

Interview with T.C. Duong
Interview by Sharon P. Doetsch

Interviewed on December 5 and 18, 2004, and January 2, 2005
At T.C.'s home in Southeast Washington, DC

b. May 11, 1972
Saigon, Vietnam

First Interview
December 5, 2004

SPD: So first off, this is different for some people. The first part of the interview is your life story. So some people just can go with that and march, and some people I ask them more questions, so it is up to you. Do you just want to kind of start from the beginning, where you were born and life as a kid?

TCD: Sure, yeah. I guess I can say I was born in Saigon, Vietnam and my parents came to the United States when I was three. So very young, in 1975. What was really interesting was the kind of coming together of two cultures and negotiating that. We moved around a lot because all of my dad's medical degrees were voided, so he had to go back to medical school. And so we came via the refugee program, to California first, Northern California and were taken in, bizarrely enough, by a pot-smoking Episcopal bishop. I found out about the pot-smoking much later, and in Carmichael, California. Then we moved around as my dad was getting his medical degree and doing his internships. So, up until age eight, where we finally settled down into Southern California, we were in Texas, Pennsylvania and California and moving around almost every year, and then we settled in Orange County in 1980. And it's an interesting place, Orange County [laughs]. It's really conservative but you know, like California, it's incredibly diverse and it is home to the largest Vietnamese population in the world. There are more Vietnamese in one place in Orange County than there are in Vietnam, in any city in Vietnam.

SPD: Oh wow.

TCD: So, I mean it was amazing because like coming up to D.C. there is just-- it's very different being sort of one of the few Asians in a room. And if you are talking about GLBT spaces, one of the only Asians in the room in so many spaces here. Whereas on the West Coast, I mean, it's just so much different and everybody, there's just huge amounts of Asians everywhere, whereas there are pockets of Asians in this area. So, I grew up there and spent my entire life in Orange County from that point on, up to college I went to Claremont McKenna College and it was-- once again, I find it weird that I gravitated towards a school that was so conservative. You know, because my politics are so not that. But I think I really had a good experience there, but I definitely felt out of place because of my politics, but one place that I was on the same page with the rest of the school and why I was drawn to it was because there was a strong belief in working within the system and having knowledge of how to work in a political system. And so that was something that I definitely enjoyed, even though I was a biology major [laughs]. Because of my parents, and the fact that sort of the deal that I made was I'd get to go away from home to school if I go

pre-med, but I knew the school I was going to had a strong emphasis on politics and political science, so I knew I could have a big grounding in that.

Then after spending my entire life in California I fled to Washington D.C. And then was looking for jobs and temped around and worked for a soulless trade association for a couple of years and then decided to change my career track, knowing that really wasn't the career I wanted to do. And get an internship with an advocacy institute in the Tobacco Control program there and working with advocates. And so from there I just worked my way from the bottom, and worked as an Administrative Assistant for the National Lesbian Gay Health Association and worked at the Sexuality Information and Education Council doing policy work. Then, really got a great opportunity to work as a field manager at PFLAG and doing organizing and policy work and then moved after two years to SEARAC and just ended that job Friday. And now I am going back to work in the GLBT community at GLSEN, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network. And so, I think what was really interesting was that when people talked about DC being such a transitory city, I experienced that because I think a lot of the people that I knew the first few years I was here are no longer here and went to grad school. And it's very bizarre because I think in this city, in particular, a lot of the professionals under 25, I mean, there is just sort of this idea that you should at least be considering grad school, if not actively applying to grad school. And it was surreal. I think it was sort of really realizing that grad school wasn't in the cards for me and it wasn't something that I particularly wanted to do, and there were ways I could grow my career as an activist and an advocate without going to grad school. That is when I realized this is my city, it was when I realized I just didn't want to go to grad school [laughs], which was very interesting. Which really gave me the ability to the community here, singing in the Lesbian and Gay Chorus and building friendships and finding a partner and all of those great things. So I think that's sort of the short synopsis of my life. I guess, are there any specific questions, or?

SPD: {7:00} Sure, well that was great. What I like to do is sort of just go back and into some more of the details. So, can you just actually talk about what it was like as a kid, like what your family was like and moving all around, and--

TCD: Sure. Well I think it was fairly typical. I feel like we were very-- I think one thing that was unusual was the fact, was how Americanized we are and how our parents were sort of actively having us assimilate and actively speaking English in the house and to have us assimilate. And one of the pieces of my identity is realizing that I am Vietnamese American, Asian American, and the American is a big part of my identity as the Vietnamese, and not being ashamed of the hybrid of the two. That my parents made a conscious decision to have us assimilate and have us learn English fairly quickly and become acculturated fairly quickly. And so that was really interesting and I think moving around was definitely-- it's hard to say it was interesting because as a kid you just sort of accept it, and whatever reality you're placed in, you don't really think about that when you're that young. But we were really typical, in that sense once we settled in California and just stayed there, but it was definitely a really interesting environment to live in, because it was very suburban and very planned community. And really the atmosphere there was so much about sort of making money and raising your children, and not necessarily looking

outside into the broader world when that was definitely something I didn't know I needed until I came out here and realized I do want to work on a larger scale, I do want to see if there is a larger community out there that I think growing up I never had.

And I think one of the challenges was also seeing my mother integrate two sides of her personality, of her identity of being a really successful career woman and advocate for refugees. I mean she actually ran a refugee mutual assistance association, which is a community based non-profit that is run by refugees for refugees. So it's funny that I just finished a job sort of helping to organize those MAA's and do organizing and advocacy with MAA's. But, she was incredibly successful, she still is incredibly successful. But, what was bizarre was as soon as she had to step up into the house, she had to have food set on the table for my dad and the house had to be clean, all of that stuff. {10:12}

And that was something that I really saw. It's interesting because I really identified with my mother. Even now, at Thanksgiving, when the whole family is gathered together, I'm in the kitchen hanging out with my mother and chopping things as opposed to drinking a glass of wine with all the men in the family, just because it's not a role I necessarily can identify with or celebrate. I'd much rather be a part of the cooking and contribute in that way. That's definitely something interesting, seeing the expectations of people in Vietnamese American society that you have a completely separate identity outside of the home than you do within the home for so many people. And that within the home, especially as a woman, you're very different. And then also, that's what I've had to do as a GLBT person and a Vietnamese person. And it's been really an interesting experience to negotiate that as a professional working in that field of how out do I be. There was a moment this past year where-- I do a leadership training every year for Southeast Asians where they come to DC and learn how to advocate on a national level. And one of the people was gay, there was a gay man who came, and I had to make a conscious decision to out myself because like the first day he was there, his roommate said he didn't want to room with a gay man. I said, "Well, there's a gay man running this, [laughs] so you're not going to escape them and you're going to need to learn." But the hard thing is, is that going to get in the way of what I need to do as an organizer? What's the balance of being true to yourself, and what does it mean to be true to yourself? Which part of your identity are you true with growing up? One of the things that is so challenging, and I don't know if you've heard this from other activists, whether they're queer activists of color or lesbians, is that you have to juggle your identity, having multiple identities. For me, unless I'm in a queer Asian space, you have to juggle your identity in queer spaces as well. Because I've had people, when I worked for GLBT organizations, say, "Oh, I forgot you're a person of color." They mean it as a compliment, they see past my 'identity.' But I don't want them to see past it. That's who I am, and I'm proud of it. There's an implication there that says I want them to ignore that side of me, which I don't. I mean, I think it's a very important part of me, I think it's what shapes me. So for somebody to say that and then also, to be the progressive one in the space, to be the one who wants to tackle multiple oppressions and to have that attributed only to your race, in like, "You're only saying that because you're a person of color," and "Why do you always have to be out there?" I mean, I think the hard thing is that throughout my life, I've always had to sort of figure that out and negotiate that and try and find that space, and it's never easy.

The hard part is there isn't a clear API GLBT group. There isn't one out there that's going to pay me to do activism yet. I hope there will be, because it's definitely a challenge. It's definitely a challenge being the only queer API person in so many spaces, in primarily people of color spaces or in primarily queer spaces. That's kind of some of the context my politics have sort of come together in, and some of the ways that my politics have been formed of never having a sense of that. It's funny because I have been going through a job search, where I was applying for jobs, and it's very bizarre because I applied for jobs in the API community and got turned down because I didn't have enough experience working in the API community. And then I applied for jobs in the environmental movement actually, where they were looking for somebody to do organizing, but I didn't have enough experience in the environmental movement, even though so many organizations say it's important to them to bring in diversity and to outreach to people of color. And for the last three years I've been exclusively working in exclusively people of color spaces and building dialogues between Southeast Asians and other groups of color. That's part of my job at SEARAC was to develop that dialogue and to develop multiethnic coalitions that were predominantly people of color and run by people of color. But I think what was really eye-opening for me is as much as people say that, they will go back to what's comfortable for them. It's very interesting that I went through this whole round and now I'm working for a GLBT organization. But I was applying for a job, and I was down to the final two, and they said, "Well we had to accept somebody who had done organizing in the environmental movement." And I think it really said something about the environmental movement, because they complained about, "Oh we're so lily-white, and we really need to reach out to people of color," but when given the choice and sort of living the reality, the reality they wanted to live in was, it's more important that we bring in somebody who knows our community.

SPD: So we keep doing the same thing.

TCD: So we keep on doing the same thing, as opposed to somebody who has built bridges and worked in predominantly people of color spaces. {17:00} And I think that that's one thing that has marked my life is that I haven't really ever been completely comfortable in knowing that the space is completely my space. Because professionally, and sometimes personally, knowing that it's going to be a space where people know where I'm coming from and that people can understand the issues of multiple identities and that doing multi-issue organizing is going to be important to them because they have to do multi-issue organizing in their personal lives, because they have many issues and many identities. I think that's where my politics come from, and philosophically that's how I've sort of had to develop. It's very interesting.

SPD: I know there's a lot of different stuff, so I wanted to hear a little bit more about what your family is like. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

TCD: Yeah. And it's funny because even though my mom has blazed the way working in nonprofits, it's still out there for the rest of my family to work in nonprofits. They're like, "When are you going to actually grow up?" [laughs]

SPD: What do they do? Are they older, younger?

TCD: I have an older brother and a younger sister. My sister is a lawyer, and my brother, he's kind of like an entrepreneur, and his day job is to do marketing for a biotech company but he also is doing all of these entrepreneurial things, like he's producing a poker video and he's in commercial real estate, and stuff like that. It's very funny because my parents are still kind of holding their breath for me to grow up and leave the nonprofit world, even though my mom is very successful in it and she's has worked in the nonprofit world for most of her professional life, so I mean, that's what's been really interesting. We're all really, really different. I feel like whereas I gravitated towards my mom, my sister's gravitated towards my dad in terms of being very outspoken, very needing to have her way, and very willing to stand up for herself and not willing to compromise. Whereas my brother is very, very quiet and he's very off to himself. But I think it's very interesting because we do follow birth order dynamics a lot. My sister being very strong and very motivated and also very abrasive, and me being somewhat of the peacemaker but also very conflicted, and my brother being very passive and quiet. It's really interesting dynamics. And obviously my father is very authoritarian. I think he's softened, but especially growing up, he was very authoritarian and needing to have his way and needing to be the center of attention. The best way to describe my parents' relationship, and it's kind of sad, but the best way to describe it is that my dad insists that the phone is on his side of the bed, but if it rings in the middle of the night, my mom has to walk around the bed and answer it. And that's the level of needing to have his way and authoritarianism. I think it's hard for him because he's in a very different culture, but I think they have to negotiate that a lot. Especially my mom, because she is in a position of authority, and right now she's in charge of the health outreach efforts to low income people for a health insurance program, and so she has a lot of responsibility, has people who she supervises, yet she has to walk home and make sure dinner's on the table and the house is clean, stuff like that. So I think that, family-wise, that's always been something I've observed of just really having this weird disconnect, where what's going on in my house is really different from what's going on in the world and really realizing-- Molly Ivins has this great quote where once you realize they're lying to you about race, you have to question everything. I had a really early realization that there's something really bizarre about this patriarchal system. Because I feel like as somebody who was queer, even though I didn't know it, and also a feminist, even though I didn't know it, and really did not want to be trapped by gender roles, even as a kid I wanted to be the one that babysat, my parents didn't let me because they were like, "You're a boy." And I hated-- like I had to give up every holiday weekend because my dad wouldn't be working, so that meant me and my brother always had to help him carry rocks to do landscaping and stuff like that. {23:00} I never had fun, and my sister could do all of that. So seeing the gender roles, but also seeing my parents were so much harder on my sister because she was a girl. They questioned who she was dating and all of that stuff and how she was dressed and never questioned us at all. I saw a lot wrong with that. As I questioned that, I had to question what is going on in the world that perpetuates all of this stuff that isn't making me feel good in my own space and, as I'm looking at my sister and my mother, is not allowing them to be who they are. Then you sort of question broader systems of economic oppression and looking at, why is there something being perpetuated by the media and conservatives about poor people and why is there a concerted effort, growing up in the '80s, that poor people were being labeled as lazy and stupid

and welfare mothers and stuff like that. And then having experiences with poor people who are organizers and knowing that's not the case.

I think for me, questioning my own personal injustices or lack of ability to be who I am made me question the whole system. It made me question what's going on in the system to change it, and that was definitely very interesting. I think one thing that I really realized is that for me anyway, I didn't see anybody benefiting from this, from the injustices of at least the sexism within the Vietnamese community. My dad didn't particularly seem happy, he seemed angry all the time when we were growing up. Me, my sister, and my brother all dealt with it in completely different ways. {25:00} My sister fought and was mean to us, her siblings, but also fought with my parents all the time. I sort of tried to placate my parents and was the one who was scrambling before both my parents got home to make sure that the house was clean. Whereas my brother just completely closed the door to his room and just was not having any of it. And I think being the youngest child, having two other children, he could get away with that and not have to deal with it. His way was complete avoidance, where he could tell our parents he was going one place and then go another place and nobody cared. Whereas I just didn't do anything wrong. Whereas my sister would fight to go where she wanted to go, and it was very interesting to see how we all reacted to that system. But I think that was definitely something where I didn't see any real winners in that. I saw my dad was angry, I saw my mom just feeling beaten down, even though outside in the world she was really successful. I saw my sister angry, I saw myself just caught in the middle of everything. I saw my brother not talking. Which is not to say we had a particularly traumatic or abnormal childhood, but I think it was definitely very typical of how people were being raised the generation above us and how that was translating to how we were acting.

SPD: And when you say your parents really encouraged you to assimilate, what does that mean like, when you mentioned speaking English with you at home, but beyond that were there other things, like encouraging you to do certain activities or things like that?

TCD: I think the hard thing was they were encouraging us to assimilate in a lot of ways but then also encouraging us to stay within our culture in a lot of ways. Obviously we were really expected to be very academic and we were really expected to excel especially in the sciences and we were expected to sort of be good Vietnamese children as well, like not talking back. But I think the assimilation was also what we wore, buying clothes that other kids were wearing, correcting our English to make sure we were speaking good English, things like that. I think it was also sort of the example they set of being assimilated themselves in terms of their cultural roles outside of the house. Outside of the house we all spoke English and we didn't try and educate other people about who we were as Vietnamese people, and bring people into our culture. It was very much like, if we were going to a predominantly white gathering, we would present ourselves as similar. It was definitely not something completely active other than language acquisition.

SPD: Did they talk to you about Vietnam or about their journey to the U.S.?

TCD: No. We didn't hear a word about it until we were all in our 20s. And my dad- we were all up visiting relatives in Oregon, and my dad took us to the pot-smoking Episcopal bishop's house [laughs] where we lived for the first year of our lives in the United States and told us the story of how we left. But until then, we spent our whole lives completely disconnected to our refugee experience at that point, and never talking about Vietnam or-- and that's the other thing, was never talking about their lives in Vietnam. We didn't hear that kind of family history at all. So I think that's where, especially hearing it at age 25, which is when I heard it, was very bizarre. But we never really had an idea, because we were very-- I was too young to remember any of it, but we didn't really have a sense of what our lives were like in Vietnam, until our mother took all the children back in 1997, and we got to see where we lived and got to see our relatives who were still in Vietnam and see what life was like in Vietnam. But until then, growing up we never had any of that. It was just not a part of growing up, we were never told anything about that.

SPD: So when your dad told you the story, did it help you understand them differently?

TCD: Yeah it did. Going back to Vietnam also helped me understand them differently. It also helped me understand their choices about assimilation as well and not feel guilty that I was assimilated and not 'in touch' with being Vietnamese. I mean, they both came from very educated families in Vietnam, and both families that were very aligned with Western culture. They had both gone abroad to go to boarding school in France, and that's where they met. And when they went back and they were showing us where, when they came back, and they were in their 20s, and they went to this-- they were married in a hotel owned by the French and had a lot of family dinners and events at this hotel too. And realizing that Western culture was part of our family history and was part of our family culture even before any of us were born, even before any of us were going to be-- were in the United States. So going there really helped me come to terms with the guilt that me and my siblings had about not being Vietnamese enough because we realized that was always going to be a part of our family history no matter whether we were still in Vietnam or not. That Western culture was a part of our family culture. It really did connect a lot of things for us. And also hearing about the fact that my dad was an activist against communism but also on behalf of the rights of Buddhists to practice their religion in Vietnam. And to hear that and to hear how divorced he is and how much he doesn't necessarily see where my activism is important is very bizarre. But I think that it's always weird to see that your parents were once young. That definitely rang some bells and saw that there was something of my dad in me that he hadn't shared with me growing up as a child.

SPD: {33:12} So what were your friends like growing up? Tell me where in Orange County?

TCD: I grew up in Irvine.

SPD: In Irvine, okay. Is your family still there?

TCD: My sister lives in Los Angeles and my parents live in Newport Beach, they moved there from Irvine to Newport Beach. I had just typical friends. And I think one thing that was very weird for me growing up, I never was part of a group. I always had friends who were sort of like, I had a friend and they had other friends, but I was never friends with their friends. One of the things is until four or five years ago where my partner and I came together and I started singing with the chorus, I didn't really have friends that I stayed in touch with. I do have one friend who I met studying abroad who now lives in DC with her husband and I've known her for 10 years. But I haven't really stayed friends with my-- I don't have any college friends or high school friends. And I think the hard thing was growing up not having a group of friends that was cohesive. I had friends from the track team and newspaper and stuff like that, but they were not friends with each other. [laughs] Weren't necessarily people who would spend time together, regardless. So I think that was very bizarre. When I see other people having circles of friends and finally having a circle of friends on my own as an adult is definitely something that is still foreign to me. My friends were friends with each other and I'm constantly introducing my friends as, "This is my friend, so-and-so," even though obviously they are and obviously before coming together, we'd been friends for a while. That was definitely a really interesting experience and somewhat isolating. But also growing up, learning to-- realizing now that I have some distance and maturity that a lot of it was because I didn't know who I was, and so a lot of the reasons why I haven't kept in touch with people from my past was also-- it was a part of my own personal history that I was still trying to figure out who I was. And so I don't necessarily know if they were going to be my friends for the rest of my life because I wasn't sure who I was at that point, so.

SPD: So what was your life like as a child? You did school obviously, but what other kinds of things did you do?

TCD: I mean, played in the neighborhood, I drew a lot and I read a lot. I'm trying to think of other things that we did. Some of us were really interesting because we always had to do academic things in the summer. Like my mother would always give us book reports, books that we would have to read and write a report on and stuff like that. We never could turn off our brains during the summer [laughs]. We would always get sent to some summer program for gifted kids and stuff like that. And then once I got older, like in junior high or high school, filling my time with extracurricular activities as well, doing the school newspaper, running track, and doing drama and stuff like that, and having a full schedule. I think one thing that was interesting family-wise is dinner was something that was not negotiable. We always had dinner together no matter what. Nobody skipped out on dinner. So even if you were in the middle of something you had to go home at least for 45 minutes and then go back, and that was non-negotiable. But it's hard to think of anything completely unusual that we did as a kid. And it's funny because I did very solitary things, like reading and drawing and stuff like that, but was wanting to be social, just didn't have the skills to be social. So I actually did a lot of looking after my brother and his friends, and not just because I was older, but it was a way to socialize with other kids without actually having to make friends of my own.

