eileen [G.] Brown [Class of 1987]. And basically was saying there’s this incredible Swiss guy here, and he’s, like, so fuckin’ hot.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: And I wrote it, and I guess I was, like, *You know what? I’m gonna see her in, like, forty-eight or seventy-two hours. There’s no way this letter is gonna get there in time. So I’ll just throw it away, get on a plane, go back to Dartmouth, you know, in early January.* And I put it in the trash. I put the letter in the trash.

So back in those days—back in those days in Hawaii, a very rural place, you had to take your own trash to the dump. There were no trash trucks.

WOO: For sure.

WILSON: [cross-talk] So, that was just a ritual. So we had, like, this big collection of trash outside that we would every week put in our car trunk and drive to the dump and throw it out into the dump. And so I put this letter in the trash. It was a piece of white paper. It was folded up. And my mother was a real estate agent at the time.

WOO: Uh-oh. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: And she was very big—big—you know, she was really becoming successful. And she had lost a paper or something like that, a contract or something. And so she—she went digging in the trash, looking for a piece of white paper, and she came upon this letter.

WOO: Uh. Uh. Your intuition wasn't working for you then! [Chuckles.]

WILSON: No, it wasn't. It did not work for me. It's gotten better, much better. And so I—maybe I'm fabricating the timeline, but this is how—this is how I remember it, and this is how my friends remember it who helped me through it, was—

WOO: For sure. Go ahead.

WILSON: —I got out of the taxi that brought me from the train station at White River Junction [Vermont] to my dorm out on the river. It's cold as fuck. I mean, there was ice covering everything. Like, I couldn't—you were just slipping and sliding. I get to my floor, and there were—we didn't have phones in our rooms back then. There was always just a payphone at the end, and that's how your parents called you. If the phone was ringing, you just picked it up, and you said, "Can I help you?" And then you'd find the person and give the phone to them.

The phone is ringing as I walk into the dorm from the train station, and it is my mother on the phone. And she was, like,

“Charles, what is going on?” And she was, like—I’m, like, “Oh, I—I don’t know. What are you talking about?” She goes, “Well I found this,” and she was crazy. She was really upset.

And so—so my mom—so if I’m—if I’ve got good intuition or if I, like, kind of go to the extreme on stuff, my mom is the person that kind of taught me this. [Chuckles.] My mom, who didn’t have a lot of money at that point, went down to the airport, asked them if there was a flight to Los Angeles leaving soon, got on that flight—and this is, like, within a couple of hours after getting off the phone from me—because, you know, six hours’ time difference.

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: So, like, nine o’clock my time, it’s three o’clock in the afternoon. They’re, like, “Yes, we have a midnight flight to Los Angeles.” And she got on it. And then she got on a flight to New York, and then she—

WOO: Oh, my!

WILSON: —to Boston, right? And then she said, “You will meet me in Boston in forty-eight hours.” I’m, like, “Really?” And she’s, like, “Charles Wilson, if you’re not there, we are not going to be mother and son any longer.” I was, like, “Okay.”

So then I had to turn around, get back in—call the taxi back, get back down on the train. There is, like a midnight—with the Montrealer Line. I took the train back down to Boston, got in the early morning. I think this is the way I remember it: meet with my mom, and then I’m, like, “No, it’s not true! You know, I just—I—I—there’s people around me—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] just back and forth, that’s the way we talk at Dartmouth. And I’m so sorry. This is not who I am. And, oh, by the way, it looks like *Cats* is in town, the play. Would you like to go see *Cats* with me?”

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: “I’ve heard of that restaurant. We should go have a nice dinner. We’re here now.” So I’m basically getting, like, this gay urban fantasy life. Like, going to a nice restaurant, going to your play.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: And I seem to have mollified my mother. And she’s, like, “Oh, God, I’m so happy. This is you. I love *you*. This is you. Not that nasty person who wrote that letter.”

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: Okay, so—

WOO: You fully fooled her.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] okay, but shut up because we’ve got to— The curtain’s going— the curtain’s going up. We’re going to see *Cats*, right?

Oh, and—yeah.

So then—oh, my God, I can’t believe what a fag I was.

WOO: [Laughs.] I love it.

WILSON: So then that was Christmas. So that—you know, and then I obviously was trying to deal with that in my head, so that actually solidified a group of friends around me. Much more—more female friends. Eileen was a big support. My friend Carol Cosenza [Class of 1986], who was the big driver of shanties, was a big support to me in my dorm, and we became very good friends.

So then that summer, my mom and my sister—I guess my mom had been sort of taken with the East Coast—decided, “We’re gonna come out. We’re gonna meet you at Dartmouth at the end of your term, and we’re gonna take a train trip down to D.C., because you’re gonna spend the summer in D.C. So we’re gonna do that. Stop in New York, stop in Boston.” And we did that as, you know, a family.

And so, like, I'm in theater, and I'm—we're in New York, and I said, "Guys, there's a great play on, and I really would like to see it." [Chuckles.] It was *La Cage aux Folles*. I don't know, have you seen *La Cage aux Folles*?

WOO: It is. It's a very gay movie. [Laughs.]

WILSON: It's a super gay movie. Super gay movie. You know, it was really an appropriate movie at the—at the time to play at the time because, you know, there's this, like, you know, what the lead song is, like, [sings] "I am what I am."

WOO: Yeah. [Laughs.]

WILSON: So, again, my intuition is not real good here because I think I was getting just selfish, but I was, like, "Let's go see it." And they're, like, "Okay." And they were just sitting there during the whole play, kind of stone-faced. They were just, like, "Whaaat is going on?" My mom was, like, "I thought we talked about this, Charles." I said, "Mom, this is, like, *the* hottest play on Broadway. This has nothing to do with me and my sexuality. What I said when you came to Boston is still true. That's not me. I'm a theater person. This is theater. I am looking at this as an artiste."

WOO: Okay, yes.

WILSON: "[unintelligible], right?" She's, like, "O-kay."

So then I do my internship. Let's get back to the internship in D.C., and my aunt calling my mother. I think my aunt had actually gone through my stuff in my room when I was away and, like, found, like, a map I had of—you know. Again, before smart phones. So we actually had to use, like, paper maps. And I had, like, highlighted a map with, like, gay bars in D.C.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: I buried it in my clothes. So she had to have gone through my clothes to find it. And so—oh!

So then my mom—my mom called me, and she was, like, "Um, okay, so you're really lying to me, and I am an adult,

and I know when I'm being deceived." And I'm, like, "Okay, you're right. I am deceiving you. And I'm sorry that you feel this way, but, you know, like the song goes, 'I am what I am.'" She hung up on me.

WOO: [Sharp intake of breath.]

WILSON: And I didn't talk to my mother for probably another eighteen months. I had no contact with any family member during that time.

WOO: Oh, my.

WILSON: I think my mother did call me about eighteen months later. I was living at Phi Psi at that point, and I didn't see her for maybe three—three more years, three or four more years.

WOO: Oh, my.

WILSON: I couldn't go home. [Starts to cry, and resumes with a tremulous voice.] I had no family, nobody to connect with. I mean, I assumed she was paying my tuition. I had a lot of student loans. [Voice recovers.] I had a work-study job and a couple of other part-time jobs in addition to doing the theater. I was very self-supporting.

Actually, you know, because my dad had died at an early age and I was his dependent, I actually received a very small portion of his pension from his military pension, and it just was sent directly to me. But, you know, I taught myself how to—create a bank account, and, you know, I—so I had a source of income. But I would have—I became very independent very, very, very quickly. And—yeah.

WOO: Three years! How—how did that—well, at least looking back, besides independency, how—how did that—how did it impact you for those three years?

WILSON: [His voice is tremulous again.] I think that prior to this, I was a really nice person, and I really didn't want to—I didn't really—I really didn't want to offend people, growing up. I just really wanted to make people happy. And after this, given the context of what's going on with AIDS, with Dartmouth, I just became a really extreme person. I was really rude to

people. I became an activist. I became— I had friends. I actually enjoyed myself, and I don't regret it. It is who I am now. But I just let anger—I just let anger take over my entire life.

So during this time with the fear of AIDS—and no one really—no one really, really knew how—how you got AIDS. We were just watching people dying. We didn't know if you got it from kissing. We don't know—we don't—we didn't know. And so—

WOO: Friends at Dartmouth.

WILSON: What's that?

WOO: Friends at Dartmouth dying.

WILSON: Oh, yeah. Well, they were mostly graduates, young people that had gone off and got to New York.

WOO: Oh, my.

WILSON: Nick, in those days, people would go to the doctor with, like, "What is this dark spot on my arm?" And they'd be dead a couple of months later. There was—there were no drugs. There was nothing. There was no care for it. [Weeps] People were dying in their own home, with no medical care.

WOO: Oh, my.

WILSON: [Continues to weep.] They weren't allowed to go to hospitals and to watch and to know the twenty-two-year-olds going from being healthy to dead in just a matter of months, becoming emaciated, covered with Kaposi's sarcoma, dying of thrush, dying of pneumonia. It wasn't even human pneumonia; it was, like, feline pneumonia. It wasn't—it was—their bodies just decomposed in front of us.

WOO: Oh, my.

WILSON: [Weeps.] And I—I—I didn't—I couldn't—I couldn't even go to the doctor. I mean, I broke—I broke my hand once in the theater, and I would not go to the doctor because I did not want to— I—actually I fell off scaffold at the theater, and I

fell, like, eighteen feet and landed on my back. And I was in real pain, and I wouldn't go to the doctor because I did not want to be treated the way I had seen my friends be treated.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: So I became very, very, very independent. Very angry. And very isolated. Very isolated.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: So we didn't know how you got AIDS. These fuckheads like Jerry [L.] Falwell, the Moral Majority, [President] Ronald [W.] Reagan—you know, they were controlling the dialogue around this. And, you know, I decided to just turn it on its head. So Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority had—something [unintelligible]. There was some story about, you know, "God would restore your virginity if you would just abstain from sex and, you know, convert and be born again, and God would actually"—and, you know, Jerry—they were crazy people. He was, like, "Young lady, you will physically, physically become a virgin again. God will restore your entire virginity."

And this person's like, "Your hymen's going to grow back?"

