

## Queer Newark Oral History Project

**Interviewee: Ulysses Dietz**

**Interviewer: Mary Rizzo**

**Date: August 14, 2018**

**Location: Rutgers University, Newark**

Vetted by: Tabitha Blackmon

Date: March 25, 2019

*Mary Rizzo:* This is Queer Newark Oral History interview with Ulysses Dietz. My name is Mary Rizzo, and we are recording on August 14, 2018. Thank you again for agreeing to be interviewed. We really appreciate it. The interview will begin with talking about your background, your childhood, family. We'll move into some questions around sexuality, and then we'll talk about Newark and your work. Begin with, when and where were you born?

*Ulysses Dietz:* [Laughter].

*Mary Rizzo:* Again, as much as information as you would like to share.

*Ulysses Dietz:* Sorry. I will try not to be silly. I was born in Syracuse, New York, on July 22, 1955. Up until I was in my 40s, it was the hottest July 22<sup>nd</sup> on record, as my mother told me frequently.

*Mary Rizzo:* Can you tell us a little bit about your family, who raised you, what the household was like that you grew up in?

*Ulysses Dietz:* A classic postwar suburban American family. As you can see, I've been writing about this myself, so it's very much in my mind. Father, mother, four children. I was the third of four children. I was supposedly the last of the four, but there was a surprise three months after I was born. My father was a corporate executive running a family company with his brother and my grandfather in Syracuse. My mother was a housewife but did the classic WASP lady things of committees and golfing.

We were Episcopalian, went to St. Paul's Episcopal church, which became a cathedral when I was a child. Generally, that sort of golden days of postwar small city industrial America, which it never occurred to me would all disappear, but there it is. That's the kind of basic background. How can I expand on that?

*Mary Rizzo:* Let me just get a couple of detailed questions. You said you're the third of four children. Your siblings are brothers, sisters, a mix? Tell me.

*Ulysses Dietz:* I can give you all this detail. The surviving brother is my eldest brother, born in 1948, Jed, John Edwin Dietz, known as Jed. My sister, who died in 1971 of leukemia, was born in 1951, Edith **Root** Dietz, born on Christmas Day. I was born on July—in July, as I said. Then my younger brother, who died in 1969 at the age of 12 in an accident, was born on August 7<sup>th</sup>. There are early photographs of us all sitting there, looking very prim and proper and very much of that moment.

*Mary Rizzo:* If I can ask about your younger brother's death, so by accident, can you talk a little more about that and how that affected you and your family?

*Ulysses Dietz:* Oh, gosh. Yeah. Again, it's something I've been thinking about. I haven't quite started writing about that yet, but that's been stewing. It was one of these terrible stupid accidents. He was just running around with friends late at night. Late at night- 9:00 at night on a Tuesday night. I was watching Doris Day. I have rather a lot of memories of that evening because he was out running around with friends, and I was at home watching **ing** Doris Day, so that says a lot in itself. He was barefoot and was climbing a streetlight in front of my grandparents' house, and the baseplate was loose, and he hit a wire and electrocuted himself 'cause it was a damp night.

It was, as you can imagine—my sister was already sick, but was, I think, at that point—no. She had just been diagnosed, and my grandmother had just died the week before, so this was this moment when the—my family kind of imploded in 1969. My brother had just declared that he was gonna drop out of college and resist the draft and go to prison because he didn't want to fight in Vietnam. It was this perfect storm. I think it broke my father in ways that he never recovered from, although he lived and worked a long life after that.

My mother was always a stoic, but I think my parents never quite recovered from those two years. I'm sure it scarred me, although saying scarred feels so dramatic, but it certainly changed me, the course of it. I'll be thinking a lot more about that in the next year. But, it changed- I was a very shy, introverted child, and I don't seem to be shy or introverted to people anymore, although I actually still am. Some of that is the direct result of this.

*Mary Rizzo:* Thank you for sharing that.

*Ulysses Dietz:* Yeah. As I say, I'm not concerned with oversharing at all. *[Laughter]*

*Mary Rizzo:* Did you have a good relationship with your parents?

*Ulysses Dietz:*

Yeah. I think it was fraught. I think all relationships with parents are fraught. As I think about it, I've always said, oh, no. I had this happy childhood. My life was idyllic. Then of course, I look back, and obviously, things were not entirely idyllic because this happened. I always was very close to my parents. I don't know how else to expand on that in that I was—I always thought I was a terribly easy child, although reading my letters that my mother saved, I was kind of an irritating teenager, *[laughter]* but I was never a rebel. I was a good kid. This jumps ahead a little bit to coming out process, but there was a book that Andrew Tobias wrote under the pseudonym John Reid called "The Best Little Boy in the World" that was published the year I started college. I was the best little boy in the world.

That was the way I saw myself. I was the easy kid. My little brother who died was already a rebel at 12. My sister was the golden girl, was the not spoiled but smart and loving and funny princess that everybody adored. My brother, the oldest, was the go-getter and the politician, and he's still like that. I'm close to him because the other two died 'cause he was—he's seven years older and was really out of the house. He was off in college. We became close because we lost our siblings 'cause we were all that was left. I think, actually, that's a silver lining in all of this 'cause I might never have gotten to know him very well otherwise.

I was always in maybe stereotypical ways closer to my mother, but I never felt that she was my friend. She was just a very warm and devoted mother who I had a lot in common with. We were both very bookish. We both had goofy senses of humor, but I'm more like my father emotionally. I'm a total romantic. I cry at TV commercials, as does my father and my brother and one of his sons. My relationship with my father is—I think somehow, this ends up being unavoidable because I was different from my brother, and he was older, but he was also closer because he did all of the boy things that he was supposed to do. My father was such an emotional and affectionate and generous person that that balanced whatever sharp edges there might have been.

I've literally just been thinking about this, just had this light bulb go on, is that my father—it's a long story, but anyway, my father had real drinking problems later in his life, and I think, in fact, looking back, it's very clear that **that** started after all of this. Really, 1971 is when, of course, I'm just going into my adolescent years that it begins to surface and only really surfaces at moments, but that's what I remember. I realize that that's when that relationship changes slightly, but it never stops being affectionate. He was always one of these people—I always had parents who told me they

loved me all the time and totally supported me in everything I ever did, including coming out.

I went into a totally underpaid, underappreciated field of study, which was being a curator in a museum, and he always loved that and were supportive of that. That was all good. I think the only thing—time my parents ever questioned me is when I would do something of dubious validity to make money, like use my name, Ulysses Grant Dietz, in order to help the Franklin Mint sell Civil War chess sets 'cause they were offering money, and my mother said, "I'll give you money if you don't do that." I didn't do it, and she didn't give me money. Very rarely *[laughter]* when I crossed the line into what they thought was perhaps undistinguished behavior somehow.

*Mary Rizzo:* *[Laughter]* That's great. I love that.

*Ulysses Dietz:* I have to remember that for the memoirs. *[Laughter]*

*Mary Rizzo:* Yes. Absolutely. I think that's fantastic.

*Ulysses Dietz:* It's a ridiculous story.

*Mary Rizzo:* It's perfect.

*Ulysses Dietz:* It really hit me 'cause I thought, oh, I'm an idiot, and my mother's trying not to say that directly.

*Mary Rizzo:* *[Laughter]* Right. Gently to steer you in the right direction. Just to make sure that I—you might have said this, and I just want to make sure that we have it. Since your sister died fairly young, could you just say a little bit more about that?

*Ulysses Dietz:* In this terrible spring of 1969, she'd been—she was in boarding school 'cause we all went to prep school. She was at a girls' school in Philadelphia called Shipley. She'd just been ill and flu-y and not feeling well, and my parents, they did a blood test with her pediatrician, and the doctor said, "I think you need to take her to New York and go to Sloan Kettering and have her looked at." That's when she was diagnosed with leukemia. I think my mother was literally in New York with her at this diagnosis when my grandmother died. Maybe it was my father was in New York with her, and then my mother came home—then my father came home, my mother went down, and then my brother died.