SPD: What's the age difference?

TCD: My sister is two years older, and my brother is three years younger. So a fairly even spread.

SPD: {38:25} And so you decided to go to Claremont.

TCD: M-hm [affirmatively].

SPD: So you were already interested in politics at that point?

TCD: Yeah, yeah. By high school I was interested in politics, like I was President of the community service club and then also on the school newspaper, and sort of did all sorts of things around that. For example, helped organize a student contingent on a march to recognize the rights of protesters in Tiananmen Square, for example. And did letter writing campaigns for Amnesty International, and helped organize an environmental fair at school, like I was already political in that sense. In high school, we had these things and I was really lucky to go to the high school that I went to because we had great teachers. And I think one of the things that we were lucky about also is that we were in the Honors track of everything, our parents always pushed us to do that. And I'm really glad because I always was in a group of people who were motivated. And I guess that everybody knew we were all going to college, everybody that I went to class with knew we were all going to college, knew that we all wanted to take the AP test, stuff like that. {40:00}

There was definitely a lot of elitism there as well, we really had a lot of disdain for what we called "the normal kids." We were like, "Yeah we have to take trig, but the Honors sophomores have to take algebra two with the normal seniors." And we constantly talked about the normal things in that term. It was very interesting that way. But I mean I think growing up we were definitely pushed to do well academically and were in a space to do that, and had the norms of achievement no matter what. But, we were also really lucky in the sense we had teachers that, especially junior and senior year, treated us like an adult, and essentially were having college-level experience of having big projects or big papers to write, as opposed to weekly tests or something like that, or homework. I think we were really lucky because college was not a transition for me in terms of changing. It was the same workload I had in high school except fewer classes and more free time.[laughs] But it didn't feel any differently. One of my classes was political science, and we had a very sort of hippy-dippy teacher who had us do these things called "I Search" projects, where we had to find something that we wanted changed in our community and do something about it. And so what I did was-- and this was something that I still take with me, was I was really disturbed that there was no student representation on the city council, even though the city council was making decisions for students like curfews and things like that, but students didn't have a voice. I actually have language for that now, when I do trainings about anti-oppressive work I always say, "Not about me without me." You cannot make decisions about my life without consulting me. And so I was really concerned about that, I was

just like, "There are all these decisions that the city council is making that we're directly affected, but we have no say in it." And so I had actually contacted some of the other student council members of other schools and the student council members of my school to write letters to the city council to ask there to be a student representative there that would come from the student council. And so we did that and then the next year, the city council actually created-- student representatives from each of the high schools came as advisory members to the city council, so. So yeah. I was always an activist in high school to do that kind of stuff.

SPD: And that started as a school project?

TCD: Yeah, it started as a school project and we were really lucky we had a kind of teacher that wanted to push us that way. I was really lucky that I had teachers who treated me like an adult, for good or bad, it meant that nobody was going to check up on me and make sure I was doing my work. But it also meant I had responsibility and was expected to do things, and really grew as a person as well.

SPD: And so then what was life like in college?

TCD: That was really interesting. In some ways college was really interesting because I met a lot of people who I thought were like me or at least closer to me than people in high school. I mean people who were motivated, and people from other parts of the country and people who wanted to do something with their life other than stay in Irvine and go to college and get a job and raise kids, stuff like that. So that was really eye opening for me. All of the feminists, the six of us on campus, all found each other and in college I was the first and only male co-facilitator of the women's forum, for example. It was really an interesting experience because I got a lot out of it and I really enjoyed myself when I was there. But I also felt kind of out of place. For example, I went to Claremont, have you heard of Claremont?

SPD: M-hm [affirmatively].

TCD: I really connected a lot with people in the other colleges. Like I had a lot of friends in Pomona and a lot of friends in Scripps, because politically they were more aligned with me. I did a lot with the students from the other school. I was involved with this group called Peace Through Justice and what we did was do work on issues like non-violent conflict resolution and do advocacy around that in terms of writing letters to Congress against the war and stuff like that. But also I was involved with them and doing non-violent resolution training for intercity kids and people in prisons as well. That was really rewarding. But it was really interesting because for example we did a Take Back the Night march, and got a great reception on all of the campuses except for Claremont where people had signs that said like, "Go Away" and people were simulating rape on their balconies. And just like, what's going on here? Part of it was I was just glad to not be in my house with my parents, but also that was really fun, but also it was good

because I was able to connect with other people because we are a very small minority. But knowing that we were very clearly out of place and knowing that it wasn't home for us, it wasn't someplace we were ever going to be completely comfortable. And that some of the discussions I wanted to have weren't going to happen because there was a strong buy-in to the "We're not going to rock the boat, and we're working within the system," and people really disdained things like direct action, and doing actual protest, and sit-ins and stuff like that, and teach-ins. There was a lot of disdain for that. While it was a really growing experience, because I think the good thing is I've never been in a situation where-- it's so interesting to hear when people who have been to really liberal colleges, they complain about like, "Everybody thinks alike, and nobody ever challenges each other." I'm like, "Yeah, that's a problem, so you can go to my school and see that you are living in my paradise." But I do realize that there is a lot of value in that, I realized not to take anything for granted, not to take any kind of values or my philosophies for granted. Because I knew that there is a huge part of the population who are not like me. I knew that people aren't always going to think like me and a lot of people aren't going to think like me. That was really valuable, I can see where they were coming from in that sense. I got a lot out of it but it was also really hard being that minority as well. But I think it really prepared me because I realized I am always going to be a minority. As soon as I feel like a space is comfortable for me, I get jolted out of that pretty quickly. Like coming out and being like, "Oh gay people, hurray," and really realizing that my racial identity was being invisible, and it was being just erased. And nobody was going to bring that to the table unless it was me or somebody who was a queer person of color. And then working in predominantly people of color spaces where the recognition that APIs are people of color and have needs. That's not an easy conversation to have and that's one where people need to check their baggage on it, on all sides of the fence. So I think that going to school really set me up in my life to realize-- to be comfortable with not being comfortable. To accept there isn't a space where you're completely like, "This is my space." I mean, for me I always had to negotiate whether it was being in Orange County or being up in Vermont. And those were extreme, but there are still so many subtle ways that I have to negotiate with my identity here.

SPD: {50:45} [inaudible] So how did you get involved in the women's center there?

TCD: Basically I had a couple of friends who were involved with that and I really liked what they were doing. But I also wanted to shake things up as well, because a lot of what they were doing-- and one of them was really a radical feminist and she was really challenged to do stuff, so she wanted an ally and she was like, "Would you be a co-facilitator with me?" I was like, "Sure." Because the women in the women's forum was very much like "We'll have networking dinners with alumni and we'll have career fairs and we'll have discussions about how far we've come as women of Claremont without talking about oppression." Whereas my friend Melinda was like, "We need to shake things up." So we created a women's resource library and made sure there was resources on oppression there. And we created discussion groups that were talking about the glass ceiling when it comes to careers and stuff like that, and we brought in female alumni who weren't just working for corporations but were working for women's groups as well, and did stuff with the National Women's Political Caucus to get out the vote and stuff like that. So it was just primarily through a friend of mine. It's weird because another piece of my experience at Claremont was I was the only guy at X, Y, or Z. For example, I really liked taking

aerobics classes, and there was this one aerobics class that I wanted to take that was only being offered at Scripps College, which was an all women's school, and I wasn't allowed to take it because I'm a guy. But they needed another aerobics teacher to teach it, because there was so much demand for this one aerobics class. And I had actually taken a "How to Teach Aerobics" class when I was studying abroad in England, so I was just like, "I'll teach the class," and so I was once again the only guy in an all women's space and I was the only guy doing X. What was really hilarious was that my class was twice as big as the other class, because all of the women really liked having a guy for a teacher because they weren't comparing their bodies to the body of the instructor. I'm not tiny and I wasn't tiny in college so I got a lot of good feedback which was like, "We really like your class and you're a good teacher and it's also really nice that we're not looking at somebody and comparing how we look to them." That was really interesting, that like as a feminist, there is really a rule for men in feminism in really, really subtle ways, ways like that where you're just like, "Okay." That was kind of my whole career at Claremont, being the guy that did something that none of the guys did, and that was very bizarre.

SPD: What kind of reactions did you get to the stuff you were doing with the women's center and trying to shake things up?

TCD: It was ignored by most of the campus. Not ignored in the sense that nobody went to this stuff, but I don't think it was so radical that people were disturbed by it or actively opposed to it. I think it was sort of 'the little discussion group' or "We're watching 'The Crying Game' and having Chinese food." I think the biggest resistance came from women. A lot of the women were like, "Well, that's great, but where are the women working for corporations, how come you're only bringing in women working in women's groups," or, "Why are we having yet another discussion about oppression, why can't we talk about what women have gained and talk about great careers or something like that." I think the most resistance we had came from other women, in terms of what we were doing, because I just don't think it was on men's radar screens. Men weren't participating in it anyways, so it wasn't affecting their lives. For example, that was kind of how the campus was. I mean, I was working with other API's at the Claremont Colleges to start an API student center, the same way there was a Chicano student center and a Black student center. And the biggest resistance we had was from other APIs at Claremont, who were like, "We don't know why we need it, we're all successful here, we're all integrated here. We don't need to celebrate our own identity. We're okay." It was very bizarre. We never really got it, we got a half-time staff member to work there through another college, but we never actually got our own center the way other groups have their own centers. And the biggest resistance came from other APIs at Claremont because they just didn't feel the need for it. And I think that's where issues of privilege come in.

SPD: And tell me about the prison work you were doing.

TCD: That was really amazing. It was through this group called Alternatives to Violence Project and what we were doing was, we went through three sets of trainings. The first to actually just learn techniques of non-violent conflict resolution, and then the other two were training our

trainers. It was sort of a two day weekend course that we could implement to teach people how to deal with conflict nonviolently and where you could come to resolutions and changing mindsets of people. A lot of it was self-esteem building. The whole first day was focused on building self-esteem and talking positively. And for a lot of these people, that was never part of their growing up experience. So we would go to inner city schools and prisons and stuff like that to talk about that. It was predominantly white, but what I liked about it was it was very focused on people's own experiences, and so asking people to talk about their experiences in positive ways, and talk about themselves in positive ways, as opposed to telling them what to do, and "You have to do X, Y, and Z." And then also teaching them techniques about, "This is where in X situations, you would be able to address an issue or address disagreement without escalating it into violence." So it was really gratifying, it was very rewarding. And I did that for a year while I was in college. Unfortunately I do not have time to keep it up, but when I did it-- I think what amazed me and what was really interesting was, people were really open to listening. I think one of the stereotypes that people have about people in the inner cities is that they are all tough and they don't want to care and dumb, when they are incredibly bright and very engaged. I tried doing with the student council at my college, and being people of privilege, thought they knew all the answers and thought they didn't need it, and therefore it was really the most frustrating experience I've had as a trainer. Just like, they didn't want to open themselves up to the idea of having disagreement not be something that's oppositional and stuff like that. It really opened my eyes to the fact that a lot of people who we stigmatize as violent aren't necessarily violent in the sense of their personalities. They were people who took in what we had to say the most clearly and had the most to say and were the most engaged. {1:00:27} Whereas, you know, sort of the upper middle class kids in college were just blowing us off left and right when we tried to do it at our school, and so that was really interesting.

SPD: And one of the other things that you mention was the Peace for Justice. Was that when-- you said you were doing some anti-Gulf war activism, is that right? Can you tell me a little more about that?

TCD: Well we organized with other groups at the 5 colleges, a teach-in around the Gulf War about like-- it was the day where we were all off classes and we had people come and talk about all sorts of things. Our group organized a panel on sort of media messages that were coming out about that and talking about the language that was being used about why some missiles were being called 'smart bombs' and the other missiles were being called 'scuds'. Like the messages that were being implied by that. And once again, it was so weird because, we had huge, huge, huge response from the other colleges. Claremont was just like, well, barely anybody left at Claremont, and a lot of people were-- I mean, I got hate mail under my door, of saying like, "Get out of America." That type of stuff.

SD: Did you respond to it?

TCD: No. I mean it was anonymous, so--

SD: Were you concerned or did you tell anyone about it?

TCD: Yeah. I gave it to our dean of students and he blew it off, was like, “ Oh, yeah, don’t worry about it.” That was our dean of students [laughs]. It was awful. But I think it was definitely another example of why Claremont wasn't really my home, was just like, we couldn't even have that kind of dialogue. They weren't willing to enter into that dialogue with us. And that was really interesting and just getting hate mail, and being told that I was un-American and that I wasn't American, was very interesting, that I didn't belong there. And especially being an Asian immigrant and how bizarre and hurtful that was, was just a really weird experience. Because I think up until that point I've always sort of-- I've always saw myself as an American, and I always saw myself as sort of just like the other white kids, and then realizing that I’m not, because the other white kids weren't getting hate mail and being told to go back to whatever county they came from. The other white kids involved in that weren't getting that kind of thing. And realizing that I need to claim my space as a person of color.

SPD: So what happened? Did you talk to other people about that?

TCD: I talked to my friends about that, but I really didn't-- I mean, it was my first year at Claremont and I didn’t want to deal with it, so. I mean, I think looking back I would have liked to have really pushed it more and engaged with other activists about why the hate mail I was getting was different from the hate mail they were getting. But I didn't have the language for it.

SPD: And so then did you-- or how did you go about trying to make a space for yourself? You mentioned the API center, was that part of that?

TCD: That was part of it. I mean connecting with other API activists at the other colleges was part of it. And a lot if it came after college and after I came out, and realizing that coming out and finding queer spaces was not completely the answer either. And realizing that I wasn’t completely home in the queer spaces either, and that they weren’t talking about some of the issues that were important to me. And also actively saying like, this is not our issue. Of saying like, “Well you know, we can't work on that because we’re not people of color, so we’re not going to work on that.” Or saying issues of racism aren’t queer issues, when there are queer people of color. So, are you saying queer people of color aren’t queer, or they're only half queer, I mean, what’s the implication there?

SDP: {1:05:22} So when did you come out?

TCD: I came out in 1995. In the spring of 1995.

SPD: And that was when you were in DC?

TCD: Yeah, I was already in DC. I was in a group house. It was really interesting because I was in a group house with a bisexual and one lesbian and one gay man, and the rest were straight. It was very progressive. And so when I came out, it was like people threw me a party. I mean, I literally got a party. It was like, "Let's all go to dinner, that's wonderful!" And that was kind of interesting because it took me a year to come out to my family, because I was just like, "I kind of like being in this very supportive bubble and I don't want to deal with the negative implications of coming out right now." [laughs] And then when I came out to my family, it was very weird because everybody was very reasonable but nobody wanted to engage. And so everybody was like, "Ok, fine. Did we tell you cousin so-and-so is having a baby?" And never actually wanting to engage and say they-- I mean, I think part of it was nobody wanted to say they were uncomfortable. Nobody wanted to say they were freaking out and didn't know what to do. And a lot of it was this family whispering campaign of hearing about so-and-so being upset because they told somebody else. And I'm just like, "Okay, not sure what to do there." But it was very different. I definitely did not want to come out for a while because I had such a good experience coming out to the people I was living with and my friends that I didn't want to come out to my family. Because it wasn't going to be that way, I knew that for sure.

SPD: And so how did you figure out that you were gay? I mean, gay, is that how you identify?

TCD: Yeah, I self-identify as bisexual. Basically it was a camping trip, and I really had a lot of-- because I was very closeted to myself up to that point. And had always said, "I can't be gay because I'm a feminist." And so I actually had gone to a camping trip with a bunch of friends and everybody sort of paired off like it was Noah's Ark. And so it was me and this other guy, and he came on to me, and I was actually really excited about that. And I think part of it was actually living in a group house where it was totally okay to have same gender affectionate feelings. And I think part of it was that it was nine months after college, and I was living in a really progressive group house, and so it was somewhat normal to respond to those feelings at that point, because it was okay for everybody around me to. And so he came on to me and he put his arm around me as we're on a porch swing, and I was like, "I really enjoy this and I like this person." And so it really felt very natural and it really felt-- I was surprised how little baggage there was around it, around coming out that way. But that was when I realized I had feelings for men, of actually acknowledging them and being able to say like, "I'm okay with that." And I still identify as bisexual because I do have attraction to women as well even though I'm in a long term relationship with a man.

SPD: And so how did you get to DC?

TCD: I wanted to get to DC because my school did have a strong public policy program so I thought I could use the contacts there to find a job, and that didn't actually work out, but I was here and I was temping, and got a job at a soulless trade association. And stayed because I really love DC. Once I got here, I loved the fact it's essentially like a small town really. And I think what I loved about it was, DC is this sort of receptacle for all of people who want to do advocacy and activism and work on broader issues and not just get a job, but get a job that's going to

change things. And so coming to DC as somebody fresh out of college and being able to be in that sort of environment with these people was really gratifying for me. And I just couldn't leave. And the only way I could envision myself leaving was for grad school, and then I realized I didn't want to go to grad school. So I stayed and built community here.

SPD: So what year was it that you came?

TCD: 1994.

SPD: And that was right after you graduated?

TCD: M-hm [affirmatively].

SPD: When did you start identifying as a feminist?

TCD: I identified as a feminist early on. Like junior year of high school.

SPD: How did that happen?

TCD: I think the community service group that I was working with, we were talking about whether we wanted to go a NOW conference or not. And it was like, "Of course we're going to go to a NOW conference, that sounds like fun." And they were like, "But that's for feminists." And it was just very quick, of like, "But I'm a feminist, are we a feminist group?" And then I asked, actually, "Why aren't we a feminist group? Come up with a reason why we aren't a feminist group and these aren't our issues." And so, I don't actually think we went now that I remember it. And once again it was really normal, like "Yeah, this label fits me and I'm not ashamed of it at all." Because once again I really felt in terms of patriarchy-- I felt I was getting the short end of that stick. And just the fact that I couldn't babysit and get money either, and my sisters could.

SPD: And did you date when you were young?

TCD: M-hm [affirmatively].

SPD: What was that like? Was there drama?

TCD: There was drama. There was drama because I hated being the guy in relationships. I really hated being the guy in the relationships. I hated having to open doors. I hated being told by a woman like, "Why are you so emotional, and why are you letting this get to you?" type of stuff. I'm like, "Because I'm upset. Why can't I be upset?" and being the one to want to engage. That was the dramatic part for me, because the woman that I was dating, I was actually very attracted to. But I think one of the reasons why I've been as an adult, post college in predominantly gay relationships is because it is so much easier for me to not fall into gender roles. And I think it is so much easier because even in the initial dating stuff of having seen there's a lot of fear among women. Not necessarily like, "Oh my god, is this person going to rape me?" but not feeling comfortable with somebody showing them interest, even if they're interested. "I'm with my girlfriends, don't talk to me, but here's my number." And sending mixed signals that way and being-- and in a lot of the relationships I was in, I felt I wasn't allowed to be emotional. And then was told like, "Why can't you be more of a man?" to the thing, and I'm like, "Well, why is it not being a man?" So I think that's why I've been loath to get into a relationship with a woman. Not that there aren't straight women who buck gender roles and who allow men to be that. Especially when you're in high school, you don't have that. And in college, in a very conservative college, I didn't have that. So that was a big challenge. So it just felt easier to date men.

SPD: And so did you date a lot of women or were there a few significant relationships?

TCD: Yeah, I had a significant relationship in high school and then I dated like three women in college and a couple women after college. And then I came out and dated men ever since.

SPD: {1:15:30} You mentioned that you studied abroad in England.

TCD: M-hm [affirmatively].

SPD: Was that your junior year?

TCD: M-hm [affirmatively]. Yeah.

SPD: Where did you go?

