

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives

Interviewee: Victor Fein

Interviewer: Alicia Hopkins

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ALICIA HOPKINS: Today is March 23, 2018, and I'm Alicia Hopkins with the University of Illinois archives. I'm here today at the Urbana Free Library with Victor Fein to talk with him about his experiences as a student at the University of Illinois in the 1960s. First of all, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My first question for you is, what years were you a student at the University of Illinois?

VICTOR FEIN: I started February of 1965 and finished in February of 1970.

AH: Mhm. And how did you decide to attend the University?

VF: Well I had just gotten out of the army about ten months before I came to the U of I. My brother was a teacher here, and I was offered the GI Bill for being in the army. And I worked at a place on the south side of Chicago for a period of time once I got out of the army, and then my brother and my father were encouraging me to start school. And that's how I decided to come down here to start college.

AH: What departments were you active in?

VF: I started out in physical education because I was an athlete, played a lot of baseball, and then transferred to health education, then transferred to radio and television, then I took up some acting.

AH: Okay.

VF: And theater, it's now the depot, back then it was called [?] now it's called the Station theater, back then it was the depot.

AH: Oh, okay.

VF: And then I got in communications, wound up in LAS. [AH laughs.] I had no idea what I wanted to be. I kept sticking my toe in the water, finding out [?]

AH: That's how you gotta find out sometimes. Where did you live when you were a student?

VF: Various places close to campus, but the most memorable one was in a commune with fourteen other people.

AH: Was that over on Lincoln?

VF: Yeah, Lincoln near Green. And that was really, it was in 1968, very active, alive time on campus.

AH: Yes. So in the late sixties, were you involved with any of the protests or anything that was going on on campus or were you involved sort of in a culture separate from that?

VF: No I wasn't involved in demonstrations as well.

AH: Yeah but do you have any that were notable that you, looking back, remember, any experiences with that?

VF: I remember one where we were, marching down Green going west on Green, and then turned south on Fourth Street, and about a block down, not even a block, there's a big red brick building that was occupied at the time by AT&T Corporation, and there were many big windows facing Fourth Street. And a number of demonstrators went over and grabbed rocks and threw rocks at the windows. And my – I got involved in that too, and I was – peace and love was my gig, and I got caught up in the vibe of that demonstration. It was after work when I was reflecting on it, that I really realized about the power of group impression, because I got sucked into that and felt bad about it afterwards, not the demonstration but the throwing of the rocks. In the meantime, there's no more windows on that building. It's all bricked in.

AH: Yeah, yeah. Were you involved in any student organizations on campus, like Students for a Democratic Society, the SDS or anything like that?

VF: No, I was the vice president of student senate in '69. So really my, that was my main involvement at the time.

AH: Yeah, what lead you to run for student senate?

VF: My friend was, my friend and I, he ran for president and I was vice president, we wanted to change the, we hoped to change the structure of that organization and get more involved because in time prior to that, I didn't see that group was doing, effecting, having much of an effect on campus, and we figured that we'd give it access to money to start programs and it just so happened that that was the year of 500 program. And we were able to actually in time befriend some of the men, men and women from that, and influence them by offering them money and ways for them to start programs.

AH: Were you involved – were you heavily involved with Project 500? There were a lot of demonstrations and activism related to that, especially after the students arrived on campus.

VF: Yes I was, and so was my wife. And as I mentioned, we befriended a number of people, most of them are local from the north end. And over time we became very good friends, and they used to come to our house off campus. There were actual gang wars going on in the north end at the time, in some evenings, some of these guys would come to our house with their guns, and my wife was, well now she's four foot eleven, she was five one at the time, she would say "Okay you can come but you have to put your guns in the closet," and they listened to her.

AH [Laughing] Small but mighty. Do you feel like when you were vice president of the student senate, do you feel like you guys were able to make any of the changes you hoped to, did you see any of it enacted, was positive of your goals?

VF: Yes, but it's been so many years now I don't recall the specifics of it. But we did, certainly have influence and make changes, positive.

AH: Were you involved with the Red Herring?

VF: I remember meeting my wife there. [AH laughs.] And there was a place where, on occasion, after demonstrations, there would be meetings there for various organizations that I wound up in.

AH: How did you meet your wife?

