Peter Werner '68
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Karen Navarro

LIBRE: My name is Matthew Libre ['21] and I am joined here today with Peter Werner. The date is June 7th, 2020, and this interview is being conducted over the phone for Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I'm calling from Cabin John, Maryland, and Mr. Werner is speaking with me today from Los Angeles, California. I would like to start today by expressing my thanks to you, Peter, for speaking with us today. Thank you.

WERNER: I'm already enjoying it.

LIBRE: Just to begin, where and when were you born?

WERNER: I was born January 17th, 1947, in New York City at LeRoy Hospital, which is no longer there.

LIBRE: And do you have any siblings? Can you tell me about your family a little?

WERNER: I have an older sister named Patsy [Werner] Hanson, who is married to a man named Michael Hanson, who was actually a senior at the high school I went to, which was Hotchkiss [High School, Lakeville, CT], and then he went into the Marines and was sent to Vietnam, where he served in a sort of journalist corps in Vietnam when I was a senior at Dartmouth and graduating. So, and then I have a younger brother, Tom, who was the head of a company called—is the head, or was the head of a company called Carsey-Werner [Company], and they made, among other shows, *The Cosby Show* and *3rd Rock from the Sun* and *The '70s Show* [*That '70s Show*] and *Roseanne*, and now he still makes TV shows, but he also is the co-owner of the Boston Red Sox and Liverpool soccer—[Liverpool] Football Club as it's called. That's my family.

LIBRE: Wow, that's great, and sort of all over there, I think, like they're doing a lot of things, so that's great. Can you just tell me maybe about your parents, or their experience, where they came from?

WERNER: Well, my ancestors go way back. I had an ancestor who was the first native born rabbi in what was then New Amsterdam, and he went on to be the rabbi at George Washington's inauguration. So, it's a quite an august family tree that I have to live up to. My grandfather on my mother's side was a banker who came from Alsace-Lorraine by way of Switzerland and London, and became a very successful banker in New York. And my family on my father's side was in the rag business, the schmatta business as it's known. So, those were my grandparents. An ancestor of mine invented the rubber eraser that's put on pencils. [laughter] So, talk about all over the place.

And I grew up in New York City. I went to an extraordinary boys' school called St. Bernard's [School], which is still there, and I proceeded to go to boys' schools from first grade to the end of college. I went to a boarding school called Hotchkiss, the Hotchkiss School, before I went to Dartmouth, and as you and I have spoken about, the reason I went to Dartmouth was that my father [Henry Werner] went to Dartmouth. He was a Class of 1934. And I didn't get into my other two first choice and second choice schools, which were Yale and Princeton, and I think it was an arrangement with the admissions officer who was obviously trying to get as many graduates from Hotchkiss into as many Ivy League schools as they could, so he basically decided that I was going to go to Dartmouth. And so, I went to Dartmouth with a little bit of a chip on my shoulder, but as the story will tell, I am very grateful that I went there, and I had an extraordinary experience at the school and afterwards.

LIBRE: Yeah. And that's interesting. So I guess, based on what you said, so you grew up partially in New York, and then you were a boarding student in high school.

WERNER: Right.

LIBRE: What was New York like at the time for you, in terms of socially? What were some things that were going on that you remember?

WERNER: That's a very interesting question. Well, to be honest, my parents were—although my father's roommate at Dartmouth became the publisher of the *New York Times*. His name was Orville Dreyfus. So, we actually got two *New York Times* every day Monday through Sunday. That way my parents

wouldn't have to compete for any sections. And I would say the *New York Times* is as much of a venerated institution as *The Bible* is to some people. Speaking of which, my parents were very assimilated German Jews, and so they considered themselves Americans first, and Jews way down the line.

So, you know, I was sent to Episcopalian schools where we had chapel five days a week at St. Bern's and six days a week at Hotchkiss. And I only identified as Jewish because my parents were very, they were kind of, not ashamed of being Jewish, but they certainly weren't, they didn't identify particularly as being Jewish. So, there was one year they sent me to, me and my younger brother, to Sunday school at a place called Temple Emanu-El, which is a gorgeous, beautiful temple in New York City on the corner of 65th Street and 5th Avenue right across the street from the Central Park Zoo. And our nurse would take us to the corner of 65th and Madison and leave us, and then we would sort of mingle with the crowd, and I would secure some comic books underneath my shirt, and my brother and I would play hooky and go across the street to the Central Park Zoo for the two hours of Sunday school, and then we'd mingle back in, very nefarious at an early age, and then get picked up by the nurse. And it wasn't until the report card came out, and what did us in was we had the exact same number of absences, which they didn't figure was coincidental. So, they decided as punishment that we would not have to go to Sunday school ever again. [laughter] And, so we weren't bar mitzvahed or anything like that.

So, but I was very unconscious of any race problems, any political problems. My parents were sort of Rockefeller, because he went to Dartmouth, Republicans at the time. And it clearly wasn't until my years at Dartmouth that I became aware of the problems in the country, the civil rights problems and the political problems. It's kind of ironic because I was one of those protestors who went to Washington and shouted, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?" and I ended up making a TV movie about young Lyndon [B.] Johnson that really changed my view of him as a truly tragic figure. And I got to meet Lady Bird Johnson and talk with her. So, but Dartmouth was my sort of coming to awareness of politics in the country.

So, the thing I loved about growing up in New York at the time was two things. One was the drinking age was 18,

which meant essentially you could go to bars when you were 16 and nobody seemed to have a problem, and it was pretty safe because you would take a taxi home, nobody was driving. And the other thing was movie theaters. I could walk to a movie theater, to maybe 15 or 20 movie theaters from my house: first-run theaters, theaters that had double features, art house theaters. So, and my parents were quite liberal about letting us go out by ourselves. So, from the time I was about 11, I was free to walk to the—we lived on 72nd Street and Park Avenue, and there was a Loew's 72nd Street [Theatre] that was literally one street, you know, I could walk across one street, which was Lexington Avenue.

So, essentially from the time I was 11, my parents would give me 25¢ for a ticket and 25¢ for popcorn, and I would be on my own for four or five hours watching movies like *The Ten Commandments* or *The Hanging Tree,* every single kind of movie I would go to. And then, as I got into high school I began to see [François] Truffaut films and [Federico] Fellini films and [Ingmar] Bergman films, and you know, every film that was made I would probably try to see. And you also had movies on TV. TV is—I'm so old that our first TV was black-and-white, and there was a show called *Winky Dink* [*and You*] where you'd put a screen on your television screen and draw on the screen, and that worked well enough until they realized that I was drawing on the TV without the screen. That was the end of that show for me. But, you know, I loved television and I loved the Westerns, and I could sing the songs, and still can, for [*The*] Rifleman *a*nd *Have Gun Will Travel*.

And the third thing that I loved was sports. And I loved baseball. And we used to go to New Jersey in the summer to the shore, and I would play—I created a game where I could pitch and hit against the wall, and sometimes I would go so far as to on a summer afternoon go into my grandmother's house and turn on the TV set with a scoreboard, the scorecard, and I would keep the score of the Yankee games. And I would turn off the sound and I would announce the games, like Mel Allen and Red Barber and Phil Rizzuto, and occasionally like the maid or the cook would come in and they'd see me and I'd get quiet, and they'd say, "Don't you want the sound on?" and I'd say "yes," and they'd turn the sound up and then I'd wait until they left and I'd turn the sound down and announce the games. And, so it's a certain

pride that my brother both went into television and into baseball in such a big way.

But those were the sort of three biggest things growing up in New York. You could also just take the bus anywhere in the city. As long as you didn't go out at night, it was very safe, so I would go to the West Side, where I had my first bagels when I was like 13 [laughter] and, you know, go to all those art house theaters on the West Side. So, it was kind of a great place to grow up, New York at the time. And it was kind of coming back from its bad years. Mayor [John] Lindsay was the mayor and he was very cool and attractive. My sister worked for him in his campaign. So, I began to feel a sense of what was going on in the world once I was able to take the bus to the West Side.