TCD: University of Lancaster. So it was really working class actually, the university. It was really interesting. I mean, I learned a lot about myself and I learned a lot about American culture because it wasn't there. People that I met were really interesting because people in England are really reserved in one way and really crazy another ways, in other ways, of like, they're hard to get to know and become friends with, but once you become friends with them, you're their friend

for life. And also even though they are hard to get to know, once they get drunk they are rowdy and crazy. And it was really interesting because that was where I really thought about economics and economic justice as well, because I was like, I mean, it was really nice having the National Health Service, and I got my teeth cleaned and I got hard contact lenses. And I went to the doctor every other month just because it was free and it was paid for by the government and it was very accessible. And so I got an extra pair of glasses and I got contact lenses, and stuff like that, and I was like, "Why can't we have this in the United States? We're supposed to be the richest country in the world." It was really bizarre. But it was a good experience for me. It was a good experience to connect with other Americans and also connect with international people as well, because there was a large international population, a large Greek population actually. And see how a lot of people view Americans. And see how Americans view themselves as well, because I think one of the frustrating things for me, was I was luckily in groups of people who were very like-- groups of Americans and non-Americans. It was very integrated in the groups I was in. But I saw, especially the Americans-- I saw groups of Americans being really sort of 'circle the wagons' and just hang out with each other. And then I saw, especially traveling, how Americans put themselves in this huge American bubble, especially Americans who are studying abroad oftentimes have these programs where it was essentially an extension of their college, where their professors came over with them and taught them and they all stayed in apartments with other Americans. And I was really lucky to have that experience of actually going to a school in England and being in the English educational system as opposed to other exchange programs, where people were in a program where they got apartments with their friends and they were taught in like American lab schools or whatever you call them. And just traveled around and went to places and just partied with other Americans. I mean, that was really bizarre. But it definitely made me realize some of the strengths of America as well, and the fact that people really celebrate other cultures here that they don't. I mean they may be dumb about it [laughs]. They may be really completely ignorant about another culture for the most part unless it's like Middle Eastern cultures, something like that, but for the most part, Americans really are interested in other cultures. So if somebody comes here from another country, Americans are interested in knowing about that country, whereas, I found in Britain, people aren't. They're so close to so many other countries that it's very sort of everyday for them. So they don't necessarily want to know about your country. I feel like, especially in high school, if there was an exchange student, everybody would be like, "Oh!" really interested in wanting to talk to them, whereas it's very different in other countries. I have friends who say that too, who are British. They say like, "Yeah, there's just not as much interest."

SPD: And what were you studying there?

TCD: I was studying biology. [laughs] The reason why I chose it was because it had a program that was compatible with my biology program. And I wasn't going to lose any years in preps or anything like that.

SPD: And did they encourage you to study abroad at Claremont?

TCD: Um-hmm. At least half the junior class was abroad. I mean, you kind of were the people left behind if you didn't go abroad. So, there was a culture there that was-- and I think part of it was because in a school of 800 people, you were just so sick of everybody by your junior year, just ready to have a year where you weren't with all those people, the same people that you knew year in, year out. So it was worth it.

SPD: {1:21:03} And so then you landed in DC? And so what was that like? Was this the group house-- the one that you came out in, were you there right off the bat?

TCD: No, I came to DC, and I lived in a huge apartment on the corner of Montrose Road and Rockville Pike with a friend from college, and it was the most miserable experience of my life. I was just really isolated; I didn't know anybody other than my roommate and some relatives, and didn't have a community. And the other piece of that was, my whole entire life, I had something to define myself as: a student, somebody who worked in the school newspaper. And I didn't have anything to identify myself as, I didn't have any kind of identity, because everything was defined by what grades I got and what extracurricular activities I had and stuff like that. So it was really isolating. I stayed there three months, and was just like-- I told Serena, I was like, "I need to live in a place where there are other people." [laughs] And so I actually moved into the group house and it was a great experience. I lived in group houses up until the point where my partner and I moved in-- well, my partner actually moved into a group house that I was living in, and then we moved in on our own like a year and a half later. But up until that point, I'd lived in group housing, and it was a wonderful experience and it was-- were intentional communities where it wasn't a commune, but it was like, we shared food, we all put in money for food and bills. We had house night once a week to check in with each other. And so it was nice to have community and I really like it. I think, if there could ever be a space in my life to do it again, I'd do it again. And if it was with people that I knew and that I liked. I was really lucky because I was in group houses where there were really nice people. And really people who were good communicators.

SPD: How did you find that place?

TCD: Ad in the city paper. [laughs] I wonder if there are that many group houses left just because DC is gentrifying all over. I know of a couple group houses in Adams Morgan that were group houses that-- it would be economically stupid not to sell. So they sold for an exorbitant amount of money and kicked all the people out. So I wonder how many group houses like the ones I sort of came of age in still exist, because it's a great space. I mean, I think it's a good space to meet people, it's a good space to share resources-- I think that's one of the things I really liked, was there was sharing resources, and there was an openness about that. And that people saw value in that. Obviously, there are plenty of group houses where it's just like a bunch of people who don't know each other and don't care. But the group houses that I went to were started by people-- I don't know if you heard of the different religious volunteer corps of like Menonites and Lutherans and stuff all have volunteer corps where people spend a year in a city doing volunteer work for non-profits and they live in community, in group houses where they share food, and share rent and stuff like that. And there were a bunch of group houses, at least when I

was living in-- both of the group houses that I lived in were started by Lutheran Volunteer Corps members who really enjoyed the concept of group houses, enjoyed their experiences, and wanted to recreate it outside of their volunteer year. But there was still that spirit of wanting to share resources and wanting to have community that wasn't just like, you're sharing a space. And not that we were spending every waking moment together, but just that we know what's going on in our lives and that we respected each other, and we respected the house as well.

SPD: Where was that house, the first one?

TCD: The first one was on 14th and Emerson Street, and the second one was on Connecticut and Military Road.

SPD: How long were you at the first one?

TCD: The first one was a year and a half, and the second one I was in for six years.

SPD: Why did you move?

TCD: Because I think my partner and I were ready to have our own space. And I think it was just time, we were ready to have our own space and be on our own.

SPD: And why did you move from the first place into the second one?

TCD: Because in the first place, the group of people who I moved in with were together for about 9 months and then people started leaving. And I think the challenge was that a lot of people-- the people who were left weren't as invested in the house, weren't as invested in finding other people who were invested in the house. There was particularly one person, and the impetus for me leaving, where she was just bringing in people all the time and the doors being left unlocked at all hours of the night. And this person would bring their friends in, and their friends would bring their friends in, and people were coming in and out all the time. And it just didn't feel safe at some point. It just felt weird.

SPD: So how did you find the next place?

TCD: Actually through somebody who used to live in the first group house, knew people who lived in the other group house and they were looking for someone, so.

SPD: Was that pretty much the same group of people the whole time you were there?

TCD: No, not the same group of people. I mean, we definitely had people coming in and out, but in terms of-- somebody left like 5 months after I moved in, and then a couple people left a year after I moved in. But I think one of things was we were really choosy about who we were bringing in. We weren't bringing in somebody just to cover the rent. If we got desperate, we were like "Fine, we'll split it up five ways instead of six ways." Because it was more important that we find somebody who was going to fit in and who was a good communicator and who had our values instead of somebody who was going to pay rent on time all the time, even though we wanted somebody responsible. The reason that we stayed that long was because there was definitely commitment. And my partner and I as a couple really enjoyed living there as a couple too. It was one of the reasons why we're a strong a couple as we are, [laughs] because we got to live in community and not it just be about ourselves. I think if we just moved in together right away just us, I don't think we would have gotten the skills to talk to each other and not personalize things as much as we did in the group house, where there was a venue in the house night to talk about so-and so, like "Can we just be cleaner about picking up after ourselves," and stuff like that. You don't personalize it, at least in the structure that-- I mean, obviously, you still can if you wanted to, but really the group of people who was in the house, we didn't. So it wasn't like, "Oh my god, I can't believe you did that!" It was like, "Hey, let's pick up after ourselves," or "I know you weren't able to do last week's chore, can you do my chore this week then." It was learning to communicate without having to carry all that baggage around was really good for our relationship and having a space to talk about all of those nitty-gritty issues, without it being like, "You didn't do this." It was really useful.

Second Interview December 18, 2004

SD: {1:29:45} I don't know if you even remember what we talked about last time and if there was any place you thought you wanted to pick up?

TCD: Not really. [laughs]

SPD: Okay. We were still talking about coming to DC and the group house. So I thought we could pick up there and talk more about your life and activist work in DC.

TCD: Sure. Anywhere I should start or?

SPD: Well I know you had this-- was it an association job?

TCD: Yeah, with the International Mass Retail Association, that was sort of an association of like the Walmarts of the world.

SPD: Okay.

TCD: [laughs] It was really depressing.

SPD: And what were you doing when you weren't working?

TCD: I was actually trying to find sort of a group, and really try to find my niche, so I sort of volunteered at all of these different places. I volunteered for the pro-choice march in 1995, calling people and encouraging people to come to that. I volunteered with Whitman Walker Clinic, working as a volunteer for them, and really just doing stuff like helping out in the office at Whitman Walker. What else was I doing? Then I also volunteered with the NAMES project as well. And helped them out wherever I could. And a lot of that was just like helping them out with their garage sale fundraisers, or something like that. Certainly nothing like bringing the quilt to places or anything, but it's kind of ironic because I've taken up quilting since-- and I actually started taking up and I'm really addicted to it now. [laughs] If I had those skills, I would probably be more involved [laughs]. But it was really hard to find a group that I could really call my own in terms of a place that I wanted to go week in and week out and stuff like that. So, that was a really interesting dynamic, and I also think that-- spent a lot of time with my housemates. It was a very eclectic but very progressive group of people. It has one person who was getting his masters in social work and particularly in policy, on welfare policy. And then I had another roommate who was the Executive Director at the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, and another roommate who was a grassroots organizer and had come off working on the 1994 campaigns. And then had another roommate who was an ASL teacher and so had a really eclectic group, but what really brought the group together was progressive politics to that. I spent a lot of time with them as well and just hanging out and finding solidarity, and really connecting with people. And it's very bizarre because one of the people, the guy who was getting his MSW-- and it's very bizarre how my politics have changed, because one of the people was really a radical organizer who had very, very anti-oppression politics and a very multi-issue lens. And I wasn't-- even then, not aware in my consciousness enough to hear everything she was trying to say. And also she was saying it in ways that were very abrasive. Even now, I feel like my politics have definitely moved more to the left. I still want to find common ground with people and want to hear what people have to say, even if what they're saying is not what I believe in.

SPD: {1:34:15} So what were some of those conversations like?

TCD: Well, one of them-- and it's so illuminating because I would have a completely different take on it now. But still, I would never approach it the way Hedel did. One of the comments was like-- Roger who was the MSW student, he was talking about how he was really upset because the-- one of his friends in MSW school who was a man was selected by the student body to be the graduation speaker. But then the whole student body felt it was weird that a man was being the graduation speaker for a graduate program that was predominantly female. I remember this conversation very distinctly, mainly because it shows how my politics evolved. But he said and I actually agreed with him, like, "Why is that a bad thing if everybody chose it? Why can't the most qualified person be the person who is the graduation speaker?" And then that led into a discussion of how in women centered spaces, how men, even if men don't want to be the people talking and don't want to be called upon, they're often looked to for opinions and stuff like that. So, I kind of agreed with him on that, and also agreed with him on the point of, why is gender such a big deal? Now, it totally makes sense to me Hedel's points, because Hedel was saying, well a), that may be that you may be called upon, but you need to be aware of what you're putting out there as well, that even if you don't think you're putting out 'pick me, pick me,' think about the context of where you are and how you're taking up the space, and how you're saying-- because oftentimes as men, what happens is we take ownership over that space in very subtle ways but also in very ways that push people out. And so I think that definitely, in terms of my evolution, I really think about that conversation and realized, "Oh my god, I would totally be saying what Hedel said," not necessarily in the way she said it, but just-- she was very dismissive, like, "No, you just don't understand. You don't understand what the women are going through." Is how she put it across there. I remember that conversation very distinctly about how she wasn't willing to come to the table-- even though now I agree with her, I definitely would want it to be a learning opportunity for them, and not necessarily just closing the door on them and saying, "Hm, whatever." {1:37:45}

SPD: How did you feel like she closed the door on people?

TCD: I just feel like it was very dismissive like, "You don't know what you are talking about," or "You just don't get it," was very much the kind of messages that she was putting out there. And not really creating a space to say, "This is my reality, that's your reality and they're both valid." But I still feel like, now that I look back at it, it makes total sense to me why-- it's very obvious that this is a space where a woman's voice is very necessary and the fact there is gender stuff that is contributing to the fact that somebody may be chosen as the voice of a class, even though they don't necessarily represent the gender of the vast majority of the class. There is something disturbing about that. And it's worth examining, for me, and challenging. So that was definitely kind of the tenor for the politics for the house too, I know we were talking about it. And it's also really interesting because the house started off as a former Lutheran Volunteer Corps house, populated by former Lutheran volunteer people, that there was a very Christian-centeredness about it as well. And that was really fascinating, because one of the debates we got into with Hedel was whether we would be able to put up a tree and have a Christmas party, and Hedel really did not want that to happen. She said, "I don't buy into Christianity, I don't buy into Christmas, and I have to have that everywhere, and I think it's really hard for me to think of this as my home if I walk into it and then the cultural norms that I don't buy into are being represented in my house."

And it was really interesting because I didn't get it back then and I get it now. It's interesting, I'm having that conversation at work at our staff meeting. We went through sort of a facilitated discussion and training about inclusion and conflict resolution on Friday. And one of the things people said was, we should create a space for everybody to express their culture. The example they gave was, "I don't understand why we can't have Christmas decorations up, and the way to remedy that is, why not also have a menorah up as well, why not celebrate Ramadan." And I said, "Well, I think the thing is--" I was the Hedel. It was weird that I've become the Hedel. [laughs] And I said, "I can totally understand that, and I love Christmas, I celebrate Christmas, but I think the hard thing for me is that I don't know who's not at the table to see how they want to be represented, and so we can't represent everybody. And what about the people who walk in who don't ever feel at the table and walk into our space and see cultural images and cultural cues that are not reflective of their experience at all. And the cues that we have are ones based in who's in the room at this moment, and predominantly Christian, predominantly European, predominantly based in mainstream culture. And so I'm like, "We can add a menorah, we can add Kwanzaa and stuff like that, but even then, we don't know who's not in the room, and we're not going to create a welcoming space for the people who-- because I think one of the goals of diversity or "diversity in ending oppression," is that people feel comfortable in a space. And we are who we are in this room. If somebody who was Islamic-- and you know, we don't have people who are Muslim in this room. Do we feel comfortable representing their culture even though we aren't part of that culture? To do that? We don't have them in the room and will-- do we feel comfortable representing them to make them feel comfortable in that space when we don't know. What do we need to do for that?" And so, I think it's a really interesting piece of my own evolution, that I have gone from the person who was sort of bought into, to some degree, mainstream culture, to the person who has to challenge it. And I really celebrate Christmas, I think it's an important holiday for me. And you know, for example, last night when I came home, I had to go to a friend of mine's Christmas party and tree-trimming party, and she also had caroling and my partner and I had a debate about that. What's interesting is I really like the concept of caroling, and he really doesn't want to participate in that because he feels like it's proselytizing and it's enforcing and pushing your culture on another person. And I don't necessarily feel that way, but I can see that. And it's really interesting where I move in those spaces, which part of the spectrum I represent or which part of the spectrum I buy into. So, it was a really interesting space to be in and space to mature in.

So, I stayed there for about two years and then I moved to another group house, mainly because I think the-- one thing I really realized I value is a commitment to community and sort of a spirit of generosity when you are in community. And, as people were moving out, as it's DC and people leave, the people who we were bringing in weren't necessarily committed in the same way, like didn't necessarily see a point to house night, and coming together every week to just share space and talk about-- and find out what we're doing. So as more new people were being brought in, I didn't feel my level of commitment being reflected. And also there was somebody who moved in who was really, I guessed, a messed up personality. I didn't like her because I thought she was very needy and very somebody who, for example, brought in people who she barely knew into the house and let them stay overnight, and it didn't feel safe to me. For example, she invited a prospective housemate to come and spend the weekend in the house. It would be different if it was somebody she knew and it was just her friend or something like that, but it was a prospective housemate who spent the whole weekend there. And just made me feel completely uncomfortable that she did that and just completely misrepresented who he was.

Said, for example, that he had friends in the area anyway and if it felt uncomfortable, he could always stay with them. And he didn't know anybody else in the area. I mean, and part of it was that nobody was upset about that and nobody wanted to validate me being upset about that. I mean, everybody was like, "Well I met him, and meeting him, he doesn't seem that dangerous. I don't feel uncomfortable with that at all." And part of it is, it's not an issue of whether he's actually dangerous or not, it's an issue of the process of being lied to. So I just didn't feel like people cared after a while. So, I actually moved to another group house, actually another LVC house, where people who previously lived in the house that I was currently living in knew people who lived at that house. And it was great because I think people were more mature there. And I think were really better communicators. Whereas the house I was living in, people were pretty much somewhere around 25 or 26. This house people were primarily around their 30's and early 40's. And so it was a much better space for me. Also, because I knew there was going to be less turnover as well. Nobody in the house was looking to go to grad school. Nobody in the house was just there to work in DC to get experience and move on. So that felt great to have that stability, and I'm very close to several of the people in the house. And actually, my partner moved into the house with me, and it was really interesting because it was the best thing that ever happened to our relationship, because he was in a really bad living situation and so, he was living with a co-worker of his who was mentally ill, clearly mentally ill. So I was just like, "Come move in with me." So, he went through the whole process of being interviewed by my housemates, and them getting to know him. And they found it was great that we were going to live together and move in together.

SPD: {1:48:54} So you met him before he moved into the house?

TCD: Yeah, so we met--

SPD: Where did you guys meet?

TCD: On the internet.

SPD: Okay.

TCD: It was very funny because he-- it was my first sort of foray into internet dating and it was totally as a joke, because a co-worker of mine and I had this experiment that we did, where we put one ad, which was my ad, personal ad that was very, very sincere, because I really actually wanted to meet somebody interesting, and said something like, "Activist looking for somebody to share the New York Times with on a Sunday morning." And then we put the world's most offensive ad possible [laugh] on the internet, on a dating website, I think it was the Yahoo dating website, to say like, "Exotic Asian flower looking for older gentlemen to keep her in this manner in which she was accustomed to." And so, nobody responded to my ad. But as I was looking through ads, I saw my partner's ad, which said like, "My idea of a good time is to protest a

Christian coalition, looking for intelligent feminists, please respond.” But, the exotic Asian flower got about two hundred responses. It was very disturbing, I was like, “Wow.” It was weird that there are more dirty old men in the world than there are feminists [laughs].

SPD: Or at least on the internet dating. [laughs]

TCD: Yeah, true, true. I mean that might be some form of assurance [laughs]. So we met the week before Thanksgiving in 1999 and then he moved in, in February of 2000. It was great because it was very like, “We weren’t moving in together.” I mean, he was just being another housemate. Obviously another housemate who, we were sharing a room and we were dating. But I think it was great because we could interact with each other and suddenly there was a bigger context to it in a group house setting. Where if people were leaving the dishes out or not doing the dishes it wasn’t like, “Jonathan, you didn’t do this,” it was just, “Hey, could you people be a little cleaner.” So, it was like, we really learned a lot of relationship skills living in that house. And I think people were more mature and so we could really do that, and see other people-- because there was actually another couple in the house as well, so I think it was really nice. And we keep in touch with them and they have a child and stuff like that. So, it was fun. So, yeah, I mean that’s sort of my whole group house experience and we lived there for a year and realized, I think, we really wanted our own space after a year. We loved living there and we loved the people, but I think we realized we really wanted to have our own space and explore our relationship, just the two of us, so.

SPD: So, what’s the relationship been like?

