

Werner Tillinger '86
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
February 22, 2012

DONIN: Today is Wednesday, February 22, 2012. My name is Mary Donin. We are here in Webster Hall, Rauner Library, for the first interview of the Dartmouth Community Oral History Project and our narrator today is Werner Tillinger, Dartmouth Class of 1986.

Okay, Werner, I think we'd like to start out by putting your presence at Dartmouth in some sort of context by finding out a little bit about your childhood: where you grew up, what your family life was like, and how it is that you—how you ended up coming to Dartmouth.

TILLINGER: Okay. Good morning. I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. I am the middle son—or middle child—of my mom and dad, who emigrated here from Europe after World War II. My family is Danube Swabians, which is an ethnic German group that lived in the Balkans, in the Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary area until 1944 when they fled into refugee camps in Austria. And so I'm first-generation American. Grew up in St. Louis, as I said.

Early in my childhood, at ages two to four, we moved back to Austria and Germany for a while. My father was working over there, and my youngest brother was born in Salzburg. So I was born in St. Louis and lived there until I came to Dartmouth. I was a pretty bright child and excelled academically. I was not into sports or the arts, though. So when I got to Dartmouth, I did notice that difference: that I was not an athletic guy and a lot of the people here were.

I came here to Dartmouth in 1982. And it's funny. My parents—my father—helped found the St. Louis Community College system in St. Louis. And there was just this expectation or this assumption on my dad's part that I would go two years to community college and then finish two years at a state school.

I wanted to do something different. I wanted to—I was just attracted to something bigger. And to be honest, I did searches for Ivy League, found out what the schools were. Did some research and then my father and I visited several campuses. And I fell in love with Dartmouth when I came to visit, and I applied here early decision, and I got in early decision. And that's how I got to Dartmouth.

DONIN: What made you fall in love with it when you were here?

TILLINGER: The weekend that—The time that my dad and I came to visit happened to be the week of Homecoming. And the leaves were still changing a little bit. Fall was in the air already; it was very crisp, and they had this big bonfire outside. And everybody—It just seemed like such a happy, engaged community. And I just told my dad, as we sitting in our room at the Hanover Inn, I said, “I think this is where I really want to go.” It helped that it had its own ski area. Being from St. Louis and having gotten into skiing recreationally, I was really drawn to the fact it had its own ski area.

DONIN: So what was your family’s reaction to the fact that you were going so far away?

TILLINGER: I don’t recall there being much stress around me being so far away. The stress, of course, was, how are we going to pay for this, having not saved anything for me to come here? And I am very grateful that my parents did quite a bit of penny-pinching while I was here that enabled me to be here. I’m very grateful for that.

There were other reactions that surprised me. My high school counselor, when I went in to tell him that I was applying at Dartmouth and Harvard and a few other schools, he said, “Well...” He said, “I don’t think you should waste your time. You’ll never get in. And even if you do, you won’t be able to pay for it. And you should just take the four-year scholarship that Mizzou, University of Missouri, is offering you and go with that.” And I said, “Well, I don’t want to do that. And I’m going to apply anyway.” And I did get in and we did figure it out. So that might have been the first memory that I have of doing what felt right inside for me rather than what other people were telling me to do.

DONIN: Significant.

TILLINGER: As we go on, it’ll turn out to be very significant.

DONIN: Did you have any pals in high school who were doing the same, going off, leaving St. Louis, going off to Ivy League colleges?

TILLINGER: Certainly not Ivy League and certainly not this far away. Perhaps there were—A lot of people went to Mizzou, University of Missouri at Columbia. Some probably went to Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma,

Arkansas. As far as I can recall—and I don't remember where this memory comes from—I was the first person in about 30 years to go to an Ivy League school from my school district.

DONIN: That's some notoriety... Either good or bad; I don't know. [Laughs]

TILLINGER: There was a little bit of—it was a mixed feeling for me. I was very happy to be going to Dartmouth. But I have to admit I was a little bit of a snobby little guy. I was teased and bullied a lot in high school and in grade school. And although I don't believe in the idea of revenge now, there was this—When they announced my name at graduation and under scholarships was Werner Tillinger, Dartmouth College, Dartmouth scholarship, there was a certain satisfaction there [laughs] I must say. But that's all in the past, and those feelings were very young and very juvenile.

DONIN: But understandable. So you arrive on the campus at Dartmouth. Can you talk about what it was like arriving here?

TILLINGER: I was scared to death. My mom and dad drove up with me. And when we unpacked— First of all, I had asked for a single room in a coed dorm. And I was assigned into a triple in an all-male dorm. And in hindsight, what was driving the anxiety there was that I was a gay guy that had not come out of the closet yet. But I knew that the idea of living in an all-male dorm in a triple was—it was terrifying to me. And I was the first student of the three of us to arrive. It was me and a Jew from Long Island and a WASP from Westport, Connecticut. And I just thought, oh, gosh, what is this going to be like? So I was terrified.