My older brother, in typical fashion, decides, this is the time I'm gonna tell my parents I'm gonna be a draft resister, because you always pick bad

moments in family history to announce things. I remember writing about it in a fiction course in prep school that this was actually a really good time for me, weirdly, because I got very close to my sister because there was this knowledge that her time was limited. And we'd been the typical little brother, big sister annoying each other, but not terrible. Not really negative, but we got really close at this moment. She recovered. She went into remission. It was particularly pernicious kind of leukemia, and things like spinal taps were just being used. They were just beginning the whole idea of marrow. What do you call it? Marrow—

*Mary Rizzo:* Transplants?

*Ulysses Dietz:* Transplants. It was just on the cutting edge, and they hadn't really begun it yet, so there were experimental treatments that she went through. As a teenage girl, she went through all these things of losing her hair and swelling up. She was very beautiful, but she got fat and lost her hair. Life got very interesting because we began to travel a lot, and we went to New York a lot. My father was very lavish. And so I enjoyed it all, and for the times we were together in New York and all that. I was off in boarding school, and she was off in boarding school. She went to Stanford for a year and had a boyfriend, which I've always looked back on. Weirdly enough, there's a big photograph of him in the family piles of photographs, and nobody remembers who he was except me.

I know that he eventually dumped her because he couldn't deal with it. At that time, I remember being really angry, but in retrospect, I'm thinking, geez, you're 19 years old, and your girlfriend has a fatal illness. How are you supposed to deal with that? We have this photograph of him, and I remember his name. So she had a good time, knowing that her—the clock was ticking. Then things all went south the summer I turned 16. She ended up in a coma at Sloan Kettering and died somewhere that fall, in the fall of '71.

*Mary Rizzo:* Thank you.

*Ulysses Dietz:* I could go on endlessly 'cause I'm someone who's thought about this a lot because I've got this narrative in my head. It was that weird period that it was both bad and good. I remember my English teacher in school being puzzled but interested that I was writing so positively about what was such a bad moment because, in fact, for my life, my parents' reaction to all of this was to try to live life really full, and so I always see this as a happy moment, and then in retrospect thinking, “Oh, but it wasn't really.”

*Mary Rizzo:* Right. That's interesting. Of course—

*Ulysses Dietz:* Which I guess it worked. Their idea was to distract us from the impending sadness by filling our lives.

*Mary Rizzo:* At the same time that there's so much shifting happening politically and socially in the country, right?

*Ulysses Dietz:* Yeah. I grew up a Republican child. They were very pro-Nixon. Of course, as my brother hastens to point out to me, my older brother, is that Republicans were more liberal than you'd think because the Democrats were the southern Dixiecrats. He went to college in the South, in North Carolina, so he knew exactly that it was the Republican kids in the South who were pro-integration. He reminded me that I grew up in a different kind of Republican world than exists now.

*Mary Rizzo:* Let me ask a little bit about school for you. Can you tell me where you went to school and what those experiences were like? Did you like school? Was it—

*Ulysses Dietz:* I have just been writing about this a little bit. I went to elementary school in my neighborhood. The chapter in my memoir of where I talk about my childhood is called Leave It to Beaver because—and I watched that show at the time, and it all seemed like everything was exactly the way my life really was except not. *[Laughter]* I went to elementary school, and then I went to junior high, which we called junior high then. I had a lot of the same classmates from preschool through junior high school. There were also kids who peeled off. I was just writing about this because the switch to junior—the switch from junior high to high school was when a lot of kids went away to school, but other kids stayed in the public high school. My parents gave me that choice.

Even in junior high, a lot of my friends peeled away and went to a private school in the suburbs, although I don't know what they were running away from 'cause the public schools were still pretty—not particularly well-integrated in Syracuse. I went there. I went to Lincoln Junior High School. Then I toured boarding schools because that's what everybody in my family did. I think my kids are the first children in my family to go to public high school- for all sorts of reasons, but mostly because they weren't academically up to these boarding schools. I chose Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, which I loved.

Again, I haven't quite gotten to that chapter, but I was so good at compartmentalizing who I was. I think the trauma with the death of my siblings probably helped, helped me build walls around the different parts of my personality, 'cause I have distinct memories in junior high school that I was becoming aware of the fact that, as much as I liked the girls,

there was a limit to that. They were really like my best friends until they, of course, didn't want me as a best friend anymore, which was another signal. Exeter boarding school was great because it was very easy to keep myself compartmentalized, and so I was really happy.

Exeter is a very academic school. You had to be a straight-A student to get in. Then it slapped you down because it was tough, and everybody's grades collapsed when they got there. If you were lucky, you built them back up. I just really put myself into my studies. You were kind of trapped. You weren't allowed to go out at night. You were in a dormitory. You were watched pretty closely. I actually loved it. I loved the teachers. You had great teachers. I turned my love into language because I learned to love French, and I started taking Russian. I learned I was no good at math beyond a certain point. I actually made my poor math teacher cry, I was so stupid. When you got past a certain level- I have that intense vision. He was quite young, and he was so frustrated because... I was not being difficult, I was just being- I was reaching the limits of my brain.

But I was great in languages. English, French, Russian, I really thrived. Obviously, sports were not a big deal, but I knew my—I knew how to fake my way through those. I was really happy. Exeter at that point was a coed boarding and day school, but there were 800 students, and 40 of them were girls, so there was no pressure to date for a nerdy skinny kid with glasses and buck teeth. I guess I had braces, so my teeth were fine by then. That was a great way to keep safe 'cause I could make friends with the girls without being under any pressure to date them. I had very close friends among the girls there. I had a great time to the point where everybody goes, “What?”

I graduated in January. I was advanced enough as a student that I could finish up quick, and I graduated in January and then voluntarily stayed on for a postgraduate semester taking courses pass/fail. That was when I did things like acted in theater and began to get over my fear of public speaking, which, of course, is something I love to do now. And I realized that I didn't have to do sports. I could read F. Scott Fitzgerald and write vague book reports about what I liked. It was really fabulous. Again, it was this very protected, safe environment. My dorm master was my Russian teacher, and I babysat for his kids. And so it was this very nurturing community, but it was also this moment in Exeter's history when, in my second year, there were 30 students expelled for smoking pot in the first three months.

This is in 1971. I was clearly not oblivious. I was very conscious of this. There was a lot of drug action going on at this very elite prep school, and it was all coming in through the rich kids. And I just managed to just not

think about that. Nobody worried about me. Nobody thought I was gonna narc them because I was a good boy, and I would just ignore things I didn't want to—*[laughter]* so that was all part of my life there. See, again, in retrospect, I had all the traumas of being a teenager. And the whole idea- That was when I knew I was gay, when I was 16, in 1971. I absolutely knew it but just decided to put that aside and not deal with it.

*Mary Rizzo:*

How did you know? Was there a moment?

*Ulysses Dietz:*

There was a definite moment, and I have written this down recently. It's a little embarrassing only because it's one of these weird moments where—'cause I had been very—my parents were not devout except my father really was. We went to church every Sunday in the Episcopal church, which was not so liberal in the 60s, but in the late 60s, there were women trying to get ordained. As you know from other people you've interviewed, that was when there was this upsurge of gay rights awareness and stuff. There were some very liberal leaders like William Sloane Coffin, who actually advised my brother on his draft stuff. In Exeter, there was a chapel, but it was very secular. There was no religious content to it at all.

That was the moment when I drifted away from church. I would go to church with my parents when I was home, but that was when I—always, I guess, this is having not been raised in a fundamentalist setting, you were not browbeaten over faith or anything, but this was a real challenge. It's a very specific moment that I do write—it's actually the opening scene in my memoirs. I'm lying in my bed, sort of praying, but not really praying, but just stewing over the fact that I know I'm gay, but my brother is resisting the draft and might go to prison, and two of my siblings are dead, and how can I do this to my parents? How can this happen to me?