TCD: It’s been great. It has been amazingly nourishing, and just a space where I’m really challenged by somebody who shares my values, but also comes from a different background than me, and has a different way of communicating and a different way of organizing himself. But we really love each other and we’re always excited to talk to each other. It’s been great. I mean, his family is wonderful because they are really progressive people from Texas. His mother is a teacher and head of her teacher’s union when she was teaching. And so it’s really funny because he has a very conservative sister and she’s the black sheep of the family, everybody’s wondering like, “Where did we go wrong?” [laughs]. I’m really lucky to have them honestly, they’re just absolutely wonderful to me. It’s nice to be in an in-group of the family, as opposed to being the black sheep of the family. I love Jonathan a lot, and he is just somebody who I-- part of it is just he’s the fixture of my life, like I couldn’t imagine spending the day not talking to him. It’s always weird not to go home to him when I’m traveling and stuff like that. I mean, it’s just very natural that he’s in my life. And I think one of the things is that we built community together, we have a really strong group of friends and we have a name for our group of friends that’s called the “Saturday Night Dinner Party,” because it started off as, for some reason, or another, the same group of people ended up having dinner together every Saturday night for four Saturday nights in a row. And we realized we just like spending time with each other, and so, while we don’t have Saturday night dinner every Saturday night anymore, we still-- we’ve gone on vacations together, and we have-- they were instrumental in helping us plan our wedding and

organize the wedding and stuff like that. Yeah, it's been great, and one of things that I really love about Johnathan is a lot of the men-- almost all of the men I've dated had been raging introverts. [laughs] I don't know why I have attracted men who have been raging introverts who were slightly socially awkward. But I think one of the things I love about Johnathan is he meshes so well. Obviously, I think he meshes so well in any group he's in because I would not have [laughs] inflicted him on my housemates if-- and that's obviously the negative connotation, like the word inflict, but it's really not because it felt very natural, like, "Of course you're going to move in here. You hate where you live, I love where I live, come here." At some point I was like, [whispers] "I think they like you more than they like me." [laughs] And I was like, "Oh." But certainly he's got just as good of relationships with those people as I do. And certainly my friends have become his friends, and his friends have become my friends and we've formed a strong relationship network together, one really based in feminist values, and anti-oppressive values, and our complaint is it's really hard to find straight men for the straight women in our group. [laughs] So, it was really a joy in my life to have him and I like how we fight too, because I think we never walk away, we never shut down and disengage. We're always fully engaged in conflict so we know we're going to work through it. On a political level that's very important too, because I find when white folks are called out on issues of oppression or when people of privilege in general are called out on issues of oppression, an easy defense mechanism is to shut down, and blow them off, and walk away and not engage in talking about what people's experiences are. And I'm really lucky that interpersonally, I have somebody in my life that doesn't and politically, I have someone in my life who is willing to say hard things and willing to push the envelope. {1:57:29} He is the Executive Director of the Capitol Arts Workshop and actually recently this week, they have an affiliate program which is a program that is housed under them but not run by them, that's the Capital Hill Youth Chorus, and I sing with the Lesbian Gay Chorus of Washington and I also facilitate the GLBT Arts Consortium every year. The GLBT Arts Consortium has a-- what do you call it? A remembrance for Martin Luther King, for MLK Jr. 's birthday, and we invited the Capital Hill Children's Chorus to sing as part of that. And members of the board said unnamed parents were uncomfortable having their kids sing with GLBT people, because they weren't sure how to talk about sexuality with their children at age six or seven, which is somewhat ridiculous to me because like, what's the sex talk? I mean, you're not talking about mechanics. I think you can say, "Some women love women, some men love men, some people feel like they are a woman in a man's body." Really not that difficult. But they gave that as a reason why. And when Johnathan found out about it, he really-- luckily he had the support of the full board of CHA when he presented it to CHA saying, "This is really violating our non-discrimination policy." When he brought it up at CHA, they supported him, the CHA board supported him. So, he and the President of the board actually went to a meeting of the Capital Hill Children's Chorus and brought that up and said, "You know what, this is very difficult for me on a personal level because I am gay, I self-identify that way, and you're saying you don't want your kids to sing with people like me, and also saying on a political level, that doesn't jive with the mission of our organization. We can't say we're an inclusive organization if we house a group of people that are saying they can't sing with a group of people because it's a separate group of people." {2:00:00}

So I think he's willing to say that-- and the fact that we get to engage on that and talk about it, and I can talk about it, somebody supports me. I was able to say, "You know what's fucking ridiculous to me is that nobody has come forward to claim responsibility about that." It was a board decision by the board and the person who told Johnathan refused to say where she was on

that issue. I think other people, other white folks might feel defensive about that, and say, "Hey, that's not the case, you're being too extreme." But I said, "It feels like they're hiding behind a white hood. They're not disclosing it because they know it's bigoted, but it's an easy way for them to be bigoted without being accountable." And I said that I feel like they're hiding behind a white hood. It's dandy. It's much easier when you don't have to identify yourself. And I think a lot of white folks would say, "Hey, it's not that extreme. I think that people are uncomfortable." But Johnathan was even more outraged than I was. Who better to spend the rest of my life with? [laughs] I think that's very satisfying. Obviously, because we're attracted to each other, but part of what we're attracted to is our politics as well. [laughs] And finding a soulmate that is a soulmate not just sexually, but in terms of your politics and your values is just a huge gift.

SPD: {2:01:53} How did y'all decide to have a wedding?

TCD: I think it was always in the air that we would always have a wedding. I don't know, I mean, I always wanted to have a wedding. I always wanted to have kids, I mean we definitely want to have kids. I mean, the first thing I said to Johnathan on our third date when I realized, "I could really spend the rest of my life with this person," was, "Just to let you know, I want to have kids." He was kind of taken aback [laughs]. He was like, "Okay." I was like, "I just want to put it out there." And I think because he spent so much time in alternative communities, he hadn't thought about it, whether he wanted to have kids or not. But I definitely wanted to have kids, and I said, "In terms of family structure, in terms of how we are as a couple, it could be that we're not living together and I have my kids and you have your own life." And it's very funny that I'm less conventional in that, and I'm more conventional in the fact that I want to have kids. But we always wanted to have some form of public recognition that we were a couple. We always sort of talked about that. It was something that we'd always wanted. And after living together for two years, on our second anniversary, it was really in the air, and so he actually proposed on our second anniversary, where we went away for the weekend to a bed and breakfast, and had a great time and during our little trip, he proposed. It was great, and it was very important to us and it was very interesting because I think of all the people we told-- I mean, we invited hundreds of people, we told hundreds of people, I think maybe three people, tops, were over the moon like, "Oh my God!" A lot of people took it for granted, like, "Yeah, we kind of figured. You guys are living together." No fanfare. A lot of people were like that. Especially Johnathan's family was very much matter-of-fact, like, "Okay, just let us know when it is." My father, what was horrible was my father. We got engaged over Thanksgiving, so we decided to split our Christmas, spending the first half at my parents' house, and the second half at his parents' house. So, we went to California to visit my family, and I was having such a good interaction with my family and I think Johnathan was really enjoying my family, that I told my mother. We were staying there for four days, and on the second day I told my mother, and I said, "I just wanted to let you know that Johnathan proposed and I accepted, and we'd really like for you to be a part of this wedding, and we really hope that you will celebrate this with us." And my mother was really like, "Yeah, okay. Whatever you need from me." Once again, no fanfare. What was horrible was my dad. That really is a rift that has yet to be healed. But my dad actually said-- and it was such a weird little process, because we asked my mom, "Should we tell dad now or should we wait the night before we leave just in case it is awkward, we won't have to stay there long?" She said, "Wait until the last minute." So we did actually do that. It was like 5

o'clock and we said-- and we were leaving early in the morning, and actually we had plans to spend the night at some friends of ours house, actually people that we lived in the group house. We had plans to spend the night with them and we were almost close to changing those plans because we were having such a good time with my family. So we tell my dad that, and to this day, I very much regret the way I presented it, because I was like, "Johnathan has asked me to marry him and I would really like your approval of this and your blessing of this." As opposed to just declaring it. And so my dad just grunted. He just said, "Eh, whatever." So we just were like, "Okay, whatever." I wasn't expecting that he was going to be overjoyed, so that was fine. And then we're packing, and he comes into the room where we are packing and he says, "I have to say you caught me off guard and it wasn't the best reaction that I had. So I wanted to let you know I don't approve of the wedding. I don't believe in gay marriage, so don't include me in it." And I was like "Okay, whatever." That was actually more the reaction I was expecting, so I was like, "Whatever." And then, my mother comes back and says, "Dad wants to talk to you, I think he said things that he regrets. So I go back to my dad, and I say, "What do you have to say? I'm really curious." And he was just like, "Well, I think there's definitely more to say on this, and I just wanted to let you know that I am not comfortable with gay relationships at all and please don't ever bring Johnathan to the house again." And I was like, "Okay." I said, "I can understand where you're coming from and if you were that uncomfortable, next time let me know before we stay here that you're that uncomfortable." I said, "I respect your opinion and you're allowed to have your opinion, and I will respect what your needs are as well." So we hightailed it out of there and I rented a car, and we were really lucky because luckily we didn't change those plans and we ended up staying with our friends, and they were just really nice and really supportive of us. I think my family has a sort of 'don't ask, don't tell' policy about Jonathan, where they recognize him-- and actually, the one positive piece was it's the one time my mother stood up in a very open way to my father. Because she had said, "Well, you may not approve of this wedding and you may not approve of TC and Johnathan, but I do. And I am going to organize my side of the family to come. You don't have to participate but my family is and I am." So that was really affirming. It was really affirming. And part of what was really upsetting to me as we were leaving the house was I kind of felt relieved. I had a such non-relationship with my father that-- and he's just such a difficult personality that-- I just remember him at my sister's graduation from law school and he had to throw my sister a dinner, but my sister could only invite one person and he invited like eight of his friends. And then he gave a toast about why it was an example of his great parenting that my sister graduated from college. So I was actually really somewhat relieved that he wasn't going to be part of the wedding, because I was just dreading what he was going to say or dreading how he was going to make this wedding about him, or make it difficult in some way. {2:10:00} So the weird thing was, I was actually really relieved, and I think that actually upset me even more, was that it was just such a testament to the non-relationship I had with my father. That there was a huge piece of me that was like, "Thank God he's not coming to the wedding." But, it's such a contrast because Jonathan's parents-- his family took it very, very, very, matter-of-factly as well. They were just like, "Okay, tell us when it is and we'll be there." They really love me, they really love Johnathan, they really love me, and they wanted me-- his dad said the sweetest thing to me, his dad was like, "You two are the most interesting people I know." [laughs] So they really love us but it was so bizarre, because even then it was sort of like our announcement was such a non-event for them. That's something culturally, as far as we get, there is still some cultural barriers. Johnathan's sister came to the wedding, but she refused to sign the marriage certificate because her church says gays are going

to hell. So it is really interesting, the evolution of our relationship, how we got to where we are and where our families are, and how different our families are.

SD: When was the wedding?

TCD: The wedding was January 18th, 2003. So we're heading into our second anniversary, which is really fun.

SD: And where was it?

TCD: It was at the Friends Meeting of Washington. I am a Quaker-like spirit and not necessarily by practice [laughs] because I really believe in Quaker values and really participated quite actively in the Quaker church for a lot of my life after college. Because I really believe in Quaker process of consensus and people finding their own truth and having a rigorous process for that, and having a religion that affirms people's humanity. And it affirms people's truth. So, we had it at the Friends Meeting of Washington, and it was absolutely wonderful, because what I love about Quaker weddings and I want to go to as many as I can now, is that-- the process is the couples gives their vows early as the first thing. They give their vows and exchange their rings as the first thing, and then you settle into silence and people stand up and make comments about the couple, and comment on the union. It was wonderful to get that much affirmation. To hear people affirming who you are and what your relationship is, and how much it means to you, and having all the pieces-- part of it, it was amazing because - to see the tapestry of your life come together. I wish there were more opportunities for that, that it didn't just take the affirmation of your relationship for that to happen. But I wish there were more opportunities for that - everybody gets access to that. It was so great to see college friends and family and [inaudible] people, and we invited the lady down the hall from us in our apartment building because she was just really nice and people from the Friends Meeting in Washington were there. To see the full tapestry of your life, everybody who means something to you and who've touched your lives come together that way and affirm your relationship. There was a couple in the Friends Meeting of Washington, a lesbian couple who got married six months after we did and we sort of helped them with their wedding and stuff like that. They were much younger than us, and they were-- one had been out for a much shorter time. I think because our politics are really out there and our relationship has been so well acknowledged, and we have really treated our relationship with a lot of acknowledgement, that a lot of the messages were not political at all and the messages were not like, "Oh my god, it's so brave that two gay people are getting married." It was very much like, "We're so glad that Johnathan and TC are together and TC is great," or whatever. But the Martha's-- both of them are named Martha-- so at the Martha's wedding, both of them had more conservative families and a lot more people were like, "It's such a gift that you women--" I mean, it was so much more political, so much more universal than our wedding, and it was very interesting how that went down.

SPD: Why do you think that was?

TCD: I think it was because our politics are really out there, and it has always been articulated in our lives, and we have really-- and part of it is because we were together longer. I mean, we were together for three years by the time we got married, and living together for the majority of the three years. So it felt like less of a revolutionary act for us and for the people around us. Whereas for the Martha's, they were much younger, they were like 24 and 25 and we were like 31. And they had been together for a year and a half. I think it was newer and people weren't as used to it. And the reason why the Marthas came out is because she met Martha. So it was much newer for them being a queer couple. So I think that's kind of why it needed to be political because a lot of people needed to affirm the political commitment that they were making. Whereas we'd already made that political commitment very early on. Very early to ourselves as same gender loving people, so we didn't need that.

SPD: So when you go to visit your parents now, do you stay with them?

TCD: Yeah, I go alone. The hard thing is, Jonathan and I have very different family structures and very different ways of communicating within our family. My dad and I will always have a distant relationship. I think he's a lot warmer to me now and I think if I brought Johnathan around, everybody would be okay with it. But, he has not officially apologized, he's not engaged with Jonathan at all or reached out to Johnathan. And I think there is an expectation that he'll just come around but that's not very direct. So it's very interesting because my mom has come here and stayed with us. I think we've gotten a lot of support from them in a lot of things.

SPD: So what do you do for holidays then?

TCD: I go to my family's for Thanksgiving and Johnathan stays here, and then we both go to Jonathan's family for Christmas and spend time with them there as a couple.

SPD: Let's see. So you're working for the Association, volunteering and hanging out with these people. And then what next? How did you end up leaving that job?

TCD: It was a good job, I was getting paid decently. The reason why was because they wanted to promote me. And I was like, "If I'm promoted, I can be a lifer here." And I just didn't want that. So I got an internship with an advocacy institute, and their tobacco control campaign, and so I did that. I just applied to the internship and they accepted me.

SPD: So did you leave the other job and was it an unpaid internship?

TCD: No, it was paid. It was like 400 dollars a month.

SPD: So semi-paid [laughs].

TCD: Yeah, semi-paid. But luckily I saved enough money at the previous job to be able to subsidize that. [laughs] So I did that and it was a really interesting learning experience. It wasn't a particularly fun place to work because my direct supervisor was really unpleasant and somebody who was horrible about giving feedback-- was just an unpleasant person {2:20:03}. The first thing she said was, "Don't expect a job here. That's just not the way it works." Which I was like, "Nice!" Even though I found out later that's how she got her job. She interned under the same-- and two other people got their jobs as interns, but I don't know why she said it off the top of the bat. But she was horrible about giving feedback and would just say things and would not give [inaudible] feedback at all, like, "I just don't like this," "So what should be changed?" She was like, "You just need to reread it." Whatever. But it really got me in the door and also during that time, I was really, really heavily involved with the NAMES project, helping to organize the quote display in 1996. So I learned a lot. I think that's opened more doors actually than the internship. Mainly because I learned a lot of organizational stuff. I learned a lot of what my skills are and really became comfortable in being able to direct people and realize a lot of my skills-- and this is what I really hate about school, is what I realized. What I hate about school is that it doesn't measure everything, and what I am good at is not taking tests or amassing a body of knowledge. What I am really good at is being able to see what needs to be done and organize people and empower people to do what needs to get done. What was wonderful was for example, I was helping out doing new panel check in, checking in-- because people wanted to bring panels to the quilt and have it incorporated in the quilt. So I was helping out with that and was on the committee. And what was great was while there were tons of volunteers, there was always stuff to be done. People who were much older than I am and much more experienced were doing 12 million things anyways, but they would hand off stuff to me to supervise people and say, "You got six people who want to help out, can you figure something out?" And I did. What was great is at the end of the display, during-- everybody had so much to do. For closing up the quilt and folding up the quilt and putting it away, nobody thought about what kind of ceremony needs to happen. Because there's a very, very defined ceremony. A very, very defined way of opening up the quilt and putting it out there, but we didn't think about how we were going to do it and everybody else had everything else to do. So I actually got a bull horn, they were like, [inaudible] but I got a bull horn and I was like, "Okay, everybody needs to get around a square, hold hands, have a moment of silence and I think we need to fold it up the way we put it together. So can we all do that?" And then I was walking up and down and seeing who needed help and blah, blah, blah. And that was really a big experience for me because it really let me know what I'm good at. That was like, "Okay." And it was so weird because in school you're never measured by any of that. You're never measured by how you're working with somebody. You're never measured by whether somebody feels empowered and engaged by the end of a project that you're working on. You're never measured by whether you were able to see the holes in a task and fill that hole. You're measured in how well do you study, how well do you take a test, and how well do you write a paper. That was really an eye-opening experience for me. {2:24:09} I think it gave me an inkling of what I could do, and so once my internship ended, I worked at the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association for a year and a half. They were

undergoing some massive, massive, massive organizational problems because they switched from one Executive Director to another and the second Executive Director didn't know what she was doing, so really didn't prepare a budget and just ran the organization into the ground in a period of a year. So I needed out. Luckily, the Executive Director who had hired me at NLGHA had moved on to an organization called SIECUS. So he was like, "The public policy department needs sort of a Policy Coordinator one level up from entry level, do you want to go?" And of course I'm ready to jump ship. And I was really, really blessed because I had a great mentor by the name of Dan Daly who really taught me about how to-- find stuff as a career and do a job, and to build on my skills in a way that is going to help me with my career. And honing a vision about-- if I was going to do work in policy, how does that look and how do I move forward on that? So he was a great mentor, and it was me, Dan, and Vivian who were working in the SIECUS office. And what was very funny was that we were just a very close-- slightly incestuous group of people who really hung out together and were very social with each other. What was very funny was that I kind of got hired because I was halfway in between Dan and Vivian, because Dan is a gay man and Vivian is a straight Asian woman. And I'm gay and I'm Asian [laughs], so I'm kind of halfway in between. But I think that was a really interesting experience for me, working in reproductive rights and being in a female centered space. Being one of three men in a group of like 30 women, and being there. So I think that was really fascinating for me to be a part of that.

SPD: How so?

