

**University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Unit One/Allen Hall Oral History Project
Interviewee: Sam Siner, former resident of Unit One
Interviewer: Spenser Bailey, Student Life and Culture Archives
Date: 9 February 2024
Method: Zoom
Length: 1:13:13¹**

Spenser Bailey: Good afternoon, this is an interview for the University of Illinois Archives Unit One Oral History Project. My name is Spenser Bailey, and I am an Archives Research Assistant at the University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives. The date today is February 9th, 2024, and I am pleased to be speaking with Sam Siner today. We are speaking via Zoom, and recording the interview via Zoom, and Sam, thank you very much for speaking with me today. And I'll say before we get started, if at any time you would like to take a break, pause, just let me know and we can go from there.

Alright, great. To begin, would you please say your full name.

Sam Siner: Sam Siner.

SB: Okay. And where are you from, Sam?

SS: I'm originally from the South Suburbs of Chicago, I currently live in Chicago.

SB: Which one, if I may?

SS: Glenwood, Homewood-Flossmoor area.

SB: I'm from Lemont, so I'm not all that far from [unintelligible].

SS: Oh, cool. Nice.

SB: Yeah, so would you mind talking a little bit about what growing up was like for, what things were important in your family when you were young?

SS: Yeah. I grew up with a mom, a dad, and my younger sister. School was always a really important value in our family, so were the arts. My dad has worked for the Lyric Opera of Chicago for many years, in development there, and both of them really loved, and still love, music and art and everything, and so I was kind of exposed to that from a young age. And that

¹ **Transcriber's Note:** Some "filler" words – "Um," "Mm hm," and others – were not included in this transcription. Additionally, repeated words and phrases were removed when possible. I endeavored to write a transcription as faithful as possible to the conversation between interviewer and interviewee. That said, there may be some errors, so anyone considering citing any part of this interview is encouraged to listen to the relevant part of the conversation and make their own determination of what was said.

was a really important value, and then also just in general, community and family and friends. All of those were important values, also, growing up.

SB: Yeah, that's great. And you would say, also, that education was important?

SS: Yeah. Education was a very, very big value in our household. Something that both my parents emphasized quite a bit.

SB: Did you always think that you'd go on to college after high school?

SS: Yeah, yeah. I grew up in kind of the very typical, '90s, early 2000s era, middle-class Millennial. There's not even a, there's no [unintelligible] conversation about not being college, right. To the extent that I think with my own kids now, I'd probably have a broader conversation about what's right for them and all that kind of a thing, but that wasn't part of the conversation then. It was definitely, the question was where and how and how much would it cost, not whether. [Laughs]

SB: That makes sense. How and when did you first hear about the University of Illinois? Are your folks alumni, perhaps?

SS: My folks aren't alumni, but I, I went to high school in Illinois, so I knew about it, like every high school student. Also, my, I have an older half-sister who's quite a bit older than me, who graduated from U of I, and my dad went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and just loves the Big Ten and everything, so, [unintelligible] about it, I think. I don't remember specifically, but I think I probably visited Champaign a couple times throughout my life, just as were doing road trips and stuff. I just knew about U of I just in general.

SB: So you had seen campus probably once or twice before you actually enrolled?

SS: I think so, yeah. I mean, it's so long ago, I don't really remember, but I don't think it was completely foreign to me.

SB: And what, what made you, when it did come time to start applying to colleges and making that selection, what made you choose the University of Illinois?

SS: Yeah, what's interesting is at first, I didn't. So I applied to a variety of schools, I was the valedictorian of my high school class, and applied to a whole bunch of schools and actually got into Harvard. And I actually went to Harvard for about a year and a half. So I was a transfer student into U of I, and, actually came in in my sophomore year at U of I. But at first, yeah, at first I went to Harvard, and I had a very difficult experience there. Just feeling very isolated, depressed, far away from home. Just in general, a campus culture that didn't feel very supportive, and I, in the middle of my sophomore year, I think in October or something, I just actually decided to come home.

I was feeling really bad, really depressed, I actually pulled out of that semester, came home for the rest of the year, actually. Went to community college, just took community college classes at

home and worked locally. I like to say that I think I'm probably one of the people who went to Harvard, a state school, and a community college. [Laughs]

I'm proud of that, though, I think that's, I ended up in an earlier career that I can talk about later, post U of I, I ended up going into higher education, student affairs, the whole journey was a big part of that decision. But anyway, so I transferred into U of I in fall of 2007, as a sophomore. And lived in Allen Hall from the time, it ended up being from the time I came into U of I until the time I graduated. The whole thing we'll talk about.

SB: And when it came time to, when you decided after your time at community college, and you decided you wanted to get back into the university environment, did you apply to anywhere other than Illinois at that time?

SS: No, no. I decided that U of I was the perfect balance of what I wanted at that time. And probably honestly what would have been an even better fit just post high school. But at that point, it was clear, I wanted a large university that had just a ton of options for, I was also an undecided student, major-wise, at the time, which was unconventional at Harvard but very, very common at U of I. They even had a whole advising office for students who were undecided on their major that I went to quite a bit in my sophomore year. And so, I wanted a lot of academic options to explore, I wanted a lot of social and extracurricular options to explore, and I wanted to be close enough to home where I could have more support, but still far enough from home to not feel like I was living at home. And also, just more intangibly, I just really liked the campus and the feel of it. It felt, I still love it, it feels very just, down to earth, but with a lot of opportunities and I felt like that fit really well with who I was. Much better than Harvard had fit.

SB: That's a great way to describe it. What were your first impressions of campus when you arrived as a student and not for a casual visit?

SS: Yeah. My first impressions. I was very excited. I was very, I was nervous because I was coming as a transfer student, it's hard enough to come as a freshman, it's even harder to come as a transfer student, so I was nervous about making friends and everything. But I felt like, I immediately felt comfortable, I remember that. And Allen Hall definitely helped, going to orientation there, not only did it help, it became a pivotal part of my experience, that again, we'll talk more about.

But I, even beyond just Allen Hall and Unit One, I just felt immediately like, you know, it was a place that I could grow. You want to be in a place that's challenging enough to help you grow, but still gives you a sense of comfort and stability. You want that middle ground, always, right. And this felt like that. I just felt that, instinctively, even from the moment I got on to campus and I just loved biking around the Quad, and [unintelligible], and going to CRCE to work out, and, I don't know, just the classes and stuff. That was just, but my first impression was just like, this feels comfortable but exciting.

