CHM Computer History Museum

Oral History of Matthew S. "Matt" Stern

Interviewed by:
David C. Brock

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Brock: Okay, well, thanks again, Matt, for doing this. I really appreciate it. I was wondering if you could share with us how you first became interested and engaged with computers.

Stern: So, I went to a math and science oriented high school in New York, but that wasn't where it actually happened. I didn't see a computer or really interact with a computer until I went to MIT, my freshman year, and I took an introductory course that was in the mechanical engineering department, for some reason. I don't remember why. But it was a popular course for people to just get a sense of it. And actually, we programmed on batch cards. So, I feel like I've run the whole gamut of computer experience on that. We had decks of batch cards. If you wanted to change your program, you had to retype the card and find the right place to put it in the deck. And then, I was a little bit at a loss as to what I wanted to major in. I had thought of a chemistry track, but I was taking organic chem, and it was okay, but it wasn't thrilling me. And I liked the computer class, and I went on to take the kind of basic intro computer class in the computer science department my spring term, and that was kind of it. I clicked with it, I liked it, I wasn't bad at it. Let me see if I can silence some of the things that are going to make noise at my desk. Let me take a second.

Brock: Sure.

Stern: Sorry, I should have done that.

Brock: No, please.

Stern: And my Microsoft Outlook isn't wanting to close. I'll try not to say nasty things about Microsoft in this interview, even though they're hardwired from my time at Lotus, still. Yeah. That's really funny. It's not. I can't get Outlook to close. Totally bizarre. I'm going to do the brute force method, and just kill it. Okay. I think things should be a little quieter now.

Brock: Okay. So you were saying, after that introductory computer science course, you were really-- it really appealed to you.

Stern: Yeah, it did. I think I-- there was a certain elegance to putting software together, to creating something, to thinking it through logically, figuring out the parts of it, making the parts work together. And it was quite amazing, what you could do. And it was really-- I think, look, this was 1978 and '79, my freshman year, and I think it was an exciting time in the computer world, but it was still pre personal computers, but certainly, people were getting a much better idea of how key computers were going to be to everything that we did, going forward. So, it was a little bit of an alternate universe, and one that I could work well in. I mean, I think -- I've read Sherry Turkle's book about that [*The Second Self*], and I think I fit some of the profile of some of the people that she looked at. I mean, not-- I think not necessarily to the extreme that some of the folks in her works inhabit, but definitely, it was a place that I could create. And, in a way, I mean, I think software is an art-- it can be a bit of an artistic pursuit, in some way.

Brock: For sure. So, how did your-- how did your interest in computing evolve over that time, from your experiences? Did you-- were you, I mean, clearly gravitating towards programming and software?

Stern: You know, I didn't have a big vision for myself. I mean, that was the product of my childhood. I didn't-- ending up at MIT was not something I had envisioned prior-- at all, prior to my junior year. I-- yeah, for a whole lot of reasons probably not that interesting to anybody here, but I didn't have a big vision for myself. So it was more just one foot in front of the next, and what was working, and what did I like. And I didn't-- I wouldn't say, you know, at MIT, I was a good student. I did well, but I wasn't one of the people that you thought you'd read about, you know? And clearly not one of the people that you were going to read about that was really going to make break-through technology. There were some real geniuses around, as you might imagine. And I wasn't one of them. And, you know, so it was more or less-- I don't even think I thought that much about what was I going to do when I got out of school. Quite honestly, I think if I did have any vision for myself, it wasn't being in the corporate world. It wasn't necessarily being a technical person. It was some sort of formless idea of doing good in the world, which might be where some of the other threads [of my life], you know, peeked out, and--

Brock: Yeah, right.

Stern: And so, I don't think-- yeah, I think, if I really dig, it wasn't my agenda, for what-- whatever agenda I had or whatever ideas I had for myself, it wasn't to succeed in corporate America.

Brock: Did you have any work experiences in computing, prior to graduating?

Stern: Yeah. I had-- gosh. The summer after my freshman year, one of my floor mates at school was working for a company called United Computing Systems. And he was from Kansas, he worked for their Kansas office, but he hooked me up with people who worked in New York, and I came home to New York for the summer, and they gave me a job. So I had my first job. I think I was making $10 an hour, and I think that was really good money at that point.

Brock: Sure.

Stern: And yeah, I supported some kind of-- gosh, I think it was COBOL, and I-- some kind of financial reporting system. So I did that over the summer, and then they actually hooked me up with a remote terminal and a dial-up modem, and I continued to support the things I did over the summer during the school year from my room, you know, which I think was also pretty groundbreaking at that time.

Brock: Yeah, having a terminal in your room, yeah.

Stern: Totally, totally. And then, I had-- I got connected to the engineering internship program at MIT, which was a five-year master's/bachelor's program, which I ended up not pursuing, but that got me a job at Hughes Aircraft Corporation in the next summer, out in Los Angeles. So, god, I don't think I remember what I did there. Some kind of satellite-- something for a satellite, in fact. And then, yeah, the following summer, I ended up working at Teradyne in Los Angeles--

Brock: Okay.

Stern: Creating kind of-- on more of the hardware side. I was programming hardware to duplicate tapes more quickly than they were currently doing.

Brock: And when you graduated, how did the-- you know, what kind of opportunities were you looking at, and how did joining Lotus come into focus?

Stern: So, I'm-- you just made me smile, because I'm recalling-- I had a-- you know, they had interview days at MIT where lots of corporations would try to come and sweep people up who were in their senior year, and I had an interview with Steve Ballmer at Microsoft, and needless to say, he didn't think that much of me, and I didn't get the job. But, in hindsight, you know, he became a, you know-- a very famous person. Microsoft became Microsoft. Because this would have been maybe the spring of 1982, just when things might have been bubbling, but they hadn't reached public consciousness yet, around it. So, I went to work my first year out. I got a job at a place called Logica, which was a British company that had just acquired an American company, and I worked-- and I went to work in the Boston office of that company. It was financial software. And I think I chose between that and a job offer from Digital [Digital Equipment Corporation]. And I think, what attracted me, and I think it was a hard call, was that-- this was-- you know, they were calling me a software consultant, and I'd be working directly with clients, and I thought that the human interaction would be a nice balance. So I think I was always a little bit afraid of getting sucked into the computer world, even at the same time that it was not hard to get sucked into it. Finding a little bit of balance on that.