VF: Well it was after a demonstration, and many people wound up at the Red Herring, and she was there, and my brother who was – you know from the interview, one of the heads of Students for a Democratic Society, free speech movement, and she knew of him and she had approached him, it was quite crowded downstairs but she had approached him to ask him some questions, and he was very busy, and he said to her, "I can't talk to you right now but I will in a little bit, but this is my brother," and he introduced us, and we wound up spending that whole evening together, and getting to know each other. That was fifty years ago.

AH: Fifty years is a long time, that's really great to be together for fifty years.

VF: Yes, it is.

AH: Especially from a chance meeting like that. And so colleges across the country were rather tumultuous at the time, after the shooting at Kent State and also at Jackson State College, do you feel like that had any impact on students on U of I's campus?

VF: Yes, it did. It just made us keenly aware that things can definitely get out of hand and that the national guard and the police cannot be trusted to value the lives of the students, that the

emotional things that happen can trigger, bore, bore itself into reality, that killings could happen from the demonstrations, so that put a very heavy aura around the whole thing and it helped to turn the movement negative, because it was a peace, a peace movement was the beginning and over time it started to get more and more violent and destructive. And personally, my belief is even to this day, had it remained peaceful and not gone in the direction of the violence, that it would have been more effective and lasted longer.

AH: Yeah, and the shootings at Kent State were not long after the U.S. went into Cambodia [VF: Right.], which seemed to be a moment in which where there was a shift in demonstrating and protesting, if, me looking at it from here instead of being there.

VF: Yes, yes, absolutely true.

AH: So one of the questions that I talked to your brother Vern about was that a lot of times there are like commonly cited moments as to when culture really shifted in the sixties, some of them like the assassination of JFK or Robert Kennedy. I had a professor who said that for her it was when Bob Dylan went electric at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. Do you think that there was a defining moment for you?

VF: When?

AH: Just in terms of your social and political, perhaps awareness or involvement in the sixties, was there anything that made you say, this is something that I really believe in and would like to get involved with in demonstrations or anything like that?

VF: Well I wasn't raised to be a racist. It was when I got back from Okinawa, I was gone for a year and a half in the army, and then I was stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina in late 1963 and arrived there about three weeks before President Kennedy was killed. And as you said, just drew a blank.

AH: In so, the two others that I mentioned specifically were Bobby Kennedy being shot in 1968 and then when Dylan went electric at the Newport Folk Festival.

VF: No, it was certainly Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy for sure. There was –

AH: And – go ahead, go ahead.

VF: Violence behind that too, and that's what – oh and there was a poignant moment when I was visiting my grandmother. I was in college here but I was out for the summer, I was visiting my grandmother, and I was looking at the Chicago Tribune and three or four pages into it there was this one column, about four paragraphs. It talked about hippies in Haight-Ashbury, California, and that they were about peace and love, and God. I read that article and I put the paper down and I actually got emotional, like these people are who I am, and it was just a really

impressionable moment, and it really was the beginning of my consciousness about working deliberately to bring peace.

AH: And did you say about what year that was, do you remember?

VF: It was, I would say probably 1967.

AH: '67.

VF: Excuse me, my voice.

AH: No, you're fine, you're fine. No worries. And did you ever travel – I know there were other campuses particularly in Carbondale as far as Illinois is concerned that were politically active Did you travel to any other campuses around the country or to the Haight-Ashbury at any time in the sixties?

VF: Yes I did. There was a very influential person from California, his name was Michael Roseman, who was, he travelled the country speaking about education reform, and he went back and forth across the country and Universities would hire him to come and speak, and when he would come here he stayed at Allen Hall, they hired him to come and talk. And we got to know him when we were in the commune, and whenever he'd be crossing the country [?] he would come stay with us. We got to be very good friends, so myself and other people from the commune would go to California to his commune, called the Dragon's Eye. And so we saw what was going on in, around Berkely campus, [?], Haight-Ashbury, it was influential. There were a couple times when he was coming across, he would stop here and he asked me to go with him to Ann Arbor, it was one moment, he talked about educational reform. I talked as part of it, encouraging students to take control of their environment, 'cause I was conscious about people's environments [?]. And [?] decorating that he noticed, and he encouraged me to talk to the students about doing things with their room, making decisions that it's their room, they have the power to not just leave it as it was structured.

