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Title: LGBT Oral History: Chris Dietz

Date: October 4, 2017

Location: LGBT Oral History – Dietz, Chris – 029

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Interviewee: Chris Dietz

Interviewer: Barry Loveland

Date of Interview: October 4, 2017

Place: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

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Abstract:

Chris Dietz was born on April 6, 1975 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He lived in Carlisle shortly after he was born, before moving to Perry County with his parents and younger sister. There, he attended West Perry School District and participated in many extracurricular activities. From high school, Chris was accepted to Penn State and studied engineering until he graduated. In this interview, Chris shares his experience with coming to terms with his sexuality at 30 years old as a life-long member of the United Church of Christ Christian church, and in turn how it has influenced his parents' perception of him. He also expands on his achievements both as a manufacturer and a community leader. Chris worked as a mechanical engineer for a printing press until 2009, and now is a project manager at Alfa Laval, a manufacturing company for heat exchangers. Chris was appointed to Millersburg Borough Council in 2006, and has been a part of local politics ever since. Chris ran for state representative in 2012. The interview concludes with Chris' thoughts on social change in the future for LGBT rights and transgender awareness.

BL: Alright, thank you for joining us Chris. My name is Barry Loveland. I'm here with Catherine McCormick who is our videographer, and we're here on behalf of the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania History Project. Today is October 4, 2017, and we're here for an oral history interview with Chris Dietz. And this interview is taking place at the offices of Millard-Dickson Drake in Harrisburg. Chris, do we have your permission to record this interview today?

CD: Yes, you do.

BL: Great. Well, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed and spending some time with us today. So, we want to start at the very beginning and find out where and when you were born.

CD: I was born in, on, April 6, 1975 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

BL: Could you talk about your family life growing up and then your schooling and so forth?

CD: I have one sister, who's two and a half years younger than me. My parents – well we lived in Perry County, and they still live in Perry County, between Elliotsburg and Landisburg. When I was born we had moved. We moved from one house to another one, where I spent most of my time growing up, shortly after I was born. And that house was on – when we first moved there, was on a dirt road. And over time, it -- they did tar and chip in front of the driveways to keep the dust down. Then they tar and chipped the whole thing, and eventually it was paved in in macadam. So gives you a little bit of an insight of what kind of area we're talking about. It was between two ridges, and there were a few other houses around but it was not a town or anything

like that. So, that's where we lived. And I went to West Perry School District, which is half the size of Perry County basically, and there were a 170 kids in my class when we graduated. I was involved with youth sports, baseball and soccer, and Boy Scouts growing up. I made it to the level of the rank of Star, which is two away from Eagle Scout, before I turned 16 and started driving, which is when they said we would start losing interest, and that happened to me as well. But, let's see... I played trumpet. I started in elementary school and was involved with band in elementary, junior high, and high school. Marching band, and concert band, and jazz band in high school. I studied college prep when I was in school. I had an aptitude for mathematics and science, and I am now a mechanical engineer [chuckles]. So, that played well into that role. From high school, I went to – I applied to a couple different schools for college. And I was looking at going to aerospace engineering at first so I applied to Embry Riddle in Florida and also Penn State. I ended up going to Penn State; in my first two years I went to Penn State Mont Alto between Chambersburg and Waynesboro and then I went for two and half years to Main Campus before I graduated. And while there, I really wasn't involved in many, in any, clubs or anything. I had a group of friends from Mont Alto. Well, I can't say that. When I was at Mont Alto, I played soccer there as well, intermural, so we played the other commonwealth campuses. And I was also a line ambassador for a while, while I was there. And then once I got to main campus, there was just so many things going on, and I had my friends that I made at Mont Alto, so I had the best kind of the small, kind of small-town campus type college, as well as the huge university as well.

BL: And when did you get some sense that you were gay?

CD: Well I was questioned a couple times growing up, and of course I denied it. And I think most gay people that you'll talk to kinda know but aren't really willing to admit it to themselves, and I y'know I kept telling myself, "Oh, I'll kinda grow out of this or whatever." And I was raised ... We went to church every Sunday and were involved with a lot of different church things as well. So there was a struggle there for me in reconciling being gay with being Christian and that kind of thing. So even though I knew, I really didn't come out to myself until I was probably... I don't know, about 30, 30 years old. And I was dating a woman at that time, and she pretty much was the epitome of what I thought I would want in a woman, for a wife. And I really just did not want her to ... I didn't want any intimacy when we were together. And I was like, "You know what? If this is not...if it's not gonna happen now, it's not gonna happen ever." So, I guess one evening I came back from a date with her and my best friends that lived across the street from me happened to be home that night, and their kids were away, so it was just them. And that's – my big moment [chuckles] in the first time saying that I was – that I'm gay and that kind of thing.