TCD: Mainly because it made me be very aware of the space I'm taking. And also aware of the personality dynamics between women as well. I saw there's a lot of exploitation of younger feminists by older feminists that isn't acknowledged at all. And I think a lot of progressive movements chew their young and spit them out. I mean, Johnathan used to work for NOW and that happened and it still happens. I think a lot of what happens is like-- the way I can describe it is like boot camp, where they make your life as miserable as possible and then if you survive the experience, and go off to law school and come back, then you can stay there for the rest of your life. One of the things is how dysfunctional organizations are and how, in so many non-profits, it's so personality driven as well, like dependent on one person's personality that guides the vision of the organization and also sets the tone of all the neuroses of an organization as well is what I saw a lot of there. So it was a really great experience because I had such a good mentor and I got to do work on sexuality education and reproductive rights. That really just felt like home to me, really being able to do that. But the organization was so completely screwed up because the Executive Director was such an egomaniac, and really was a horrible manager and did not manage us well and was very much of the space-- I didn't have to deal with it as much because my boss was sort of our human shield. He was the Director, so he had to deal with her directly, but would just give us horrible feedback that wasn't useful-- would say completely embarrassing things in public forums that we would have to clean up. People would call saying, [inaudible] said this, I think she's crazy." And we were like, "We know, we're the public policy department, that's not what SIECUS's stand is, let us clear it up." So it was really exhausting to be having to clean up her messes and not have any power to affect long term institutional change to actually make sure we were a truly effective organization. So what ended up happening was Dan left, so it was just Vivian and I. It was miserable because we had to deal with this woman

directly. {2:30:00} And it was just sort of—I don’t know how to describe it— but just sort of constantly being told our work wasn’t good enough but hearing all the crazy things that would come out of her mouth. Her saying in a public forum that she thought-- her first thought was of profit was just insane, absolutely insane, and having to face our coalition partners with everybody knowing she was a big embarrassment to us, yet somehow, she’s Executive Director, and she drives out truly intelligent, functional people like my boss. So it was weird because we were totally miserable but since we were the DC public office and not in New York, we did exactly what we wanted. Actually, did the bare minimum of what wasn’t going to embarrass us. But it was really demoralizing because we just had no will to actually move us forward because we knew institutionally the organization wasn’t going to support us on it. So Dan left and then four months later Vivian left, and so I looked for other jobs during that period. And really the reason why I left was because I thought maybe with a new Public Policy Director, we could do something but we had somebody great lined up who was actually a friend of Dan’s, but somebody really smart. And they really, really yanked her chain and made her go through these hoops of like writing an essay for them and filling out an application, and I was just like, it’s demeaning. I mean she’s a professional who has worked with us for a long time who we know. I just think that process was horrible and they didn’t give her a response for months and months and months, and it was just fucked up. When she finally dropped out of the process because she just didn’t feel like being humiliated anymore, I was like, “Okay, there’s no guarantee that there’s going to be somebody functional in this position, so I’m not going to stay around to see who they end up picking. So I applied for a job at PFLAG and worked there. That was also one of the best experiences of my life and one of the most harrowing experiences of my life. I think I learned so much and I grew so much as a professional at PFLAG. I mean, by leaps and bounds, was able to do stuff, work on federal level legislation, and work on policy, and also support the chapters. I really feel like even now, I feel like I’ve become an expert in that process of how to manage a chapter based organization, how to manage chapters. One of the reasons why is because when I was applying to the for the PFLAG job I actually-- because at that point the NAMES Project had a chapter base, and so I asked the people who ran the DC NAMES Project chapter, “Let me know everything you would want in somebody who was going to support you on the national level and pick their brain about it. So I really came in there knowing what I needed to do. It was great because PFLAG came from chapters. They started off as a federation of chapters as opposed to being a membership organization and then branching out into different areas and having the chapters start from the national. So my boss had a very strong social justice, anti-oppression framework, and her politics were right on. I really liked my coworkers. I thought we were doing great work in terms of supporting the chapters. But one of the challenges was the board-- we had a very ineffectual Executive Director with no vision and it was almost the opposite of SIECUS where the Executive Director was a crazy egomaniac. This Executive Director just didn’t have a vision of what PFLAG could be.

SPD: {2:34:41} Who was it?

TCD: Oh God, what is her name? Kirsten Kingdon is her name. At that point PFLAG was incredibly successful in terms of the programming that we did, in terms of the fund raising that

was happening and PFLAG was doing really well. So among my tasks was to organize this network called the Families of Color Network, of families of queer people of color and queer people of color to come together to provide support for other families and queer people of color. That was really satisfying for me because it was the first time ever I had been able to be in predominantly people of color space and to talk about what the relationships are between different people of color. It was so amazing to me because I realized so much of the dialogue about race that goes on here in our country is about how people of color relate to white people and specifically how Black people relate to white people. I think APIs are totally invisible in that. In fact, over the last three days we were sort of talking about GLSEN and what each department was doing. The person in the development department actually said "We're really trying to reach out to different groups this year. So we're reaching out to people of color groups, to disability groups, and to Asian groups." I'm like, "Asians are people of color." It's so bizarre but it was such an affirming space because we really could talk about some hard things and the way we structured that retreat was that it started off with a fishbowl exercise, that groups of people sat in the middle of the fishbowl and answer the question of, what do you want from an ally and what are things that prevent you from acceptance of someone as a ally? So we did that with different groups of color and we had representation from the Latino community, the Native American community, the African American community, the Arabic community, and the API community. But also representation from youth and transgender people, so all of those different groups came into the fishbowl and talked about that, and talked about how PFLAG can be an ally organization to their work. So it was really exciting and I grew so much in terms of how do you organize people, how do you support a chapter, how do you move a chapter forward, and when do you let a chapter go? When is it appropriate to say you do not need to push so hard if there is only one person. And helping chapters measure what they're doing because I think so many chapters were like, "We don't have 500 people in our membership, [fake screams]" and I'm like, "You just testified to your State Senate about-- you have relationships with the state legislators and you're writing policy and stuff like that. Measure it by the change you're creating, not the structure for creating change, whether that's like 10 people or 100 people, you're doing the work of a two million dollar organization. Celebrate that" So it was really great. I hate to say this, but one of the problems was our department head became really close friends with one of the field managers and began to actively sort of tear the rest of the department down. It was really demoralizing of her saying, "Well, Lisa does this and you guys don't, that's really disappointing." And also actively trying to tear me down. For example, a chapter leader complained about me and I was put on probation. I was not asked what my side of the story was or I was not asked to talk to that particular chapter leader. It was arbitrarily like, "You disappointed the chapter leader." Working with chapters of people not everybody is going to be happy and she knows that. She had said to Lisa, who was her close friend, "Don't worry about that person, you know they're difficult." But because one chapter leader complained about me, I was on probation. For example, I was supposed to put together this one training material and I did put it together and she said it was unacceptable. So I was like, "What needs to be changed?" And she was like, "Lisa and I will do it." So essentially what she changed was the order of the contents and I read through it. I think there was some stuff about changing passive voice to active voice but nothing in terms of the basic content. But it was unacceptable, and she and Lisa stuck their names on it. And to other people in the staff meeting she would be like "Lisa, what do you have to say about this?" somebody else would raise their hand and be like, "Oh, I've heard from my chapters about that." And she was like, "We need to hear what Lisa says." And then never coming back to the other person. It was so freaking destructive. What was really weird was Lisa was mixed race, she

was Arab and Jewish. And what was very interesting was we were in the middle of unionizing at PFLAG and a major push for that was primarily the people of color who were pushing for it. And what would end up happening— and this would happen over and over again-- was that Lisa sort of kept all the other people of color out to say the difficult things. She stepped back and said like, “I’m here to mediate.” It was really just bizarre. I think one of the problems was the other people of color were predominantly male, and so any time we had a problem, we as people of color had problems with Lisa, A) she said we were threatened by her being a woman and B) it was because we were threatened by her being mixed race. It was very manipulative and I just could not take it anymore. I absolutely could not take it anymore. I actually quit without having a job in line at all because it was just too demoralizing to walk into work every day and know that the cards are stacked against you. Luckily I announced that I was quitting and then two weeks later I found another job at SEARAC. That was a stroke of luck.

SPD: Who was your boss there at that time?

TCD: Cynthia Newcomer.

SPD: {2:43:12} [inaudible] trying to see if there were people who I know about. Can you talk a little bit more about the workshops that you were talking about doing with different people of color, queer people of color and allies. I’m interested in more detail of what kind of things came up, what kinds of things you learned, particularly moving moments and things like that.

TCD: I think one of the things we learned was how much people of color [sneezes] can support each other as people of color. Some of the moving stuff was really people of color get marginalized in the queer community. For example, one woman said-- who was the mother of a Black person, “I cannot walk into this room anymore being told that African Americans are too religious for the queer community. I’m coming into this room and I am being told that I am not doing enough and my community sucks.” And it’s like, homophobia is like food, and it shows-- it is different in every culture but it’s there. One of the things is just how marginalized we all felt and how powerful it was to connect with each other. And also one of the challenges was that we all have different styles and we all have different priorities. And one of the things is how-- particularly with Native American groups, Native Americans in the group was-- what they think of as moving forward and they have more space, they create more space and create more time to think about things and move forward about things than I think Western people do in general.

SPD: Can you explain that a little bit more?

TCD: Just that they're okay with a decision not being made a lot more. They don't need to make a decision, they need to go back to a group of people and think about it, and be able to hold that space. At least the Native Americans in our group didn't need to have a point of leader for them. They could speak as a group with many voices. I think that was really interesting as well. I think one of the things is that obviously finally having people here that-- APIs are people of color. At SEARAC, another amazing group that I got to work with was a group called Out of Many One, that brought together different people of color whose primary concern is to reduce health disparities for people of color. That was amazing, they are amazingly thoughtful about what they do and how they do it. I mean they're predominantly a lobbying group to push for legislation to reduce health disparities. To get the kind of support from other people of color was great and to do that kind of planning. And one of the things I realized is that I'm very good at facilitating a group to come up with concrete products as well. We had a retreat to put together a coalition building resource for approaching people of color, for people of color to work with each other. I think one of the challenges that so many activists have is that they're thinking so wide and so broad that they don't create tools, they create philosophies. For example, when we were talking, each group had to sort of come up with some recommendations and stuff on how to work. One was like create communication, increase communication. I wasn't officially facilitating the group but I was like, "I need to say that doesn't work for me," and "How does that look?" And constantly pushing that. Our group's recommendations were very specific and very much like-- for example, one of our recommendations was to have an effective coalition. When decisions are made, input must be solicited in a variety of ways. For example, via written and email, via one and one phone conversations, and via group meeting. That everybody has a very cultural way of giving their input and so therefore if you want to have a multicultural coalition and have a decision that reflects your multicultural coalition, you have to solicit input on a decision on multiple levels. Those were the kind of recommendations we were making. I think it was definitely something I was proud of, that I could push the group to use their knowledge and frame what they're saying in ways that people can take away from it as opposed to communicate better or respect each other. Like what does respect mean? I think that's one of the biggest challenges in working in multicultural settings, is respect means something very different for me based on my age, based on where I grew up, and based on my ethnicity, than somebody-- for example, one of the people that I work with now is a transgendered Latina lesbian who was raised by two lesbian mothers. So, she has very different norms on how to communicate and she is very in your face. I'm totally used to that because I have been around activists who are very in your face, and some people aren't and some people found her to be abrasive. And I'm like, "That's how she communicates." So I think I just-- really glory in working in multicultural settings. It feels as much like home as possible because also you recognize each other in a way that you don't leave yourself behind, and you recognize each other in really interesting ways. Because also if you're in a setting that is only your ethnicity. what ends up happening is you either feel the need to back each other up because you're API or all Latino or all African American and don't want to make it appear to everybody else that there's dissension in the ranks or you have to rip each other apart. So you can't talk about hard issues like adultism and sexism and homophobia in the same way than if you are with a very diverse group of people of color sort of space. I really strive to bring people of color together in multicultural spaces. I'm really excited because one of the things that I am going to be doing in February is going to be participating in a students of color organizing retreat to sort of hear from students of color about what are ways to organize and help train them in organizing as well. So I'm really excited about that. One of the things that we were talking about in terms of the training we were doing at

GLSEN this week was about conflict and that I'm not afraid of conflict and I like conflict. It is a relief to have conflict for me because growing up my family didn't have conflict, it was my dad getting his way, and everybody got out of his way to accomplish that and we never talked, we never-- so I really enjoy when people can be angry and people can be upset, and as long as they're not making personal attacks on me, I'm okay with holding that space. I think a lot of people aren't, but I always say, "This is why we call it a struggle." We're not calling what we're doing a struggle because it's easy and because we're all going to feel comfortable. I'm very okay with not feeling comfortable. Because also as I've come up from the [inaudible] I mean, I've also had to be kind of called out on my own privilege and my own ways that I was silencing other people. I think about how fresh out of college, how different I was of supporting a bunch of guys who were saying like, "What? I don't see why there is a problem of having a guy represent the voice of a program that is predominantly female." And really, the important thing is that I didn't walk away. I was like, "Wait, what did you mean by that really? I had no idea that was offensive to you." And not being like, "Well, I'm sorry you feel bad about it." And I don't need to put myself out as this pure God of knowledge and privilege, but it's more like, I've grown so much out of getting my ass kicked [laughs]. I've really learned so much out of that and got so much out of that. I couldn't imagine not being able to stay engaged. Not being able to stay in conflict especially when it comes to issues of oppression.

SPD: Can you talk about in the multicultural settings, when it's working, what do you think makes it work?

TCD: I think part of what makes it work is really-- I hate to sound exclusive but really choosing people who are committed to it. Who are open to the process and open to talking about it and willing to be uncomfortable.

SPD: How do you know who that is?

TCD: I think part of it, it's just basic organizing. A lot of people think of organizing as you turn on the spigot and the grassroot comes out. So many people just think, [whispers] "Just get the grassroots to write something." That's fine if you don't want to build a network to empower people. For example, Greenpeace is totally okay with having a bunch of people on their mailing list and emailing them telling them to write their senator and not wanting to build leadership and having somebody head up the campaign for the grassroots, and that it comes from the grassroots. For me, true organizing is about hearing what people need and talking to people and working with people who are willing to come to the table. For Out of Many One I didn't organize and I just came as a participant. What was very bizarre was that my mother came too, because she's worked with refugees all her life. So they were very conscious about who they were choosing and what kind of knowledge and what kind of stake and what kind of politics people were

bringing to the table. And not that we all agree. For example, this is really embarrassing [laughs] but my mother and I got into a fight in that space.

SPD: Oh really?

TCD: My mother and I got into a fight. We're really different. My politics are way more radical than hers are. [laughs] We were talking about who do we bring in to increase the coalition and stuff like that. And whether to bring in white people or not. And I was like, "Well, right now I don't need to, I really value it being a people of color only space, it's very important to me." And my mother was like, "But I don't want people to think we're exclusive," and I was like, "But can we have these conversations around white people?" She was like, "Yeah, look at the Vietnamese community, there are plenty of dumb Vietnamese people and Vietnamese people who don't have their act together." I was like, "Well we don't just choose that." So we were going back and forth, and it was so funny because then she was like, "You just need to stop talking now." I can't believe this came out of my mouth but I was like, [whines] "Mom!"

SPD: [laughs]

TCD: [laughs] And everybody was just like--

SPD: Did everybody know she was your mom?

TCD: Yeah, it would just be unconscionable for us to not put it out there that we're related. Everybody laughed. It's definitely weird to be a professional in the same space as your mother.

SPD: That's wonderful.

TCD: It was wonderful. It was really great because I think that people-- what was great about that is when my mom has been in a similar professional space, a lot of people have given me positive feedback in front of her and she actually sees me do some adulting, which is very affirming. But I think it really takes building a relationship beforehand, you just don't throw any group of people into the mix and expect what comes out of it is going to be automatically productive and [inaudible]. Whatever. You really have to do a lot of pre-work to know who's coming into the space and to really be clear about expectations of what you're trying to get out of it, and to build trust as well. It takes a really good icebreaker and it takes sharing of yourself. I think one of the things people, especially white folks do, is they cut out the personal aspects,

when you're working you cut out the personal aspect. So much of why these groups have worked is because we did a lot of personal sharing about what our journey is and what our story is. So we knew each other as people and we had dinner together before anything else started. Before we talked about anything. About anything about structure or strategic planning and stuff like that. It takes food, it really takes sharing food. It really takes seeing somebody across the table as a person and knowing what their story is, and knowing why they talk a certain way, and why they communicate a certain way, and it's a lot of pre-work. But those have been the most satisfying spaces for me, the spaces where I felt like it was home and it felt like we were going to move forward. And what was great was, we would have a lobby day, and it was like family reunion time for us during the lobby day, of catching up and I think what makes those kinds of coalition work is that you look forward to participating in it, and you look forward to working with these people, and we have gone on the Hill and met as a multicultural group of people representing all communities in terms of representation of race and ethnicity, and backed each other up, and called on each other. I think that's the great thing. I think that's the really satisfying thing, is the trust that gets built when it works, and it's just really-- I think it just changes the world, I really think if nothing else, it's the dialogue that gets created. But it takes a lot of intentionality. And I think in the society that we live in, people are so eager to move-- even though I just said I want to frame things in a concrete way, if you don't have that trust, it's not coming out of anything solid. And one of the things is that our multicultural resource guy has helped form about 12 coalitions, and they have set it and we have just followed it. And we are in our second year of working together and so far we are really tight and we've been able to lobby our county for increased funding for all of our groups and that happened, and stuff like that. When you hear that, and when you realize that it comes from a place of commitment and trust and that it comes from a place of people who really know each other, I think that's why it works. That's really why it works. And it's in contrast to the reproductive rights movement, where-- a friend of mine described a meeting of the Executive Directors of different reproductive rights groups as "wet cats in a burlap sack." [laughs] There's so much turf issues, there's so much ego, there's so much friction, and it's just-- it's because they're forced together, it's because they don't necessarily want to spend time with each other [laughs] outside of policy and other scenes like that. And I wonder if on some level, that's why-- for example, the latest World March for Women's Rights, completely messed up process. They had it on the same weekend-- or they scheduled it two weeks before the National Abortion Federation's annual meeting. And it was really run by NARAL, and everybody else was forced to get on board or left behind. And there's so much ill will about it, even though it was this huge undertaking and huge turnout too. It makes me wonder about how effective are these movements sometimes? Is the GLBT movement for example? When people have been brought together as professionals to get stuff done, everybody has their own piece, everybody has their own niche, and you're not connecting to each other as people. Whereas in the space that I've participated in among people of color, the ones that have really stayed together and have worked, it's because we have really emphasized people as people. And it's a space that we are people and not just our job titles.

SPD: So what do you mean by home, when you say it feels like home?

TCD: I think it feels like a place where I can say what I need to say, I can bring up difficult issues and people are going to stay engaged and people are going to put out their own realities in

a way that is not destructive, in a way that is to really illuminate me in terms of what I see, of creating 'Aha!' moments. I think about my own evolution as a person. I was really depressed the first year after college, certainly not clinically depressed but very just alone and sad and realizing that the reason why was because I had spent the last 12 years of my life, or however long it is that you're in school, defining yourself by your grades and your extracurricular activities and stuff like that and never being defined by who you are as a person, how well you treat people. So when you're in a space where somebody is looking at you not just by your job title and not just to get on with it and 'let's just start the strategic plan,' but values getting to know you, that feels like home to me, that feels like home to me. Even if they don't share my way of communicating, they don't share my culture, they don't share my politics, but they're very interested in who I am. That's what feels like home to me, you know. I'm not working at SEARAC anymore, but I still am calling these people to talk about my new job and to talk about how to do I approach it and to get them as a resource.

SPD: So can you talk a little bit more about what you did at SEARAC?

