Michael F. Lowenthal ’90
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
SpeakOut
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

[ANNE Y.]

PINKNEY: Good afternoon. It is April 8th, 2019, and I am interviewing Michael [F.] Lowenthal for SpeakOut. My name is Anne [Y.] Pinkney, and I’m located in the Rauner Special Collections Library in Hanover, New Hampshire. Michael is located in Roslindale, Massachusetts.

So first of all, I just want to say thank you so much for participating in SpeakOut. It’s a project that means a lot to many of us here at Dartmouth. And I guess perhaps the best way to start off would be if you talked a little bit about your early life: where and when you were born and just what your early childhood was like, if that’s a good place to start for you.

LOWENTHAL: Sure. And I would love to start by just thanking *you* for participating in the project, which is such a great idea, and I love it, and I know that when you’re a student it’s hard to find big chunks of time to do stuff like this, so I really think it’s great that—that you’re taking part.

Yeah. Well, I was born in 1969, which was fifty years ago, which shocks me to a degree that it’s hard for me to express. And I was born in the U.S., but—but my family moved shortly thereafter to Lima, Peru, so I lived there for a few years, then in Princeton [New Jersey] for a few years, and then my sort of main growing up was in Chevy Chase, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C.

And, yeah, my parents were both—my dad is a Latin American studies professor and Latin American policy analyst, so when we lived in D.C., he was working for the [Woodrow] Wilson [International] Center, which is part of the Smithsonian [Institution].

My mother was working for various nonprofit groups and also in the government. She was for a while an anti-nuclear power activist, the head of an anti-nuclear power group. She at other times worked in the area of, like, world hunger and international development and food policy. She worked on

the Presidential Commission on World Hunger under President [James E. “Jimmy”] Carter [Jr.].

So it was a sort of—you know, sort of milieu I guess I—I grew up in, sort of typical for Washington, D.C. area.

PINKNEY: Absolutely. Did you have any siblings growing up?

LOWENTHAL: Yeah, I have a sister. She’s three years older.

PINKNEY: Wonderful. So I guess what—how old were you when you kind of moved around, so from Lima to Princeton and then to Chevy Chase? How old were you when those moves took place?

LOWENTHAL: I was six weeks old when we moved to Peru. [Both chuckle.] And then I was three—I think three when we moved to Princeton and probably seven or eight when we moved to D.C.

PINKNEY: Right. So the majority of your kind of growing up, like you said.

So what was school like for you kind of at elementary school, middle school, entering towards high school? Like, what were you interested in? How would you characterize that part—that portion of your childhood?

LOWENTHAL: I think it was, you know, pretty normal. I don’t know what that means exactly, but I went to public school. Actually, there’s one part of my schooling that was not normal. I forgot. I’ll come back to that. But went to public school and, you know, just—I was always, you know, a pretty good student, but I wasn’t particularly driven to do any one thing or another.

In high school I got interested in—in journalism, and I worked on the school newspaper, and I was the editor in chief of the school newspaper, so I think that sort of started me off on the direction toward writing, which has ended up being how I’ve spent a good part of my life.

The one sort of little bit wacky and wild part of my schooling was that for my junior year of high school, I was involved in helping to start and then attend a school on a bus. It was three teachers and twelve high school students, and we sort of refurbished this old school bus, and we spent the entire

school year driving all around the United States. I think we put about 30,000 miles on the bus.

And we had this great experiment in experiential learning. It was sort of like the last gasp of the hippie, crunchy, granola era. And a bunch of us had known each other from a summer camp that was very influential in my life. It was a Quaker camp up in Vermont.

And, yeah, so that was—that was really a formative experience for me, probably much more so than the other years of schooling, and it gave me a chance to see all sorts of different parts of the country and different ways that people live. And a lot of my interests got sort of sparked during—during that time.

PINKNEY: What—now I'm curious about—that's a very interesting and unusual, I guess, aspect of your high school career. I'm wondering what a day-to-day—what does one day look like on the bus, you know?

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. Well, that was the thing, is that—

PINKNEY: That's kind of an aside.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah, no, that was the thing, is that every day was so different. So if we were—sometimes we were sleeping in tents, like in national parks or state parks. Sometimes if we were in a city, we were split up into people's houses or we stayed in, like, community centers or Quaker meeting houses. And then if we were—you know, when we were in D.C., we would go meet with congress people and learn about government. And when we were in the Grand Canyon, we would go on a week-long hike and learn about geology. And we would be swimming, you know, off the Florida Keys to learn biology. Or in San Francisco we would be doing a community service project, helping to put fences along the beach to stop erosion. And, you know, when we were in New Mexico, we were working with farmers and learning Spanish

And so any given day, it was just completely different. And then there were days that were—that had a lot of driving time, with a lot of outdoor activity, but a lot of—a lot of real, you know, learning as well. So, yeah, it was great. We could do a whole—a whole separate interview on that. [Chuckles.]

PINKNEY: Yeah, I—I'm sure of it. Was it affiliated with the Quaker religion? I think you mentioned you stayed at Quaker townhouses.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah, it wasn't—I don't think we had an official affiliation with a particular Quaker meeting, but we were definitely guided by a Quaker philosophy and ethos, and that was right in our materials and in our name, actually. It as called Friends of the Open Road, so "Friends" obviously being a Quaker term, and "Open Road" sort of being borrowed from a Walt Whitman poem.

PINKNEY: I want to circle back real quick to the summer camp that you mentioned as very influential, the Quaker camp in Vermont. Would you be able to talk a little bit about that and what that was like for you?

LOWENTHAL: Sure. And that's another thing. You know, sometimes I feel nervous talking about it because first off, I know that going to summer camp shows a kind of privilege that not everybody has, and also it can sound maybe silly for an almost-fifty-year-old to talk about—you know, how—how in love he was for this summer camp.

But to be honest, it was, you know, aside from my parents, where I got the most of my values, I think. It was a place called Farm & Wilderness. And it's in Plymouth, Vermont, about forty-five minutes or so west of Dartmouth [College]. And it's a Quaker camp, and they just really have a wonderful philosophy that has to do with, you know, community building and simplicity and non-competition. So, you know, other camps will have, like, color wars. It would be all about winning a ribbon or something.

But at this camp, it was about cooperation, and there was a lot of building. Like, all the —all the camp buildings have been constructed by the campers and counselors themselves, so each summer there would be a project to build a new cabin or build a new, you know, dining hall or something. So I learned a lot about carpentry and construction techniques.

And there was a lot of wilderness stuff, like camping and working with axes and—and forestry, all that kind of stuff. And it was also just a place of sort of radical openness in terms of emotions and all that. So it was a place where I

really learned that it was okay for guys to have feelings [chuckles] and talk about them and stuff like that, so—

There was also—there's a pretty direct line for me from there to Dartmouth because the reason—a main reason I ended up at Dartmouth was because I fell so much in love with that part of New England and the outdoors that I knew I wanted to spend time there and, you know, even to the extent of, like, Cabin and Trail and what we used to call the [Dartmouth] Woodmen's Team, which I think is probably the Forestry Team now. Those were all the same skills that I had been working on at this camp and the interests that I had developed there, so I knew that's exactly where I wanted to—that was sort of one of the slots I wanted to fit into at Dartmouth. Yeah.

PINKNEY: Absolutely.

So just to kind of circle back for a quick second, how did you initially get exposed to the Quaker faith and, like, learn about Farm & Wilderness? Was it through your parents? Was it through other outreach materials?

LOWENTHAL: It was through the mother of one of my best friends and across-the-street neighbors, growing up. She had been a camper there, I guess, I would imagine, in the fifties, and so when her son, Danny, was old enough to start going to camp, she was going to send him there, and I heard about it through them. And it was really just a total—you know, a lark that I—that I heard about it, because he was—I probably asked him what he was doing for the summer, and he told me.

And when I look back, I'm just sort of astonished and grateful by how that little stroke of luck changed my life. This is neither here nor there, but I actually hadn't seen his mother in, I don't know, maybe twenty years, and I—I was down in D.C. last month, and, for a totally unrelated reason, my mother had her over for brunch [chuckles], and so I got to see her and talk to her for the first time in a long time.

PINKNEY: That's so nice. That's so nice.

So I think we talked a little—we've touched on this a little bit, right? But I'm wondering if—like, what were the types of communities that you were exposed to? What were the most

formative aspects of your world view, kind of, going into college?

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. Well, definitely that camp and then things that were sort of associated with it. I mean, it was the—the—because of also, I guess, the Quaker philosophy, it was a very—a camp that was involved in the peace movement. I mean, we would sometimes, you know, instead of playing Capture the Flag or, you know, swimming at the waterfront, sometimes we would be joining a peace march or, you know, making banners for—for that kind of a thing.

And I also really had that kind of progressive and activist mentality instilled in me by my mother early on. Probably my first really clear memory—this is from when we lived in—in Princeton—was of standing on the steps of the [New Jersey State House] in Trenton at an anti-nuclear power protest. And we had these wonderful—I know this is dating myself. We had these wonderful tie-dye T-shirts that said, “Stop Nuclear Power.” And, you know, I was probably five or six years old, so I—I really had that as a model in my head.

And so when I was—I guess it was a little bit unusual how early I was involved in politics and activism. Even when I was in—when I was in junior high—there was—there was a—a sort of an activist group at my high school called the Student Union to Promote Awareness [SUPA]. I never knew awareness of what [chuckles], but I didn’t really question it. So it was S-U-P-A, SUPA [pronounced SOO-puh].

And when I was in junior high, I would go all the way over to the high school to join their meetings. Maybe I got connected to it through my sister, who, as I said, was three years older, or something like that. And we would, you know, be—it’s also one of the sort of the benefits or the curses of growing up in the D.C. area, but we would—there were just protests all time downtown on the [National] Mall and by the Washington Monument and the White House.

So I spent a lot of my weekends as a twelve-, thirteen-, fourteen-year old going down and marching on the Pentagon or marching on the [U.S.] Capitol. And it was, you know, the height of the [President Ronald W.] Reagan era, and the country was taking this intense conservative turn with the Republican Party and also the Moral Majority, so called, with Jerry [L.] Falwell [Sr.] and sort of the rise of evangelical

Christianity and the marriage between evangelicals and Republicans.

And Reagan was also implementing all these conservative economic policies, busting the unions, and so there were labor marches. There was a big march called Solidarity Day. And Nuclear Freeze movement, and U.S. Out of Central America movement, and so I was really involved in all that kind of stuff.

And—and that very much shaped my world view, I guess I would say. And also the feeling of growing up in opposition to that, sort of knowing—knowing how strongly I held my own values but seeing that somehow they weren't being shared by the country. In fact, the country was overwhelmingly turning in the other direction.

And when I look back, I think that's a very formative sort of emotional position to have been in. And then that related very much, to jump ahead and we'll come back to it, but that related very much to my experience at Dartmouth.

PINKNEY: Right. I was just thinking that would be—that's a good segue. Just based on the information you provided in the—in the from when you initially signed up to do SpeakOut, that was something you mentioned. So we'll come back to that for sure, in a couple of minutes, but—

So I guess at this point in the interview, we're kind of on the cusp of—you're about to leave to go to Dartmouth. And I guess I'm wondering, in addition to the location and the connection to the wilderness and the outdoor and that specific part of New England that was very formative in your childhood, were there any other influential factors that shaped your decision to commit to Dartmouth College?

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. There were—I'm trying to think if I'm going to leave anybody out, but I'm thinking of two important people in my life who went to Dartmouth. One was when I was in my early teens, the son of one of—the son of some of my mother's closest friends came to live with us for about a year or two. We had a sort of a basement apartment in our house that could be sort of made into a separate lodger's apartment. A

And his name was [William C.] "Bill" Hunt, and he was Dartmouth Class of 1980. And I just—you know, I was a

young teen, and he was ten years older, and I just completely looked up to him. And he was—you know, he had been at Dartmouth, and he was—had been in the [Dartmouth] Outing Club, and he was super competent in terms of hiking and canoeing and skiing and all those things. And he was into music that I loved, sort of folk and blues, and he would take me around town sometimes to concerts. And so I think there was a bit of hero worship going on there.

And then one of my very, very best friends in high school who was—he was two years ahead of me, and we were—we both played trumpet in the band together and sat next to each other in the band and all that, and—and he was a great friend. His name was [Michael G.] "Mike" Derzon [Class of 1988]. He went to Dartmouth. So he had been there two years already.