So from that moment on, I didn't really know any gay people or have any gay people in my life, so I didn't know how to navigate or meet people or ... I-I didn't know anything about anything [laughs] really. So I went to -- I basically got my company's health insurance doctor book for psychiatrist or psychologist and kinda went down the list, and I called the first one to make an appointment. And they said "Well, our area of expertise is not what you're looking for. It's mostly women's issues and menopausal type things." And I said, "Okay well I clearly called the wrong place" [laughs]. So I called the second one, and luckily I contacted a doctor that was

intimately involved with the LGBT community in Central Pennsylvania. So I met Dr. Melinda Esh kind of [BL chuckles] from dialing random psychologists from the health insurance book. Which was great, and... You know, I had someone to talk to, she knew what was going on in the community, she gave me some good advice. And I started attending MCC of the Spirit and met some folks through there. So I can remember the first time I went there, I thought, "This seems kind of like a regular church service" [laughs] except for some of the people have strange haircuts [laughs]. That was my first impression. So, I don't know. I felt pretty comfortable there. Pretty much, after a couple weeks. The people were really welcoming and that kind of thing. I didn't really start dating for a while after that. It was important for me to come out to my family, my sister and my parents, before I did anything that could possibly get back to them and then be caught off guard. I'd rather it come from me than anyone else. So I talked to my sister and brother-in-law first, and they were good with everything. And...

BL: And this is all around age 30-31?

CD: Yes, in that area. So, maybe 29, but it was right in that area. So I talked to them and that went well. And but I knew the big hurdle was gonna be my parents. So, even though it's recommended not to do it, I actually talked to them about it on Father's Day because my sister was there and y'know. Not that they—they, well I don't know. At the time, they might've lived in Philadelphia then. I don't know, they were in Philadelphia and Boston, so I'm not sure how close they were. It wasn't a regular occasion that we were all together at the house, so I took that opportunity to talk to them. And it wasn't the worst; it wasn't the best. And one of the things that I understood when I was coming out to them was that y'know I've had, how many, 30 years to reconcile myself y'know to this, and this was a surprise for them, most likely, so it would take time for them to get their minds around it and things. And, so it did, it took a little time. But basically it boiled down to my mother saying, "Well, I don't agree with this but you need to tell me what's going on in your life because I need to know. I'm your mother and I need to know what's happening". [Laughs]

So, so I tried to share as much as possible with them about the things I was doing and the new people I was meeting. From a young age, I remember at one point in time having a conversation about homosexuals with my parents, and at that time I remember saying, "Why would anyone want to wish – want to come out if they, because society pressures and everything were so bad?" In my mind, y'know, "Why would anyone want to come out and tell people they are homosexual unless it's were real, and that's who they are, you know?"

So, I always had a lot of empathy and maybe some part of me was thinking y'know someday I'm gonna have some of that feeling as well. So over multiple conversations with my parents, kind of we agreed to disagree on things somewhat. Eventually I met Alex, and that was in the spring of 2008 and – or maybe early summer of 2008. And after we were dating for a while, I mean, I had told them that I met, I told my parents that I met him, and it took a while before they were willing to meet him. So, it was an on-going process, and the bright lining to that is when we got married three years ago, three-and-a-half years ago, my whole family, my parents and my sister, brother-in-law and three nephews were all at the wedding ceremony, and we celebrated together. So, as much as it was a drawn out experience, I think we're at a good place now. And they

definitely always ask after him and what he's doing and everyone gets along pretty well. So, yeah [laughs].

BL: The church that you mentioned that you grew up in, was that a more conservative denomination or was it ... ?

