

Richard Otto '88
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
SpeakOut
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

MAC NEILL: This is Hugh Mac Neill interviewing [Richard] "Rick" Otto for the Dartmouth SpeakOut Oral History project. The date is October 22nd, 2018, and the time is 2:14 p.m. We are interviewing in the [Baker-]Berry Library.

So, Rick, my first question for you: Can you tell us when and where you were born?

OTTO: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio (rah-rah), October of 1965,

MAC NEILL: Can you give me the exact date?

OTTO: Yes, October 5th.

MAC NEILL: Okay.

OTTO: Don't anybody use that to steal my identity, thank you.

MAC NEILL: And can you tell me a little bit about your hometown?

OTTO: Well, I was born in Cleveland but grew up in a suburb—one suburb until I was five, and then we moved to another suburb, which is where I spent most of my time, so I'll talk about that. That was when my parents bought a house. And it's Lyndhurst, L-y-n-d-h-u-r-s-t, Ohio. It was a very bland, white, red suburb. Grew up post-World War II. Most of the houses were built in the sixties and seventies. And it was very middle class to slightly upper middle class, but it was, like I said, very bland and white bread, not diverse. Always had to use cars to get around.

MAC NEILL: And can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

OTTO: So my dad, Ivan Otto [L.], I-v-a-n, was born in 1936 in Hungary, and he and his family were—lived through World War II, most of World War II, in Hungary, and then they fled when the Soviet troops started advancing onto Hungary from

the east. And there's an entire audio library that I did, getting stories that my dad told, but just to break it down, it was him, his mom and dad, and one younger sister, and then there were a whole slew of family members that eventually made it to West Germany, what became West Germany, as refugees. And then in 1949, he was sponsored to come to the United States. The family was sponsored. And they came to Cleveland because Cleveland had a very large Hungarian population at the time, and I think at the time it was the second largest Hungarian city after Budapest [pronouncing it BOO-duh-pesht]. And so that's where he ended up, and went to school and law school and then practiced law, and then retired in I think it was '99.

And my mom grew up in suburban Cleveland. Her name is "Kathie," Kathleen Otto, K-a-t-h-i-e. She was always a stickler for spelling her name. It's not a "C," and it's not a "y." And she was an only child. Grew up in another white-bread suburb that was made famous in *The Drew Carey Show*, Parma, Ohio. And she went to college in—at Western Reserve University, which became—or Western Reserve College, I think, and then it became part of Case Western Reserve University.

She was rather feisty. She was the one who actually asked my dad out, because she was getting tired of waiting for him to ask her out, because she knew he liked her, but he was sort of seeing somebody but not really seeing somebody, and then he kind of—she was, like, "C'mon, let's go." So she invited him to a play, I think, and then the rest is history.

And she passed away in 2005 of Alzheimer's [disease]. She was only sixty-seven, so she had early onset Alzheimer's. And my dad's still alive and lives in a retirement community in Cleveland.

MAC NEILL: And can you estimate the year from when your dad's family came from West Germany to Cleveland?

OTTO: Oh, it was 1949.

MAC NEILL: Oh. Okay. Great.

OTTO: Yeah.

MAC NEILL: And can you tell me about maybe like a normal day in the time you grew up in?

OTTO: [Chuckles.] Well, actually—okay, we'll talk—we'll talk two different things: school and non-school times. So I went to Catholic school for first to eighth grade. Well, actually, I went to Catholic elementary and high school. There was a public—I—I did go to public school for kindergarten. I—I was in the afternoon. I think it was in the afternoon. Maybe I was in the morning. I can't remember. And it was—it was a walkable—although I can't remember whether my mom walked me to school, because, I mean, I was five, so—

And then—but for grade school, you know, it was going to classes. I didn't do any sports, extracurricular, when I was—well, actually I did. I did bowling. [Chuckles.] I was part of the bowling team. But there was—there was no real elementary football team; it was a CYO, Christian Youth Organization, football. And I just didn't have any interest in it, even though my older brother, [James M.] "Jim," who was a Dartmouth '83, played football. He was the jock.

So it was—you know, it was elementary school stuff. It was about a mile and a half away. It was a predominantly Italian parish, even though we lived in a very Jewish part of town. So we were the Gentiles that got the leavened products at Passover from our neighbors because they wanted to get them out of the house.

And—and in the summertimes when I was a little kid, it was—we just played. I mean, I—I—I would come home for lunch and just be outside with the neighborhood kids. We'd ride bikes or, you know, make messes and get into trouble. Before the neighborhood got built out, there were some areas where there was some vernal pools in the spring and early summer, and so we would catch frogs and tadpoles, and that was very exciting. That was about the extent of the country living that I had in the suburbs.

And then in high school, it was—I went to a Catholic college prep school called Gilmour Academy, and that's G-i-l-m-o-u-r Academy. And it's in Gates Mills, Ohio, G-a-t-e-s, and then the second word is Mills, M-i-l-l-s. And it was a all-boys

school when I started. In my junior year, it merged with an all-girls school down the road that was having some financial difficulties, and so my junior and senior year was co-ed.

But the reality is, is that the—the girls and the boys would take classes at either of the schools on—there was a bus that ran between the campuses. They weren't that far apart. And so we had girls in classes since I was a freshman in high school, so it wasn't like it was really all boys.

And I was really—when I got to—I mean, I was the smartest kid in grade school, and then I discovered I could be the smartest kid in high school, so I kind of buried myself in—in schoolwork. I did not play sports in high school, either. I was very involved in the newspaper, and I was somewhat involved in the theater. Not that much. I—I was—had no big roles. I was—I had a couple of cameos and then worked behind the scenes for a couple of years and then gave that up.

And I also got a job. After I got my driver's license, I worked as a stock boy and delivery boy for a local drugstore, so I worked the summer after my sophomore year in high school and then had the option to continue, and as my parents, who were always the—the ones wanting you to succeed academically—"Well, as long as your grades don't get affected, then you can work, but if they start to drop, then you'll have to quit." So they didn't drop, so I was able to work pretty much through until I went to college.

And I think that's it. Summertime in high school was mainly—was a lot of—you know, I was working, like, four days a week and hanging out with friends, and when I could drive, I was able to go all over the place, so—

MAC NEILL: Can you tell me the names of the elementary and—the Catholic elementary school and the public school that you went to?

OTTO: Yeah, the—the kindergarten school was called Sunview [Elementary] School, S-u-n-v-i-e-w, on Meadow Wood Boulevard in Lyndhurst, Ohio. "Meadowood is one word, only one "w." And then I went to St. Clare School, which is C-l-a-r-e [now part of Corpus Christi Academy], in Lyndhurst,

Ohio. And that's on Mayfield Road in Lyndhurst. Still there. I—it's—yeah.

MAC NEILL: And you mentioned that your town was predominantly Jewish, or a strong Jewish community as well as a strong Italian community.

OTTO: Yeah, it—it was—Lyndhurst, when I was growing up, had about 20,000 people, and now it's less than that. But there were certain areas that, you know, for whatever reason—I was a kid, so I don't presume to think that, you know, there were—there were—there was active segregation. I think it was self choice, where people would live, and we just happened to be on one of the roads of a handful of roads that tended to be more Jewish. I have no idea why.

And then there were areas that were—seemed to be very Italian. Actually, they *were* very Italian. And there were a lot of—it was predominantly southern Italy, so a lot of Neapolitan and Sicilian families in the parish. Saw a lot of immigrants as well.

MAC NEILL: And so you—you mentioned that you had gone to Catholic school. Did you have any Jewish people attend those schools, or was it—

OTTO: In grade school, I don't remember—I can't honestly say. There may have been one or two non-Catholics who attended, because one of the things is a lot of times, non-Catholics would send their kids to Catholic school because it's—it's actually a good education, despite all of the negativity around it. And trust me, it was a good education, but it was very Catholic.

In high school there were definitely non-Catholics—you know, Protestants and Jewish kids who attended. Not a ton, but there were enough, so—

MAC NEILL: And did you notice any tension between the Italian community and the Jewish community? Either inside school or outside.

OTTO: No, not—you know, it was—just—just a—when we had talked earlier, you had asked about—I was sort of reflecting

on any negative things, and I don't want to paint it as, like, I had this Pollyanna-ish upbringing, but either I was completely clueless or it just wasn't that big of a deal. I just don't think it was that big of a deal. I would say that the communities kind of kept to themselves. You know, socially it wasn't, like, there were a whole lot of fresh-off-the-boat Italian immigrants who were entertaining, you know, the Jewish folks from the local temple and vice versa. But it wasn't, like, that there was any—any animosity or tension between the communities.

And in—in high school, there weren't even a hundred kids in my class, and we—we reasonably got along. I'm sure that there were insults thrown around every once in a while, but it—it—you know, it wasn't, like, that there were racial slurs being, you know, uttered at—in high school, or in grade school, because that wasn't allowed. I mean, you—you—if you—if they found out you said that, it was—it was—it was curtains for you, curtains, I tell ya! The nuns would have it out for you in grade school, and then in—in high school, you know, you'd go down to the headmaster's, and that just wasn't acceptable behavior, and people didn't do it. We were belled in other ways.

MAC NEILL: So what other ways? Do you recall?

OTTO: Well, there was the smoking—smoking behind the gym or wherever we could do it—go. One of the things was that since after they merged the schools, the—the girls' campus was down—and the name of the girls school was Glen Oak [School], G-l-e-n, and then the next word is O-a-k, Oak—Glen Oak School. And when we were able to drive, we were actually able to drive between the campuses. So of course we could get away with stuff on—you know, on the way down, so we could—people could have a cigarette or—I—I don't recall it being very common that we had beer during school, but I think once or twice we were crazy and had a beer because we thought that was just the—the most radical thing was to have a beer in the middle of the school day.

We did party on weekends, and there was definitely alcohol consumed in high school, so—yeah.

MAC NEILL: Can you tell me a little bit about the neighbors you had?

OTTO: Actually, it was inter- —okay, so—[Chuckles.] Like I said, most of them were—were Jewish, and—but there was this one guy who lived next door to us, Mr. Pasto, P-a-s-t-o. And he was Italian, and his English was so-so, but he was the guy that nobody wanted the ball to go into his yard, because you were afraid to get it, because he was mean. But I never was, because he was—well, I wouldn't—I wouldn't say I was *not* afraid, but I was always the one who went, because he seemed to be nice to me most of the time. But he was basically—you know, it was sort of a—you know, you—you mind your business; I'll mind mine. And he was just a cranky old man. There wasn't anything underhanded. But it's funny that we were in between a Jewish family and an Italian family.

But, yeah, it was—so—so a lot of the kids—some of them were Catholic that went to the same school I did, but they weren't the ones that I played with. It was mainly actually Jewish kids that I—I would hang around with. And we'd play pickup football games or, you know, do—you know, do some basketball. I was horrible at both. You know, we'd ride around. We'd, you know, do—do things kids do: make messes, dig holes, stuff like that.