I went on the freshman trips. I was terrified again because I was not an athlete, I was not outdoorsy, and I didn't know if I'd make it through the trip. But I did.

DONIN: Was this up Moosilauke, for that kind of thing?

TILLINGER: Yes.

DONIN: Hiking up Moosilauke?

TILLINGER: It was hiking through the mountains a bit and then ending at Moosilauke. I think it was three nights out in the wilderness, which was great fun. Very bonding. It's something that I really encourage the College keep doing. It's really a great bonding experience. And

immediately upon getting here and engaging in the process, I started discovering all these different types of people that I'd never encountered before.

DONIN: Such as?

TILLINGER: Well, my Jewish roommate from Long Island. In my high school we had 2500 students. We had one Jew. And we had one student who was half white, half black.

DONIN: Wow.

TILLINGER: So diversity certainly was brought to the fore, diversity of experiences. My roommate from Westport was from a very wealthy background and so that opened my eyes to another way of life. And my world immediately broadened exponentially. And it was very exciting. It was very exciting.

DONIN: You said you were terrified when you learned you were in an all-male dorm with two other people. What was terrifying—Can you talk about the terror? What was it about?

TILLINGER: Well, certainly the memory of having been bullied in grade school and into high school and teased and being called things like “faggot” and “sissy,” things like that.

DONIN: Oh, so you were—I don't even know how you say it. You were identified as a gay child?

TILLINGER: I don't know if I was identified as a gay child. I was different. My home language was different from the norm because we spoke German at home. I incorporated a lot of our traditions into my life growing up. You know, other kids brought baloney sandwiches to school, and I brought bratwurst and sauerkraut. So I was teased for being different. And it's just that that F-word, the faggot-word, was used to generalize, I think, people that were different and boys that were sensitive. I was a very sensitive boy. I often found my best friends in class to be the teachers. I bonded very much with my female instructors.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

TILLINGER: And I always preferred to be around adults rather than my peer group. I was a little too old for my age, I think.

DONIN: And when did you discover or acknowledge that you were gay?

TILLINGER: I first recall putting into that context of understanding of being gay, being attracted to the same sex, in junior high, seventh or eighth grade. And when we were in the locker room changing for gym, I noticed the other boys. And I knew that there was an attraction there that I didn't feel for girls, and I was very ashamed of that. And I recall up until I got to Dartmouth and probably into my first year here, every time I had a birthday, I would think, okay, now I'm going to be 16, and it's going to go away. I'm going to be 17, and it's going to go away. So that was pulling at me quite a bit.

DONIN: Did you have a group of your close family and friends who knew you were gay, who supported you?

TILLINGER: Well, I came out at Dartmouth. Actually I went to Kenya on a foreign study program and traveled throughout Europe after that. And I think I went to every gay bar in every city [laughs] that I went through, really exploring.

But after that trip, I came home, and I had not told my parents yet. I know that they knew by the... When I got off the plane, I had my hair bleached in London, I had very fashionable clothes from Milan on, Fiorucci and— But I was very depressed.

After a few weeks, my dad said, "Okay, do you want to go for a walk?" And I said, "Sure." He said, "Well..." And my parents were basically from peasant stock in the Balkans. So very conservative ideals of what gender roles are and so forth. My dad said, "You seem very troubled." He said, "I'm guessing that either you've gotten into some fringe political group or you're dealing with religious questions or you're questioning your sexuality." And I said, "Well, it's not number one or two."

And my dad said that they loved us, that he and Mom loved me anyway, and that they would always support me. And that was amazing, really, coming from where it did. My dad made homophobic comments when I was growing up. And he turned around 180 degrees that moment.

And my dad had an easier time than my mom accepting it, which is I think not the norm. I think it's usually the other way around. So that lifted a big load off my shoulders.

DONIN: And did it make it easier being here at Dartmouth, once you'd come out to your parents?

TILLINGER: It did because I always felt there was that safety place that I could go to. At Dartmouth I always associated as the outsider of the group that I was aligned with. I think it was a way of me getting attention or being noticed. I was the most conservative member of the gay students that I would hang around. I don't know if I actually ever joined the Gay Students Association officially.

When I was here at Dartmouth, there was an incident I recall where the *Dartmouth Review* published the names of the members of the Gay Students Association. And so that terrified me, and I did not want my name on a list. So that kept me from joining. But I did find people that would accept me, but then I always chose to sort of be the odd one out. I can think of a number of instances like that.

DONIN: Who were your— If you had to identify who your social group was when you first got here, who became your, you know, your crew of friends?