Brock: And how did the shift over to Lotus come about?

Stern: So, I worked at Logica for a year, and I think, if I'm remembering, things got a little rocky at the company, and I don't-- yeah, I think the-- I don't know if it was the future of the overall company or the future of that office, something prompted me to answer an ad, and I got hooked up with a head hunter that was-- I think I was working with her more generally, but she was connected to Lotus, and she'd been hired by Lotus to help staff their software development, and she got me an interview at Lotus, and that's when things started to click with me. One of the things-- so, haven't said this explicitly to you, but I'm a gay man, and I was dealing with figuring that aspect of my life out at that point. Wasn't really out at that point. And the idea of being out at work wasn't-- it was still fairly revolutionary at that point.

Brock: Yeah, sure, yeah.

Stern: And yeah. And I wasn't sure, yet, how to manage that, my personal life, my parents, with my colleagues, with friends, you know, a whole thing around that. And I went for my interview at Lotus, and in the-- sitting in the lobby of-- it's a nice, corporate campus, way out in Cambridge. And I remember watching the receptionist, Elaine Yeomelakis handle the calls. She was this really sweet, sweet person. And on the bulletin board was a copy of an article from the Boston Business Journal, I think, profiling Chris Morgan, who was a Vice President at Lotus, who the article said was openly gay, and how noteworthy that was, to have a senior executive at a up-and-coming Boston-area company be out as a gay man. That got my attention.

Brock: Yeah, I'm sure.

Stern: And, you know, and a lot of things did. It was a laid-back atmosphere, it was very different than the-- so whatever I thought about the kinds of interaction I would have at Logica, it was a downtown Boston, financial district, suit and tie kind of place, formal, stuffy, working with bankers, you know? It wasn't-- you know, it wasn't necessarily really the place I wanted to be, let's just say it that way. And this place was laid back, and I mean this was a precursor to what Google is now, and Apple is. And, you know, where, you know, there's the free-- we didn't have free food, but we had free soda and free soft drinks, and that was revolutionary at the time. And there were Friday afternoon beer blasts, if I'm remembering right, and things like that. So, it was a real cultural shift. And the job sounded interesting. It was programming in assembler, which I didn't know, but they decided that I was capable of doing it. And, yeah. I think I remember that my friends thought I was crazy, because personal computers were still like what-- that's not serious. You know? That's not serious. You want to be on the minicomputers, the mainframes, whatever, you know? That's where the real stuff is. Yeah.

Brock: And so, what was the first project that you worked on when you were at Lotus?

Stern: I worked on a communications driver for what became Symphony.

Brock: Okay.

Stern: So, getting computer-- getting personal computers to talk to each other over modems, through Symphony. They were-- the driver to run the-- gosh, I'm so-- the card-- you know, the communications card, or the modem card, would be in the-- that would be in the PC. And those were going to vary, depending on hardware. So, we needed drivers-- so, we created a driver interface for Symphony to talk to so Symphony didn't have to know the details of the hardware, it would just have this standard interface to send a character, and then I created the software for at least one of the cards, you know, one of the cards, and prototyped that. And then, yeah, that was my first-- my first role. So, that was really at the beginning of thinking about what was going to happen after 1-2-3. 1-2-3-- I think my first week at Lotus, we were all asked to go to the distribution center, I think it was called, and-- because 1-2-3 was shipping, or at least 1A was shipping in my first week, and they needed all hands on deck to pack the boxes. Just get some boxes, and then the boxes in the sleeves, and then take them over to the shrink-wrap machine, or whatever it was, and get them out the door. So, you know, we were that small, that it was, you know, everybody stop what you're doing, come over, and let's get this product shipped. It was kind of a cool, you know, small company. I was-- I mean, they already thought they were-- had gotten pretty big. I was around employee 107, I think. And a year later, there were 300. A couple years later, there were 800.

Brock: Right, so you were just there for the--

Stern: Huge trajectory.

Brock: Yeah, wow.

Stern: Really exponential. So, working on the driver. And then, what happened was the plan had been for Jonathan Sachs, the architect of 1-2-3, and Ray, Ray Ozzie, and Barry Spencer, they were going to get them out-- because I think Lotus was getting too corporate for everybody, and there were too many interruptions, and too much-- I don't know, did we have email back then? I don't know what it was, I don't remember. I think we did. And just too many

distractions. And the idea was, if they ever wanted to really make Symphony happen, they were going to have to get out of there and create a little-- you know, a little laboratory for their work. And I think, given where they lived, they settled on Littleton, Massachusetts, for that. It's about 35 miles outside-- northwest of Boston. And the plan was for them just to go out there, and, you know, nobody was supposed to bother them, and let them code and let them create, and Symphony would be born. And I think what happened, and I don't remember why, Jonathan decided not to be on the project, at some point. And I don't remember-- I don't remember why. And clearly, I wasn't replacing Jonathan, but clearly, they needed another body to come and help. And I think Ray moved up into the architect position, more or less, and I came on to do more the junior work that they needed. So, inside of-- I think that really happened within three to four months after I got there, I started commuting out to Littleton, and spent the next year holed up with Ray and Barry, creating software.

Brock: Wow.

Stern: Unexpected.

Brock: I was wondering if you could share some of the most, you know, memorable aspects to you, of that project?

Stern: You want it to be about the work? Or about--

Brock: No, whatever was most memorable to you.