And New York was just such a great place in terms of international, and you'd hear voices, French voices and Iranian voices and Indian voices, as you were just walking around the streets. So, and I guess I should also mention it, if you're interested, Central Park, because I think that's heaven on earth, and I was just able to explore every nook and cranny of Central Park and still, you know, when I die, that's where I'd like my ashes to be scattered.

LIBRE: Wow, yeah, that's something, and it's something incredibly wonderful in childhood in so many ways there. I find it really interesting that you mentioned so many very distinctly American sort of things, growing up in New York, the big city there, but then seeing all these films, seeing Westerns, going to see movies, you know, loving baseball and Central Park, and it's like pretty distinctly American things. But then also, you know, that New York was the international place, and that that sort of helped you to start to see the world a little more, going to the west end a little bit more. And I find that really interesting. I think… Yes, go on.

WERNER: I mean, I'd also say, you know, my parents dutifully felt that every once in a while they had to travel with us. I mean, it was never a lot of fun, but we went to England and France and Rome one summer, and then we went to Los Angeles one summer. And they knew people who were involved with Universal Studios, so we came out, we stayed at the Beverly Hills Hotel. There's a story my brother liked to tell about this actor named Jack Hawkins, who was in the *Bridge on the River Kwai*, and they delivered his breakfast to our room, so

we took it over to his room, and he opened the door, he was in his bathrobe, and that was a big deal for us. And we went to Lake Tahoe on the way back, and Lucille Ball was in one of the cabins and we woke her up in the morning and she came out in curlers and yelled at us. So I had a, you know, a sense of the world in that way.

I would also say as far as my father and Dartmouth, he kind of had a very positive feeling about Dartmouth. I think he was the class secretary for many years. Although the one thing that he felt very bad about was, he had wanted to join a non-Jewish fraternity, Psi U [Psi Upsilon], and they hadn't let him in because he was Jewish, and he felt a great sort of sadness about that, so when I was there, very much encouraged me to join Psi U, which I did, and I got whatever it's called, accepted or whatever, and then after I got there I realized I didn't really—I wasn't a fraternity guy. So I became known as the phantom, because I was the only senior who did not live in the fraternity, although they did tap me to write the fraternity play contest that they had every year, and I wrote and directed a play for them, and I was given the award as the best technical director. So, that was my one and only theater experience, but it was actually a pretty great experience. But, he really did—we would go to Dartmouth-Yale games and occasionally Dartmouth-Columbia games, and he was very proud of the school.

LIBRE: Yeah. One quick—it's funny that you said a lot of that there, and this is sort of a side thing now, and maybe you'll be interested here, I am myself in Psi U.

WERNER: Oh, really?

LIBRE: Yes.

WERNER: And your father went to Dartmouth.

LIBRE: Yes, he did. He was not—he actually was, I believe he talked about his experience actually—and this is sort of an aside—it's interesting to hear about your father's experience being Jewish and sort of the fraternity system there. And my dad was a part of a different fraternity which was Delta Psi at the time, but I think it was previously maybe under a different name and he talked about them being one of the first fraternities to have any Jewish members. So, I mean, yeah,

that's very interesting that the way it culturally, you know, the shift.

WERNER: Yeah.

LIBRE: But yeah, I mean, it sounds like he, you know, your father still had such a positive, warm feeling about Dartmouth, then.

WERNER: But he was a funny man, because I had a nephew who applied to Dartmouth, my sister's younger son. And my father wrote a letter of recommendation, obviously. He'd given money every year to the school. And my nephew was not admitted, and ironically ended up going to Yale, which is where his father went. And it really pissed off my father [laughter] and he stopped giving money to Dartmouth as a result of that. So, he wasn't a very forgiving man in any case [laughter] So, you want me to talk about going to Dartmouth, then?

LIBRE: Yeah. I think, yeah, I was just going to move into that. I just have one more question about your growing up and the way—and you said that you traveled and you had a pretty good understanding of, you know, I said before, pretty distinctly American feelings and being you said Jewish, but then, you know, American kind of first and not as sort of a… You know, I see it as another characteristic that wouldn't have been in the front of your mind at all that time. And I think—what do you think it was like feeling American, but then I'm sort of understanding this sort of international world view? What was it like to be American when you saw sort of a broader view of the world?

WERNER: Well, I think it was a very Hollywood influenced… government changed it over very much a '50s, you know, kind of *Mad Men* time in terms of my perception of America up until President Kennedy's assassination, which happened my senior year. I was actually thinking of this sort of coincidentalness that I graduated in 1968, which was probably one of the most seminal years politically in American, in certainly the second half of the 20th century, and my son just graduated from his college, which is Vassar [College, Poughkeepsie, NY], and in what is now turning out to be one of the most seminal years of political and social revolution in the United States. But I would say that I was naive and optimistic, and I believed that America was full of

justice and mercy and leading the world in every way, shape and form. I was probably more of a Democrat than my parents when it came to that, but even when we would go abroad, of course, we would see the best sites and everybody was very happy to see Americans when we were in those countries.

Obviously, when I went to Dartmouth and I began to understand race relations and our politics, especially with Vietnam, I got a very different view of how America actually was and how we were perceived. So, that was quite an awakening. Although I would say that Dartmouth was certainly not a liberal bastion in those days, and it was fairly mainstream, get to the point where, of my graduation where half the class walked out on Jacob Javits' speech. But that's, you know, four years down the line.

LIBRE: Yeah, I'd love to hear about that actually. I hadn't heard that. But, I'm sure there's a cool story there. And what was your—I mean, obviously you got to Dartmouth, what, in '64?

WERNER: Yeah.

LIBRE: You know, Vietnam had certainly been on the American horizon a little earlier than that. And what was that like, and I'd sort of like to know when was your first recollection of the US involvement in Vietnam?

WERNER: Well, you know, it was interesting. At Hotchkiss there were no—there was a TV in the common room in each building, but you were restricted from watching television until like maximum two hours a day. And even when I went to Dartmouth there was no televisions. I don't think there were any in our dormitories. So you just weren't that aware of even what was on CBS news. But I would think you'd have to say that CBS news and Walter Cronkite were the barometer of where America was at in terms of international politics, and Vietnam specifically. And, so it was a very gradual awakening.

And we're human beings and I think most of us are pretty narrow minded and selfish in terms of how we view the world, and really it wasn't until it dawned on me and my friends, and probably my classmates, that we were going to be drafted and be forced to go to Vietnam that we really cared what was happening to the Vietnamese or anybody

else. And then we began to read that this war, you know, might not be justified, that the domino theory might not necessarily be the law of the universe, and that the assassinations of Presidents and the division of Vietnam, that this guy, Ho Chi Minh, actually believed in the American Revolution and believed in the American Constitution, and the people in South Vietnam were, you know, capitalists, and as soon as things got bad, they were leaving the country with their money, that, you know, we began to go "hum, this might not be such a good thing."

And I think that also led to an awareness of the civil rights movement, which of course was huge at the time, and Martin Luther King and the assassination of Malcolm X, and the writing of James Baldwin, you just began to be aware of the situation. Like, when I was at Hotchkiss I think we had one African-American—no, not even African-American—we had one black person, who was from Africa. So it was a very white and white privileged education that I got. And it was, so by the time I was a senior I was registering voters and marching on Washington, but that was a long process.

LIBRE: Yeah, clearly something pretty integral happened over that four year period, and obviously it could have been a Dartmouth thing, but I mean, very definitely, you know, certainly a societal thing, I think.

WERNER: Yeah.

LIBRE: [inaudible] generation can speak to that.

WERNER: But Dartmouth was very divided. I mean, I think one of the most cinematic moments, which I think you actually have a picture of in your Dartmouth Project video, which incidentally I think is excellent and I say what from a filmmaker's point of view, but in the spring of our senior year we'd been having these silent vigils on I think it was Wednesday from 12:00 to 1:00. All the anti-war students would line up on The Green on one side of the walkway and we would just stand there for an hour in silence. This is a silent protest. And so, one of those Wednesdays the other side, the pro-Vietnam students and, you know, and sadly a number of them went to Vietnam and either killed Vietnamese or were killed, tragically. But, it began to be sort of a thing, like how many people are going to be on the anti-war side? And the pro-war people decided that they would stand on the other side of the pathway facing

the anti-war people, and it would be like how many people would show up and which line would be longer?