SB: That's good. And so I guess, the other thing is that, you're decision, your thought process in taking a break from Harvard and leaving, then coming to Illinois and deciding

that this was going to be the place, pretty quickly after you did arrive, you probably knew that you had made the right call?

SS: Yeah, yeah, I did, yeah.

SB: And you said that you started out in Allen as a transfer, how did you end up selecting that as your dorm?

SS: You know, I don't totally remember. I don't remember much about the process of applying. I don't think I knew anybody in Allen Hall or anything like that, I don't think I knew much about it. I don't remember what it was described as, but when you have to make selections for residence halls, I think I probably remember seeing a description of Allen Hall, as a place, an exciting community in the arts and all this stuff, and small classes and all that, and, basically described as, I think what they've said is like a liberal arts college inside a large university. Which it is exactly as described. [Laughs] It was accurate advertising. But I think I was probably just interested in that. Like I wanted, I loved the community, I loved the arts, I loved hanging out and having kind of that feel, but I did want it in a bigger, large university setting. And so I think, again, I [unintelligible] just instinctively drawn to that idea.

SB: And what were your first impressions of Allen specifically, either as a dorm or with the Unit One community and the environment there?

SS: Yeah. Immediately positive. Unit One does and did and I assume still does an orientation before the wider campus orientation, a two or three day orientation and it's so well-planned and it's so intentionally community building and I just remember like, I didn't immediately make tons of friends from it or whatever, that doesn't happen Day 1. But I remember the first night I was at Allen Hall there was a drum circle on the front porch, and people playing guitars, and I play guitar, and so I think I probably joined that. Coffee house open mic type-thing, probably in the first week, and I just remember immediately the feeling like this was a good fit. [Laughs]

And also the building itself felt pretty comfortable. At least it was carpeted and very nicely laid out, central community spaces and the dining hall right in there and everything, library and all that. It just felt very comfortable and easy to hang out in.

SB: So, I guess, it was a good environment both physically in the building and the space and also with the community that you started experiencing, pretty early on?

SS: Yeah, yeah.

SB: Do you remember your roommate or what, or your neighbors, or what was that like your first year?

SS: Yeah. First semester was hard. I was put in a quad, so there were four of us in one big room, I think it was probably a year they were overbooked in the residence hall or whatever. And it was, that part was pretty bad. It was hard to get sleep, my roommates were all pretty respectful, for the most part, but someone would have their girlfriend there, someone else would

have different sleep schedules, and blah blah. The lights were never really off, right, because it's one big room, four different people's schedules. That really, that combined with a few other things really affected me in that first semester. And I actually almost, I almost didn't come back the second semester, not because of U of I itself or Allen Hall or anything, but just because, it was still a hard transition despite all these positive things. But I came back my second semester and decided to do several things that would try to make things better. I transferred rooms, or asked for a different room, I had met a friend who I ended up rooming with, and he's now one of my best friends, what is it, 12 years, when did I graduate, 14 years later, holy c***.

We were just regular roommates in a regular double room, and that was so much better. I got a job working at the front desk at Allen Hall, and at first was put on an overnight shift, which was a terrible thing. I stopped doing the overnight shifts after that, and got involved in Allen Hall actually as an orientation leader and stuff, for the Director of Orientation.

All this stuff that was, that really helped me my second semester. But yeah, the roommate situation was tough.

SB: That sounds like it sucks, a couple people when I was an undergrad said, "Oh, we should go get a quad." I said, "No!"

SS: Yeah, wise. [Laughs]

SB: Either that first semester or that second semester, with the programming and the artists-in-residence and the like at Unit One, had you started getting involved in those things yet?

SS: Yeah, a bit. I was a participant at that point, I was involved in, I went to a lot of the community events, especially coffeeshouse which I really enjoyed, that happened monthly. Kind of a general open mic. I don't remember, in that first semester, how much I participated, but I think I probably played there a couple times. I took, I don't remember if I took a class my very first semester there or not, but throughout my time in Allen Hall I took several classes in there.

There were different clubs, I joined French Club and probably something else, I don't know. And they always had the guests-in-residence, which I think are a really important part of the culture. I didn't go to as many of those, because they often seemed kind of niche and I didn't always, I wasn't always that interested. But I went to a few of those as well. So, just kind of dabbled in a lot of different things they were offering.

SB: That seems like it's really a hallmark of Allen Hall, is that maybe not every programming event, guest, or class is going to be nice for everybody, but most people are going to find at least some things that they really enjoy.

SS: Yeah, yeah, definitely. That was the hallmark, and it was designed that way. As I'm sure we'll talk about in a bit, I later became a program advisor in Allen Hall and was responsible for putting on the programs and got to see it from a different perspective. That was a hallmark, clubs, we had a ton of, almost really like a liberal arts school. There are obviously tons of clubs

to join at the broader U of I, but also inside Allen Hall. And any student could form a club, they could be like, "I want to do whatever," and they'd get some funding and do it and that kind of grassroots community building was so cool.

SB: So these are clubs that existed, might have been part of, but existed mostly within the Allen community?

SS: Yeah, exactly. And dozens of them. Some more active than others, but I'm sure there are at least 20 or 30 clubs in Allen Hall.

SB: And Allen's not all that big of a dorm, either. That's really something.

SS: Yeah. Maybe five or six hundred people, maybe not even that big, I don't know.

SB: Just to make sure that I ask, you're actually, I probably should have said this earlier, this is the fifth interview that I've done for this project.

SS: Oh, cool.

SB: The first one was with Laura Haber, who you probably know.

SS: Yeah.

SB: You must have worked with her.

SS: Yep.

SB: With two guys, two men who were there in the very early '70s, one who was actually in the first group.

SS: Oh, how cool!

SB: And then one who was in the '80s, so it's been really interesting getting these perspectives, just about what changed, what stayed the same, what has changed.

SS: Yeah.

SB: I'm digressing rapidly, I wanted to ask...

SS: No, that's so cool!

SB: ... was the, the Unit One Community, was that, when you were there, was it all of the dorm Allen Hall?