Stern: Let me see if I can be work-focused, initially. You know, I don't know if anything stands out specifically, but it was just this tunnel of coding, coding, coding, you know? Catching a few hours of sleep, coding, coding, coding. Talking, making it work, figuring out it wasn't working, scrapping things, rebuilding. And I think what-- one of the things that stands out for me is we were creating a product that was based on 1-2-3, but the vision had really expanded. And we were still dealing, though, in a world of limited storage, in a world where we were still coding an assembler to keep the memory size down. But the limitations of building a larger program on a platform where you're bumping up-- I think we had just gotten XTs [IBM PC XT] with hard disks. We'd just graduated from dual floppy PCs. And it was very primitive, I think, at that point. So I think it was a tough project, because I don't think the tools really matched the vision. We would-- so we had a shared set of files, but if more than one person needed to change a file, it wasn't like a locking mechanism on that. We had a-- Ray wrote a program called P-Merge, which would try to merge two people's changes on the same file, but if they both changed the same code, of course, it wouldn't know what to do, and then there would be conflicts. So, every week, there was a build where we had to merge our stuff and resolve the conflicts. And I don't know how interesting that is, but it seems like a relic of the past. I think what I was thinking about-- the first thing that stood out was losing my keys in the snow, my keys to the office in the snow, car keys, and-- in the snow, one Saturday, I think, that Barry and I were out there. And we had just gone to lunch, at-- walking distance, at the Chinese restaurant that served big scorpion bowls-- and luckily, it-- the snow turned to rain, because my keys got buried in the snow and we couldn't find them, but luckily the snow turned to rain, and six hours later, after we'd recovered from our drinking and gone back to coding, the keys were right there, when we opened the door and tried to leave.

Brock: And you were using PCs to develop Symphony? Like you were using the target machine to develop the--

Stern: Yes, we were, and I think that might have been a little unusual, and I don't know whether that was a good decision or not. But I do think other places were developing software in other environments and then bringing it over, but we were doing it, I guess native would be the word. There were XTs at that point, but, yeah.

Brock: And after that real, you know, push to create Symphony, you know, did you just go straight into another software development project? Or how did that work for you?

Stern: So-- well, I went back to Cambridge, and Barry came back to Cambridge as well, and I'm-- I don't think Ray-- I don't think Ray came back. That might have been around the time when Ray spun off toward Iris [Iris Associates].

Brock: Right.

Stern: You know, there might be-- I might be missing a year here or there, but I don't think Ray ever came to Cambridge. But Barry had an office next to mine, if I'm remembering right. And-- so, look, Symphony was supposed to be 1-2-3 release two. I don't know if that-- how widely known that is. But the idea was the next generation will do more things, everybody who has 1-2-3 is going to want this. That was not a good-- that was not good forecasting on Lotus's part. People did not want to upgrade to Symphony. They liked their 1-2-3, and we made a lot of changes, and I don't think we fully understood the notion of backward compatibility, or just how dug-in people were, and the way they were using 1-2-3 in ways that weren't even necessarily documented, but there were just side effects. Like an example that sticks in my mind were-- I don't think we had-- we used character sets with 256 characters, and we were only using the lower 128, but the upper 128 were graphic characters that could make boxes and things on the screen, you know, very primitive by today's standards, but lines and things. And people discovered those, and had created, you know, fancy things on their spreadsheets that-- things were in boxes and all that. And we took the upper 128 for Symphony to do other things with, not knowing that our existing customers designed applications that, when they loaded them in Symphony, suddenly looked terrible, because they had all sorts of garbage characters where they had just gone and used the characters that were there by default on the IBM PC-- maybe not even true on all the PCs, but--

Brock: I see.

Stern: So, yeah, that level of-- and we changed the user interface, so the macros weren't running. You know, the macros were all based on the menu structure, and we changed the menus for systems. There really was a lot of-- I think we ended up creating a macro converter and maybe creating a way to run the-- other ways to run the macros in Symphony, but it was a lot of jury rigging. And I think the initial reactions may have-- you know, I'm not a marketing expert, and knew a lot less about it then than what little I know now, and-- but I wonder if we really blew it.

Brock: So it proved-- in practice, it proved to be maybe a step farther than a lot of people wanted to take, because they had these kind of like, you know, set practices with how they were using 1-2-3?

Stern: Yeah, we liked it the way it is. I mean, of course, we want it to do more things, but don't go changing-- don't go changing what's been working for us. And I think it's a great lesson learned. I mean, and also, I don't know

whether any other product had that level of installed base, other than, you know, Microsoft DOS at that point. I think we were the number one selling software product ever to that point. So who knew how to manage a base of I don't know, millions of-- I don't remember what the number were, but I think they were in the millions. That was not something-- those were growing pains, let's say that, that I'm not sure people had really adequately thought about at the time. So, that's a long way of saying, my next project was 1-2-3 release two. Even though that was kind of my first project, but that became called Symphony. I remember there was going to be a Symphony release two and a 1-2-3 release two, and so I think we were basically deciding that we had two platforms now, and there was some folks-- I think, in Europe, Symphony was doing a lot better, because 1-2-3 didn't have the same foothold in Europe, so Symphony was reaching customers for the first time, like in Germany, was one of our big markets. So, Barry got Symphony "two" as project manager, and I got 1-2-3 "two" as project manager, but we were going to develop a common core that could work for both. I think there was a common core, at least to some-- there certainly was-- I don't know if core's the right word, but maybe it is. It was common code, or certainly copied code that was very much in tandem with the two products. And that was my next project.

Brock: So was that something that you were working with a whole team of other people to develop that second release of 1-2-3?

Stern: So, yes. Again, there were the two teams, and Barry is-- Barry was definitely-- I think he was the software architect at that point, and I was definitely lower on the chain, so he was sort of in charge of the more-- so yes. So, one of the things that I think the second releases were going to do, they were going to access something that was called expanded memory, which was a way of building out the capacity, the native capacity of the PCs, by installing another card. But you needed some good hardware support and software support underneath it, to access that memory. And so his team was-- he had a few people under him who were developing that software, and probably some other things that I'm not remembering right now. And I had one or two people under me, to help develop the 1-2-3 side of things.

Brock: And that was expanding the capabilities of-- was it just what-- doing what you were just describing, like keep a lot of stuff the same and then add to it?

Stern: Yes.

Brock: Yeah.

Stern: I'm not sure I really remember what features that was for release two, and what set it apart from release one and one-A.

Brock: Was it while you were working on that project-- was this around the time that, you know, you became involved with engaging Lotus about the AIDS crisis? Would that have been-- are we getting into 1986 or so?

Stern: We're not quite there yet.

Brock: Okay.