Then I heard a voice, and it was six words, which is, "Live a good life. Be happy." I don't know where they came from. In my mind at the time, I sort of assumed that somehow, God spoke to me But God's never spoken to me before or since, and so it may be just the way my mind worked to say, "don't worry." It was an enormous thing because what it basically did was eliminate the guilt. Not the fear or the anxiety or other stuff, but there was no guilt. There was no longer any question that this was okay. I just had to figure out how to deal with it. Of course, I compartmentalized it and didn't deal with it for four more years, but I wasn't guilty about it anymore. That's a real watershed for me. I haven't shared that with many people before. My priest, actually. *[Laughter]* I'm not sure which one. I think maybe it was—there were several. We've had several gay priests at my church.



And I think one of them, I talked to about this at one point. It was such a simple thing. I don't know whether that's my brain somehow so desperate to rationalize being okay that I just did it, *[laughter]* but whatever it was, it made a big difference. Maybe that's why I was happy in high school is that I didn't have this thing—I wasn't stewing about this. I stewed a lot about it in college, but it was really more, “what do I do now? What do I do now?” Not, “Oh, my God. I'm evil. I'm going to hell.” It's like, “I'm 20 years old, and I'm a virgin. What am I gonna do now?” *[Laughter]* I was going crazy by that, so that's the next stage.

*Mary Rizzo:*

I want to ask, so you have this moment where you realize that you're gay. What did that mean to you at that moment? There's so much more discussion about these issues publicly today than there would have been back then. Was that a word that you used?

*Ulysses Dietz:*

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I definitely knew the word. Let me think 'cause it's—that was the culminating moment, that epiphany that—just to stop fighting it because the awareness was kinda trickling in. That goes back, oh, to when I was—to the summer my brother—my little brother died, and I was sent off to Colorado to stay with cousins so I wouldn't be home for his birthday. It wasn't for me so much as for my parents, who were just reeling. Again, it was a great two weeks or something I spent in Denver with my cousins. I had a cousin my little brother's age named Olga, called Sandy then. We had a wonderful time.

I shared a room with my—with her older brother, Tom, who is a retired history teacher, who was a redhead and a total jock. He would wander around in his underwear, and I got very aware of that. I think I also imprinted on redheads. *[Laughter]* That has stuck in my mind as a critical moment in awareness. What was I? As I said, I was 13. 'Cause I think I turned 13 before, and then after my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, I went off to Colorado. Again, it was wonderful trip, and I got to know my aunt and uncle really well and my cousins. Even though I don't see them very often, I still keep in touch with those cousins, who I'd known all my life, but they were always in Colorado. They all stayed west. None of them ever did anything in the east except be tourists maybe.

Also, middle school, I can also very—the notorious eighth grade trip to Washington that, in my generation, everybody did, and they still do it sometimes, but being very conscious on the bus that there was a lot of carrying on of a very mild sort with the boys and the girls. Of course, the popular boys and the popular girls, the jocks and the pretty girls in the back of the bus. I was always the court jester. I have just been writing about this is that I was a classic totally dweeby little nerd kid with braces

and ugly glasses and an appalling sense of style, although I thought I was very groovy. I was just right out of a TV show. I was a stereotype.

I was never bullied, and I was always sort of kept in the circle of smart popular kids because I was funny. I think clearly, that was a self-defense mechanism that worked really well and kept me happy. Also, on this bus trip—and I'm only thinking of that 'cause a bunch of the girls, like- tied me down and gave me a makeover, made up my face. Then there were pictures **floating** around, and it wasn't particularly flattering. They did it, and there was nothing malicious about it. It was that I was the boy one would do that to, whereas the other boys were the ones who were making out with the girls in the back of the bus, and I realized that, as I was aware of that, I was aware of the boys and not the girls. And that sort of sent a little alarm through my head that there was something going on here.

In retrospect, the awareness creeps in. I don't know when in boarding school it really hit me, although I have one distinct memory—again, in retrospect, I have all sorts of memories of what boys looked like and the boys I admired because of what they looked like. I didn't necessarily admire them any other way. Because I was pretty confident in myself academically, and so I didn't feel I needed to—I had no interest in jocks because I didn't care about sports. I was just interested in the way they looked.

This all sounds very pervy, but remember, I'm 14 or something, or 15, and I'm—so in the showers of this incredible—Exeter had incredible facilities, this massive new gymnasium that had just been built. It had two indoor hockey rinks and an Olympic pool. It was a big gym. Just in a shower moment of a senior football player who was what we called a ringer, but he was already a—I knew him well enough to have talked to him to know his story. He was brought in to have a second senior year at a prep school to prep himself to get into college football or something. He was just there showering, and I don't remember his name or anything. I just remember being riveted to the spot at how beautiful he was. That was a clear message to me. There must have been something—that must have *click-click-clicked* in my head. Maybe it was the second year, but whatever it was, it was early in that—in my career. That's another moment I'm very conscious of that.

The other thing that happened—and I don't remember what year this is. I don't think it's senior year. I think it's before. Because the irony is that I had a circle of very close friends at Exeter, all of whom ended up being gay, but none of whom ever came out to each other until we were all well into or past college. That's the tragedy of that period because these days, the chances are, you're gonna come out in high school, although it's still

not easy. I remember what we all did, and this is—I don't know who owned the record. We were in some kid's dorm room, and we all sat and listened to the LP cast recording of "Boys in the Band".

*Mary Rizzo:* Oh, wow.

*Ulysses Dietz:* I remember arguing with Vito Russo about this 'cause he hated that. It's on Broadway now, and I would love to see it 'cause none of those guys were born when I was in high school. I remember my visceral response to "Boys in the Band" other than the trauma of their unhappiness was the sense, it's not that I'm like them, but they're like me and that I'm not alone, that these guys are out there. I never saw it as a negative. I said, oh, yeah, they're miserable, but I'm not gonna make friends with them. *[Laughter]* I never associated their unhappiness with my potential unhappiness. To me, it was, oh, I'm gonna be happy, but they're out there. All this happens in these first couple of years in boarding school.

*Mary Rizzo:* That's interesting.

*Ulysses Dietz:* In retrospect, I've gotten to know a lot of these people subsequently and even went to one of their weddings. **[Note: I don't quite know what this means. I think I'm referring back to the friends I listened to Boys In The Band with—I had attended one of their weddings to another man eight years ago.]** You can see this builds up. This is the way I'm gonna try to build the narrative in my memoir is that it's this building body of evidence until I can't deny it anymore.

*Mary Rizzo:* Right. You mentioned that you had friends at school who later came out. Did you have any other folks who you went to school with, maybe teachers or other people in your extended family or who, looking back, you could see were gay or lesbian and that you had any connection to?

*Ulysses Dietz:* Not at school. My Russian teacher was a totally straight man, and I was very fond of him as an avuncular type 'cause—and he was just like a regular Joe. He'd learned Russian in the Army, and he was not fancy or prep school-y at all, but he taught Russian, and Exeter had a Russian department. He was it. I was just trying to think. My French teacher, who was lovely, American, but spoke beautiful French and was very warm with the students. Single woman in her 30s, so I have no idea. There was never any kind of hero worship, but I just liked her. I loved that, as a teacher, she encouraged us, and she really encouraged those of us who liked to speak, who really were into the language.

It was a useless major in college, but I will never regret it because, for a while, I got very fluent, and I've never really forgotten it. I'm not fluent, but I could become fluent again if I lived in France or something, which is another retirement idea briefly. Although there is, in retrospect, there was

a staff member—and this is upsetting because I was close to him. Not really close. Apparently, not really close because he ended up, 30 years later, being called out by students for abusing them.

*Mary Rizzo:* Oh, wow.

*Ulysses Dietz:* For sexual contact with them. This is when he was in his 70s, got called back. He was a young man, attractive in a Kennedy-like way. Then somehow, in retrospect, I'm thinking, "Oh, I wasn't attractive enough," which is, of course, a terrible thing to say because—but I was very fond of him. I remember, as we were young adults going forward, there was another very close friend of mine named Rick, who died of AIDS at 40, but he and I were very close friends and came out to each other fairly soon once we got into college, once we came out. He'd been very close to the same guy and was never fiddled with either, so we were both—I don't know because he died long before this happened.