SS: Yeah. It was the whole dorm, yep. So the whole dorm was Allen, and you'll hear me refer to Allen Hall and Unit One almost interchangeably, right, because that's how it felt. Yeah, Laura

Haber was the program director at the time, and when I became a program advisor, she was my boss for a couple of years.

SB: Yeah.

SS: And there was always a resident director also running the actual residence hall part of it, kind of in partnership with Laura.

SB: That makes sense. And it's always interesting to just check up on, actually, that's the other thing that I have to consider with my supervisor, Ellen Swain, who's our Student Life Archivist, is exactly what are going to we title this project. Is it going to be Unit One/Allen Hall, Allen Hall/Unit One, a combination of the words? [laughs]

SS: Yeah, it's hard to separate them.

SB: It seems like, pretty, I have yet to pinpoint exactly what year it was, but it seems like pretty early on it became the entire dorm and pretty much stayed that way.

SS: Interesting. I didn't actually know that. Will I have an opportunity to read the final project [unintelligible]?

SB: Oh, absolutely! Oh, yeah.

SS: I would love to. I'm really passionate about Unit One, even now.

SB: We're really getting rolling on this history. It's really, it's been interesting for me too because I was an undergrad here, and then a grad student, and now I work here. And I didn't live in Allen, I knew what it is, what it was. So it's been interesting learning, okay, what has it been for different people at various times. As you started to get more involved, and you said, was getting the job at the desk like your first experience of not being just a resident there?

SS: Yeah, yeah, it was. I took that job at first because I needed money. But through that job I got to know the Resident Director a little bit, and then, I was always someone who just naturally did, liked duty and leadership stuff. I created, in that first semester, I worked with the Resident Director and he was creating a funding board to take the funding that we had, the student programming funding, and make decisions on how to allocate it in the board, in the dorm. And so I joined that and got to know the Resident Director through that also. And then, or maybe it was, maybe that was the second semester, I don't know. But yeah, it started with the front desk, and then it went to the funding board, and then, no, that was in the first semester.

Because then the second semester, because of my involvement with the funding board, Laura and the Resident Director at the time, Jonathan Farr, he, they asked if I wanted, or maybe I applied, I don't know, but, to be the co-director of orientation. Because it was coordinated by students with Laura's guidance, and the RD's guidance, but we did all of the project management work and put the whole thing together, which was really cool. It's not typical. [Laughs] And so I

worked on that a lot in the second semester, and then we did orientation for fall, I guess it would have been for the next fall, which would be Fall 2008. Or, 2008, yeah, Fall 2008.

SB: So in a year you went from being totally new to campus, pretty happy you're in the right decision, still new to it, and being in this orientation, to, one year later, you were planning the orientation?

SS: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah. That's right.

SB: That's really something.

SS: Yeah. To some extent, it was just this series of serendipitous events that lead to that. But on the other hand, I've, again, I've always been and continued to be someone who gravitates toward leadership and community building and stuff like that. So that, in retrospect, wasn't terribly surprising that I kind of gravitated toward opportunities like that.

SB: That makes sense. I did something similar with a couple of programs that I was in, starting out in the orientation and then by the next year was helping with it.

SS: Yeah.

SB: Just also, in your first year, generally, when you were on campus, what was your experience of classes, and of if you did any activities or anything like that outside of Allen or maybe with people that you met at Allen, what was that like?

SS: Yeah. Well, class-wise, my first semester, so while I was at Harvard, I took a variety of different classes and wasn't quite sure what I wanted to major in, like I said. I liked psychology classes the best, but when I came to U of I, there were so many more options for majors, I wanted to try a bunch of things. I actually thought maybe computer science, because I had taken AP Computer Science in high school and really liked it. And U of I has a great CS program, but I took a computer science class and it was so stressful, just taking up so much of my time and really preventing me from doing other things that I wanted to do, like meet people and have fun. [Laughs]

And so I kind of ruled that out. I also was considering architecture and urban planning and all these things that I hadn't really been exposed to but was interested in. And just decided those weren't right for me. And so I actually ended up coming back to psychology, and so in my second semester, I declared psychology as my major. And starting that semester, like really loved my classes for the most part. Especially the major classes. The psych classes were great, I minored in business, which was also fun, and some electives I took were pretty cool. Especially some of the ones though Allen Hall. I took a couple semesters of sign language in Allen Hall, which was probably my favorite class there. My favorite class in Allen Hall, but also just a really cool set of classes.

I, overall, I'm very pleased with my academic experience. And then other than, outside of Allen Hall, I got a bit involved in the Hillel, did some, I was never involved as a student leader there

really, but I did, I went to services and different programs there and met some friends there. And I also played guitar, like I said, I play guitar, but I do Jewish music as well, and so I would lead services there sometimes which was fun.

And then, just hang out with friends around Champaign and Urbana. Probably... actually, I forgot about this. In my first semester, I actually pledged, was it Alpha Rho Chi, an architecture fraternity when I thought I might be an architecture major. And then, shortly after I decided not to do architecture, and decided not to go through with that. [Laughs] So I got involved... I was just dabbling at the very beginning, right. And, once I kind of got settled with friends and stuff, we would hang out a lot in Urbana, and go to the restaurants there, Farmer's Market and whatever. [Laughs]

SB: Did you, you lead into it a little bit with that, but I always try to ask. Did you ever consider joining a social fraternity?

SS: Not strongly. Again, like yes, my first semester, I did, it was a co-ed architecture fraternity, so probably about the nerdiest fraternity you could join. But I always felt, I always was uncomfortable with the rigid social constraints that were put on people in social fraternities. But always drawn to the community aspect of a community like it, and that's, I think, why Allen Hall, it felt like the right middle ground for me. It wasn't as rigid as the fraternity, but it also had the structure that I think is a good thing about a fraternity.

SB: You're not the first person to say something like that when I've asked that question.

SS: Interesting, yeah. I think Allen Hall has been really good for students who feel similarly, right. Because, for that reason, yeah.

SB: Yeah, that's really, that doesn't surprise me in the slightest. And when, you said you took classes there like that one in sign language, when did you take your first Unit One class? Was it that second semester?