So I think that, combined with my desire to be up in New England and—and sort of the thrill of the idea of being near the mountains and being able to ski and hike—those are really the—the biggest influences.

And then I'm sort of nervous just to record this for posterity, but I guess I'll just be brave and—and say it. It's—there's no way to say it without sounding super, super gross and privileged, but I come from a family that has tons and tons of connections to Harvard [University], so my—both my parents went to Harvard, my aunt went to Harvard, my grandfather went to Harvard, cousins galore. My grandfather's first cousin was the head of the Board of Overseers at Harvard, so it sort of would have been—in my family, it would have been sort of like a natural or normal thing to assume that that's what I would aspire to.

And so—this sounds so ridiculous to anybody who's not from my family, but for me, the idea of going to Dartmouth was, like, actually an act of rebellion [chuckles], because it was just—like, I—you know, I know that it wasn't like going to Reed College, or it wasn't like skipping college entirely, but it was definitely not what my father in particular would have expected.

And so there was definitely—there was a little spirit of that in me, too, that it was sort of like, *I'm not gonna do what you all think I'm gonna do. I'm gonna go my own way and do this*. Now, in retrospect, this just makes me guffaw because, you

know, it's not like attending Dartmouth, of all places, is a particularly radical act. [Chuckles.] But if I'm being honest about my seventeen-year-old self, that was—that was a little bit part of it.

PINKNEY: Well, thank you for your bravery and your honesty.

Well, I guess—wow, that's funny! Don't worry. No need—no need to feel—no need to feel weird about—about saying that in this interview. No judgment at all.

LOWENTHAL: [Chuckles.]

PINKNEY: I guess—so you grew up with such an activist background, and you're attending these protests every weekend in Washington, D.C., and then you kind of come to Dartmouth when *The* [*Dartmouth*] *Review* is kind of at its peak, right?—and, like, it's kind of a bastion of conservatism in the eighties. And so I was wondering, what were your first few months like at Dartmouth? Like, what was that transition like for you?

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. And I'll just—I'll backtrack one sec in terms of that and say that—and I appreciate that you—you seem to have a good, clear background about what was going on at that time. The infamous shanty incident, which you probably know about—

PINKNEY: Mm-hm.

LOWENTHAL: When the apartheid protesters had these shacks built on the [Dartmouth] Green, and they were sledge-hammered down on Martin Luther King [Jr.'s] birthday. That happened, if I'm correct on my history, after I was accepted to Dartmouth but before I matriculated at Dartmouth. I think I got in early, which must have been in the late fall or so, and then that happened in February, and then I was supposed to show up in September.

So it was just such an intense, heightened, fraught period. And one thing that's always stuck in my mind is being in the kitchen in my house after I got into college and hearing my mother, with one of her good friends, sitting in the living room and eavesdropping and hearing her friend say, "But Mike is such a nice kid. Why would he go to Dartmouth?"

And, you know, so that was—that was the sort of atmosphere there.

And then when I arrived, you know, there were *Dartmouth Review* staffers handing out free Dartmouth Indian T-shirts to every freshman, which—and the freshmen—most of us didn't really probably know the whole controversy about that, and we just said, "Oh, cool! A free T-shirt!" and just sort of unwittingly, you know, step into the fray, although I soon defaced my T-shirt, as I remember, and I think I put, like, a red circle with a slash across it and wrote some kind of a cheeky comment on the back.

The other thing that always stands out so clearly to me is during our orientation week, there was an all-class gathering in Spaulding Auditorium in the Hop [the Hopkins Center for the Arts], which I guess is the only place on campus that can fit the whole class. And among other speakers, we heard from—I don't know if he was currently the chair of the Board of Trustees [sic; Trustees of Dartmouth College] or he had been the chair of the Board of Trustees, but he got up, and he came out as a recovering alcoholic and talked about how his alcoholism had started when he was a Dartmouth student.

And I thought, like, *Wow! You know, this place really maybe is changing,* and all this terrible press it gets, such that, you know, my family friend would think it was a terrible place for a nice kid like me to be at, and despite the tearing down the shanties and all that, like, *Wow! They would have, you know, the chair of the Board of Trustees talk so openly about something like this.* And I was so excited.

And then they had—I don't know if this would be meaningful to you if I say it was a [Philip J.] Donahue style thing. Phil Donahue used to be this daytime talk show host, and he sort of pioneered the idea of, like, taking a microphone into the crowd and letting people talk. So that's how I still think of it.

Anyway, they had—they had microphones being, like, passed around to these, you know, first-week freshmen, and one after the next after the next of these people who I was about to spent my college career with were getting up and saying to this brave man, "You can't tell us what to do! I have every right to drink if I want to. I came here to work hard and play hard, and just because you couldn't handle your

drinking doesn't mean you're gonna keep me from drinking." And on and on and on.

And I was so horrified by my classmates and by the atmosphere, I left the event, and I scurried downstairs. I found the nearest payphone, which was in the music department, or just outside the music department at that time, and I called my mother and basically said, "I can't do it. This place is awful. Would you be ashamed of me if I came home and dropped out after less than a week?" And bless her, she said, "I love you, and I'll support you no matter what, but why don't you give it another week and see how it goes?" [Chuckles.]

So I did, and I stayed, although there were certainly times where I thought about leaving. So, you know, it was just that kind of overwhelming frat culture and—and the privilege of, you know, sort of prep school kids and "work hard, play hard" and *The Dartmouth Review*—all that kind of stuff. It was just a sort of a crazy hothouse atmosphere that for whatever reason—I honestly don't think I had really thought through any of that. Like, if I had—if I'd really thought about what it would be like to have my values and my political views and then be part of that community, I'm not sure I would have made it, although maybe there was this perverse part of me that liked having—sort of being an underdog and having something to fight against.

I mean, my sister went to Oberlin [College], and, like, a sort of famously, you know, leftie, hippie, progressive place, and I had friends and mentors from camp who went to Earlham [College] and other, you know, sort of lefty—and Hampshire [College]. Sort of my most important mentor from summer camp had—had gone to Hampshire, and I had even attended his graduation there, so I had a sense of—I knew those places existed.

And somehow—I'm not sure why—I was still drawn to be at conservative Dartmouth. But once I got there, it was this sort of rude shock about just—just how much it was, although I also—I apologize, I'm going on and on, but—

PINKNEY: Oh, no worries.

LOWENTHAL: I did also, you know, quite soon start to feel like there would be a few kindred spirits here and there, so, you know, I—I

started going to Outing Club stuff almost right away, and I loved the—the Freshman Trip [Dartmouth Outing Club First-Year Trip] because that was just my groove. And I immediately signed up for all the different bands. I played trumpet, so I was in the [Dartmouth College] Wind Ensemble and the [Dartmouth College] Marching Band and the Barbary Coast Jazz Ensemble.

And I knew that there would be sort of somewhat cool people there. So, yeah, I—I—I was already, like, sort of horrified in one sense, and in the other sense already just trying to find the little tendrils of hope and community that I figured must be there.

PINKNEY: Absolutely. That kind of segue—you kind of partially answered this already, but, I mean, first of all, that's unbelievable [chuckles], what you just described, that happened at Spaulding Auditorium matriculation week. That's quite horrifying, as you put it.

I think that after that, I was starting to wonder how you began to carve out—I got the sense from your—from your bio that you provided that you kind of carved out a space for yourself at Dartmouth through kind of leftist political activism, and I was wondering how you kind of found those communities. So we kind of segued already, perhaps, into this, but that's my next question for you.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah, I think—I mean, that took me a while, actually. I mean, I guess first I would say I found not—not, like, an activist community but just sort of a more comfortable community, and it was probably, you know, mostly through Outing Club, where there was, you know, room for sort of more oddball people, who—not that these things don't sometimes overlap, but, like, instead of, you know, spending all weekend in a frat, might be the kind of people who wanted to go out canoeing or hiking or something like that.

So, you know, there's this already—there were—those types were somewhat more odd, you know. So—but my first, you know, year, at least, I mean, I just basically—my—my response was to just hole up in the library and—and read a whole lot and—and just jam on my classes. And I—I worked super hard.

I mean, I had a roommate situation that was a little bit uncomfortable, so I would leave early in the morning and go to Sanborn [House] Library and just work, work, work.

So when I found the activist community, I think—now, I have to think back to it, but I think coming out as gay, which didn't happen until my sophomore year—that's really what led to my meeting and becoming friends with people not just, you know, in the gay and lesbian community but feminist community and the international students and the anti-apartheid activists and all the other people who were really active at that time.

So that was—that was life changing, when I finally met those folks. But I think, if I'm remembering correctly, that coming out as gay really was the stepping stone to that.

PINKNEY: Would you feel comfortable talking a little more about that, what that was like for you?

LOWENTHAL: Sure. What do you mean, coming out?

PINKNEY: Yeah, coming out sophomore year at Dartmouth.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah, sure. I—I think I did just sort of dive into my work and sort of repressed everything for that first year, and then, you know, things just somehow build up. Who knows—who knows the mystery of, you know, how and when anybody becomes ready?

But the—so I'm sure things had been building up for a while, but what I remember is there was a particular event. I was at a hockey game, and the people in the stands were just absolutely heckling the opposing goalie—you know, "Fucking faggot this," "faggot that" in a way that, you know, had nothing to do with the guy's sexuality, which they didn't know. [Chuckles.] But it was just, you know, the typical insult.

And for whatever reason, that was the breaking point for me. I hadn't discussed my sexuality with anybody. I certainly had not had any sexual or romantic encounters with *anybody*. That was a long dry spell. And—but I just couldn't take it, so I—I remembered I wrote a letter to the editor of *The* [*Dartmouth*] *D*, sort of, you know, decrying this intolerance and saying how awful it was.

And then within a week or so, I went to a meeting of the DAGLO, the Dartmouth Area Gay and Lesbian Organization, and I—I—you know, at the time, I sort of felt like to be publicly identified as the writer of a letter to the editor talking about homophobia—only a gay person would write a letter like that, so I figured the jig was up, you know? Like,—like, everybody would know. [Chuckles.]

So, yeah, so I went—and, you know, at the time, I mean, I was terrified. And it was this—you know, the meetings were I think on the second floor, second or third floor of Robinson Hall, which also where the Cabin and Trail and the Outing Club stuff was, so I was super nervous about, like, entering the building and scurrying up to the meeting and wondering if anybody from the Outing Club would see me and all that kind of stuff.

And, you know, there were these sort of hush-hush meetings, as I'm sure you know, just prior to my coming to Dartmouth. Maybe a year or two before, I think, was when Laura [A.] Ingraham [Class of 1985], as the editor of *The Dartmouth Review*, had–you know, they had infiltrated the Gay Students [Association] meeting, and the published the names of the attendees in *The Review*. And, you know, it was just a sort of awful breach of privacy and all that.

So the meetings were, you know, quite, you know, quiet and private and—and almost clandestine, I guess. And, you know, I was super nervous. I didn't know if I would fit in with these folks, but people were really welcoming and supportive, and I remain so grateful to some of the people, the upperclassmen who were there, who helped me.

And I can't remember if Peter [C.] Saccio was there that first meeting or not. I don't know if you know him, but he was an English professor, and he was at the time the only openly gay or lesbian professor at Dartmouth. He was that for years and years and years. And I think it took such—such courage for him to play that role and be who he was. And he was a mentor to lots of us. And so—like I said, I can't remember if he was there that first meeting, but I certainly met him relatively soon after that, and—and he was a big help.

And then, you know, also, I think it was later that—so this must be around February of '88, I'm guessing, and right

around that same time, there was a production of the play, *The Normal Heart*, at Dartmouth. Do you know *The Normal Heart*?

PINKNEY: I don't know *The Normal Heart*.

LOWENTHAL: So it's a play by Larry Kramer, who was the founder of ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power], and the founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis. And it was one of the first sort of pieces of literature to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and it had a run in New York. I can't remember. I assume it's from around 1985 or so. And then—so by a few years later, it was being, you know, produced at—at Dartmouth, which I think was pretty unusual and brave for a college at that time to do a production.

And it's all about—it's sort of a fictionalized version of his own life, about the AIDS crisis and founding GMHC and all that. And so it was—it was really intense to be able to go to this play right in the Hopkins Center that was dealing with HIV/AIDS. I don't know if you can put your mind back to that time. It was just—you know, it was when AIDS was still a death sentence, and—and the gay community was it total crisis about it, and there was no light at the end of the tunnel.