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: He was like, really? So I was just, like, *Ho-ly-fuck. I cannot believe—like these snake oil salesmen are controlling the national dialogue on sex and AIDS?*

So, you know, there weren't a lot of out gay people at Dartmouth. Hanover is pretty isolated. And so I wasn't having a lot of sex. Like ever.

WOO: No.

WILSON: So at Phi Psi, you know, everybody kind of had to have—we were very—I don't know what Panarchy is like now, but there were a lot artists—

WOO: There still are. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Yeah. A lot of acid heads, a lot of Grateful Dead people. There was this one girl who wouldn't wear shoes even in the winter. I was, like, "You're fucking insane. You've taken too much acid."

Anyway, we all had—so, like, we didn't have a president. We had different roles. And there was a role in the—you can go to Phi Psi. You can look at some of the pictures, and they'll have different names, like, what their—you know, like, their nickname in the house, right? There's a role called the Pope, the Pope.

And so Ted was the Pope, and he'd been the Pope forever, and he was actually supplying everybody with LSD at the time.

But I was, like, "You know what? I want—I want to be the Pope." And, like, "Well, you know, Ted's the Pope." I said, "No, I want to be the Pope." And everybody's like, "Well, you're gonna have to do something pretty holy to become the Pope."

And so I thought about this. I thought about Jerry Falwell, and I thought about the fact that I hadn't had sex in a long time, and I said, "I have done something holy. I am—I have restored my virginity because I have not had sex. I've abstained from sex for years, so that's pretty darn holy, isn't it? Have you abstained from sex?"

And so I became the Pope-in-waiting, and eventually I did become the Pope. But every year, we would actually have parties at Phi Psi to celebrate—the theme of the party was to celebrate my third year of having my virginity restored, my fourth year, you know? And these were big parties. Like, hundreds of people would come.

WOO: For you!

WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible] one of the parties— well, for the house.

WOO: Oh, yeah!

WILSON: [cross-talk] But I was, like, the—the main attraction, right? So I was still the only out gay person around, and they were, like, “Look at this eccentric gay person. He walks around in clothing from the 1930s. He tries to look like David Bowie. He’s a virgin.”

And so I remember at one of the parties, we auctioned—no, we had a lottery at the door. You came in. You were given a lottery number. And then we had a lottery drawing, and whoever won the lottery was required to take my virginity.

WOO: Oh, wow!

WILSON: So [chuckles] people were, like, “Oh, this is so crazy.” Of course, I’m, like, to the people who were at the door—because back in those days, we had to check IDs and stuff. I don’t know if they still do that at parties.

WOO: They still do, yeah.

WILSON: Yeah. And I said, “You know, this is not gonna be a regular lottery. This is a rigged, totally rigged lottery. I mean, think about what you’re saying. You’re saying, ‘I’m gonna—I’m gonna sleep with this person.’ I get some—I get some say in this. So what I want you to do is here’s a list of people. When you give them a lottery number, I want you to remember what the lottery number is that you gave them.”

WOO: Oh!

WILSON: “And then—then, when we pull the lottery—we pull the ticket, we don’t read what’s on the ticket. You just say the number of the person that I told you that I want you to win the lottery.”

WOO: Yes! [Laughs.]

WILSON: And so, like, the cutest boy, the cutest boy won. And was like, “Wowwww! Holy—this is—will you guys take pictures?” You know.

WOO: Oh, yeah!

WILSON: And then, you know, that was, like, the party. And then I walked away with him, and I went up to my room with him, and he was so fucking nervous. He was straight. And it's, like, "This is just a game. It's fine. Thank you for playing. Thank you for participating. You can go now." I was not going to force him to do anything. But that's kind of who I became. Like, I was much more in your face, much less apologetic. And I actually think that's kind of when I became queer. I mean, I don't—I don't consider myself a gay man. I don't like the connotations, the connotations that come around being, a quote, "a gay white man," you know?

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: I'm successful. My husband and I we're relatively successful. We have beautiful things. We're take lovely vacations. We're actually the epitome of what people think gay white men are. And I also have been working in public education in urban spaces for thirty years, and I'm totally dedicated to social justice. And right now—like, in Oakland, I'm the executive director of enrollment for Oakland Unified School District. And my work for the last three years has been dismantling a lot of the enrollment structures that have prioritized upper- — middle- and upper-middle-class families and left a lot of black and brown children out of the mix. So trying to work on enrollment integration policies.

So I am gay white man, but the real person to me is the person who goes to work—and so actually I would consider myself queer. Queer—I don't need to apologize for who I am. I can enjoy life.

WOO: I hear you.

WILSON: I can actually—I can actually also be a real agent for change. I do think I'm going to leave a legacy in this world for social justice, but I'm also going to really enjoy it too.

WOO: For sure. How much do you think it has in part to do with these atrocious times at Dartmouth?

WILSON: Absolutely created me 100 percent who I am. If I had—if I had gone to some, you know, more accepting place or—I don't think—well, first of all, I've always been a very

persistent person. I really persist at things. I don't give up easily on stuff.

WOO: I can tell, yeah.

WILSON: And I think that if I had not gone to Dartmouth, I think if I had not been challenged by these atrocities, I don't think I would have learned to persist across these different issues. I don't know if I would have developed my—I don't know if I would have developed my anger, and I don't know if I would have learned to channel my anger into productive things for the world.

I increasingly became less interested in drama, and I became much more interested in education, and I spent a lot of time there. Actually, my—my work-study job was kind of cushy. I actually was, like, the assistant to the secretary at the [Nelson A.] Rockefeller Center [for Public Policy]. The Rockefeller Center had just opened. And so I basically did—yeah, I did all the shit—I did everything at the Rockefeller Center.

If there was a forum or a lecture, I had to set up all the chairs. I had to go and actually get the person from the airport and bring them back, so, like, I was—I remember I went and picked up Sandra Day O'Connor, who was the first female Supreme Court justice,—

WOO: Mm-hm. For sure.

WILSON: —and, like, drive her from the airport in Lebanon [New Hampshire] to—to Dartmouth. And, you know, people like that. And so I got to meet important people, people who'd made a difference in the world. I didn't—I wasn't taking, like, political science classes or anything like that, but I was around it a lot. And I was connected to—the education department was just down the hall from there. So that was my other recluse hangout, was that building in the Rockefeller Center.

The chair of the education department at the time was a woman named Faith [L.] Dunne, a really, really wonderful woman. And she saw something special in me and just gave me opportunities and challenged me to pursue that part of

myself that was for social justice. And she really taught me how to look at data and analyze situations and start planning solutions or remedies. And that's really who I've become in life.

Actually, I haven't had a career in the theater. I never worked in a professional theater. I did for a very brief time in the summer, but to me—actually, it's taken over my life, this desire for activism and social justice. Not activism. Just social justice. I believe that social justice people have to be driven by activists, but activists aren't enough. You actually need somebody on the inside.

WOO: Exactly, yeah.

WILSON: So, like, the gay rights movement, like, you know, marriage—marriage equality—yes, that—that came from a fair amount of people doing outrageous things and, you know, being up front and loud and proud and all that. But actually, it also came from people putting on suits and going into corporate spaces and going into government spaces and being sane and being rational and reasoned and arguing points. So you need people on the inside. If you don't have people on the inside, the movement is not going to work.

And so I basically have decided to become that person on the inside.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: Sorry, my dog is snoring. I hope it's not getting on the recording.

WOO: Oh, no.

WILSON: She's sitting here with me.

So anyway, I—I say it's taken over because now that's all I do, is, like, education and policy and things like that. And I don't actually do—I've lost my connection to literature and theater. I consider a lot of it to be very frivolous, and so I don't—I would like to reignite some of that in my life, but I don't really seem to have time.

WOO: Wow. I—I—yeah, I find it so inspiring. I know I'm not supposed to give my opinion or anything, generally, for these, but, you know, for—for a lot of people, for people like me who—who have just been queer my whole life, it—it's—I think that there is a very big difference between being queer and being gay. And this is that queer is very non- —like, you can be a very conforming gay, and you'll—I'm sure there are many in your class, actually, who weren't out and didn't have to face everything that you had to.

WILSON: Yeah.

WOO: And it's—you know, it's—I think a lot of people in my generation, at least, forget that this was very recent.

WILSON: Very recent.

WOO: Very recent, in '84. That is not—not that far away.

WILSON: The thing, Nick, is we're going back there. We're going back there.

WOO: Very much so, yeah.

WILSON: This is why Donald—this is why Donald Trump is—is—Donald Trump is not the problem.

WOO: No, for sure.

WILSON: Donald Trump is the—he—he is the symptom. He is the symptom of the dysfunction of our society right now, that we've returned to cruelty. We've returned to bigotry. We've returned to all of the things that—jingoism—that has threatened to tear our society apart in the past, and we are returning to it, and we're embracing it wide-eyed.

WOO: I would totally agree.

WILSON: Donald Trump is too stupid to be the problem. He is too dumb. He doesn't know what the fuck he's doing. That's one—the only saving grace we have here. The problem is he has cleared the path for truly monstrous individuals,

diseased individuals like Stephen Miller and [Stephen K.] Bannon.

And look at his cabinet, and look what they're doing. I don't know if you watch—what's his name?—the show—Hasan Min- —Hasan—

WOO: Hasan Minhaj?

WILSON: Hasan Minhaj. That's the show. He did a show recently about the cabinet. You see what's going on. I mean, you put—it goes beyond [Elizabeth D.] "Betsy" DeVos. But I guess I'd saying all this because they are the ones who are really fucking our country, changing policies and creating things.

I mean, I personally work with people who have been released from—who are former detainees from these detention camps for immigrants, you know, and I have to embrace family. And every member of the family—the children have tracking anklets on—you put a tracking anklet on a child? Really? We're—it is the beginning of Nazism. I mean, that was the point of labeling people, right? And so you could identify them early so you could eliminate them later. And we're going back to that, Nick, and so I think it's important that we—we—we fight against this.

WOO: For sure, I think. It's scary to know that because, even here at Dartmouth today—even *The Dartmouth Review*—there are a lot of people in it who still—there are a lot of vocal people who—people who are vocally supportive of Trump here on campus. And, I mean, thinking back to in '84, I know a lot of these people are going to become powerful and gonna be the Ronald Reagans or whatever of forty or fifty years down the road.