SS: Um, let's see. Was it my... I don't remember when I took my first class. It was pretty early on. I remember I took human sexuality as an elective in Unit One. I took, I think, one of my business classes I took there, I don't remember which one. It was accounting or something, no, it wasn't accounting, but one of the business classes I think I took there. Yeah, the sign language classes. I don't remember what else. I really enjoyed the classes in Allen Hall, and I think they're a really pivotal and important part of the experience there. But they weren't the main thing that I got involved in in Allen Hall. But I did do several. Oh, and I took, and these were classes because I got credit for them, I took a whole bunch of music lessons as well. They were one credit classes that you could take periodically. And I took several semesters of music lessons.

SB: And those were actually taught in Allen Hall itself?

SS: Yep. Allen Hall still has, there's a whole wing of Allen Hall with, where there are music practice rooms, and there's also a darkroom, and there's a pottery studio, which is just so cool.

SB: Is it still in Ground Floor North?

SS: Yeah, yeah.

SB: It's been there since the '70s, apparently.

SS: Wow, cool.

SB: The first couple of, my first two interviewees were ones from the '70s, recall that, like, the darkroom being in Ground North and these spaces being down there.

SS: Oh, that's awesome. When I became a program advisor, the PAs' rooms were in Ground North, so I actually lived in Ground North. That's the only residential rooms that are down there, so the three of us lived in this hallway in Ground North along with all these spaces. I would, at 10:00PM want to go play piano or whatever, I would go to the music practice room. [Laughs]

SB: Just down the hall?

SS: Just down the hall, just so fun.

SB: It's really great to, the more I'm learning about this place the more I can see why people really felt at home there.

SS: Yeah, definitely.

SB: When you mentioned you started getting involved as a program advisor and leading the orientation, you said that you had gone through a bit of an informal process where you got to know the leadership, Laura, and her counterpart on the residential side, what was your specific, what sort of things were you doing when you got involved with that right off the bat?

SS: Yeah. So again, it started with the front desk and the funding board. But once I started doing orientation, it was me and one other student, Clare was her name. And we, Laura was just incredibly good at giving students autonomy to do these things and to grow. And she gave support, of course, but she basically just handed it off to us and was like, "Here you go!" And there were probably some documents from before or whatever, but that was pretty much it. And we put up flyers, we got a whole group of people who wanted to volunteer to help, other students in the dorm, and we planned out the whole thing. We planned out the whole schedule, we ordered the food, we designed, arranged activities, we reserved the rooms and sent out the marketing to the incoming students and all that jazz. So that was, through that I started to make more friends, and feel more a part of the community.

And then, it actually was truly serendipitous the way I became a program advisor, because it was toward the end of the summer, orientation was going to happen, and a couple weeks, and I got a

phone call from Laura Haber, out of the blue, and she said that one of the program advisors had left, and do I want to come in, I hadn't applied to be a program advisor, it wasn't even on my radar. And she was like, "Do you want to come in as a program advisor for the year?" You'll get free room and board, and a small stipend, and get to do these things.

And I was not sure I wanted to do that, because I was honestly not sure what direction I wanted to go for the rest of my two years at U of I, in terms of activities I'd been involved in. I actually wasn't, at that moment, sure that I wanted the residence hall to be the rest of my college experience. And also I expected it would be more stress, and just a much bigger commitment than I was expecting to make. And I really wrestled with that, talked with a mentor and stuff like that, and I was like, "What the heck, let's give this a try." And went down the next day because RA and PA training was already happening. Went down to U of I the next day and jumped in. And I'm so glad I did, it ended up being one of the best experiences of my life.

But yeah, my junior and senior year I was a PA, which was the best of both worlds. I got to all the fun community building stuff without any of the annoying RA stuff, right. I didn't have to bust students, I didn't have to be on call or any of that. I just got to do the fun stuff, and Laura gave me complete, really complete autonomy, I did all of, you know. I redesigned Allen Notes, which is the weekly newsletter that we put up in the door, and I created a, I took over Coffeehouse a lot and led that. And I created some new traditions that I heard, I don't know if they still exist now, but I went back several years later and they were still there, which was pretty cool. One was called Allenpalooza, which was an end of the year arts fair, and one that was called Allen Hall-iday, which was an end of the first semester, holiday thing. And created an acapella group called Acapallen, which was fun. So I just got to take my own interests, basically... [laughs]. I also took over French Club, and just did stuff like that.

So, I don't remember what the question was, but those were some things I did as a PA.

SB: Yeah. I was just asking about how did you end up in the program director role, so that, or the program advisor role?

SS: Yeah.

SB: And so that would have been your second year on campus, when you were a junior?

SS: Right.

SB: And you, had you, before you got that call from Laura, had you planned to live in Allen again?

SS: So I had also wrestled with that. Toward the end of my sophomore year, there was a group of people that I was friendly with, not super close with, but a group of guys that wanted to get a house in Urbana, six of us. And they invited me to be part of it, and I was considering it, and then I decided not to. I just didn't want to do that at that time. And so I was going to live in Allen Hall for one more semester, and then reevaluate. And probably move off campus at some point with someone, was my thought. I wasn't super excited about that, but I also wasn't, at that

point, super excited about just living in the residence hall indefinitely as a junior without a role there. So I honestly wasn't quite sure where it was going to go. And had this not come up, I probably would have just spent another semester at Allen Hall and then moved off campus, I don't know. It would have been fine. But yeah.

SB: So it seems like the program advisor call from Laura was just really fortunate in multiple ways for you?

SS: Yeah. Yeah, it really gave a sense of purpose to my last two years in a way that I think would have been hard to replicate. I'm sure I would have had a fine time and gotten involved in some things, but this really gave it a sense of purpose that was really great for my last two years there.

SB: And when you started getting these, started setting up these programs and coming up with different activities and stuff, for the living... did they call it a Living-Learning Community at that time?

SS: Mm hm, yeah.

SB: Okay, they used that. They still do. I wasn't sure when that term quite came up.

SS: Yeah.

SB: Was Unit One the only LLC then, or were there others?

SS: No, there were several. I couldn't tell you what the other ones were, though. [Laughs] I don't remember. It was the only one that was as all-encompassing, right, where it was the whole residence hall and it had that much work. The other ones were more thematic and maybe like a wing of a hall, or a hallway, or something. And they were spread through a variety of other residence halls, I think. But I don't remember what they were.

SB: Yeah. That makes...

SS: There wasn't really much intermingling between them when as far as I...

SB: Yeah. The, originally, you have heard this, but if not, I want to make sure that I tell you that, do you know why it's called Unit One?