TCD: Yeah. I was in charge of their advocacy initiative and organized the MAAs, the mutual assistance associations. Those are small community-based organizations that are run by refugees for refugees to do advocacy. And so I would monitor legislation as they related to Southeast Asians and monitored policy such as deportation, immigration, education, welfare reform, and language access. And would activate our networks to advocate for those policies or trying to stop bad policies from happening. And then also developing resources around leadership, and so I also had every year, a leadership training that brought community advocates from across the country to come to DC to share their stories and share their approaches and how they view certain issues and then to also train them in how Washington works so they can be voices for their own community on the federal level as well, and to help inform us about what we should be taking on and how they take on an issue. So it was good. It was another example of a job where I just grew and really developed a reputation, a good reputation, [laughs] as a professional who can do training and who knows policy and stuff like that. I think the thing with API organizations is you can really grow as a professional in them because they're tiny compared to, you know, NAACP has 5 million chapters and a \$100 million budget and hundreds of people working for it, and we had five. And the thing is it meant that I was the lead point person for so many issues that I got press calls all the time because I knew them better than anybody else. I had relationships with legislators and legislative staff in Congress. I was able to help write legislation, and I was also able to organize people as well and do training, so I think it really has cemented my professional status as somebody who can do that work. One of the interesting things about where API organizations are right now is that they've spent-- most of them came about in the last 15 years and have spent the last, probably 12 years, fighting to be at the table, fighting to be recognized in terms of our needs and be asked to be at the table when these things are discussed, and stuff like that. API organizations are finally being asked to be at the table and the challenge is everybody wants us at the table now. So many people want us at the table, and nobody's willing to pay for us to be at the table, so my advocacy was paid for by general operations, and then I had several grants to do trainings. But the advocacy that I did, nobody wanted to fund it, so that was really bizarre. But everybody wanted us to come speak somewhere, and everybody wanted us to participate in policy stuff. It's a weird and interesting time for API organizations

right now, because I think the need is there, the desire to have API organizations at the table is there, the capacity and the funding is not. It was very weird. And the constituency is not. That's one of the challenges, is our constituency is way behind in terms of being advocates for themselves and prioritizing advocacy that makes a difference. For example, and I think this happens on all levels--I mean I see this in the queer community too--if somebody says something stupid and racist, for example if Jay Leno makes a racist comment, or Abercrombie and Fitch makes a racist T-shirt that denigrates Asians, you can pretty much get hundreds of thousands of e-mails and letters and phone calls about that. You can mobilize people on that like that [snaps]. People respond to that and just go crazy. When it comes to issues of welfare reform that affects people's lives, that actually means somebody's electricity won't be turned off, somebody can get health care, it's so hard to mobilize. It's so fricking challenging. It was really demoralizing for me that people are willing to jump on board of all of this, "Oh my God, something racist was said on '60 Minutes'." {3:14:00} For example, there was the Japanese American Citizens' League, I have not seen them put out a single action alert on legislation. But before I left, the last action alert I saw from them was that there is a road in Florida called Jap Road, and they want it to be changed. And I'm like, "Is that going to give anybody else a voice? Is that going to increase access to institutions to anybody else? Is that going to put food on the table, make sure that people have adequate health care, make sure that people have adequate education that reflects their reality?" No, but that's the priority. The reason why it's their priority is because that's what their members want them to do. Their members don't want them to work on the fact that people are getting deported for frivolous reasons. They don't want them to work on the hate crime stuff. They don't want them to do coalition building with the Sikh community on hate crimes.

SPD: {3:15:12} Why do you think that is?

TCD: I think because it's easy, and it's immediate, and it hits them very quickly. Legislation is a long-term process. Changing policy is a long-term process, you know. So it's so much easier to get somebody to apologize in a national forum for something stupid they said than it is to affect real change. For the Southeast Asian community, the institutions that are in place are community-based organizations that were funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. So they have sucked at the teat of the federal government and aren't going to bite the hand that feeds them. So the voices of organizers and advocates don't get institutional support in the Southeast Asian community. SEARAC trainings are often the only spaces they can come together as Southeast Asians. And a lot of Southeast Asians who want to do that work go to radical organizing groups like ACORN and Center for Community Change and other groups with a broad agenda rather than working in their own community, because their own community doesn't want to work on those bread-and-butter issues or working on them in very service-oriented ways. You know, we're not going to advocate for the city to provide these services, we'll just translate these materials ourselves and hope the city will give us a grant for it. But they're not invested in institutional change, and the people who do want to create institutional change are marginalized in that community. I saw it time and time again. Every time I asked them what their needs were, they just said, "Funding. Can you tell us where to get more funding?" For example, there's this one organization in Wisconsin that-- they've never had a strategic plan, and they said, "Why do we need a strategic plan when that might not get us funding?" And I'm like, "Because you're there to meet their needs, not to meet the funders' needs." It is really based on a very handout

model, and a very a charity model, as opposed to an empowerment model. {3:18:00} It's a big reason why I left. Almost because of the way organizations in that community get funded, I can't do what I want to do in that.

One of the things that was really demoralizing was that in my job at SEARAC, I was doing a project on creating resources around refugee leadership, and we were forced to work with an organization called the International Rescue Committee. It was one of the most demeaning professional relationships I've ever had in my life, because the International Rescue Committee really didn't want us to be part of them and they were forced by the Office of Refugee Resettlement to work with us. So, for example, they didn't sign the MOU until three months after the actual date of the MOU, but they expected us to deliver the same amount of deliverables on that MOU, even though we had three months less to deliver it. And they weren't willing to shell out more money for us to get more resources to complete that. Another example is that they refused to assign us-- we were working with individual organizations, and we had to be assigned from them, from the International Rescue Committee. So we did site visits there to work with the staff to do that. And they would give us like two weeks notice sometimes to set up a site visit, and oftentimes irrespective of our schedules. They scheduled like a week after my leadership training, and I was like, "I can't do that. There's so much follow up I need to do on that." They were like, "You have to do that." And then they got mad at me because I turned in my report from that two days late, because guess what, I've got a million other things to do and I told you this is not a good time for me. They really were just treating us like children and not being accountable to us at all, us saying like, "We need more notice," and they'd be like, "Too bad, that's just the way it works." What was really demoralizing for me was that because it was a big source of funding for what I was doing for my job, we were dependent on them. I said, "We're expending way too much resources in terms of aggravation and in terms of my time, because I'm being scheduled in completely wacky ways." And my boss said, "Well, actually I have to increase your hours on this project because it's paying for so much." I'm like, "I can't work like this! I can't work where funding is really dictating the terms of who we work with and the effectiveness of our product." We couldn't do effective work under that condition. I can't get to know an organization and provide them with technical assistance with two weeks of approval time. It was crazy, it was absolutely crazy at the end. Part of it was when I got the job, we had an incredibly dynamic, very good leader, very good Executive Director, who was my boss, KaYing, and she got absolutely completely burned out and left two years after I started. In the last year, our Deputy Director became Executive Director, and he isn't a visionary. And so he was the one who saddled me with more hours on a project that he acknowledged was demeaning. Like okay, what does that say about us? That was really just exhausting for me, going to work knowing that I would have to do this. And luckily, I'm really enjoying where I'm working now, because so much of the money comes from individual donations and comes from sponsorships. That's all general operating money. It's an eight million dollar organization, and only two million comes from grants, and the rest comes from individual giving and sponsorships. So we get to set our own agenda. Luckily one of the really satisfying things about working at GLSEN is that I really walked into it knowing what I wanted to do and saying, "Okay, if I'm working on the state level, I really need to assess who's there, who's on the ground and then also what legislation was introduced before, and who are our allies, and who's in the legislature that we support and who's not." So they're really on board with what I need to do, and I'm getting a lot of support for my boss and a lot of support from the organization to do that work. It just sounds like it's a matter of me needing to get my way, but I feel like also if I'm wrong, I trust the organization and the

leadership in the organization to point that out and that it is really about strategy and effectiveness and putting something out as best we can, as opposed to, "We just have to work with these people because they're funding us. The funder wants us to." Or, "I know this is difficult, but politically we can't do it that way." I mean politically, if it means we need to get the legislation passed, you know, that's fine, if it's about politically the work as opposed to politically how does it look for us as an organization {3:25:00}, to a funder, you know.

It was really great to work at SEARAC. People still are calling me, the press is still calling me to talk about the issues I was working on. It really is an issue of being a very big fish in a very small pond, and I wasn't even that big of a fish. One of the biggest challenges is there's a brain drain in the API community, and there's a fund drain in the API community. It really irritates the crap out of me that there are a lot of rich Asians out there, but once they get rich, the groups that they give to are mainstream organizations. For example, there's this Vietnamese guy who owns like 10 hotels in New Jersey, and he gave like five million to the 9/11 fund. He has not given a single penny to any API group that I've talked to, you know. It's so different than in other ethnic communities. Like I hear from the National Council of La Raza how many donors they have [inaudible]. If we had like a 10th of that kind of support. And it's not just the money, it's the investment that people have, that they're not going to leave their community institutions behind once they get rich, once they've made it. That's really why I was itching to work in the GLBT community again, because people don't leave the community because they made it, people don't ignore who they are because they made it.

Third interview
January 2, 2005
{3:27:00}

SPD: So, I don't know if you have thought of specific things that you wanted to talk about that we haven't gotten to yet.

TCD: Not yet.

SPD: {3:27:14} Okay. Well I was hoping you would talk some about the Lesbian and Gay Chorus and when you got involved with that.

TCD: Sure. I got involved with the Lesbian and Gay Chorus fall of 1997. And I've been involved ever since, and then two or three year ago I was co-facilitator of the chorus as well. That was a very interesting position of sort of being the voice of the chorus and also being the person, because you're the voice of the chorus in so many ways, you have to get a sense of the

chorus and you do that through facilitating the meetings, and also being the person who people come to to bring up issues. So you are the one who facilitates the process of, if an issue gets brought up, how do you deal with it? I think one of the challenges that so many non-profits don't do enough celebrating of what they do. So sometimes, especially Jill, we have to really create space to celebrate. Then also dealing with the business of being in the chorus as well. Helping to do the personnel and long-term strategic planning, things like that. It's been a really great experience. I think that is what solidified me being rooted in DC actually, because a lot of people in the chorus were here a long time. Jill's lived here for 25, 30 years. A lot of people in the chorus have lived in DC for a while and consider DC their home. I think when you come here straight out of college and you're young, 20 something, some many of the other 20 somethings that you know really don't see themselves living in DC for the rest of their lives or in any long term. I think that was one of the reasons why I never went to grad school, other than I didn't want to go. But there is so much pressure to go to grad school in the city when you're younger. I felt weird enjoying living in DC because everyone I knew was moving on and going to grad school or moving back home to where they want to live for the rest of their lives. I really like living in DC and encountering a group of people that really like living in DC and [inaudible] and wanting to stay here in the long term is a big piece of the chorus for me.

I had always wanted to learn how to sing, and being non-auditioned, it was great for me, because it meant that I could really learn and it was a really open space to learn. People were very nurturing about that, nurturing about letting people find their voices on all levels. It's such an interesting metaphor because as an activist, by the time I had joined the chorus, I was really just beginning to find my voice. I just started to work for SIECUS and realized I wanted to do activism, wanted to be doing some kind of policy and organizing. And then I walked into the chorus and I'm finding my voice as a singer as well. What I love about the chorus is those two sides are very integrated, actually, because the chorus really is intentional about the music it sings. The chorus has a political aspect to it. Right now, we're trying to figure that out in the face of the 2004 elections about what kind of voice do we need to have politically rather than just musically and reinvesting ourselves in that, knowing that this is an opportunity to sing in places that we're not comfortable in and sing a repertoire with a clear social justice message. That's always been there, but how do we do it to make a movement as opposed to just sing? And I think that's really exciting. That's always been integrated into what we do but now it's become more the forefront. {3:32:00} It was very interesting, and I think one thing I love about the chorus is the fact that it's a constant process of engagement, it's a constant process of wanting to talk about a lot of hard issues. For me, it was a great incubating place for my activism and for my anti-oppression politics. Because not everybody in the chorus is coming there to be political or coming there with an anti-oppression mindset, but because we have a consensus process that doesn't leave anybody behind in terms of talking about issues and talking about making sure that people are heard, I think that's really important. For me, one of the things that I find is really important is that at least there are some elements of consensus in an organization if I'm going to be affiliated with them. That an organization can hold many different opinions and value different opinions. Definitely the chorus is one of those places. One of the interesting things is I came into the chorus already having a strong communication in consensus because I'd been a Quaker since my first year out of college and finding the Quaker church and being invested in that in a spiritual context and finding that in a musical context is really exciting too, you know. So I already knew that kind of process, I knew the value of that kind of process because I sought it. Because I think one of the challenges with a volunteer organization that is consensus based is

it's a constant state of recapitulation. Of, new people come on board and you constantly have to educate them about the fact that their voice matters because so many people are working off of a model of "Here's the Board of Directors. If you have a beef, talk to the Board of Directors and they'll decide," as opposed to the whole chorus deciding. It's interesting, the chorus has been a home for me and has been a family for me on all levels in terms of good and bad. It's a family in the bad ways of like, you're stuck with these people. If you really believe in the chorus, you're stuck with the people who can be dysfunctional and the people who don't share your politics and that you have to constantly be there. And I think one of the great things about the chorus is the people who are invested, even the people who I don't necessarily agree with or find problematic, they're still invested in the chorus and they're not going to walk away from the conversation. They may be dysfunctional in the conversation, but they're not walking away from it. I always say one of the marks of privilege is that you can walk away. And the way I've said that is I, as an API person, as a person of color, can't walk away from my people. I'm still going to need to deal with white people, I cannot surround myself in an all-API or all people of color enclave. I have to intentionally create it and then we still need to go out and work in white context. {3:36:00} Or I as a queer person still have to deal with a heterosexist context. We can't walk away from that. That's how I define privilege is that a white person can walk away from people of color, can surround themselves primarily with other white people. A heterosexual person can do that. And in the queer community, men can do that. It's very easy for men to do that. That's one of the reasons why it's so important for me to sing in the chorus, for me to be involved in that is that I think in the queer community it's so easy for gay men to isolate themselves from people of color and from women. And the fact that the chorus isn't that space for people to do that is great for me. For example, this is on a very personal note, but we're planning our New Year's with some friends of ours, and two friends of ours had sort of initially-- a white gay couple had offered to organize it and this past week they said they weren't going to host and so we had to sort of figure it out on our own, and we found out they wanted to go to another party, a party of gay men. They're still our friends, it wasn't as much drama as Serena's, but it really brought that into context for me, like I'm the type and my partner is the type to really surround ourselves with people with feminist backgrounds and people of color, and in a context that makes it comfortable, it's not going to Nation and dancing your shirt off, more coming here and chilling out and playing board games and stuff. I think that's one of the wonderful things about the chorus is people aren't going to walk away. And one of the great things about it is it's challenged me as a person of color to look at who are my allies and accept who are my allies and really see evolution. Our director of the chorus, one of the wonderful things about that is he started singing with the chorus as a singer and then became director over the course of four or five years. I remember when we were first talking, he was going to a meeting for a business and he was talking about, "Why is it taboo to sing Christian music and why do we constantly have to do concerts talking about depression and stuff like that." Now he's the first person to bring it up. "We need to be clear about what our message is in this," and I think the concerts are more coherent. I have seen that evolution among many people. There was one time, it was so fascinating to me because I was on the same side as a lot of the people who I'd never felt supported by in terms of my politics. We were debating this song called "I Ain't Afraid." The lyrics of "I Ain't Afraid" are like, "I ain't afraid of your Jesus, I ain't afraid of your Yahweh, I ain't afraid of your Allah, I am just afraid of what you do in their name." And what was funny was, a lot of the people who "advocated" to sing more sacred music and to say, "What's wrong with singing from a Western canon?" were the ones who were really supporting me in the chorus singing that song-- a lot of the people in the chorus were very uncomfortable with singing that

song. A lot of the very progressive people were really uncomfortable with singing that song. It felt too negative for them. It felt it was attacking the Church. A lot of people were uncomfortable with singing music that mentioned religion. Even though it was music that was mentioning religion, in my opinion, in an anti-oppressive way, in a way that was engaging people. Those people were really uncomfortable with that. The people who were saying, "I really need to sing this music." were the people who came from a very Western, Christian background. Because they were like, "This is speaking to my experience of being marginalized by my church, by my church." And I really like the fact that we're engaging people on that. It's fascinating to me the chorus is that space that we can consciously think about that. One of the great things is none of us are labeled that way of-- I'm not the liberal one, I'm not the one that constantly has to push these issues. My singing in the chorus has been such a home for me and such a family to me because it's who I'm connected to that I don't walk away from and they don't walk away from me. What's interesting about the chorus, I mean, one piece that was really difficult that I had to preside over was deciding not to renew the contract of our music director because he was extremely problematic in following through, being responsible. He was a great conductor and was somebody who really could inspire the chorus, engage the chorus and had a lot of gifts he could bring to the chorus, but a lot of us could tell he was not responding to people in the chorus and he was never responsible. I think Jill had spent much of the time together kind of playing clean up for his lack of following through. She reached a boiling point to where she could not work with him anymore and we had to make a decision about renewing his contract and renewing her contract at the same time, cause they get renewed every year. And one of the things that I did was to say, "I'm not the person to facilitate the meetings, because it would be unfair of me to preside over a meeting where we're determining whether we are going to renew their contracts or not, and facilitate it at the same time." Because as a co-facilitator I have to work with both of them and I have very strong opinions about what goes on there that I think I need to share. But I can't share and be co-facilitator at the same time because for me it would be completely inappropriate, I don't know how one would actively engage and participate in that conversation and facilitate it at the same time. One of the things I did as co-facilitator was, "I'm happy to sort of facilitate the background of this and letting people know, but handing off the facilitation of the meeting to other people." And it was fascinating, it was great because the whole chorus was involved. It was a two meeting process. It was very much longer than that, over the course of the season, we had done a mid-season evaluation of both Jill and Ray and how people thought they were being responsive or how people felt they were following through and how people thought their leadership was and stuff like that. So we had done that and we had also asked them to evaluate themselves. So what my role was setting up the context so people had the information to make an informed decision, but not setting up the conversation, because I wanted to be part of the conversation. It was definitely a very traumatic experience for the chorus but a very strengthening one as well. I think we had a difficult but very strengthening conversation about the kind of leadership we needed from the musical director, I think we're growing from knowing that we need to constantly engage with our music director, and we don't turn off our brains. And constantly know that we need to let the musical director know what we're doing and how we're feeling. I think one of the things I feel lucky about is that our current musical director is really a great technician and he is growing into being a great leader at the same time. I think he is really engaged with us and very much wants to know what we are going through and wants to hear what we need from him. So I think that's really heartening for me. And I will be very honest and say that the chorus is at a low. There are fewer people in the chorus than I have ever seen. I've been in the chorus when there have been close to 50 people and now we have about 25. I'm

kind of sad by that because I feel that there's a cadre of people running the stuff and I'm one of them in terms of doing the fundraising aspect of it. But I feel like the chorus as a whole isn't engaging. Out of the 20, there are six people who are doing the work, and we just shifted. And it's very sad because we just shifted from Jill who retired as general manager. The challenging thing about Jill, as having her as general manager, was she was general manager and a singer at the same time. As general manager, she was contracted to work 20 hours a week. But you never knew where she stopped being general manager and started being a singer. So, she really did put in 50, 60 hours a week for the chorus, and we took that for granted. Unfortunately, I don't think we were prepared enough to realize that we were losing Jill. When Jill stepped out of that, it meant we really needed to take ownership of a lot of the stuff like fundraising and stuff like that. And accountability and communication was really important and we're still struggling with that. We do have a paid staff, we do have a general manager who is truly a general manager who works 20 hours a week. And she is new so she doesn't direct herself as much this year because she doesn't have a sense of our clan yet. I'm hoping in the future she will have a better sense of when to direct herself and manage time accordingly. I'm surprised about how much we need to manage her time because she's just not clear about that yet and that's completely natural. But I think that's really interesting. For me, the sad part is I was hoping that when Jill retired we would have a full chorus investment, that doesn't seem to be happening. And I think there are a big chunk of people that come there just to sing. Unfortunately, that might have been great before Jill retired because Jill was doing so much, but now we all need to participate. And I think it'll happen, I think it's a natural evolution of the chorus. Every chorus has moments where people aren't coming and people aren't staying. And I think this is one of those moments and I think we'll make it through but I hope-- I think what I'm trying to engage with as co-facilitators now is, how do we let people know where their crafts are without panicking them? Right now, I really want to let people know I'm working at capacity as a fundraising chair. The co-facilitator is working at capacity. Our general manager is working at capacity but there is still a lot to be done and it's still exhausting. We could do it that way but that means in one or two years when I step down and the co-facilitator steps down because we are just so damn burnt out, "Where are you guys going to be?" And I'm like, "Who's going to come up to take that over?" So that's what really concerns me, that kind of stuff. But I think it's part of nonprofits and I see that over and over again with a lot of nonprofits that I work with. I feel grateful because we are volunteer driven and we are supported by the community, that-- there's an API organization, the Asian/Pacific Islander Partnership for Health that had three full-time paid staff that was working under a 500,000 dollar government grant. And they lost the grant and had to just fold their doors.