Stern: But it's interesting and if you want some background to how that happened, I think it was in-- so, Symphony got introduced-- maybe that's why we went to San Francisco in the fall of 1984. You know what, Symphony was introduced at the Pierre Hotel in New York City in June of 1984, if I'm not mistaken. But there was a conference, I believe, out in San Francisco, that a whole bunch of us went to. I don't know if it was the COMDEX or what, I don't remember anymore. And I was out to a few people, but not many people, at that point. It's kind of the old-- like the old guard. I was kind of out to Chris [Morgan] and to some of the other folks who were actually more in HR and some leadership positions there from the first 100 people, but I wasn't really out with the rest of the folks that I worked with. And I'm in San Francisco, and hearing what some of my colleagues are saying about some of the people that they're seeing. And, you know, fruits and queers and lezzies and, you know, whatever. It sounds so silly to say that kind of stuff, but it was real, and it was insulting. And I wish I could say I confronted them head-on, in the moment. I didn't do that. But when I came back, I think I was already on the philanthropy committee at Lotus. More about that in a second. But when I came back to Cambridge, it stuck with me, and I-- we had a new newsletter that was going out to employees and all that, and I wrote a letter to the-- you know, I wrote a letter to our VP of Human Resources, somebody that I felt very comfortable with. And I-- and they said, "we'd like to publish this in the newsletter." I wrote a letter about that experience. "We want to put that in the newsletter, without your name, of course." And I made a decision that I didn't want it to go without my name. That I was in a good position to weather whatever storm might come of that. And they were very protective of me, which I appreciated. About-- you know? Because there was the old guard, and they were very progressive lefties, and I'm sure you've dug a little bit into Mitch's [Mitch Kapor] background and--

Brock: Yes.

Stern: Like Janet Axelrod and-- who was the VP of Human Resources, and other folks, they came from very, very interesting backgrounds. Definitely not corporate, definitely not mainstream in a lot of ways. And so-- and they were protective of me because, you know, we had our white shirt, suit and tie sales team. And again, I don't mean to disparage them at all, because there are actually some really great people there, but we had our-- we were becoming increasingly corporate, and, you know-- and Jim Manzi-- I like Jim a lot, but, you know, whatever he was perceived as, it wasn't as being one of these counterculture people that ended up, you know? And-- yeah, actually, what ever happened to Jim Manzi? Maybe you can tell me, but--

Brock: I don't know, I've been trying to look him up, because he was-- you know, he was the CEO of the company when that book that we have in our collection came out, and he actually-- you know, he wrote something-- well, there-- something very nicely written in there that went out over his name, at least, in that, and I've been trying to find contact information from-- somewhere in the Boston area, but I'm still trying to find a connection. Yeah. Anyway, I'm sorry.

Stern: No, no, please don't be sorry, it's interesting to me. I think it felt like I had-- I had some credibility and respect because I'd been part of that secret team that went off to Littleton and created Symphony, and now was part of moving into 1-2-3 release two, and I just-- I wanted to put my name on it. And I have to say, no negative ramifications at all, at least within my earshot. And--

Brock: Were there any positive ramifications?

Stern: I would say yes. I would say-- so, someone relayed to me how a colleague of ours responded like with these-- something close to these words. "I like Matt, but Matt's gay. I don't like gay people, but I like Matt," you know? And sort of that thing that we've later learned, you know, that knowing someone gay was a great way to bring some-- you know, was a great way to normalize that, when people found out someone among them was gay, it changes them, you know? And it makes sense. And I think that was a great illustration of-- you know, I like this guy a lot, he was a real-- he was a real-- if I can stereotype him, he was Boston working class, and, you know, not from South Boston, but had that accent and that feeling, and, you know, to hear his mind get opened to that-- and he was-- I don't know whether he ever knew that I knew that he had said that, but he was warm, nice, we were-- yeah. Never any sense that it really-- that it bothered him. Or he never changed toward me. And, in fact, I think I-- yeah, if anything, it got to be better acquainted, better friends, after that. And then, also, I think what happened was people started coming to me with their own stories.

Brock: Oh, wow.

Stern: So, it was really interesting, when someone I would have never guessed-- she was married, she had kids, lived with her family, you know, and she comes in my office one day, closes the door, and kind of leans back against it, like just this kind of fear response, and she said, "I am too."

Brock: Wow, oh my god.

Stern: "I've been having an affair with this woman for a year and nobody knows, and, you know, I don't know what to do, and my husband can never find out, and what would my kids say," and all of that. And she actually-- if I remember right, she left her husband, and moved in with her girlfriend in the next year. So, yeah. And a lot of-- I got to know-- certainly, I got to know a lot of people at Lotus who were gay that, you know, the knew about me, we got to know each other. Honestly, I think being gay was a great networking tool. Not that I envisioned it as that, but I think it helped my career at Lotus. I think it helped-- it got me out of the silo of just being the nerd engineer, software engineer, no offense to any of us who went to MIT, and you know, who's he, right?

Brock: Right, that's really interesting, in that particular context, that it was.

Stern: Yeah, it would not have been that way at a lot of other places, for sure. But, for me, I never felt-- I never had a regret about doing it, and I don't think I suffered in any way from that. And I think that laid the predicate for the next steps. I think-- I'm guessing the fact that some of the leadership had already known that I was gay was part of putting me on the philanthropy committee in the first place. I think-- yeah, it just opened the door for me to talk about AIDS, you know? You really couldn't talk about AIDS at that point, if you weren't willing to talk about being gay, or at least having people assume that you're gay and having to deal with that.

Brock: Right.

Stern: So, that was out of the way. Yeah, and you know, I was thinking that-- I think we were early on, in terms of-- as I think I said before, employees being out at work. And I do want to acknowledge that there was a group that I knew about at Digital that was, I think, one of the first groups that preceded us. I think it might have been called--

would it have been called Dignity[1], or something, or I might be confusing things. But there was a Digital-- a group that-- because we ended up creating, I think, a new formal gay group at Lotus that-- at that point.

Brock: Okay. And so, was it once you were on that philanthropy committee that the opportunity for Lotus to participate in that-- well, in AIDS support, or AIDS awareness, and also that AIDS walk, came about?

Stern: So, I decided, in 1985, that the AIDS crisis was-- I felt like it was getting closer to home for me, and I wanted to do something, and I started volunteering at the AIDS Action Committee in Boston, which was the one-stop place for dealing with that, dealing with AIDS at that point. It was the umbrella group for that. There weren't too many other groups at that point. Later on, there'd be a lot of groups, but I think AIDS Action was really the-- it was the GMHC, the Gay Men's Health Crisis of Boston, same thing. And what did San Francisco have? I'm not remembering, but I think there was like an analogous group [San Francisco AIDS Foundation].