And on that Wednesday, probably almost, you know, probably 90% of the campus, including teachers and staff, came out and stood silently opposite each other for an hour. It was very weird and beautiful kind of ritual. I must say that there were more anti-war people than pro-war, but not—you know, maybe 5% at the most. But it was a stark and beautiful spring day, so it was the contrast between what we were doing and the day, and everybody's peacefulness, too, so then in contrast to the war and what was going on in the country at the time.

LIBRE: Yeah, see, I was wanting to see this, you know, to have been there. It seems like for the Class of '68, this was really truly a pretty integral—you know, this before the Parkhurst takeover in '69, I think it sounds like one of the biggest displays of just showing how divided the campus was. And I guess I would ask, you know, was it clear to you before this moment and before this kind of wild spectacle how divided the campus was? And also, were there certain lines along which people would make that decision? I mean, were students involved in certain groups?

WERNER: It's an interesting question, but I don't think I know the answer to it. I mean, I think on the one hand it was a very intellectual problem that was brought home by the fact that when we graduated, we would actually be forced to make life choices. But at the time there was much less hostility between the pro-war and the anti-war people than there is today between the left and the right, and the blue and the red states. I mean, it was—I never remember any kind of violence or pushing or shoving on campus. And again, it was a very white school, so that it was really only after we graduated that Dartmouth began to introduce programs like the ABC [A Better Chance] Program. I remember Dean [Thaddeus] Seymour was involved in that. But it was removed—Dartmouth was very removed, it was not just in New Hampshire and, you know, five hours from New York, but it seemed politically very removed from the warfare, the class warfare and the race warfare that was beginning to come up.

LIBRE: Yeah, it's interesting now that, you know, even being removed as it was, that there were still people taking a pretty definitive stance there, right?

WERNER: Yeah.

LIBRE: On one side…

WERNER: Yeah, and again, I think it was self-interest in some ways. It began to dawn on me, I think, somewhere around my sophomore year that there was a draft and I was healthy enough to have no easy excuse not to be involved, so it began to be like, well, maybe if I didn't want to go to war, maybe I should do something about stopping the war. Again, I think it's self-interest, but that's when I began to realize I was going to be involved in the shit. And I didn't want to—I didn't believe in what the government was doing or saying. That's where sort of my antipathy to Lyndon Johnson started.

And I should mention one of the most glorious incidents in my life was in the summer between my junior and senior year, a friend and I had planned to go to Europe, just the two of us, and again, white privilege in upper middle class situation. And at the very last second, he decided that he, my friend, wasn't going to go. So it was either get a job or go by myself, which scared the shit out of me. But, I was a member of, I was actually one of the leading members of the Dartmouth Film Society. You should remind me to tell you a story about that. And the head of the Dartmouth Film Society, well, there were really three people: there was Blair Watson [John Blair Watson, Jr.], who was the head of the audiovisual part of the school; there was a guy named David Stewart Hull ['60], who was a critic and wrote for like *Film Comment Magazine*; and then there was Bob Gish, who was our head projectionist. Bob went on to become one of the leading proponents of film preservation in the country. Blair remains one of my great friends.

And David said—he had a ticket to go to the Berlin Film Festival, which was still West Berlin, and he said, "Nobody knows me." And this was at a time where you could, you know—nobody was checking passports and stuff like that. So he said, "Well, why don't you go to the Berlin Festival as me?" And, you know, "they'll give you a hotel and they'll give you a per diem, and you can go to all the movies." And it

was like, “Okay, well, then I’ll go to Europe by myself.” [laughter] And I went to London and flew into West Berlin, because that’s how you had to do it. And up to that point I was staying in hostels and backpacking, and here I was at the Berlin Film Festival as David Stewart Hull with a pass, and I got to see the Beatles and I got to see Jean-Luc Godard and Roman Polanski.

And then, because of my nature is to like have a goal, my favorite teacher at Dartmouth who I noticed was already interviewed, so I started listening to his interview, but I didn’t get far enough yet, is a man named Peter Bien (B-i-e-n), and he was the best teacher I had at Dartmouth, and I took every class that I could with him. And one of the things that was so interesting about Professor Bien was that he translated Nikos Kazantzakis. And he said that—I loved that he said he learned to speak the Greek language in bed, because he had married a Greek woman who spoke very little English and he spoke very little Greek, and so he learned Greek through their relationship. And he taught Modern American Literature and Modern European Literature, and I actually ended up taking a seminar with him on Joyce and Kazantzakis, and that’s what I wrote my senior thesis on.

A digression is that one of the people in this little seminar was a guy named Hank, and Hank was a football player and not very—I think he must have been an English major, but he was the least interesting and interested person in the class. And he got A’s all the time. And I struggled and I got B’s. And so, one day I said to Hank, “How do you do this? I mean, how do you—you seem so uninterested and yet you get A’s all the time. You don’t seem to work very hard.” And he said, “Oh, you know what? I just developed this thing where I just, I take voluminous notes as to what the professor says, and then I write these papers where basically I rewrite what they said in their lectures, and they love me for it.” I thought *that’s pretty smart*. [laughter] Hank went on to become the head of Goldman Sachs and the head of the Treasury for [President George W.] Bush. Hank Paulson is his name.

So, anyway, I went to—after Berlin, I flew to Florence, and then I hitchhiked to Kazantzakis’ grave. I hitchhiked down to Naples and then across to Brindisi and then to Athens, and I took the boat to Crete. And the funny story there was, I arrived at Kazantzakis’ grave, which was my destination,

which was a museum, at like 4:45 on a Friday, and the museum was going to close at 5:00. And I planned to go to the museum, you know, essentially touch the gravestone and then turn around. And it was Friday late, and Monday was going to be a holiday. So, I just made it in time or else I would have had to wait until Tuesday morning. And I went up to the guy, and he didn't speak English and I didn't speak Greek, but I made it clear that I wanted a ticket, and he said, he shook his head no, we're closed. And I pointed to the sign and said, "No, 5:00," and pointed to my watch, you know, "it's 4:45." And I said, "I'm just going to go in for a minute or two and just pay my respects and then leave," and he said "no." And I begged him and he said "no" [laughter] and closed the museum.

And so, I didn't get to see Kazantzakis' grave, and I wasn't going to wait for three days, and I just laughed and it was so Kazantzakian that I would make this incredible trip for this purpose and not get to have my goal, but I made the trip, which was very much like a poem that Professor Bien had us read called "Ithaka" by Constantine Cavafy, which is one of the most beautiful poems ever written. But I think that trip was also a coming of age for me, because I was completely on my own.

There was another story I'll tell which is that I was in Copenhagen, I had arrived in Copenhagen, and I didn't have a hotel, but everybody had told me when you get to Copenhagen, you just go to the train station and they have all sorts of people—it's the equivalent of Airbnb's. So I went, I found a place, I called the people, they said "come over." Again, it was Friday. And they told me—they spoke English and they said that they were going to go away for the weekend to their cottage, and but I was free to stay in the house. They trusted me. And so I said "great," and they packed up and I went for a walk. And I'm walking around the city, and then finally I headed back to their house, and when I got there I realized I didn't have the keys to their house. And I had about the equivalent of about $30 in traveler's checks or cash, and I was like panicked, like *what am I going to do?* And this was before cell phones and I don't think I even had these people's phone number. So I was just like, I literally had to either sit down and calm myself down or flip out, because being homeless is one of my deep dark fears.

And so, the only thing I could think to do was to go to a movie. And there was an art house theater nearby that was playing *Sabrina*, and so I paid her some money and I didn't know where I was going to sleep or how I was going to eat. And there was a guy in the theater who was an American who was going to the movie, too, so I went up to him. He was my age. And I introduced myself and I said, "I know this sounds really crazy, but…" and I explained the situation, and he said, "No problem. You can sleep on the couch where I'm staying and I'll loan you money until they come back." And we've been friends ever since. So, movies have always saved my life, so to speak.