I remember how much it affected me. Related to that production of the play, they invited a Dartmouth alumnus to speak on campus, and he [was] positive, and certainly the first HIV-positive person that I had, you know, ever been in a room with. And at some point in the middle of his talk, like sort of a beeper went off, and he had to interrupt the talk and took out his pill box, and he talked about how many pills a day he had to take and how many times a day he had to take them. And so this, you know, alarm would go off periodically during the day, and he would have to stop and—you know, at that time, sometimes HIV-positive people were taking twenty, thirty, forty pills in a day to try to stay healthy.

So that had this profound, profound effect on me, and it was all right at that same—that same term, I think, that—that I was coming out, myself. So it—it—I have such, you know, vivid memories of all that being wrapped up together, some of it super positive, some of it you know, terrifying—the HIV stuff but all of it—all of it starting to happen at once.

PINKNEY: Absolutely.

I want to circle back real quick to—so you mentioned—you mentioned that the infamous, the now-infamous GSA taping by Teresa Polenz, which happened in the spring of 1984, and then the legal proceedings extended into that fall, if I remember correctly. And I was wondering if there are any residual effects that you notice. I know you didn't matriculate until 1986, but if there were any residual or conversations going on that you noticed in those earlier years.

Also, I apologize for my sniffling and my coughing.

LOWENTHAL: I—I feel bad if you feel bad, but then I won't have to apologize quite as much or my coughing, which I'll probably do. I've been having issues, myself.

PINKNEY: We can both cough. It's fine.

LOWENTHAL: That sounds good.

You know, I—I don't know about specific residual effects other than, like I said, there were definitely—I don't remember exactly what they were, but there were definitely procedures implemented at the DAGLO meetings, so it may be that we didn't ever put our names down on a—on a sign-up sheet or something like that or that we did but somebody was charged with, you know, always taking it home and this, that or the other.

And there was definitely sort of like watching the door of that room in Robinson Hall and sort of checking out who would—who would come in or who wouldn't come in. So it was definitely in the air. I mean, you know, I—learned about it as soon as I showed up in—into the gay community at Dartmouth.

So, yeah. And those—*The Review* folks sort of hovered in our consciousness, I think, as these, you know, villains. I mean, I actually think they—they were and are villains in an almost cartoonish way, so I don't feel bad about still thinking about them that way. [Chuckles.] I mean, a lot of them—a lot of them have gone on, as I'm sure you know, to—to continue to be such vile and negative forces in our culture, so they—they were who they were already.

PINKNEY: Absolutely. Isn't that the truth? My goodness. I guess I want to pivot a little to kind of the activities that you did at Dartmouth, specifically in terms of your work for I guess it was called The Daily D back then. It's called The Dartmouth now, which was the newspaper, and the column you wrote for that. And also how you kind of came to found the queer newspaper, Dartmouth's first queer newspaper, In Your Face! And when that was, also, in, like, the timeline of your college career.

LOWENTHAL: Sure. I—I'll start with The—The Dartmouth. I think I—I—I think I didn't start that column until my senior year, so it was sort of short lived, and I shared it with a good friend, so we each—we alternated weeks. And then In Your Face!, the queer newspaper, I think—it might have only had two or three issues, maybe even just two when we were there, and I think it started in, like, January of 1990, so halfway through my senior year.

And I certainly can't take credit for—for founding it. I mean, I was in the group of people who were creating it, but other people took a more lead role: [Steven F.] "Steve" Cosson [Class of 1990] and my boyfriend at the time, [Christopher J.] "Chris" Hogan [Class of 1990] and some other people. But I—but I wrote for it and was, you know, involved in creating it.

And I was actually just going back through and looking at some of the stuff. I—I don't remember all the details, but the—the two things were related or—how should I say this? So after the first issue of *In Your Face!* came out, there was a really negative reaction, as I remember, in *The Dartmouth*. And I actually—I know the date because I wrote something about it, and I would love to go back and find that issue of *The Dartmouth* and see what they said, but apparently it was, like, February 5th, I think, 1990.

The reaction to that and something called Jeans Day—you know, sort of if you wear jeans, you're supporting gay rights, something like that. There was this really homophobic reaction in the paper, and my boyfriend Chris and I went to meet with the president of the college, James [O.] Freedman at the time, and we were complaining and protesting, and then we decided to write this letter to the editor of *The Dartmouth* and meet with the editor, and—I won't bore you with all the details, but basically he barred us from writing a

response and essentially fired me as a columnist if I—if I was going to say anything about this or protest or write about it in my column. He was going to fire me.

So I did write one last column about this, and he refused to print it. And then we printed that later in *In Your Face!* Side note: That guy who was—as I remember him—a really sort of unpleasant, somewhat politically reactionary guy, who ran *The Dartmouth* in a way that was very sort of problematic and demeaning to all sorts of marginalized people—he, himself, was kicked out of Dartmouth for sexual harassment of a woman. There were actually a couple of different accusations against him, I think. So maybe that's neither here nor there, but—

But I really enjoyed writing the column for *The D*, as we called it. And, I mean, we look back, it's sort of—I guess for the time the columns were a little bit out there. I mean, one of them was about the anonymous gay sex scene in the bathrooms of the library. I was a senior fellow, and so I had an office up in Baker[-Berry Library], and during the day, when I had to use the restroom, there was a particular men's room I would always go to.

And that, as it turned out, I think, was one of the hubs of gay sex activity. So people would be, you know, scribbling messages on the stall dividers—you know, like,—I won't make them as X-rated as they were, but, you know, essentially like "I'll be here at five o'clock. Who wants to meet me?" And I can't remember exactly what I wrote about that, but I did—I–I sort of went through it in a column.

And there was another one about—I think it was the beginning of my senior year. They—they had, as part of the first-year orientation, they had something. I think it was called Social Issues Night or something like that, and they made all the first-year students, you know, come and—sort of a kind of sensitivity training idea.

And I was part of the group that was doing it, and we would perform these little skits, and then, you know, the students were supposed to discuss them. And in one skit, I was playing the—I was cast against type, I would like to think, and I was playing the awful, sexist, homophobic, drunk frat bully, saying horrible things to women and horrible things about lesbians, whatever.

And the idea was that my character would be so cartoonishly heinous in his sexism and misogyny and homophobia that it would make a point, and then the students would be able to discuss, you know, why that was a bad thing.

And the problem—I'm talking about this all because it's one of the columns I ended up writing for *The*—for *The D*. The problem was that the kids in this first-year orientation class seemed to love my character [chuckles], and when I said heinous things, they cheered. And, like, there was one point where, like, I was treating a woman a certain way, and she was, like, "You only look at me as, like, a sex object," and somebody from the crowd called out, "Well, you are."

And then at the end, when we broke character and talked about what was happening and talked about the communities of the college that we were involved in, that kind of stuff, I ceased to be this, you know, homophobic bully, and I said, "And, you know, I'm actually gay, and I want to tell you all about the Dartmouth gay and lesbian organization and encourage you to, you know, come if that's your community, whatever. And people hissed and booed and all that kind of stuff. So I guess I'm—I'm recognizing a pattern now with my—my failures at the first-year orientation events, but [both chuckle]—

So I wrote a column about that as well, so it was a really—it was a great forum to have, to be able to write about what I cared about. And then I wrote about other stuff, too. I mean,— forgive me if I'm all over the map here, but one thing that I wrote about was my time—my connections with some Amish friends, and I'll—I'll circle back to the weirdness of my coming out.

I came out in that winter of my sophomore year, and, as I said, you know, I wrote this public letter to the editor. I immediately went to the DAGLO meetings. I went to the production of *The Normal Heart*. I was, you know, suddenly finding this identity as a gay person.

And then the next thing I did was I took spring term off, you know, because I was going to be coming for my sophomore summer, and I—for my spring term, I went down to Pennsylvania, and I lived with an old-order Amish family and worked on their farm for three or four months. And so that

was like a place where I could not have been more closeted. I mean, I just had to be completely closeted. I mean, you know, discussing sex or sexuality in any way would have been completely out of bounds.

And it's just funny, when I look back how a lot of my friends—you know, they came out, and then the next thing they did was explore gay bars or, you know, go to Boston or New York and go dancing in a club or, you know, start hooking up with people or whatever. And what did I do Immediately following my coming out? Went [both chuckle] and lived on a farm.

So that was a sort of strange, strange whiplash that I actually realize I want to try to write something about that at some point, but I have to—I have to pull together my thoughts about why I did that and what it meant.

PINKNEY: That's—that's something else. You could write a whole play about that, or a book, whatever, any sort of—any sort of something. That has a lot of potential. My goodness!

Let's see.

LOWENTHAL: I appreciate that you say "My goodness" like—

PINKNEY: [Chuckles.]

LOWENTHAL: —a person of a different generation.

PINKNEY: Well, I am an old soul. What can I say? This isn't about me, but—

LOWENTHAL: [Chuckles.]

PINKNEY: Well, let's see. That was—you're very—you're very interesting to listen to. I really—you're a very good storyteller. I will say that. So I think I kind of got lost—lost in the details a little bit and lost my footing of where—where I was.

LOWENTHAL: No worrys.

PINKNEY: But I think—so what I'm kind of getting in the bird's eye picture of your Dartmouth career is that you kind of had this transition from being this, you know,—correct me if I'm

wrong, but, like, this bookish freshman who, you know, studies in Sanborn and is, like, closeted and kind of keeps to himself in terms of, you know, like, very studious, et cetera, involved in various outdoor organizations.

And then cut to your senior year, you're in the president of the college's office with your boyfriend, telling him why—like, you know, advocating for the gay community. And I see that as such an incredible—an almost, like, unbelievable transition, you know? Especially at a place like Dartmouth.

So this will kind of me commenting more than asking you a question. I'm just processing all of it. But I guess, how—how do you see—I mean, do you agree with that? Do you agree with that sort of characterization? How would you track those changes, and, like, what do you think was most instrumental in facilitating that personal growth?

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. I mean, if I—if I look at the whole trajectory, I agree with you to some extent. I can see that. I mean, I think senior year really was this intense culmination of all of that, although, you know, junior year, it had been—it had been building up, so it wasn't sort of overnight.

But—and, you know, I guess I should say that for all the—the problems that were in the Dartmouth community at the time—and, you know, I never intended to bash Dartmouth. I mean, I have very fond feelings about it, and—and—but, you know, I try to be sort of clear-eyed about some of the challenges that were—that were there at the time.

But, you know, while those were there, the sort of up side of a community that is as sort of small and intense and cohesive as—as Dartmouth's, is that there really was opportunity to—to have a genuine influence, I think. I mean, I think a lot of us felt that, in a way that it might have been harder or, you know, one might have gotten lost at a—at a bigger school.

At Dartmouth, it really was possible to sort of feel like you were moving the needle, and that was about the accessibility of the leadership, and so, I mean, I will say—and I could talk a lot about President Freedman and who he was in our various interactions, but, I mean, I was in his office frequently. And I think he, you know, groaned and rolled his eyes occasionally to see how often I was there, but—

And I met with various deans frequently, and when I had a beef, I would let them know about it. And when—one of the big, sort of controversial issues during my time was—Dartmouth had just recently, for the first time, included sexual orientation in the nondiscrimination clause. You know, previously it had said that Dartmouth would never discriminate on the basis of race or national origin or gender. And they—it was a big push to get them to add sexual orientation to that list.

But when they did that, they had a carve out exemption for government agencies, which basically meant that the—the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] would still be allowed to come and recruit on campus, even though the CIA, you know, had anti-gay policies.

So one of our big fights was about that, and, you know, we were sitting in at the—I don't know if you—I assume you still have it; I don't know what it's called now. We used to call it CES, Career and Employment Services Center or something like that, the place that helps—you know, helps seniors find jobs and that kind of stuff.

So we took over, and we had a sit-in there, and we had numerous sit-ins in Parkhurst [Hall] and all that kind of stuff. And that led to the president appointing an ad hoc committee on the question of discrimination and equal opportunity and whether the CIA should be allowed to continue recruiting or not.

So, you know, it felt like we pushed for that, and then we got it, and I was appointed to be one of the people on the committee, so it was, you know, mostly faculty and deans and the head of the career place and then me, and there might—probably would have been another student or so.

So, you know, it was just—it really—it was so meaningful to me to feel like that if you cared about something and worked at it and pushed for it and were articulate about it that you could actually be part of the process of change. And, you know, change was frustratingly slow, and it often didn't come, and President Freedman pushed back quite a bit.