TILLINGER: My crew of friends was mostly women.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

TILLINGER: I don't know that I had many gay male friends here. I dated a few guys here. But they were women that I just felt comfortable around, that had some sort of nurturing quality to them. And my best friend here during my college years was an African-American woman from Lynchburg, Virginia.

And I grew up in a very segregated St. Louis. And as I said, we really had no Blacks in our high school. And I grew up in an area of St. Louis where if you saw an African-American walking down the street, you would call the police. It was very, very segregated.

But I'd always had an affinity or attraction to those that are oppressed because I think I felt oppressed. So there was the commonality of experience there or emotional experience. So this woman and I hit it off famously.

Just fast forward for a bit: When she got married in Lynchburg, Virginia, many years later, I was in the wedding party. And it was an

African-American Baptist wedding in Lynchburg. I was the only white person at the wedding. I was one of the ushers. And when the guests arrived, they had to look twice to make sure they were coming into the right wedding. [Laughter] It was really great.

DONIN: So that was a lasting friendship obviously.

TILLINGER: Yes. We're still friends.

DONIN: That's wonderful. But were you able to find a community, so to speak here, with whom you felt comfortable and could acknowledge your being gay?

TILLINGER: Not really. I did hang around other gay students. But most of them even drifted away towards the end of my stay here because I didn't align myself 100 percent with the views of those that I hung around. And I guess in college years it's really important to feel that one belongs, one is accepted, that one is approved of. And as I said, I have this sort of contrariness about my approach to people where I wanted to be the one that was different and stood out.

So I think I was a little too conservative for some of the other gay students here. And, no, I didn't really have a group that I identified with. The term GDI, for God Damned Independent, which is used for people that do not join fraternities and sororities, really resonated with me. I was very proudly GDI, but lonely.

DONIN: Yes. So you didn't see an opportunity.... I mean, despite the fact that you rejected the Greek system of having community, you weren't able to identify another community that you felt comfortable with because it was your choice to not join.

TILLINGER: It was my choice. But what I will say is that one thing I'm grateful for is that for whatever reason, I have been able to float in and out of many different types of groups very easily. And I adapt myself very easily to situations that I find myself in, which has provided a richness of experience for me, experiencing and appreciating the many different diversities of experience and belief systems that people have, which has, I think, given me a very grounded and balanced approach to this thing we call life.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. And is it fair to say that you found— You did find diversity here at Dartmouth?

TILLINGER: Diversity, I think, is relative to one's place of origin. Coming from an all-white, Anglo-Saxon background, very middle class. Where I grew up was, you know, the "Leave It to Beaver" of the seventies and eighties. Very typical—stereotypical actually. Wonder Bread. And so anything different—I mean, it didn't take much to be diverse from the experience that I'd had.

So I was enthralled by the differences in people's backgrounds and wanted to find out as much as I could about many different types of people. I studied in Kenya while I was here, which was— It blew my head open. It was amazing. That is *the* most wonderful memory that I have of Dartmouth.

DONIN: And this was a term away?

TILLINGER: Mm-hmm.

DONIN: Yes.

TILLINGER: Environmental studies in Kenya.

DONIN: Oh, yes. Did you bond with the other students that went on the trip?

TILLINGER: Very much so, very much so. In fact I would say that probably three quarters of the alumni that I am in contact with were on that Kenya trip with me.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

TILLINGER: Because it was a magical experience. It was 1985, and here we were, a bunch of 20-year-old brats in Kenya, hiking through the Samburu country and, you know, hiking with lions a hundred yards away. It was just amazing. I mean how can you not bond in a special experience like that? Because you can't really talk and relate to other people outside of that experience about what that was like. So there was an immediate bonding. Lots of special memories.

DONIN: And were you out to that group?

TILLINGER: You know, I think so, selectively. You know, I told a few people, but probably everybody knew by the time the rumors got around, and it was okay.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

TILLINGER: I was living with a family in Nairobi with one of the other students who was a straight guy, a year older than I was, and it didn't seem to bother him at all. So, yes, I was out. And I don't remember how much I talked about it. I think I probably talked about it a lot in order to normalize it for myself.

DONIN: It's part of the process.

TILLINGER: It is part of the process.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

TILLINGER: And I did not feel resistance. If there was any from other students, they were being polite and kept their views to themselves.

DONIN: Well, that was my next question. During your time here, did you— Was there homophobia that was directed at you?

TILLINGER: You know, that's a hard question to answer. I saw homophobia quite a lot here. I don't know if I can say it was ever directed at me. But because of the way I viewed myself and judged myself, there was a lot of internal homophobia going on inside of me. So I may have personalized things that were directed at other people. It felt like they were being directed at me. Maybe they weren't. So I was probably my biggest judge at the time.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. So did you feel that your social group here that supported you, your community, did that sort of evolve over time? I mean, if you think about who was your group of friends and support system, when you were a first year versus when you graduated. Did you migrate to a different sort of group? Or did it stay the same?