In retrospect, Exeter's dealt with some really tough problems of late, that being one of them. The fact that you could see I was so oblivious. My sexuality as such, any sexual activity, was so totally repressed that I don't know what I would have done. It could have been very damaging if anyone had hit on me as a student, even another student. I was really not ready for it. I was ready in my brain, but not beyond that. Other than that, I never thought back on anybody. I think about the teachers I sort of had crushes on, but I never thought about it that way at all.

Then I'm leaping ahead because I know that in college that one of my French teachers was not only gay but openly gay, but that was all part of my coming out process. He had nothing to do with it, but I started to run into him. There were gay people at the academic level at Yale that did make a difference because the world was really changing. A lot of people think, "Oh, you came out in the mid-70s. That's so early," and I guess it is, except it didn't feel early to me. It just felt like it was the right time. In retrospect, it was only the right time in a few places, and I happened to be in one of them.

*Mary Rizzo:* Why don't we talk a little bit about college then? Sounds like Yale.  
*[Laughter]*

*Ulysses Dietz:* As you can see, I don't have any problem—

*Mary Rizzo:* That's great.

*Ulysses Dietz:* just spilling forth.

*Mary Rizzo:* No, that's fantastic. Yeah. Tell me a little bit about that.

*Ulysses Dietz:*

Again, it's one of these things that—I even talked to my kids about this, that I looked at and applied to three colleges. Harvard. No. Yale, Stanford, and Williams. Stanford because my sister had gone there. I've still never been to Stanford and realized that I didn't want to go to California 'cause I wanted to be close to my parents, close enough to drive. I didn't want to go to Williams 'cause, quite rightly, I realized it was barely larger than Exeter and was another small-town rural jockey sports school. As lovely as Williams is, I realized I needed something bigger and more anonymous. I chose Yale because my parents had friends who lived there who were involved with the university. I loved the buildings. I loved the campus.

Nobody loves New Haven except I still love it. I'm still involved, very much involved with the Yale art gallery, and I've kept in touch with my—the teachers who are still alive—ever since. Somehow, it felt right. Then it turned out to be the absolutely perfect place. I go to Yale, and the one thing Exeter did for me that I will always be grateful for is, I was ready to hit the ground running. I was so better prepared than a lot of public high school kids in terms of writing and research. I can write, but doing research, I'm not really—I don't care about anymore, but I was better then.

This, I have written about. This, I've written a lot about 'cause that part of my memoir is all written. I really got to Yale thinking, okay, I'm gonna start all over again. I've got three Jewish roommates because they either thought I was black or Jewish with my name. Ulysses Dietz, you're one or the other. They put me in with three Jewish roommates, who all—we got along really well, but the first day there, my best friend from Exeter, who had graduated early and gone off to the south of France with his mother, pops in the window.

We're on the ground floor. He has this massive curly blond hair, and he's tan. He has a very effete voice, tall and skinny with a big Roman nose. He says hello. We haven't seen each other in six months. He hasn't talked to me. Just no email, nothing. He came to look me up as soon as he got to Yale. From the time he goes from the window around to the door to come into our room, my roommates look up at me and said, "Who's the fag?" Then I decided. In my head, I said, okay, social life is not gonna be my future here. I'm gonna be a scholar. I'm gonna get straight As, and I guess I will not be a normal kid. *[Laughter]*

It turned out to be easier than that, but—because I wasn't gonna abandon my best friend, and we got very close. He helped me come out. He was very important in that 'cause he decided to push me out so he could see what it was like. *[Laughter]* It was one of those things. It was this epiphany on the day I get there. My roommates were always cool to him.

They all got along fine. It's not like we socialized together. I didn't socialize with my roommates much, but we all got along fine. Remember, at that point, I've got John Reid's "Best Little Boy in the World". I've already got that book, and I keep it under my pillow as a freshman 'cause I'm thinking college, what am I gonna do?

Then you just get caught up in school and the whole Ivy League. I don't know what it means anymore because I couldn't get into Yale if I paid them \$1 million. Once you get over the thrill of being in an Ivy League school, it's really, you're just at college, and I've got a lot of work to do. That's really what I did. I just threw myself into it. I was taking French, Russian, English, religion. We had to take sciences, so I took astronomy and sociology- psychology. I loved everything. It was a lot of work, but—there were no computers, so you write your papers by hand. You type them all night long with earphones on because it takes you 14 hours to type a 25-page paper, and you have to correct it by hand and retype pages. Oh, God. I got very caught up in it. I managed to compartmentalize my way out of dealing with my sexuality for two more years. *[Laughter]*

*Mary Rizzo:*

Just what year are you—

*Ulysses Dietz:*

I started in 1973, graduated in '77. I would say those years between 1970 when I turned 15 and 1980 when I started at the Newark Museum, so that decade's a pretty big decade for me. I figured out pretty quickly I'm gonna be a French major for no other reason than, what else am I gonna do? I could be an English major or a history major, but I love French, so why not just roll with that? I couldn't be an art history major because that meant more languages, and I had too many languages, and Russian is not useful for art history. I couldn't take on any more language.

Then the summer after my freshman year, I become basically a volunteer intern. I didn't know that's what I was doing, but I volunteered at a historic house that I could see down the lake from my parents, who had bought a summer property with a cabin on it in upstate New York. I started volunteering at that house, and halfway through that summer, I thought, I could do this for a living. *[Laughter]* Then I start taking decorative arts courses at Yale, which is the only university in America with a massive American decorative arts collection on a par with the Metropolitan Museum's. That just hooked me. Immediately, I knew what I wanted to do.

I kept the French major 'cause I couldn't do art history, but I did—so I did mostly art history courses, but American. I didn't have to take the ones I didn't want. Architecture, architectural history, American painting and sculpture, American decorative arts. That was what really filled my mind

at Yale until junior year. My third year and—the memory I have, the way I've written this down, is that I'm sitting at my desk in my little room—oh, by the third year, I've left my other roommates. My best friend Sam and I are roommates, and we have this great Victorian suite in a part of Silliman College that we really decorate 'cause he had money.

It's embarrassing because, again, neither of us is out, but this room just screamed gay boys 'cause it was just—anyway, straight boys don't decorate like this. It was a great room. It had a big Victorian fireplace. We just loved it. It had a bay window. We were very happy. We had a good time together. We went to movies. We went out to dinner late. We had very different course structures because after freshman and—we took courses together early on, but Sam and I just—he was very deep into serious Renaissance art, and I was doing decorative arts. Junior year, I can remember I'm sitting supposedly studying early American silver or something, and all I can think about is a boy that I have a crush on in one of my classes because I'm literally, I'm 20 years old, and I have never kissed anybody. Either sex. Nothing other than family kisses. It's just making me crazy, and I'm feeling like I am never gonna have sex.

*[Laughter]*

I'm surprised I didn't have a stroke. My hormones must have been boiling away. I don't really do anything, but apparently, my obsession with this boy who was straight, but he wore pink sweaters and things, so he was freaking me out. Gaydar broken already, and I'm only 20. This is the story that's in my memoirs too already is—'cause it's a great story. I actually turned it into a short story—is that we go out to some movie, and we go out to our local place, and he has rice pudding, and I'm having a liverwurst sandwich because that's what we ate. He says, "You've got to do something about this gay thing," and it blew my mind because I had just been waiting. I'm such a nitwit. I needed to get pushed. Then it got—

*Mary Rizzo:* This was the roommate that told you that?

*Ulysses Dietz:* This was my roommate told me this.

*Mary Rizzo:* I want to make sure I had that.