WILSON: Yeah.

WOO: And just listening to what you had to say is chilling, because it's—it's almost like this is our fate as well.

WILSON: Yeah.

WOO: I did—I wanted to ask you—well, I guess as a follow-up, do you have any—what pieces of advice, given your experience here at Dartmouth and given the political climate at this time—what do you have advice for other queer students at Dartmouth who—who are—who may be facing some financial troubles or may be facing—may be feeling very alone on campus?

WILSON: Right.

WOO: What is something—what is something that you'd like to tell them?

WILSON: Well, I mean, I think the first thing we have to recognize is that every single person who is at Dartmouth is an extraordinarily special and talented young person. You are not selected to be in that space because you're just a normal person. That is—we have an obligation as different people, talented, different people. Many of us—many of us are privileged, talented, different people. We have a moral and ethical obligation to use those resources to change the world.

And so if you're a young queer person at Dartmouth and you see the tide turning back toward some of the horrific things from the '80s, do not be quiet. Do not fit in. Do not be silenced. Simultaneously being loud, proud, out, angry, in your face is a strategy. Develop your ability to also go into the spaces of power.

People can't—so these people—so I've been working—these people who are in policy, they're people. They can be reasoned with. Many are not that bad people. They're being guided by bad people. But use your talents to persuade. So you have to marry the two together. You have to marry your—your queerness with your intelligence, with—you have to be thinking—queer people have to be thinking four or five steps ahead of society.

WOO: Mm-hm. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Queer people have to be seers. We have to be the seers. We have to see ahead. So this is where I get back to my intuition, which has gotten much better, by the way. You

have got to follow your intuition that says, “This is not right. This needs to change. I see where this is going, because I know history.” Queer people *have* to know history.

WOO: Mm-hm. I hear you. I—I—well, as a follow-up, I think—at least right now I know with a lot of my friends in the queer community, it’s hard to think intuitively because a lot of queer people, especially queer people of color and people who are nonconforming on campus go through a lot of mental health struggles—

WILSON: Right.

WOO: —on campus. Do you know—if you could bring it back to your time at Dartmouth, what was the culture like? What were the mental health concerns of the queer community at that time, and how you and others kind of were able to overcome it, if at all, if ever?

WILSON: Well, I think that “if at all” and “if ever” is actually a big part of it. I think, obviously, there was a lot of severe depression, just—and everything that associ- —that’s associated with severe depression, which, you know, leads to—can lead to psychotic episodes just because you’re trying to survive in a world that’s—

WOO: Not built for you.

WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible]. Exactly. I mean, it’s truly—so I think what happened in my career at Dartmouth, for a lot of us, is a lot of us descended into substance use and abuse. And Dartmouth has just, you know, got a long history around substance use and abuse. And it, you know, I’m not opposed to having a good time, but you need to ask yourself: *Are you doing this because you want to have a good time, or are you doing this because you’re trying to escape from your reality?*

And escaping’s not a bad thing, but you just need to know that you’re escaping. You need—like I said, you need to be a seer ahead. You still need to be a seer ahead in your own life. You need to say, *If I continue this drinking pattern, if I continue this substance use pattern, it is going to exacerbate these problems that I have.* That’s part of our intelligence as people who can identify as worthy of—

You know, Dartmouth is a rare place. There's other places like it, but this is one of the few rare places. I personally am struggling still with substance use. I mean, I'm at an age now where my body is not resilient, and I have to make some choices, and I've made some choices to change my life for the better. So I guess I would just say that is—I don't know if drinking is at the same scale as it used to be at Dartmouth.

WOO: I—wow. It's—it's chilling, but it's also humbling because I—so many of these problems you think that are issues that would only happen in the past are, at least within my circles, very visibly still the same.

WILSON: Yeah.

WOO: Wow. I'm just speechless right now. [Chuckles.] Let me—
Well, to bring it back to—to kind of your time a little bit after Dartmouth, could you kind of tell me a little bit about how—what—what kind of pers- —what—what—what perspired [sic] or how did your life progress after college? Did it, in your view, get better, get worse? And what were you kind of up to?

WILSON: How was my time at the later years at Dartmouth, or—?

WOO: Yeah, your later years and how they kind of developed your time after Dartmouth.

WILSON: Yeah. So I think my later years were actually much better in many ways, because Phi Psi was a village, and I loved Phi Psi. I don't—I don't love many institutions, but—

WOO: [Laughs.] Neither do I. [Laughs.]

WILSON: Yeah. Actually, I like to fuck—I like to fuck around with institutions, and so—

WOO: Yess! [Chuckles.]

WILSON: I actually was part of the group that picked the name Panarchy.

WOO: Really! Wow!

WILSON: Because we—yeah, yeah. No, we did that in 1987, in the fall—spring of '87, my last year there.

WOO: How did that come about?

WILSON: We needed a new name. Well, we needed to separate ourselves from the Greek group, which we—

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] we were just like, “Why the hell are we”—I don’t know if you know the history of Phi Psi, but it was—I don’t remember what it was before. It was Phi Sigma Psi, I think, before it was Phi Psi. Phi Sigma Psi is a national—is a national fraternity.

And so I think what happened in the seventies, I think, at Dartmouth, they admitted a black student to Phi Sigma Psi, and then the national—the national group found out about it, and they—you know, they issued, like, a inter-institutional blackball, which is basically, you know, they could blackball members by saying, you know, “You’re not welcome. You can’t be here.” Somebody from one other college was, like, “Okay, I’m actually the president of the national, and I’m gonna blackball this person at Dartmouth for joining.

And so, you know, to their credit, the students at Phi Sigma Psi said, “Okay. Well, we’re not actually part of your group anymore,” which is a very privileged place. They must have had some benefactor someplace that was helping them pay their bills.

WOO: Yeah. Uh-huh. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: And so because they weren’t a national any longer and they, you know, didn’t have the cachet of, like, some of these other frats—because, you know, like, some of these secret societies and these fraternities, they’re actually pretty instrumental in developing the relationships you need to—for your later years on Wall Street, for example.

That's—my uncle went to Dartmouth, and he was a stock broker, and he—he was member of the—not the Tabard. Maybe—anyway, those relationships.

WOO: Mm-hm. The Tabard.

WILSON: So, anyway, I fucked ar- —we—that's when they started admitting women to Phi Psi, because they just needed the cash, and also they thought it was right. So we fucked around and we were, like, "We have to finally break with the Greeks group, so"—

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] we're—we brainstormed, and we came up with Panarchy. Yeah. And for a brief period of time I had campaigned to rename the Gay Student [sic] Association meeting, because, like,—

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] the meeting in that time wasn't—wasn't describing women, and it was—

WOO: No.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] like not all just students. There were staff. There were community members or alums. And I know it's called DGALA [Dartmouth Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Alumni/ae Association, or Dartmouth LGBTQIA+Alum Association] now, I guess.

WOO: Mm-hm.

WILSON: But for a brief time, I pushed to have it renamed—[chuckles] DAGLO [pronounced DAY-glow; Dartmouth Area Gay and Lesbian Organization].

WOO: DAGLO?

WILSON: Dartmouth Area Gay and Lesbian Org- —DAGLO, yeah, D-A-G-L-O. And I even—I even came up with some—with a logo, you know, we had DayGlo colors, and we posted it around campus, and I remember David Garling and some of

the others were like, “That is the stupidest name in the world.”

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: So [unintelligible]. So. They ended up—they ended up changing it, so.

So anyway, my later years. Phi Psi was great. I kind of honed those skills of negotiation and getting into places of power. So where I went after Dartmouth? So the rest of the—the rest of my college career at Dartmouth really focuses on just Phi Psi and drama. It’s funny, because my freshman year,—one of the benefits of having taken all of these AP classes—like, I took every fucking AP class—

WOO: [Giggles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] and scored—and scored out on most of them. I got, like, fours and fives on most of them. And so I essentially started Dartmouth with enough academic credits that I was basically a sophomore.

WOO: Ahh!

WILSON: —[cross-talk; unintelligible], so I didn’t have to take any of the freshman required classes.

WOO: Uh-huh.

WILSON: [cross-talk] That’s when you had to take freshman math, freshman this, freshman that. But I was already—you know. So it was great. And so I was—so my first experience was in my freshman year in the English department, I had a great freshman seminar, such a really extraordinary guy. I can’t remember his name. And great class. And I never really went back to the English department, because I didn’t have to take any more classes there.

But then my senior year, I was, like, *I need to get back into the academics of drama. I need to get to another—[unintelligible]*. So I took a class in—it was so weird—French Restoration comedy.

- WOO: Oh! [Chuckles.]
- WILSON: Yeah. So, like, you know, pretty specific topic, right?
- WOO: French. Does that have anything to do with, like, *La Cage aux Folles*?
- WILSON: No. I wish—well, maybe. So this was, like, pre-[William] Shakespeare—
- WOO: Oh, okay.
- WILSON: —[cross-talk] pre-Shakespearian you know, drama. Post—Restoration dramas after the [Oliver] Cromwell years, when theater was banned in—in England. And then the French comedies: [Jean-Baptiste Poquelin] Molière and
- WOO: Oh.
- WILSON: —[cross-talk; unintelligible].
- WOO: [unintelligible], mm-hm.
- WILSON: Anyway—yeah, exactly. I took this class, and so it was a very strange class because—I think it was because it was such a random topic, but the—their—and so nobody really would enroll in this class. It was always really small. But the African-American—I don't know if was a fraternity, or African-American Society [sic; Afro-American Society]. There was an African-American male group. I don't know if they still do. They used to do, like, step routines, where they would—in front of the Hop. They would do, like,—
- WOO: Oh, yeah.
- WILSON: —[cross-talk; unintelligible].
- WOO: Like D-Step and—
- WILSON: Right.
- WOO: Yeah. Oh, wow!
- WILSON: Do they still do that?

WOO: They do. They are many groups like that.