But, you know, as they—as Dr. King said, the arc does bend towards justice, and, you know, when you—when you look

back now from a distance of almost thirty years, you can see that. And even in that time, you know, the—at first, President Freedman would not agree to sort of cut off ties with the CIA or the Defense Department [U.S. Department of Defense], which is what we were sort of pushing him to do.

And as you probably know, this is right in the wake of the [anti-apartheid] movement to divest from South Africa, and that had been a long, long, long struggle, and that we had actually—I say "we"; I mean, I was only very, very, very tangentially involved at the very tail end. But, you know, that activist community had won that battle, and the college had actually had divested from South African investments. I think it was the second or the third Ivy League college to do so, so it was—it was one of the leaders.

So we were pushing him to do the same kind of thing with—with the Defense Department. This is, you know, before "Don't ask, don't tell." It's when gay and lesbian people were just barred from—from the military.

Anyway—sorry I'm taking such a long time—but I think it wasn't until maybe a year or so after I graduated, but President Freedman did finally write a letter to the secretary of defense, who at the time was none other than [Richard B.] "Dick" Cheney, saying that the Defense Department's exclusion of LGBT people was incompatible with the mission and values of Dartmouth College, because, you know, we refused to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

And, you know, it was—it's a big deal when a president of Dartmouth College sends a letter like that and makes it public. So it was just—it was great to be part of that. And I learned so much from other activists among the students at Dartmouth.

There was a fabulous feminist activist contingent. And they were smart and funny and creative, and so I sort of tried to—we sort of hooked onto their style too, and we had some—some really fun times. I mean, I don't know if it sounds strange to say that, but, I mean, I had just such fun, fond memories of—as—as—as painful as some of the experiences were and the discrimination was and as hard as it was to feel like an outsider and have all the weight of the conservatism and the frat culture and everything pressing

down on us, we just had such a fucking fun time, I've got to say. [Chuckles.]

And, you know, there was a time where we, on Dartmouth Night, you know, during [Dartmouth] Homecoming weekend, we had this whole, you know, sort of like hush-hush almost like terrorist idea, where we would put—you know, they bathed Dartmouth Hall in those—those spotlights, and we had it all—you know, we, like, coordinated our watches so at the exact moment, we would put—we put pink gels over those lights, so suddenly Dartmouth Hall was bathed in pink light.

And at the same moment, somebody who had snuck up into the building unfurled a big, like, gay rights banner from one of the upper-floor windows, and we all ran off, and there was a getaway car waiting for us, you know. [Chuckles.]

So we just—we had great—great times fighting for, you know, values and causes that we thought were—were super important.

I—all sorts of stuff is coming back to me, and I could go on and on, but I should probably let you actually ask some questions.

PINKNEY: Well, I guess I just want to say you do not at all have to apologize for going on and on. I think that's also part of the purpose of SpeakOut, is kind of to spur these memories, so I think—you know, it's just so interesting to hear all of your stories and experiences, and oftentimes—I'm just here as a facilitator. You know, there's really no guidelines or no boxes that I have to check, so it's kind of whatever—whatever comes to mind, you could say. This is—this is your interview. And if there are other experiences that you had in mind that you'd like to talk about, I'm a hundred percent would love to hear about them. And I'm sure whoever else listens to this recording would also love to hear them as well.

But—totally up to you right now. I can take it in a different direction, or I would love to hear more about those experiences that you just mentioned, or hinted at.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. Well, let me see if I can spool some things out, and feel free to interrupt at any point. Again, we've—we've covered to some degree what the atmosphere was like, and

I'm just trying to still—paint the picture, you know, to remind myself and also for you.

I mean, as I said, there was really only one gay professor. There were other—clearly other gay people there, but they weren't known—many of them weren't even known to LGBT students. And even Peter Saccio's partner, who was a professor in the drama department—and, you know, I think most people in the drama department knew that, but he—he wasn't, you know, really out officially.

And there were a few professors who were deeply closeted. At the time, as I remember, there was not a single tenured black woman in the arts and science faculty. And in the entire faculty, I think there were fewer than ten minority professors with tenure.

So, you know, the African-American community of students were really active in pushing for change. The international students were really active in pushing for change. As I said, the feminists. I mean, you know, this really isn't all that long when you think about it after Dartmouth went co-ed. Really it's just about a dozen years, a dozen, fifteen years since that.

So—and as I mentioned, the anti-apartheid activists. So there was just this whole swell of—of activism, pushing back against Reagan-Bush era conservatism and—and frat culture and all that.

And I guess I—the other thing is once I did come out and became so active, I think I sort of had a scarlet letter or something, because there were so few openly gay students—that's the other thing to sort of try to convey. I mean, I would be hard pressed to say there were more than about a dozen truly openly gay students at any time.

So because I was so—I think other people had this experience, too, other out gay people—I was so identified as an openly gay person that the closeted gay people, like, wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole, right? Because it's such a small campus, people are so identifiable, so if, you know—I think some people might have thought, well, if you—if they were seen with me, it would be too—it would be a giveaway.

So in retrospect, I missed this whole gay world, this whole gay sort of subculture at Dartmouth, of closeted people, so, you know, I come to find out there actually *were* all these gay and lesbian people, and they were even hooking up and having sex and probably were even, you know, in romantic relationships, including in all of the frats (surprise, surprise).

But I didn't know anything of that, I mean, I guess except for reading the graffiti in the bathroom stalls [chuckles], to be honest, because I knew—I knew people were hooking up there. So it was such a strange experience to have that—to feel like I was in such an isolated little group and not really know this other thing was going on.

And I would—you know, again, it makes me sound like such an oldster, but this is all pre-internet, and so the connections to the—and—and—and Hanover, as you well know, is so isolated, so the only connection to sort of like a wider gay culture, without having gay mentors other than Peter Saccio, was gay magazines that—the Baker Library, God bless them, subscribed to, *The Advocate*, which came every week, and then eventually a magazine called *OutWeek*, which was founded in New York in the late, very late eighties, I think, and was sort of a radical, queer weekly magazine.

And, you know, it was just one of my lifelines. Once a week, I would go into the new periodicals room at the library and read those, and at first I was probably super furtive and terrified and hoped nobody would see me, and then as time went on, I would hold it up obviously in front of my face, desperately *hoping* somebody would see me and identify me as gay and, you know, have some interest in me. [Chuckles.]

And actually, let me circle back to what I was saying about sort of the privilege of being in a community that is small enough where you really *can* be involved. Sort of one of my favorite little stories about—about how that works, but I think it was—it was right after one of our big protests, where I–where we had done something, you know, somewhat illicit, like put pink lights all over Dartmouth Hall and scurry away in getaway cars.

And I used to—I had a boyfriend for my whole senior year, named Chris Hogan. He was in my class. And we both lived in off-campus houses, and on any given night I might be staying at my own house or I might be staying at his house.

And, you know, the morning after or very soon after one of these protests, the phone rang early in the morning, at Chris's house. And it was a call for me. And it was from the dean of the college's office. [Chuckles.]

And so first I thought, like, *Okay, this is nuts. This college is small enough that the dean of the college's secretary knows to find me at eight o'clock in the morning at my boyfriend's house, not at my house.* And I was terrified that they were going to haul me in and I was going to be suspended or, you know, whatever, for having done something illicit at this protest, or maybe they were angry at *In Your Face!* and the way we had been distributing it on campus, or something.

And I don't mean to, you know, boast or whatever, but the—what actually ended up happening was they called me in. It was—Dean [Edward J.] Shanahan was the dean of the college. And I walked in so nervously, and he said, "Congratulations. I have the privilege of telling you that you're going to be the valedictorian of your class." [Chuckles.] I was like, "Oh! *That's* what this is for?" [Chuckles.]

So I just—you know, that's just how—how sort of weird and small, you know, the college is, I think. I imagine it still feels that way for you. But it was—you know, it was—it was, as I said, a privilege to feel known by the people in charge and the powers that be, because at the time, I would have—I would have yelled at them and told you how awful they all were. But looking back now, I realize how—I mean, they had jobs to do, but how—also how sort of open-minded they were to trying to support us in what we felt was—was important.

PINKNEY: Absolutely.

I think—so you provide me with a great transition once again. I was going to kind of segue into your very, very famous valedictorian speech, and I wanted to ask you—this kind of an empty question, but when's the last time that you read your valedic- —like, how familiar are you with it at this given point? [Both chuckle.]

LOWENTHAL: Probably embarrassingly familiar, although it's been years—you know, years and years since I've read it. But I—

PINKNEY: No, that's perfect.

LOWENTHAL: [Chuckles.]

PINKNEY: That's perfect. I have it in front of me. No pressure.

LOWENTHAL: [Chuckles.]

PINKNEY: "Conformity and Community." So I just want to kind of I guess circle back to your sophomore spring, because—and this is an assumption that perhaps is wrong, but once you mentioned the Amish family that you lived with at that point, I immediately kind of thought, *Hmm, I'm pretty sure you're referring*—were they the Herschbergers that you mentioned in your valedictorian speech?

LOWENTHAL: Yes.

PINKNEY: Okay. Perfect. So how about we start with that sophomore spring, that off term and what that was like for you, before transitioning into the speech, which was—man oh man! It's just—it's very—it's incredibly impressive to me that you had such, I don't know, courage to come out—you know?—as a valedictorian, whatever. I don't want to, you know, be—I don't want to make you feel weird about me being star-struck or whatever—

LOWENTHAL: [Chuckles.]

PINKNEY: —but, whatever.

LOWENTHAL: No, I appreciate it. I appreciate it so much. Don't worry about it.

Yeah, I mean, I think I said a little bit about this before, but I have—I have to figure out exactly the psychology of it, but I—I definitely—you know, when I spent that spring living with the Amish, there was definitely I think sort of a safety in that for me psychologically, where—I mean, part of me was, you know, desperate to be gay and explore that world, but it was also so new and so nervous-making in a lot of ways that, whether subconsciously or otherwise, I'm sure there was some—some sense it was, like, safe to go to this place, where I didn't have to—I could sort of take a pause and not test all those issues and that sense of self and that identity.

Because, you know, I just—I lost myself when I was there—I mean, pleasantly lost myself in the work and in the immersion in a totally different culture. I was, you know, fascinated by their culture. And I was a religion major or double major; one of my majors was religion, so I had an interest in that kind of stuff.

And, you know, as I said, because their culture is so, you know, different from ours, they don't talk openly about sexuality, really, of any—they don't talk about sexuality between married couples, really, particularly, as far as I know. So I just didn't have to sort of deal with that, although I did have some sort of funny sexuality-related moments when I was there.

When I was there, an old girlfriend from high school came by to visit because she—she lived not too far away, and I spent the day with her, and at the end of the day [chuckles], the twelve-year-old boy of the family, who, you know, didn't know yet that one shouldn't ask such things, assumed that she was my girlfriend and—I don't think he had any context for sexuality; he only had context for, like, farm animals and stuff. And after she left, he said, "So have you bred your girlfriend yet?" [Both chuckle.]

PINKNEY: Oh, my goodness!

LOWENTHAL: I've never forgotten that line. But, you know, other than that, I probably went three or four months without any, you know, mention of sexuality, although I was getting letters from a couple of people at Dartmouth, who I had met in the gay community, so I sort of had that—that lifeline going on.

So I think I—I think I sort of was recharging my batteries and really trying to figure out who I was. Like,—how to say this? Like, I didn't know whether—I think a lot of people who come out probably face this, but you don't know whether changing that one big thing is going to mean you—you have to upend everything about your identity and be a completely new person, or whether there can be sort of stuff that you carry forward.

I mean, I think—I would hope that now people who come out and come out much earlier have an easier time of it, but it—it felt then to me and to a lot of us that it might necessitate this

radical break with your past and your family and your values and your everything, right?

And so I think I was just taking this time to figure out, like, what part of me is still me? What part of me has to be new? And I knew that I—I—I liked the values in this community, and I liked hard work in the outdoors and that kind of stuff. Like, could I still hold onto that, or was I going to have to now be somebody who—I mean, you know, what's the stereotype at the time? I don't know. Like, become somebody who lives in Greenwich Village [a neighborhood in New York City, New York] and, you know, hangs out in bars and whatever the stereotype of a—of a gay life was, you know, at the time.