But, I think that that summer was really also a rite of passage, because I began to realize that I could take care of myself, but I also, you began to read the Paris, the European edition of the *Herald Tribune*, and began to realize that this shit was going down in the United States and, you know, by the time I was ready to go back, I really was dedicated to doing something that involved protesting the war, changing the situation in America, and hopefully using movies as my way of telling stories about the problem.

LIBRE: Yeah. That's very interesting to hear that this, you know, how sort of [inaudible]. It's very cool to hear [inaudible]. One thing I ask, I know you're reading the papers there and yet you're seeing how else the other side of the world views the US, especially a lot of Western Europe, and especially like France had been involved in Vietnam and always [inaudible] What did it feel like in person for you as an American introducing yourself, you know, as clearly an American? What were people's responses to that? You know, did it still feel like the America of the movies from your childhood where people saw the US as maybe a force for good in terms of, you know, World War II and the Marshall Plan and everything that the US had done there? Or did it feel like maybe something else now that the US wasn't viewed so positively, but…

WERNER: Well, you know, you ask very interesting questions that are causing me to think about things that I hadn't really thought about. My father was a—he had gone to, he was in Air Force Intelligence in London during World War II, and his job was to brief pilots on their bombing missions. And it wasn't until my brother, who has done a lot of things involving veterans with PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder], was honored

by the Army that they said that my father's job was to brief these people, and then to go out when they flew back and get the information from them. And, of course, you know, 10%, 20% never came back. So, it was a very traumatic job that he never told us about. He was a very private person, especially when it came to World War II.

So, when I was there, when I was in Paris that summer, it was also a very big time of protest in Paris. And, but what was interesting is that Jean-Luc Godard and Truffaut and all those people were among the people who were leading the protests. But, much like their feelings about [Alfred] Hitchcock and American film, they loved America, and they were protesting France's and America's involvement in Vietnam, and they were thinking about their own relationship to Algeria, and stuff like that. So they were very politically conscious, but they loved Americans.

And you know, here was an American who was going to the cinematheque every day, and I would get in these conversations with these young men and women my age about Vietnam, but we were all on the same side. And so, they would have me over to their apartments and we would drink wine and they would smoke cigarettes. And so it was very exciting and very international and fun. But, they were very, they were positive. I mean, everybody believed, still believed in American ideals. They just felt that the country was hypocritical in terms of its practices. But they loved America and they loved everything about America, especially the movies.

LIBRE: Yeah, I mean, that's always incredibly interesting to hear about, I think. You still hear nowadays, [inaudible] and I would be anywhere else in the world but right here, you know, what people think of the United States right now, you know, sort of like [inaudible] socially and leadership-wise, just there's a lot of unrest. But yeah, I think it always [inaudible] here if you are a like single American or [inaudible] in general. Yeah, and I guess, sort of heading back home from there, and I think we kind of just jumped right into your experience at Dartmouth, but like, you know, obviously for the sake of just like a—I used a chronology I think a little bit—when you got to Dartmouth, obviously movies have been a huge part of your entire life, right? And can you talk about sort of just what you studied?

WERNER: Right. Well, again, I arrived…

LIBRE: It talks about the Film Society.

WERNER: I arrived at the school with a little bit of a chip on my shoulder and I'd just broken up with my girlfriend who was down the road at the Putney School [Putney, VT], and so I was kind of lonely. And I went to *The D* [*The Dartmouth*], the newspaper, and I said, "I'm a freshman. I just got here. Someday I'd like to maybe review movies or something like that. What do I need to do?" Because I'd heard about my friends who went to Yale, they would spend two years doing grunt work before they'd even write an article. And they said, "Well, here's a pass to the Nugget [Theater]. Why don't you review the movie? We'll read it. If it's, you know, decent, we'll publish it the next day." And they did. And it was pretty incredible to see your name with a byline writing movie reviews.

And then I also went and said, "I know how to expose film," so somebody said, "Well, why don't you shoot the football films?" So I would stand on the top of that stadium—what's it called, Baker Field? [Memorial Field]—on the roof, and I would turn the camera on. It was a wide angle lens, so it would just be each play. And then I would turn it off after the play, and then I'd get the film developed and on Monday I would screen the movie for Bob Blackman and the football team, which I think went on to win the Lambert Trophy. It was a really good football team. So, that was really exciting because I'd never gotten any kind of letter at Hotchkiss. [laughter] And I also joined the freshman Dartmouth squash team, and I got a letter as a freshman squash player, but I never went on to play squash after that. So it was very exciting because I was involved in all these things.

And eventually I was stage manager on a production of *Once Upon a Mattress* with this classmate of mine named Bob [Robert] Reich ['68] who played the king, and it was directed by a student named Jerry Zaks ['67]. Jerry became, is one of the top Broadway theater directors. And of course, Bob is Bob. And Bob actually narrated the one film that I made when I was at Dartmouth, so we became friends. But, there was a teacher our freshman year named Arthur Mayer, who was teaching the one film class at the school. And I was not allowed in that class because they weren't letting

freshmen. So I petitioned to be in the class through Blair Watson and I got in.

And I became very good friends with Arthur and his wife, Lillie, who were two of the most extraordinary people that I'd ever met. They were radical leftists. They were against the war. They would have students come over for tea and we would talk about stuff that was going on in the country. And Arthur would take the time at the end of the class for anybody who wanted to talk to him for half an hour, so I went over to their house and I said, "I'd really like to stay in touch with you," and he said, "I'd be happy to do that," what a nice person I was, and we talked for about half an hour. At the end of it he said to me, "Peter, I just want to ask you, is going into the film business something that you want to do after college?" And I was still a freshman, but nobody had ever asked me that question, and I was very, very excited to be asked that, and I said out loud, probably quite quietly, "Yes, I would like to do that." And he paused and he said, "Well, don't." He said, "You're too nice a person. You're too sensitive and the film business would eat you alive." And I was totally crushed, [laughter] but I also felt, *I'll show you, Arthur*. And we did stay friendly until he died, and in fact my daughter is named "Lillie" after Lillie Mayer.

So, you know, I really got into film in a big way. And probably that was what I value most from my Dartmouth education. I mean, there was a lot of good teachers and a lot of great education, I'm sure, but it also was not—you know, you had to take economics and psychology and sociology, and classes that were pretty general and not very honed to being interesting. So, and there was only one other film class that I took, that I was able to take, which was with a man named Maury Rapf ['35], and it was a film production class. And I made a short film, and that was very exciting. But there wasn't a very big film program, but there was a lot of film…

And the story I wanted to tell you—I know this has nothing to do with VISTA [Volunteers in Service to America], but I would write Film Society notes, and we would show most of our films in 35mm, and occasionally if there was a film that they could only get in 16mm, we would show it. And there was a man who lived about 25, 30 miles from the campus who was a big film person. And if it was a 16mm print, we would actually drive—one of us would drive the print to his house after we'd screened it and he would send it back, so

he wouldn't have to come. So I knew where he lived. And one day—he would be the last person to arrive at the film, and he would be the first person to leave, because he was very private. So one day, just about closing the doors, I'm passing out the Film Society notes and I'm closing the doors, and he comes along and I hold the door for him, and he stops, and he says to me, "Are you Mr. Werner?" And I said, "Yes, Mr. Salinger." And he said, "You write the best Film Society notes." And so, he went inside, and I was complimented by J.D. Salinger. And there's more to that story later on.

LIBRE: Well, I was going to say, I only know so many Salingers, and that's incredible.

WERNER: Yeah. [Both talk at the same time.] The second part of the story I'll tell you later.

LIBRE: Great. So, it's great to hear how, obviously now that even though Dartmouth has a much broader and sort of more diverse array of classes you can take with films, that you've obviously [inaudible] from there.

WERNER: Well, it was pretty… [Both talk at the same time.]

LIBRE: Yeah, a huge part of your…

WERNER: Like Arthur would bring people to school to lecture, and one of the people he brought up was a graduate named David [V.] Picker ['53]. And I wouldn't consider myself a hustler, but I was—you know, if anybody was connected to film, I just, you know, I wanted to touch them or something, I wanted to be around them. So, after David spoke, I wrote him. He was the president of United Artists, which was of course making James Bond and Woody Allen and the Beatles and, you know, some of the best films of the late '60s. And I wrote him and asked him for a summer job and he gave it to me. So, it was my—I spent the summer between my first, freshman and sophomore year working at United Artists in New York and, you know, screening [Ingmar] Bergman films and writing coverage, and it was tremendously exciting.