WILSON: Yeah. So at that point, their initiation, you know, quote unquote, lasted, like, a really long time, like months, for these young members. And they basically moved as a group, these maybe five or four young African-American men. And they went everywhere together. Like, literally everywhere. They—I don't know how they engineered—they lived together, they ate together, took classes together. They just moved together. And now—you know, now that I work in social justice and I understand a lot more about identity development, I understand and I celebrate and I applaud them for the effort—

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] I don't know if the technique was [unintelligible]. But it was actually, to me, a little bit cultish and a little bit like mind control. But the reason I mention them is because this, like, French Restoration comedy class—there was me and five members of this African-American group. And I think the reason they were there is not because of the topic, because the topic was, like,—no one—nobody cares about this topic except very strange people. Like me.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: Because it was the only English class that had space. Back then, you had to go in at—at the Top of the Hop, there was a big, like, meeting room at the top. And so we actually physically had to go in there each quarter, each term and submit and request our classes, and they, you know, would keep track of—like, “There's only two seats left.”

And so I think that they came as a group to do that, and they were, like, “We need four spaces”—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —“[cross-talk; unintelligible].” You know? “All the classes—all the good classes are kinda gone, so, eh, French Restoration comedy. We're there.” So I think that a lot of

people develop senioritis—at every school, even elementary school. Fifth graders—

WOO: Uh-huh. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] get senioritis. And, you know, I think they were, like, “You know what? Eh, I don’t really care if we take an F in this class or a pass or whatever.” They came for a few classes, and then this group of guys—who was basically the entire rest of the class—never came to class.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: So it was me and I can’t remember the professor’s name, but it was just basically me and this professor every class. And it was, like, amazing, the most amazing instructional experience I’ve ever had.

WOO: Oh, my gosh!

WILSON: Because, you know, if you’re sitting with somebody who’s, like, a professor at Dartmouth and you’re basically spending hours every week with just you and him and just talking through stuff and going deep—and so—I mention all of this, is because I said that I don’t embrace literature or theater that much anymore because I—I kind of find it frivolous.

This professor said to me, and it really—it kind of hurt me—at the end of the class, you know,—he said, “You know, it’s really kind of a shame that you have never been in the English department. I’m glad that you decide to cross the Green. But wow! You know, you really could have done something with—with your insights and knowledge. Okay, happy graduation.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: I was, like, *Whaat?*

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: So it was, like, *You believe in me? Well, why didn’t—why did it take it four fucking years in this place—*

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] literally to the day for someone to say that—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] they believed in me? Because in the drama department I'd be, like, "Uh, you're not really qualified. You're—we're not going to cast that roll—

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] but we do have—we do have the role of extra. Also, would you mind between scenes running the follow spot?" So, like, I was totally used and abused in the theater because, I always be like, "Oh, yeah, I'll—I'll stay and strike the set and stay up"—you know. I never really got to enjoy, like, being in a big role.

And now this guy, in like, literally last day of my career at Dartmouth's like, "Yeah, you really could have been something. Wow." So that was kind of my closing [unintelligible].

But my life moved very quickly away from theater and literature. I left. I had no career plan. None. Zero. We saw those, like, career recruiting people they would have, like, in [unintelligible]. The CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] was there recruiting, or the National Security Agency. I was, like, *Wow, that's—I was, like, There's no way they would take me. First of all, I'm gay. Second of all,—*

WOO: Spying on the gays!

WILSON: —[cross-talk] I was taking waaay to much drugs.

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Yeah, no, exactly. But back then, if you were gay, there were just certain jobs you just could not get. You would never get security clearance. Yeah.

WOO: [Chuckles.] Oh, my!

WILSON: So I was, like, *What the fuck am I gonna do?* So for a year, I actually did try to work in the theater. I was an electrician's—a lighting intern at a theater in Norfolk, Virginia, which was a really scary place. Talk about physically dangerous for queer people or basically any people except white men, white straight men.

I worked there, and I got—I made a hundred dollars a week.

WOO: *A week?*

WILSON: A hundred dollars a week to work in the theater. And so literally the only way I lived was—so part of the rules of—in theater is—one of the [Actors'] Equity [Association] rules, like a union rule, is that if you have a matinee and an evening performance, you have to provide a full dinner to the cast. And so this theater—like, these ladies from the South—this is Norfolk—they were, like, ladies who supported the theater, and they would put on these spreads, like big-time Southern food spreads on the weekends, and sometimes, like, we would do a matinee on Wednesday and we always did one on Sunday. And then, of course, there was the closing spread and the opening spread because—it was, like, when you open a show and close a show.

And all of us who worked in the theater—because, you know, you can only eat so much. We literally would steal the food and store it and live off of it between—between—you know,—

WOO: O, my!

WILSON: —Wednesdays and Sundays. Yeah.

And then there was a really crazy, run-down section of—of Norfolk. This theater—a beautiful, beautiful old theater, the Virginia Stage Company. Like, three balconies. It was just amazingly old. For years and years and years, it, you know, turned into a brothel and porn theater. They showed porn movies in there. They closed up the stage and—

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk; unintelligible] other stuff. So we were in the process of returning the theater to a theater. But that kind of tells you the kind of neighborhood it had become. It was, like, really run down. It's, like, porn and drugs and all kinds of stuff in Norfolk, Virginia.

So there were a lot of empty storefronts, and this Korean family opened up a Korean restaurant, their restaurant, in an old—it was, like, an old fast-food joint. It was like the old McDonald's. You go in and, like, the tables and chairs are all from a period, and they're all—they all looked like—it used to be that McDonald's everywhere looked the same. If you walked in the room, you'd go, "Oh, I'm in a McDonald's."

Well, basically,—I don't think it was McDonald's. It was something. I think, maybe it'd been like, Howard Johnson's, which was actually a chain back then. Everything was orange. And so the space—you walk in, and it was, like, "This is a Howard Johnson's." And they're like, "No, it's a Korean restaurant."

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: I was like "I *love* Korean food. Oh, my God!" And so I got—I got to know them, and so I always had access to tickets, and I—free tickets at the theater.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: And they were, like, "What are you do?" I'm, like, "I work in theater." "We like theater." And I'm, like, "Well, I have, like, tickets to every show." And they're, like, "Oh, can we come?" Like, "Yeah!" So I was just give them tickets, and they would go to the theater with their friends, and I would just basically eat free there.

WOO: Ah!

WILSON: So that's another way I survived, so—I mean, you know, they would give me, like, a bowl of bulgogi and rice, with some kimchi—

WOO: Uh-huh.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] that was—you know, I'd get that every—I'd get that every couple of days, and I'd have to live off that. Yeah, so I did theater, but—that was—that was fun, but I was, like, *Oh, fuck, I can't do this. I can't—*

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] *do this this way. It's—it's too punishing, and it's too unimportant.* You know, to actually not—so then I thought *Well, I want to get my MFA [Master of Fine Arts].* You know, *I wanna, like, —I don't really want to pursue this performance, and I—you know, it became really clear that I'm not—I probably could do it, but I'm not as driven. I don't have the drive. I don't care enough about that.*

So when I moved after Dartmouth and then I moved back to Hawaii for a year and taught in my old high school. And that was a hot mess. You don't—you don't want to go back and be an adult and work with your former high school teachers, because you realize—

WOO: Ahh! Yeah!

WILSON: —what freaks—what freaks most of them are, so—you know, it was a private school, a boarding school, as we talked about earlier. And it turned out that a lot of the male teachers were sleeping with some of the female students,—

WOO: [Sharp intake of breath.]

WILSON: —which I just found absolutely reprehensible, absolutely reprehensible. I mean, there's a—there's a certain trust that devel- —there are—

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: —certain things you cannot violate, and the teacher-student—that—that relationship can really—can never be violated.

WOO: No.

WILSON: So I was just, like, *This is disgusting.* Also, I tried to be gay there, and they were, like, “You're—you—you're a freak. We

raised you. How did you become this?" I'm like, "Shut up. You're all a bunch of—you're all a bunch of pervs,—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —and you're sleeping with, like—

WOO: Yeah, they're the ones talking. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —fifteen-year olds." Yeah. "And so I'm the perv? Because I'm, like,—I haven't had sex in, like, three years. C'mon!"

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: And so I did that. I was, like, *Okay, that's not gonna work out in Hawaii, so*—a nice place to vacation, but it's a hard place to live as an adult if you have any interest in the world. It's pretty isolated.

Then I moved to Boston, and ironically, I met my husband (who's now my husband)—I met my husband, like, in the first three days I was there.

WOO: How??

WILSON: Well, so my friends—you know the Prudential Tower in Boston?

WOO: I do not.

WILSON: It's near Copley—it's near Copley Square. It used to be one of the only sky- —there used to be only two skyscrapers in Boston. There was the Hopkins—I don't know what it's called now. It's the building by Copley Square. And then the Prudential Tower. And the Prudential Tower used to have a restaurant on the top that rotated. It spun around, so, like, every hour you could see the entire cityscape of Boston—

WOO: Oh, I see.

WILSON: —[cross-talk; unintelligible]. So it was a good—a lot of people went there for happy hour, so my friend's friend was an older lady named Muriel [spelling unconfirmed] and she—I actually think she was gender misidentified. I think she was

actually a gay man, but her body was physically female. But she was, like,—wanted to set me up on a blind date with a friend of hers. And she was, like, “Okay,”—she worked in that building, and so she’s, like, “Okay, meet us—meet me—I’m going to—I have a friend who’s coming. Meet me and my friend at the top of the Pru for drinks. And then my other friend, who’s your blind date, is gonna come, and then you guys can go off.” And I’m, like, “O-kay.”

So I get there, and she’s with this guy named Marcus [Silvi]. Marcus worked with her at Boston Electric [sic: Edison] Company there. You know, mindless student jobs.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: Like, like, like, like, like entering checks right from the bill, something that we automate now, that we—

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] used to actually have physically people do, you know. And I’m like, *This guy is a) really cute, and b) super smart—really tuned into art and music. Went to Williams College. And he’s angry as hell. He’s angry. Oh, my God, he’s so angry.*

WOO: At Williams?

WILSON: Yeah. So—

WOO: At just everything? I’m sure at Williams, too. Aw, jeez. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Yeah, he graduated from Williams in ’83, so he started there in ’79. So he—yeah.

WOO: Aw, jeez.