Brock: Yeah.

Stern: And I started volunteering, and they quickly suggested the walk was the place, because they needed a lot of support and all that. And I remember-- I think it was the first meeting I went to, when the woman who was running the walk, her name was Liz Page [Elizabeth Page], she said, "We're looking for a corporate sponsor, and we're doing everything we can, and doors are not being opened to us. Corporations do not want to be associated with this disease. And Boston-- you know, Boston being Boston, it was harder than New York. A harder nut to crack than New York and, I would imagine, San Francisco. Very conservative, old boy kind of place. We're not getting anywhere. If any of you have any contacts, if any of you know anything, if any of you, you know, have leads, please share them with us." And I was like, oh, god, I think I'm in the right place at the right time. Because like I'm on the philanthropy committee. And clearly this wasn't in our-- you know, our guidelines were technology transfer and anti-racism. Which was also very progressive at the time. But people did not want to be your staunch conservative place, giving money to the museums and giving money to, you know, the symphony, and all the sort of starchy cultural things that, you know, are important things, but not leading edge at all, very established. So I think I just came back and I said, you know, "I hear that-- I hear that the walk for AIDS in Boston needs a corporate sponsor, and is it something that Lotus would consider? That this committee would consider recommending?" I think it definitely was going to need approval from Mitch [Mitch Kapor] and Jim Manzi, at that point. I don't remember what the, you know, exact leadership structure was then, and I think the message back then was to write a proposal and talk about it. So, I did. I was really just being in the room at the time and hearing the need and deciding I was well-placed to do it. I don't think I really expected them to fund it, but Lotus did like thinking of itself as different, as breaking the mold, as not being your regular corporation and being a place where people like working and treat each other differently and doing it better. So, this fit. This fit the story that we had for ourselves, the narrative and yeah. I mean, I'm really touched when you said that Mitch is actually how you got on to this, that he recalled it as an important thing. I really...

Brock: Oh, yeah.

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[1] The Globe article that David shared identifies it as DEC PLUS, which I think stood for "People Like Us." Jane Meredith Adams, "Slow Going on AIDS: Few Firms Have Programs to Educate Workers," *Boston Globe*, June 17, 1986, p. 25.

Stern: I'm happy to hear that. I mean, not that I would doubt that, but still, to have him hold on to that moves me.

Brock: My impression was that it was very much a point of pride about the sort of place that the company was. I think precisely because maybe it was-- because it was an early move. So, there's-- I mean, because it's-- I imagine it's-- the money part of it certainly is important, but it's also-- and also, I think it must be also not giving the money anonymously, but putting the kind of company's name behind it as well, I think, is a big part of it.

Stern: I think that was really-- it was-- sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Brock: No, not at all.

Stern: It was a $10,000 grant, which more money then than it is now, but still not-- it wasn't the money. It was a symbolic-- definitely the symbolic value of the grant.

Brock: Forgive me for not knowing, but was this like one of the first AIDS walks in Boston or the first?

Stern: It was the first.

Brock: The first. Okay.

Stern: I'm thinking that GMHC maybe had its first walk a year or two before ours here, in New York, but it was definitely the first walk and it was the same thing. It's like "Are we going to walk on the streets of Boston in support of AIDS? Like, what's-- are we going to get attacked? Are we going to get yelled at, shouted at, ostracized, all that?" I don't recall that happening at all, but that certainly, that level of fear-- certainly, I think people gawked because it wasn't something you advertised. It wasn't something a lot of people had seen before, people publicly identifying as having AIDS, loving someone with AIDS, hearing about AIDS, being gay, being an IV drug user, being whatever, somebody with hemophilia, whatever it was. People did not expect to see that. I don't think walks were that ubiquitous at that point either. I think there was the March of Dimes and things like that, but there weren't very...

Brock: That seemed-- yeah. Yeah. That seemed to have been the model and it's become-- it's interesting how it has become such an effective model -- the walk -- for visibility of all different kinds of groups in addition to an effective community engagement, a visibility opportunity, and a fundraising opportunity, but it's really interesting how that kind of model of the walk has grown.

Stern: Yeah. It was really-- I'm getting chills a little bit remembering back to what it meant to be out in public that way and we had a contingent-- yeah, we had a contingent from Lotus that walked under, behind a banner and somewhere I've got a photograph of that. I got to speak on the podium at the gathering in Boston Common. I think it was just 4,000 guests. That was probably a huge accomplishment at that point. There were 4,000 walkers, I think, and the Governor came, which was amazing. The Mayor came and yeah. It's really, really important.

Brock: Could you talk about how-- did that lead to the engagement of other like area tech firms, like DEC to become supporters? Was it-- did Lotus-- I'm looking for the right term, like kind of break the ice or open the floodgate or whatever, show the way for other people to participate or other organizations?

Stern: I think so. I mean, I don't have a lot of recollection and I don't know whether you can point to cause and effect, but I think it was growth and it happened by our sponsorship. It happened with the Governor and the Mayor showing up.

Brock: Right.

Stern: It happened-- more and more people caring more and people getting it, more and more knowledge happening. I definitely think we were part of something and did break some ground, whether we specifically influenced anybody else to do it, I don't know whether you can say that, but I would like to think so. I would like to think that any time someone puts something out energetically in the world like that, there's a response and it builds.

Brock: True. Well, I think you were at Lotus for about another two years or so after the walk and...

Stern: You know everything about me. That's scary.

Brock: What's that?

Stern: You know everything about me.

Brock: Well, I just read your LinkedIn carefully and triangulated off of some other dates that I could find. I hope it's not unsettling. I'm just trying to be thorough! Yeah. So, I was just wondering like how Lotus as a company continued to deal with the AIDS crisis during that time. There's a lot of new understandings of AIDS happening in this time period and a lot of education for people about what it was and what it wasn't. I wondered if any of that was happening in the workplace.