SS: No! I would love to know!

SB: So, this comes from, I forget which of the two guys from the early '70s, either the one who was there in the first year or later, but it's called Unit One, at least according to him, because the idea was, originally, that there would be Unit Two, Unit Three, other communities. Which there, of course, we know that there ended up being, but I think in the early years it didn't quite take off.

SS: Ohhh.

SB: So I guess whenever the second LLC was founded, they did not go with “Unit Two.” But that was, originally, why it’s called Unit One and there’s no other Units.

SS: Cool! Yeah, I never knew that. I knew it was one of the first LLCs in the country, I’ve read that once. Among the first LLCs in the country, kind of one of the groundbreakers of that concept. But I didn’t realize that’s why it’s called that. That’s cool. Thanks for sharing!

SB: Yeah. That was, that’s been interesting, both hearing that, because I was always like, “Why is it called Unit One,” because all the other LLCs are, I lived in the Honors LLC, new my year, for my first two years. It’s Honors, the Women in STEM one, “Why is this one called Unit One?”

SS: Right, right.

SB: It was nice to hear that, and we’ll definitely have to work that in whatever summary goes up with these interviews eventually.

SS: Definitely.

SB: I’ll ask also, when you started planning these events, being part of the place, on the side of planning things and not just attending them, what was it like getting other students to participate or was it hard to find an audience for some things, or would you generally get a lot of interest?

SS: It was not hard. It was an engaged group of students. I also found that I had a talent in that, in gathering enthusiasm for things like that. I also tried to listen to students and what they wanted, so I wasn’t, we did, I planned a series of salsa dancing nights that students said that they were interested in. I wasn’t particularly interested in salsa dancing, but I knew that some people were interested, and so I did that too. And I also did a lot of marketing inside the dorm, flyering and other stuff, and so, in general, I didn’t, it was such an engaged group of students. That orientation really set a tone, and it was already students who are mostly interested in the concept. Obviously not every student there knew exactly what they were walking into, or was super gung-ho about it, but a critical mass of students were. Every coffeehouse would get 50 to 100 students, that’s not normal in other parts of [unintelligible], residence halls certainly, but even other clubs and things, necessarily. And so I, in general, didn’t find it hard to.

I think it also helped that the clubs were so interest-based, and so centered around that community, right. So with French Club, I just found all the kinds who liked French, and they came to this because we got some funding and we went and ate French food or whatever, and saw a French movie, and who doesn’t like that if you like French. And it’s right there. And that, I think, was the biggest part of it. When you go to a club, even on campus, you have to decide, “Ok, it’s the middle of the winter, I want to go halfway across this large campus to this classroom or whatever, to go do this thing, and I don’t know who’s going to be there, I don’t

know if I'm going to like it. It's a whole series of things that are kind of in your way when you decide to do that. And it's a bigger leap of faith if you decide to go.

But in the residence hall, right, it's right there, you already probably know at least a couple people, and if you don't, they at least live with you. You can keep your pajamas on if you want, nobody cares. You don't have to put on your coat, and if you don't like it, you never have to come back. So I think it was easier than normal to get people to come to things.

SB: So what you're saying is that it was a distinct advantage to be able to do and conduct maybe most of, not all, but most of this program in the dorm itself?

SS: Yeah, definitely.

SB: That makes a lot of sense. And as you got involved as a program advisor, that first year, what was it like as you started exploring being able to lead things like that, being in that role while you were also still a student?

SS: Yeah! It was fun, I think it helped that I was slightly older, you know, than many of the students there. Because not only was I a junior at that time, but I was, because I had taken a year off in between Harvard and U of I, I was an even older junior. So I was, I don't know, whatever that would be, 21 instead of 20 or something like that. And a lot of the students there were 18, 19, and 20, and so I think that helped a little bit. I think I felt, I mean, that also, it helped to also be in that role, though, right, because being a 21 year old with a bunch of 18, 19, and 20 year olds, nominally should, feels, probably feel a little bit different. Obviously, there was a potential for some awkwardness, right, because I was also making friends in the dorm.

What was nice about the PA role was I felt like I was able to have generally less separation between myself and the rest of the student body there, than I would have if I was an RA and had a certain level of authority that I was expected to uphold. I was just there to be the person creating fun stuff, and I just basically made friends and hung out with people. In that particular role and with the particular culture there, I felt like it was just, it was mostly just fun and engaging and purpose-building and I didn't feel a whole lot of the awkwardness that could come from a slightly different position like the RA role.

SB: As you're in this part-planning and admin side, what were your interactions with Laura and the other, more permanent, personnel and administrators?

SS: Yeah. I had frequent interactions with Laura and with the RD, after Jonathan Farr left, Michael Williams was the resident director for the last two years. And he became a really big mentor of mine, and a big reason of why I went into the student affairs field as my first career. But yeah, Laura and I, we had one-on-ones, I'd basically talk about what I was doing, and she'd just give me some advice or whatever. It was very low-key, she was pretty hands-off, which I liked, I don't know, I saw her as a mentor. But honestly did my own thing a lot, and very similar with the RD too. I didn't have almost any interactions with the rest of the administration. I remember the RD's boss, so I guess the area director, also had her office in the building, and so I

saw her occasionally, I think I knew who she was and she knew who I was, but I didn't really get to know higher-level leadership much at all.

SB: As you're doing this planning and as you're having these experiences and learning about that side of things, what, do you have a favorite among all the activities and things that you put together?

SS: Yeah. I think it was probably Allenpalooza, which was something that I created my senior year, I didn't do that the first year. And then it, again, stuck around for at least quite a while after I left, as kind of a tradition there. Because it was, there really wasn't any end of the year wrap-up event, and I was basically like, "We're in essentially an arts community, let's celebrate the arts, and so we did a visual arts exhibition and a big coffeehouse and performances and all sorts of things. And people had a lot of fun doing it, and it was kind of like the other flip side of orientation.

And that felt really fun, but also probably Acapallen, I'd always wanted to, I had always been in choirs and stuff, but I had always wanted to be in an acapella group, but didn't want to do the intense time commitment of a traditional acapella group. And so this was a drop-in acapella group for anyone who wanted to come and sign acapella, and we just had a lot of fun. It wasn't the best-sounding group you'd ever heard, but it was just fun, had probably a good dozen people at any meeting, and I just really enjoyed that.