WILSON: —[cross-talk] went through a lot of things himself.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: So—

- WOO: That's funny, because I almost ended up in Williams.
[Laughs.]
- WILSON: Well, I think—I think it's a different place now.
- WOO: It is, hope- —
- WILSON: I think Williams is a different place. Anyway, it was like Dartmouth is. I think Williams is actually ahead of Dartmouth in terms of—
- WOO: Probably. Probably.
- WILSON: —[cross-talk] some of its diversity things. Yeah, yeah.
- WOO: Anyways.
- WILSON: So I, like, instantly fell in love with this guy, Marcus. I've never had that experience. I looked at him, I talked to him for five minutes, I'm, like, *I'm in love. I've never been in love before. I—I'm completely in love.*
- You were going to say?
- WOO: In five minutes. Wow!
- WILSON: Yeah, five minutes.
- WOO: Awww!
- WILSON: And I was, like,—I was, like, “Oh, Muriel! You know, oh! I'm not feeling that good. Jeez. I don't know if I can go through with this blind date. Ooh, ooh, there goes my stomach.” I was totally pretending. And I said, “I gotta go. I gotta leave. And so tell your friend I'm sorry. We'll meet another time.” Which we never did.
- And I was, like, *I'm in love. Why would I go on a blind date with somebody? I'm in love. I—I'm—I'm in love.* Of course, Marcus didn't know that I was in love. So Muriel has really good intuition, too. Had. She's—she's passed. But Muriel had really good intentions, too. Intuition.

So the next day at work or the next Monday at work, she said to Marcus, “I think you’re gonna be getting a little call pretty soon. Someone’s looking for your number.” And so, like, you know, again, before computers. We didn’t walk around with laptops. We didn’t walk around with smartphones. This was ’87, ’89—’88.

And so, like, there—we actually—I had to look in the phone book, or I had to actually, like, figure out—and so I finally figured out—or I think actually Muriel may have provided it to me later. But I called him up, and I was, like, “You know, I’m the guy you met with Muriel, and, you know, I would like to see you again.” He was, like, “You know what? I’m not—I’m actually leaving town pretty soon.”

WOO: [Sharp intake of breath.]

WILSON: “In six weeks, I’m moving for Japan for, like, I don’t know, maybe—maybe forever.

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: I’m like, “I don’t care. I don’t care. I just—I like you. I’d like to meet with you.” So there was, like, a Japanese film festival going on. I’m, like, “Well, there’s a Japanese film festival going on in town, so, like, we could start going to the films. I’d like to—.” Actually, when I was younger, actually, I lived in Japan for a summer when I was younger. On my own. That’s another, independent story.

But we started doing this, and then he—we would, like, shake hands—

WOO: [Giggles.]

WILSON: —when we’d meet for the film, and then we’d shake hands after the film, and then, like, on the third film, third time—you know, it’s an art cinema, and they would have, like, coffee. They didn’t—they didn’t have sodas at the front; they had, like, artisanal coffee, which is, like,—this is ’87—like, *Oh, my God! A theater that doesn’t serve soda?*

And so, like, I—we were talking, waiting for the movie, and I guess there was some coffee on my lip or some milk or something, and he reached over—

WOO: [Sharp intake of breath]

WILSON: —with his hand, and wiped the drop of coffee off my lip, and I'm, like,—

WOO: Ohhhh! With his hand!

WILSON: *We are gonna—we are gonna have sex! We are going to have sex.*

WOO: [Laughs.] Eh-heh.

WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible].

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: But, like I said, if I—if I put my mind to it,—so we had sex that night, on the roof of his building.

WOO: You had good intuition then! [Laughs.]

WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible]. Oh, really good intuition.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: We had incredible sex, laying in the gravel of a flat brownstone roof, in a crumbling section of—you know, super hot. It was, like, 1,000 degrees in Boston that day. So we just started having sex all the time. We were like having—I—yeah. I was, like, *Wow! So this is what they're talking about.*

And I met all of his friends—you know, his—you know, friends from Williams, and then he was like, “I’m going to Japan. I’m still going.” Like, “Yeah, you should go. You should go, because you need to do this for yourself. And, by the way, I need to start *my* life here in Boston, and I—we’re having so much damn sex, neither of us—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] has time to do anything else. So, yeah, I need a little break.” And so he went off to Japan, and I’m living in Boston, and I ended up becoming a teacher at an English language development program at Simmons College [now Simmons University], a women’s college in Kenmore Square. And rich foreigners would come and prepare to go to, like, University programs here. I did that.

So, he ended up—ah! Back then, he was super poor in Japan. He was teaching English, and he literally saved his money for, like, two weeks, to then go to a phone booth—he lived in Tokyo— to go to a phone booth in a really run-down section. He lived in a building that didn’t have heat or something like that.

He’d go to this phone booth and call me. And, of course, it would be, like, midnight my time or midnight his time. And so these calls—I’d never had that kind of person who was like, “I just want to hear your voice.”

WOO: Mm-hm. Awww.

WILSON: The operator—the operator would come on and say something in Japanese, basically saying, “That’ll be 1,000 more yen.”

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: [cross-talk; unintelligible]. And then you’d hear *clunk, clunk, clunk* cause he dropped some coins in and that’s the way we did it. And he—for my birthday he sent me a mixed tape that he made. [Chuckles.] You know, and that’s what we used—that’s how you showed your love back then, is you’d make mixed—

WOO: Mixed tape. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] tapes and things—like actually, cassettes, cassette tapes, and then you’d— because it was very time consuming, because you had to know where—you had to know where on the record—this is before CDs—you had to know where on the record the track was that you wanted to go on your mix. You had to figure out how to pause the

cassette recorder. You had to, like, time your two hands to drop the needle and click on—and he was really good, because he—he just—it was amazing.

Anyway, he came back—he came back, and so during this time I had reconnected with my mom, and things were going pretty okay. Still, it was just sort of like, “Yeah, we’re not going to talk about all that, but I miss you both.” We missed each other.

WOO: Aww.

WILSON: So he came back, and I ended up—you know, we moved in together, and I ended up writing a letter, a really long letter to my mom and said, you know, “I’m in love. This guy’s name is Marcus. We’re gonna live together. This is the life I’m living now, and I hope you can understand, and I hope you then come to love Marcus.” And then I didn’t hear or speak to her for five years.

WOO: Five years.

WILSON: Because of that letter. Yeah, so I did three—I did a three-year stint in college, and now I’m on five years’ probation. So, again, I have to become independent. So I’m a young adult in Boston with a lover, living, you know,—it was—it was difficult. We couldn’t find places that would rent to us. It was difficult finding apartments that they would rent to us. It was difficult finding—

WOO: Really? Wow!

WILSON: —[cross-talk] restaurants where we could eat. Oh, yeah, it was difficult.

WOO: Like, how would they—? I’m just trying to imagine how that would happen. [Laughs.]

WILSON: Well,—

WOO: How did they do the—did they just outright tell you no?

WILSON: — [cross-talk] you would just call— yeah, no, I mean, you would—you would—you would go through the newspaper

and you'd find rental listings, and you'd make a call, and you'd set up appointments to go, and then both of us would show up, and, you know, we're not, like, hugging and kissing, but people could tell.

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: And they'd be, like, "Oh, I'm so sorry! Someone just took that—"

WOO: Aw, those fuckers!

WILSON: =[cross-talk] "—You were so close."

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: "Bad luck. Bad luck on your part!" And so finally we ended up taking over a sublet from one of Marcus's friends from Williams. And he—I don't know if you know Boston at all, but there was a section called—there is a section called the North End, and it's the Italian section.

WOO: Uh-huh. Yeah, I've been there.

WILSON: It was very, very, very Italian. Like, in the summer they have the saint festivals, where they, like, march around with statues of the saint and have a, like, a little brass band that played, and the little ladies sewed dollar bills into, like, rosettes and crosses and lowered them down from their windows, because they're too old to leave their apartments. And it's—it's very Italian village. It was very Italian village—in a metropolitan area.

So it was—it had character, you know, but it also had—unfortunately, another thing it had was— [chuckles] there was a lot of Mafia there. And so—

WOO: Oh, still! Oh, my goodness!

WILSON: Oh, yeah. Well, the Anguilo [pronounced ahn-JEW-low] family was still in—it's when they had—the Anguilo family was—that's a whole 'nother story. But they ran the—they ran the Mafia.

So Marcus actually knew one of the Anguilos. After we moved into the North End.

WOO: Oh.

WILSON: Yeah. Well, he's Italian. Marcus is Italian, but he made friends when he worked at Boston Edison.

WOO: Okay.

WILSON: —with one of the Anguilos. And he was, like,—he was a nice guy. And he'd known we'd move into the North End or were willing to move into the North End. And he said, "Marcus, you know, if anybody tries to fuck with you boys, just—just talk to me."

WOO: [Laughs.] Yes, that's what we need in this world. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Right? So we moved into the North End, and it's, like, people kind of knew we were coming, and I don't [chuckles]—I don't know what his connections were, but there was, like,—we didn't encounter that kind of problem.

So Mrs. Fobiano [spelling unconfirmed] allowed us to sublet, from Marcus's friend, her top floor apartment, and it was a crazy space. It used to—back then in the North End, they would have—ah!—it's kind of like in the Chinese community here in San Francisco and the Bay Area, is these family associations. So, like, if you—if you drive around, like, in the Chinatown section of San Francisco or Oakland, there is, like, buildings. And it's, like, the Lee Family Association, and it's a whole building. So it's, like,—

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: It's family, but it's also organized crime. [Chuckles.] And the same thing—the same thing happens in the Italian community. So they had different "men's clubs," and they were different sects of the—of the Mafia. So this Mrs. Fobiano had—her husband had been, like, a—one of the good guys, and he had a men's club at the top of his building that he owned.

And so this whole place—there were built-in speakers in the ceilings. There were marble floors that was in this little tenement with, like no lighting to go up the stairs. You wouldn't know. There was a punching bag holder in the middle of the ceiling that you could attach, like, a punching bag. And then there was a rotisserie oven in the closet. There was a rotisserie oven in the closet.

So it, was, like—

WOO: What?

WILSON: They were, like,—okay—you know, because the dad who ran this club, because he was one of the guys kind of making space for the other guys in his family—he'd gotten old. I think he had Alzheimer's, and so he—they had this space, and they were, like, "Well, we gotta rent it out."