And so, Arthur would have people who were connected to film who had been connected at Dartmouth. And there was a writer named Walter Bernstein ['40], who wrote *The Front* and some great films. He came up. And then we'd also show

films of Dartmouth alumni. There was a guy name of Arthur Hornblow [Jr.] who was a producer. So, you really got a sense that, I guess it was a sense that for the first time, going into film, which had always been a secret dream of mine, was possible because the other people who had followed a similar path to mine had done it. So, you know, it'd be the equivalent of, you know, a black person seeing a successful African-American or reading books that had an African-American in it, and going *wow, I can now identify with this*. So, I was beginning to identify with film people because of their connection to the school.

LIBRE: Right, yeah, I know that that's so important, I think, having obviously role models and people who…

WERNER: Role models, yes.

LIBRE: That way you can see yourself in them, you know. It's a great way to project yourself into…

WERNER: Right, exactly. Exactly.

LIBRE: Yeah. And what other sort of political involvements were you in? I know in our previous conversation before this recording, you mentioned something about Dartmouth Experimental College and your…

WERNER: Yes.

LIBRE: Can you speak about that a little?

WERNER: Well, by senior year I was fully committed to not being drafted. And among other things, I explored every possibility, I explored going up to Canada. I drove up to Toronto and I met with some expatriates—I hate the term "draft dodger," but that's what they were called. They were really patriots who were against the war. You also could go to prison, which was out of the question. And that's where I began to realize that I had to do something, and my only choices, the only way you could stay out of being drafted would be to do something which would get you a deferment. I mean, of course you could pretend to have a bone spur in your foot or say you were gay, which of course was at that point, you know, they didn't want anybody gay in the Army.

So, that's where I began to focus on VISTA. My two choices were VISTA or Peace Corps, so I applied to both. And I had a girlfriend, and we both applied to Peace Corps, and we were accepted to go to Uganda to work with people who were blind, or I was accepted to VISTA and I would go to Chicago, so ultimately decided to do that. But in the spring term, Dartmouth was beginning to sort of open up their course curriculum, and if you taught in the Experimental College, you would teach the class, but you wouldn't have to take another class. And by that point, all of our focus was on what we were going to do after college, and it was spring, and so, you had to submit your idea and you had to submit a curriculum, and then they would either approve you or not. And I said I would develop an experimental film class, and I would bring people to campus and I would, you know, I would teach a small seminar about movies as I knew it, based on a couple summers of work and my passion.

And I remember one of the classes we had brought in this pretty big actress named Shirley Knight, who unfortunately passed away in the last few months. And she had starred in this movie called *The Dutchman*, which is a very political story about a white woman and a black man, and it was written by a writer named LeRoi Jones, who had changed his name to, I believe, Amiri Baraka. And he was one of the great sort of off-Broadway writers. So, Shirley came up and we showed the film, and during the film, which I'd seen and so I was sort of standing at the back, somebody came in and whispered to me something, and then when the film was over, I went up in front, before I introduced Shirley, and said, "You should all know that Martin Luther King was assassinated." So that was the night. So it kind of brought everything together: that film, meeting a movie star, Martin Luther King's assassination, and teaching, quite frankly, because that's what I was going to do when I went into VISTA.

LIBRE: I mean, it seems like so much happened sort of all at one time there in that, I mean, do you feel like that's the kind of thing that sort of catapulted on, you know, for you to do what you kind of went with in the years after, I guess, with VISTA and going forward and making movies about sort of the social [inaudible]? Because I mean, that's wild that this all came at once.

WERNER: You know, very much so. I think also the kinds of movies that were being made in the late ‘60s and the early ‘70s… There’s a wonderful book called *Pictures at a Revolution*, [by Mark Harris], which is about the five films that were nominated for an Academy Award in I think it was 1967. And there was one old studio Hollywood movie, and then four films that were defining the direction that American film was going. And I still remember them because it’s a wonderful book. I’ve listened to it a couple times. The one old school film was *Doctor Doolittle*, which was a 20th Century Fox musical extravaganza that failed miserably at the box office, but still got a nomination. And then, from right to left, there was *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, Sydney Poitier and Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, which was in retrospect a pretty lame movie. I think it was directed by Stanley Kramer, who had done a lot of very progressive political movies. And this was about a white woman bringing a black man to dinner, and but of course he was a doctor and he was Sidney Poitier and stuff like that.

But the other three movies were *In the Heat of the Night*, which really was a kind of a groundbreaking movie, the first one where a black man actually slapped a white person, which brought gasps from the audience. And *Bonnie and Clyde*, and we know how sort of revolutionary that was. And *The Graduate*. So, American movies in the ‘70s were really about, you know, there was Hal Ashby’s movies about society and there was [William] Friedkin movies, and there was [Francis Ford] Coppola movies and there were, you know, *All the President’s Men*. And so, movie making in the ‘70s was really political in a way that nothing, you know, maybe now Netflix or something like that is doing some of these, but it was a very exciting time. Even movies like *The Wild Bunch*. So, it was just thrilling to think about making movies that had a message that were about what was going on in the country. *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Prince of the City*. So it was just a very exciting time in cinema, and to want to be a part of that was exciting.

LIBRE: Yeah, I think it was clearly a, you know, it becoming more socially [inaudible], and I’m sure it was an exciting time in cinema, so yeah, like so many things. But I think it’s a very interesting and cool way to sort of express that and reach sort of a large audience in a way that a lot of other things didn’t necessarily, especially [inaudible]. And so I guess, sort of transitioning to your time in this, you know, and then under

your Dartmouth career, like earlier you had said that at the day of your graduation many of the students walked out, based on the speaker?

WERNER: Yeah.

LIBRE: Can you talk about that a little bit?

WERNER: Yeah, it was a very… I mean, Jacob Javits was the commencement speaker. The Javits Center of New York is named after him. And he was a Republican, but very much about, sort of a Rockefeller Republican. But he was pro-war, and so we decided to organize. I was a member of SDS. Have you heard of SDS?

LIBRE: [inaudible]

WERNER: It's Students for a Democratic Society. It started in, I believe in Wisconsin or Michigan, and we had a branch. There was a guy named Dave [David] Sinclair ['67] who was a rock and roll guy and went on to start a Detroit rock and roll group, and he was a classmate. And, you know, we'd talk about the war and protest and march on Washington and stuff like that. And, so we organized that anybody who wanted to would wear a black armband, and then when Javits spoke, we'd walk out. Bob Reich was our valedictorian. And, you know, it was a tremendous… Our parents were there, and my parents were beginning to be aware of Vietnam. They were never kind of like anti-war, but they also realized that their son might be sent over there. And so, they were coming around to a different perspective, as was Walter Cronkite and the whole country. I mean, we weren't that radical.

And, so when Javits spoke, we walked out, which I consider ironic because my son's commencement speaker online was Jacob Blum, who produces all the horror films. But he was very sad that he didn't have the live commencement, and here I was walking out on my commencement. But, you know, sometimes I'm not sure whether I'm making these stories up, but I'm pretty sure that that's what happened. [laughter] I guess you can ask Bob Reich about that.

LIBRE: Great. And, you know, looking back on that, was that something that you, did that have a big impact on your experience? Obviously it was a [inaudible]. And is it

something you look back on now and think that that was sort of a culminating event in your activism, at least as a student?

WERNER: Yes, I would say so. I mean, in retrospect, it's kind of a fun story. At the time, even though we were, again, white, you know, we weren't experiencing George Floyd moments or anything like that, or Martin Luther King moments. We were really beginning to see that the American government and American society was corrupt and hypocritical and dangerous. And, but we also were optimists, and we felt that *we can do something to change this*. *We can stop the war*. *We can convert our parents*. In a sense we were very romantic, because we really believed that collectively we would have the power to do the right thing, even if it cost us some time or hurt us physically.