SB: And as you moved from your second year here, so [unintelligible] into your senior year, you stayed a program advisor?

SS: Yeah, I stayed a program advisor.

SB: What sort of a transition was it like for you to decide that you, I mean, it seems like you knew pretty quickly that you enjoyed that role, when did you, or what influenced you in the decision to stay in that role another year and not move off campus, or not move off campus but also stay involved or something like that .

SS: Good question. I actually don't remember. I don't remember that part of the decision-making process. I don't know if I just... I think at that time it just didn't feel like my work there was done. There were things I wanted to do, like some of these traditions that I put together in my senior year. Also my two best friends in the dorm became RAs my senior year, so it was going to be come an even better social experience, peer-wise for me, and it was. It ended up being really fun. And all three of us are still really good friends to this day.

You know, my senior year I became a, what's it called, what's the word for it, a fellow, I forgot the name. A fellow in the office of the Vice President of Student Affairs, where I got to work in that office and do large-scale projects, which was really cool, especially since I was starting to think about going into student affairs as a career. And so, yeah, I don't know. I think the decision to stay was actually easier for my senior year than it was for my junior year, because at that point, I had such a community built in the residence hall, and all that.

SB: And it seems like those two friends of yours who became RAs, it seems like they might have been the people that you would have moved off campus with, but they're also staying in the dorm?

SS: Yeah, that's true too.

SB: And how did you get involved in that fellowship position with the University administration?

SS: Yeah. I just applied. What was it called, I'm sure it still exists, Let me see. UIUC Office of Student Affairs...., so you can have the name, I want to see if I can remember what it is. But, let me see if I can find it. But yeah, no, I remember, I think I just applied for it. There were three of us that got selected, it was pretty selective, and I think I just applied because it looked really interesting. [CORRECTION: The program was called the "Turner Fellows" program.]

SB: And what sort of work did that involve?

SS: Special projects of various kinds. I remember I worked with the Assistant Vice President for Finance, to do essentially the funding board but at the student affairs scale. So we allocated millions of dollars of funding [unintelligible] on that board, which was super cool to see. I was the student representative on that board. I planned some big event for the Office of Student Affairs. I don't remember what it was, but I planned some kind of big event, and I did a big research project on the cultural centers. I don't remember what we were researching, but it was something having to do with student sentiment about the cultural centers, I think that they wanted to see what the future of those cultural centers should be. I did a lot of, I actually put together a survey, and did a lot of interviews and stuff for that and put together a whole report for that too. Those were kind of cool projects that seemed to actually, they seemed to be real things that were needed on the campus.

SB: Seems like you had a really busy senior year then!

SS: Yeah, I did. I was doing that, and I don't remember what else I was doing, but I was doing a lot. I was also going to grad school interviews, several of them in the spring semester, so I was out of town a lot for that, yeah, there was a lot going on. It was a busy [unintelligible].

SB: I'm assuming that at some point you found time to go to class every once in a while?

SS: [Laughs] Also that, yeah.

SB: Sometimes in my, this is my eighth year here now, it seems like things that you get caught up in, "You just gotta remember, you DO need to go to class, not every day, maybe, but go every once in a while or something."

SS: [Laughs] Right, right.

I forgot about this, I was also the research assistant in a psychology lab, cognitive psychology lab, to make some extra money and get that experience too. I was basically just running experiments, I didn't really like cognitive psychology that much, but it paid well, so I was running experiments and sitting and waiting for people to come that wouldn't show up and stuff like that. [Laughs]

SB: How did you get connected with that? Did you take a class with the professor?

SS: Yeah, I did. And I probably just saw the job on, there's, I think, a psychology job board for jobs like this. It was 10 hours a week or something like that, yeah.

SB: And when you were putting all these things together in Allen, you mentioned that you did lots of flying and similar things, word-of-mouth, and your time here would have been when social media was really taking off. What was it like to, how much did you utilize the early versions of Facebook or YouTube or did you still use stuff as it might have been more commonly a couple years before you got there, or were you starting to embrace that digital realm that's so common among students now?

SS: Well, it's interesting, because I went to Harvard in 2005, when Facebook had just started two years before. Mark Zuckerberg, I lived in the same dorm as Mark Zuckerberg, and he had been there two years before me, which was kind of interesting, right. When I got my first Facebook account in 2004, the Wall was just literally a wall of text that anyone could edit. And then, right, by the, throughout my whole time in college, Facebook was my and everybody's main social media at the time. I don't remember doing a whole lot of marketing on Facebook, maybe I did, I probably posted about some of the bigger things. But it was mostly, more a social tool. The marketing, I think, because it was just so easy to do there, in the dorm, I did most of the marketing in the other ways you described. But definitely Facebook was the big one. YouTube, people watched YouTube, but I didn't know anyone really who put anything on YouTube at the time. And Instagram wasn't really a thing yet, or if it was, it wasn't a big thing yet.

SB: Did Twitter even exist then?

SS: I think it did. I don't remember, I was never a big Twitter user. I think I had a, I think I got a Twitter account in grad school and did a little bit with it, so it probably existed before then, but I wasn't really big into it and no one I was friends with was really big into it either.

SB: At least in your experience, even though that social media and the digital world was certainly appearing and evolving, that you were still, at least in your work at Allen, still utilizing like word-of-mouth and flyers and those sorts of things?

SS: Yeah, yeah.

SB: ... more so then, maybe, somebody would have five or ten years later, just because of how common it is now.

SS: Totally. And I saw, a few years later, I was a resident director, and all my RAs were using Instagram and then TikTok to do all these things. So definitely.

SB: Did the dorm room still have landline phones at that time?

SS: Yeah, they did. I think they took them out, they might have taken them out while I was there. I think I vaguely remember that being a thing, but yeah, when I moved in, at least, there were still landline phones.

SB: That's been a really interesting thing to talk to people about. Just because, to me, the concept of having a landline in your dorm, like at least I know what a landline is, some of the current freshman, I'm not positive they do.

SS: Right, right.

SB: It's been interesting to learn about how, the subset of the Archives that I'm doing these interviews for, is Student Life and Culture. As someone who was a student in different ways for seven years, it's really been an interesting thing, and something that I try to focus on with these interviews and with things that I collect and that I work with, is how are these, how did people have these, how did you stay in touch?