So anyway, Mrs. Fobiano—you know, I signed the lease. Marcus is sitting there. I signed the lease, and everything's done. So she's got a contract. And then she says to us, "You know, there's just one bedroom in this place. Where are you two boys gonna sleep?"

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: I'm, like, *It's really intriguing that you didn't ask that question before we signed the lease. Now, we signed your lease and paying your overpriced rent. Now you have that question.* I was, like, "Well, you know, the living room's got space. Maybe I'll take out the rotisserie oven."

WOO: Right. That's right. Back in the closet? [Laughs.]

WILSON: Yeah, right exactly. And she was, like, "Oh, okay, yeah, yeah, okay." And she—she wouldn't give us—we weren't allowed to have a doorbell, so—you know, normally if you have a brownstone building that's been turned into apartments, you would have multiple doorbells on the outside. And she wouldn't let us have a doorbell. We asked. We were, like, "I'll pay to have it installed. You know, we do have friends. They want to come over." She said, "Oh, you know, they can just ring my doorbell and I'll let them in."

So Mrs. Fobiano, like, never wore real clothing. She always wore what they called housecoats. So it was like—it's like—it's like a bathrobe but it's something that you could actually step outside in and people would know that you're not going anywhere; you're at home. But it covers up your night—your—your pajamas. And then slippers, bedroom slippers.

WOO: I can imagine, yeah. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: So she'd always wear that. She always—yeah, she always had her hair tied up in, like, a rag or cloth or curlers or things like that.

And so our friends would come and ring the doorbell, and she would be, like,—opened the door. The way she greeted people, our guests, she would be, like, “What? What do you want? Oh. Oh, those boys are having another party upstairs? Oh! Nice for them! So who's gonna pay the electricity bill? It's gonna be”—

So, like, we actually had a couple of friends stay over, two women. They were sisters, actually from Italy—they grew up in Italy—stayed with us. And she knew—she knew that we were gay, but she also knew that—she also knew—so she—she saw these women staying with us for a couple days, and they were sleeping in the living room. And she called me one day, and she said, “What's going on with you two up there? Is there something weird going on up their?”

WOO: Weird! [Laughs.]

WILSON: I'm like, “No, Ms. Fobiano, you know, like, no. They're our friends, and they're sisters.” And she was, like, “No, no. You know, okay.”

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: “You know, girls take long showers, and, you know, I pay the water right now, so, you know, if you're gonna have these girls staying there and they're gonna shower a lot, I'm gonna have to take it out of your rent.” Like, “Whatever. Go ahead.”

So then we developed a system with our friends, and I said—we'd be, like, “If you're coming to our apartment, you

really have to be on time, and I will stand at the window, look out—we're on the fourth floor—and I will throw the keys down to you, and you just let yourself into the building." So we just had to, like, bypass Mrs. Fobiano. And—yeah.

So then we ended up moving into the South End because I just couldn't handle it anymore. We moved in with a guy named Louie Felippo [spelling unconfirmed] in the South End, which was just kind of—it used to be a really run-down area. And he had this beautiful brownstone with, like, eighteen-foot ceilings on the parlor level and things like that.

So we ended up renting—he turned the whole parlor level into an apartment, and I don't know if you know how those buildings are constructed.

WOO: No.

WILSON: Like, they're all the same: You go up the steps from the street. You go to a foyer. There's sli- —big sliding doors that go to the parlor, and then there's a set of stairs that go upstairs. And then underneath the stairs and underneath the building there was, like, a cellar, where, like, the servants would live because these used to be really nice, high-end apartments—buildings in, like, the 1800s. The building was, like, built in, like, 1860. It was really old.

So he rented out this beautiful space to us, and we lived there, and Louis was about five-foot three inches tall. He weighed about 300, 350 pounds? And he was really rich.

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: He—from what I understand, he was a chemist at Revlon[, Inc.] or a chemist, and he patented—so he was a really smart guy. He patented, like, Revlon Lady Red No. 43—like some shade of lipstick. And he lived off the proceeds. I mean, these guys—he got royalties from Revlon for—I don't know [unintelligible]. So he had houses—like, he had a house in London, he had a house in Puerto Rico—

WOO: Oh, my goodness!

WILSON: But he—he also—he was gay, and he had—

WOO: Yes!

WILSON: —a lover who was this incredibly handsome African-American guy, which was—the reason I mention his race is that it was actually unusual in those days to see people living—you know, mixed-race anything. And Garlan [spelling unconfirmed] was just a really nice guy. Garlan was super handsome. He was an educator.

But anyway, the first time we paid rent to Louis—and Louis used to sit on his front step, and he wouldn't wear clothing; he would wear—again. He would wear a muumuu, because he he's so fat. He can't—it's not comfortable to wear pants because it cuts you, through your fat, and he's short, and he had bad [unintelligible].

So anyway, he would sit on his front steps wearing muumuus, and I'm like, you know, I'm like "Louis, I like your muumuu. That's a nice one." And he's, like, "You know what? You know how I do this? I buy two twin sheets. I sew 'em up. I cut some armholes. I cut a neck hole. Voilà, I got my muumuu."

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: "You're really wearing two twin sheets?" Like, "Yeah. But, you know, I can't find shit in my own size? Where am I gonna find a muumuu for a fat man?"

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: So anyway, he would sit on the front step, and he would say "Hi" to everybody, but he'd cuss up a storm. He was, like,— he would see some kid that dropped a candy wrapper or something on the street in front of his house, and he'd come up—"You! You young mother fucker! Get back here"—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —[cross-talk] "And pick up your trash! So—"

WOO: That's so hilarious!

WILSON: Everybody knew Louis—if you walk down Pembroke Street, you really had to behave yourself if Louis was out there because he was going to call you out. Either he'd be really nice to you or he'd be really mean to you.

And so the first time we paid rent, it was, like,—we'd moved, like, in June or something, so it was hot. And he's sitting on the front steps in his muumuu, and I'd delivered the checks to him earlier in an envelope for the rent. And he's screaming from his stoop—and our window's open. He's, like, "Charles! Charles, you mother fucker! Get the fuck out here right now."

And I'm, like,—he's screaming. And I'm, like, "What? Louis, what's going on?" He's, like, "What the fuck do you think you're doing, paying rent with two checks?" I'm, like, "Oh, I—I'm sorry. I mean, is that a problem? I mean, your bank won't accept them?" And he's, like, "No, you stupid mother fucker." He said, "You and Marcus are gonna be together forever."

WOO: Awwww!

WILSON: "I do not want to have two checks from you. I want a single check next time and it has both of your names on it."

WOO: Awwwww.

WILSON: [Chuckles.]

WOO: [Giggles.]

WILSON: And then I was, like, "Louis, I don't—I don't know many banks that will do that." This is 1989 or 1990. It was, like, really? And he was, like, "I got a guy." And he then took us to his bank, and I opened a bank account with Marcus, and we comingled our funds. So it was very rare in those days, because a lot of people just kind of popped in and out of relationships.

And Louis—Louis kind of saw that I'm a kind of angry activist, and he used to call—he used to call me his—his "pigson."

WOO: "Pigson."

WILSON: His “pigson.” I was his son, but I’m a pig, so I’m a “pigson.” He knew that I’m a dirty pig. He knows that I’m a “dirty mother fucking pig.” That is what he’d called me, because I would always try to say things to shock him, and it’s really hard to shock somebody like Louis. And so—anyway.

But I credit him with recognizing Marcus and me as a couple at a time when my mother’s not talking to me and *his* family’s being really weird, and so we’re just really independent. And we have family—a role model—at least *a* model of what *a* relationship could look like. I wouldn’t want to be in that relationship with, like, that Louis has.

But we—we’re celebrating our thirtieth year together this month, so—yeah.

WOO: Awww!

WILSON: Yeah, we’ve been together for thirty years without a break, and I think we’re about to kill each other. I’m not sure, but—[chuckles]. No.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: Yeah. So we’re going—we don’t do big vacations, but we’re—in four weeks, we’re flying to Venice [Italy], and then we’re going to take a cruise down the—through the Adriatic Sea and go to Croatia and Montenegro and Greece and around to Rome [Italy]—actually, Naples and then Rome. But, I mean, that’s our celebration for our thirtieth. So to me it’s testament that we’ve stayed together, we’ve persevered. Like I said, if I start something, I’m gonna finish it. And I finish, I think, finish for this means—one of us—is going to die of old age someday.

WOO: Noooo. [Chuckles.]

WILSON: And, like, from a time when we were literally scraping together to just get food, we can afford our motherfucking *expensive* trip to Italy. I mean, we’re doing it up—we’ve never—we’re doing it *up up*, so it’s going to be really nice.

So that—it's not—you know, I don't care that much about not having—like I said, we like—we like nice things, but we like to be doing the right thing, to make the money to do the right thing. So both he and I have worked together for school districts for—for a long time, so we both—I [unintelligible] years with Oakland Unified [School District]. He's worked at Oakland Unified for seventeen years. He's actually worked in my office for me for the last two years.

WOO: *For you!*

WILSON: Yeah. I'm the executive director, and he was having some problems in one of his positions, and I've been in the district so long, I was just, like,—

WOO: What was *that* like?

WILSON: Well, they—that's not good. Don't do that.

WOO: Yeah. [Chuckles.] I figured.

WILSON: You and your—you and your future lover or husband can work for the same group, same people, but don't work in the same office. Don't do that. That—there's a space—we need to take sometimes our individual self to work and be that person at work, and so if he needs to be his person—and it was just weird. He's [unintelligible]. He's really a good guy, but—

The reason that came about was that—so, like, from being difficult to find apartments and people turning us away and not knowing if I could open a bank account, not—afraid to go to doctors because of the—you know, being always—every time we went to a doctor in the '90s—like, every time you'd go to the doctor, they'd say, "Well, you're a gay man, so, you know, that ingrown toenail could be a precursor to AIDS. Have you—

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: "[cross-talk] had an HIV test?" [Chuckles.] We're, like, "No, it's an ingrown toenail. I just need you to cut it out. Like, shut the fuck up—"

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: So, you know, so that theme and that condition—position, where we're always being told, "You know, you're a really diseased person, and"—to being working together, and I've been in the district long enough. I'm one of the top, you know, officials in the district. And Marcus had something happen at his job where he was—they were going—he'd been promoted, and then it was a probationary promotion, like a lot of them are, and that he—when the time came around, they did not want to continue with the promotion. That's fine. Fine. You know, some—there's always—not everyone's fit to do everything.