TILLINGER: It changed. I wasn't here as much as some students. I think I was only on campus eight terms, out of the number that we were required to be here. I don't remember what that was. It was either eight out of 11 or 11 out of 15. Honestly, I chose to be off campus as much as possible as a way of earning my credits because of the oppression that I felt on campus.

DONIN: From whom?

- TILLINGER: From the campus culture, I think. The tradition here that I felt at the time, that I perceived as being very homophobic and not friendly to those that were placed outside of the very male-dominant traditional culture, frat-related.... Look at *Animal House*, the movie, and that's how I perceived what it was to be Dartmouth, with a very intellectual side to it.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- TILLINGER: And I didn't feel like I belonged.
- DONIN: So it was easier to be off campus.
- TILLINGER: Much easier to be. It was a relief to be off campus.
- DONIN: Hmm.
- TILLINGER: And even being off campus with other Dartmouth students was great. Being off campus liberated people from having to fit into a paradigm.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- TILLINGER: And my most memorable learning and bonding experiences with fellow Dartmouth students happened off campus in environments that were not set in Hanover.
- DONIN: Who did you perceive was sort of setting this tone? Was it your peers, the students here? Did it trickle down from Parkhurst, you know, the president and the administrators and the deans that you interacted with, the faculty?
- TILLINGER: I do recall thinking that the president—the administration—probably was not very sympathetic to differences. I seem to recall that it was a very conservative administration. And the—You know, Dartmouth only went coed, I think, what was it?
- DONIN: 'Seventy-two.
- TILLINGER: 'Seventy-two it was, okay. So the male dominance was still fairly well entrenched.
- DONIN: Well, the women didn't reach parity I don't think until the mid-nineties.

TILLINGER: And what I recall is this sense that, okay, we'll let some token women in and people that are different. We have to show geographical spread. But really, they're going to sort of be like little pieces of frosting around this big cake that really is just the Dartmouth it always was.

For example, when it came time for recruiting in the spring, because I wasn't in the Greek system, because I didn't bond with other Dartmouth students, which was a lot of my own doing, I didn't feel like I really had a network to go to, to start this whole process. And where other kids or students here were landing positions on Wall Street and in very exciting areas, I didn't really even know where to start. I felt kind of left out of that process because I didn't have those connections.

I always thought that those types of opportunities would be granted to people based on their abilities and didn't really understand the importance of networking.

DONIN: But you had high abilities. You said you were an excellent student.

TILLINGER: I was an excellent student in high school. Remember, I went to a very average, if even mediocre, public school system in St. Louis, in the suburbs. I had a 3.8 out of 4.0 coming here, which I think now is even kind of low coming here. [Laughs] But after my freshman year at Dartmouth, I had a 2.8.

DONIN: Oooh!

TILLINGER: Yes. [Laughs] My pre-med dreams only lasted about a year.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

TILLINGER: I thought I was an excellent writer. My first paper here, I got a C. It was quite a humbling experience, that's for sure.

DONIN: Was that just a wakeup call?

TILLINGER: It was a wakeup call. You know, I was pre-med because I was doing what I thought people expected me to do. It was the golden boy when I was growing up. And my parents were immigrants, and I was sort of this burgeoning birth of the American Dream. I mean, my parents were immensely proud that I was going to an Ivy

League school. They never had thought that was even remotely possible. And so I kind of felt like I owed them something, that I had to become a doctor and just keep building on those accolades.

So after the 2.8, I went with my dad, and we went to Washington University Medical School after my freshman year. And we had a meeting. The dean of admissions there basically said, you might want to think about something else, which was devastating at the time. But such a blessing. I ended up majoring in geography, modified with government, which was an international relations degree that I created, with certificates in African studies and environmental studies.

So once I started studying things that were more passionate to me, things that really drove my hunger for more knowledge and engagement, my grades did go up. I graduated here with a 3.3, which is not too bad after coming out with a 2.8 freshman year.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Nothing like finding your place, in terms of academics.

TILLINGER: A good thing I found it after the freshman year.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Okay. I sort of got you off your topic. So you didn't engage— You didn't feel that you could qualify to do the recruiting, participate in the recruiting.

TILLINGER: I did a few events, and I felt very unprepared. I felt at a disadvantage to many of the other students who probably were coached within their fraternities and by alumni networks and so forth. I kind of came in cold. And I think when I was interviewing, those recruiters probably looked at me and said, Where are you coming from? And so, there were no opportunities offered. But I mean, all of this was colored by something else that was going on inside of me, which I suspected but wasn't sure of. And my senior spring term ended up being hijacked by something other than my recruiting process.

DONIN: And that was?

TILLINGER: When I was—In my senior spring, I started feeling ill. And it was like a flu, and I didn't know what it was. But it wouldn't go away. I had fever, and I felt malaise, and I was nauseated, achy. So I wasn't motivated to study or think about getting a job or anything. I just was not feeling well.