MAC NEILL: And to go back to high school, can you describe the social circles that people had?

OTTO: Well, we—like I said, we were—it was a small class, so we didn't really have a ton of cliques. We had two, because you kind of fit in one or the other. And I think it was unusual for our class to only have that, because I think ahead of us and behind us, that they—they were more segregated. But they were what I call “the beautiful people,” who were all the cool, wonderful—you know, the people who—who thought they were going places.

And then there were the rest of us, which I would sort of label the geeks or the misfits, and you pretty much fell into one or the other. There were a couple of people who straddled them, but there wasn't a whole lot of animosity between the two of—two of—the two groups. I'm trying to—I do not remember what the other name of the gang in *West*

Side Story is, but the Jets and the Whoevers. We were not that.

And, you know, we would go—some—we would overlap parties, so it wasn't like if you—if a beautiful person's house was the party site, it wasn't like we weren't allowed to come. And vice versa. I think that—does that answer?

MAC NEILL: [No audible reply.]

OTTO: Okay.

MAC NEILL: Where would you place yourself in all this?

OTTO: Well, I was a beautiful person. No, just kidding. I was definitely one of the—the geeks slash—I won't say misfits, but it was just sort of like the—the folks that were a little less focused on social stuff, which I guess there would be people who would follow stars and stuff on social media now, because we were just sort of doing our thing. And we would usually argue about cars more than anything, about whether Fords or Chevys were better. It was the Midwest. What can I say?

MAC NEILL: And can you describe a little bit more about what you did at the newspaper?

OTTO: Well, I was one of the editors. We all—I mean, it was—it was a school newspaper in a small school in the eighties, and from the technology standpoint it was very old school, so we would—we would literally have to do layout, where we would be cutting the newspaper—we would figure out what the layout was, and you'd actually have to cut, physically cut paper and lay it out.

We'd have photos, and sometimes some of our—what was cool about that was that, you know, we had a couple of guys who—who were really good artists, and they could draw goofy things, and we could put that in.

And that was actually a lot of fun. I think that they were only monthly paper—it was only a monthly paper, if I recall. But they were pretty big. They were probably about ten, twelve pages long. And, you know, when you think about the fact

that it wasn't a very big school, that we—you know, that—that—but we did have a lot of things that we would share, not just sports, but we would talk—interview faculty, talk about different goings-ons.

And it was—I remember weekends where we would basically hang out at somebody's house and work and get all this stuff done, and it was just—you know, there were, like, maybe five to ten of us throughout the evening who would—who would do this. And it was so much fun. It was actually one of the fondest memories of high school, because these were my friends. And we were kind of dorky and goofy, and we—

Oh, that was the other thing: My official title was alliteration editor, so I was the one who came up with the goofy headlines that were alliterative, so—yeah. So—and I wrote—I mean, everybody wrote for the paper. When you needed an article, you would write a pa- —you would write an article, so—

MAC NEILL: And was this mostly local—like, local going-on, goings-on?

OTTO: Yeah, it was—it was all about the school. I mean, if there was a new album released, you would—you would have the—the kid who liked that album write the review of it. And inevitably, that sparked a lot of discussion and controversy after the paper came out.

We didn't really report too much on local politics or anything like that; it was really focused on—on what was happening at the school, and—yeah, I think that—that just about covers it.

Yeah, we had—well, we had—we had—I will not mention his name, because he doesn't deserve to be made fun of in—in—but we did make fun of him. There was—one of our—[Chuckles]. In senior year, we would—we had “The Most Likely to” or “The Most whatever.” And so we—we had a survey that we basically handed out to all the—the seniors. And so—and it was—usually, it was potentially multiple choice, but you could do write-ins, so we would—we would—one of the categories we had was “most paranoid.” And one of the—one of the guys who was one of the choices

walked in on a group who were filling this out, and he goes, “You’re not putting me down for ‘most paranoid,’ are you?” [Chuckles.] And everybody just kind of looked up, and they all were, like, “Well, now we are.” [Laughs.] Anyway, that was fun. Okay.

MAC NEILL: And just—just to make sure I get this all correct: So you were in Lyndfield?

OTTO: Lyndhurst.

MAC NEILL: Lyndhurst. And you were there from kindergarten all the way to the end of high school.

OTTO: Correct.

MAC NEILL: Okay. And you weren’t in Cleveland.

OTTO: I never lived—well, Lyndhurst is a suburb of Cleveland, but the hospital I was born at (which no longer exists) was located in Cleveland.

MAC NEILL: Okay. Okay.

OTTO: Yeah, I’m trying to think of—oh, and the other thing—just—just to add a little nuance for the school: The high school was actually a partial boarding school, so there were kids who stayed in the dorms. There were—you know, I think that they had maybe fifty, sixty beds, total, for—I think it was—I think—I’m not sure if the—because it had grade school as well, a middle school, and then it started an elementary school after I was there. And I don’t know whether seventh and eighth graders were in the dorms or if that’s changed, but I know that there were a couple of classmates that were boarding students. But most were day students.

MAC NEILL: Do you remember where, like, these boarding school students came from?

OTTO: Oh, like, one of them was from the west side of Cleveland, and so the commute would have been too much, so he basically stayed in the dorms during the week and usually went home on the weekends.

And then there was a guy I know from Pittsburgh, who basically—he will also remain nameless. He got kicked out of a bunch of Pittsburgh prep schools, and they sent him away to Cleveland. [Chuckles.]

MAC NEILL: And this is—sorry, this is just for high school.

OTTO: Just for high school, yeah.

MAC NEILL: Okay. All right. And at what point did you realize that you were gay?

OTTO: Well, I think that I had mentioned this when we talked earlier, that I—I mean, I always knew that there was something different about me. I always knew that—I mean, ever since I was a little, little kid. I don't think that I was able to label it as a sexual thing until I was probably in high school. That was the one thing, I would guess, that—you know, as far as any negativity—I mean, it was the Midwest in the seventies and early eighties, so of course, you know, you would play Smear the Queer, which was such a delightful game, where you would basically chase after whoever had the football and try to “get him.” And they were the queer, because you wanted to “get him.” So that was the—any epithets—you know, you'd call somebody a “homo,” and that would be just a horrible insult.

I don't think that I was labeled it any more than any other kids, although—because I didn't really play sports maybe a little bit more. Obviously, for most of the population that I went to school with, it wasn't true, so it didn't really matter, but, of course, I always thought, *Hmm, maybe they're right.*

So I—I—I guess that as I started going through puberty and started realizing that I was more attracted to guys than women, or just not really attracted to women no matter how hard I tried, that I realized that this might be something very different. But most of the time, I was, like, *Oh, it's a phase. I'll get over it. I'm sure it'll change.*

But even pre-adolescent, I—you know, I was a little kid and liked doing things that other little boys didn't like to do. I mean, in—in very stereotypical fashion, I—I was more

interested in sort of crafts and reading. I liked reading a lot. I was very bookish even when I was a little kid.

I—I didn't really play sports a ton. I mean, I would play, like I said, the pickup football games, and we'd play baseball with a tennis ball in the back yards and stuff like—you can—with a metal bat, an aluminum bat, you can really whack a tennis ball very far, which is why we always hit the ball away from Mr. Pasto's yard.

But we—most of the time, I was—when it wasn't playing with the other kids, doing something sports wise, it was—I was more interested in doing sort of quieter things, or quote unquote, "girly" things. And my parents didn't care. They—they were, you know, just like, "If you like doing this, then do it. If you like doing crafts, if you like putting things together"—I mean, I also did models and stuff like that, so that wasn't that weird.

I do have to tell something really funny, though. So my brother and I had G.I. Joe—again, brother Jim. He's four and a half years older than I am. He was born in 1961. So we—we had G.I. Joes. So we had our G.I. Joes, and this was—so it was—of course, they had no genitalia, which really pissed me off, even as a little kid. I was, like, "Where is their junk?" And they had the—the string where you pulled it, and they would say something, but they would say random things, so if you had something you wanted them to say, you had to keep pulling it [chuckles] until it got to it. And that would always break. Either the string would break or the—whatever the mechanism would—would break down, so—

So we would play G.I. Joes, and they would—out in the back yard. This is, you know, digging holes, and they would—you know, they had all this different stuff that they could do, but they didn't—they only had certain toys for—like, there was this all-terrain vehicle with a winch on the back, and so my brother was, like—they didn't have a—they didn't—hadn't started really branching out on a lot of things. They didn't have a mobile command center, is basically what they didn't have.

So my brother and I were looking through the Sears[, Roebuck and Company] catalog (may it rest in peace), for

Christmas toys, presents, ideas. So we were flipping through, and we agreed that we would split asking for certain things to—to—for G.I. Joe stuff. And because there wasn't a mobile command center, my brother suggested that I ask for a Barbie camper, and I was, like, "I don't want a Barbie camper! Look at it! It's, like, all yellow and pink and stuff." And he goes, "Oh, no, no, no, those are stickers. They'll peel right off."

Well, they didn't peel right off, because it was all vinyl, and it was all embossed and printed on it [chuckles], so—so our G.I. Joes went around in this pink interior camper, with this white and pink, flowery exterior. You know, they also had the all-terrain winch vehicle, but we just thought it was hysterical, because, like, within a year, they basically took the same thing and made it the G.I. Joe command—the mobile command center. It was just—then it was red and black.

So I don't know whether my brother was taunting me secretly or not, but we still joke about that. It was, like—you know, it was, like, you know, our G.I. Joes running around in a Barbie camper. [Chuckles.]

MAC NEILL: I didn't ask you this earlier, but was Jim your only sibling?

OTTO: No, I have an older sister. She is six years older than I am. And she was born in 1959. That's Mary Lou [Splain, née Otto], M-a-r-y; the second name, L-o-u.

MAC NEILL: And how close were you to your siblings?

OTTO: I would—the—the difference in age was—was definitely—my sister and brother, growing up, were probably closer than—to each other than they were to me. I mean, when you think about it, you know, my brother was thirteen and—and doing his football stuff, and I was, you know, eight or nine, so it was—it was—you know, there's—once you hit a certain age, it gets to be where, you know, you're a kid and your older brother and sister are not. You know, they're—they're turning into young adults, and you're just the—the pest.

But I would say that we got along reasonably well. I mean, my brother and I would get in fights, and of course he would beat me up—I mean, not, like, fisticuffs, but we would

wrestle, and he would win because he was bigger and older than me. So I was relishing the fact that I was bigger and taller than him at the same age, because my mom, of course, had all the doctor's records and saying how tall we were. And then promptly, at sixteen, I just stopped growing, so he's still taller and bigger than I am. Damn!

