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N.3: Undergraduate Internship Program: Fall 2013

Interview N-0021
Victor Schoenbach
3 October 2013

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ABSTRACT – VICTOR SCHOENBACH

Victor Schoenbach discusses his childhood growing up in New York City. He also describes his college years at Harvard and Columbia as well as his graduate work at UNC-Chapel Hill for Health Education and his work as a computer programmer for First National City Bank. Schoenbach recalls radical student activism surrounding the Vietnam War as well as the reception of homosexuality on UNC-Chapel Hill's campus during the early 1970s. He describes his role as a counselor for the student-led group, Human Sexuality Information and Counseling Services, led by Robert Wilson, as well as his role as its Head of Outreach and Special Events. Additionally, Schoenbach recalls his involvement with Health Ed 33, a popular sex education course offered at UNC during the 1970s, and its discussion of topics such as human anatomy, premarital intercourse, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, male homosexuality, marriage, and relationships. Looking at sexuality on a large scale, he discusses the societal issues involving sexuality, Dr. Takey Crist's influence on sexual education activism, changes in awareness, and acceptance of sexuality over time.

FIELD NOTES – VICTOR SCHOENBACH

Interviewee: Victor Schoenbach

Interviewer: Ashley Templeton

Interview date: October 3, 2013

Location: Office 2104D in McGavran-Greenberg Hall in the Gillings School of Global Public Health, UNC-Chapel Hill, NC

Length: 2:00:54

THE INTERVIEWEE. Victor Schoenbach was a graduate student at UNC-Chapel Hill, to get his MSPH in Health Education; a teacher's assistant for the only sexual health class on campus at the time, Health 33; and a leader in student activism for sexual education on campus. During his stay in Chapel Hill from Spring 1971 to Winter 1973, Schoenbach worked to provide students with greater access to sexual education and sexual guidance through his work as a teacher's assistant, a group discussion leader, a counselor for the student-run Human Sexuality Information and Counseling Services, and as the Head of Outreach and Special Events. He worked with Dr. Takey Crist, a major faculty supporter for the sexual education movement, as well as Robert Wilson, who created the HSICS and was a leader of the student initiative for more available sexual health information. Dr. Schoenbach is now a professor of epidemiology at the Gillings School of Global Public Health at UNC-Chapel Hill.

THE INTERVIEWER. Ashley Templeton is UNC-Chapel Hill undergraduate and an intern for the Southern Oral History Program in UNC-Chapel Hill for Fall 2013. She has been working with other interns on a project to explore student and faculty participation in the Sexual Revolution of the 1970s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted in Dr. Schoenbach's office, a pleasantly cluttered space filled with piles of papers and books, and a small nook for two large computers and a rolling chair. Dr. Schoenbach seemed excited for the interview, and was even able to assist the interviewer with a technical difficulty before the interview began. The interview began with a discussion on his childhood and the influence of his more radical and varied years of young adulthood. The interview moved into a discussion of his student activism at UNC-CH, and Schoenbach explained how he got involved with Health 33 and HSICS. He described the environment on campus and in these organizations, noting that the work he and his colleagues were doing was "filling a definite need." He did not recall much about the issue of homosexuality on campus at the time. Schoenbach reflected on the projects through all of his activist groups and personally. The interview concluded with a discussion on his interest in transcendental meditation and its potential for public health research.

TAPE LOG – VICTOR SCHOENBACH

Interviewee: Victor Schoenbach
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Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

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Time Topic

[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]

- 0:01 Introduction: "This is Ashley Templeton with the Southern Oral History Program at University of North Carolina at Chapel...I'm here with Dr. Victor J Schoenbach." Interview to focus on involvement with student activism and sexual education from 1971-1973, When Schoenbach was a graduate student at UNC-Chapel Hill.
- 0:26 Childhood. Born in 1944 in Baltimore, Maryland. Moved to New York City at age 7. Speaks about father's influence as both an absent military father and a doctor, and his father's early death and the impact that had on his mother and his growing up years.
- 2:00 Family influence on his ideology. "My social ideals were very much aligned...(My mother) was a liberal, believed in more advanced ideas on a number of things." His mother openly taught her children about sexuality. Schoenbach did his "rebellious-thing" as a teenager and became more radical.
- 3:18 College years. As a good student in high school, he was encouraged to apply to Harvard and got in. After two years at Harvard, Schoenbach could not decide what to major in and took a leave of absence. Took up computer programming and got a job at First National City Bank in New York City. Enrolled in Columbia University at age 19, finished a degree in Economics because the bank would pay

for related studies. Schoenbach talks about connections between economics and health issues.