So finally after maybe two weeks of this not going away, I went to Dick's House, checked in for about three or four days there. I remember exactly when it was. It was when the Chernobyl incident occurred because I was watching the news of that on TV from my hospital room. And the best the doctors could guess was that it was either Epstein-Barr virus or cytomegalo virus. And of course, knowing that I had just come out and that I was gay, there was this fear of HIV and AIDS—terrifying. I mean it was terrifying. But I thought, well, it can't be, you know, because I've been in this bubble.

Well, a month after graduating, I did get a call from my doctor in St. Louis who said that I had tested HIV positive. And so my world view changed. It just crashed down. And I had to figure out what my world view was going to be now; because I remember thinking that I'm 22 years old now, and I'm supposed to be looking for my first job, and instead, I'm wondering if I'm going to live another three years. I remember thinking, oh, gosh, I wonder what it would be like to be 25 years old. I'll never know, but I wonder what that would be like.

DONIN: So '86, that was the height of the virus being discovered. And at that point the research was not hopeful about curing it.

TILLINGER: No, it was absolutely terrifying. It was not a question of, will this kill me? It was, this will kill you. And the most optimistic prognosis I got from a doctor was that, you know, if things go okay, you'll live maybe ten years, which was not very comforting. Here we are now, 26 years later.

DONIN: Thank goodness. So, yes. So your world dropped away from....

TILLINGER: I didn't know what to do. I was absolutely terrified. I mean, I was in a state of trauma, sort of active trauma, for many, many months. Every day, I was just a nervous wreck because I just didn't know what was going on.

There were a couple of things that saved me. One was, I'm very fortunate. My parents were standing next to me in the room when the doctor called. And they have been with me all along the way. That day, my mother—and I don't even know if she was crying because I think she probably tried to show stoic strength—but through the anguish that I'm sure she was feeling, she looked at me

very determinedly and she said, “This will not kill you.” And I have held on to that ever since. It is the biggest gift I ever received in my life; the most wonderful gift. And so I held onto that.

And then I, you know, here I’m coming from this academic background, and the academics and the research are coming at me saying, you know, you’re not going to make it. This is really bad. You’re going to die. But something inside, and I don’t know what that was, just said: No, it’s not. In every situation, there are exceptions. And why can’t I be an exception?

And I made an active agreement with my virus: I spoke to it, and I said, “You know what? I’ll let you live, if you let me live.” So I guess I kind of agreed that it’ll never leave. But [laughs] as long as it allows me to live, that’s okay.

So what I did then is, I was in terror for about six months doing nothing in St. Louis. No job search, no nothing, not knowing what to do. So I decided to escape. And I went to Europe, did what every Dartmouth student would do. I got on the trains, and I rode the trains for about four months just thinking about things.

Had some pretty neat experiences during that. There was one instance where my dad called me, and he said, “You know, there’s this story of these young children in Croatia who are seeing the Virgin Mary every day appear. And they’re having visions of her and speaking with her. Why don’t you go down there and check it out?”

So I did. And I was in a crowd of hundreds of people, which gathered every morning back then. And every day they selected ten people to go into the library in this small town where the visions were occurring, and I was chosen. And I went into the library, and I watched while these children were having what they were perceiving to be—and personally I believed to be—visions of the Virgin Mary.

I saw them speaking to something up in the corner of the room, small children with very directed glances. And they were speaking, but there were no voices coming out. But they were mouthing conversations as though they were speaking to someone up there.

And the night before that happened, I was in the town next door at a hotel, and I was sitting at dinner, and out of the blue, a nun came

to my table, uninvited, sat down, looked at me, and said, "Everything's going to be fine."

And that night I was sleeping. I was woken up in the middle of the night. I don't know what time it was. And I was lying in bed facing away from the door, and I felt this really strong presence of something at the door. But I was frozen. I could not move anything in my body. I felt this surge of energy going through me. It was very intense. I remember thinking, I should be absolutely terrified right now. And then another voice said, "No, because everything's going to be fine. You don't have to worry about anything." And it lasted for a few minutes and then stopped. And I remember thinking, I want to turn around and look at what was there, but I thought, no, I don't need to, and I went right back to sleep. And then the next morning I was chosen to go into that room. I don't know how to explain that. But it had a positive influence on me.

DONIN: So physically, how are you feeling by then? I mean you were able to travel and not be uncomfortable and exhausted and....

TILLINGER: Well, as we know now, the virus progresses at different speeds in different people. And I resisted it. Now, I'm not saying that I did anything special because it could all just be luck and good fortune, you know, the way things have turned out for me. But whenever I would get negative thoughts of, oh, my gosh, when am I going to die? Immediately, another voice, you know, another part of my consciousness said, No, don't listen to that. Don't let.... It's not going to happen. And there was this resistance. And maybe it was my stubbornness or my denial. My denial had power. [Laughs] It was pretty strong.