But—and so by the time I got to high school, they were gone. They were in college, and, you know, they would come home for the summertime, but, you know, it was—it was just me, and it was awesome having the bathroom to myself—I mean, for a variety of reasons, as an adolescent male. But, you know, it was just nice that it was my bathroom. I could—I could leave it a mess if I wanted to. And I didn't have to share it with them.

So—yeah. I mean, it was—it was probably very typical, growing up. I mean, we're—we're closer now, I think, as adults than we were when we were kids.

MAC NEILL: And to—to go back to kind of discovering your gay identity,—

OTTO: Mm-hm.

MAC NEILL: —did that have any effect on your—how you, like, had—had relationships in high school, either with friends or with, like,—

OTTO: Well, in high school I was still convinced it was a phase, or I could make it a phase, so I dated a few girls, but they were—they were, you know, multi-month, at most, relationships. And then we always ended up being friends. Gee, that should have told me something. I never—though I may have fantasized about male classmates in high school, I never did anything with anybody. That wasn't until I was in college. I—I just—there was just no way. It wasn't—that, I knew was inappropriate and would get me—that—that would lay me open to a lot of potential insults, ostracization and stuff like that.

But, at the same time, I was still convincing myself, *Well, it's just—it's a phase, and so I don't need to really worry about it because, you know, once I'm, you know, all grown up it'll—it'll just—it won't be an issue anymore.*

MAC NEILL: Did you see the threat of ostracization from someone else getting ostracized, or was it kind of a hypothetical that you knew would happen?

OTTO: I think it would have been more of a knew what happened, just because of the environment. I mean, there were—I wouldn't say that there was ever any overt—of course, maybe there were some classmates who, if they were either ostracized or marginalized, they would tell me, "Oh, you don't remember this, Rick." But, you know, over all, I think that if anybody was sort of marginalized, it was because they had done something to piss somebody off and it was a temporary thing.

I—I'd like to think that anybody in my class would be able to be in—in either of the groups, even though there were a number of kids who were—I wouldn't say that they were loners, but they—you know, they were more solitary. They weren't as social. But—and they typically were the ones that hung out with us when there was a group thing going on.

But it was—it was, you know, eighties, Catholic, Midwest, the start of the AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome] epidemic. All of that basically was: "Don't—you don't say you're gay." You know?

MAC NEILL: How did you decide to apply to Dartmouth?

OTTO: My brother was a Dartmouth '83, and so I was familiar with the campus from visiting him. He played football for a few years at Dartmouth, and so we would come up every once in a while for football games in the fall. And I thought it was totally cool. My high school was—the guy, Gilmour—whoever he was—this is really kind of embarrassing because I don't even remember—actually, it wasn't Gilmour. I think it was a Bishop Gilmour that they named it after. See, I don't even know what my high school—who my high school was named after. But it was some rich guy who had an estate in Gates Mills, and he basically gave the money to the Catholic diocese, or gave the land, and probably an endowment. And so there's this old Tudor mansion on the estate, and there were some outbuildings, and then they just built, built, built from that.

So I was kind of, sort of used to this sort of leafy campus-y type thing. And, I mean, I liked it. It was not an urban campus. So coming to Dartmouth was kind of like that on steroids. I looked at—I didn't—I knew I didn't want to go to school in the Midwest or the South, and the West Coast or the mountains, the Rocky Mountains were too far away.

So I was looking in the Northeast because, again, sort of that whole—you know, that whole Ivy League thing, and feeling like it was—you know, this was—this was destiny. *Here I am, a first-generation, and I get to go to an Ivy League school, just like my brother.* And after looking at narrowing down choices—I mean, I looked at—in Cambridge [Massachusetts], at Harvard [University]. I did apply to Yale [University]. Didn't get in, but that didn't matter because I really didn't—that was my last choice.

I didn't want to apply to Columbia [University]. It was—I just didn't want to be in a city. So narrowing it down, it was—it was basically Dartmouth, Princeton [University] and Williams [College]. And I knew in the—I had take- —French was one of the languages offered in high school, and I took four years of it because I really liked it, and I liked the teacher I had most of the years. She was an Egyptian Copt, and she was taught in Egypt by Parisian nuns, and so she was—she basically spoke French and wrote it like a Parisian. And I just loved the language classes because it was like traveling without actually leaving your home. Of course, it was, like, *Oh, wouldn't that be great to travel around the world and be able to do this for a career some day?*

So I knew that I wanted to do something off campus-y, preferably overseas. And Dartmouth at the time was probably one of the few campuses that had such a—it had a really huge presence of overseas study programs, and not just languages. I mean, I know that it continues to today and it's—it's—it's bigger than it was when I was an undergrad. But, you know, that was not a typical thing on college campuses. I mean, more so in the Northeast perhaps, but Dartmouth—it was almost like if you don't go off campus, it was, like, "What's wrong with you?"

So I—that—that was really the impetus—one of the many reasons why I wanted to come to Dartmouth over Williams and Princeton, was just—was the familiarity, I liked the fact that it was in the middle of nowhere, and I—and the off-campus programs were really appealing. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just knew that I was going to do it.

MAC NEILL: Do you remember what year it was when you first started at Dartmouth?

OTTO: As a first year?

MAC NEILL: Mm-hm.

OTTO: Nineteen eighty-four, fall of 1984.

MAC NEILL: And do you remember kind of your first impressions of the campus?

OTTO: Well, they were first impressions but not quite, because I had been here so much. I remember it—it's—you know, it's pretty. It's a pretty campus. I mean, you can't deny it. It felt kind of outdoors-y and more active physically than the way I had been living my life. I mean, my parents were not—are not—my dad—I mean, neither one of them were athletes, and neither one of them really did a whole lot of outdoor stuff, so part of the appeal of Dartmouth was to be able to do stuff outside, that it—it—it—you know, that there's a—a culture of activity here, which is another reason why I was attracted to Dartmouth over a more urban campus.

And so the idea—part of it was that I thought, *Oh, well, I could be more physically active*, and part of it was because that's the kind of guy that I wanted to be with, so I figured if I was that kind of guy, maybe I'd have a better chance of attracting somebody who was active and outdoors-y and stuff like that.

So, you know, everybody—people would run. They were involved in a lot of different physical activities, even if they weren't on a sports team, so—so that was another impression, was, like, people were always doing something, you know, or coming back from a run or going to the gym or whatever. Yeah.

And I filled out my housing questionnaire, and I—I wanted to be in a double in a co-ed dorm, and I ended up getting into a single in an all-male dorm, so I figured my lottery number really sucked. And so my first year was in Smith Hall, 207A, if anyone cares. The one thing that was really nice is that it actually overlooks the Bema, which is awesome. But unfortunately, the guy across the hall played music really loud at all hours, and that was really annoying, but anyway—

MAC NEILL: Can you tell me a little bit about where Smith is situated in? I'm not sure I know.

OTTO: Smith is—well, it's—it's Rip- —Rip, Wood, Smith: Ripley [Hall], Woodward [Hall] and Smith. At the time, Ripley and Smith, which were the ones on the ends, were the all-male dorms. Woodward, the one in the middle, was all female. And you could cut through the bathrooms to get from one dorm to the other, so—so you—you would knock on the door and wait for somebody to say yes or no, if you can pass through. [Chuckles.] And if the women were in the shower, they wouldn't care, but if they were out, then you couldn't—they'd tell you to wait until they've put a towel around them, so—

It's—it's next to the Bema. It's next to the Sphinx, which is the senior society. It's next to AD [Alpha Delta, now derecognized] fraternity, which is no longer AD fraternity. So it's kind of across from the gym/tennis courts, which I guess are going to become a new dorm. Yeah, that should—eastern side of campus. It was the farthest east dorms until they built the East Wheelock Cluster [now East Wheelock House].

MAC NEILL: So given what you've said about the Dartmouth culture thus far, did you get sense of how people felt about gays on campus?

OTTO: Well, the—I know that Dartmouth had a reputation for—for being a party school as well as a very conservative school. And since I was still deluding myself that I really wasn't gay, I was, like, *Oh, that couldn't—it's not gonna be that big of a deal*. One of the things was, after having come on campus, was it became very clear very quickly that gays were not

mainstream here. And there were a number of—should I talk about the incidents prior to coming on campus as well as my first year, what transpired, which—basically—if you had any idea that maybe you'd want to come out, after this stuff happened, you would be, like, *There's no way in hell*, which is kind of where I ended up.

So the winter before I—I started Dartmouth, so winter of '84, there was an incident with *The Dartmouth Review*. I don't need to explain what *The Dartmouth Review* is, or should I explain what it is?

MAC NEILL: No, you don't have to.

OTTO: No, no need to do that. I think every LGBT, et cetera, student, alum knows what *The Review* is. There was a, quote unquote, "undercover operation" which I believe the—the—the reason given for doing this was to investigate whether the money, which was, like, four hundred and some dollars that the Gay Students Association, the GSA, got from the college as a student organization, whether they were using it to—to buy alcohol for the officers to party.

So that's what *The Review* came up with as an excuse to send somebody undercover, a woman, Teresa Polenz [Teresa A. Delany, née Polenz, Class of 1987], who I think it's T- —I don't now if it's T-h or just T-e-r-e-s-a Polenz, P-o-l-e-n-z, to record the—a meeting. I mean, this was a confidential meeting among gay students. I mean, it was an advertised meeting, but still, you know, this is—this is—this was 1984. Gimme a break. And—and there was an assumption of confidentiality, which *The Review* completely tossed aside.

So I think that the editor—I think she was editor—was Laura [A.] Ingraham [Class of 1985], who I will not spell; she doesn't deserve that. Just a horrible woman. Continues to—I can't believe that woman has children and is still as—as just blatantly mean and nasty as she is. And she was that way at Dartmouth. And so they outed a bunch of people in *The Dartmouth Review*.

And, of course, if you were a gay student who was looking for support and didn't want to tell your parents because of

the very real fear that you would be cut off—you'd never be able to finish college—you know, you were never going to go to a Gay Stu- —a GSA meeting. Forget it. So when that sort of filtered through the ether as I was a first-year, if there was any thought that maybe I would explore this, it was—you know, that—that kind of put a kibosh on it.

The other things was that, is that there were a couple of guys, [Stephen A.] “Steve” Carter [Class of 1986]—that’s how it’s spelled—it’s spelled how it sounds—and then Sean [P.] O’Hearn [Class of 986], who I think it—he’s S-e-a-n. I think it’s O-apostrophe-H-e-a-r-n. I think that’s how he spells it. Those were the two guys who were—well, the men; I can’t remember if there were any women who were the face of the GSA.

And Steve dyed his hair green and had a Mohawk, and Sean wore skirts, or probably kilts. And I didn’t see that as me then, and it’s not who I am now. But since I’m a little bit more confident in who I am, I—I—I can associate with people like that now. But then it was—you know, I was a—a—a Catholic, Midwestern kid in the first year in college, and I was, like, *I can’t—that’s not me! How could I be gay if that’s who is gay on this campus?* So that was—I just didn’t feel that there were people like me in the Gay Students Association.