And so when I came out of that and then came to sophomore summer, I think I was really ready to try to figure out my own version of me, you know? So, like, I came out, and I was—I came back to Dartmouth, and I was certainly gay and eager to explore that world and eager to be an activist in that cause.

But I also still just wanted to be, like, a little bit weird in the ways that I guess I was weird. So, I mean, I—I laugh, looking back, but I—that whole sophomore summer, I went barefoot. I went to class barefoot. I went—you know, went to meals barefoot. And I wore this Amish straw hat the whole time. [Chuckles.] I was just sort of—I don't know, I was just sort of being free, you know?

So somehow that—that whole period was helpful to me in figuring that out. And then—not to skip ahead to it yet, but as I think I tried to write about in my speech, I mean, it—it certainly made me think really intensely about what community means and what conformity means and what aspects of yourself you have to sort of subsume for the benefit of a larger community that you're part of and which aspects of yourself you need to fiercely protect, even if it's going to potentially cause friction with the community that you're part of. And so I definitely came back to Dartmouth very much thinking about that and sort of trying to investigate that tension.

PINKNEY: I remember you mentioning—this is aside—but I remember you mentioning to me in an e-mail last summer, when I was on my sophomore summer, that you spent yours entirely barefoot, and that—I remember reading that e-mail and

thinking about it for a couple of minutes, about what that would be like.

LOWENTHAL: [Chuckles.] You weren't—you didn't try it?

PINKNEY: I did not try it. I must admit I was wearing my sandals all summer. But, you know, who knows? Maybe I'll do it this spring, during mud season. [Both chuckle.] Yeah, it's thirty-five out today; it's not that—not too barefoot friendly.

But I guess that brings us to the speech, the speech itself. So when did—I guess I'm trying to place it in the context of time, and I'm kind of curious in your—like, how you conceptualized the speech and—I guess the timeline between when the dean called you and notified you that you'd be valedictorian and then you writing the speech, and also—we don't have to get into this now, but also what Alternative Commencement was like. That's something else we want to touch on. But basically anything in that vein, anything in that vein that you feel is pertinent, I'd love to hear about.

LOWENTHAL: Sure. To be honest, I wish I had clearer memories about how the whole process went. I mean, I know there was that day I got the call and I went into Dean Shanahan's office and he told me I'd be valedictorian. I think that it was slightly earlier in the process than it usually would be for most people because—not to get into the weeds of it, but because I was a senior fellow for my whole senior year, I didn't—I wasn't taking classes at all, which meant that I wasn't getting any grades.

So my grade-point average was basically set in stone at the end of my junior year, so there must have been some time during the senior year where they realized it would end up being—you know, nobody else was going to get higher than that or whatever, so I think that came slightly earlier than—than it normally would have.

And I honestly don't remember how long I wanted to—to try writing the speech or sort of how I got the idea. I mean, I think it just sort of—as I said, I'd been thinking about issues of community and conformity and individualism, partly through my being a religion major and partly through my interest in the Amish and my own background with—coming from a somewhat religious Jewish family with a grandfather

who was a rabbi. I guess I haven't mentioned all of that, but—

So I think it just sort of came a little naturally, and I wrote it. And the interesting thing—I mean, to me it's interesting, that I would, you know, like to say is that at some point fairly close to commencement, the dean's office said they wanted to see a copy of the speech. And I at first—you know, my activist self bristled and freaked out a bit, and I thought, you know, *They're gonna censor me. I shouldn't agree to this.* You know, that whole kind of a thing.

And I can't remember how it all worked out, but they convinced me that it was, you know, the thing to do. And I met with—I don't know of her exact title; I assume she was, like, associate dean for something or other. Her name was Ngina [pronounced in-GEE (hard G)-nuh] [R.] Lythcott. She was a wonderful woman who had—was supportive to the activist students and just, you know, a really wonderful person.

And she read my draft of the speech and gave me advice that was so good, not just for that speech but sort of for everything, and I will be honest: I still think of her advice every time I give—I speak publicly or write something, and I've used it in my own teaching when students are giving me pieces they're working on.

What she basically said was—she—she wasn't trying to tone down my message or defang it, but—and I can't remember exactly my first draft, but it probably, just right out of the gate I was, you know, slashing and burning and saying how Dartmouth was homophobic or whatever. And she said, to paraphrase, basically:

"Listen. Not everybody is going to agree with your message, and you can't control that. Some people will; some people won't. The only thing you can control is how long they will listen to you before they either agree with or dismiss your message. And if you—you know, if in your first line you say something hostile and offensive and controversial, you're going to immediately lose a large part of the audience.

"But if you, you know, sort of build up to what you want to say, then you'll—you'll hold people longer, and actually by the time you say the challenging thing you want to say, you

may have won them over to some degree with what you've said, that they'll be more open to listening to your message that they would have immediately dismissed and disagreed with if you hit them with it in the first paragraph."

And I just vividly remember sitting in her office and her going through the speech line by line and saying this to me. And so I went home, and I, you know, redrafted it. And I just think it was such—such generous and wise advice, and I'm so grateful to her for it.

And I actually just, through the joys of Facebook, reconnected with her maybe two years ago, and that was—that was just so wonderful, to have the chance to thank her. I don't think she would mind my saying this, but she is a lesbian, and I look back with astonishment, again sort of—I'm not saying anything at all about her personally or her personal choice but just about the atmosphere of the time in the college.

To think that I was this gay student who'd been a gay activist, who was coming to her with a draft of a speech that was including all this stuff about gay rights, and there she was, sitting there as a gay person, and I didn't know that she was gay; she didn't tell me she was gay, and I didn't find that out for years later.

This is fascinating to me now, to—to look back and think about that. And, yeah, you know, I'm not in any way challenging or doubting her choice, and it may have been the completely appropriate thing. I just—I—I—I look back sort of sadly, worrying that she might have felt, you know, fearful or constricted in her life that her—her job or her position in the community might have been at stake if it were more widely known.

She might have been out to her colleagues and her friends and other people in the administration. I wouldn't doubt that she might have been, but just that—you know, that she wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing that with a student in my position is very striking to me, looking back.

PINKNEY: Absolutely.

Wow, I mean, Facebook never fails to, you know, provide some sort of something, some sort of—

LOWENTHAL: You know, I actually —

PINKNEY: —[cross-talk; unintelligible].

LOWENTHAL: —fully bit the bullet, and I deactivated my account a couple of months ago, which has actually felt great, but now it's making me think *I wonder—I wonder what I'm missing.* But that's their whole business model, isn't it?—is to—is to instill FOMO [fear of missing out] in as many people as possible across the world.

PINKNEY: Oh, absolutely. Well, you're fighting the good fight, I'll tell you that.

But I guess—oh, this is a quick aside, but what was your fellowship project? I want to go back to the speech, because I have *many* more questions it, but I was wondering what your senior fellowship project was at Dartmouth.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah, it was just—it was in creative writing, and so I was writing a novel. I mean, I guess thirty years later, I sort of want to say I was writing a, quote, "novel," unquote. But, you know, I actually—believe it or not, I—I drafted an entire draft of a novel during—during that year. I was studying with [Ernest] "Ernie" Hebert, who was a wonderful novelist who was on the creative writing faculty, who just—just retired a couple of years ago. Yeah, so that—that was a great experience all around.

PINKNEY: Fantastic.

Okay, so the speech. I don't know where to begin, honestly. There are so parts of it that I just—you know, that just spring—that spark a lot of questions for me, good questions also. I'm not, you know, trying to undermine your valedictorian speech—from really thirty years ago.

LOWENTHAL: No, ask anything you want.

PINKNEY: —from really thirty years ago.

LOWENTHAL: Challenge anything you want. Go for it.

PINKNEY: Okay. So I think the part that perhaps struck me the most, besides you coming out, of course, which is the kind of

centerpiece of what people remember, but during the speech—correct me if I'm wrong—you do kind of call for the end of the Greek system. And we touched on this before.

LOWENTHAL: And how—and how did that work out for us?

PINKNEY: Well, it certainly did not work out that great at all, since seventy percent of undergraduate students that are eligible are affiliated. Great.

LOWENTHAL: And what was that about the—the arc of the moral universe being really, really, really long? [Both chuckle.]

PINKNEY: Well, we'll see if they—you know, maybe they'll come around. Perhaps not.

But I think—I was just wondering—we've touched on the really toxic frat culture. I don't think you quite put it this way, but, like, the toxic masculinity evident on campus and kind of the really, you know, unseeming [sic] underbelly of what the—you know, the—of the—in the broader culture of the Dartmouth fraternity system. And I was wondering if you could speak a little more as your, like, motivations to including that in a—especially in the nineties, when Dartmouth was even more committed to the Greek system than they are now. I mean, at least now they've, like, derecognized two fraternities. But I think—I was wondering if you could speak a little bit more about that as we warm up, of course, to the—the big crescendo.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. I mean,—I mean, in some sense I got to say—I should acknowledge that maybe I'm a total fraud to even talk about it, because in my four years at Dartmouth, I stepped foot across the threshold of a fraternity exactly one time, which was when the Barbary Coast was playing a concert at one of the frats on Frat Row (Webster Avenue in Hanover, New Hampshire]. And so I had to go in. [Chuckles.]

But I—I mean, I literally never went in a frat, never attended a frat party. I mean, I guess—let me set that aside. There was Phi Psi [Phi Sigma Psi], which is probably now known as Panarchy or—I'm not sure if that's still there.

PINKNEY: Yes.

LOWENTHAL: I—I don't think anybody involved with that, or certainly I didn't consider that a frat. So I was there quite frequently because Chris, who I was dating, was a member, and I had a bunch of friends who were there, and Chris lived across—when I started dating him—with him—he actually lived inside Panarchy, and then he lived across the street, so there's that.

But, I mean, you know, sort of the real frats, I never went to. So maybe you could dismiss everything I have to say, but, yeah, I mean, the toxic atmosphere that you—as you phrased it—was just—it just pervaded everything. And, you know, like I said, from the first event in Spaulding during my orientation through—you know, I—people I knew were—what do you call it when you're trying to join a frat?

PINKNEY: Rushing.

LOWENTHAL: Rush- —pledging, whatever, yeah.

PINKNEY: Oh, yeah. Oh, right.

LOWENTHAL: And, you know, just getting completely blackout drunk and—and, forgive my language, but, you know, shitting the bed and peeing on the floor and—and breaking windows and all that kind of stuff. And so I just—it was so—it was so pervasive and all-consuming, and especially, you know, talking with my women friends at Dartmouth and hearing about their experiences and the ways they got treated, it was just—you know, obviously there are places other than fraternities where misogyny exists, and, you know, there's—there's the world, which doesn't—people don't live in fraternities, but there's still sexism.

But it was just clear that so much of it was centered around that culture and that if you didn't sort of go at that culture, there would—there would—it seemed to me, would be no way to make genuine progress. I mean, it was just this—it was like this weight that was always going to be tugging you back, no matter how much—because there's just no other way to really—I mean, how do you justify people of the same gender living together in that atmosphere, with that, you know, kind of substance abuse and all that kind of—you know.

Anyhow, I'm probably not saying anything you don't already know or think about. But—so I don't—you know, it wasn't, like, a focus of my—it wasn't the number one thing, I guess, on my list when I woke up in the morning every day, but it just seemed like if you didn't address that, you'd just be nibbling around the edges also. So I guess I—you know, I felt it was important to at least say that or mention that.

But that was—that was, I'm sure, one of the things—I mean, you have the speech in front of you; I don't. I'd be curious to know sort of like what—what percentage of the speech I had already given before I said that line, because I bet that's one of the things where Ngina said to me, you know, "If you say get rid of the frat system, literally nobody in the audience will listen to any word that follows that statement." [Chuckles.] So—so I probably tucked that closer to the end, if I'm remembering correctly.

PINKNEY: Yeah, it's in the third to last paragraph. And for the record I should probably read the line. It says, "There are many formal actions Dartmouth can take as an institution to facilitate this opening process, the most obvious and effective of those being the complete elimination of the Greek system, where much of the prejudice is entrenched." So that's in the third to last paragraph.

And also, I mean, if you look at the broader context, it was only six years prior that the Tri-Kap [Kappa Kappa Kappa] purge happened, in which multiple brothers were expelled because of their sexual orientation, you know? So it's not—it's certainly not out of place, and I don't want to seem like I'm—I'm certainly not disagreeing. In fact, I'm fully behind everything that you said in this.