*Ulysses Dietz:* In the short story version of it, the dialogue is very witty, but I'm sure it was just awkward and teenage still. He's older than I am by a year. That really started it. He kept pushing me. I was, like- afraid. I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what to do. He said, "Do this." I said, "I can't. I'm scared." He said, "All right. Write a note, and I'll deliver it and ask someone to call you," and they did. So I met with someone. I got taken to a meeting of the Gay Alliance at Yale. And I was like- *[panting]* I was

terrified. At that meeting, I met these guys who would become my housemates and the boy who would become my husband of 42 years that very first night. And It's too late to have regrets. *[Laughter]*

I can't second-think what I did. It's like, I was so ready. I think it really changed my whole perspective on the world because once I sort of came out, as I blew that closet door off, I just couldn't even think about going back in for any reason. It was just like, I never—it never occurred to me that the world might not be safe, although I was very conscious you had to be discreet. I mean, I've lost all that discretion over the years. It's just that it was going forward. I just couldn't go back.

*Mary Rizzo:* What changed then, let's say, on a day-to-day basis, right? How were you different?

*Ulysses Dietz:* The initial week, I was different in that I felt just this incredible burden off my shoulders that I had been out to myself, but now I was out to other people who were there. That was a pretty narrow range, but of course, then after the first week, Gary and I had our first date, and that opened another door. That, of course, again, totally changed things. I became a full person. I became an adult. What was that ridiculous Thomas Wolfe book? *A Man in Full*. And that changed, becoming a sexual person, just totally rearranged everything.

One of the things, as I jokingly say, I realized that I could still get straight As with half the amount of work. I didn't need to memorize every textbook all the way through. I could actually do half the work and still get straight As because I was a good student and have a social life and do things that weren't necessarily legal. I don't want to get into that too much. *[Laughter]* I had fun, and I had a social network outside of college, although it was right next to college. They were graduate students, most of them. Gary had just graduated and was working at the computer center, so he wasn't even a student. It just totally transformed the way I felt. I wasn't tentative. I just roared into this.

I was never heavy-duty party. I never did drugs a lot. I never drank a lot, although I did drink, and I did get drunk, and we stayed out late and danced and stuff. There was also a couple of good bars in New Haven then. Just suddenly, it was instantly comfortable. It was what I was waiting for, and I just went for it. That sounds so dumb, but it's not like, oh, I'm going to change myself. I became myself. That's essentially it. Things get complicated as life goes on and your life changes. I get through there. I'm a very different person by the end of that. I think I came out to my parents—I met Gary in 75. I think I came out to them late spring of 76.



*Mary Rizzo:* You have graduated from—

*Ulysses Dietz:* No. I'm still a junior. It's one of those things that I'm close to my parents, and the idea of—now that I'm out, it's no longer tolerable to keep that secret from them. I knew they were gonna be okay, but I was still terrified because of course you are. And I wrote them a long letter because I've never been—I've never liked telephones. I talk on the phone all the time, but cold calls or any kind of awkward call on the phone is just the worst. I wrote them a long letter with a bibliography [*laughter*] because I'm that much of a nerd. [*Laughter*]

*Mary Rizzo:* Oh, my God. That's fantastic.

*Ulysses Dietz:* The only book I can remember, "Best Little Boy in the World", but there was a recently-published book by St. Martin's Press called—by Laura Z. Hobson who wrote "Gentleman's Agreement", and she wrote a book called "Consenting Adult" about her own son coming out. My mother called her 'cause they knew each other from publishing days. That book is still by my bedside because that book was the book that made it easy for my mother to understand 'cause my parents had both had gay friends in the 30s in New York. My father worked in the theater. That's a more complicated story even, but my mother certainly had gay friends.

Her best friends were—the head a publisher at Harper Brothers was a man named—now I'm not gonna be able to remember. She called him Mac. I think his last name was **MacGregor**. But he and his boyfriend were friends of hers. She would spend weekends with them. This is in the late 30s. She meets my father in '40. But this is very close. It's different from having gay friends. She grew up very conservative Republican, very upper-class WASPy New York Republican, so this was not something one talked about. My father, who spent time in the theater, was also pretty familiar with this. I remember my Great Aunt Ethel talked about—who lived in Greenwich talked about her architect and his boyfriend would come—this is when I'm a kid. I hear these little things, and they're all stored away.

I somehow knew coming out to my parents was really critical, but both they and my brother were incredible. My brother is very theatrical. He sent me a telegram saying, "Thank God you're my brother," which I thought—even then, I sort of giggled over it. He went around telling people 'cause he thought it was so cool that he had a gay brother. He still does. I love him for that very reason, even though he's 70 now.

So that summer, I went home after college, but then came right back after a couple weeks and moved in with Gary and lived with him for the rest of

my college career. I moved off campus and had a room in his house, in the house that they shared, which my father called a commune, but it was all academics. It was all gay men, but it was academics, graduate students. A professor owned the house, and it was right near the Yale campus. That really became the transformative place for my next year. Then the tricky thing is there was reincorporating my friend Sam, who I'd left in the lurch 'cause suddenly, I have a boyfriend, and I'm out of there. We actually eventually got him to move into the house with us, *[laughter]* but he had to live alone on the top floor because he couldn't deal with us. He really wants me to leave him out of the memoirs, and I said, "I can't leave you out. I will use your first name only, but I can't leave you out 'cause you're too important."

*Mary Rizzo:*

Did you continue to be involved with the Gay Activists Alliance?

*Ulysses Dietz:*

Yeah. We stayed there. Yeah. Yeah. Because we were involved in GAY. I think I marched in my first Pride march in New York in '76. We really are the children of Stonewall. This is only seven years later. It was all very exciting. Being in a Pride march in '76 was a scarier—actually, less scary 'cause it never occurred to us that anyone would shoot us. Nowadays, I'm much more worried about big crowds and terrorists, but back then, it was like, people might throw tomatoes at you or something. It was all really very exciting and much smaller-scale. It's gotten so crazy and large that I'm an old man and I don't enjoy it anymore. We carried that on. Then I graduated, and we spent a year in New Haven.

I was working at the art gallery doing something menial, and he just was working at the computer center. We moved into our own apartment and just spent a year 'cause I didn't get into grad school the first time. I blew my interview. But I got in the second time, and I went down to this program called the Winterthur program at the University of Delaware. He moved with me. He got a job in computers down in Delaware within walking distance of our apartment. We had two years there. We joined the Gay Alliance at the University of Delaware. Somebody, for some reason, opened a gay bar a block away from our apartment, so that was convenient. A mother and her son opened this bar together. So we had a gay life there. And graduate school- I've already jumped in grad school. Is that all right?

*Mary Rizzo:*

Yeah, that's fine. No, that's fine.

*Ulysses Dietz:*

In retrospect, I didn't quite understand that it was pretty outrageous. It was pretty scandalous that—and I came in with real connections. The people who had founded the Winterthur program were my teachers at Yale, so I had very powerful connections. Plus, family ties to the DuPont family,

distant, but there, and they were very aware of it. It's an incredible program because you not only get free tuition for graduate school, but they give you a stipend, so it's a total free ride. Then I show up with this Jewish boyfriend and bring him to things, and he's there.

Right away, I was like- I was certainly the first in the history of this program to be so openly gay. And I didn't talk about it. I just had Gary with me, and I talked about our life and our apartment. And it never caused a problem. Again, I was very lucky. It never caused a problem because I didn't—what is the word? I didn't flaunt it except I did flaunt it just by being myself. I dressed pretty flamboyantly then, I got to say. College, I calmed down, but—I dressed more gay before I was out.

*Mary Rizzo:*

Interesting.

*Ulysses Dietz:*

I think because I was trying to—I was thinking, if I looked gay enough, someone would tell me. *[Laughter]* I wish there were selfies and video—phone cameras 'cause my friend Sam, his mother worked in the fashion industry, and one of the things he brought me, he got me to wear, was a long-sleeved T-shirt, bright red with a scoop neck and a sequined automobile on the front of it and with bell-bottoms and clogs. In 1973 at Yale, that was about as gay as you could get, except I wasn't out. The whole thing was—it's like, I wanted to look gay so that people would tag me, but they didn't 'cause they were all so discreet and diplomatic at Yale. In retrospect, it just makes me cringe. But I was comfortable with that.