And then I believe it was in the fall of my freshman year, and it may—I think it was fall—fall or winter—was the Tri-Kap [Kappa Kappa Kappa] purge. So Kappa Kappa Kappa fraternity basically booted out a bunch of members that they said were gay. I think that they all were. There were a lot of members still left in Tri-Kap, who I’m pretty sure were gay. And, you know, again, this was, like, “You’re different. You’re not welcome.”

So—so it was pretty clear by the time my first year was under way that if you were gay and you came out, you were going to be marginalized. So even though it was becoming more and more obvious to me that this wasn’t a phase, I totally stayed in the closet.

And at the time, you know, the—they gay—the AIDS epidemic was actually hitting urban, gay communities hard.

One of the nice things was—about being up here, is that, you know, you were insulated from it in the sense of it was—it wasn't an issue like it would have been on an urban campus in Boston or New York or San Francisco. So in that sense, it was—it was probably a bit of a safer place to be. And, of course, since I wasn't having sex with any men, it as really safe. Yeah.

Should I talk about my freshman group and just—yeah.

MAC NEILL: Yes. Do you mind if I ask one question?

OTTO: Yeah, go ahead.

MAC NEILL: So you had mentioned that you kind of—it kind of spread up in the ether that—the news from—about *The Dartmouth Review* and the Teresa Polenz incident. Do you remember specifically how you would hear about these types of incidences?

OTTO: Well, it's interesting. You know, there was a later incident with the shanties when I was actually a student, and so information was more readily available since I was on campus when it happened. You know, I could see in real time. You know, I think that in the—in the sense of that it—it—it blew over, more or less, in the sense of it wasn't necessarily an active issue on campus; it was just something that was told and known. And I—I honestly don't remember if some of what I'm remembering was information that I gleaned long after this. I just remember the—the whole outing, GSA, *Dartmouth Review*.

And I remember one from my brother being on campus—you know, that *The Dartmouth Review* was being published, and I—that wasn't my politics, so I really had a—kind of a very negative feeling, bad taste in my mouth toward the whole idea of this neoconservative, anti-anything-different point of view.

So, yeah, I'm sorry I can't be more specific, but it was—it was something that I know was talked about, and I'm not sure if some of the information came from upperclassmen, maybe read it in *The [Dartmouth] D*, so—

MAC NEILL: Just—do you remember how—how people talked—in—in what way people talked about it? Did they talk about it in a positive way, or was it kind of a—a negative way?

OTTO: Well, I—I don't think—let's see. That's a good question because I've been trying to sort of think about freshman year. In the end, I kind of gravitated—or I would say that my—the people I hung out with were a little more middle of the road than—than right wing. As time went on, especially since I ended up majoring in Russian, and so, of course, we were all “commie pinkos.” But the—but, you know, in my first-year dorm, I don't remember any *Review*-ites.

I do remember—and it was—you know, there were some jerks on—in the dorm, but for the most part, if—if it was talked about, I don't think it was necessarily—I mean, they would—they weren't going to be super supportive of the Gay Students Association, but I know that there was generally negativity from a lot of quarters toward *The Dartmouth Review*, which probably informed a bit of—of how I heard about it, was, like, the jerks at *The Dartmouth Review* doing their stupid things again. And even if they weren't supportive of—of the Gay Students Association, it was really kind of a really horrible thing to do to students.

MAC NEILL: So—so if a student were to come out—oh sorry—

OTTO: That's okay.

MAC NEIL: —if a student were to come out at that time, do you think that their major concern with *The Review* somehow publishing about them, or would it come from the general campus being—

OTTO: I would say the latter. I think that *The Review* just sort of pointed up the general conservative nature of the campus. And I know that sort of doesn't make sense, given that I said that most of the—most of my memories from first year, anyway, were—were not a ton of really radical people. But, you know, there was—there was sort of the—the fact that even though that they were only a handful of students that wrote for *The Review*, the fact that it was an off-campus, well-financed from wealthy people, not students, that it had an outsized influence, I would say.

I've got to believe that it had some influence on the Tri-Kap purge. And then, you know, just the general negative feeling in the country toward not accepting gays and lesbians. I mean, it was the early eighties, and, you know, I mean, a lot of the—with—one of the things that the religious right would say—and, again, this was when the Republican Party started getting—the religious right started being one of the—the three legs of the stool to support the Republican Party, was that, you know, that AIDS was—was God's revenge on gay people, so—because they're doing horrible things, and this is—is stuff that is—is sinful in God's eyes, so they deserve this. And, I mean, that was—that was not a Dartmouth thing; it was a national thing. Did that answer the question? Did that get to what—

MAC NEILL: Yes.

OTTO: Okay.

MAC NEIL: And I'd also—I'd like to follow it up with what made you think that the 1984 Tri-Kap purge was linked to potentially, like, the goings-on of *The Review*?

OTTO: Yeah. I don't—and maybe I'm misremembering it, but I—I don't remember if anybody from Tri-Kap was in *The Review*, was writing for *The Review*, but—maybe they were. Maybe somebody was involved. But it was one of those things where—I know that—that Tri-Kap wanted to be seen as sort of a neocon house, neoconservative. And, you know, looking back on it and even in the middle of it, it was, like, well, of course, if you'd want to not be thought of as gay, well, then join Tri-Kap, even though you *were* gay, because (1), you know, you could be seen—it's the neocon house, so there's no way you're gay, but then there are all these gay guys in it.

And it was kind of known that there were gay guys in it. I mean, my—one of my classmates joined Tri-Kap. He rushed and sank freshman year. It was Alex [M.] Azar, A-z-a-r [Class of 1988]. He's the secretary of Health and Human Services from the [Donald J.] Trump administration. And he basically—you know, this is I think for him as well as for a lot of people joining fraternities, this was a—a starting—starting your network. And so he's one of the reasons I'm—I don't

want to speak *too* much for him, but if you sort of saw the kind of people who were in it, taking aside the gay folks and the gay purged folks, you know, this was something that—that, you know, they might be folks that later on—you know, if I like hanging with them, they could be useful. You know, we could—we could network with each other. So, you know, here you have an example of, yes, Trump is—or Tri-Kap *is* the neocon house because, you know, look, one of the Trump administration officials is in—was in Tri-Kap.

I was going to go—there’s actually a relevance here with my freshman group. So—so one of the things that—when I was an undergrad, there were these things called UGA groups, undergraduate advisor groups, and so it was, I don’t know, a dozen freshmen who were in the—in a—in a group. You had an undergraduate advisor, who was an upperclassman who lived in the dorm with you. You had a—a faculty or staff advisor, and it was—it was a way to—you had your first-year trips, so you bonded with some folks who were around campus, and then you had your freshman dorm, and so that you had this group that you could bond with as well, of your—you know, your neighbors, folks that lived on the hall with you. So, you know, hopefully you always had somebody to go get something to eat with.

And they would do social events and stuff like that. But I—I mean, my freshman group turned out to be really gay [chuckles]—I mean, a lot of them. I mean, one of the eventually became president of the GSA. That’s [William D.] “Bill” Spencer, S-p-e-n-c-e-r [Class of 1988]. My best friend from college is Jeff Wutzke, J-e-f-f W-u-t-z-k-e [Class of 1988], and he was in my freshman group. And both Bill and Jeff joined Tri-Kap. [Chuckles.]

And what was ironic was my—my friend Jeff was out to a number of friends in high school in West Virginia, of all places. And one of the things—you know, as we’ve kept in touch and—and discussed this over the years, is—you know, as he says—after all the stuff that I have already described, you know, he was, like, “I’m not gonna be out on this campus.” You know, so he basically went back in the closet because it just wasn’t safe. And, of course, he looks back, and he’s, like, “God, I cannot believe that I joined”—

I mean, he de-pledged Tri-Kap later, as did Bill Spencer because it was, like, “What—what? Are you guys crazy? What are you thinkin’?”

But it was a—you know, so that was—you know, that was sort of the dynamic. It was this very odd combination of neocon, “I’m gonna”—I think it’s—it’s a protective thing. If you’re different, you’ll join the house that or the group that—you know, “He who protesteth doth.” If I can basically join the group that is so anti the out group, then I can’t be part of that out group. And it was—so it was—I wouldn’t say that there was a—a culture of fear on campus, but it was really nasty. It was—it was not a pleasant place to be if you—you know, certainly if you were gay, out and liberal, it wasn’t as hospitable if you were, you know, conservative, white and, you know, not—and straight. Then that would—

MAC NEILL: So would you say that your friends, like Bill—were they outwardly gay enough, you know, you could tell if they were gay? Or do you think they passed as straight?

OTTO: Well, Jeff—Jeff, I didn’t really—I mean, there were—there were rumors as the—as—I wouldn’t say rumors, because I don’t think—you know, by the time he was an upperclassman, Jeff really didn’t—I mean, he wasn’t, like, going around, you know, waving a rainbow flag, saying, “Look at me. I’m gay.” But it wasn’t anything that I think that—if you asked, I think he—and he trusted you, he’d tell you.

Bill was a little bit different. And I think that it was—it was probably—he was—he was probably a little more stereotypical.

MAC NEILL: Stereotypically—

OTTO: Gay. But he wrote. I mean, he was a—he rowed—I think he rowed—I don’t know if he rowed all four years. He was on the lightweight crew team. And that was a big thing for him. And so he was kind of a jock, so it was kind of hard to say. But it didn’t surprise me when I found out. Let’s put it that way. I surprised him, apparently, because we were having lunch one time. I think that it was either my senior spring—or *our* senior spring, or it may have been after I graduated,

because we were both living up here, and I had lunch and told him. And he said, “I almost fell off the”—we were sitting on the wall at Collis [Center for Student Involvement], eating lunch, and he goes, “I almost fell off the wall when you told me that.” And I was, like, “Why are you that surprised?” Anyway, I guess I hid it really well.

MAC NEILL: And so I guess I’m interested in knowing, I guess, why Tri-Kap would, I guess, accept members who they knew were gay, but then later the purge. Is it because they thought they—

OTTO: Well, the purge was—the purge was before my friend sunk, so that was—that was before spring. And maybe they were trying to, like, polish their conservative bona fides. I don’t know. I—I always thought even as a first-year—I had no interest in—in joining Tri-Kap, just because, you know, it was—you know, I would go to parties there, but I—I didn’t have any interest in—in joining. I mean, I talked to Alex socially. We weren’t friends, but, you know, it was not like we were—we didn’t know each other. And he was a nice enough guy.