CD: It was United Church of Christ. Which, there was a huge division [laughs] in the UCC congregation. My particular congregation had a lot of internal discussions, and again I was a youth, so I didn't pay particularly close attention to it. But, what I do know is that there were factions that wanted to leave the church and become independent or go into a different denomination, and there were those that wanted to fight the change from within, and that was where our pastor was at the time. So I think the majority of people kind of stayed with that idea. But a number of my parents' friends and my friends that I was in Sunday school with, their families left and went to other churches. And that was probably in the early '90's, right around 1990, maybe the late 80's. And my church was involved. We went to the general synod meeting at Susquehanna University, and my family was involved in presenting an amendment. I guess it's an amendment to the constitution or a bill or whatever kind of legislative process, what it's called I'm not sure exactly. But we were presenting the idea that the Bible should be interpreted literally. So, when that was introduced, the synod counsel or committee immediately referred it to a different committee, and I think it pretty much just died right there. At least that was the last I heard anything about it.

So it was a little bit of a hurdle and then we, Sunday evenings we had the focus on the family, movies and things like that, which we watched all the time. Which were not the kindest to LGBT folks and teachings and that kind of thing. So for me it kind of came to a head and I was just like, "Look, I'm not gonna be able to live [chuckles] the life that I want if I can't come to terms with this and just realize that this is who I am, this is how God made me, and y'know move forward and move on. So... And then meeting Alex and getting into a good relationship and having a lot friends and that kind of thing, really changed a lot of that isolationist kind of feelings and that kind of thing too. Once I let myself open up and talk to different people and realized more people are alike more than they are different."

BL: Talk a little bit about your career once you got out of college.

CD: Okay, I took a job for one year in Bloomsburg as a mechanical engineer. And from there I followed one of my classmates to northern Dauphin County, just outside of Millersburg, to a company that manufactured printing presses called Dauphin Graphic Machines. That was in 2009 and I worked there until the fall of – February of – I'm wrong. That was in 1999, and I worked there until February of 2009. So ten years, and the economy, the bottom dropped out in 2008, and the printing industry got destroyed and never really bounced back. So I was laid off. I was laid off for about a year and a half, at the time, where I did some odd jobs. I worked a lot on borough council. I was elected to Millersburg Borough Council and currently the president of the body. So at the time we were working on a grant to update and improve our riverfront park. So I spent a lot of time getting that all together and all of the different things you need to file, through PAD, CAR, [laughs] all of that. So, I focused on that, and then I worked a little bit for AC Moore and I worked a little bit for Historic Harrisburg Association before Dauphin Graphics called me

back. So that was late in 2010, and I worked there again until the spring of 2013. At which time the project that I was working on ended, and again they didn't have any work for me so I was laid off again. And then I found work in about a month, this time because the economy was much better [laughs]. I found work with Alfa Laval in Lykens, Pennsylvania, and there I started as a project engineer and I'm now a project manager. And Alfa Laval is an international corporation with over 17,000 employees. Our local factory manufactures heat exchangers, spiral heat exchangers. And it's been a challenging but good place to work. But again, there's some turmoil in my near future, because they announced in the summer this year that at the end of 2018, or maybe into 2019, they're going to be moving our factory to Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. So, we have no plans, Alex and I have no plans to move there. So, I'm going to be on the job market again. But this is the state of affairs of manufacturing in the US at this point of time. There's a lot of movements, ups and downs, and some industries are on their way in, and some on their out, so just kind of have to roll with that. So that's my engineering job outlook and history. But like I said I was elected to Borough Council in Millersburg—

BL: What year was that?

CD: I was first appointed in 2006. So this is my...at the end of this year will be my twelfth year on borough council. And I'm up for re-election this year, so fingers crossed [chuckles]. Which it's been a great experience. We've been able to do a lot of great things, I think, for the area and try to promote Millersburg and get more people to come and spend some money locally and support our small business. We've had a movie theatre renovated, we have a wonderful -- just outside of town we have a wonderful center for nature and art, the Net Smith Center for Nature and Art. So I'm involved with some of those things. We have a lot of activities going on, park improvement projects; we've recently passed a couple of ordinances to help maintain our properties and structures. Again, with the manufacturing questions, y'know, there's a lot of small towns that have had industries in point in time in Pennsylvania, and a lot of that's moved away. So, it's a struggle to try to maintain your businesses, and people now instead of working a block or two away, work a half hour or 40 minutes away. So it's harder to keep money local and support your town. As much as a struggle it is I find it to be pretty interesting and a lot of fun. For the most part, there's some areas that are a little bit challenging. But that's been a good experience. And though that, I ran for state rep in 2012. Ultimately unsuccessful, but the process was really enlightening. And I spoke to about 20,000 people at their front doors, [chuckles] so that was wonderful. You don't really get that experience -- to just kind of cut through a broad swath of people, your neighbors, and try to understand what's going on in their lives and how government can help their situations or address their needs. So I cherish that time and that opportunity to meet all those people.