- 7:06 (cont'd) Went to get his MSc in Economics at the London School of Economics in order to avoid the draft for the Vietnam War. Discusses opposition to the war.
- 8:12 "Where did your interest in sexual health and sexuality come from?" Schoenbach discusses the sexual drive of young males and his disagreement with peers over the ways to handle sexual intercourse and women's health.
- 9:34 The Sexual Revolution and fighting sexual suppression as a form of activism that was relevant to the actual lives of white, middle class people and young adults in particular.
- 10:40 More about college years and student activism. Discussed the Columbia Uprising of 1968, he was not personally involved but it inspired him to become more active in student movements in London against the Vietnam War and socialist advocacy. After finishing his masters degree, worked for a left-wing propaganda group called Agitprop passing out pamphlets on socialism and women's liberation.
- 13:10 Moved back to New York City after a relationship with a young American woman ended, not sure what to do next in life. Supported mother through hardship before embarking on a large trip to visit friends and wander. Hitchhiking brought him to Chapel Hill, NC. Age 27.
- 15:19 Slept on the dorm floor of a friend's brother who was a student at UNC-Chapel Hill for a week. Wandering around, he heard about a sex education course called Health Ed 33, taught by Dr. Takey Crist. Schoenbach discusses the importance and popularity of the class at UNC-Chapel Hill and his relationship with Dr. Crist, and other forms of sexuality education that were present on campus at the time – "Elephants and Butterflies" column in the Daily Tarheel and the student-run sexuality counseling services. Became a teaching assistant for the class and a student counselor in January 1972.
- 19:03 Health 33. "Can you describe what the class environment was like?" Schoenbach discusses the "Era of the Small Group," guest lecturers, flexible structure of discussions, the textbook, etc. Topics of lectures included anatomy, contraception, STDs, infections, abortion, childbirth, male homosexuality, and marriage and relationships.
- 22:20 Schoenbach discusses what the general campus knowledge of sexual health and sexual expression was, how the world was changing sexually, and an increase in sexual infections as an unintended consequence of more sexual expression.

- 25:49 Discusses positive and negative reception of the Health 33 class, mostly positive, and the popularity of the course. “There was no doubt that the class was filling a need.” Dr. Crist speaking out in favor of relaxing the prohibition of abortion.
- 27:35 The importance of Robert Wilson in the sexual education movement. [Short pause, phone call from son, Michael]. Wilson’s role as a campus leader, planned on-campus conference on abortion.
- 29:30 Relationship with Dr. Crist. Dr. Crist was an obstetrician at the medical school and his exposure to women’s health problems led him to start Health 33 to address these issues on a broader scale rather than case-by-case. As a doctor, Dr. Crist was very busy so there was not much interaction beyond the classroom, but Dr. Crist was still a big leader in the campus movement.
- 31:55 Not in chronologic order, before graduate studies: job as a computer programmer for the Carolina Population Center to support himself, working 30 hours a week. With his free time, he worked with the HSICS and found ways to meet people.
- 35:22 “I’m an emotional person, it’s very hard to talk about some things, even when they’re happy.” Met his wife at the Carolina Population Center picnic at a colleague’s farm.
- 36:19 While trying to meet people in the Union movie line who could bring him as a guest, Schoenbach accidentally flirts with the girlfriend of the Chair of the Department of Public Health Education, ends up with an introduction to the program. Gets accepted in April into program with a focus in Sexual Education. “It was totally serendipitous.” Spent summer at The Kinsey Institute for Sexual Research, started the graduate program in August 1972, then went to the picnic to meet his wife.
- 41:45 Human Sexuality Information Counseling Services (HSICS). Started with the counseling department January 1972. Schoenbach discusses set-up of the HSICS on the second floor of the student union, phone calls and walk-ins were attended to by two counselors on duty at a time. Gay resource counselors were not typically around, but could be reached for counseling help if needed. Training for the counseling position included a talk from a Health Services counselor, a talk from Takey Crist perhaps, and practicing with role-playing.
- 46:49 Question about counselor training excerpt: “[The counselors] were prepared to discuss the five alternatives open to pregnant woman: to be married and have the child, to be single and have the child, to place the child up for adoption, to have an abortion or to commit suicide.” What was the purpose of the fifth option? Schoenbach discusses the seriousness of unintentional pregnancy at the time and now.