Yeah, I never could figure that out about Tri-Kap. I don’t have an answer for you, because I always thought it was the weirdest thing. It was, like, here are these guys who are supposed to be all so—oh, so conservative, and, you know, like, ooh, you know, [Ronald W.] Reagan era,” blah, blah, blah. And, you know, I’m, like, “You’re all gay!” [Chuckles.] And it’s just, like,—

But then think about how gay some of the Republicans in the eighties were. Of course, now, of course,—don’t ask me to name any of them, but, you know, as time goes on and—and you find out about these Republicans or these evangelicals, like the guy from Colorado who had his escort buddy from Denver, and then the guy was a—I can’t remember. Larry [E.] Craig, whoever the rep from—

MAC NEILL: The Larry Craig scandal? Yeah.

OTTO: Yeah, and the guy who—who got arrested in—in the Minneapolis[-Saint Paul] Airport for trying to, you know, pick up a cop in the bathroom. And, I mean, you know, you’re just

looking, and it's, like, it—it shouldn't shock anybody that—that these—these right-wing folks are covering. So maybe that's just part of what it is. I don't know what the dynamic is these days with Tri-Kap, but, I mean, they did a renovation on their house and expanded it late- —you know, within the last couple of years, so they're obviously, you know, still doing well financially.

Did that answer your question, or not answer your question in a way that explained why I can't answer the question? [Chuckles.]

MAC NEILL: It did.

I'd like to ask one more before moving on to talking about your Russian major, but I guess I'm interested in—do you think that these members actually *did* support conservative politics, or did you—did you see it more as a cover? And you're saying that—that might be kind of hard to parcel out, but did you actually feel like the support for conservative politics was genuine?

OTTO: I get what you're saying, and I think it's more—I don't want to, like, say it's all a cover. I think it was a means of being accepted, whether you really supported conservative ideals or not, or just sort of mouthed it, because, you know, again, I—I mean, Alex Azar obviously is conservative. My friend Jeff is not. Bill is not. And I wouldn't say that they are anti-conservative; it's just that, you know, they're—it's—it's weird. I think it was—it was a way to sort of deflect. And I think a lot of people who grew up in the Reagan era—

And that's one of the things historically that—it's—you know, given that Reagan would basically be a moderate Democrat in today's world, it's shocking to think that, you know, he was just this right-wing, you know, sensation. It's just so funny to think about how Saint Ronnie would never get elected in today's Republican Party. But it was a big movement. It was—it was—the Republicans felt like they were the party of ideas, that they—and the neocons were part of it.

You had this rise—I mean, and Reagan only was elected—he won every single state except Minnesota in 1984. I mean, it was a landslide. It was the last time that you had this

cross-over. And so it was a real movement. And—and so I think that there was a feeling like you were part of that, which actually kind of goes into the whole—it's a good segue into the Russian thing and just my personal experience about never really feeling like I was a part of anything on campus, that I always felt like I—I was—

I spent four years trying to figure out where to land, and I never really landed anywhere. Russian was about—the Russian group that I was involved with because of my major was probably the closest thing to a home that I had. So should I go into that?

MAC NEILL: Yeah. Did your interest in Russians kind of stem from your love of language and—

OTTO: Well, it was—I keep talking about the Reagan era, and I—I—I know that in—for younger people in—in the early twenty-first century, there's—there's not this understanding of how—what a big deal it was. And so one of the things Ronnie said (that was Ronald Reagan)—he called the Russ—the Soviet Union [sic; the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] “the evil empire.” And so we—you know, so—so me again being fairly moderate to liberal, I was—my parents, despite being Catholic, were pretty moderate to liberal.

And I thought—you know, again, coming to Dartmouth, they—I wanted to do an off-campus program. They had all these—as part of orientation, they had open houses in all these different departments that—that you could go and talk to the professors or students. And so I—the idea of going to Leningrad [now Saint Petersburg, Russia] to study, because there was this foreign study program in Leningrad—I was, like, *Oh, my God!*

So it's kind of cool. It's a weird language because it's got a different alphabet, but it's not as wacky as Chinese, because, you know, the whole character thing. And I could study in “the evil empire.” Wouldn't that be—wouldn't that blow my—my conservative maternal grandparents' mind, that here I am, going to study in Russia?

So it was a little bit of—of being, you know, an iconoclast, but it was also just that I thought, *This would be really cool.*

See it up close. What's the big deal? You know, our—our—our number one enemy.

And—plus, it would have been—it was—it would be a challenge. So, yeah, that's why I decided that I would start—I would study Russian. And then once you—at the time, once you kind of got involved in Russian, if you were going to go to Leningrad for the foreign study program, which was after two years of language study, in the summer, which meant that you spent your sophomore summer in Leningrad, you kind of were in so far, you may as well just major in it because you had invested so many prereq classes that it was, like, well, if you're going to decide to major in something totally different, you're never going to take any other courses other than Russian and then your major, because I think that I ended up taking eighteen courses, either related to or as major. You know, they were—they were to support the major, which was a lot. It was insane.

MAC NEILL: I think it's about half the courses you take.

OTTO: Yeah, and I don't know what it's like now, but between Russian and engineering, those were, like, the two worst as far as the number of courses when I was an undergrad. If I had it to do all over again, I probably wouldn't major in Russian, just because—geopolitically as well as just because there were other courses I just couldn't take, so—

So when—the group that—as you can imagine, it wasn't exactly a—a—a super-right-wing group that was studying Russian. [Chuckles.] Ironically—I mean, you'd think that at a place like Dartmouth, that some of the neocons would—would study it. And I don't really know whether they survived to the foreign study program, many of them. But it was—you know, because you were studying so much and you had drill—language drill, and you had language lab, you know, there was a bonding. And then when you went to the Soviet Union, you spent two months there with, you know, the twenty-some kids that you were studying with. You know, it was your—it was—you learned a lot about each other.

It was—you went—you know, it was—[Chuckles.]. Ah! Yeah. It was—it was an adventure, to say the least. One of the things I'll just mention as an aside was one of our first

purchases in Leningrad was an electric tea kettle, because you—there were parasites in the water in Leningrad, and so you had to boil the water before you drank it. And so we would buy glass bottles of mineral water, which was just the foulest tasting stuff, and we'd pour it out. And then we'd use those to fill up from the boiled water so that we could brush our teeth and have water to drink.

And so, you know, obviously, if somebody was short on water, you'd be, like, knocking on somebody's door, saying, "Do you have anything? I—I—I just need—I just need a little bit of water." [Laughs.] So it was one of the many ways we bonded in the Soviet Union.

MAC NEILL:

And can you—can you just—to go back for just a second, can you tell me a little bit about what drill and language lab is?

OTTO:

So—oh, okay. So the—the way that language is taught at Dartmouth is based on the Rassias Method, John [A.] Rassias, so J-o-h-n, and then his last name is R-a-s-s-i-a-s. He developed this—this approach to language that involves regular class time, language lab, which is basically not that unusual; a lot of schools have it, where you listen to a tape and then you say what—it's either for pronunciation or just being able to answer questions or—or—you know, it's—it's to hear yourself say the thing and see if you got it right.

But the big thing was drill, and so we did drill four or five days a week. I don't remember how many. And it was led by an upper-class student you was facile in the language. And he would—you know, there would be, you know, sometimes only a few—you know, two or three people showed up, especially if it was winter and it was eight in the morning. But, you know, you could have, I think, up to ten or twelve students, and you'd all sit in a semicircle. It was very nice in the spring, when the weather broke, that you could do it outside.

And the whole idea was that you go through different drills, and the drill instructor would try to sneak up on you, so they would basically be looking one way, and—and they'd go through, and you'd get—you'd get sort of like this example. So they would say a sentence. Like, in English it would be,

like, “I am walking.” And then you—and then they would demonstrate—they would say, “You,” and then it would be “You are walking.” So you’re trying to conjugate “be walk-“—you know, verb “walking.”

And so once you did that as a group, then it was basically running through all the pronouns and names and people and stuff like that. And so then they would try to sneak up on you. They would—they would say what you’re—the prompt, snap, point and then look at you. And so what they would do is they would do that and, again, try to sneak up on you, so you weren’t prepared. You didn’t know it was coming to you, and you would have to say it just like that, without thinking.

And the whole point of it was to say it without thinking, is that—that—so the Rassias drill method was, you know, as things got more complex, is you would just—automatically it would come out of your brain. And if you made a mistake, there was a way that—to sort of like check—you know, get another student to say the correct thing, and then you’d work your way back to the person who made the mistake so that they got it and they understood it, so—so yeah. It was fun It was fun and—and brutal at the time because, like I said, I had eight a.m. drill on—in winter, and it was really hard to get there all the time

MAC NEILL: And so obviously Russia is a very different world, almost, than Dartmouth. Can you talk a little bit how—about how—how you understand, like, the feelings about gay people there?

OTTO: Well, yeah, I mean, Russia now, as it was in the Soviet Union, is just an incredibly homophobic country. And—and that was not anything that—I mean, it wasn’t like I was going to fool around in Leningrad in the summer. There just was no way that that was going to happen. I mean, also because it’s not like there were places to congregate.

In the interim, post-Soviet collapse pre-[Vladimir V.] Putin, there was a period of—of liberalization in Russia, and I actually went back and studied pre-Soviet collapse, but it was 1990 that I went back and did fool around. Of course, in Moscow the—all the gays gathered in the park in front of the Bolshoi Theatre. Of course, that’s, you know, the ballet.

Why—why not? But it was a window in between two very misogynistic, conservative, right-wing periods, and so that was basically the bulk of my experience with Russian culture and gays when I was a student and then a grad student and then, you know, it's kind of come full circle now.

Did that answer your question?

MAC NEILL: Yeah. Wait, so I just want to make sure I get this right. So you were in Russia for your sophomore summer—

OTTO: Yeah.

MAC NEILL: —in '86.

OTTO: Eighty-six, yeah.

MAC NEILL: Okay. And then you went back again to Russia.

OTTO: Two more times, both after I graduated from Dartmouth. So one was in 1989, from early—late January, early February to end of May, for a semester in Leningrad. And then about a month and a half on a pre-Indiana University summer program in 1990, where we spent most of the time in Leningrad but then—every time you go to the Soviet Union, you had to go to Moscow. I mean, it was always—you were going to go—if you weren't studying there, you had to go there.

And everything was very regimented then because it all had to be done through the Intourist, which—l-n-t-o-u-r-i-s-t was the foreign tourism group that basically managed all foreign tourists coming into the Soviet Union. So you were always affiliated with them, because you couldn't just show up. You couldn't just say, "I'm going to go to Leningrad and see the sights." You—you—that just didn't happen in Soviet times.

MAC NEILL: And so when you were describing gay men congregating in front of the—

OTTO: The Bolshoi. That was 1990.

MAC NEILL: I see, okay. And you were mentioning that there was like cruising going on there, or kind of nearby.