So I was in pretty good shape. I probably had a lot of psychosomatic stuff going on at the time. I mean, every time I got a cough or a snuffle, I thought, oh, my gosh, is this the end? Is this it?

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

TILLINGER: You know. Because we didn't know then. We thought that anything could trigger it, could trigger the final, you know, progression and spiral down.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. The power of positive thinking.

TILLINGER: Absolutely. Absolutely.

DONIN: Yes. I'm just going over our questions here to see how we're doing. So if you could summarize for us, how your experience within the Dartmouth community, how it changed you during these four years? Even though you weren't here for the entire four years.

TILLINGER: I think in a twisted way, not having a community and feeling like a loner had its benefits. And that is that first of all, the experience that Dartmouth afforded me—traveling, studying in Kenya, studying in Hungary when it was still Communist but just starting to change over. We studied at the Karl Marx University of Economics. I mean, that was just wild. And the breadth of experience and the breadth of exposure to the world that Dartmouth afforded me, combined with my doing it, feeling alone or by myself, I believe instilled a belief in me that I could do anything if I set my mind to it. Or that anything was possible. That there were no impossibilities. And that cultivates, for me, a sense of hope. There's always the possibility for things to change.

DONIN: Did you ever have moments here that you didn't feel that you were on the outside?

TILLINGER: Hmm. Yes, actually. When I declared my major as a geography major, modified with government, when I started doing well in my classes and I was acknowledged for that by professors and then they wanted my input on projects that were going on, or I became more engaged in the conversation of that particular department, I did feel a sense of belonging there, and I felt very safe when I went to my departments of major.

DONIN: Because, as you said before, you were becoming more like your perception of what a Dartmouth person should be.

TILLINGER: Yes. And I hung onto that intellectual side of the Dartmouth experience, which took a while to get to because having a 2.8 as a freshman, I had to really get a number of good grades before I felt like I deserved to put myself in that intellectual category. But anyway, that is how I ended up identifying as part of the Dartmouth experience. That and the overseas experiences, because that's very Dartmouth as well.

DONIN: Right. So, if I can put words into your mouth, it was earning the respect of faculty that made you feel that you were on the inside track, so to speak.

- TILLINGER: And that I deserved to be here.
- DONIN: And that you deserved to be here....
- TILLINGER: Mm-hmm.
- DONIN: Because of your academic success.
- TILLINGER: Yes.
- DONIN: Right. So is it fair to say there are different tracks to feeling like an insider, whether it's the social track, the athletic track, the academic track?
- TILLINGER: Yes, there are. And I did start feeling like an insider on the academic track. However, I will say that those were always the experiences that gave me a taste of being on the inside, was the academic track. What I longed for, what I hungered for, was being on the inside on the social track. And that still really didn't—That never happened here.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm. Did you do any—what did the *Aegis* say? Were you in the marching band?
- TILLINGER: I was in the marching band freshman year.
- DONIN: Oh, just freshman year.
- TILLINGER: Yes. Mm-hmm.
- DONIN: I'm just looking at your other activities. Oh, no, it's all FSPs.
- TILLINGER: Yes.
- DONIN: Uh-huh.
- TILLINGER: I didn't do much extracurricular here at all.
- DONIN: Because?
- TILLINGER: I was too—I was really shy. I was really self-conscious. Any extracurricular activity was an opportunity for me to be teased or to

feel like I didn't belong. So I just didn't even engage the possibility that that could happen.

DONIN: Were you able to identify others that were like you?

TILLINGER: Yes. Mm-hmm. And I was friends with a number of those people while I was here. I don't even know if I can name all of them anymore. But it was a friendship not because necessarily of affection, but friendships of common experience. And so we felt safe in groups.

DONIN: It was sort of a survival—

TILLINGER: Yes, it was absolutely a survival group. Mm-hmm.

DONIN: Was there ever an opportunity to be mentored, either socially or academically by people in the administration? Or, I don't know, dorm counselors or—

TILLINGER: No, I saw the dorm counselors as being too much aligned with what I thought was the stereotypical Dartmouth personality here.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

TILLINGER: And so I didn't go there. My freshman year— I'm sad to hear they've gotten away with—they've done away with the freshman office. But the dean of freshman my freshman year was a godsend. Margaret Bonz was absolutely a godsend. I just loved her. She was so helpful to me and encouraging. And then I think I had Jennifer Joseph—Joseph or Josephs; I don't recall. I also was very friendly with. She was very inspiring, and her husband was one of my favorite professors, Richard Joseph.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. So they were.... In those days, there were no student groups— there's a Native American House now— you know, for the various groups that self-identify one way or the other. There are a lot of opportunities for students to join these groups, there must be a group of gays and lesbians. They've got a dormitory here for them now. Those things didn't exist then.