SS: Yeah.

SB: I also, I interviewed Laura, I think I mentioned that. And she was talking about when she was working in anti-apartheid activism in the '80s that they had phone trees...

SS: Oh, yeah.

SB: ... for getting the word out for stuff. The concept of something like that, at least because I lived in Nugent Hall, so that one was built after they disposed of the landlines, so it's not even there was a phone jack on the wall...

SS: Right. [Laughs]

SB: ... to remind you that there had recently been a phone in the room.

SS: Right, right. Totally. The changing ways people do things with technology is so interesting, I came post- the phone tree era, but pre- the big social media era. I mean, Facebook was huge when I was there. And it was also huge for marketing, I just think I didn't have to use it that much for marketing because I had such a tiny pond to be marketing in. [Laughs]

SB: If you put up a flyer by the front doors of Allen, 95% of the residents are going to at least walk by that.

SS: Exactly. They'll see the flyers, a lot of them read *Allen Notes*, we put *Allen Notes* in the bathroom stalls so people would have no choice but to read them. [Laughs] So, you can't get easier than that.

SB: It's the best marketing. They had the spring activity fair a few weeks ago when the semester kicked off, and I was wandering though the Illini Union, and I ducked in to use the men's room, and there they were, had them propped up everywhere.

SS: Great, amazing marketing. I'm 37, and I came in in an interesting age, right, where I grew up, basically without computers until I was a middle-schooler, and I came up through the whole AIM period, and the first mainstream desktop computers, and from there to the Facebook and social media era, and now, of course, to everything beyond it. I got my first cell phone, like flip phone, my senior year of high school, and that was pretty common among my age group. And then I didn't get a smartphone until sometime in grad school, I think, and now I couldn't live without it, right, or at least it seems that way. It's just amazing how these things change so rapidly over time.

SB: It really is. Even here, just in my time in the last few years, we, campus has deployed two-factor authentication for signing into IllinoisNet, and it's like even on those days when I would try to leave my phone at home to focus on work or go to the gym without it or something, I have to bring it!

SS: Right, right, yeah, totally.

SB: And you mentioned grad school, you said you had interviews that spring semester. What was your process and mindset like in deciding that you'd like to go to grad school or picking your program and where you were going to go for it?

SS: Yeah. Well, actually, I just want to give one more comment about the technology thing that just came to mind...

SB: Please!

SS: ... then I'll answer that question. I remember that we would have discussions about programs that we couldn't do programs, or we didn't want, in the spirit of being inclusive, we didn't want to do programs that required people to have a phone. Because not everyone had phones, or certainly didn't require people to have smartphones. I don't even remember, that was so new at the time, I don't even think that was part of the conversation, the iPhone came out in 2007, 2008. But even a regular cell phone, I don't know specifically what, but you want to do a scavenger hunt where people had to have their phones or not, we decided, often, not to do that because a critical mass of people still didn't even have cell phones which was kind of fascinating. Just thinking about how things change.

But anyway, going to the grad school conversation. Yeah, right, I had been a psychology major, business minor. Like with my major I was pretty up in the air about my, what I wanted to do as a career also. I considered human resources, which I'm very glad I didn't go into, in retrospect. I

also considered statistics teaching, because I... Oh! I was also a TA for Stat 100 with Ellen Fireman, I don't know if she's still there.

SB: I took, I think I took Stats 200 with her.

SS: Oh, okay.

SB: 100, I don't know if you, she might have been a little bit after your were a student, but somebody named Karle Flanagan took over. And she's been the Stats 100 guru for several years now. But I think I, I did take Stats 200 with Ellen Fireman.

SS: Cool, yeah. She became kind of a mentor also, but I became a TA for Stat 100 because she had undergrad TAs, and, I mean I liked stats so much and also liked her so much, and she liked me also, and she wanted me to take over as the Stat 100 person, this was in 2010. I actually applied to the Masters in Statistics program at U of I, and got in. Which was kind of cool, and if I'd done that, it would have been with the, teaching Stat 100 and then taking it over eventually. Which, basically, what it sounds like this other professor ended up doing. And, at the same time, I was considering human resources a bit, for no other reason than it paid well and used the combination of interests that I had. I wasn't particularly interested in human resources beyond that.

I didn't have any background in HR, so I was considering doing the Masters in HR, whatever it's called, that U of I has. They have a really good one. And then the third thing I was considering was student affairs, because I had mentors in student affairs and I loved doing all this community building work and all that jazz. I put my eggs in all the baskets! [Laughs] I applied to all the programs in all these areas, I ended up getting in to the programs in all these areas. In student affairs, it was a stressful process, because I did, I think, four or five on-sites at, you know, I did one at Indiana University where I ended up going, one at Colorado State, one at University of Iowa, those are three that I did. I turned down a couple that I didn't ultimately like as much. But I went to all three campuses, and this was for several days. You do non-stop interviews, super stressful, and it was a whirlwind of a year, as you can hear. And it was a very, very difficult decision. It came down to decision day in April, when I had all these things on the table. I figured out pretty soon I didn't want to do human resources, so I took that off the table. The stats thing was challenging, because I, in theory I thought it was cool, but ultimately decided I didn't like statistics enough to have it be my thing. I liked it, but not enough to go into it.

So, really, it came down to student affairs and between a couple schools and it was kind of a hard decision. But yeah, I went to IU because I would have the chance to be an assistant Resident Director in a large, very interesting residence hall there, and again, mentorship's very important to me, there was someone there who seemed like he'd be a good mentor for me. So that's how I made that decision. I always make my decisions more by just feeling my way through them than anything else. It's generally served me well.

SB: That makes a lot of sense. After you, I guess I don't want to take too much of your time today, so I'll migrate a little bit towards my question list about your post-college, post-U of I experience, because it seems like that's about where we're at anyway. How did your

experience at U of I, in general, and/or at Allen specifically, as you started in this career in student affairs, did you often look back on your own time as a student and as a program administrator to inform your decisions and your path?