LOWENTHAL: No, and, like,—like, you asked about before, with *The*—*The Dartmouth Review* taping incident. Same thing. The Tri-Kap purge was very much in the conversation for us in DAGLO. You know, it was—that would be something that—it was sort of like sort of oral history that was immediately passed down to all of us. Yeah, so that was definitely—that was definitely in the air as well.

PINKNEY: Yeah. Wow. Whenever I do this research (as a quick aside), it always astounds me how much and how little has changed. It's, like, this crazy paradox.

But to go back to the—to go back to the speech, I think, honestly, I am so curious as to how you felt—I mean, I read in *The New York Times* that you were given a standing ovation after the speech, which obviously differs from *The Review*'s account, for—you know, because they're *The Review*.

LOWENTHAL: "Fake news! Fake news!"

PINKNEY: I know! It's fake news. It's been happening forever.

LOWENTHAL: "The failing *New York Times*. You're gonna believe what *they* say?"

PINKNEY: [Laughs.] But I was just—I was curious, like, how it felt for you to kind of, in the speech, say—for the record, you know, it says, "What if I told you that another assumption, that I am heterosexual, is not true?" So you say that. And then it generates, like, this national discourse. I don't know, it seems really big. Maybe it seemed really big then. It seems pretty significant when I researched it, at least. And I was wondering how you felt in kind of the—the days and weeks after, when, like, this discussion about what the Dartmouth valedictorian said was going on, you know?

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. I mean, ah, lots to say, I guess.

PINKNEY: Or if you've ever felt unsafe also, because of *The Review*, the attention you got from *The Review*.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. No, I mean, I guess I'm privileged to say I—I never felt unsafe particularly, and I think I had enough support that I—that I was lucky enough to feel it was a badge of pride, you know, when they came after me, as they had come after so many people I respected and looked up to and had learned from.

And there was even some point—I think it might not have been until a couple of years later or something, where they—they saw some—some ad in a gay magazine or something and there was two gay guys, and one of them sort of vaguely looked like me, and they thought it was me, and so they published this thing, making fun of the fact that I had been in this gay ad or something.

And it was just sort of hilarious to me that they were so—I mean, not to—not to flatter myself, and it's nothing on this level, but almost the way people are, like,—the way conservatives are just freaking out about [New York Congresswoman] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez right now. Like, *The Review* would latch on to people like me or like Professor [William S.] Cole—was that his name?—in the music department, or President Freedman or various people. They would—they would latch on and then become obsessed sometimes.

So anyway, I was happy to take that as a—as a badge of—of pride, and—and as I said, luckily I felt enough support from the people that I really, you know, cared about, although it was a very difficult period also. And I was—you know, I had my feelings hurt a lot, and I was frustrated a lot. I'll try to come to that.

But I'll tell—I guess I'll—I can just tell you a little bit about the—the day, itself, maybe, and the reactions? Is that a good place to—

PINKNEY: That's a great place to start, yeah.

LOWENTHAL: I—I mean, I'm sure I was nervous as hell, although if I can a twentieth of the confidence and self-assurance that I had at the age of twenty or twenty-one that I do now, I would be happy. But I actually remember the—the speech itself sort of going well, and I felt the reaction in the moment was really good I think. And I was—you know, as I—as I imagine is the case for a lot of people in situations like that, you know, I had my own stuff going on, and I was sort of—that's what I was—I mean, it was—it was the day I was graduating from college, so I was sort of paying attention to that. And my family was there, so I was—they were the ones I was sort of most focused on, I guess.

PINKNEY: Had you previously come out to them? Sorry to interrupt.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. So I had come out to my mom, like, a year and a half or so earlier, I think. And I had not come out to my dad until about six months before the speech, and I had come out to him in a letter, and actually one of the reasons I did come out to him was I—I knew that he would come to graduation, and I don't think I knew I was going to give the speech yet, but I—you know, I—I was this gay activist on campus, and I

had a boyfriend and all that, and I knew that if he—you know, he came to campus for my graduation, all the—all my friends who he met would know me as this one thing. So I knew—I just knew I had to tell him. But that was sort of fresh, you know, six months, I guess, felt relatively fresh.

So I was nervous about all that. And there had been some family controversy, you know, because I had one grandparent still alive at the time, and she lived in Boston. It wouldn't have been that much of a stretch for her to come up to New Hampshire for my graduation, particularly because in my family, you know, education—educational achievement was sort of, you know, revered.

And—but my—my aunt had called me, and I think I had—you know, I had sort of warned my family that I—that I would be giving this speech and that I would be coming out, and my—my aunt called me. As I remember, it was on my twenty-first birthday. And I—I love my aunt, and we have a fantastic relationship now, and she's been incredibly generous and supportive for years and years and years, I need to say.

But in the moment and during that era, this was all new, so she was quite upset and angry, and she called me—rather than wish me happy birthday, she told me how this was such a mistake and how could I do this to the family, and that if I insisted on giving this speech, she was decreeing that she wouldn't come—she wouldn't bring my grandmother up to the graduation.

Anyway, so that was—you know, those were my reasons for being nervous. It wasn't abut *The New York Times* or *The Dartmouth Review* or anything like that. But I'm happy to s-—and I was also—we'll talk about Alternative Commencement at some time, but Alternative Commencement was this wonderful thing that took a lot of organizing, and I was very involved in it, and so I was also just sort of focused on—I had a lot of things I had to do that—that day.

But I just had a wonderful experience, I must say, at the speech, so—my mom was there, and I think I remember saying, you know, "Well, what do you think—what do you think your—your parents or your grandparents would have thought of this?" And she said something along the lines of,

“You know, they always—they always brought me up to say that, you know, the one thing you have that nobody can ever take away from you in life, no matter what else happens, is your own integrity, and that’s the most important thing.”

And she said, “I think they would have—you know, the whole gayness thing would have been a little bit weird for them, but they would have recognized that this was an act of integrity, and they would have been proud of you and thought that you were continuing the family legacy” or something like that, which is maybe the nicest thing that anybody has ever said to me in my entire life, and I remain incredibly grateful for that. As you can probably hear in my voice, I still choke up about it when I think about it.

And then the other sort of—I was nervous about how my dad would react, and the sort of great stroke of luck was that—do you know who [Barnett] “Barney” Frank is? He was the longtime congressman from Massachusetts and the first openly gay congressman—well, that’s not true. Gerry [E.] Studds was—I can’t remember how he—the exact historic nature of who he was, but basically one of the first openly gay congress people and a huge figure in the—in the gay rights movement.

He happened to be at graduation, because his boyfriend at the time, a guy named [Herbert M.] “Herb” Moses [Tuck 1990], was graduating from the Tuck School [of Business] on the same day that I was graduating. And my dad and mom were—were college classmates of Barney’s, and friends. I think my dad and Barney were both in the student government together at Harvard or something like that.

And so my dad got to be the proud father of the guy who was just the valedictorian and came out as gay to Barney Frank, a gay congressman [chuckles], and so it just—we sort of like leapt over this whole awkward nervous thing because instead of being, like, ashamed or embarrassed about having a gay son, my dad suddenly got to be the super-proud person who would be—you know, who would be impressing Barney Frank. And so that—that was real awesome. And I got to meet Barney, and I had my picture taken with him.

And I had such incredible support from my professors, who were—Peter Saccio was there, and my mentor, Blanche [H.]

Gelfant, who was an English professor, was there and was—you know, we had our picture taken on that day. And everyone was just saying just the kindest, kindest, most supportive things.

And then Alternative Commencement happened, which, again, maybe we'll come back to that. But, you know, in the period afterward, it was just this crazy sort of bipolar experience because I was getting tons of mail. Some of it was beautiful, gorgeous, generous, heartwarming mail, people coming out to me, people saying that they were closeted but I was inspiring them, people sharing their stories—you know, all that kind of stuff, which was just amazing. I mean, I just felt so grateful that people would—that, you know, that I sort of somehow sparked something that people would want to reach out in that way.

And also, you know, that *Times* article was fun. I mean, my—my favorite high school English teacher saw that *Times* article and—and sent me a note saying how proud she was, which, you know, meant everything to me. Years later, I learned that *she* was a lesbian, which I didn't know [chuckles] in high school.

And, you know, it was covered in the gay press, and I was asked to write something for *OutWeek* magazine, which was one of those magazines I had sat reading in the periodicals room of Baker Library, and it was, you know, like, my first chance to actually publish something as an aspiring writer in a—in a national publication, so that was thrilling.

And then there was just all this horrible—you know, these attacks, letters to the editor of the *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* and the *Valley News*, and people saying how—what an embarrassment I was and how thoughtless I was and how could I be so disrespectful, especially to the fiftieth anniversary reunion class.

And that—that really—I've got to say that really stung, particularly that—I—I—I mean, I guess one could argue it, if you go back and you read the text of the speech, but I never intended in any way to dishonor or disrespect those people. In fact, I was trying to—I don't remember the exact lines of the speech, but I seem to remember I basically said, like, you know, "Look at these people who are back here fifty years after their graduation. You know, they felt such

incredible bonding and community and cohesion in their class that they're still friends fifty years later, and they still love their college fifty years later."

Like, wow! I was trying to say, like, "That's amazing. That's great. That's what we should strive for." But it—it's not as simple anymore to just, you know, bond with people because they were all similar backgrounds, you know. Now we have all this diversity, and so it takes an effort to bond and to have that kind of community. And I was, you know, saying, "Here are some of the things we could do to make it easier to bond as a community, despite the fact that we are all so diverse, or in fact celebrating the fact that we're so diverse."

So that—you know, that's how I meant it. I didn't at all mean to diss those people, and so that was the part where, like, I really wanted to—I wish I could, like, talk back to people and say—and say, "No, you're wrong! You're wrong! You're wrong!" But—but, you know, people definitely raked me over the coals for supposedly having disrespected and dishonored those—those folks.

So that was sort of the immediate aftermath. And, you know, weirdly enough, thirty years later, I still run into people who were there or heard of it or something, and it's just so odd to me that this one—you know, it must have been five minutes of my life or something—still sometimes ripples—ripples out.

But, you know, in retrospect, I'm just really glad for the experience. Even though parts of it were painful afterwards, mostly it was great, and it put me in touch with a lot of people and opened doors in other ways. I mean, there were—

I won't bore you with all the details, but somebody who ended up being a really important mentor for me in the writing and publishing world and was a dear, dear friend—I initially—he was pulling together an anthology, and he had an open call for submissions, and I submitted an essay to him, hoping that he would choose it. And when he got the submission from me, he recognized my name, even though he was not associated with Dartmouth. And I think it was one of the things that sort of caught his attention, and he ended up reading my submission and accepting it for his book, which was another one of my very first publications. And, as I said, he became a dear friend and a mentor.

So there were all these little ways where it—it—you know, it ended up helping out. So oddly enough, it's been—it's definitely been a factor, somehow, in—in my life as I've gone on.

PINKNEY: Absolutely. I just want to say, you remembered it very well [chuckles], the passage that you were referring to. It's almost—it's—it's exactly the structure of the paragraph. [Both chuckles.] It's funny how things stick with you.

So I think now perhaps is a good opportunity to talk a little bit about Alternative Commencement and what that was, your involvement with it, things like that.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. I—I don't remember how long it had been going or who had started it, but it definitely, you know, was, like, this preexisting tradition, that the—you know, among the students who were sort of "other" at Dartmouth, who didn't feel part of the—the—the mainstream community or felt a little bit alienated. But it wasn't—I guess that's an odd word, because—it wasn't sort of some hostile, humorless, sad-sack event; it was actually this—sort of going back to what I was saying about, like, the sort of the madcap activism and all the fun we had sometimes.

It was this, like, wonderful, irreverent, supportive, celebratory, funny Alternative Commencement. So as I remember—you know, and most people didn't, like, skip the official commencement and then do this; most people, you know, I think did both. So as I remembered, it was sort of later that afternoon. We did it on the lawn, maybe outside of—could have been outside the AAm, the African-American [sic; then Afro-American] Society.

And it was just, you know, really progressive and supportive and fun. And that year, we brought as our guest speaker Essex Hemphill, who was just an absolutely amazing man, a poet, an activist. He was living with HIV, and he—he—he wrote sort of fiercely open, proud, gay and African-American experience-based poetry and was just a wonderful leader and a—and a voice in the community.

And, oh, I just feel so lucky, looking back, that we—we had the chance to have him and interact with him. And one of my classmates, [Gregorio A.] "Greg" Millett [Class of 1990] and I

went to pick him up at the airport and then, you know, brought him—brought him over, and he—that was, I think, the night before, and he—I got to introduce him to my mom. They were fast friends [chuckles] and all of that.