TILLINGER: Not as much, no. Not for any groups that I might have identified with. I think the fact that these opportunities exist now or these places, is tremendously valuable to those students that are trying to

find a place, trying to find their place in society, trying to find their value.

But we had a Gay Students Association. I don't even know if it was official. We had a—I shouldn't say we, because I never did. The Gay Students Association and the students that identified with it had hoodies made with Greek letters Gamma Sigma Alpha, for Gay Students Association. And that was their way of saying, we've got a group, too. But I don't know if it was sanctioned by the administration then or not. I remember that we would sort of informally meet or get together, and I would join in sometimes. But it didn't seem to be very official.

DONIN: Was it your sense it was sort of underground?

TILLINGER: Yes.

DONIN: It was underground.

TILLINGER: Yes, I think it was.

DONIN: And that was a sign of the times, basically.

TILLINGER: It was—you know what? It was a sign of Dartmouth's place in the times, because Dartmouth was a little bit behind the curve in acceptance of gays and lesbians.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

TILLINGER: But I must say from what I've seen, it's caught up, and I'm very, very happy to see that. Very proud of Dartmouth for that.

DONIN: So do you perceive that—I mean, you just said that you perceived a change here. But do you perceive a change in yourself as well from your feeling of not belonging here 25 years ago to now?

TILLINGER: Absolute 180 degree shift. It has changed dramatically.

DONIN: Can you talk about that a little more?

TILLINGER: I had my 25-year reunion here last June. And about a year before we went, of course they announced it was happening. And I— There have been a lot of things that happened between Dartmouth and now, of course. But I was coming out of a very dark period of

my life. And I knew that in my process of recovery, which I'm sure we'll get to, I needed—I knew, something inside told me, I need to reengage with my Dartmouth community. There must be just some sort of connections that I can make that will help me to pull myself out of this place that I was in. And so I said, I have to go to this reunion. I was scared. And I thought, what if I spend all this money and I go up there, and nobody talks to me and it's just like it always was? But I went on faith.

Before the reunion we were asked to write a submission to the reunion book, and I did. And I was very open about just about everything. Not everything, but enough that it made me pretty vulnerable. I had an experience out of Dartmouth; it was not traditional. And I just put it all out there. And after I submitted it and one of my best Dartmouth friends was one of the editors, and of course, she said it was wonderful. So I said, okay, fine. I'll leave it. Afterwards I thought, oh, my gosh, what if I get up there, and these people look at me like, oh, he's not one of us. Look at this freak over there. And you know nothing could have been further from the truth.

I got up to the reunion, and I was afraid I wouldn't have anybody to hang around. And it turned out that I had too many people that I wanted to hang around; I couldn't hang around with all of them as much as I wanted to. I had strangers, or people I didn't know when I was here, come up to me and say, "Are you Werner? You're one of the people I wanted to meet this weekend because I read your submission in the reunion book, and I just think you have an amazing story. And thank you for writing that."

And so I got a big yes for what I wrote. And I took that as a big yes for validating—I don't like to use the word validating anymore, but when people say that you matter and your experience matters. I am so grateful for that. Those 25—those years of not belonging at Dartmouth and for the 25 years afterwards, all of that was completely invalidated and ended in that weekend.

Since then I have engaged with many alums. I'm also on the—I joined what the Class of 1986 calls the Compassio Committee. And the Compassio Committee—compassion without the N; I think it's the Latin for compassion. The Compassio Committee is—Our objective or our mission is to help our classmates who are in need, who are experiencing death, illness, job changes, relationship changes, coming-out issues. You name it. Addiction issues. We are

a group of, a network of classmates who are willing to support our classmates in need as they go through difficult times in their life. And that feels so right for me. It came out of the memorial service that we had for the 11 classmates who are no longer with us.

I am most proud of my class for taking this initiative. It is such a show, a strong display of compassion, which is something that I didn't think we had. And the fact that people are taking it so seriously and so fully engaged in this process and the establishment of this committee is—I can't— words fail me now. It is just such an encouragement to me. It's a redeeming, it's a redeeming.

DONIN: Could you have imagined this 25 years ago?

TILLINGER: No. Well, I don't think I had engaged my own compassion.

DONIN: Right.

TILLINGER: Twenty-six years ago, no.

DONIN: So this is a reflection of not just you changing but some of your classmates.

TILLINGER: And it's a reflection of the humanity that resides at the core of human beings that transcends what Dartmouth is, what professional careers are, what labels are. It lays bare that commonality of humanity.

DONIN: Do you think this will trickle up to whatever the Dartmouth community is today?