Then after I came out, then it just—then I toned it down in graduate school just because we all wore cutoffs and flip flops when we weren't actually giving tours of the museum. That presence was really there, and it just—again, I wasn't conscious. I wasn't saying, “I'm gonna do this to be radical.” It was just, this is me, and I'm just living my life. Then I got the job in Newark in 1980, so that's only two years in Delaware. I get the job here. I'm 24 when they hire me. Then, of course, Gary comes with me and gets another job in New Jersey 'cause you used to be able to do that. And with more money so we could afford to buy a house, and I got an American Express card, which I've had since 1980. And we moved to Maplewood, and I started at the Newark Museum.

*Mary Rizzo:*

What was your title when you started?

*Ulysses Dietz:*

I was the curator of decorative arts. With no experience, *[laughter]* I got a departmental head job because I was willing to take the lowest salary. The negotiation, I think—the salary range is between—it was really something like 14 to 20,000, and I said, “Oh, I'll take 14.” *[Laughter]* I wanted that job. It's funny. I loved the museum right away, and I loved the Ballantine

House 'cause I loved houses. Remember, that's where I started. The idea that I had a collection and a house to deal with was perfect. The fact that I was close to New York was sort of part of it, but it wasn't really the big deal. We knew New York. One of the great tragedies of my life is watching Greenwich Village colonized by people who are not us, also young. *[Laughter]*

Going there as an old man is sad. That was where we would go on the weekends and hang out. 'Cause we lived our lives—by the way, you notice we moved right to the suburbs 'cause we thought about it, and we wanted to live in a house in a green town. We did not want to live next to Gary's parents, although we did because they were right there 'cause his family was all from Newark, eastern European Jews who came to the Newark in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. So we had a huge family around here.

*Mary Rizzo:*

His family were still in Newark?

*Ulysses Dietz:*

His grandparents were in Newark, but the rest of his family all lived mostly in Springfield. They'd ended up in Springfield, which is where his parents lived mostly for the rest of their lives. But that was just- I said, "Okay. Your parents are close by." He had come out to them just out of necessity the year we were living together in New Haven because they were coming to visit, and we had a one bedroom apartment that was the size of this room. You walk in, and you see the kitchen and our bed, so he had to tell them. They came anyway and never spoke of it again in 25 years.

His parents were not emotional people. They were not sophisticated people. His grandfather lived to be 93 and lived in Newark for 80 years and never came to the Newark Museum. *[Laughter]* "Oh, nice place. I've never been there."

We had a good relationship with them, although they were never enriching as a family. I have to figure out how to write about that too. But they were always good to me, and I was good to them. I was a good son-in-law, so to speak. Just we didn't talk about it. We just were there, and they coped with it.

Then Gary's—the baby of his mother's family, Uncle Phil, was living with a man since the 1950s in California because he ran away from home at 19. So we got very close to Phil, and he became our—we became his surrogate children because he was living in California with his partner of—I think Fritz finally died after they lived together 35 years. That was a little bit—there was little bits—I have a lot of gay cousins. All of that began to surface as part of the background of this. I haven't figured out

how I'm gonna put all that in there. I'm sure they don't want me talking about that.

There's a detail. So my father's- My grandparents, the Dietzes, have four children: three boys and a girl. Their first generation of kids, each of them has four children because Grandma Dietz wanted four children, so there was 16 of us. Then the next generation has children. Not all of them have children, not all of them are married, but between the first generation and the second generation, every single line of the family has redheads and gay men.

*Mary Rizzo:* Interesting.

*Ulysses Dietz:* Every single one. The two things that run in the family. My niece is redheaded, [and so is the daughter of one of my cousins]. There are three gay kids in my generation, [in three of the four families] but the—so the people who didn't have redheads had redheads, and the people who didn't have gay sons had gay sons. I think that's fascinating. Genetically, I think that's the most fascinating statistic in two generations, all four branches of the family. I don't know how that's gonna go forward. My kids are adopted, so it's not gonna go forward through them. [Laughter]

*Mary Rizzo:* Let's talk a little bit about the museum and Newark. Those are two related topics. Maybe we can start with talking a bit about the museum. You come to the museum. You're young but you're partnered. You're in a gay relationship.

*Ulysses Dietz:* Yeah. At that point, he's just my boyfriend or my friend because there's no other term for it. Partner hasn't cropped up. Lover strikes—we say that en famille with other gay people, but neither of us particularly likes that. Boyfriend seems so juvenile. Maybe not when you're 25, but certainly by the time you're 40, it seems juvenile. My boyfriend. Yeah. Anyway, I didn't let you ask your question.

*Mary Rizzo:* What was the museum like when you got there?

*Ulysses Dietz:* The museum in 1980 was very still—it basically physically had not changed since the 40s. It was still the museum that had been around since 1947, I think, when the planetarium was built with rec room paneling around the outside. There was just the main building and the north wing, which we called the other side. [Laughter] Even as I got there, the old YWCA, which had been owned by Rutgers, had been Rutgers Law School for a while before they moved into the Newhouse building and then built the new building or wherever we are, right over there. That had been abandoned and had just been given to the museum, and we hadn't figured

out what to do with it when I got there. That was all in the background. I was still too junior to be aware of any of that.

There was a lot of crap in the gymnasium, which is now our auditorium. There was a lot of crap that had been given to us that I had to figure out how to get rid of 'cause that was—one of my jobs, I remember, was, I was running the decorative arts collection and managing the docents and doing the Ballantine House, which was just the ground floor at that point. My job was to say no because they were aware that there was all this crap that had been given to the museum by the—taken in by my predecessor, who basically, I think in retrospect, was using it as camouflage 'cause he was stealing things from the museum, but that's another whole scandal that burbled up after I got there. It took years for that to come out.

I was there because that same guy took a job at Winterthur and knew his job would be open, and he called me and said, "You should apply for my job." Newark was my fourth job interview, but it was the one I got. The second job interview was the Brooklyn Museum. A friend of mine from Yale got that job, and he just retired. A gay friend, actually. I can't mention his name because he can't be in the closet at 65. Anyway. *[Laughter]* This is another story, but just Gary and I in our little apartment on Broadway in New Haven, our little three-room apartment, we had a little dinner party for what, by that point, I was perceiving as all the gay graduate students in the decorative arts department. They were all so closeted. *[Laughter]*

It was really a socially awkward evening because I was just assuming they were all out, and none of them were. I think they all—actually, one of them ended up being straight because I just couldn't read his beats properly. I've never seen him again, so I don't know what he's really like. That's not quite true. I did see him as a middle-aged man. Anyway, one of those crew ended up as the curator at Brooklyn. I was always slightly- I can't say I'm ahead of the curve. I was always a little obtuse to people's closetedness 'cause I didn't see the world that way. Anyway, so Newark was very mom and pop. It was Sam Miller and his wonderful flamboyant wife, Rosetta. Then there was no deputy director.

He had a kind of administrative powerhouse—he had a secretary named Mary McGill, who I loved. Then he had an assistant who wasn't really an assistant director. A little gray-haired Irish lady named Dottie McNally who had started in 1937 in the Ballantine House when we bought it as a secretary. She was the one who knew where all the bodies were buried. She knew how get into the safe. She was administrative. She was not in line to be a director, but she was the assistant to the director. The structure of the museum was a strange hodgepodge of people.

There was one guy who did nothing but—one of his jobs was to read our mail, so all the mail was opened and read before it was sent on to us, often with notes. Presumably, it was to pull checks out if anybody sent us checks. That's long since gone. It was very mom and poppy. It was very homey. All the administration was on the second floor of the Ballantine House, so that's where I'd go to get my paychecks and things like that. The 80s was that moment when we hired Michael Graves because he had worked—he'd done something that never got built in the 60s, which thank God it was never built.

Then all through the 80s was this development of this what we called the master plan to renovate the Rutgers—the Y building and to renovate the whole museum and to reinvent ourselves in this postmodern guise, which really transformed us into a modern museum. We were all pretty aware of that. The curators who were there when it all finalized in 1989 when it opened realized that we had suddenly become something that we should have been before 'cause we missed a whole generation of development because of Newark's collapse. Even though the museum did well, it had never expanded. That's my first decade at the museum is this decade of incredible growth and expansion.