Stern: Yeah. Actually, in preparing for this, I found out-- I had this framed but it wasn't hanging. It was in my closet. I've got this article that was in-- I don't know how well you can see it-- but it was in a local gay newspaper and the pictures are actually taken at an AIDS education session in the-- I forget what that room would be, the auditorium or-- we had a gathering room, a big meeting room at the 161 First Street building and so, there was a presentation about the walk, a presentation about AIDS in the workplace, and that's where those pictures came from.

Brock: Oh, great.

Stern: So, I know we did that. I certainly think we were progressive in our policies, made clear that we weren't going to discriminate on those grounds and made sure people had training. I don't remember too much specific about that, but it was definitely in the consciousness of people that our company, the company we all worked for, had taken a stand on this and people were mostly supportive or if they weren't supportive, you didn't know. It was definitely-- I don't think you'd want to make it known that you weren't supportive of that.

Brock: Sure. So, I think it was in 1989 or '88, '89, somewhere in there that you decided to leave Lotus and become an AIDS Education Coordinator for the Service Employees International Union. Could you talk about just the timing of that and your feelings around that?

Stern: Sure. So, the walk happened in '86. Late in that year, I-- here's a little more Lotus background-- late in that year, I was at-- so, Symphony was not happening in the United States at that point. Things had gone back into 1-2-3.

There was a third release in process. So, maybe it was already out there and I think a Windows release was coming. I don't remember the exact timing on that. But again, as I mentioned before, Symphony was a much bigger product in Europe.

Brock: Yeah.

Stern: We had an office in England, the UK, with developers and they-- the company decided to do a second release of Symphony that they asked me to go over and sort of be the lead. I wasn't-- there was like a project manager, but I was like the lead technical person because I had all that experience developing Symphony and 1-2-3 in the first place.

Brock: Sure.

Stern: So, I went over there and I lived in London for the better part of a year working there, which was really a wonderful experience for me on so many levels and when I came back, I wasn't sure I could just go back into life as normal and do another round of product development. I felt like I kind of exhausted the cycles of that and so, I'd decided in early '88, came back, I think, in January of '88 and I decided that I didn't want to stay and that it was time and I think-- I had been well-rewarded for my work on 1-2-3 and Symphony and I looked at it and sort of that was where our earlier conversation comes back. I always thought I was going to do more in my life than just work and make-- and not that software wasn't great and of all the places I could work in the corporate world, we were making software that made a lot of people's lives more efficient and productive and all good or at least not intrinsically bad. Any technology can be harnessed in many different ways.

Brock: Of course.

Stern: And all that. But we certainly-- I could believe to a certain extent the story that our technology was good and doing good things and changing the world for the better. But I still was at that place of I always thought I was going to do other things and not necessarily keep chasing the check and the glory of whatever that glory is in the software world and like, okay, I want to explore some different things. So, I left and I didn't know exactly what I was doing, but I went back to the AIDS Action Committee and I said "I'd like to learn some things." I found that they actually-- they were developing an AIDS in the workplace education program, which they were actually going to sell to corporations as a revenue stream for the organization. I had no skill as a public presenter. I was very shy. I was very introverted. But I-- yeah. So, they asked and we did a little trade. They said "It'd be great if you want to volunteer to help us create an AIDS reference manual for the workplace." So, I took that project on. I was able to hire writers and designers and I did that, but in exchange, I said "I want you to make me into a trainer," and they were like-- probably laughed at the idea, but they humored me because I thought that I really wanted some more-- I wanted to confront those issues in my life that were keeping me from connecting and being a little bit more willing to-- well, being willing to get up in front of a room and say things that needed to get said.

Brock: Right.

Stern: So, they did, they trained me and I started going out to some area corporations and giving presentations and I was even, I think, getting paid a small amount of money to do that. But it wasn't a full-time gig and I don't think it

really had the potential to go there and I saw this ad for the Service Employees Union was looking for an AIDS educator for its membership and I sent my story into them and they hired me and that was a really interesting year.

Brock: It must have been. Can you share some of what that experience was like? I'm just imagining that you're going into all different sorts of contexts. So, what you would be-- how your messages were being received must have been pretty varied. I don't know. I'd be interested to hear about that.

Stern: Really great question and really interesting. I mean, we were a national program that was funded by a Robert Wood Johnson grant. But I was located in the Boston regional office for SEIU and my counterparts were located one in Chicago, one in San Francisco similarly [and a couple of people in Washington, DC] and we had this sort of matrix management going on. Like, I reported to the national director at the program [in DC], but I also reported to the regional director in the Boston office and these folks didn't know what to make of me. Here's this gay guy, this gay-- I don't know the extent to which they verbalized it, but this was a very-- the office was-- I guess I'm getting into stereotypes, but it was predominately Irish Catholic old-school building-trade union, things like that that-- "Who's this guy coming in here?" So, there was a lot of weird dynamics around that and not that I think this is that relevant, but one of my favorite memories from that time is I'd gotten to know a beautiful person, Sister Zita Fleming, who was a nun who had an AIDS ministry and was comforting and supporting people with AIDS and was very progressive, way far beyond what the church did and one day-- and I'd somehow gotten to know her. I don't remember exactly how and one day, she came to the office and she wore lay clothes and wasn't, to me, identifiable as a nun. But I went-- she came to the office. I went out to lunch with her. When I came back, everybody's like saying "What are you doing going to lunch with a nun?" Like in jest and I'm like "How did you know?" They said "Oh, the shoes and the handbag." So, that one stays with me and it was pretty ironic that of everybody in the office to go, it was the gay Jewish boy who's dealing with AIDS who went to lunch with the nun.

Brock: Right.

Stern: And so, that was-- there were those dynamics, which were not great, and I ended up leaving because I didn't like the feeling that I was getting in the office in the sense that they were really-- they didn't like my autonomy and really were trying to control everything I did. It was really amazing going out to talk to members and they really did range-- this was a major international-- well, major national union, hundreds of thousands of folks, from home health aides to custodial staff, to office workers, to government workers, really wide-- state workers, yeah, really wide-ranging and going up and talking to a bunch of DPW, Department of Public Works folks in Maine, who were keeping the rest areas working on the highways and all that and talking to them about AIDS was really an experience because they were like "We need to wear gloves. Stay away," but they were also-- I think one of the things I learned out of that was if you were willing to talk-- and I'm sure there were major exceptions to this rule, but by in large, if you're willing to be honest with people and to be yourself, there was a way to transcend all that and maybe because it was such a shock to have someone get up in front of a room and talk about AIDS and admit that he was gay, there was a certain amount of respect that you earned. Whatever they thought about that, this guy is here speaking his truth and that got people's attention.