Whereas I feel that our chorus, because we have a diversified funding stream, because we're consensus based, we can go through this period of-- the model that we're working under is problematic but we can still do it. And hopefully the shape of the chorus will change so that it won't be six people doing all the business of the chorus and people will step up. But I think that we're lucky that we're flexible enough to be able to accommodate that as an organization. It's funny because as I'm listening to myself talk, what I'm finding interesting is the business of the chorus is almost a bigger part of my experience with the chorus as the musical part. It's not like I've talked about repertoire or performances. It's all really important but I find it really interesting that what I'm sort of bringing up is the business part of it, mainly because it's such a different nonprofit model than what I've worked under, and that's been really fascinating. And it's been very satisfying as a singer to sing that way as well, because we're not turning off our brains when we're singing. We're singing politically. One of the most memorable singing

experiences with the chorus was taking a bus to our music director's hometown and singing-- it's a very conservative part of Ohio. They didn't publicize to the mainstream community the fact that we were lesbian and gay. What was fascinating to us was people were driving two or three hours to hear us sing. Queer people were, and their supporters. That's when I felt like our music and our politics and who we are was so much at the forefront, because in the performance, it was held at his church, and the pastor was just saying like, "This is the Lesbian and Gay Chorus of Washington, and these are people in our community," and one of the things that we had done for the program is that each of us answered two questions: who are you in one sentence and why do you sing in the chorus? And he read four or five people's descriptions of who they were, and you could tell that it was half people from the community who didn't know what to expect and half people who needed to hear us and came to-- knew it and was walking to it, and it was very powerful for us to sing in that context. It was very enjoyable for us to be embraced that way and to have to struggle with it as well, have to struggle with people who weren't willing to publicize us as us, and trying to think politically, how do you wrap your brain around it? How do you get there and sing knowing that there's a measure of shame involved with the people who were bringing you out there? But I think that was a very satisfying to me when it did happen.

SPD: {3:54:52}What do you think the politics of the chorus is?

TCD: I think it's very based in our mission and vision of every voice matters, in a [inaudible] sense. And so I think that's what I go back to, time and time again. We as a chorus want to make our voice matter. Because we think we have a very important voice of men and women singing together. The men, particularly, who are in the chorus are in the chorus because they want to sing with women as partners and as equals and as people who bring something to the table, and not just their voices. I think the chorus's politics are driven by consensus and that means that it can be very different from year-to-year based on who is participating and who is active and making their voice heard in the consensus process. I think we are always, mainly because of Jill, always making sure that we are embracing diversity and embracing social justice in whatever form it takes. I personally want us to move away from a diversity model actually. I'm actually helping to write an anti-oppression resource packet for my job. We have a committee of volunteers who are helping to review this and somebody asked me "What is the difference between diversity and anti-oppression?" And I was really taken back, because I'm like, "Wow, have I ever thought of that?" You know, I have, but for me, the difference between diversity and an anti-oppressive model is that you can be all white and be an anti-oppressive organization. It's not about what you look like, it's how you operate. You can be all white and realize that you are an ally to other people of color and what you do is leverage those resources for populations who are oppressed and that what you're doing is not trying to bring people of lots of different opinions together or people of different things together but what you're doing is trying to end oppression. And I think that's very, very important. And I think the distinction is very important. Because one of the things that pisses me off in the chorus is people saying, "Well, we need to be diverse, we need to hear the voices of conservatives." And I'm like, "I don't need to be diverse." And I hate to say that, but I don't need to be inclusive of bigots, sorry. I don't. And it's what pisses me off about political discourse right now. "We need to move in the middle, we need to talk to the people in the Heartland," stuff like that. I don't need to talk to homophobic people. I know that may not get me anywhere politically. But I guess for me, if you start giving up things, when do you stop

being yourself? I hope that the chorus can think about-- because so many nonprofit organizations are struggling with this right now, especially after the election, of "inclusivity and diversity." And losing sight of anti-oppression, of ending oppression. My goal is not inclusivity. My goal is to make sure people whose voices aren't heard and are marginalized get to be at the forefront. That ending privilege and ending forms of oppression is important to me and not necessarily diversity. And once again, I would say that I would much rather join a group that's predominantly white and anti-oppressive than one that's "diverse," because there are many front groups of people of color for the Republican Party, and that's diverse. But that doesn't make my life better as a person of color, and that doesn't mean that the places of power now are distributed to everybody. I think there's that distinction there that I hope organizations really need to engage in. But I don't think the chorus is there yet. I'm hoping the chorus will get there at some point. {4:00:15} But it's hard for me to think of many organizations that are there. The organizations that I think that are there are the National Youth Advocacy Coalition. One of the exciting things is they have a constituency of young multi-issue, multicultural organizers. I feel like a lot of the young folks coming up in the GLBT movements and a lot of young activists in general just naturally have a very, very anti-oppressive model of organizing, just because that's what they know, that's how they came up. And because they at least have had to deal with the issue of adultism on top of homophobia and transphobia. And that's kind of exciting for me and it really pisses me off because I remember hearing Kim Gandy of the National Organization for Women say, she was like, "I don't know why those young female organizers don't shut up and listen to their betters." And I'm like, "Okay! You're not [inaudible] [laughs]" And I wanted to say part of it was is I could never say that, mainly because even I came up in a very different movement, GLBT-wise, and even my friends came up in a very different movement, in terms of the women's movement, than people 20 years ago and than people coming up behind us. And the people coming up behind us, I feel like, already have a very multi-issue organizing mindset. A mindset where you know it's a given that you engage with multiple oppressions. And for somebody to say that, especially when the women's movement in the past has a history of marginalizing people, why would you marginalize or not listen to the voices of people for whom including all people is a given, you know. That for me is really weird. And I think part of it is so many organizations, especially having been the spouse of somebody who works in it now [laughs], and seeing the kind of damage that can wreak. And with so many reproductive rights and women's organizations-- and I don't say that because they're women-led, I certainly think that happens in so many organizations, but I just see that more firsthand, is that there's so much of eating their own that comes out of that as opposed to nurturing people. And it's kind of like this whole idea of medical school, like young interns and residents are forced to work 30 hours shifts, with the idea of, "If you can survive that, you'll be a great doctor." As opposed to making sure people get good care by a physician that's slept eight hours. And I think that there is that kind of mentality of, if you can run the gauntlet and you're still there, you're down with it. As opposed to, if you were nurtured by this, supported by it, and fed by it, you have a legitimate voice and participate in it.

But I think chorus wise, that's another piece of that that's very important about the chorus. There's a sense of care of people because I think people know they're coming as volunteers and they're coming and putting pieces of themselves into it. That it's an artistic process. It's a very interesting artistic process that we are kind of revolutionary. I'm sure lots of feminist choruses are already doing it, and all women's choruses are doing it, because our sister chorus, the Bread and Roses Feminist Singers, do that all the time. We're part of a very small and I hope growing

movement. I mean, I don't know that we are really challenging notions of artistic integrity and how music gets made and how art gets made. So much of art, art that's profitable, is about fulfilling one person's vision, and in the chorus, it's not that, it can't be that. But what's really interesting is, how do we live as singers what we live as activists? That's a big challenge. Living as singers, engaging with the music director but respecting the expertise of our music director. Letting him know where we're at and what we need from him and how he can improve but also respecting his expertise as well. {4:05:58} I think that's the biggest challenge. Every model that people see in schools about how to make music is, there's a music director, he is all-powerful. *He* is all powerful. He directs music, played by *him*, written by *him*, very much so based on a canon that is predominantly Western, almost exclusively male, and with almost no politics whatsoever. So the paradigm that has been set, and it's how rehearsals are set. Even with us, we have a director there who is teaching us our notes and teaching us what we need to emphasize and stuff like that, but we have very strong voices in terms of how the music is selected. And letting him know how we feel about rehearsals and what we need from him, and he engages with us on it, and he asks us how we're doing and stuff like that. But it's a constant process of mitigation and I think that's-- but it's still a big challenge because a lot of people get intimidated by that and want just to be told what to do. But when it happens, it's wonderful. One time our music director was out of town and he asked members of the chorus us to lead the rehearsal, and there were some really important things that happened. Our alto section is really insecure, and there are twice as many altos as there are in any other section, there are only four tenors, and there are like 10 altos, and what's really fascinating is they don't sing with much confidence a lot of the time, and I can't-- even though I stand next to the alto section, I can't hear them a lot of the time. And when we were self-directed, I think the person who was directing us for a song asked the altos, "Hey altos, I need to hear you. Can you sing louder?" And they did, and they sounded great, actually, once they did. But that could never happen with the music director because I think there's so much baggage of feeling judged and feeling evaluated, like, "I can't hear you, you're not singing good enough." Whereas if it comes from a fellow singer, it's like, "Okay, they need to hear me, so I'll do that." And I think that touches what we could be as a musically strong organization but also an organization that empowers people. And that's where I've seen that this is really important and we need to encourage that.

SPD: Can you talk a little bit more about what you mean by "singing politically"?

TCD: Yeah. I think singing politically means that-- a lot of it is content and context, that we can't-- one of the things we evolved in the chorus is that we do sing sacred music, but we don't sing sacred music just because it's pretty and because it fits musically into our repertoire. We sing sacred music because it fits into the social justice message we're trying to accomplish. For example, we do sing a lot of spirituals, for example, we're singing, "Wade in the Water" for this concert. We actually had an education process with Ysaye Barnwell about singing Jesus in spirituals and not replacing it with love or truth or spirit or something like that because there's a very specific reason why Jesus was the word usage put in spirituals, and that was because they had-- slaves could not say the word freedom, could not say the word truth, and stuff like that, and so they had to replace-- it comes from knowing the history of when your voice was so oppressed, there were words you could not say. And we need to honor that voice as well and be conscious of that. So singing politically is about setting the music you have into context and making that clear

to your audience. And singing politically means that you're singing not just to your supporters and your own community and your own friends, but singing in places that you are singing out and building relationships with. {4:11:03} One of the wonderful things, and the keystone of that is Jill, is the outreach that the chorus does. We never sing with somebody just because they've asked us to and it's convenient, and whatever. We sing with people, and where we sing, are places that we want to build relationships with. For example, with the Jubilee singers. We sung with the Jubilee singers a few years back. We did a commissioned work based on the NAMES Project AIDS memorial quilt, and the writings of that, and it was a collaborative commission between DC Different Drummers. And this was particularly painful because I think DC Different Drummers turned themselves off from us and really-- how to describe this. So we were doing the commission on this with DC Different Drummers, and we think that they're totally on the same page as us because they're a non-auditioned lesbian and gay musical organization. And as it turns out, we're very different politically, and I think it was very hard for them to be challenged politically on what we were doing. And knowing that they did not have a social justice component to this at all. Which is fine, I don't think-- every organization needs to be what it needs to be. You don't need to turn yourself into the National Center for Lesbian Rights. Not everybody needs to be the Gaia Foundation, but we were particularly hurt because I feel like, personally, they closed their hearts to us in that process. Because where it first started was, where we would solicit money from to support this commission and they wanted to go to the Human Rights Campaign and go to PR agencies that would get us in touch with corporate sponsors and were comfortable taking money from tobacco and alcohol companies. It was weird because we came out of that meeting very challenged for ourselves of like what do we mean by inclusive? What we came up with was we should allow them to solicit whoever they want to solicit because we're representing the face of AIDS. Everybody gets AIDS, even rich gay white men, and we wanted to say if our music is diverse, if our message is diverse, we should have a diverse funding stream for it. And the people who we're going to solicit are going to be our community members and our grassroots partners for support, but if this is a true collaboration, we need to open that space up for DCDD to do what they need. But that tainted the relationship for the rest of the time. It was so difficult. And it was so upsetting, because then I would hear from my friends in DCDD what the leadership was saying about us, that we were PC. And I have to say, if anybody ever-- I've said this to my friends actually, I said, "Don't ever use the term PC in my presence." It is the tool of people who want to oppress me. It is a tool of people who want to silence my voice. A Christian isn't called PC when they say, "I'm uncomfortable with you talking about sex." They're not called PC. A conservative person isn't called PC when they feel uncomfortable with me, when I have children, saying expletives to my children, because I personally don't care. I'd much rather have my child have a full vocabulary and be able to express themselves and use their voice rather than their fists, you know. But they're never called PC when they don't feel comfortable with what I'm saying. The other side, whoever the other side is, of people who aren't comfortable with my sexuality, with my progressivism, are never called PC. The people who are called PC are people like me and people who want a multicultural curriculum, people who want to make sure that people's rights are protected. I've never once heard some white person who said they felt uncomfortable talking about sex, they felt uncomfortable talking about issues of privilege, they felt uncomfortable hearing swear words, I've never heard them called PC. We were called PC, we were called anti-white by this organization, and we were marginalized musically. It was a seven movement piece with some movements for choruses, some movements for band, and combined movements, and our director was told-- and part of it was the composer ended up being a complete asshole and I think fueling the DC Different Drummers to exclude us,

and our director was not allowed to direct any movements of the piece when it premiered, and we were constantly being told that there were not enough people in the chorus, when there were many musical things that you can do to beef up the sound of the chorus without adding more people. Another thing that fueled this and why I talked about building relationships was that they were feeling very insecure about our numbers and so they had just approached the Georgetown Chorale to sing with us because they're big {4:18:00}. We had approached the Jubilee Singers from the UU church in Adams Morgan to sing with us-- and they were around the same size as us, because they were a chorus and musical group who had a very strong social justice message, who had a repertoire and a history and a-- I don't know how to describe it, but an organizational bent to sing music from the African American tradition, and was definitely something that we had worked on. And to this day we're still engaged with them, it wasn't just a one-shot deal. We had sung in their church with them two months before the performance because we wanted to connect with them. We didn't want just to sing with them and that was it. We wanted for them to be an ongoing partner. And then this past year, we sang with them again on that same weekend to maintain that relationship. And they're coming to sing with us every year we have an MLK celebration for the GLBT Arts Consortium that the chorus leads, and they're singing with us in that. So I think part of it is we were trying to really build a relationship. The UU church gave us \$100. How many collaborations result in one organization giving another organization money? So when we said that made us feel really uncomfortable because number one process wise, why didn't you say you are uncomfortable with our numbers directly to us as opposed to asking Georgetown? And we didn't want to sing with anybody willy-nilly, we wanted to sing with people who we were forming a relationship with and that was going to still be there. So it was really difficult. In terms of the way we sing, it was a real challenge, and because of our numbers. Somehow our music integrity was less because we had fewer people. So politically, that's another piece of that is who we decide to sing with and the fact that we want to sing with people who we value and who value us and aren't just there as a gig. The other piece of that is we've really formed a strong relationship with the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland. It's a wonderful space. It's one of the most musically friendly spaces we've ever sang in. We've gotten glowing reviews every time we've sang there in the *Washington Post*, so it's really satisfying to sing there. We've built that relationship. And this year we sang at a December 1st World AIDS Day remembrance there as well. So all of that is part of singing politically, of who you're singing with, where you're singing, what context you're providing the audience, and you're not just singing music because it's musically nice, although that should never not be [laughs] part of the agenda. But you're singing music that is expressing something that challenges oppression and that engages the audience not just with their ears but with their heads. And I think that's what I mean by singing politically. {4:22:00} And I think it's hard because the organization that sort of connects all the GLBT choruses, or that says they connect all of the GLBT choruses, GALA Choruses, right now is organizationally not doing that, and I feel like representing predominantly large men's choruses and the voices of women's choruses and mixed choruses and especially of community-based mixed choruses are not being heard. I would love to start a progressive chorus association of choruses that are singing for social justice and with a social justice context to it. So I think politically singing is very much a part of what we do. I don't think we ever disengage our heads when we sing, which is really satisfying.

SPD: {4:22:54} Can you talk about joining the Quaker church?

TCD: Yeah. When I first came to DC, I was kind of shopping around for a community of faith, and I had a very weird experience because there was a Lutheran Church near us, near where I was living at the time, so I went there with one of my roommates and I actually really liked the sermon that the person gave, I mean they talked about the importance of doubt, and the fact that doubt is a very healthy thing and is a sacred thing. And I really like it but then the pastor followed up me being at that church with a really kind of slightly racist visit. He came and he just kept on talking about, "Well, as a Vietnamese person, you obviously know all about Buddhism," and I don't. I have as much Buddhism as a secular white person has with Christianity, which is I've celebrated the holidays, but I don't know anything about it really. And he kept on saying, "Well, as a Buddhist, you know that blah, blah, blah," And I'm like, "No." So it really turned me off. But then I went to the Quaker church as part of shopping around for a spiritual home and it was so-- it was very challenging at first because it was just silence, it was silence and people speaking out over the silence. One of the great things about it was they did have at that time a meeting with a special welcome for gays and lesbians and bisexuals. And they do, but I think we have these three meetings that go on. The first is what we call the 'big meeting', which anybody can come to, but doesn't necessarily expend a special welcome, and then the smaller meeting in the Quaker House expends a special welcome for gays and lesbians. But I think because the Friends Meeting of Washington has become more integrated and more clear in its social justice message, each of the meetings are very different based not necessarily on who's there, whether a gay or lesbian person is there but sort of on the tenor of the meeting, I feel like the smaller meetings is more based on silence, and less on people standing up and sharing messages, and the big meeting is much more talky [laughs]. So I went to the meeting with the special meeting for gays and lesbians and it is silent. But what people were saying was really speaking to me and what people were saying was really ringing a chord in me about struggling with trying to figure out spirituality and also the basic Quaker tenet of seeing the light in everyone and recognizing humanity in everyone and recognizing everybody has their own truth is very important and also the peace testimony involved in that, of seeing peace as very active, vital, and sometimes confrontational thing. It harkened back to my Alternatives to Violence Project trainings, and also just spoke to me about coming into fellowship with a spiritual community that was so focused on that and that was based on the voices of everybody. None of the meetings were led. There was no sermon. There was no liturgy. It was people coming up and sharing their truth and feeling so moved because they felt moved by the Spirit to do so. And I loved the intentional speaking, and there were many points when I feel like I heard the voice of the divine, where I just felt like what somebody was saying was ringing in me in a very deep way, was very, very important to me. I was really active for three or four years and then I sort of stopped going for a couple years. Then 9/11 hit, and I had to go back. I had to go back because there was no other community that was going to talk about 9/11 the way I needed to talk about it and talk about how we as a society are looking at affirming people's humanity, all people's humanity, even the humanity of the people who perpetuated 9/11 and that it's not simple. {4:28:00} I think part of it is that the Quaker church constantly engages with the world and constantly looks at the world as something to be a part of and not necessarily something to change in your image, type of thing, I think is really important. The Friends' Committee on National Legislation is constantly looking at legislation and looking at things in a very nuanced way, for example, Friends' Service Committee actually came out against hate crimes legislation because they said, "We know that the criminal justice system is inherently unjust. Can we address the issue of hate crimes with an unjust instrument?" And that there is a spiritual element

to that for us as Quakers. That's why I find it a community, is because my politics and my spirituality are not divorced. In the same way in the chorus, my politics and my artistic expression are not divorced.

And we got married in the Quaker church. If anything affirms my own faith was our marriage because they called it a marriage. We have a marriage certificate that I'm framing as we speak from the church. We were part of a long history of challenging how people see marriage. The first interracial marriages were Quakers, were done under the care of the Quaker meetings, and that made me feel very good. And it was so special, for me it was so special because we get this little 'So you want to get married' packet. The first thing they said was, "We just want to let you know, you're marrying each other. There's no priest marrying you. You're marrying each other, and you're just being married under the care of the meeting who's committing to support your marriage." The other thing it said was like, "Please do not include obey in your vows [laughs]. They actually said that. While everybody needs to express themselves the way they need to, we as Quakers prefer not to include 'obey' in our vows." I think the other thing is I feel like Quakers have a sense of humor about themselves because there's so many stereotypes about what Quakers are, that I think Quakers are very funny about that, and when you read that kind of stuff - that's the kind of stuff you see on Quaker meeting boards and stuff like that, like, "Oh, by the way, please don't say 'obey.'" It's hilarious. But I thought the marriage was so beautiful because it was such an expression of my own faith as a Quaker. The way a Quaker marriage is is essentially we give our vows, and sign a marriage certificate, and then we settle back down into silence, people just stand up and talk as they're moved about us. And it's lovely because the wedding is about us but it's not about us at the same time. I was really worried that maybe people would freak out about the silence, and how long it was, but God, I wish the silence were longer, because it was really important and beautiful but wow. And it was very affirming. But I think just the way they handle marriage is so indicative of who they are, who we as Quakers are. Of like, we aren't each other's property, we're affirming who we are as people, and that the voices of everybody are involved in the marriage, and at the end of it, everybody's name is signed into the marriage certificate as people who will support the marriage. That's very important to us, and I think it's how I want to raise my children. It's very interesting, because Jonathan and I are debating the issue of spirituality, of like, do you raise your children in a church or just let them find their own religion, and not bring in the church because they need to find their own religion. And we're struggling with that, because I get so much out of being part of the Quaker church, and I want to share that, and at least give my children some context to ways people can be spiritual but also we don't want to dictate to somebody, even to our children, what spirituality they should be. {4:34:00} And will that be dictating. I don't know.