AH: Yeah, four white walls.

VF: Yeah, and use it as an example of, you know you can think for yourself and take action. So anyway, I had some experiences with him at a few campuses.

AH: Did you – were you involved with the strike in April, May of 1970 with the classes happening on the quad and outside of the classroom and using that time to educate other students about what was going on in the world, did you teach in any of that?

VF: No I didn't. I was, in 1970 this is when I was beginning to remodel a building that where Earthworks was to put in my restaurant.

AH: Okay. So then turning toward Earthworks in that time, it's all borne out of this movement, can you talk about what inspired you to start those companies?

VF: Well originally it was myself and another man, Bill [?], and we're both artists. I was doing simple woodwork, he was doing leatherwork, you know how those things go. And Bill found out that this small part of a large building off campus was open to be rented. And we decided to rent it, and then we did a little remodeling in it and got four other artists to come in on it and started a little co-op of artists to start this space. And we put in two couches [?] and encouraged hippies or whoever to come by to talk about what was going on. And then some months after that, the man that had the lease over us and the building, he had quite a large leather manufacture business in the building, and he decided he wanted to move his operation to Homer, Illinois, and he wanted to know if we wanted to take the lease and I did, I took it, and took a part of it, a pretty good part of it, and started to remodel it to make a restaurant. My father was in the restaurant and bar business so I grew up in it, and he was always an entrepreneur. And it just kinda had that in me. So I remodeled the space, it took me quite a while because my father had died suddenly, at 51, and I was psychologically pretty, pretty effected. So, there were days where I didn't, couldn't get motivated to [?]

AH: Yeah, that makes it a lot harder.

VF: Yeah.

AH: Yeah.

VF: But eventually, ten months later, I opened the restaurant, and it's at about seventy people. And, got all the kitchen equipment from, there's still a Kam's on campus, there was a Kam's, I don't know if it was different owners or not, but they closed it down, and our kitchen was all stainless steel, but it was all greasy from many years, greasy and cockroaches and, you know, but it was stainless steel. So I got it, I bought the whole everything they had, steam tables everything for five hundred dollars, and I took it over to the garage that was just attached to the building where the restaurant was. Rented a steam, steamer, and steamed all the equipment, and it was like brand new, 'cause it was stainless steel. I opened the restaurant for 2,700 dollars.

AH: Wow, that's...

VF: Astounding.

AH: Yes, yeah.

VF: Flashing back on it.

AH: What – you mentioned at first that – so you were doing woodworking and then Bill was doing leatherworking, but there were some other artists, what other sorts of art was happening there?

VF: There was candle making, there was paintings. Another guy joined Bill, a leather, his leather was, his leather sandals were very popular at the time, and vests and headbands. Trying to think of what other art was in there. I don't recall at the moment, but there were six of us.

AH: Was it something, did you sell out of the space, or, yeah?

VF: Yeah we sold.

AH: Yeah. And what – so, aside, you said there was the garage and the restaurant and also the smaller shop, what other businesses got involved with the co-op?

VF: Okay, over time the space got to the remaining space, which included the full basement, which is quite large, and this triple car garage, it was attached to the outside. There was a tropical fish store that sold pet supplies, there was a secondhand store, there was custom clothing store, electronic repair store. What else. Well there was our foods and eventually Earthworks in general. And that 's all I'm remembering.

AH: And was the food conspiracy linked in with all of this or did the food conspiracy exist separately?

VF: That was separate.

AH: Separate, okay. And were you involved with it at all?

VF: No.

AH: Okay. Did you – I don't remember the exact years but I know, early seventies, there was a lot of protesting surrounding grapes, were you involved with that at all, could you talk about any of that?

VF: Well that was [coughing] excuse me, by that time, my efforts had moved back to the restaurant, and upfront there, there are foods in Earthworks that became the general store, grocery store, that sold you know fresh produce. They would drive to Chicago early in the morning, I mean like two in the morning. We made a rent-a-truck and be there when the markets opened. And buy, fill the truck with produce. And several other businesses went in on that as we got a whole truckload, so. Anyway, I wasn't, they were, the people who were dealing with the food up in the front, they were conscious of that and involved in it. I hadn't, I don't think there was, at that time I don't think the restaurant was quite open, I was working on it.

AH: And you said it took about ten months to set the restaurant up?