SS: Oh, yeah. My time in Allen Hall and Unit One and U of I has been pivotal for everything I've done since then. Of course it was particularly relevant in my first few years in student affairs. I referred back to that experience specifically a lot in interviews and then in grad school and beyond. Midway into my student affairs career, when I actually moved back to Chicago, I moved to Bloomington for grad school, and then I moved to Austin, Texas for four years to be a resident director. And then I came back to Chicago in 2016 to be Assistant Director of Residence Life at Loyola University, and part of my portfolio was running living-learning communities at Loyola. And then, I went from there to be Assistant Director of the Tutoring Center at Loyola, working with students on academic probation and stuff like that, and also, the academic support piece [unintelligible] tied to my work at...

And I was citing my work at Allen Hall throughout my entire career in student affairs until I, I'm now in software development, I made a whole career switch a several years ago. And it's still relevant to this day, honestly, because I'm, although I was a mid-career changer, in my 30s to software development, I'm just a few years in and I'm an engineering manager and everything. The reason for that is because I have all this leadership experience going all the way back to Allen Hall, that, of course, most software developers don't have, because that's not how most software developers [unintelligible]. So I found both immediately post-college and all the way through, all these experiences served me really well.

SB: And if you were, this seems like it might be one of the more redundant questions I've asked, but if you were going to do college over again, you'd still be part of Allen?

SS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely.

SB: And also, would you recommend, or, perhaps, have you recommended that new students at the University be part of it?

SS: Oh, absolutely, yeah. I've recommended some students go to Allen, and I would recommend it in general, right? It's not the right fit for every student, and nothing is the right fit for every student, there's a good amount of students who are there really just for the academics. Or where they really want to join a frat, or they're just not interested really in being part of community stuff like that, and that's totally fine. There's nothing wrong with that. Allen Hall's probably not the right place for them.

SB: Yep.

SS: But I think there's a pretty decent amount of the U of I population that would have benefitted from a place like Allen. We had a lot of hangers-on, people who lived in other residence halls who would just come to stuff, because one of their friends lived in Allen or whatever, and it was just fun. So yeah, I would recommend it to a lot of students.

SB: And because I forgot to ask earlier, you said that you went to and enjoyed some of the artists-in-residence but that there were, of course, some that just were presenting or working with things that you weren't quite hip to. Do you have, did you have a favorite artist-in-residence, either from your time that you worked with, or just that you went to and attended?

SS: No. [Laughs] I guess this is public, so I probably shouldn't say it. I don't know, I always found the guests-in-residence to be, again, a really cool part of the culture and something that I knew was pivotal to the ethos of Allen Hall and Unit One, but not often something I was personally that interested in it. I don't know why. As part of my PA role, part of my role was to help facilitate some of these guests-in-residence programs, and I would often be there for the guests-in-residence to help them out while they were here, stuff like that. But, as you can see by the fact that I can't even remember what any of them were, it just didn't make as much of a personal impact on me as it did, maybe, on others.

SB: Well, like you've said, there's different things of the program were good for different people, and it seems like yourself, as an administrator, was no exception.

SS: Yeah, that's true.

SB: And are there any favorite memories of your time at the University, not necessarily Unit One-related, that you recall, or things that stand out in your mind that you'd like to recount?

SS: Hmm. I'm trying to think, beyond, I mean, just random things. Going to concerts at, it's been too long, what's the name of the big...

SB: Krannert?

SS: ... yeah. Well, at Krannert also, but, no, the big building in the middle of the Quad.

SB: Foellinger, the Auditorium.

SS: Foellinger, yeah, going to concerts at Foellinger, or Krannert, also, both of those. It was always really fun. I got to see Sara Bareilles and Jason Mraz, you know, all these artists that were popular at the time. Just a lot of hanging out in Urbana, in the coffee shops there, and particularly, you're going to have to remind me on names of places, because it's been too long, I hope it's still there. There's a restaurant in Urbana that's kind of like a diner...

SB: Courier Café?

SS: Courier Café! Yeah, absolute favorite.

SB: Still there.

SS: Okay, great. Yeah, Courier Café, hanging out there, and then, I don't know, on-campus. Probably less memories and more vibes, right, hanging out on the Quad, biking through the Quad, going to classes in these big classrooms that were just super cool in these old buildings. I don't know, I just liked it. [Laughs] I just liked it.

SB: I'm much the same way. I wouldn't have stuck around for eight years if I hadn't.

SS: Yeah, yeah. There's just some things, some people find it to be too big or just not their thing, but I think a lot of people, at least alumni of U of I who enjoyed being there, feel very similarly.

SB: Yeah.

SS: It's just, there's just something about it. It's very, relaxing and exciting at the same time, I don't know.

SB: That's a great way to describe it. Also, as I work for the library, I'd be remiss in not asking this. Did you have a favorite study spot or a favorite library that you liked to work in?

SS: Hmm. Yeah. Which one was it? There was a library I went to a fair amount, it was one of the smaller ones, I don't remember if it was like a math or architecture library or something like that. It was some niche library, I liked that one, but I couldn't remember which one it...

SB: Communications, maybe?

SS: It could have been, I honestly don't remember. But I particularly appreciated the residence hall libraries because that's pretty unique, most places don't have that....

SB: Yes.

SS: ... and schools don't have that. I didn't study in there a ton, because the nice part about Allen Hall is there's just so many different community spaces and study spaces, so I honestly would usually study just in one of those study spaces. But having the library there, and I did study there sometimes, was just really awesome. Just so unique to have a library as part residence halls.

SB: 100%.

SS: Yeah.

SB: Well, Sam, I can't thank you enough for taking some time and sharing all this with me. It's really great to have your perspective. And I'll ask you one last question. Is there anything that I haven't asked, about Unit One or any subject about your time at the University that you'd like to mention?

SS: We had a wide-ranging conversation, I don't think so. Not that I can think of. This was really fun!

SB: Good! I'm glad. Really enjoyable for me too. Like I said, my time here, now I work for the Student Life Archives, this is the thing that we try to focus on the most.

SS: Yeah. Awesome.

SB: I'll also just tell you that, what we're working on with this project, I think I told you I've done four others, and I've got feelers out to a few more people. We have an oral history portal, which I can send you a link to in an email, but that platform is getting a little long in the tooth. So we're currently working on trying to deploy a new hub for oral histories. And so these would probably be the first new collection to go up on that.

SS: Cool.

SB: I'm working on transcribing them, and of course, I'll be in touch with you about that.

SS: Yeah, great. That's fantastic!

SB: Great! Sam, I'll let you go now, but thank you again.

SS: Thank you so much. Have a great day.

SB: Bye.

END