BL: Great. Talk a little bit about the acceptance that you feel in terms of being in a small town like Millersville, Millersburg, sorry, [both laugh] and how they've accepted you and Alex into the community.

CD: I really haven't had any -- well, there's been maybe one, I can't say any. No one directly has said anything negative to us. For the most part, I feel like we are welcomed. When I started dating Alex, I was already elected and y'know around and involved in different things in the community. I just started bringing him along to the events and introducing him as my partner,

and not many people batted an eye, and generally he's friends with most of the people I'm friends with now. So I'd say it's pretty good. Just after we got married, our pastor at the time from MCC at the time came to visit us, and we had dinner and then we walked around town a little. I think three different people stopped us when we were walking around town to congratulate us on our wedding while she was there. So, that was pretty neat to have that kind of thing. Not to say there aren't challenges. I think many people, especially the people that you get to know, I think it changes their perspective. And being a productive part of the community helps as well. People know our work ethic, and that we're committed and dedicated, not only to each other but to the town and to the area and to improving – trying to help improve people's lives and that kind of thing. So, despite the fact that a couple – even when I ran for as state rep, there was really only one person there that was nasty to me. And I think he's pretty nasty to most people so... [Laughs] You have those people. I think for the most part, it's not really any issue.

BL: And you were not involved in any way in the military during your life?

CD: No.

BL: In terms of organizational affiliations, and so forth, either LGBT or non-LGBT, you could talk a little bit about how you got involved in the community organizations?

CD: Okay, well, my time in the community in Millersburg started with the Bicentennial Celebration, which was planned for 2007. And in 2005 they had a logo design contest, so I made couple logo designs and submitted them, and one of my designs won the contest. It was like an oval, kinda like the place stickers you see on people's—their back of their cars. But ours had the slogan, which someone else that had a winning entry in that competition, and that was – '1807 to 2007, the future begins with us.' I think, something along those lines. So that was around the outside and then the gazebo, which was in our square was in the middle, and then some dates and things were in there too. So I won the competition, and I started going to the meetings for this group, which it was really an opportune time to get involved because there were folks from Millersburg Borough and from Upper Paxton township that surrounds us that were all working together for this celebration and this pretty much weeklong of events -- and there were a few other events throughout the year too -- but it was really focused around Labor Day of 2007. So to be involved with the process where people all work together for a common goal, [laughs] in a relatively good way, really set a good example for me of what can be accomplished. And in our small town we managed to raise \$300,000 for this event. And about \$100,000 of that was left over. Through interviews with people, and input from people, the Bicentennial Executive Committee decided to let that extra money to the borough to use for park improvement projects and that kind of thing. So I think that because I was involved with both, I was somewhat of a bridge to encourage that and help that to happen.

So part of our riverfront park improvement project was funded with that, and we're also going to be doing, which is another park that's along the river in Millersburg. We're going to be using the money to improve that as well in the next year or so. So being involved with that really jumpstarted me in the Millersburg community. And then, being on Borough Council, I got involved with the Dauphin and Lebanon County Boroughs Association, which is a local county association connected to the Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs. So, currently I am the

president of the Dauphin and Lebanon County of Boroughs Association, and I am elected by that group to be a board member of the statewide Boroughs Association. So that's pretty neat. Through my political... I can't even think of the word... connections or works and that kind of thing, I was appointed to the Pennsylvania Wine Research and Marketing Board this year, which is a statewide board as well. Which is pretty cool. So we basically give out grants to folks that are doing research on growing grapes or wine making, or some part of the process. Then also marketing Pennsylvania wines to help improve the numbers, the sales numbers, and the experiences that people have at wineries. So, that's kind of on the political side. I guess I'm also vice president of the Council of Governments in Northern Dauphin County as well. So it's been a great kind of building thing to be involved with, and you learn a lot of things about things you never knew you wanted to know anything about. But, [laughs] so there. So an LGBT organization I was the vice moderator for one term for the MCC of the Spirit Church, which is kind of second in command to the pastor. I was also on the board for I think two terms as well there. Many – I don't even know how many years I was on the board for Capital Region Stonewall Democrats. Which is a great local group to help try to get allies and LGBT candidates elected to local offices. Where we hosted rallies at the federal courthouse for marriage equality and celebrated when it was finally passed here in Pennsylvania and then, nationally. And raised money to support many, many candidates in the region. I, in turn, got their support as well when I ran for state representative. Trying to think of what other...organizations that I am involved with...I'll come back to them if I think of any more, but –