VF: Yes.

AH: Yes. I don't think we've said yet that the restaurant was called Metamorphosis, was that – where did that name come from?

VF: Well it was a time of change [laughing].

AH: What was the process like during those ten months of setting the restaurant up and getting prepared to open?

VF: Well as I mentioned I was psychologically affected by my dad's sudden death, so I was kind of depressed, and [?], I had a dear friend that would come over every day, and say "Come on Vic, let's do this," and he, he wasn't skilled with his hands at all, but he would come over and just hang out with me and encourage me. So there were days where I just couldn't get up for it, but it was a process and as time went by I got better and was more consistent, but I did pretty much everything.

AH: Yeah. Did you do, like, all of the meal, the menu planning and cooking and that kind of stuff once the restaurant actually opened?

VF: No, my wife was more involved in that, quite a bit involved, I was but peripheral compared to her, but I did the physical space, wallpaper, walls, sanded all the floors and varnished them. We got all of our tables and chairs from garage sales. You know, structure, made the structure for the bathrooms, I had to have a plumber come in and an electrician, 'cause I couldn't do it myself. But I did everything else. There was resistance from the inspectors, they just couldn't see hippies opening up, 'cause we had a, they had this image of us being dirty and you know, not cleanliness so personally I wasn't that way, some hippies were at some point, but it was a generalization that they shouldn't have applied to us but they were particularly hard on us, on me. But eventually, I went along with whatever they proposed, and got it open.

AH: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about what the physical space looked like? You had mentioned earlier that you talked to a lot of students across the country about like decorating their own dorm rooms, how did that go into how you decorated the restaurant?

VF: Well, there were two rooms, and I had created two different types of environment. One was with furniture being purchased at garage sales, the other ones we made, it was more, that one was more contemporary, more simple, clean lines. And the other room had colorful wallpaper and everything was wood, a variety of colors of wood, had great big windows running down all one long wall. I put in a very large fish tank full of tropical fish. There was more warm and friendly. The other room was also friendly but more as I said simple. I wanted to appeal to a variety of tastes.

AH: Right, yeah. How long were you open?

VF: Four years.

AH: Four years?

VF: Yeah. I had borrowed the money. I borrowed the \$2,700 to open it from the father of a hippie girl who got involved in the restaurant and the creation of the restaurant. I, once a month I would pay him a hundred dollars once we opened. And the way it would work, I was opened for six months and turned it into a co-op collective whereby anybody that worked there had weekly meetings and an equal vote on decisions to myself and my wife. So we kept track of the hours that each individual worked and then the money that came in for the week, we took out the hundred dollars for the payment, took out the money we paid for our food, the food, and then split up the remaining money depending on how many hours they worked. And it generally came out to be about 95 cents to a dollar an hour, which back in the seventies, the early seventies, was not much money but, a lot of those people who worked there, most of them lived in communes so between that and the money they made, and it was set up that they could eat one meal at the restaurant for free, but reality was many of them ate more than one. So anyway, it was all for survival to quite a few people.

AH: How many did you feed on average in a day?

VF: Oh boy.

AH: If you know [laughing].

VF: I can't remember.

AH: Yeah, so from my research and looking at The Walrus and other newspapers, there was often like live music and things going on in the restaurant, is that correct?

VF: Yes.

AH: Yeah, what kind of music and experiences did that offer through the restaurant?

VF: Well it was more, there were, well generally it wasn't groups.

AH: Going back you said that you had a friend that you went into the army with who then came to the U of I after you were done in the army and then we were talking about what happened after you finished with Metamorphosis and Earthworks.

VF: Oh he and three other men rented a small space west of Champaign. And they pitched in woodwork tools and started a little woodshop. They didn't do it to, as a business, they did it just to have it, to be artistic and make wooden things. Well, as you know from our earlier interview that I had been into woodwork before I started the restaurant, and then remodel the restaurant, and I had first gotten involved in summers when I was in college, I would go to the south side of Chicago and work construction. So anyway, when I was thinking about getting out of the restaurant, but my son was born and I was thinking of a different career, I started going to this woodshop that my friends had and learning more about cabinet making. So then eventually when I wanted to get out, I had some skills, not a lot but some. And the church I was going to, I befriended a guy who was a carpenter. So he had a lot of skills in carpentry, I had skills in cabinet making and other woodwork, so we joined up and rented a building north of Urbana and started in on a cabinet shop.