SPD: And so your parents are Buddhist?

TCD: My mother is actively practicing. And she and her family is, but I don't think my dad actively practices it. And it's very specifically a Vietnamese, Asian form of Buddhism which is very much based in ancestor worship. But they go to the temple regularly, they're very active in the temple, in terms of going there to meditate and chant and pray. And then also contributing to the temple as well.

SPD: So when you were young, you said you just celebrated holidays, that was about it?

TCD: Yeah, we celebrate Lunar New Year and we celebrated Buddha's birthday and the anniversary of our ancestors' deaths. I certainly was never taught about the process and taught about the actual theology, and encouraged to be part of that. Because I think my family is very secular in a lot of ways and religion is very personal to my family, nobody is going to tell somebody else to-- we were taken to the temple because my parents weren't gonna leave us at home, but we weren't really told that this is your spiritual path for your life.

SPD: So how did you decide that you wanted to look for a spiritual community?

TCD: I think I wanted to do it because I wanted to express my faith and I wanted to approach spirituality in a ritualized manner and in a manner that included fellowship, included connecting with other people. My sister who's completely areligious was like, "Well, if all you're doing is sitting in silence, why don't you just stay at home and sit in silence?" I'm like, "Well, because it's a lot about space and it's a lot about being with other people and hearing the voices of other people who are inspired by the Spirit." I think it's about fellowship and it's about connecting with other people as well.

SPD: So I'm trying to figure out how your faith developed, I guess. There's a piece missing, maybe in college?

TCD: Kind of, yeah. In high school, I had some very Evangelical Christian friends and I went to their churches and it was really interesting, because it was really nice because people were nice to you and partially because they wanted you to join their church, but one of the things that icked me out the most was just how completely homogenous it was, not just in ideology but like race and class. And the other thing that was disturbing to me was that it really ruled their lives. But I went to it because they were nice people. And then in college I was involved in InterVarsity, I don't know if you've heard of that.

SPD: The Christian fellowship.

TCD: Yeah, the Christian fellowship. InterVarsity is a great place for gay people to be in college because InterVarsity discourages dating. You're a big group and you're all friends and you don't want two people to separate themselves from the group. So it was really interesting. And it was great. People were very nice. It's silly but one of the things that disturbs me is when people close their eyes and wave their hands. I think it's very weird to me. Part of it is, as I was seeing all this this, I realized that my spirituality is very personal, it's not something I need to talk to strangers about and evangelize about. The way I express my spirituality is not something that is based in

closing your eyes and waving your hands around like that. It's something that's very-- quieter. One of the things that appeals to me about the Quakers is that it's quiet. It's not showy. Not that showy is necessarily bad, I think of African American AME churches, singing and being exuberant is really important to them. So I was part of InterVarsity for a while, so I did know the power of fellowship and the power of having a group of people sharing your beliefs and sharing your ideology, but obviously InterVarsity was not that for me. It was more social than anything else. I really wanted to have a space for spirituality, so by the time I left college and was no longer a part of InterVarsity, I really wanted to find a spiritual home that spoke to me. Because so much of that was I want to talk about God, I want to engage in that but in a very critical minded way. In a way where faith is not mindless. I just had so much of mindless faith that people were just talking about doing all of these good works and stuff like that without thinking about changing the systems that were undergirding that.

SPD: {4:39:55} You've talked about bringing your politics into the arts and into spirituality. And I'm wondering, if you feel like you bring the arts and your spirituality into your politics as well?

TCD: Not so much the arts into my politics. Because I think that I bring the processes of the arts or the institutions that I'm involved in in terms of the arts and my spirituality into [inaudible] that I'm working with in terms of consensus. I think that's what I bring from those two institutions. Part of it is that I have experienced knowing that consensus works because it's worked for Quakers for hundreds of years and has worked for our chorus for like 20 years. So I'm not afraid of consensus. I think a lot of activists are afraid of consensus. Because they think it's going to be one big long conversation and everybody needs to talk and it's going to be a free-for-all, when it's actually really structured. It has as much structure as Robert's Rules of Order, but it's structure that ensures everybody has a voice as opposed to a structure that places power in the hands of the parliamentarian. I definitely think spiritually what I bring to social justice is that there's something that undergirds it and I have a very critical view of what mainstream Christianity in terms of what the media is portraying mainstream Christianity as, and that's not my Christianity, it's not my brand of Christianity, it's not what I know of Christ to be. I think Christ is the original grassroots organizer. I think there's a spiritual element to wanting social justice because I think it's not just about organizing or it's not just about my work but it's about the fact that-- I think it's something that God wants for the world [laughs]. I think what brings it is when I have to deal with the religious right in my work and knowing that that may be their vision of God, but that's not the only vision of God. Those kind of arguments are very specious for me. That's certainly not the Quaker vision of God or what Christ says. And I think part of it is that social justice is something that is part of your life. It's not something that you can cordon off. And I think that is something that I'd have to say that it flows into everything. That it's not just a job that I do but it's how I live my life. I think that's one thing that I see in my sister-in-law, Jonathan's sister, who is Evangelical Christian, who worships at a 10,000 person church that she tithes 15% of her income to, is that it's their whole fucking life. After church, they have coffee at the after church Starbucks, there's a Starbucks in the church and they have a church daycare and they have a church spiritual group that meets twice a week and they have a church potluck group that meets twice a week, and all of their friends are church friends, and all of social networks are church social networks, and how they organize their life is based on the church. I mean, they have kids and they have books on how would Jesus raise your child? How would Jesus do his

finances? And I'm like, [whispers] "Actually, Jesus wouldn't do his finances because he gave all his money to the poor." Jesus actually took an active vow of aestheticism, to do ministry and to do social justice organizing on behalf of people who were cast out like prostitutes and lepers. So they should probably get rid of their house and their cars and go around the country actually ministering the poor if they were actually going to do what Jesus does, but their church is-- wouldn't have that because then no one would be giving to it, have a building the size of a shopping mall to house their church. But I think that is one thing that I do see that is so important for me, the parallels there are like it is important in my life. It's how I sing, it's how I worship, it's how I work, and it's who I spend my time with and who I have fun with as well. I think that's the parallel there. I think in my own way social justice and trying to end oppression is a part of my whole life and not just what I do for a living or what I volunteer to do. It's how I think about the choices I make. But there's no 'What would a social justice organizer do?' book. 'How does a social justice organizer do their finances?' but I think as a whole, the connection is that the social justice flows into each other as opposed to the art, because those are very separate.

SPD: How has it influence the people that you hang out with and your personal relationships?

TCD: I think the people who we spend the most time with are people who we can engage in in those conversations. They are necessarily all the same politics. Some of my close friends, some of Jonathan's close friends are quite conservative and have voted Republican before. It's hard sometimes when I think about it because sometimes I wonder what the people who we know who vote Republican think when they're saying that my relationship is not valid to them if they are voting for people in power that are actively working to end any legal protection I have in my relationship. Sometimes when I think about it I wonder about some of the friendships we have. Not necessarily the friendships in terms of what good friends they are but just intellectually what are they thinking? What are they thinking in terms of our relationship? But I think the people who I actively choose to hang around are people who I can engage in that conversation. {4:48:00} Those people, the people who are Republicans, I'm not going to bring that up. A lot of them are Republicans because they're apolitical, not because they're actively political. Because we have a very close group of friends that we call the Saturday Night dinner party, I think I talked about that in previous interviews and those people who we see on a regular basis are people who we really enjoy and part of it is because we can talk about politics and we can talk about differences in ideology and difference in visions of social justice. Once again, they are people who are going to walk away from the conversation or disengage from the conversation. Some of them have different politics. I mean, our friend Sarah once said, when Martha Stewart was being carted off to jail, she was like, "They're only sending her to jail because she's a strong woman." And I was like, "No. Do you want me to list her transgressions in terms of using sweatshop labor and exploiting the people around her and underpaying her workers?"

SPD: But that's not what she went to jail for, we don't care about that [laughs].

TCD: Yeah. She went to jail because she exploited the system and used her privilege to get money. But at least we can talk about it, at least I can say like, "Well actually, let me tell you her transgressions for me." And that we're continually going to be able to discuss what our politics are and what our social justice views are. I think that's very important for us, that we don't have

to all think alike. We don't all have to support the same political agenda. Although we all are Democrats, in SNDP. We all watched the election together, and it was devastating for every single one of us [Laughs]. I still am on a front-page ban of every single newspaper I read. Because I only read left-wing political websites to get news right now because I cannot-- for example, one of the things that was said was, "Bush wins in decisive victory." I'm like, "How is close to 49% of the people not voting for him counting as a decisive victory? How is that? What planet is almost half of the country marginalized? I don't understand that." So I can't read mainstream papers. I get the *Post* and I read it for the style section, but I still can't read the front page. I was devastated. That night, it was worse than getting dumped by a boyfriend. I had felt like the country dumped me. That 51% of the people said, "This isn't your country." We were all just devastated. I think for the close, close friends, the people we see on a regular basis day in and day out, if anything, if I saw what connects us politically, we were all just devastated. We were all just hurt by it, very emotionally hurt by it. I'm still hurt by it. It felt like breaking up. Because it was like when you end a long-term relationship, or when somebody ends a long-term relationship on you, you just wonder-- for me, when I've had that happen, one of the things I wonder is like, "I've kind of organized my life around this person. What am I going to do?" "I've organize my life around the fact that democracy works and people are intelligent. What do I do? [laughs] What is my future going to look like?" I had this huge hollow feeling in my heart for days afterwards. The other part about it was-- not denial because I know it happened, but just like not wanting to deal with it, which is also very similar to the breakups I've had, like, "I don't want to think about it, I'm just going to work a lot." So I think if anything our politics are similar on that level of, it's devastating to see people who really don't care about other people getting into power. If anything connects us, it's that. We support people who care about other people. We support politicians and politics that cares about other people, however different that expresses itself politically among each of us, and it does, that's what I care about. That's what my friends care about. We were so invested in the election coming out that way that it was really hard for us, all of us. I don't remember anybody who wasn't crying in the room actually when it was midnight and the final returns came in. As I think about it, politically, the people we see day in and day out are very similar in that sense. We're very different in the way it expresses itself, but very similar in our basic core values.

SPD: {4:54:19} How would you say living in DC has affected the work that you've done?

TCD: I think it's affected it because I always think about the rest of the country. I think it's also affected it because people don't see DC as reality. People always, always, always say, "Oh you're from DC, you don't really know what's really going on." When there is reality in DC. There's reality in DC in terms of the politics that happens. And I think part of it is that I always think of the national aspect to what I'm doing, even if I'm organizing locally. In the work that I'm doing now, I'm doing state-level legislation and like, "Wow that's really going to set us up for a possible move on the national level, or if I get this passed here, I can work in these other states." So working in DC and doing activism in DC, you never lose sight of that, you never get, "This is my own community and I'm just going to work there." You know that it has implications other places. You know that it sets it up for other places. And that the legislation you're working on, the activism you're doing is based in a national model. I think one of the frustrating things is there's so much suspicion against DC national organizations of being sort of inside the Beltway.

And I think there's an important balance there, that you need to acknowledge what's going on in other parts of the country and stuff like that and you need to be engaged and you need to know that it's important to talk with and engage people on the state level in other states, but I kind of think a lot of people don't think that DC experiences similar things as other parts of the country, and we do. I mean, we're getting the fucking baseball stadium, which is so completely ridiculous, and that happened in Texas, and that happened in Minnesota, and that happened everywhere, where the public was getting screwed so that a bunch of rich baseball owners could get richer off of the backs of tax breaks. So I think one of the things about working in DC that's really important is that, if you're doing it right, personally, because I think there are a lot of people who get very invested in DC stuff without acknowledging the rest of the country. I think a lot of people also think that the rest of the country is just automatically going to value what you're doing, which I know it's not the case, because there's also stuff going on in their own communities, and there's also really important stuff that goes on in their own communities that sets up what I do. So I think the thing for me is that you're always conscious of that, you're always conscious that you're doing national level work, and you're always conscious of the impacts you have on the rest of the country working in DC.

SPD: So can you talk about what you're doing now at GLSEN and how it's going?

TCD: Sure. It's going great. I am the State Campaigns Coordinator for GLSEN. And what I'm doing is organizing at the state-level, building coalitions and working with state-level organizations to pass safe schools legislation, legislation that would prohibit bullying and harassment of students based on several protected categories, gender identity and sexual orientation included in that. So I'm working in five target states: Michigan, Missouri, Iowa, North Carolina, and Texas. And I am working with the state-level organization to bring in unlikely allies and also to support their on the ground organizing as well, so helping them organize lobby days and trainings of activists about the legislation and coordinating with our policy analyst to develop the legislation as well. I've only been in it a month, and December is a really interesting time to start in any organization in DC, because everybody's so checked out in December, because everybody is really casual about it, like, "Yeah, okay, I'll get back to you." But right now what I'm doing is a work plan and what I'm doing is talking to all the state-level GLBT organizations and also some of the state-level education associations, like chapters of the NEA and chapters of the American Federation of Teachers, to talk about what they've done in the past, what's worked, what hasn't worked, where we can be helpful, who are their allies right now who they'd like to bring in, and also what was their strategy for pushing it in the last term and what are their goals. Each state has different goals, for example, in Texas, their goal is simply to get a hearing for the legislation, to get the legislation introduced and getting it heard in the Legislature, as opposed to passing it. Whereas in Michigan, there's actually a lot of momentum there, and we're hoping to pass in session. It's a really exciting job. I think GLSEN has historically been seen as very patriarchal and very gay white male, and to some degree it is. The Executive Director is the same Executive Director it's been in. And I think he is somebody who is perceived as very much about his own agenda. And especially working at PFLAG I saw that perception. But I think the great thing about GLSEN right now is they are bringing in-- a lot of the staff are young organizers, about a third of the staff are people of color. Out of 30 people, six people are transgendered, two are male to female, four are female to male. It was so much

fun at the all staff meeting in New York. We had to go around the room and say what our preferred gender pronouns were. So I feel like, A) I am not going to be the only out-there lefty progressive person, that we can support each other. And I think, B) I think there's a critical mass of people to question what GLSEN does to make sure it is moving from a very patriarchal gay white male model to one that is multi-issue organizing. It's a slow process, but I see that change at least in the discussions that are being made and the way things are being engaged upon. I think that's what I really like about it. When I was in New York for our all staff meeting, we also had a training on conflict resolution and diversity, and one of the things that was said was, I think we're really good on conflict resolution one on one, and I think what we need to talk about is institutional visions of diversity and changing institutional culture. In many other organizations, I think people would be invested to make nice and just sort of go through the motions of diversity training as opposed to saying something as difficult as that. To say, "This is kind of bullshit, let's move on to the heart of it." And I think that's where I'm really gratified to work with GLSEN. I feel like I've got a lot of support there. My boss I feel like is very supportive. And I feel like there is a contingent, even if it's not the majority, I'm not alone, of working at GLSEN. Quite frankly, after the election, I'm really glad to be working on the state level. It was really hard after the election to go back and work with the staffers I worked with in Congress. They were all just like, "Okay, if we're less than focused, we're just really depressed." I was like, "Yeah. This isn't going to be pretty, is it?" So it's nice to be working at the state level, and I think there's a lot of excitement there, there's really a lot of excitement there. So that's where I'm at right now. I'm only a month in, but it's a great place to work, and I feel very supported.

SPD: {5:04:24} Let's see. What do you think sexuality has to do with politics?

TCD: I think it has everything to do with politics. I view sexuality in a very broad way. I view sexuality in terms of not just sex, but how we deal with our bodies and how we view our bodies. I find it very fascinating that the new Director of Health and Human Services said something horrible about like we're reducing Medicare benefits because a lot of people on Medicare are obese, and they should just lose weight. And this guy is fucking fat! He's heavy, and it's all about class, and it's all about bodies. It's how society conflates class and physicality and the fact that there are plenty of fat rich people out there. There are plenty of fat policy makers out there, but they're penalizing poor people for being fat, and we penalize people for being fat. And I think so much of it is losing touch with our own bodies. I think so much of politics is about stigmatizing somebody's body, stigmatizing the way people express their bodies, whether we want to think about that or not. Whether it's welfare mothers-- what is the myth of the welfare mother? She buys a steak-- it isn't about she buys jewelry. It isn't about that she spends money on expensive gas as opposed to regular unleaded. One that was put about, it was how she ate. I think so much of the way politics gets played out is about bodies. I think it's broader than sexuality. I think it is about physicality. I think it is about the way we stigmatize how people express who they are as physical beings. It's the same thing that comes from Puritan values of the Earth and the body is the devil's playground and heaven is somewhere else, you know. That's where I feel like it comes from. I feel like it's a very effective tool of oppression, because it's very easy to blame somebody for their body. Because it's their body, it's not your body, it's their body. If you're rich and you're fat, it's very easy to blame a poor and fat person, because it's not your body, it's their body. If you're a man, it's very easy to blame a woman for an unplanned pregnancy, because it's about

their body, and we all have separate bodies, and our bodies are very separate from each other as physical beings. So I feel like the way physicality is used, it is the bludgeon of oppression. It is the way oppression exerts itself in policy. We just don't want to acknowledge it. {5:08:00} We'd much rather say it's about people being lazy. It's about supporting a corporation because they're employing people, but it's never about-- people don't want to say what the root is, which is about people's ability to take control of their own bodies and be healthy in their own bodies. That's why we have an organization called Centers for Disease Control, as opposed to Center for Health Promotion, is because we don't want people to take control of their own body, we want people to wait until something goes wrong with their body and the government or a corporation steps in and corrects it, and they make money off of it, you know. There's reasons why we've got institutions set up the way we have it set up. There are reasons why we don't talk about health disparity among people of color and white folks. So I feel like sexuality is only one facet of it. Part of it is sexuality is yet another reiteration of the fact that people are uncomfortable with other people having any form of control over their own body in terms of what they want to do with their body with another person. For me, it flows into so many other ways about how you treat your body in terms of making it healthy, what you put into your body. It's so fascinating that whenever something invested in sexuality and physicality happens, we as a society spin it off into this crazy ass thing of not dealing with the root problem. I think there's some really fucked up stuff about teen sexuality and kids being exposed to unhealthy sexuality. I mean like, I don't want 13 year-old girls to be giving blowjobs, especially because I don't want thirteen year old girls to be giving blowjobs because it's not like they're asking anything in return. They're not asking to be eaten out in return, you know, everything I've read, they're not. So I think that's horrible, and rather than actually engaging 13-year-olds on setting the boundaries and having sexuality based on feeling good about yourself, we as a society get freaked out over the fact that somebody's nipple gets shown. That's our focus when it comes to sexuality, that's our focus because it's much more flashy and splashy to talk about that than to talk about "dad" damage, whatever dad damage is, as opposed to talking about the fact that there are teenage girls who have no boundaries and don't value their bodies. It's the same thing with eating. Rather than encouraging people to eat more vegetables and stuff like that, our society says, don't eat carbs ever [laughs]. I just feel like any time something happens when it comes to sexuality and physicality, we go into this crazy ass spinning world of tangential craziness when it comes to the actual problem at hand when it touches on that. But I do think fucked up body stuff is the core of bad policy and the way people can oppress other people, and it's the major way people oppress other people.

SPD: That's great. That's all that I have. Is there anything you want to talk about that we haven't yet?

TCD: [laughs] Not really.

END OF INTERVIEW