And at that moment of walking out, I was caught up with what I was going to do a week later, which was to drive to Chicago to start VISTA. And I know I was both really excited and really afraid, really scared. I mean, it was one thing to go to Europe, you know, and lose my credit card. It was another thing to go and live in the ghetto in the summer of 1968 when, after Martin Luther King had been killed, and this of course was prior to Robert Kennedy being killed. So, it was a scary time, and that's I think what I was thinking about when I walked out, sort of *this is colorful and this is fun, and this is Hanover and this is summer, but in two weeks I'm going to be in the thick of this race and war problem*, and that was pretty scary.

LIBRE: Sure, yeah, I mean, that must have been a huge change. [Both talk at the same time.] Yeah. And going from there, can you talk a little bit about the training through VISTA?

WERNER: Yeah. Matt, can you just give me—can you put this on pause for two seconds while I just go down to the bathroom a second?

LIBRE: Yeah, absolutely, no worries. [Pause in tape.] So I think when we last dropped off, we were talking a little bit about your introduction to VISTA and what that looks like. Can you bring me through the training situation there?

WERNER: Well, we went to—I drove to Chicago, which was probably the furthest I'd ever driven by myself. And, you know, it was, again, very exciting and very scary. They would—we were

going to have a week of training in Chicago, and then be assigned to some organization. The way VISTA worked, and probably still works, if you are like a church or a poverty program or homeless or whatever organization, charity organization, you would apply to VISTA for volunteers. You would apply for one volunteer or two or whatever, and VISTA would say, "Okay, you can have four, and we'll pay them." So, it was a good deal for the organizations because essentially they would get free labor, and VISTA would give us a small salary and pay for our housing, and I think there must have been some stipend for food. But, you certainly didn't go into it to make money.

So, went to Chicago. They put us up at the YMCA. And there were men and women, which is only worth mentioning because so much of my education was without women by our sides, and you know, you certainly went out with Skidmore [College, Saratoga Springs, NY] girls and Colby Junior College [New London, NH] girls and etc., but we weren't in classes with them or we weren't on the line with them. [inaudible] went to a protest march, but it was kind of noteworthy.

And the person who I remember talking to us—we would have morning and afternoon and evening sessions, and they would tell us where we were going to go and what kind of organizations, but they would also talk about organizing. And the person who spoke was a man named Saul Alinsky. And if you look him up, he was really one of the leaders in community organizations. I think he was kind of somebody that [President Barack] Obama—I don't know if Obama knew him personally, but being an organizer in Chicago and Obama's background, he had a lot of reverence for Saul Alinsky. And Alinsky was a little bit of a sort of a rock star. So, it was—you know, and hounded by the FBI and considered a sort of a "Commie." But, it was kind of exciting being in that atmosphere with all of these other men and women who were really dedicated, putting their lives on the line to change American society.

I and another guy and a couple were sent to Dayton, Ohio, and to a Calvinistic church, a black church in the ghetto of Dayton. So we drove down there and started our work. Dayton surprised me because I've always thought that Ohio was kind of a Northern liberal state, which of course it's not. It went overwhelmingly for Trump. But, Dayton I didn't realize

was really like a Southern city. I mean, it's not that many miles from the Mason-Dixon Line, and in that summer it was like I was really seeing firsthand Jim Crow and racism, even though it was in a, quote, "Northern city."

One of the things that I did for pleasure or to just get out of the ghetto was I became friendly with an African-American man who was attending Antioch College, and Antioch, which is in Yellow Springs, Ohio, which is very close to Dayton, was one of the great liberal schools in America. And I met this guy and we talked at a certain point about *what are you gonna do after VISTA?* Because VISTA was only a year, and if your deferment ran out, you would be drafted. So it was still—I was already thinking, you know, what would I do? And he mentioned that Antioch had a graduate school in teaching called Antioch-Putney, [Putney, VT] and that if I got into that and I taught, then I could have another year of deferment. So that planted that in my mind.

It was the summer of 1968, early, it was June, and hot, and the pastor said to me, "You know, I want you to come up with some programs for some of the kids in our congregation. What could you think of doing?" Well, at Dartmouth I had taken pictures for the newspaper and I knew how to—I had a Nikon and a few lenses, and I knew how to take and develop film myself, so I thought, said to him, "What if I start a little project? I go to the camera stores and see if I can get some Kodak Brownie cameras, cheap cameras, and some slide film, and give them to the kids, and we'll do a little kind of a seminar on photography, and their assignment will be to take pictures of their lives. And then, we can take some time and take the slides and put them into a slideshow and put music"—Motown was huge at the time—"and, you know, get some Stevie Wonder music and Motown music. And I'll try to set up meetings with some liberal organizations around the city in the suburbs. And then I'll take the kids and the slideshows to the community groups and have a talk between the sort of white suburban liberals and our kids?" And he thought that was a fantastic idea.

So, I went about it and I got the cameras donated, I got the slide film donated, and we began to shoot our pictures, and we'd look at the pictures and then we'd talk about their lives, and they'd take more pictures, and we put together a pretty great slideshow. And this took about three or four weeks, and then we were ready to go to the suburbs. And our first

meeting was in a place called Wright-Patterson, which is an Air Force Base. And we set up this meeting, and I drove some of the kids and the pastor drove some of the kids, and we had this like two hour meeting with these very lovely sincere white middle-aged people who were very concerned about race in America and the war, and it was just fantastic. These kids had, some of them had never been out of the ghetto, some of them had never had anything that they'd ever done be appreciated, and they were showing their work and it was fun and, you know, there were comic pictures and there were serious pictures. And the people from Wright-Patterson said, you know, "Let's stay in touch. We'll come in and visit you. You come out here on the weekends." It was just fantastic.

Drove back, felt terrific. The next morning the pastor knocked on the door and he looked really stressed and he said, "Look, you guys gotta get out of here. The Ku Klux Klan heard about what you're doing and they think that you're exporting the revolution to the ghetto." And the Klan was pretty big in Indiana, Ohio, had always been big, and he said, "I just don't want any problems." So literally that day we packed up, and I guess VISTA had been contacted and they said "get them out of there." And we were sent to Detroit, [laughter] which was out of the frying pan into the fire because Detroit had had one of the worst burnings after Martin Luther King had been killed, which had actually led to the murder of some blacks in something, it was called the Algiers Motel incident, which was turned into a book by John Hersey and recently a movie called *Detroit*. So, it was a "hot town, summer in the city" in 1968.

And we were sent to, the two of us—we were split up, the four of us were split. I went initially to a Catholic agency, but they only had like a month left on their VISTA contract. So then afterwards I was sent to a Lutheran community organization which was on Meadowbrook Avenue in Detroit, which is a block from the river and it's down near where there's a very famous club called the Roostertail where all the Motown groups, the Temptations and the Four Tops and Smokey Robinson and the Supremes and Martha and the Vandellas and everybody would sing. But it was the heart of the ghetto. And my job was to run a community organization and to teach at the junior high school, and live with eight African-American orphans between the ages of like 15 and

18 who were wards of the state, and the community organization was giving them a place to live.

So, it was a mind blowing time. As you know from our conversation, I come from a very Eastern rose garden, white privileged Park Avenue point of view, and living with these young uneducated, you know, sweet, sincere orphans was 24/7, was just incredible. And I was very angry, I was very sad, I was very lonely. I never was very afraid, until one day I came back to… There were two incidents that are worth noting. We had a television, and I remember watching the [1968] Democratic National Convention with the kids. I had asked the pastor if I could go. Chicago and Detroit are obviously not very far away, and I knew a lot of people who were going to that convention. And he said "no," you know, "we need you here." So I ended up not being able to go.

And if you remember any of the news, I mean it was—in fact, they were talking about it recently when Trump was invading Washington. But, these images on the TV of Abraham Ribicoff saying, "There's a revolution outside. They're hitting. They're clubbing Americans." And Mayor [Richard] Daley standing up at the convention and giving Ribicoff the finger. And I'm watching this with these kids, and I'm just, like my blood is boiling and my pulse is racing and I want to run at the TV set, and they're laughing. They're going, "Hey, what's the big deal? This is what happens to us all the time." I'll never forget that.