- 49:16 “What kind of counselor were you?” Schoenbach was a general counselor for less than a year, and then he became the HSICS Head of Outreach and Special Events. Schoenbach gives Templeton the report from the HSICS.
- 50:33 Common student questions and problems. Information on contraception, symptoms of STDs, relationship questions on how to meet somebody or how to better communicate with others, etc. Schoenbach remembers a positive student reception to the counseling service.
- 53:00 Concerns came from administrators more than the students: Questions of valid counselor training. Were these students actually qualified to be giving health advice? “People in the health area would, understandably, want to be sure that this was something that was a positive and not a danger.”
- 54:41 What kinds of people were HSICS counselors? Schoenbach said the group was made up of undergraduate students, graduate students, UNC-CH faculty/faculty wives – diverse group. Mentions Dan Leonard as one of the gay resources counselors, possibly Ned Rice as well.
- 57:03 The gay counselor experience at the HSICS. “I don’t know a whole lot, which is why I’m glad you’re talking to Dan. Of course, most of the questions we got didn’t involve male homosexuality because most of our questions were from women, and that wasn’t usually the concerns they were bringing.” Gay counselors were on standby because of the relative infrequency of the homosexuality questions. Schoenbach comments that he was not “knowledgeable or liberated” about male homosexuality at the time, but his opinion on the topic has evolved since then. He shares a memory of a relative who was walking in Long Island and got beaten up for looking like a homosexual.
- 59:08 Reception of homosexuality on campus during the early 1970s. Schoenbach comments that some assault on homosexuals still happens today, but that back then it was much more widespread. “People weren’t as upset about it as I think we are now.” Schoenbach admits that he may be forgetting, but does not remember any large public events or any outreach programs regarding homosexuality. Homosexuality was discussed in Health 33, but given the same gravity and attention as any of the other topics. “When I was doing my outreach, I may have said something about homosexuality. I didn’t say much, I didn’t know much to say.”
- 1:03:00 Schoenbach says that the topic of homosexuality probably came up in the dorm discussions, but he didn’t encourage that discussion because “I didn’t really know where to go with it.” Discussed the ambiguity of how to handle homosexuality problems at the beginning of the HSICS.
- 1:04:21 Schoenbach’s involvement with campus outreach. Schoenbach discusses his goals in outreach, including the confrontation of the guilt and anxiety that accompanied

sexual expression. Spread the message of the positives of being sex affirmative, and being smart about sex. Discussed SIECUS and its mission and opposition.

- 1:08:40 Distribution of sexual education pamphlets on campus. Schoenbach discusses the origin of his interest in pamphlet distribution as an effective way of spreading a message. Narrates the process of his successful pamphlet distribution on campus and the growth of his outreach project.
- 1:12:36 Drafting “The Sexual Education Health Care Responsibilities of the University” to present the Ass. Dean of Student Affairs. Discussed the difference between student activism and the risk of university support.
- 1:14:48 Frustrations of outreach position. Inability to get a program broadcast. At the time, Schoenbach believed the university was doing enough activism, though he understands their position looking back. Other than that, frustration was minimal. Student government and other groups were supportive.
- 1:15:46 Most rewarding part of outreach was appreciation of other students. Reflects on his possible lack of qualification and the impact of transcendental meditation on his growth as an individual.
- 1:17:02 Schoenbach shares an anecdote about a high school sexual education talk gone awry. Discusses the “swimming analogy” and how the school’s sexual education week was almost ended because of his speech.
- 1:21:51 Other anecdotes from his speech and discussion giving days. Taught a Sunday School class. Comments on himself as an outsider to religious, southern, conservative culture when he interacted with such people. Talked to inner-city kids, reflects how a sex affirmative argument is not the right thing for every audience.
- 1:24:42 Did any of your activism groups interact with the Carolina Gay Association? No, because the CGA was established in 1974, Schoenbach was a student until December 1973.
- 1:25:33 Life after graduate school. Inspired by epidemiology class, he chose to pursue that in his further studies and career.
- 1:27:35 Became more interested in transcendental meditation (TM) and its potential for public health. Combined epidemiology and TM in his further studies at UNC-Chapel Hill.
- 1:30:48 Schoenbach shares anecdote about being a black sheep in his doctoral epidemiology class because of his interest in TM. Discusses health benefits of TM and meditation.

- 1:34:16 Schoenbach describes levitation as a part of advanced TM and his progression through TM training. The physical limitations and possibilities of TM and levitation.
- 1:40:50 TM as a new scientific frontier. That it is laughable, like other natural phenomenon that were ridiculed before they were understood, but possible. Schoenbach expresses his desire to understand and research TM and understand its actual health benefits.
- 1:43:38 “The world needs some new knowledge.” Schoenbach discusses TM as a way to manage the problems of the world and better humanity. “Our conscience is not adequately developed. We’re not seeing, we’re not realizing the longer term and broader impacts of what we’re doing.”
- 1:46:19 (cont’d) Schoenbach discusses environmental determinates of intelligence and the significance of a narrowed focus on world issues. He advocates TM as a way to broaden a person’s mind, increase their awareness, and connect better with other members of humanity.
- 1:52:35 The physiological differences in state of consciousness while practicing TM. Schoenbach discusses its uniqueness in terms of other meditation types and his plans to research TM in the coming years.
- 1:55:06 How has peoples’ awareness and acceptance of sexuality changed over time, both during your time as a student activist and now? “Obviously the attitude towards sex has changed enormously.” Schoenbach discusses the HIV epidemic as a factor in how society treated and studied sexuality. Now studies on sexuality and sexual diseases are everywhere. At UNC-Chapel Hill, the sexuality counseling department has become more formal and organized. Schoenbach discusses societal problems regarding sexuality that exist presently.
- 2:00:07 “Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me, it was a great talk.”
2:00:54 (end of interview)