TILLINGER: I think it already is. I think the fact that Dartmouth had me speak on my experiences with HIV and addiction and being gay. I spoke last night in Alpha Delta. And the fact that I spoke in a basically College-sanctioned talk at a fraternity house that had other reputations in the past—not necessarily tolerant ones—is... Dartmouth gets high marks for doing that.

DONIN: And for the purposes of history, is AD not the house that was profiled in the movie *Animal House*?

TILLINGER: Yes. *The* fraternity that the movie is based on.

DONIN: Right. Okay.

TILLINGER: There's a perverse pride in that [laughs] I think on this campus.

DONIN: Right. So is it fair to say that the perception of the community of Dartmouth that current students here find today is very different than the community that you found 25 years ago?

TILLINGER: Yes. Now, from what I have seen the few days that I've been on campus, and what I learned from our reunion, the Dartmouth that I went to was still very representative of the Dartmouth of tradition, of history, reflecting a certain segment of society. The Dartmouth of today, I am feeling, is much more representative of society as a whole.

DONIN: Well, not to take the credit away from the College, but in order to survive, they need to represent the greater world outside the Dartmouth bubble.

TILLINGER: Well, and by doing so, Dartmouth is able to better serve the world and to better help heal the world. Or produce or grow future leaders that will be able to do that.

DONIN: Which is exactly the message that we hear from our current president.

TILLINGER: That is the message that came through loud and clear when I was at reunion, when Dr. Kim spoke with us. I was delighted to hear that. Of course, his experience in HIV medical delivery around the world is very heartening for me, and I feel a bond there. I feel a connection there. So I'm thrilled that he is the president here.

DONIN: But to bring it full circle, one of his favorite phrases, of course, he's taken from Dartmouth's 12th president I think it was, John Sloan Dickey, who famously has said to all the students that he was here for, "The world's troubles are your troubles." And I think Dr. Kim has embraced that phraseology as well, in order to groom this batch of students to go out into the world and deal with those troubles. Get outside the Dartmouth bubble.

TILLINGER: Absolutely. I mean my experience with addiction certainly took me out of the bubble of entitlement and privilege. But only by going through that process am I able to identify with people that need help

that are in the process and know what they need. Or not know what they need. Have an idea of what they need. Everyone's different.

DONIN: So it sounds to me like the Compassio Committee of '86 has got a great new member in you.

TILLINGER: Well, I'm one of many, and we all have very different perspectives that we lend to the work that we do.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. So can you think of anything else that you can tell us about your experience at Dartmouth as it relates to our theme here that we're trying to document? You know, over the course of the second half of the 20th century, how the Dartmouth community has been transformed by its members, essentially?

TILLINGER: Now this is just a perception on my part. This is a guess, okay? But what I intuit is that the Dartmouth graduates of the past 20 years have placed themselves in different segments of the world, have placed themselves in a broader range of experiences than what was typical for a Dartmouth graduate. It's not just all ivory towers and Wall Street. So people are diffusing or place themselves in a wide variety of places and positions in parts of communities that weren't necessarily traditional places to go. And I think what that's done is it's created parents who are having children, some of whom come here, who have a broader world view and instill in the children the importance of understanding a much greater breadth of what it is to be human. And what the human experience can entail.

There also seems to be a greater acknowledgement of and valuing of serving others, serving humanity and the richness that comes from that. And, you know, I'm a product of Dartmouth in the Reagan years. And that just wasn't even in the conversation. And it's heartening to see that happening.

Last night when I was talking to Alpha Delta and I was talking about my experiences with finding masculinity through sex and drugs and being Mr. San Francisco Leather in San Francisco, some of the most poignant questions came from what I perceive to be heterosexual men, who were really asking direct, intensely-aware questions. And that surprised me. It was great. But it surprised me. And I thought, wow! I mean people are more aware now. And I also spoke to a couple of students who've actually already volunteered or done internships in San Francisco in gay nonprofits. I mean, this sort of thing just didn't happen when I was at Dartmouth.

There's an earlier engagement of social issues by students now, I think. When I was here, it was what you wanted the administration to know when you were applying or when you were here is, what did I do? What did I do to enrich myself, to make myself bigger? And it seems now that what the students are telling the administration is: Here's what I did to do my part to help out in the world. It's more of an outward helping rather than an inward helping. Perhaps a sign of the times. Those were very "me" days. But I'm seeing more focus on "we" days.

DONIN: Well put. And I think you're right. It's definitely a reflection of the times. It's almost assumed that students are going to do some sort of outreach to a community that is not within the Dartmouth bubble. Whether it's right down the road in White River Junction teaching kids in the after-school program, or, as you did, go around the world and find a population someplace else.

TILLINGER: Oh, I sure hope so. We sure need it, don't we?

DONIN: Yes, truly. Well, Werner, I think for our first go-around with these questions, I think you did wonderfully. And I'm going to turn off the tape.

TILLINGER: Okay.

[End of Interview]