By the time I'm 35 in 1990, the museum is suddenly this much better-known place, and I've built my—somewhat my reputation on a few exhibitions, although I didn't do anything major in that—you just said, "Oh, I want to do an exhibition," and the director said, "Okay. Go ahead and do it." There was no budgeting. Nothing. He assigned money out of the funds. Nothing was very expensive, and nothing was very ambitious, and there was no publicity, no PR. You did PR, but there was no marketing, no merchandising. You didn't take out ads. There was no money being spent on that. It was just, you sent out press releases, and the Star-Ledger gave you a front-page article.

There was a wonderful woman named Friedman, Audrey—it's not Audrey. She's a jewelry dealer. Her name was something Friedman. Oh, my God. It's terrible. I can see her. She was sort of a little old lady who had written on the arts for the Star-Ledger for many, many years. Always in her articles—she would do these massive articles for anything I did at the museum, and she always mentioned that I went to Yale in the first paragraph. *[Laughter]*

*Mary Rizzo:*

That's great.

*Ulysses Dietz:*

It was very small town. It was this weird—and that was probably when Walter was involved. It was so easy to get publicity because there was no

Internet. There was no competition. 280 hadn't been finished, and 78 hadn't been finished, so it was harder to get into New York. There was no Midtown direct train, so getting into New York was just enough of a hassle that people would come to the museum instead.

*Mary Rizzo:*

Interesting.

*Ulysses Dietz:*

It was this great growth spurt. By 1990, things are feeling very grand. Then we go through an economic problem because we suddenly have this new building that we didn't plan on paying for. We paid for it. We didn't plan on running it. I'm kind of oblivious to all of that 'cause then in the 90s, I begin to work on the Ballantine House 'cause that's finally empty, and I can take it to the next step, which turns into a huge project. Then I come up with other ideas. My career goes on, and that feels so immediate, and that's 23 years ago. It feels like yesterday. Basically, my career at Newark has been two big projects, the big jewelry show in 1997, and the Ballantine House that opened in '94, and everything else has been small.

I published books. I've done some good exhibitions. I've written a lot of articles. Basically, I wasn't ambitious. What I wanted was interest and stability. I wanted a job that was rewarding and interesting. I wanted to feel like I was doing good, and I wanted stability. I wanted to be here and live my life. Eventually, when we kicked into the notion of children, which was in the mid-90s—early 90s, but we got them in the mid-90s—I just- I've never been a curator who was ambitious. I enjoy whatever notoriety I've achieved. I just came back from a conference in Seattle where I was one of the lead speakers.

I like applause. I like making an audience [respond]—to me, it's a performance, and I enjoy that, but I don't do it for the money. I do it because I want to be liked. This is that desperate junior high school kid who is funny, and I work for laughs too 'cause I want people to like me, and speaking is the best way to do that. Exhibitions is a little more detached 'cause you really don't get the response from people immediately. *[Laughter]*

*Mary Rizzo:*

Right. They're looking at the exhibition, not at you, but of course, you're there.

*Ulysses Dietz:*

The museum has grown incredibly and gotten more sophisticated, and it's become just like—in its complexities, which is good and bad, has become just like every other museum in the sense that it now struggles with all those issues because now things are not cheap and easy. Things are difficult and expensive. We struggle with, how do you fund that? How do you have enough staff? And this weird post-retirement gig of being the interim co-director, which is the second time I've done that, was—again,



neither time as something I wanted it. Because I think I'm a lousy director, but I'm—this time around, I'm actually really learning to think more like that, which is why I'm—I've got this meeting with the curators, as I call them, my curators—I keep forgetting I'm their boss—to talk about stuff that's official with them today.

It's a nice way to end my career is by—I'm only two [three] days a week. In retrospect, I realize that, again, I came to Newark with this boyfriend, with this Jewish boyfriend who had local history, and that, without my knowing it, was throwing everybody for a loop. It just never came up. I know Gary and I moved to Maplewood convinced that we were going to be the victims of horrible homophobia, and never. None ever. The one time I think we had a battle with the mayor of Maplewood in the early 80s, '81, '82—it was '82—is that they wouldn't let couples who weren't married join the town pool as families. All we did was got the ACLU to threaten them with a lawsuit, and they caved. *[Laughter]*

Then for the next—and then eventually, we had children, so we had family memberships. We got involved in local—in the New Jersey activism, which cropped up in the 70s because there was a very strong movement in the 70s in New Jersey—and I'm sure people could tell you the name. It was a woman who was trying to recriminalize homosexuality on the New Jersey books. All these gay groups cropped up. There was the Gay Alliance, the New Jersey Gay Coalition, which became the New Jersey Lesbian and Gay Coalition, which my boyfriend, partner, husband was the president of for at least a couple terms, but we met a lot of friends through that.

Then there was the Gay Activists Alliance at Morris County that met out at the big unitarian fellowship mansion in Morristown. We did a lot of stuff with them. We went to their programs. We went to their Halloween parties. We met friends through that. I was trying to think. There was something else. There was something up north. There was a Bergen County gay group that I've totally forgotten the name of. There was a lot of that going on. I never really knew what was going on at Rutgers, interestingly. I knew Jamie Credle. I didn't know him well, but he was certainly somebody who was through our circuit.

Then through the church, I got dragged in in 1989. The bishop, Jack Spong. At some point in the mid-80s, that's right, I went back to church because there was—Gary and I—the Organization For Gay Awareness, which met in a church in Maplewood. It was this little totally disorganized anarchist group, anarchist only because we were all too lazy to organize it, that met at St. George's. It had been a historical thing that St. George's Episcopal church had said—first, they had said yes to AA groups meeting,

and then they said yes to Dignity, which is a gay Catholic group meeting, and then they said yes to OGA, or maybe OGA and Dignity were two different things. We met in the parish lounge for years, a decade and a half, I think, until we finally—until I finally said, "I'm out of here. I got other stuff to do with my life." The group just collapsed 'cause nobody—the anarchy finally imploded it. It was really amazing, who we would get to come out and talk to us.

*Mary Rizzo:* Oh, yeah?

*Ulysses Dietz:* We'd get really important figures in gay activism in New York, like Vito Russo, to come and talk to us, this little band of ten loser men who would sit around and have punch and cookies because that was sort of in the air, and New York was close. I can't remember. There were some really famous people whose names I've totally blanked on. Arthur Bell was a very famous figure who was quite a powerful writer. People died in the 80s. Through that, the priest of that church came to one of our meetings and made it clear that we would be welcome not only as individuals but as couples.

I went with friends who were Catholic and were trying to get out of it, and they took me on a Palm Sunday in 1986, and I've been a member of the church ever since. I've been a warden. I've been on the vestry. I'm the head of the altar guild. That drew me back into church. I'm a very conditional Christian, not like Louie Crew, who is pretty unconditional. As long as they say the right thing and do the right thing, I'll stay there. I'm very tied to my particular parish. This has become a real—Jack Spong was an amazing radical transformation from being a southern Baptist to a southern Episcopalian to this kind of firebrand liberal Episcopal Christian who was notorious—so Newark was the most notorious diocese in the country. You can go anywhere and say, "I'm from the diocese of Newark," and you'd get a reaction if you went to a church. *[Laughter]*

*Mary Rizzo:* That's so interesting. That's really interesting. I think we have had some other folks mention him as well. That's really fascinating. I want to be aware of your time. When do you have to leave?

*Ulysses Dietz:* Five of 1:00, so we've got a half-hour.

*Mary Rizzo:* Great. I do want to be aware of that, but I have a bunch of questions to ask you, so we'll see what we can get through.

*Ulysses Dietz:* I can't go until they text me where they're having lunch.

*Mary Rizzo:* That's important. *[Laughter]* Lunch is very important.

*Ulysses Dietz:* I can't meet them until they tell me where they're going. I already told them once.