BL: Okay [chuckles].

CD: [laughs]

BL: The chamber? Are you involved in the chamber at all?

CD: I'm a member but I – unfortunately, haven't really been able to devote the time to that.

BL: Yeah, okay. And let's see – in terms of the...your awareness of growing up in a different age – let's say the people who came before you – were, maybe there wasn't so much talk about with gay rights, gay politics, whatever...what kind of sense do you have of how that affected your coming out process?

CD: Well, I was always very nervous when there was an afterschool special that dealt with anything about gay kids or lesbians or y'know, anything along those lines.

BL: [chuckles in the background]

CD: But, I also thought it was pretty cool. And I remember watching Dawson's Creek when the first – I think the first gay kiss happened on television. The character there and what he went through in coming out... And so, I don't know. I mean there were some things like that, that I thought were pretty cool to be able to see some images and some stories about how people come out and situations involved. And I know it's funny now because I know that there was a lot of things happening here in Harrisburg in the 90's..., uh, and -- but I don't remember that as a

youth. Y'know, in hindsight, hearing y'know meeting other people in the community and hearing the things that they were doing. So, I don't know.

BL: You didn't have any sense of other kids in your class, for example or your school that were gay or had come out or anything at that point?

CD: There were some rumors, after going through. Like when I was in college, there was rumors about other kids that were maybe a year ahead of me or a year behind. But while I was there, no. And that was one thing – and I can't say that I've had positive influence on it – but I have contacted our – the guidance counselor that's there still at West Perry, and that's been a little bit, I asked about what they offer for LGBT students and that kind of thing.

BL: Do they offer anything?

CL: Which isn't very much. I think they probably have some pamphlets and that kind of thing. But...and unfortunately they weren't, when I did make that contact, there were no teachers that were interested in sponsoring a GSA (gay-straight alliance) or that kind of thing. Which, I can understand because I think it's probably still a little stretch for most folks to...And even y'know in Millersburg and lot of places in Dauphin County don't have a GSA either so...that's still a frontline in trying to raise the level of equality. I was proud of our borough council. Even though it wasn't completely a public doing, we did support – send a letter of support to our state representative in support of the non-discrimination bill that was -- I think about a year or so ago, we did that. So, it's a constant state of progress and trying to push forward and talk to people and let them know how important these things are.

BL: Do you think there'll be a time when maybe, Millersburg would pass a local ordinance?

CD: It's possible. It's possible, but I think going through what I did with trying to get the support for the non-discrimination ordinance at the state level, I don't know that we're ready to do that locally. And for a lot of small communities, I think the idea of setting up a HRC for us to hear these kind of things is daunting.

BL: Yeah, yeah.

CD: A lot of the ordinances that we have have some sort of committees or boards that y'know, whether it's a hearing board or a something for people to make complaints to and that kind of thing, there's a lot to get people involved with those kind of things within the community. So, it's, I think it's another kind of hurdle to get that set up for it as well. And we know some other LGBT folks in the community there, and we try to have them over or go to dinner with them and that kind of thing. It's not like we're not there, we are. [chuckles] We're everywhere.

BL: [chuckles] Yes, we are everywhere. What do you think are the important events or turning points in your life?