And one day I went back to my room. My only valuables was my camera, and I had a room on the first floor which I could lock, and I would lock whenever I would leave. And I had bars on the window to the outside. And I came home and the door to my room was slightly open. And I remembered locking it. And I looked at all the other kids and I said, "What's happening?" and they just kind of didn't have anything to say. So I opened up the door to my room, and my camera wasn't where I left it, but the window was locked, the bars were there. So, I felt that there was somebody in the room. I opened up my closet and there was this kid. He was not one of my roommates, but he was a kid who would hang out with us all the time. He was about 16 years old and he was looking, you know, like a shit eating grin on his face, and I said, "Where's my camera?" and he said he had handed it through the window to his brother. And I said to

him, “Get it back or I’m gonna have you arrested.” So he went out and I did get the camera back.

But the next night I was walking home, and it was night, and I saw coming at me six black teenagers, one of whom was the brother of the kid who I caught. He was a big guy, he was bigger than me, and four other guys, and they were just laughing and talking. And we were about a hundred yards away from each other, and I was walking toward them and they were walking toward me, and I remember thinking, *I could just turn around and run, but they’d probably run after me and beat the shit out of me.* Or I would just walk right through them. I would just go straight, look at them, and in a sense challenge them to part and let me through. And it really was probably the most frightening moment of my life. But I was too—you know, courage, there’s nothing about courage, you just do what your instinct tells you. And I walked right through them like I was a crazy person, and as soon as I passed them, I just kept going and they started laughing and making fun of me, but they didn’t come after me.

And, you know, after that I realized… I actually moved out of the house at that point and moved upstairs so I would be by myself, but the whole rest of the time I was living above these kids, you know, locking the doors, but pretty—it was the first time I realized that there was danger. So that was… But I taught at the school and it was a very depressing thing because I was teaching junior high and these kids, they didn’t know how to read, they didn’t know how to do math. It was… And the community organization was a little bit of a scam, because the guy who ran it whose name was Reverend [Richard] Eberhard, he was going to run for City Council, and that was really the reason he had this organization. It was kind of a little bit of a front so he could talk about all of his good works. So again, I was realizing how little one could do to solve a problem just one-on-one.

And here’s where the story digresses a little. Once again, it was such a, it was a cold winter and it was a very lonely time, and I made some friends who went to the University of Michigan, and so on weekends I would sometimes go out there just to be among my own people and watch movies. And I had a girlfriend. And I got to know a guy named Dean Jengle. At the time I was very unaware of homosexuality or anything like that. But, I knew, you know, I knew that it

existed. At Hotchkiss if you were accused of being gay, it was the worst thing that you could be accused of. And Dean had a best friend named Allen [Richard S.] Wishnetsky. And Allen attended Wayne State [University], which was in Detroit, and he was this brilliant Jewish kid, but really, really out there, real almost crazy when you would talk about politics and revolution and stuff like that. And I never got very close to him, but Dean was close to him.

And we started a group. It was sort of SDS (slash) meets guerilla theater, and we'd get together and we'd, and again, this is me trying to do something outside of the depressingness of that community organization. And we would have meetings and then we'd go around the city and we'd do this sort of adjunct prop guerrilla theater stuff. And Allen would constantly come up with these ideas, and I'd say, "Allen, you know, we could get arrested for that," and he'd say, "Yeah, wouldn't that be cool?" And I'd say, "I don't think that would be cool and I'd lose my deferment and I would be drafted. So, no, let's not do that."

But, one day, and it turned out to be Yom Kippur, which I didn't particularly celebrate but I knew what it was, we were going to have a meeting, and I went to it and Allen wasn't there, but Dean was literally white as a sheet. I said, "What happened? Did something happen?" And he said, "I just got off the phone. Allen walked into his temple" [Temple Shaarey Zedek] where he had this rabbi who was pretty well known named Rabbi [Morris] Adler, "and Allen starts yelling, 'You people are such fucking hypocrites. You call yourself good Jews. You go to temple three days a year. All you care about is where you're sitting. You don't give a shit about the war in Vietnam. You don't give a shit about the people who live two miles away from you.'" And he's yelling this at the top of his lungs and, you know, created quite a furor.

And his rabbi, Rabbi Adler, walks toward him and starts saying, "Allen, you've gotta calm down." And then Dean tells me Allen pulled out a gun. And I thought to myself, *Holy shit, that's taking guerrilla theater way too far*. Allen pointed at Rabbi Adler, people start screaming, yelling, and then Allen pulled the trigger and shot Rabbi Adler in the head and shot himself. And at that moment, they were both—Dean said, "They're in the hospital. They're both in comas. They're in adjoining hospital rooms," which I thought was sort of

noteworthy. And the next day they both died. So, I never obviously forgot about that.

Again, I digress and say that after a few years, I was admitted to the American Film Institute, and I was a particularly unself-confident person, and so I was really not sure whether I had what it would take to stay in the film business. Our first year we made all these short films, and we would show them to each other. And mine were terrible. And I really didn't know whether I was good enough to become a filmmaker. But my films were getting better, but they were still pretty terrible.

So, we had the opportunity in our second year to make a short film if it got approved. And I'm thinking about stories and I'm realizing that I really am not a good enough writer to come up with an original idea, but maybe if I find a short story, I can adapt it. So, I'm reading all of these short stories by all these writers, and there's this writer I discovered named Joyce Carol Oates, and she's from Windsor, Ontario, which is right across the river from Detroit, and she says that she teaches at the University of Detroit. So, I'm reading this book of her short stories and there's a short story in it called "In the Region of Ice," which is about a nun who teaches Shakespeare at a Catholic university in Detroit, and her relationship with a student, and who tests her faith. And at the end of the story he commits suicide. And I thought, *This is an amazing short story*. But, I could see this as a movie. I mean, I'd make it in black-and-white, set it in Detroit. You know, I knew it. I knew what would go on the walls. And also it was about religion, which I studied at Dartmouth; it's about Shakespeare, which I majored in; and it's about suicide, which I'd been very interested in, intellectually and emotionally. So, I thought it was perfect.

So, how to get the rights to it? I remembered when I was in Detroit, I'd become friendly with this priest named Father [Thomas E.] Porter, who taught film at the University of Detroit. And so I called him, and I said, "Do you know Joyce Carol Oates? It says that she teaches at the University of Detroit." And he said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, because she wrote a short story that I'd like to get the rights for." And he said, "Yeah, I know her, but she'd never let anybody do any of her short stories or books into film." And I said, "Well, I might as well—I can't pay her, so I might as well just ask." And he said, "Sure, I'll give you her information. Just out of

curiosity, what's the name of the short story?" And I said, "It's called 'In the Region of Ice.'" And there was a sort of a pause, and he says, "Of all the short stories, that's the one that she'd never let anybody do." And I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, it's sort of autobiographical. It's based on her own relationship with one of her students. She wrote it, sent it off to the *Atlantic Monthly*, they accepted it, and then something happened and she tried to have it withdrawn from publication, but it was too late. So, I don't think she'd want a movie made out of it." I said, "Do you know what happened?" And he said, "Yes, I do. As I said, it's based on her relationship with one of her students, and in the short story the boy commits suicide, but it turns out that the real boy went out and shot a rabbi and then shot himself."

It was Richard. And I wrote her, and I told her about my relationship and knowledge of Richard, and asked her if she would give me the rights, and she did. And I wrote it, wrote 17 drafts, spent probably six months prepping, making, posting the movie, and it would cost $15,000. We shot it in black-and-white 35mm. It was an incredible experience shooting it with a group of my friends. And to my surprise it turned out pretty well and so, sent it off to the New York Film Festival, and to my surprise they showed it. And since it was shown at the New York Film Festival, I figured, *Well, we might as well see if we can apply to the Academy [of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences] and see if it can get screened for there*, and to my surprise it was nominated, and to my great surprise it won an Oscar.

LIBRE: Well, that's incredible.

WERNER: So again, Detroit and VISTA completely changed my life.