Brock: Yeah. I can totally see what you mean. I mean, it's a brave thing to do. So, even if-- I can see that just that bravery of doing that would kind of disrupt some sort of stereotypical reaction or just get people out of sort of a rut that they're in, just that-- yeah. That's really interesting.

Stern: I mean, look, I don't know what they said about me after I left, but I survived, never had anything thrown at me, and never really heard an ill word. I heard a lot of ignorance at times, but not malevolent ignorance, just people needed to learn a lot and get comfortable and going through COVID right now and feeling my own reactions sometimes on the street when someone approaches me, when someone's not wearing a mask, when I'm aware of my own like fear of contagion and proper distance, wanting proper distance and all that, it's like "Wow." It's another lens into how-- not that AIDS was transmitted in the same way, but certainly in the beginning when there was that level of fear and concern, it's not hard to get.

Brock: Yeah.

Stern: That people would respond that way.

Brock: Yeah. It has been very interesting for me too because just-- well, the year I got to-- when I started my first year of college was 1986 and there was still a lot of-- it felt like a lot of-- still a lot of unknowns and a lot of uncertainties or at least a lot of ignorance around AIDS at that time and props to the university-- we had like intensive instruction about kind of AIDS education such as it was at the time. But that kind of feeling about uncertainty really kind of reminded me of what was happening at the beginning of this pandemic about just the uncertainty and the fear. It was really-- yeah. I can totally relate to what you're talking about.

Stern: Yeah. You want to believe that once the science tells you that you don't have to worry, people will come along with that and some folks were certainly harder to convince, but god, look at the culture we live in now, where people don't want to believe the science on anything. There's whole groups of people completely committed to not believing the science.

Brock: Yeah. In some ways, it seems worse, in a way.

Stern: I agree. You're right.

Brock: Well, so, you pretty soon found another role to play directing an AIDS support organization after your time with the union. Is that right?

Stern: Yeah. I left the union just-- yes, because I just didn't feel like I could keep walking into that office in Boston and I had been on the board of this AIDS agency, a small grassroots kind of agency and the director kind of-- as a board, we weren't doing a good job of governance and the director had kind of overspent and left town one day, basically, and left the organization not in very good shape and since I was not working at that moment, I volunteered to step in as a caretaker to basically shut the organization down, but somehow, that didn't happen because I liked what we did and there were a lot of people committed to what we did and I started to learn about what it was going to take to help build an organization and make it survive.

Brock: What were some of the things that the organization did?

Stern: We were primarily providing support in the way of weekend workshops for people with AIDS and people-- we defined it very openly. It wasn't just for people with HIV or AIDS. It was people affected by HIV and AIDS. So, our workshops brought together a nice mix of people and they were really about creating a safe space for people to

deal with the emotional implications of having [or loving someone who had] what was at that time still considered a death sentence.

Brock: Yeah, sure.

Stern: What happened was so many people would find out from their doctors-- I don't know if you've heard of it, but a friend recently told me about a series, a British show I think is showing on HBO Max called-- oh, god, I'm blocking on the name of it. It will probably come back to me. It's set in England in the mid-1980s about gay men going through the AIDS crisis, worrying about and dealing with it and it really took me back to the way doctors would say "There's nothing I can do for you. You're going to die in six months," and there were definitely-- whether they said that exactly that way or communicated it in some other ways, that was the message people were getting and many people were just going home, drawing the blinds, pushing people away, separating themselves, just so ashamed of their situation and so helpless and they went home and they died, and I think we know a lot more now about the mind-body implications of mental state. Not to say it's a miracle cure, but there's some really strong studies at this point that show people with support who have terminal illnesses live a lot longer than people without support. We even know that not even with disease. People who report good levels of community around them, they live longer, and they don't have heart attacks. They don't die at the same age that they might have if they were lonely. It's really, I think, pretty well established now. We were about creating community for people and about giving them a chance to really break through that sense that they were dying, that they were doomed, not to counter the idea that they might be dying soon, we weren't denying that at all, but we were certainly challenging everybody in the best way possible to recognize that they were still alive in those moments and there were things worth thinking about, dreaming about doing, and we have people that would come in at the beginning of these workshops and they really-- they looked like they were dying and they could barely move and they needed help getting up and all that and we had them-- some of them, we had them dancing by the end of the time. So, just breathing and all that stuff that we know now from yoga and from visualization and meditation and all that, but there really are ways to-- there are real physical implications to what's going on in your head.

Brock: Absolutely.

Stern: So, I think we were really early and ahead of the curve on that and we weren't really that science based. So, it was a little bit of a-- it was a little airy-fairy for some people. But actually, one of the things that I guess I'm most proud of is I was able to pull together some of the early literature on what they were calling at that time-- I don't know if they still call it that, but psychoneuroimmunology, which is basically a fancy term for body-mind effects on your health and I wrote a grant proposal and we got funding from-- I think we got Ryan White CARE Act funding. That was administered through the Department of Health and hospitals in Boston and I thought that was a real-- that was a bit of a breakthrough.

Brock: Yeah, absolutely.

Stern: To be able to ground our program in some of the science that was going on and I did try to formalize that program a little bit and get some more structure to it to make it a little more palatable to funders. You've got to do that sometimes.

Brock: Absolutely. So, what was your kind of next path after working with that organization?

Stern: Yeah. Well, that's called burnout. I hit the wall after about four years of doing that. I felt like we'd gotten to a place where we weren't all-volunteer anymore. I was drawing a salary. We had some grants. We had some respect in the community. We had a functioning board and I thought "I think I've hit a wall and I need to step back," and actually, I did a sojourn back in technology because Barry Spencer, who I'd worked with at Lotus, he had moved out to California and he had started a software company called Cool Software Technology in Santa Cruz and I was traveling not long after I left the AIDS job and I went to visit him and he said "Why don't you come out here and work for me?"

Brock: What did you do-- what did you two do together?