So it was just, you know, sort of, again, in—in that realm of sort of Republican-dominated America and conservative, frat-dominated Dartmouth, to have this radical, gay, black, HIV positive poet fly up and—and speak to us at our Alternative Commencement was just almost like other-worldly, you know? It was just so, so great.

And, yeah, I guess I don't remember exactly what else we did. I'm sure some students spoke. But it was just such a nice way to sort of recognize and culminate the—the fact that we all had found our own community outside of the mainstream Dartmouth community and that we had sort of kept each other alive and sane and healthy.

I mean, I think—you know, I mentioned earlier there were points where I thought about dropping out, and I think almost every gay person and black person, immigrant student—I mean, all of us wrestled with these difficulties in the community, and we all sort of stood up for one another and helped each other through, and bonded through these communities, like the *In Your Face!* newspaper and a lot of other things. So it was just sort of a culmination of all of that and thanking one another for having been there. So it's one of my—my really happiest memories.

PINKNEY: That sounds so wonderful. It sounds so wonderful.

LOWENTHAL: Does that not happen anymore at all?

PINKNEY: You know, I'm not too sure. I've never been on campus for commencement, but that's something I can—I can look into. I've never heard of it prior to researching you as a person. Sounds weird, saying I've researched you as a person, but, you know, besides—

LOWENTHAL: I think the term is—the technical term is "stalking."

PINKNEY: Oh, okay. "Sleuthing," perhaps. [Chuckles.] Prior to sleuthing you and your past, I had never heard of it, but I can look into that and let you know if that's still something that goes on. It would be cool if it is. I would go to that.

LOWENTHAL: Or if not, you should reintroduce it.

PINKNEY: Absolutely. Yeah. We can—I'll talk to you about it after—after I stop the recording. [Both chuckle.] Pause.

But I guess now I was wondering if we could shift gears a little bit to talk about the years that you kind of worked at Dartmouth, because you graduated in 1990, and then 1992 to 1994 you work—you start working at the University Press of New England, which is technically Dartmouth College affiliated, in some respect. And I was wondering specifically about the processes behind, like, starting the first LGBTQA [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual] staff/faculty group, the first, you know, LGBT studies course.

And I also—a question that kind of cropped up for me, and please feel free to stop me if I'm asking too many questions at once, but Peter Saccio is someone who's come up in conversation a lot over the course of this interview, and I was wondering to what extent he was influential in starting that LGBTQA faculty/staff group.

So any one of those questions [both chuckle] that I just asked you.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. Those—those are good questions. This is a period that's somewhat dimmer in my memory, so I'll do my best. I may get some of it wrong, and I hope there's other people in the project who will be able to—to fill it in.

Maybe this is the point to say, too, like, I think I have a notoriously spotty and sketchy memory, so I'm going to be—I'm sure I've made lots of mistakes or remembered things wrong, and I'm going to be mortified when anybody points that out, and, again, I just hope there are other people from my era, whether it's Chris Hogan or Steve Cosson or Greg, who I just mentioned or just—you know, I could go down the list. I really hope that they have a chance to participate and give their versions, which are probably more trustworthy than mine.

I guess just very briefly I'll say about this sort of interim period after college, I went—for the summer, I worked at that summer camp. Then Chris and I moved down to Northampton [Massachusetts], where two other Dartmouth—

people who graduated in either the Class of ’88 or ’89—I can’t remember—and who were a lesbian couple and who we had known through activist circles and all that. They moved to Northampton. And so we went, and we joined them, and we shared a house, and we started ACT UP Western Mass, and so we—you know, we sort of continued the activism and all that.

And then for various reasons, most of them having to do with sort of job and economic troubles, Chris and I decided to move back up to the Upper [Connecticut River] Valley, where we knew we had enough friends and acquaintances and support that we would be able to somehow, you know, keep food on the table.

We—we knew somebody who would let us live rent free in return for doing some carpentry and painting in their house, and I knew I could sort of be a research assistant for some of my professor-mentors.

And so it was sort of funny, after having, you know, left Dartmouth in a fiery blaze of whatever [laughs] and having criticized the place so much, to return really just a year later and—but, you know, I loved the area, and I had great friends there, and, as I said, I never meant to bash Dartmouth. There are great things about Dartmouth. It’s a wonderful community.

So anyway, be that as it may, I just wanted to sort of explain how I—how I got back there. And I was eventually working, yeah, for University Press of New England, which was—sadly, it just went—went by the wayside, but it was a wonderful press, and it was an official Dartmouth, you know, employment situation.

And like I said, I can’t remember exactly how it all—I don’t know whether Peter [Saccio] was involved or others. I do know that at some point, Chris and I moved in with our friend, Susan Ackerman [Class of 1980], who is a, you may know, professor of religion at the college. She had just—just arrived as a professor. I mean, she was—she’s actually a Dartmouth grad as well. But she had just arrived as professor, and we became friends with her and then eventually shared a house with her for a couple of years.

And I remember Susan being quite involved and also a guy named John [G.] Crane [Class of 1969], who worked at the library, and a few other people. I apologize for not remembering the origins, but we—we pulled together this LGBT staff and faculty group and had meetings and tried to decide what we wanted to work on.

You know, there were still a lot of—the kinds of issues we worked on at the time were sort of—our strategy was sort of like—in some ways, it was similar to when we were trying to get the CIA barred from campus because they discriminated against LGBT folks, and we were pointing out the discrepancy between that and the college policy.

So the college every year would run this huge fundraising campaign for United Way, and the college, you know, put its own resources behind it, so you would, like, get an official college e-mail from your department or whatever, encouraging you to donate to the United Way.

Well, we pointed out that the United Way—some of that money would support the Boy Scouts [of America], and the Boy Scouts were famously refusing to let gay people be scout leaders at that point. And, again, I'm sure you know that's a fight that went on for another twenty, twenty-five years, and they finally let gay people in. But at the time, there was big case because there was this one Eagle Scout who wanted to be a scoutmaster, and he was gay, and they wouldn't let him in.

Anyway, we were arguing, you know, the Boy Scouts are discriminatory, the United Way is giving all this money to the Boy Scouts, and here's Dartmouth rallying the troops to give money to United Way. That goes against our principles of anti-discrimination, so we should stop this. So that was the kind of thing we were working on.

And then we were also working on trying to get—at the time—you know, this was so long before gay marriage was, you know, even in the conversation, really. So we were trying to argue that—that gay domestic partners should be able to get spousal benefits, like to put your gay partner on your health benefits. Again, in the years before Obamacare [Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act], that was even all the more important because it was so hard to get health insurance.

So we did that. And, actually, Chris and I were sort of the poster—poster children for that. I remember there being a big article in the *Valley News* about the fact that Chris and I were fighting to see if he could be put on my—on my college health plan. And we actually did eventually win that benefit.

And so sort of wrapped up in all that was also this idea of starting the LGBT studies course. And people had taught—you know, Peter Saccio had taught, like, gay playwrights courses or gay literature courses. There had been some LGBT-themed courses. I actually took one in my—when I was there, it was—it was a visiting professor in the religion or philosophy department, and he did a course on AIDS and Ethics, which, looking back again, that was sort of fascinating. I mean, I think that was probably 1988, and that's an—that's an early time to have taken, you know, a course on AIDS. So I feel lucky, looking back, that I had that chance.

So there had been scattered courses here and there, but there had never—you know, queer studies or LGBT studies was such a new-ish field at the time, and we wanted to make it official and have, like, Intro to LGBT Studies, whatever. So Susan was definitely at the forefront of that. And Peter was involved. It may have been the two of them developing the course together. I can't remember exactly.

And, you know, I was doing a lot of reading on my own in that—in that area, too, so I was helping them with the curriculum, and—again I forget all the details, but, you know, it went through all the official channels, the curriculum committee or whatever, and it got approved. So that was the first time that that had happened at Dartmouth, so that was another sort of notable—notable achievement, I think, of—of the time.

I feel awful—that's really sort of all the details I can remember at this point. Susan Ackerman would remember a lot more, I'm sure, as would a few other people.

PINKNEY: Yeah. Well, no worries about, you know, the limits of the human mind, you know? Absolutely no worries.

I think now might be a good point in the interview to kind of pivot to a little bit of a different discussion, just more so

about—I guess I have a couple of questions about, like, who you were as a person before Dartmouth versus who you are as a person now type of deal—like, kind of in general, how you as a person have grown or developed over time. I think that you've mentioned a couple of times that you know you're fifty years old, and that commencement speech was thirty years ago, almost. It's hard to believe.

But I think I'm wondering, like, how that's influenced you today, how your experiences at Dartmouth have really influenced you or, in general, like, you know, what's up with you since—since you've graduated. I know that you're a writer. You have—you've taught writing in some respect. But I'm kind of curious—it's more of like a reflection question, I suppose, in the most general of senses. But anywhere—

LOWENTHAL: Well, yeah, you can keep—you can keep prompting me and trying to shape an answer. I mean the first thing that sort of popped in my mind—I'm not sure what you're asking, but—and then it goes back to something I was saying about sort of the—the benefits of being in this community, where you felt like you really could have an effect and—and move the needle and that your voice might be heard or whatever.

When I—you know, everybody talks about privilege these days, which is a great conversation to have. When I think about privilege, and how it [unintelligible] sort of manifests in—in—in my life. I mean, I'm sure there are different kinds of economic privilege and race privilege and gender privilege and all that.

But what I really think of—and this is sort of like a positive spin on it, in a way: The way Dartmouth is or was when I was there is such that it sort of trained me to feel, in this privileged way, that I was important, my views were important, my voice was important, I deserve to be heard, I deserve to have access to the people who were in charge, I deserve to expect that I should be able to change them and change the—the system and the structure and the institution if I was able to make a forceful enough argument.

And that's a kind of privilege that you can't pay for. You know what I mean? Some people might say, "That's exactly what you do pay for when you go to an Ivy League school," but, I mean, that's—to me, it's that sort of attitude or assumption that really is at the essence of privilege, and, of

course, it's unfair and unequal that other people don't have that experience.

But for me, having the benefit of that experience at Dartmouth and knowing that I could barge into President Freedman's office and complain to him and that I could take over the Career Employment Office and demand to have them set up a committee to investigate that, and then to see that it led to change, that President Freedom wrote a letter to the secretary of defense, or to see that the, you know, LGBT studies course was approved or to see that we did get spousal benefits for gay partners, all that kind of stuff.

That sent me out into the world with this whole feeling and attitude that, you know,—of—of—of worth, you know?—of—of—of sort of self-assurance and that—and that I had something to say and that it was worth saying and that people might listen.

And I think it was—that gave me this confidence—you know, I have, trust me, days upon days of self-doubt now, especially at mid-life, and I worry about whether I do have anything to say and whether anybody would listen to it, but at least for a long time, when I came out of Dartmouth, there was that—just that solid feeling in my core that gave me the confidence to do improbable things, like try to become a writer or, you know, start writing opinion pieces for newspapers, or tell stories that I wanted to tell, or, you know, keep fighting for—for change in the political system, whatever.

So that has really, you know, carried through. And when I do have those moments of doubt, I try to think back of the feeling of confidence that was sort of trained in me at Dartmouth. And I try to draw upon that, I guess. Yeah. Does that make sense?

PINKNEY: Absolutely. Yeah, I think—

I also had another question. Now, forgive me. I'm going way back to probably minute ten of this interview. [Chuckles.] But—

LOWENTHAL: I think I can remember that long ago.

PINKNEY: Oh, good. Okay. Good, good, good. It's only been two hours. So Farm & Wilderness, the instrumental summer camp that was very influential in specifically your, like, formation of personal values and kind of sense of self—I think—you mentioned that they really emphasized things like cooperation and non-competition, and a question that I've had for—since then that I've wanted to ask at the end, after we've kind of talked about the bulk of your Dartmouth experience: I was wondering how this kind of transferred not only to Dartmouth but, like, how it's—how/if it stayed with you for the rest of your life, despite going to a school where I think—maybe you disagree with this characterization, but I think it can be pretty cutthroat at times, and kind of this communalism is not really something that is rewarded at a—at one of—at this particular Ivy League school.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. Yeah, no, I think—and I'm sure I've—I'm sure I've fallen short of my own standards and values and failed many times, but I—but because of that early influence and that early training in cooperation and—and consensus (like reaching consensus is this huge Quaker thing), I think that at least gave me the attitude where—I mean, of course, you know,—and once, since I was also—I was striving individually and trying to, you know, do my own thing, and being a writer is a totally, you know, individualistic, self-centered thing, whatever.