LIBRE: Well, absolutely. I mean, and I think that it's so interesting this is not—it was sort of a personal story for me, too. I mean, as much as it was autobiographical for her, Joyce Carol Oates, I mean, maybe that—and I'm sure that this probably is such that the passion in the work and obviously the product of what you were able to make there, do you feel like your personal knowledge of the situation of those involved, that really influenced that? You know, the work you put in and what you were able to make?

WERNER: Oh, very much. And I think that as film has changed, you know, going from those '70s films to *Jaws* and *Star Wars*

and, you know, blockbusters and stuff like that, I think in general it's gotten much less political. I mean, I would say that probably *The Godfather* or *Star Wars* are very personal movies, and that's part why they're so successful. But I think that the films that I've made, the television movies that I've made, the feature I did about Vietnam, the best work I've done, and I'm very proud of many of these movies, is because they were personal. I really cared about the subjects, whether they were Lyndon Johnson or Hiroshima or, you know, I made a film that was nominated by the Television Academy called *Why I Wore Lipstick to my Mastectomy*, which was a kind of a comedy about cancer. But, I got very close to the woman who wrote it who I'm still friendly with, and that's our relationship.

And I have a relationship to the Shrivers. I was asked to do a film for Hallmark Hall of Fame about a young man who had Tourette's [Tourette Syndrome] and became the Georgia state teacher of the year. And it was produced by Tim [Timothy] Shriver, who is the son of Sargent Shriver who started the Peace Corps and VISTA, and so it was a very personal connection to Timmie, and it ended up being a wonderful, wonderful movie that also was nominated for many awards. So, where I've been able to connect the things that I care about, the thing that I empathize with and identify with to my work, it's the best work I've done, and obviously a tremendously rewarding career to be able to say that about what you love.

LIBRE: Yeah. I mean, it really is incredible especially to hear the trajectory of your work, how something like the Vietnam War draft might have sort of a domino effect that led you to be a part of this to—[inaudible] to make it regionalized which helps, you know, your career itself. And I think there really is a lot in there that… you know, we talked about how this specifically is the Dartmouth Vietnam Project, and people sometimes wonder does that mean that you're only looking for students who served in the war, or you're looking for veterans themselves? And really there clearly is a whole lot more to it that, you know, the war and the [inaudible] environment of the time, there's so much interconnected and important things that led you to have just as integral and as fascinating of a role that sort of sparked your career, and you obviously were the springboard to so much of, as you said, your best work, things that you felt you were connected to. And I do think that's really incredible.

WERNER: Well, that's why I'm very excited to hear about your project because, you know, to some extent, the after effect, sort of the one line about how America responded to Vietnam was *yeah, it was a bad war, but the people who fought there were heroes*. And America turned very law and order with Nixon, and the people who were against the war, they were considered draft dodgers, which isn't quite as noble as fallen heroes. So I thought, oh, this is going to be another project about the unfortunate tragic lives of people who died in our class, or people like my brother-in-law who were against the war, but fought it and nobly, and came home and spoke against it. So it was really interesting to me that you're including the VISTA volunteers and the Peace Corps people who, as I said, my experience was pretty scary and pretty depressing in some ways, but also it changed my life and I know made me a better human being, and also hopefully in the long run I contributed through my movies to a certain kind of consciousness.

LIBRE: Yeah. And I think that that's one of the most rewarding parts about this is that I think students of history, and you try to see the entire scope of things, and I think it's really a great thing which you just reflected on there is that, you know, the war forced you to do things, you know, for some of them to look out and to go to Vietnam, [inaudible] somewhere far away to the outward effect of the US. But also, [inaudible] in the very same way was able to send you to look sort of more internally in the US and to see, you know, on Park Avenue, that's a pretty different street than the one you worked in Detroit, right? That it's a level reflection to see different parts of the United States in that way, which I think is really incredible. And an interesting part in the history of the wars for the United States which really was more [inaudible] about it to look up?

WERNER: Well, it seems like in a sense I think I've given you most of the stories. I'm not sure how many others are worth sharing. But I would just, I would conclude by saying that this is as exciting and interesting and horrifying and revolutionary a time as when I graduated in 1968, and now my son is graduating into this pandemic, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter moment, and it's going to be scary for him to find a job. Fortunately or unfortunately, he wants to be a filmmaker. But I also think it's an incredible time for young people who don't have the same expectations of how the film business

used to be, and they're going to create their own films and their own industry, and it's going to be difficult because of the pandemic, etc., but it's pretty exciting in the same way that that time ended up being very exciting for me.

LIBRE: Right. Yeah, I think that really is, out of all these really chaotic and difficult times, I think you do see a lot of life changing work and really…

WERNER: Right, and maybe as sort of a '70s type cinema that grew out of the '60s will come, you know, in the next 10 years…

LIBRE: Yeah. And I guess one last maybe reflection you might have, I noticed it was really interesting you said, and obviously your time at Dartmouth and sort of going forward, that there were those who were pro-war and those who were anti-war, and there was no left and right, and how there wasn't—and I think you said, this, right? that there wasn't the same sort of vitriol between the groups?

WERNER: No, yeah.

LIBRE: And then, you know, still get lunch together afterwards. How do you think, you know, looking at that in terms of what you see today, that it doesn't always necessarily show that way nowadays? I'd like to hear your reflections on that. I just think that your time experiences are invaluable and certainly your interpretation in regards...

WERNER: Well, wait, I turn that back to you, because you tell me what it's like on campus. I mean, is the campus as divided as the society is? Is it Fox versus MSNBC and CNN, and red state versus blue state? Or is there some kind of recognition of the community and the need to sort of pull together as a college and as a country?

LIBRE: Yeah, and that's really interesting. Obviously, we're not on campus right now. It feels, you know, it's different in a certain way there, but you as a filmmaker, as someone who's producing things for large audiences, and I think you have a good understanding that I think news and social media and a lot of other really public things are ways that we can interact now that you might not have had before to the same degree between students.

WERNER: Yeah, but social media seems to be as divisive a [inaudible].

LIBRE: Exactly, and I mean as a platform to publicize sort of thoughts and feelings. And I would say that, you know, it varies, I think, but at Dartmouth it feels—and this is obviously super—you know, it's exactly what I felt—I mean, it feels like people are generally on a similar page in that there's, you know, this has been a really a powerful week or two that people seem, you know, it's kind of [inaudible] in the sense, *wait a minute, something's going on here*. Granted, I can't speak to beyond what Dartmouth feels like or, you know, to other parts of the nation or places where there's lots of a sort of a uniformed opinion there. But, yeah, I mean, what I thought was interesting was that you're worried about how people were able to be friendly to one another despite like pretty fundamental differences in opinions after the fact, and I think, you know, maybe less so. They're really educated and places where there's a lot of conversation, you know, like Dartmouth. It still does feel like it in terms of the country as a whole, that it's not, you know, it seems like a pretty polarized month. So, right, and I think…

WERNER: I think it's a pretty, I mean, it's exciting, but it's also scary. I think we still believed in the value of discussion, and I'm not saying we're better by any means, because obviously the racism and the sexism were huge compared to today, but I also feel that the wokeness has polarized the situation even more. And God willing, you know, Trump is defeated. But, you know, one wonders whether that's going to go down peaceably with his base, and what will happen to the next President in terms of governing? It does not—it's a scary, exciting, dramatic time, is all I can say. And I'm sure glad I'm here to watch it, because as a student of history and a student of drama, [laughter] you couldn't have more drama.

LIBRE: Right. No, I think that this, yeah, I mean, this is a time where you are truly seeing such a momentous occasion, and I think for you, too, had a special experience. Well, it's special for me to be able to hear, interview you here, and especially people from the Class of '68, people born in the mid- to late '40s, that you saw, that you came of age and were a young person in another time that felt so powerfully chaotic, but also some sort of progress, and then you get to see it again, how it maybe it cycles over what is truly a pretty incredible thing to witness at least, at the very least.

WERNER: Well, thank you very much for having me for this interview. I really will treasure getting a copy of it, because I'm sure it's something that my children will hopefully value.

LIBRE: Yeah, thank you. And thank you so much for being here today.

[End of Interview.]