He, however,—in California, in education code law, you cannot terminate a public em- —you cannot terminate an employee during a provisional period for cause, unless you have identified that cause earlier in the probationary period. So, like, if you're, like, "You really are bad at typing. Let's help you learn how to type." So you can't terminate somebody and say, "You know what? The reason I'm not promoting you is because of your bad typing skills." Because if you give a cause now and you haven't supported that person,—so it's kind of a nice law, right?

WOO: Yeah, mm-hm.

WILSON: And it's used to—you know, because teachers need support, and people who are in education, they need training, they need support, and they hadn't given him any of that. And they gave cause. They gave him a reason why they were not continuing with the promotion.

And Marcus was kind of devastated, and he was, like, having to go back to this group he was working with, who had been really poisonous to him.

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: And I was just—

WOO: [Laughs.]

- WILSON: —and I was just so pissed off. And he was, like, “I don’t know if I can do that. I have to find a new job.” And I had a position in my group that needed to be filled that he would have been perfect for. And so I went to the superintendent, and I went to the head of HR [human resources], and I said, “Hi. So you know I love the district. I’ve been here a long time.”
- WOO: [Chuckles.]
- WILSON: “I’ve been here for forever. And, yeah, so I’m not actually coming to you for me; I’m coming to you for a member of my family—
- WOO: Awww!
- WILSON: —because your employee did this to my—my husband.” And I said, “I have a proposed solution, and, you know, can either accept my solution that I’m proposing or I will see you all in court—
- WOO: [Very sharp intake of breath.]
- WILSON: —very soon. I’ve already—” And I lied, and I said, “I’ve already retained an attorney.” And they were just, like, wide-eyed at me. And I was, like, “Yeah, no, I’m not kidding. I’m really not kidding.” And so they said, “O-kay. Well, we really can’t have him reporting to you.” So they came up with this cockamamie reporting structure that on paper he reported to somebody else. So, then he started working for me.
- And, yeah, so, I mean, to go—to be able to be powerful enough in a public agency, in an organization, to be able to throw *my* weight around to protect *my* family is a—was to me an accomplishment.
- WOO: For sure. For sure. I—wow. I mean, at this point, I’m kind of—[Chuckles.] I don’t know if I’ll be in any position of power or anything, but—
- WILSON: Well, you will. You will. I mean, what is power? Power is—it’s not power; it’s being trusted, being a trusted person.
- WOO: For sure.

WILSON: I wouldn't have gone in—I wouldn't have gone in there if I hadn't known that they knew who I was. They knew what I'd bring to the table. I've been a really powerfully strong educator for many years. And I just was basically saying, like, "I've watched decades—time after time after time after time in this organization, people coming in and protecting their families, protecting their friends, protecting this—and I've never played that card. And so now is my time to play that card."

And so, you know, I think young people need to realize is that—for me, at least, there is—happiness comes through—it's a level of autonomy. Like, I—and so autonomy comes through hard work. You earn autonomy. And so you can be a queer person and an activist, but you need to back up what you're saying you're going to do with action.

WOO: For sure.

WILSON: Because that's kind of what—ironically, Marcus was getting laid off because of budget cuts, not by my choice, but—and so we've moved out of San Francisco. We now live in Sonoma, which is about fifty miles north. It's in wine country. So the commute has been hellish anyway.

So ironically, Marcus actually—before they could lay him off, he gave notice, and he has found a job in Sonoma Valley Unified [School District] up here. And I was, like, "You know what? This is going to really suck without Marcus around."

I went and found a job and I'm going to end my twenty-five-year career with Oakland Unified next week.

WOO: Oh, wow!

WILSON: [Chuckles.]

WOO: What a change!

WILSON: Become the director of teaching and learning for Sonoma Valley Unified. So we're both going to work for the school district. Separate offices. His office is actually one door—one door down from mine, but it's got doors now, and we won't

see each every moment. And it's not a fifty-mile commute. It's three miles from our house.

WOO: That's good. Wow! So much—thirty years together this month.

WILSON: Yeah.

WOO: And then next week—a lot of change. It was twenty years at the Unified—

WILSON: Yeah.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: Twenty-five years.

WOO: Twenty-five years. Well, on the topic of family and actions, how—over those twenty years—what ended up happening between you and your mom?

WILSON: So at the end of the five years, I think when we moved to San Francisco together, she was, like, *Okay, they're moving together. Wow, this is—* she's learned, you know, *"They're really serious. They're together."*

WOO: Had she talking [sic] to anyone or something to get— [Chuckles.]

WILSON: Yeah, no, I mean,—

WOO: Okay.

WILSON: --I guess my sister. My sister and my other family members had told her what was going on. And so she called me, like, in 1994—

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: —or '94.

WOO: Ninety-four.

WILSON: And she was, like,—she started the conversation with—by saying, “You know, when you were a little boy and I would say, you know, at dinner, like, ‘Charles, you need to stop teasing your sister or you’re gonna have to go to your room and not have any dessert,’ and you would say, ‘I don’t like dessert anyway’ and then just keep teasing your sister and then take yourself to your own room.”

She said, “I’ve never been able to make you do anything, and I don’t think I’m gonna be able to make you straight—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —so I’m going to love you. [Chuckles.] I’m gonna love you, and I want to meet Marcus.

And so she had to come to term- —on her own terms. I couldn’t force it. I wasn’t going to beg. I wasn’t going to plead. She had to decide, *I have a hole in my life. I need to have it filled.* I had a hole in my life, too. But I also play the long game on everything. I’m really good at playing the long game.

I don’t go in fast and hard; I persist. I used to be a cross- —I used to run marathons.

WOO: Yeah, that’s true!

WILSON: I really know how to conserve my energy, right?

WOO: Uh-huh.

WILSON: So anyway, you know, she got to know Marcus. She learned to love Marcus. And then my mom retired from—she was very, very sick at the end of her career. She had kidney failure, and medical treatments still on the Big Island were still pretty iffy. She just wasn’t getting the treatment she needed. So she retired, and then she lost of all her money, her pension in a—the tax bubble popped around 2000. A lot of her money was in probably wrongly—in a mutual fund that just tanked.

So she ended up—and I’m, like, “Mom, I’m not moving to Hawaii. You need to move to California, and we need to get

you set up here and get you the medical care you need.” So she moved to California. We found a little apartment around the area that she could afford. We spent a lot of time taking care of her. My sister took care of her.

And ultimately,—it was a big strain on us. Marcus said, “You know what? We need to move, and we need to find a place big enough to have your mom move in with us—

WOO: Awwww!

WILSON: —so we can take better care of her.” [Laughs.] And so, you know, we had a really rocking apartment in San Francisco. It was in Noe Valley, at the top of Noe Valley. You could see the entire bay. You could see everything. This gorgeous place that we—and so we moved to this shitty apartment in Oakland that was big enough for the three of us. And my mom then lived with us for the next eighteen months, and she died in our arms, and we both held her as she died.

WOO: Ohhhho-ho-ho.

WILSON: Yeah.

WOO: That makes me so happy.

WILSON: She had an old friend from Amarillo that she’d stayed in touch with, that she went to high school with who’s now, you know, seventy or something. And I’m sending out the notice of her death to all of her friends, and her friend called me, and I hadn’t spoken to her since I was like five. And she said, “You know, I think—you need to know something, Charles.”

So ironically, my Mom’s name was Gae [pronounced like gay]. That’s her name, is Gae, G-a-e.

WOO: Uh-huh!

WILSON: It’s the French version. I don’t know why—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —cross-talk] my grandmother picked that name. It's really a strange—yeah—poetic justice for her, I guess.

WOO: Yeah! [Chuckles.]

WILSON: She—this woman—her name is Glynanna [spelling unconfirmed]. Glynanna said to me, “You need to know this, Charles.” She said, “About a month ago, your mom called me, and she said that—your mom said to me, ‘I have never seen two people more in love than Charles and Marcus, and I'm really afraid of the strain I'm putting on the relationship by living here.’” Because it was hard. We had to take care of her a lot. “And I'm really afraid that I'm going to—I'm being a strain on their relationship.” [Weeps; unintelligible].

WOO: Ohhhh!

WILSON: [Cries.] It was really—she was a loving woman. She was extremely headstrong, but, you know, she taught me. I am her son.

WOO: Ohhh! That's making me cry!! [Chuckles.]

WILSON: [Chuckles.] I haven't told many people that.

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: Yeah. So then, within the last year or two, his father was living out on Cape Cod [Massachusetts], end of Cape Cod, near Provincetown [Massachusetts], ironically, again. A very isolated place. He was ninety-three years old, living all alone in this big house. And his health was failing, and so we started this thing where we were trading going back and forth from San Francisco to Cape Cod and taking care of him.

And, like, on the third time out, I just said, “This isn't working, Marcus.” And I said, “I'm taking time off from work.” I spent the next six weeks with his dad. He was really sick. He'd fallen and hit his head, and he had a hematoma, and so they had to do brain surgery on a ninety-three-year old.

WOO: Oh, no.

WILSON: So he had to learn how to walk again. He had to learn how to eat again. He had to learn—everything. He had a big fucking hole in his head.

So I—I packed up his entire eleven-room house by myself, got it shipped to California, and then, because he had a hole in his head—or actually, it was—the hole was barely covered now with [unintelligible] skin, skin and [unintelligible]. The neurologist said, “He can’t fly. You know, if there is, like, a little micro-change in air pressure, he could die. Like, he cannot fly.”

WOO: Oh, my!

WILSON: And so I said, “Okay, so we’ll just drive.” So then I drove [chuckles]—I drove this ninety-three-year old from Cape Cod to San Francisco. It took seven days.

WOO: Oh, my goodness!

WILSON: He had never been—he had never been out of Cape Cod—Massachusetts, except when he went off to war—World War II. [Chuckles.] And he was, you know, not super happy about moving.

And then we got him into a nursing care up here in Sonoma. His sister, actually, his eighty-eight-year-old sister, was also in nursing care up here

And then I said to Marcus, “I can’t—we can’t—even this is too far, San Francisco to Sonoma.” And so we moved up here eighteen months ago to be able to take better care of his father.