*Mary Rizzo:* One of the things that I wanted to hear you elaborate on a little bit more is your relationship with Newark. You're not living in Newark, right, but you work here. Especially in the early period when you first come to work at the museum, were you—did you go out in Newark at all? Did you go to bars in Newark? Was there any social reason that you interacted with Newark, or was it, you came to go to work, and then you went home?

*Ulysses Dietz:* I'm staring off into space 'cause I'm trying—I don't know. I don't think we ever went to a bar in Newark. There was a big bar in East Orange called Charlie's West that we went to, again, when we were younger. Now, the problem being mostly that, as Gary and I got later into our 20s and toward our 30s, we realized that we didn't really like going to bars very much. It was an assumption of youth. Neither of us drinks heavily. We both like to drink, but we don't drink much. Gary hates dancing, and I like dancing, so if I give him enough—give him a drink or two, he'd pretend. We actually met a lot of friends through Charlie's West, but that was the big bar out here and the one that was easiest to get to.

I think there were bars in Newark, but there were not bars that I think we would have gone to. I can't remember much about why that is 'cause it wasn't that they were in Newark. It's just that I think they were not—that bars have personalities. There was a bar that cropped up in Orange called Rahrah's that was started by a woman who was a realtor or something like that in real life. I think I remember we went there and didn't feel it was very friendly. I think that may have been mostly women, and therefore, having a barrage of men come wandering in didn't help. It was convenient to the train. Then Doop's, which had been a fancy department store in East Orange, was briefly a bar. I think eventually, our issue with that was more that we weren't bar people.

*Mary Rizzo:* We've had a lot of people talk to us in interviews about places in Newark like Murphy's as a main gay bar. That was right by where now the Prudential Center is. It's gone. A lot of people talked about that. A lot of people have talked about in the nightclub scene, dancing at Zanzibar. These are not places that you—

*Ulysses Dietz:* They're not because we—again, because we were such homebodies. Now, I think my ties—my gay social life in Newark was either through the museum or through what I had been on the verge of saying and then wandered off is that I got involved in this group that Bishop Spong called

me and said, "I'm creating a gay support group called the Oasis." I was a founding and longtime board member of that.

*Mary Rizzo:* When would that have been?

*Ulysses Dietz:* 1989.

*Mary Rizzo:* 1989.

*Ulysses Dietz:* It was Wednesday services at the cathedral at St.—at Trinity St. Philip's on Military Park. It's interesting 'cause that was a very important moment in the Episcopal church 'cause it was this suddenly active outreach 'cause there was something called Integrity, which was—and Louie was very involved in that, a national gay Episcopal organization. This was local. This was for this diocese. It was specifically to be a place where gay folk could go to go to church if they didn't feel welcome in another church. Of course, I had St. George's already. And Oasis, gradually- We had all sorts of—the first missionary, he was called—I'm totally blanking on his name. [Robert Williams] It's really annoying. It will come to me, but somebody can tell you. Louie could certainly tell you. [Louie died since we did this.]

The first missionary we hired, and there was a great ruckus over his ordination—not ordination. About his installation as the head of the Oasis. Because this was also a moment when priests were—openly gay priests with partners were being ordained. Barry Stopfel, who was the rector of my church, and there was a heresy trial involving the diocese of Newark. There were reporters at my church every Sunday for months, expecting us to do something weird, even though the church was 90 percent straight anyway. That's how that tied that community very strongly to its gay members.

This Oasis thing was about—and it worked ultimately so well that it became—there was David Norgard was the second one. The first guy, Robert Williams, he crashed and burned because he made a very public snide remark about Mother Teresa, that she needed to get laid or something. That destroyed him. He got booted. The bishop booted him. He said, "You're out there to change the world, but you're not there to make enemies." Then David came in, and he was very successful. He's still a priest out in California or something. That was really- My social interaction with Newark was through church work and whoever the dean of the cathedral then—so then my second boss after Sam retired was Mary Sue Price.

She and her husband, Clem, who I knew—the first time I knew about them is they came to a dinner party as a date to my house, and I thought,

she's dating a trustee. We went to their wedding, which was done by the dean of the cathedral, who was this wonderful African guy who was lovely. I can't remember his name either. [Petero Sebune, I think] My mind is like a sieve. Then there was a reporter, and I'll talk about him a little bit because he was at the Star-Ledger. He died of AIDS. He was a great big African American guy named Fred Byrd. B-Y-R-D. He lived in the Colonnade. I knew him through OGA. I knew him through gay groups, but he was very closeted, very—but not bizarrely for the period.

I got to know him because of the Krueger House, the Scott Krueger House, because when that was being—it was owned by the city and was left open and was being vandalized. A group of us met up there and made a big headline. He pulled it together and said, "Let's all go to the house." I knew him through that, but I knew him through the various gay groups as well. I guess to go back to your bigger question is that I've always felt—when we moved to Maplewood, Maplewood was—the way it was marketed to us was mixed. That was the word. Diverse was not a word.

Diverse is a good word, but that didn't—I think the two driving forces in New Jersey are greed and racism. It's still one of the most segregated places I've ever known. It's actually as bad as the deep South, although it's not as weird as the deep South. It's close. We moved to Maplewood at a moment when white people were leaving Maplewood because it was close to Newark, and by golly, black people were buying houses in Maplewood. Then the South Orange Maplewood Coalition on Race was created to promote Maplewood as a diverse community, to draw mixed-race couples, to draw black families, to draw white families who were interested in a non-whitetopia setting.

I've always felt from that moment on—my house is maybe seven miles from here. In any normal city in America, Maplewood would be part of Newark. I've said this to Mayor Baraka at least twice officially for the museum, at a meeting at the museum, that the future of Maplewood is tied to the future of Newark. Newark needs to recognize that the old suburbs from Bloomfield and Montclair down even to Millburn and Hillside, that those old suburbs are intimately tied to the history of this city. The city needs to think them not as enemies, but as part of their family.

I've always felt that I lived in Newark even though I go away, even though I joined that exodus out [every evening], I am really not very far and that I've always felt that my life is tied to the city of Newark. My job was here, and I'm sure there are people in Maplewood who don't work in Newark and therefore never think of Newark and don't see that, but for me, it's always been that way, that I've always felt that I didn't—it's funny 'cause when I asked the director, "Okay, I'm gonna take this job, so where do I go?" I don't think

any of them suggested that I live in Newark, even though he lived in Newark. He lived up on Mount Prospect Avenue in a great apartment, but none of the other senior staff people lived in Newark.

Now, three of the curators live in Maplewood, and our deputy director, my other interim co-director, is about to move to Maplewood this month. That's the Brooklyn syndrome, the Brooklyn effect, which finally, this renaissance that they talked about since 1982 seems to be happening. Maplewood is already little Brooklyn West. It's all soaked in hipsters from Hoboken and Brooklyn. They're all younger than we are, although a lot of them have kids our kids' age 'cause we started late. Anyway.

*Mary Rizzo:*

Let me ask, since we're talking a bit about the issues around race, so you mentioned the Oasis group that's at the church. Was that a mixed-race group? Was it black and white, or was it predominantly white gay people who were involved? I'm curious what the relationship between the black gay community in Newark and the white gay community in Newark and the suburbs—was there interaction?

*Ulysses Dietz:*

My suspicion is those communities were segregated unless you got into something like an academic setting. Certainly, Oasis was intended to be for black and white, and there were certainly black members, and there were certainly black people in the gay community in the suburbs too. I can remember a few very distinctly. But, I don't think- We weren't so conscious about it. I think it was an assumption that we were open to everybody, but I don't think we worked so consciously to bring people in, but I think they came in anyway. I think the world of black Episcopalians is more limited just in general.

But you had- Trinity is Trinity St. Philips, and St. Philips was the black parish in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and they merged in the 1940s to become Trinity St. Philips. So St. Philips itself has always been an integrated community. The dean was African. That's the thing is, I think he was actually African, African American, but I think he was actually of African roots. There's a strong community of Nigerians and Ghanaians who have strong Anglican tendencies. Tendencies.

*[End of Audio]*