OTTO: Oh, yeah. It was just—it was—it was known, that was a place where you hung out, and so you—you would talk to—you know, there were guys, and, again, they were stereotypically slightly more effeminate than maybe your average guy, but, you know, it was also how many gay guys were in the ballet. I mean, I would imagine a lot of the—the folks in the Bolshoi were gay. And so you just kind of hung out.

And I was there with—there was another gay guy on my trip, who was an American, one of the American students, and our—our leader, actually conveniently, [Laurence R.] “Larry” [Richter], was our—was—he was a professor at Indiana University, and he was the leader of this trip every year, pre-summer program. And he was—he’s gay, or he was gay; I think he’s passed away. That was a long time ago.

And so, of course, it was like, you know, you had Daddy Larry. Uncle Larry would take you through—you know, he—he showed you all this stuff because even pre-perestroika and glasnost—I’ll let the person transcribing look that up—that was the period of opening, in the late Soviet era, by [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev. You know, he—he knew where to go. And so it was nice having somebody sort of like guide you to all the gay guys in Moscow.

MAC NEILL: This was all—this is all after your undergrad.

OTTO: Under- —yeah, after my—and I—and we can talk about that, if it’s appropriate now, as to how I finally let it go and said, *Yes, you’re gay. I’m gay. Do you want me to go there?*

MAC NEILL: [No audible response.]

OTTO: Okay, so—so I—so after the—the summer in the Soviet Union, I spent the fall in Budapest. That was a—a short-lived program, which was actually nice because, again, my dad was Hungarian, or *is* Hungarian. He was from Hungary, and I actually have relatives, cousins, there and got to meet them, and it was very cool.

And then eventually I made my way back to campus in the spring and was hanging out—there was a—a UGA group

that was very fun, so—these were a bunch of '90s, who I hung out with. There were just really fun guys. And one of them in particular I was very smitten by. And I spent the summer here, working at Collis and auditing a class, because I wanted to spend a summer in—on campus, since I didn't get to spend my sophomore summer—so even though I wasn't—it wasn't my sophomore summer, it was still fun to see campus in the summertime.

And then come senior fall, this guy's back on campus. I'd rather not say his name. [Chuckles.] And—wonderful guy. And he—I was just totally—I had a crush on him, head over heels. Of course, he had no idea. But I finally had to say something to him, because I couldn't stand it any longer. And so I did. And, of course, it turns out that despite the fact that he's kind and listens and everything else, he's a straight guy, so his wife is very lucky.

But he didn't immediately—I was afraid that he was going to be, like, "Well, you know, get the hell outta here. I don't ever want to talk to you again." But he was very kind and patient and was kind of a shoulder to cry on for a—toward the end of fall term and then into the winter term. And he was encouraging me to try to figure out how to network and find other gay guys, because he says, "You're not gonna be happy until you do."

So conveniently—again, one of the things that happened—again, I don't know whether it happens now—there's the undergraduate advisor groups, and so my senior year, I was actually an undergraduate advisor, so I was an upper-class advisor. And the faculty advisor for my group was [Ronald L.] "Ron" Green, G-r-e-e-n. And he is now a retired—he's a professor emeritus of religion, and he actually happened to be the faculty advisor for the gay student group, so that was a total score and lucky on my part.

And so I talked to him, and he put me in touch with—there was a—a group in the Upper [Connecticut River] Valley that was basically, like, once—I think it was once a month or maybe every other week—was a social group that met at people's—somebody's house. For gay guys to get together and—you know, there was usually something social. There was food, beverages, stuff like that. And that was really the

only way to really network and meet people at the time. So that—so I did that. And that was really when I started to finally let go of the fact—of the phase thing and realize, *This is who I am*.

MAC NEILL: This has come up in previous interviews, but I guess what kind of made you want to reach out to other gay men? I mean, your friend said that you wouldn't be happy otherwise, but did you agree with them? Did you not feel happy? Did you feel, like, a sense of loneliness before that?

OTTO: Oh, yes, definitely. I felt—as I said, trying to find my place. You know, and I always felt like an outsider, for the most part. I did pledge a fraternity my freshman spring, SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon], which has been in trouble of late. And I—within two weeks after, of sinking—I was, like, *This is stupid. I don't wanna do this*, so I de-pledged. So I really wasn't in a house, although I did hang out at particular houses, depending on who I was hanging out with.

But, you know, it—it—it—the idea of needing to find people like me, who can “get” what it's like to be gay, is true. I mean, you can't really transition to acceptance of yourself without having somebody there who has been there before. And I wasn't going to find it easily or safely, in my mind, on campus.

MAC NEILL: Right. And can you give me the name of the group in the Upper Valley?

OTTO: It was—it was—the—the—the acronym was SAM, S-A-M. It was called Social Alternatives for Men. And a lot of people obviously were involved in it, were related to Dartmouth, whether they were—one of the guys was an alum that I remember, and then there were some folks that—that—you know, that were either associated with the college or the hospital. But it was—you know—I mean, it wasn't a huge group. There were—probably maybe a couple dozen people would be a big, big gathering. But it was people who were gay and had their lives, and some had partners.

Of course, it was also a place to try to get dates and get laid, but, you know, I'm picky. [Chuckles.] So—but not that picky. I did—I did indulge, which was good. And I—I had—I guess

my first boyfriend, who led to my second boyfriend, so that was—neither of whom were affiliated with Dartmouth.

MAC NEILL: Okay. But did you have these relationships while you were at Dartmouth?

OTTO: The—the—yyyesss. Yes. So I was an undergrad, and I was sleeping with guys who were locals, townies.

MAC NEILL: Okay. And this started—would this have started after you came out to—

OTTO: My friend.

MAC NEILL: Your friend.

OTTO: Yeah. So this would have been winter and spring of my senior year, so '88.

MAC NEILL: Okay. And, I guess, why did you choose to have relationships with townies over other potentially gay Dartmouth students?

OTTO: Well, and that's—I guess that, again, I was—I had decided that I was going to do this winter or spring semester in the Soviet Union, and so I knew I was not going to be leaving campus. I decided that I would get a job locally and hang out until the program started. I think it was by late January we had to be in Europe to—to—for the pre-orientation.

And so the idea of being involved with somebody who lived here was appealing in that way. It was also safer because it wasn't Dar- —it wasn't on campus, so I could still not be outed before I was ready to tell friends, which I did. I mean, as time went on, more and more people knew, so probably have a dozen to a dozen friends knew by the time I graduated.

MAC NEILL: Were they most- —were they positive reactions?

OTTO: All of them were, yeah. I mean, these were—you know, I don't want to say that *Oh, God, I wish I had done it sooner* because I don't think you can force this. This is—it was—and it's easier now, and the campus is so much more supportive

now. It's so different. It's hard to explain how different it was, both the—both the campus and the country. But, you know, it was—you know, nobody who—I mean, if I'm—and some of these people I knew for three, three and a half years. Some of them I had only known for one or two. But these were all people who were, like, "Okay." You know, they didn't—because I was Rick. It didn't matter.

One of the things Ron Green said to me was that—which stuck with me forever since this—you know, the winter of '88— was that—he said if any time in the history of the country to come out was a positive one, this was it, that things were on the upswing for acceptance of the LGBT community. And, you know, it—it—I mean, it is. Obviously, there's still a lot of work to be done, but, you know, same sex marriage is legal. We have marriage equality, which—there would be no way that I would have even—if you had told me that in—I would have been, like, "Why would gay people want to get married?"—you know. And now it's just sort of a thing. It is what it is.

Did that answer?

MAC NEILL: Yeah.

OTTO: Okay.

MAC NEILL: And so as you were coming out to people in your senior year, did your feelings about, like, the GSA change, or did you still kind of see yourself as a little bit separate from them?

OTTO: I wouldn't say a little bit. I was a lot of bit separate from the GSA. I just—I was—see, I wanted to hang out with the rugby guys. [Chuckles.] And actually, I did play rugby, really badly, my senior year. Of course, I wasn't out to pretty much all of them except for, like, my friend who played rugby and then maybe a couple of other guys by the time the season was over. I was awful. But it was fun. It was fun. I could—I was strong, and I, you know, could tackle people. That was—that was good.

And so, again, it was—it was—there was a part of me that was, like, that's the crowd I wanted to be with. I was still

struggling with trying to be accepted by people who weren't like me. And—and so—and, you know, there weren't any rugby guys in the Gay Student Association.

And, of course, looking back on it, it was, like, well, you know, if I had been more self-confident, if I would have been a little bit more open-minded. There may have been—it may have been an easier time. But that's not what happened, so—

MAC NEILL: Were you drawn to the rugby team because you're—

OTTO: I like rugby guys.

MAC NEILL: Yeah.

OTTO: [Laughs.] Hey, some people join Tri-Kap; I played rugby, so—and they were nice guys. They were fun. They were fun. I mean, it's—it was a—it's a club sport, so there's not that whole—I mean, it's—it's—at the time, it was more or less student run. I don't know what it's like now. It's a lot more formal now, that they've—you know, they—they—we didn't—we didn't have a field house; now they have a field house. It's a much more formalized structure.

And, I mean, wasn't it the—like, one of the Olympic [Games] teams was led by a Dartmouth guy, one of the Rugby Sevens for the Olympics, and it was—they were always really good, but I think they've just kind of stepped it up to the next level. Plus you drank a lot of beer. I mean, that was the whole thing: You drank beer when you played rugby, so that was fun.

MAC NEILL: And so by the time you graduated, you were—you had been out to—

OTTO: A select group.

MAC NEILL: A select group, and then can we talk about, you know, what—what you did after you graduated?

OTTO: Yeah. So my first job out of college after my parents foot the bill for me to go to an Ivy League school, I got a job waiting table at Jesse's [Steakhouse], which is a local restaurant. It's

J-e-s-s-e-apostrophe-s. And part of that was because I needed to be able to do something for, like, six months, and I had met some people who actually as undergrads worked at Jesse's, and they said that it was good money. And it was a lot of fun. It was actually fun. Waiting tables is—is hard work, but it's actually kind of fun, and then when I came back a year later, I held one of the manager's to his promise that if I came back, he'd make me a bartender. So then I got to bartend, which is also one of my favorite jobs. It was—it was a lot of fun bartending.

But anyway, so I worked at Jesse's full time, and then worked, like, ten hours a week at the Russian department [Department of Russian] on a grant. There was some multimedia thing going on that a friend of mine did some programming, and we had this instructional video that we shot with some Soviet students who were there for the summer, to sort of try to make it an adventure in a small college town. And it was sort of like interactive, and the students could then pick their answers. And depending on what part of the tree they went on it—it—they would have different endings to the story. It was actually a lot of fun. So they needed somebody to be a beta tester for it and also who knew the language well enough to know what was correct and what wasn't, so I did that.

And I dated my friend, my boyfriend. I actually had a boyfriend all summer long and fall, and then went to the Soviet Union and studied for that spring term, the spring semester.