CD: Well, I guess my coming out day to myself would be a big one. Meeting Alex and marrying Alex would be big ones. [Pauses] And then just professionally, different opportunities that I've

had to be with ...y'know, to increase my knowledge of engineering and project management and that kind of thing. Nationally, I think the LGBT March on Washington was a great thing that weekend, and I heard Alex saying a little bit about that weekend as well. We went to the HRC dinner in Washington. Sat at the Hershey table. David Forney was kind enough to offer us a couple seats and it was a wonderful experience, just to be surrounded by so many like-minded people that were fighting in the same direction that we were for equality. And just the inspirational words from y'know, Jane Lynch, to Patrick Kennedy to Lady Gaga to President Obama. I mean there was a lot of people there, and Cynthia Nixon was marching close to us in the, during the, march. So, it's great to see people of some sort of stature, whether a celebrity or some sort, y'know, out there making – trying to make progress as well and supporting things. That, I think, the Patrick Kennedy speech – and I can't remember exactly what he was, what he said – but I really... But it resonated with me at the time and this was one of the big, motivating factors for me to run for state rep in 2012. So, that was good too.

BL: And what challenges do you think remain that you are interested in working on or interested in being involved with, what kind of change?

CD: LGBT or otherwise or whatever? [chuckles]

BL: Either, yeah. [chuckles]

CD: Well, I...just being involved in my local community is really important to me. Making sure that I give back and the blessings that I've had, trying to turn them back for other people as well. And now, that Mr. Trump is president, I think there's a lot of opportunity to reach out to different minority constituencies and just let them know that we're all kind of suffering through it together and that there is support out there for folks. I think at this point, I don't know. There's so many possible ways that things can go with this presidency, and depending on the Supreme Court balance changes or morphs going forward, I think we could be fighting some of the same battles that we've already fought. And that's kinda, [chuckles] a little frightening, but it's definitely a possibility. But, with those kind of things there's always positive surprises too. And the different people that step up and use their voice, and their bodies to march or get out there and make a difference, y'know. All the stories from one individual to thousands that can really make a big impact on things. So, even though we are where we're at at this point in time, a lot of our gains are tenuous. But I think we need to keep pushing still for transgender awareness, and y'know, much like LGBT people, the great Harvey Milk said, "The more people you come out to, the more people that will get to know us as people and the more people that will be on our side." And I think there's – that process is somewhat, y'know, happened to or has tended to spread and increase for the L and the G, and now I think the T's turn to, for us to really support them and get people to know them and what their situations are. And even educate ourselves on it. I think there's a lot of activity in that area to address.

And race relations, I think, in this country are really terrible. And every Confederate flag that I see, just goes right to my heart, and I just don't understand. I don't understand that mentality at all. I realize that symbols can mean different things to different people, but when you know what it means to a large segment of the population of the country and you choose to fly it anyway ... it's really depressing [chuckles]. So, I don't know what the answers are there, I mean that's been

hundreds and hundreds of years in the making. But, it's easy to point out things that aren't helpful [laughs]. And unfortunately there's too many of those happening today. So, equality is a big word, it's a big theme, a big ideology. And it works on so many different levels. So I think, y'know, going forward, we all need to be mindful of how we are in different situations, and what are our reactions to certain things, and the words that come out of our mouth, to help promote that in every facet possible.

BL: Good. And...I think we touched on this a little bit but what kind of differences do you think having the internet and media and things like that made in terms of like your peers, their awareness of gay issues versus many years ago when people were coming out when there was kind of a dearth of information [chuckles].

CD: Well, when I went to college that was my first experience with the internet at all, and it was routed through our computer that if there were more than two or three people on the internet at the same time the smoke would come out the computer and it would not be happy. So it was really kind of on the cutting edge of just the start of email and all of that. But, I think the access to information is much better than not having access to information. And just like TV or movies, being able to see somebody that you can identify with in whatever way that may set you apart from the quote-unquote "norm," I think to help you identify and see there are other people like that, like you, is a positive thing. Even for parents with FLAG and that kind of thing, that it's great to be able to have people at the click of a few buttons, and read articles about what other people are going through, and being able to reach out and say, "Hey, great job on that" or whatever, I think is a great thing. So, like any tool it comes with its downside but I think the positive side is much, much bigger.

BL: Have we missed anything that you can think of that you want to add at this point?

CD: I don't know... I mean, I think that this project is really wonderful. And I thank the Center, and Dickinson, and you, Barry, for spearheading this. I think getting these thoughts and experiences down in a way that people will have access to in the future is a great thing. So, thank you very much for the opportunity to interview and for all the effort that you put into it.

BL: Thank you. Okay, I think we're done.

CD: Alright.