AH: Yeah, so have you been in the area pretty well since then?

VF: I had that same residence for 41 years. I just recently pretty much retired. I had a crew, they're all gone now, once they got jobs, [?] and now I still have the space and occasionally we do a project [?].

AH: How would you say campus has changed since you were a student?

VF: You know, I'm not very much involved with campus at this point.

AH: Has the community – how has the community changed then, if it's changed?

VF: Well in Urbana, the part of Urbana that I live in, and Urbana in general, it's pretty liberal. And many of, I feel very blessed that many of the ideas, the philosophy that we had and were promoting in the sixties, the love and peace and being against racism, womanizing and awareness of women's rights and, war and stuff, the food that we eat and the poisons that are put into them, awareness of that of anti-war, anti-violence, all those are quite prevalent in Champaign-Urbana, particularly in Urbana. So I'm blessed to live in a community where that's lived and strived for.

AH: Yeah. How would you say that your experience in the late sixties and early seventies has impacted the rest of your life, if it has impacted it?

VF: Oh yeah. I just spoke of those values that I learned as I grew through that time. You know, prior to going into the army, I went in right out of high school in 1961, my family were republicans, they were businesspeople, and pretty thoroughly conservative. They weren't racists, but, but anyway, I went in the army, I got out of the army, then as I said, ten months later I was in the University, and then all this, all my consciousness and awareness of many different things became more prevalent through being involved more in intelligent, exposed, people from around the world. So my awareness grew, and over time my values grew, and then as I spoke of a bit

ago, those values became more and more a part of me, and I wanted to promote them and that's what led me into that whole time during the sixties and seventies and through today, where I'm very active in a church I've been to for 41 years, very liberal, community-minded church that reaches out to people in need, very aware of reaching out.

AH: And is that here in town?

VF: Yes.

AH: Are there any other topics or questions that I didn't ask you about or anything else you wanna add?

VF: Well I was just saying that it's a pleasure to – my son is now 46 years old. And I mentioned, I did mention that the year 1972 was when he was born, when I was in the middle of Metamorphosis. And we raised him, you know, as a hippie kid, and his name was Forest. And when he was in grade school, he would come home sometimes in tears because kids were kidding upon his name, and he would say, "I don't like my name, I don't like my name, I wanna be a John or a Bob or a Bill like everybody, like other people." And you know, they made him ashamed of his name, and ashamed of being a child of hippie parents. But over time, his values, he understood, and he became very proud of the values that we gave him. And then he went to school and graduated from the U of I, and then he became within a short time after graduating the creative director of an internet advertisement company in Chicago, which was cutting-edge at the time, early nineties. He did that for three years and it made him physically sick. They were flying him all over, mid-twenties, they were flying him all around the country, put him in front of boardrooms like [?], major corporations, and he realized that wasn't him, in his soul. So he quit and wound up going to a place called [?] institute in California. Extremely liberal, offering classes from teachers all around the world, top-notch teachers on all types of subjects. And he went out there just to rest and recuperate, decide what to do next. And he wound up taking a course in massage therapy. Long story short, he was there for almost two years. Had the courage, took a lot of gusto and therapy to offer there, and many other types of classes, and then decided he wanted to be a therapist. So he left there and went to [Sonoma?] State and got his master's in therapy. And, and in the meantime became a massage therapist to help pay for school. And he worked at the Four Seasons, and he really got tips.

AH: Oh that's really cool! Yeah.

VF: So then he was starting to get into therapy and he got sidetracked into, started doing yoga and meditation and got more and more into it, now it's led to, he's become a really known name in that area, arena, and he focused mainly on homeless teenagers, and he does hundreds of kids with teaching them mindfulness, yoga meditation, and he uses his psychology background in his classes and now he's hired three other teachers and expanded his programs. So he's reaching out to needy kids.

AH: Yeah, yeah that's great. That leaves a great legacy to know that you were involved with that, that's really great. Alright, well thank you so much for meeting with me, is there anything else that you wanna add before we're done?

VF: I don't think so. I'm just pleased that I was around in those special years, and I have been ingrained in those values in my life, and still promote them in any way I can.

AH: Yeah, definitely makes a difference.