At graduation, I came out to my big sister, and then she was actually my resource to figure out how to tell my parents. And so the fall after I graduated, I went home to visit my parents, and I—I came out to them. And they—it was a kind of a—it was—at first I didn't think they understood what I said, because they were, like, "Oh, okay." [Chuckles.] and I was, like, "Did you *hear* me?" And my mother says—said to me, "Oh, it's not surprising, considering." Later, I found out that was because I'm so much more sensitive than my older brother.

But it was—it was really almost a non-event. My one thing that I think enabled them not to freak out was that my father

had a mentor at the law firm that he worked at, who was gay and had a partner, and there was also a paralegal there who would occasionally work with my father, who had—that was gay and had a partner. And my parents would socialize with them on occasion—I mean, whether it was with the firm, or occasionally they were invited out to dinner at the paralegal's place with his partner, just as a dinner date thing, that the four of them would have dinner together.

So despite the fact that this was—this was a blue-blood, somewhat conservative, stuffy Cleveland law firm, there were these two out guys that everybody knew about and accepted, and so I—I—I thank those guys for making it easier for my parents to say, “It's okay that our son's gay.”

MAC NEILL: Do you remember their names?

OTTO: Yes, I do. So the—the mentor's name was [Wilbur J.] “Bill” Markstrom, and that's spelled B-i-l-l, obviously, and the last name is Markstrom, M-a-r-k-s-t-r-o-m. And he—I'm trying to think. His first name wasn't William. It may have been Wilbur, or it may have been something else. If you—if you Google him, there's—he's got a nice obituary, because he was involved in the Cleveland community, at a lot of different things—his obituary from a few years ago.

And then Scott Sippell was the other guy, S-c-o-t-t, and I think his last name is spelled S-i-p-p-e-l-l. And I don't know what Scotty is up to these days, if he's—if he's even still alive. He was a rather large man, and he had a number of health issues, so I'm not sure whether he's still with us.

Yeah, I think that—so—so that was—that was me coming out to my parents in the fall, working up here. My mom actually wanted to meet my boyfriend when they came up to visit, to see the fall colors.

MAC NEILL: This was fall after—after graduation?

OTTO: After graduating, so it was the fall of '88.

MAC NEIL: Okay.

- OTTO: And so that was her question. It was, like, “Are you seeing anybody?” And I was, like, “Yyeaahh.” “Do we get to meet him when we visit?” [Chuckles.] And I said, “Lemme ask him.” He was nervous as hell. It was actually really funny.
- MAC NEILL: And do you remember—just to backtrack for a second, can you—do you remember either of your boyfriends’ names?
- OTTO: Yes. So—well, they both live up here, still, so—is that okay? They’re both out, so it’s not a surprise.
- MAC NEILL: Yes, we can reach out to them later.
- OTTO: Oh, are you going to?
- MAC NEILL: If you’d like us to.
- OTTO: No, no, I don’t want to reach out—you to reach out to them. No, not because—it’s just I—I would rather—it would be a surprise, so—so should I—should we stop just for a sec so I can clarify?
- MAC NEILL: Yeah, sure.

[Recording interruption.]

- MAC NEILL: All right.
- OTTO: We’re on? Okay.
- MAC NEILL: Yes.
- OTTO: So that was just—thank you for clarifying. So, yeah, my—my first boyfriend, for real—he was—it was—there was a lot of sex. His name is Steve Ackerman, A-c-k-e-r-m-a-n. I think it’s just one “n.” And he still lives in the area. And then my—and I’m not really in touch with him. I see him around, and I say hi.
- And then the second, my—my more serious boyfriend was Pete Dixon, D-i-x-o-n. And he—he and his husband live in the area. His husband is a ’93, [Samuel P.] “Sam” Cook, C-

o-o-k. They're both out. It's not a surprise. And they're both—well, Pete's retired, and Sam works for Tecnica [USA] in—locally, so—and they're still friends of mine.

MAC NEILL: And what is Tecnica?

OTTO: Tecnica. Tecnica Blizzard [Sport USA], so ski boots, bindings, skis, footwear. And their actual U.S. headquarters is in West Lebanon, New Hampshire, in case anybody was interested. Also Nordica [USA] and Rollerblade [USA]. Little-known fact. It was a Dartmouth alum who started the U.S. business here as sort of a stand-alone franchise of the European—because they're all European brands, so—except Rollerblade, which they bought, which was a U.S. brand, but the company bought them. Anyway—

MAC NEILL: So, like, you're mentioning your mom asking you if you [sic] could meet your second boyfriend.

OTTO: Mm-hm.

MAC NEILL: How serious would you say these relationships were to you at the time?

OTTO: Well, Steve was sort of my introduction to gay life and gay sex, so that was a lot of fun. Pete was more serious. We were—we were definitely closer than I was to Steve. I mean, we're still friends to this day, so that's—actually, that'll give you an indication of—of a little bit more of—of—that there was more going on there.

And my parents, of course, loved him. He's a really sweet man. Yeah, and then—and then I went away and came back, and—and we kind of—you know, we'd been apart for so long that it just really wasn't—you know, once I came back the summer of '89, it—we really weren't seeing each other anymore. It wasn't—we weren't dating. I think that we were social from time to time, but—yeah.

MAC NEILL: And this is because you went to the Soviet Union.

OTTO: Yeah. I mean, I was gone for five-plus months, and it's a little bit hard to maintain a relationship after all that. And I can't remember what agreement we had, whether we had an

agreement of, you know, we'll put it on hold or we're not sure or whatever. But—yeah, so I came back, and—and it was clear that we weren't going to be really dating each other. I think we may have tried and realized it wasn't really going to work very well.

And so I was here again summer and fall of '89, into the winter of '90, and then I did the trip back to the Soviet Union, the summer program at Indiana University and then moved to the West Coast and started grad school in Monterey, California.

Did you have more—any questions about prior to that, or—

MAC NEILL: No.

OTTO: Okay.

MAC NEILL: If you'd like to continue about grad school.

OTTO: So—so I went to the Monterey Institute of International Studies, which is now called the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, because Middlebury bought it. And it—I was going to get a degree in translation—Russian translation and interpretation. And after a year of studying that, I was, like, *I just have no desire to translate and interpret Russian professionally*. I was kind of hoping to use it as a—an entrée into the business world. Because of all the changes that were happening in the Soviet Union, there was a lot of business opportunities with western companies. And then the Soviet Union fell apart, and no one cared anymore.

So I moved up to the [San Francisco] Bay Area from Monterey. I lived there for two years. This was '92. And was looking for a job and eventually got hired at Levi's [Strauss & Co.], despite the fact that my Russian had no impact on the hiring. They had no interest in doing anything in the former Soviet Union. They—they asked me if I spoke Mandarin [chuckles], so—which, of course, I did not. And so I just kind of worked my way up at Levi's, in production management, mainly. That was—that was where I spent most of my time.

And so it was the nineties. I—I'm gay, and it was—it was—I'm—it was like a cir- —actually, what was it? It was like a candy store. The—the one sad thing was, is that the AIDS epidemic was really in its high swing at that point in time. It was—a lot of people were dying. And so there were always—Levi's is a big company, and it's a very diverse company and very gay friendly, so there were a number of colleagues who succumbed in the years that I was there.

And in the early nineties, there really wasn't any viable treatment. AZT [azidothymidine] was the first one, which was basically poison that hopefully kept you alive until they found something better. So it was a—it was kind of mixed bag. I mean, it was—it was, you know, the Bay Area was the den of iniquity. And at the same time, there were a lot of people who were—you know, "safe sex" was the word of the day.

And all of the venues, whether it was a bath house or sex clubs in San Francisco, which I never went to because the sex clubs were—there were no bath houses in San Francisco; they outlawed them as a result of the AIDS epidemic, because they didn't want them to spread, and so they ended up having sex clubs, which the idea of not being able to shower after fooling around with a guy that you really didn't know [chuckles] was really unappealing to me, so I would always go to the East Bay, where there was a bath house there.

So it was—it was a complete polar opposite of my experience at Dartmouth.

MAC NEILL: And so you just—you were just saying that you had seen some of your colleagues die. Did you have any close friends you had to bury?

OTTO: Not super close friends. The—the people that I met and still keep in touch with from San Francisco—there aren't that many of them, actually—San Francisco can be a transient place. And since I lived in the Bay Area for twelve years, that kind of made me, you know, I guess a longer-lived resident than a lot.

But the other thing is, is that by the time I—I got there, it was known how to protect yourself. I do have one friend from San

Francisco who I do keep in touch with, who's been positive since I think the mid eighties, and he's still—he's a trouper, man! But it was—it was—I am fortunate in that people who I was really close to, people who I was really close to I did not, quote unquote, "bury."

There was a guy that I saw a few times, who actually was shot by police, which was a bit of a shocker, but—and he was killed. He was a man of color, so it was—it was—I don't remember all of the details around it. We—we hadn't seen each other for a few years when that happened.

MAC NEILL: Do you remember his name?

OTTO: Well, he—I think he went by his—his Muslim name was—he went by Jihad [A.] Akbar, J-i-h-a-d and then A-k-b-a-r. And I struggle to remember what he told me his name was before that. I just remember him as Jihad, so—Michael. Michael was his name that he gave. Anyway, he was a young black man, and I—I don't remember if it was a drug thing. It was in San Francisco. And whether he was making threats or not—I mean, what a surprise, another man of color killed, an unarmed man of color. Or maybe he was armed. That may have been part of the issue—you know, killed by police. It was just sad to read that because he had clearly had a really tough time, and I just never stayed in touch with him and didn't realize what had been going on in his life.

MAC NEILL: So moving a bit to present—how did you end up, I guess, back in this area?

OTTO: So I—I worked at Levi's for twelve years and got myself laid off after the project I was working on got cancelled. I had been planning on moving on within two or three years after that anyway. And so I decided it was as good a time as any to take the money and run. So I got a severance package. And while I was saying goodbye to friends in California, my friend Jeff from college and his then-partner, then husband, now ex-husband [chuckles] were living—they were living in Santa Monica, and so I went to southern California to visit them.

And I met this guy named Troy [D. Spurgeon], who we had—he had lived in San Francisco for a while, and we had seen

each other around but not—never really got in touch or communicated. But we hooked up in L.A., and I thought, *Hey, I don't have to go anywhere. This could go somewhere.* So I nominally moved to my friend's house in—or I was their roommate in Santa Monica. But really I moved in with Troy. His last name is Spurgeon, S as in Sam-p as in Paul-u-r-g-e-o-n. And he is my current business partner and ex.