WOO: [high-pitched] Ohhahh!

WILSON: Yeah. And then in March, his father died, in Marcus’s arms. But I—I was there. He alerted me, and I came over to the care facility immediately. We both held him, and—

WOO: Wow.

WILSON: So, Yeah. This is another thing about gay people, is—queer people, is we’ve been kicked to the curb so many times, and

we really know what it means to have need and what it feels like to be a person in need and being too proud to ask for help. And I don't know why, but I see over and over and over in family structures, when someone is old, when someone is dying or someone's in need, I see gay men and lesbians, queer people stepping up, more often than not, to be that person who sacrifices to help. And I don't know why it is.

WOO: [high-pitched] Ahhhh! That's so—

WILSON: I don't know why it is.

WOO: That's so, so weird, because this—okay, this is not about me, but everyone else is, like, doing, like, Goldman Sachs internships and everything, but I'm going back home to take care of my grandma.

WILSON: Case in point.

WOO: [Laughs.] Targeted. Wow! [Laughs.]

WILSON: Yeah. I mean,—and so you need to embrace that part of yourself, Nick.

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: We are—you know, in most indigenous cultures, queer people are actually celebrated.

WOO: Yeah.

WILSON: We're the—we're the—we're the twin spirit. We're the *berdache*. In Hawaii, we're the *mahu*. And these are not derogatory terms; these are terms that actually are on a pathway towards shaman.

WOO: You're very right.

WILSON: You know, they—they see that there's two genders in us, many of us. You know, many of us are—I'm not—I'm not transgender, but I do question the degree to which I am traditional male. And I don't know—

WOO: Yeah. I hear you.

- WILSON: —[cross-talk] what I identify now. But respectful cultures identify these people in their world and do not destroy them. They find an honored place for them.
- WOO: You're—you're so right. I'm a Native American Studies major here at Dartmouth, actually. [Chuckles.]
- WILSON: Are you really?
- WOO: I am! You're just—everything you're talk about is basically what you are, and a lot—a big part—or, like, most of my friends here at Dartmouth are—are queer and Native, so—[Chuckles.] I know what you're—how you're talking about.
- WILSON: Well, Nick, I mean, your—your—your decision, your choice to go and take care of your grandmother is part of that heritage. That's your heritage, you know?
- WOO: Yeah.
- WILSON: Your grandmother is your heritage, but your taking care of her is part of your queer heritage.
- WOO: Uh-huh.
- WILSON: And it's going to be a fucking pain in the ass. You are gonna ask yourself in this process, *Why the fuck did I do this? This is insane.*
- WOO: Yeah! [Chuckles.]
- WILSON: But—but you're—you know, you're going to learn stuff about yourself and about the world that you didn't know, you didn't even know that you didn't know.
- WOO: Wow. I—I—I'm just so *shook* that you're just speaking everything about me. We're like—we're almost fifty—many decades apart, but I'm in a posi-
- WILSON: I'm fifty-five. You're twenty-three, twenty-two maybe.
- WOO: Twenty-one. I just turned twenty-one two—a couple of days ago.

WILSON: Oh, happy birthday.

WOO: Thank you.

WILSON: Happy birthday.

WOO: But, yeah, I—you know, my mom is in the same position where she's, like, down—she knows I'm out, but she's, like, "Don't do that nasty thing" or whatever. Or, like, "Are you being weird at college?" I think—that's the exact same stuff that your mom told you. I thought this—who knew? Wow. So—

WILSON: And you know what? You know what it came from? So my mom and I actually had a conversation about this.

WOO: Tell me.

WILSON: She said, "You know, all the crazy stuff I did and the way I behaved," she said, "came out of fear."

WOO: Fear of what?

WILSON: "I was afraid that my child would be treated by people the way that I have seen gay people, queer people be treated."

WOO: Oh, my goodness!

WILSON: "And I've never known how to do—stand up to that because it's just something that is so strange to many of us. We don't think about it a lot. But then when people come up and it does come up and people just start becoming violently angry about it, and just violent about it," she said, "I've never known how to respond in those situations."

And I said, "Mom, the way you respond is you need to stand up and say, 'Hey, friend, that's kind of outrageous, what you're saying. You need to—that's not why I'm your friend.' You need to, you know, you need to redirect your friend." And a lot of straight people don't know how to redirect people. They do not know how to redirect people.

WOO: [high-pitched] That's so real! [Laughs.]

WILSON: Right?

WOO: Uh-huh.

WILSON: They know how to fit in. They know how to move along. But part of being straight is—I think, is being afraid. And so when I meet a heterosexual person who's not afraid and I meet a heterosexual person who is compassionate, I consider that person to be queer.

WOO: I—yeah. I would, too. Oh, my! That is—that is—that is truth.

Well, on that note, is—a lot of—kind of reflecting back on everything, do you—why—here, I guess the way I'll put the question is: Why did you choose to be a part of this project? What kind of motivated you to kind of get back involved in a—in a campus that kind of screwed you over? [Chuckles.]

WILSON: I don't know. So strangely, I'm wearing a Dartmouth sweatshirt right now.

WOO: [Chuckles.]

WILSON: — [cross-talk] when I put it on this morning I did not know that I was gonna—I didn't connect it. So it's just very weird.

I—I wanted to reclaim an experience that I feel that I was robbed of.

WOO: Mmm. Oh, I hear you.

WILSON: I feel that I did not get a chance to have the experience. I don't have the friendships. I don't—I don't—I just throw away—you know my magazine and shit comes, and it goes straight in the trash. I don't—I don't—because—well, I occasionally look at it, but I don't know anybody from the class. I don't have—these are the only memories I have at Dartmouth and of my college experience.

I mean, Nick, I didn't even know Dartmouth from a hole in the wall, but, you know, when I—I applied—I applied early admissions to Dartmouth. I had no backup plan. I had no backup plan. I was going to go to UH [University of Hawaii]

on the Big Island if I didn't get into Dartmouth. And I got in. So I went there full of expectation, full of desire—

WOO: Oh, I hear you.

WILSON: —because this was going to be *my* chance to get into the system. I had earned this place because I'm smart as fuck. And I worked really fucking hard.

WOO: If not twice as hard as everyone else.

WILSON: Well, I *do* have to work harder than everybody else—

WOO: Of course.

WILSON: —because I don't—I don't have the relationships to build on. I don't—I can't—I can't glide through because I'm someone's buddy, because I'm nobody's buddy.

WOO: I hear you.

WILSON: I've never been anybody's buddy. But I was robbed of that experience. And Marcus was robbed of his experience at Williams. And so I—I wanted to reclaim it. I wanted to—I'm very, very, very impressed that you and others at Dartmouth are doing this project, because I—you know, I've looked at the scale of what it is and what you're trying to do, and I—and Rauschenberg [sic; Rauner Special Collections Library] wasn't in existence when I was—they moved all—all the precious books at Dartmouth mostly used to be in the stacks, and I remember when I was taking that French Restoration drama class—

WOO: [Laughs.]

WILSON: —the French drama class, I—you know, I was doing some reading, and they kept referencing [*The*] *City of God* by Augustine [of Hippo], and I was, like, *I haven't read that. I need to go find that, and I need to go get an English translation of it.* So I went in stacks, and there's seven versions of it, right? And there's this one—super-old binding. And I'm, like, *Yeah, okay, I'm gonna take this one.*

And as I'm walking, I look at the book—and there's a note put in there by the original librarian who received the book whenever long ago, and the book was published in 1642. It was sitting on the stacks—in the stacks. And I took it to the checkout desk, and I said, "Do you guys know that this is, like, from 1642?" They're like, "Yeah, you can take it."
[Chuckles.]

WOO: [high-pitched] Oh!

WILSON: So Rauschenberg didn't exist. Rauschenberg was a tiny little room in the—in the—in the library. So they took over Webster Hall and made it what it is today. And I want our queer history to be treasured,—

WOO: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

WILSON: —because Rauschenberg—these—my kind of libraries are about treasures. You don't just put anything into it. And I—we have almost died trying to persist through this. And we need to be in that library. So that's why I did it.

WOO: Wow. Ahh! Well, I'm going to—I'm going to end it off as you—at here.

WILSON: Okay.

WOO: With—[high-pitched] Oh, I am just so happy!

WILSON: You've given me a real gift, Nick.

WOO: Yeah, y'all made my whole day today. I had been writing papers for two—I have been—I haven't sl- —I've been in the library, holed up for two whole nights.

WILSON: Mm-hm.

WOO: This is the last thing of my—of my junior year.

WILSON: Great.

WOO: And—uh! You and Marcus give me so much inspiration!
[Chuckles.]

- WILSON: You know, if you're ever—if you're ever in California, you can look us up.
- WOO: Yes. I just—wow. Well, thank you so much for your time, Charles.
- WILSON: Thank you. I appreciate—I appreciate you giving me this opportunity.
- WOO: Yes, it—I—I just need to—I have so much—I have so much respect for all the queer people who came before us, and I think part of the reason why I am doing this project is because I just—oh, my goodness! Everything that everyone in your generation had to go through, I think a lot of people in our generation either forget or think that it was just, like, ancient history or something. And even if it was ancient history, it's not—it's not documented or anything. And a lot of queer people on campus to this day still don't feel like we have a place on campus because, well, we don't have any history to look back at. We don't have any people to look up to or any people to—to be—to, like,—who we see as representation here at Dartmouth.
- And so people like you, who were the only people to be out at that time,—you're—wow, that's—that's representation for me. And I thank you so much for—for telling your story.
- WILSON: Thank you, Nick.
- WOO: And reclaiming your space here at this library. [Chuckles.]
- WILSON: I truly feel that I have. I mean, I'm honored that I'm going to be somewhere in the collection.
- WOO: All right. Well,—
- WILSON: Because I only spent, like, a half of my entire college career in the—in the—in the collection.
- WOO: [Laughs.] Well, thank you so much for your time, and I wish you well.
- WILSON: All right, Nick. You too. Thank you.

WOO: All right. Bye-bye.

WILSON: Good luck with your—the summer with your grandmother.

WOO: Ah, thank you, I will. Bye-bye.

WILSON: Thanks. Bye.

[End of interview.]