But, like, being part of the activist community at Dartmouth—there was that sort of grass-roots "we're all in this together," you know, sort of cooperative effort thing. So, you know, like, the newspaper, *In Your Face!*—which, again, I am not—I was not, by any stretch, one of the—the—the key people, but I was one of the, you know, small group of people doing it—there was just—it had all the best parts of, like, collectivist—you know, collective organizing and activism and—and collective art making.

And, you know, similarly, organizing the Alternative Commencement—you know, you just sort of had to get together and learn how to cooperate and learn how to—I mean, you know, people who are pushing for social change—and you see it now with the [Bernard] "Bernie" [Sanders] people versus the whoever other people. You know people have strongly-held beliefs, and a lot of people—they—they have one way they want to go about it,

and they think the other way is wrong, whatever. So it can be tough.

And there's—you know, different groups have different aims, and they don't know how much to ally. So you know, the African-American students are pushing for one thing, the LGBT students are pushing for one thing, the women are pushing for one thing. You know, how do we find common ground? How do we not alienate one another? How do we make sure that we're not stepping on toes? And how do we see our own privilege, even though we're [unintelligible] in a certain way. You know, all those kinds of issues that anybody who is involved in that kind of work faces.

So I think—I would like to think that I had a good sort of preparation and grounding for that, going all the way back to the Farm & Wilderness days, and then I would, again, like to think that I learned a lot more of that at Dartmouth from the students who were my mentors and people I looked up to.

And I do find that that sort of carries through in my—you know, even in my professional life. I mean, I'm on a faculty of creative writing in a master's program, and, you know, it's—that's like herding cats, too because it's, you know, thirty individual poets and novelists who all want to go off and do their own thing.

And I can feel myself sometimes, when I'm at a faculty meeting or a—or a group discussion, I can sort of feel that old training or—or the old practice I had in trying to help negotiate different factions. I can sort of feel that coming back into play, and I—you know, I would like to think that's useful.

And even in—I think about the difference between—this is just broad sort of stereotypes, but I've never lived in New York, and I've sort of consciously not been part of the New York writing and publishing community, which feels to me, at least from the outside, quite cutthroat, in some of the same ways that you described Dartmouth, whereas actually, the—the Boston writing and publishing community tends to be more supportive and cooperative. And there's a lot of people here—I'm one of them—who talk about sort of being a good literary citizen and—and instead of always just pushing for yourself, pushing for other people. And then, of course, you

hope that you do well by doing good and that, you know, what goes around comes around, all that kind of stuff.

So, yeah, I would like to think that there's—that you can sort of trace the trajectory and that it's all—that it all ends up being of a piece.

PINKNEY: You can't see. I'm nodding.

LOWENTHAL: Oh, I thought you were falling asleep.

PINKNEY: No, I'm not fall- —certainly not! It's only five o'clock on a Monday.

LOWENTHAL: [Chuckles.]

PINKNEY: I think my next question was how you see your activism, or even political beliefs, if you want to take it in that direction, but how it's kind of shifted over time. I think we've touched on sort of these—I don't know if you define it as, like, activist upbringing, but this, like, exposure to activism at, like, a relatively young age, and then the work that you did at Dartmouth. And I was wondering how that has or maybe hasn't or has to a certain extent transferred into the remainder of, you know, your life after college, because college is only four years of one's life, you know? So that's what—that was my next question.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah, I mean,—I mean, one thing I guess I should say is I'm actually—especially when I think back on this and describe it all, I'm sort of, to be honest, disappointed in myself or ashamed on some level that I—I haven't devoted more of my life to, you know, actually working for change and fighting for change. I mean, I—I could make the excuse that I've tried to do it in my own little communities, but I sort of haven't been as involved in, like, the big-picture fights as much.

And that is a disappointment, and I'm not sure exactly why I took that turn. I mean, there's part of being just so involved, as I said, in sort of the individualistic work of writing that I—I somehow dropped—dropped out of that.

And my sort of community-building efforts have been—[Sighs.] I mean, I actually transferred a bunch of them to the sort of literature world. So for—when I moved to Boston for a few years, a friend and I created an LGBT reading series in

Boston, and we would bring writers from around the country to hear, so that was a great community-building thing. And it had a political, you know, edge to it, but it wasn't really activism work.

And similarly, I—I was on the board of directors for a long time of an organization called PEN New England, which is an organization that fights for freedom of expression and supporting, you know, imperiled and oppressed writers around the world. And, you know, so I was active through that. And I—I went and I helped organize their program of teaching writing to inmates at a prison, and I went and did that.

So, you know, there—there are ways that I have done work that I hope is a continuation of—of the early work, but I—I haven't been, you know, fighting on the front lines of—of change. And I—I sort of wonder why that is.

Actually, it's interesting—this is really, sorry, neither here nor there, but I was thinking back to some of the people I was with at Dartmouth who *did* go on to do that but who actually were closeted at the time, so I didn't know them or didn't know them as gay people. So one of my classmates is Eric [K.] Fanning [Class of 1990], who was the first openly gay secretary of the [U.S.] Army, who I certainly hope will be interviewed for this project. But he was closeted, and I didn't know him.

Brian [V.] Ellner [Class of 1992], who ended up being somebody who—for example, he ran the Human Rights Campaign's effort to pass marriage equality in New York State, so he's been a big-time, you know, LGBT activist in—in—in New York. I knew him at—at Dartmouth. In fact, he was, like, president of the student council, I think, and he came—I hope I'm not telling tales out of school, but I remember vividly him coming to my senior fellowship office with another person from the student government and asking me, you know, what could they do as supportive, straight allies to help the, you know, LGBT activists on campus because he was closeted at the time, and then, you know, he came out.

And Keith [O.] Boykin [Class of 1987], who you may know, who worked in the [William J. "Bill"] Clinton White House and is on CNN [Cable News Network] all the time now, is a

wonderful writer and thinker and activist. Graduated shortly before, a couple of years before I did. Also closeted.

So anyway, there are people from Dartmouth who went on to do these amazing things out in the world, and I do—I look at them and I'm sort of envious, and I'm, as I said, sort of disappointed in myself.

Where was I going with all this? I can't remember [chuckles] the question.

PINKNEY: Oh gosh. Yeah. How—oh, how your activism has shifted over time.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah. I mean, I guess—I guess that's it. I mean, I—I mean, another weird thing is in terms of LGBT rights, and I will probably, at the risk of sounding very, like, sour, that the turn that the LGBT activist movement took towards marriage equality was actually sort of alienating to me. It was not the fight that I would have fought. I mean, I acknowledge all sorts of ways that it's been positive and transformative, and it may be—I don't know if I'm ready to concede that the people who decided that that was the fight to have, you know, were right. But I certainly—it—it wasn't the fight I would have chosen, and I worry that it has left out a lot of other issues and other people and that it was a sort of a—more of a conformist and mainstreaming fight.

So there was—there was a period where I just sort of got a little alienated from it and sort of just went about living my life and didn't feel like being on the—on the front lines of that. But, you know, I would join the cause, you know, here and there and go to marches.

And, you know, now in the era of [President Donald J.] Trump and transgender ban and all that, I mean, to me that is a very—I mean, it's of course enraging and tragic, but it's also energizing again, I think, in terms of activism. So I've been back out, you know, marching again for the last few years. I think a lot of us have had that experience, where we probably hadn't been to a protest in quite a while, and now suddenly we've—we've been to many of them. Yeah, so I—I would say that's—that's pretty much it.

I mean, the other—I have written a lot about LGBT issues, both in my fiction and my nonfiction, and in a way, I guess

that's how I sort of shifted how I direct my own energy. I mean, early on, I was—I was, you know, writing—there was a newspaper called *The Boston Phoenix*. It was, like, the alternative weekly. And—and I was writing specifically LGBT, you know, feature stories and opinion stories about politics and culture and whatever in the New England area.

But then when I started writing fiction, you know, I would hope that I spark conversations about stuff. This probably sounds too self-centered and self-aggrandizing, but, you know, I wrote about—a novel about sexual abuse at a boys' camp. I—my most recent novel is about two gay guys who decide they want to have a baby with a surrogate mother, and it's sort of investigating questions about gay family and what that means and sort of what I was talking about before, about the sort of balancing—sort of the old version of what a gay identity meant with sort of a newer, maybe more assimilated, more conformist, quote-unquote, "family values" version of gayness.

So I've—I've channeled those issues into my writing, hoping that—I mean, of course I hope, first of all, that people just are interested in the stories, but I hope that they spark questions about these sort of complicated issues, and I hope to sort of take black-and-white things and make them gray, if that makes sense.

So, yeah, I guess I'm just—I'm talking myself—you can tell, I'm talking myself into understanding [chuckles] what I—what I want to say. And I do really think that I—that's how I ended up saying what I wanted to say and channeling the voice that when I was in college was more of a sort of an activist voice, and I've channeled it into more of like a storytelling voice.

PINKNEY: Gotcha.

I'm wondering if there's anything that you feel we haven't really touched on, whether that be something we've kind of missed completely in this conversation, something that you'd like to go more in depth on, anything that—anything we missed?

LOWENTHAL: No. I mean, as you can tell, I could probably talk your ear off forever, but I think we—I think we covered really most of the main—the main things. I mean,—yeah, I would just be repeating myself, but I just, looking back, again, just how

many truly wonderful people there were, both among the students who I finally did find my sort of family with and the faculty and the staff and—and—and people who were really there for me.

So I—especially now that my sort of—the anger of my—some of my experiences has—has faded, I really do look back with gratitude for all the—the people who were there and the experiences I—I had.

PINKNEY: Absolutely.

Oh, I was wondering what inspired you—I don't really like the word "inspired," actually. What were your motivations for participating in SpeakOut?

LOWENTHAL: Besides loving to hear the sound of my own voice, apparently.

PINKNEY: [Chuckles.]

LOWENTHAL: No, I just—I—first, I just—I wanted people to recognize what a wonderful project I think it is and to recognize—I mean, it shows the degree to which Dartmouth has changed and the world has changed, and I—I really believe that, especially if you complain about an institution and try to get it to change, when it does show signs of that change, you should do—you have the obligation to do everything you can to support that change. So, you know, that's part of it.

And I consider it a privilege to be—to be part of it and to be able to tell my—my stories. I know how valuable it was to me when I was a student to hear about the experiences of the people who had come before and what it was like during their era, and as you can tell, somebody who—you know, stories are my thing. I'm into stories, and that's sort of how I make sense of the world, is by actually hearing what people's own first-person experiences were like.

So, you know, if I can lay all this down on tape—or I suppose tape doesn't exist anymore but if I can get this into the ones and zeroes of the—the recording system and, you know, somebody years later can get a sense of what it was like during our specific era, that would just—that would be great for me, to think that I would have some small part in shaping

how they understand the time that—you know, that I lived through.

PINKNEY: Absolutely.

Oh, my last question, I guess, before I stop the recording would be what do you hope SpeakOut will do? You know, we're collecting all these interviews. Some of them have been posted online as part of Dartmouth's celebration of its 250th anniversary of existence. But I was wondering if you had any specific hopes or aspirations with what the program—like, with what comes after the program.

LOWENTHAL: Yeah, I mean, I guess just I hope it's there for people to feel—if anybody feels alone, you know, in the future, that they can listen to these recordings and feel a little bit less alone. And, like I said, I hope people can go back and get a little bit of a sense of what the experiences were like for those of us who, you know, have—have told our stories and that that can contribute to, you know, just sort of like a realistic and nuanced understanding of what the culture is like and how it's changed and how the whole trajectory of—especially of sort of LGBT life has gone.

So I think it would be super cool if a hundred years from now they do another one, and people can, you know, compare.

PINKNEY: A hundred years from now! Wow.

LOWENTHAL: [Chuckles.]

PINKNEY: Unless the climate, you know, completely—anyway—whatever, whatever. It's different.

Well, anyway, thank you so—I just want to thank you again so, so much for participating in this—in this project.

LOWENTHAL: Thank you for listening.

PINKNEY: Oh, absolutely. You're a great storyteller. I really—you know, hearing about your experiences was super great, and I can't—can't say that enough.

[End of interview.]