He was doing his own landscaping business. He would design and then install stuff. And I gave him a back rub one night, and he was saying, "You're good at this! You should be a massage therapist." And I had been trying to figure out what to do, because I knew I didn't want to do computer work and sit in an office all day. And I thought, *Well, that would be kind of cool.* I had dabbled with being pre-med, but that ended after winter term freshmen year, where I just was, like—I didn't want to pursue that. But it would have been—it was nice, because I was thinking, *Oh, I'd have to learn anatomy and physiology.*

And so then the next day he said he wanted to do that, too. [Chuckles.] So we went to massage school in Culver City, California. And it's a—it's a school called IPSB [pronounced IPS-bee], I-P-S-B. It's still in the same location in Culver City, and it's the Institute for [sic; of] Psycho-Structural Balancing. You can look it up online.

And we spent a couple of years going to school and taking a lot of classes and started a business out there. And he knew that I had always sort of wanted to move back to Vermont, but I figured that—you know, we looked at a number of places to move on the West Coast. He grew up—he's originally from Seattle [Washington]. But then my sister and brother-in-law visited, and they were living in Middlebury [Vermont] at the time, and he asked them a whole bunch of questions as soon as he met them, about what life in Vermont was like and then announced, after that, that we would move to Vermont. And I was, like, "Should you visit it to see if you like it?" And he said, "Oh, we can, but I know we're gonna love it."

So I had obviously traveled to visit my sister, and I went to school here, so I—I was more familiar with the area, and—and we actually ended up starting our business in White

River Junction. And so we—we broke up in 2010 and kept the business together, which was not an easy task, but we did it. And—yeah. So we're still friends and business partners. He's found another partner. I have not, so he's got that one on me.

MAC NEILL: And, sorry, you mentioned your friend Jeff.

OTTO: Jeff Wutzke.

MAC NEILL: Jeff Wutzke, okay. And you're still running the business.

OTTO: I'm still running—we're still running the business. He is—he's out of commission because he had to have rotator cuff surgery to repair a very damaged right shoulder, which is unfortunate, so he's still recovering. It's been a couple of months now, and it'll still be a couple of months, but—yeah.

MAC NEILL: And what's your business's name?

OTTO: The business name is—is TouchChi, T-o-u-c-h-c-h-i.net. Check it out online. You can schedule online most of the time, although not now, because I'm so booked up, but—which is a good thing. It's—it's a—it's a unique bodywork experience. We're pretty—we—we deal with a lot of athletes and people who are active. It's—it's a lot of people with joint replacements, recovering from injury and surgery and stuff like that. It's not a fluff and buff. And it's not a rub and a tuck. [Chuckles.]

MAC NEILL: Do mind if I just go back to—I had, like, a question about—

OTTO: Mm-hm.

MAC NEILL: —your time at Dartmouth. A little random, but does the name, like, Rock Hudson—

OTTO: Oh, yeah.

MAC NEILL: Are you familiar with—did that have—did his incident with—

OTTO: Gosh, I—

- MAC NEILL: —Ronald Reagan—did that have any significance to you during your time at Dartmouth, or did you only hear about that?
- OTTO: So, well, I'm not sure I'm—I mean, I know that—I'm not sure when it was that it basically became clear that he had AIDS and was gay, because I don't even remember—that's a long time ago. Wow! What was the—the Ronald Reagan incident?
- MAC NEILL: I guess it was maybe less of an incident but more about his death and he was a close friend of Ronald Reagan's, and then he had been in a—it was a hospital abroad, and then—like, it was a matter of getting him the proper treatment, and then they tried to pull some strings and he died, and—
- OTTO: Hmm. That, I don't remember. I just remember that initially, that both Nancy [Davis Reagan] and Ronald Reagan were very slow on the uptake to deal with the AIDS epidemic. And to be honest, I wasn't dialed in enough to know whether Rock Hudson's death had an impact that made them more—less reluctant, shall we say, to—to put some resources toward dealing with the epidemic. Yeah, I just—I know that—you know, that Nancy's big thing was the "Just Say No" for the drugs thing, but, you know, the socially conservative Republicans plus the stigma of being gay and then having the "gay plague," quote unquote—you know, it just wasn't—it wasn't something that was looked upon as needed—needing immediate attention. And—and the Reagan administration certainly didn't try quickly to do anything.
- MAC NEILL: And this is one of the last questions I'd like to ask you, but how—you know, from living around here but also just from visiting campus, what do you—or visiting during reunions, what do you feel that the general culture is now and how it compares and contrasts to what you experienced?
- OTTO: Well, it's—it's—it's light years ahead of—I mean, it was—it was a significant change. I don't know if it was my—I think it was my tenth—was it my tenth year? It may have been my tenth year that I came back for, where I think I saw guys holding hands on Main Street in Hanover, and I was just a little freaked out by that. I was, like, *You're kidding!* Actually, no, I got cruised on Main Street in Hanover by somebody.

And I was, like, *This is happening? This is so weird*. It was—and it was—it was about a ten-year span, where things had clearly changed. So through the nineties—you know, [William J. “Bill”] Clinton was president. Things were moving in a positive direction for the LGBT community.

And as time has gone on, it's been—well, I'm going to give you—I'll give you two—two examples of—of—very concrete ones. In the early nineties, I had not moved up to the Bay Area yet, but I was in California, and some friends of mine and I—so one of them is a Russian studies classmate, [Richard W.] “Rick” Wood, W-o-o-d. He's an '88, and he lives in—in Berkeley, in California. And so he was in grad school at Berkeley, and I came up to visit him, and a bunch of us went into San Francisco for [San Francisco Pride]. We went for the Pride parade.

And I—so there was another classmate of ours, and on—the way that it worked is after the parade was over, you—you could get on Muni [Metro], which is the underground—in the downtown area. It's a little subway. And so you could take that down to the Embarcadero [area of San Francisco], which is where the—all the festivities were at that time. Now I think they do it at [the San Francisco] Civic Center, but—

And I ran into I think one or two other people who were Dartmouth '88s. And so I decided that I was going to, for the first time, write a blurb for the [*Dartmouth*] *Alumni Magazine*. And I was, like, *Okay*,—you know, my friend Rick had a boyfriend at the time. I ran into another classmate, whose name escapes me, but—who's a lesbian, and—and then there were some other folks who were just, you know, friends, who were not necessarily LGBT but were there.

And so I sort of—I wrote in the “Class Notes” section, they always—you know, they solicit input from alums on what's going on and who you've seen and what's—and so I did a little blurb about how, you know—at the gay Pride parade and dah, dah, and said what people were doing. And so I submitted it. And I said, *Let's see what happens*. [Chuckles.]

And, of course, they totally scrubbed everything gay related out of it. I mean, they posted in that I met people while I was up there and what they were doing, but they had scrubbed

all mention of—of gay pride and the parade, anything. And I was, like, *I'm done. I'm never submitting again to the Alumni Magazine.* And I don't think I have, actually, despite the fact that now you can post things about being gay and they'll actually publish it. So that's one—one thing.

The other big thing is back in 2014, when they had the all-class reunion for DGALA and the dedication of Triangle House, that—that a number of people came back to campus who had never been back since they graduated. And there were a number of folks who I knew as undergrads, as—as classmates. [Christopher E.] “Chris” Kelly [Class of 1988], who lives in New York, and [Thomas J.] “Tom” Ward [Class of 1988], who I think is in New York or Columbus [Ohio] or Dallas [Texas] or something like that. He—he does design stuff.

And we talked at length about what it was like being closeted on campus. And we all had—we had similar experiences in that you'd—sometimes you were sort of out but not completely out, and people sort of knew but they didn't completely know. And—and now there's Triangle House. And the festivities over the weekend were—were amazing, to see so many LGBT undergrads, who could be out and relatively without fear. I mean, I think there's always a bit of fear being LGBT, because you just never know. But at the same time, there's a home now on campus. There is a place where you could be.

And one of the things—there was a service at the Hop[kins Center for the Arts] on Sunday morning, and [Rev.] Nancy [A. G.] Vogele [pronounced VOE_gul, Class of 1985], who's the—V-o-g-e-l-e—who's I think still the head of—she's the—the—the campus ministry person.

MAC NEILL: Actually, I think she's being interviewed for this.

OTTO: Yeah. She's a—and she was—I can't think when. I think she's an '85. She—she was before me. She enticed me to come because she said it wouldn't be all Jesus-y and stuff, because she knows that I'm not all Jesus-y these days. And so—you know, she—she talked a bit, she read a little bit, and then the [Dartmouth] Rockapellas, which is a—a—a

capella, all-female a capella group, did some songs. And it was just—I mean, they were awesome. And it was so nice.

And there was a—a—a woman, who I think was a '14, who—or a '15—I think. She was a senior. Her name was Charlie. She's a woman of color. And she basically said that—you know, she—she had spent the weekend hearing all these stories and how she's LGBT and that she just is so grateful for everybody who came before, to be able [his voice starts to crack]—I'm sorry, I'm getting a little emotional—because she has Triangle House. And it is because of all of the suffering and the hell that people went through that we can have this, because it was—it—it wasn't like it is now. And I don't look upon it with regret, or—and I don't blame people, because it is what it is.

And maybe in a different time or a different place, things would have been different for me, but it's the way it was, and I can only say how I got through to be more comfortable in my skin as to who I am today. And I'm just so happy that the place that was so hard for me to be myself in is a lot easier for a lot of people to be themselves in—themselves in. I—I just—you know, anytime I go by—by Triangle House, I'm just, like, *I cannot fucking believe that Dartmouth has this LGBT house!*

Again, I never would have thought that that would have happened—you know, if you had told me that as an undergrad. But it's wonderful. And I—I hope that the—the community that gets to use it as undergrads thinks that it's wonderful and not—I don't want to be, like, “Well, be grateful for what you have,” but I just hope you like it. I hope it is everything I think it is, because it's a wonderful idea.

And the entire campus organization has shifted to be so much more supportive of non-mainstream students. It's—it's—it's light years away from the way it was when I was an undergrad. Plus, there's just more diversity on campus than there was when I was a student.

MAC NEILL:

And this is my—this is my last question for you, but do you have any advice or parting words for LGBT students on campus now?

OTTO: Oh, wow. Advice. It sounds kind of hokey, but be true to yourself. Be who you are. Don't be afraid. Try to be as fearless in your being yourself as possible. Keep in touch with your—your classmates. It's important. You know, regardless of how your network is, whether it's social or social-professional or whatever, it's—these are the people who you're going to see at your reunions. And even if you don't keep in touch with them every day or even that often as you get older, you know, it's—you're going to share a lot of stories. And keep fighting.

Vote. Please vote. Vote every time, everywhere. Get your friends to vote. Get everybody to vote. In case anybody is listening to this, it is late October, as my interviewer, Hugh, said, 2018. We're into the midterm elections after two years of the Donald Trump administration. We'll just leave it as that. Hopefully, historically that will be enough to say how important voting is.

So—yeah. I mean, we got to keep fighting for what are not special rights; they're just our rights, and it's what everybody should be able to have.

MAC NEILL: I think it's a good stopping point.

[End of interview.]