Stern: He had a team of software engineers that were primarily working under contract with a PDA manufacturer. What were those, personal digital assistants?

Brock: Yeah.

Stern: General Magic, I don't know if that name rings a bell.

Brock: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Stern: So, we had a contract with General Magic I think maybe to create a PC-- it's kind of the way now that you can access an app on your phone or you can access the app through a website or software on your PC. I think we were creating-- I honestly don't remember too much, but we were creating a Windows version of the app that they had on the hardware device that they had.

Brock: Interesting.

Stern: Some way to like sync it and you could work with it in ways that maybe you couldn't on the PDA but then you could have it all on the PDA when you're out.

Brock: Right.

Stern: So, I wasn't writing code at that point. I was sort of in a project management role. But that didn't last too long. I think General Magic was having problems. I think the relationship we had with General Magic wasn't going very well. At some point, I think the contract went away. I don't remember all the details to that and the job kind of went away and I moved up to San Francisco and indulged in another desire of mine and became a yoga teacher and did some consulting to pay the bills. I actually learned how to do Lotus Notes. So, I circled back to Ray Ozzie [in a way] and I learned how to be an applications developer in Lotus Notes. My big client was at Peoplesoft. There were a number of applications for them and taught a few yoga classes a week.

Brock: And then you-- at some point, you came back to your hometown of New York City. Is that right?

Stern: Yeah. I'd had a very close relationship while I lived in California with someone who died in 1999 of AIDS and my life kind of stopped making sense out there after that and I didn't feel very rooted in San Francisco and I wondered if it was like-- honestly, I think I avoided-- well, no, they'd actually left New York a long time. I should

say my family didn't live here anymore. That made it easier to come home. They'd actually been gone for a while. But I thought I don't know where else to go. Let's give New York a try.

Brock: And when was it that you started working with sort of animal protection and the ASPCA?

Stern: Yeah. It's a long checkered history, isn't it? It's hard to find the threads sometimes.

Brock: Not at all.

Stern: Well, I was a schoolteacher for a number of years, which is what I basically did when I came back to New York is I became a teacher. I got a couple of master's degrees, made my mother happy, finally. But at least I got a couple of master's degrees and one of my degrees was in educational leadership, but I also really found education was just a really, really stressful, hard road and I didn't find the right opportunities and I was in a challenging-- the circumstances were challenging that year and I was really reaching my limit. It was really, it was the hardest job of my life when I was working in education and the reward was not matching the effort and so, another turn was I got an offer out of nowhere to work for a hedge fund. So, it was really hard. I had to think about-- I was falling asleep on the couch at seven o'clock at night after-- I was getting up at five in the morning to be at a school I was working at. Classes were at seven-thirty. I'd want to get there at six forty-five and it was just-- come home and you mark papers and fall asleep and it was just-- it was not a life and I thought "Am I going to regret turning down a job at a hedge fund to keep doing more of the same?" So, I went to work at this hedge fund. It was fine, but they didn't quite manage-- they toughed out the financial crisis in 2008, but they never really got their mojo back after that and basically died a slow-motion death in 2011 and I left there in 20-- I might be off a year. That might have been in 2012. I left there, had a year looking for work and I decided I wanted to focus on nonprofits again, to take all this whole arc of my life and say "What's going to satisfy me? I want to do meaningful work. I want to have impact," and I think that degree in educational leadership was a little bit like a nonprofit MBA.

Brock: Yeah.

Stern: I learned enough, and I ended up in a job that was like a Chief of Staff role, I think, for my boss at the ASPCA. I wasn't specifically looking to do animal work. I wanted to do something good. I wasn't getting a lot of bites on my resume and I think I wasn't an easy sell at that point. You had to want to look deeper than-- you couldn't put my resume through a scan and pull-out keywords and find ten years of experience in this and five in that. It wasn't vanilla, but I think it was still strong and set me up well for the work that I do now, but it took someone who was willing to read between the lines on that. No regrets-- it's been good challenging work. I still hold out the thought that at some point, I'd like to do nonprofit work geared more to social justice and civil rights and human-oriented, but we do really good work as far as we're concerned with and I'm really proud of the work I've done there and really proud of the work my colleagues do, and I've got to say there are some really smart people working at the ASPCA. I have plenty of experience working around smart people from being around them from college to Lotus to just really intelligent people and I'm now working with some really bright people and very strategic and I've learned a lot.

Brock: That's great to hear. Well, I think that-- I've come to the end of my question list, Matt. Is there anything that I should have asked, that I failed to or anything that you can-- you might want to add about any of the things that we've talked about?

Stern: I imagine you've heard more than you need to, but...

Brock: No. It's been a real pleasure to talk with you.

Stern: Thank you. No. I feel like I've been on a journey at 30, 40-- close to 40-year journey from starting in college and moving forward and now, I think we've covered a lot. I'd say I-- in hindsight, I think Lotus was a really fun place to work, a really rewarding place to work. I enjoyed the people there a lot as much as anywhere. I made some good friends there and don't know if I fully appreciated it. It really was the first long-term job I had, more than a year, but I would say it was a special place and even if you can be a little-- I can be a little cynical about it grew and it got more corporate and what was it really about, but I really do think the folks who started it were very special and were really trying to create something that was different and to a certain extent, they succeeded, at least for a while and nothing lasts forever.

Brock: That's for sure.

Stern: So, it was great and what a wonderful thing they did to take a stand and to support gay people and to support people dealing with AIDS. Yeah. I'm really grateful for opportunities they gave me because I think-- I may have been the-- I don't think catalyst is the right word. I may have just been the person in the right place at the right time, but it wouldn't have happened without the framework that had been built around here. So, I don't have allusions that I could have walked into an insurance company and done the same.

Brock: Yeah. But you certainly took advantage of this kind of special context that you were in.

Stern: Well, yeah. Maybe that's what we're supposed to do, right? Not to get philosophical about it, but I guess that's the ideal. That's the aspiration, what opportunities are here for me that might not even be-- or might even be low hanging fruit relatively speaking.

Brock: Well, thanks again so much. If you...

Stern: Thank you. I loved your questions and thank you.

Brock: Oh, yeah.

Stern: For being interested in me, I appreciate it.

Brock: Oh, it was great to talk with you.

END OF THE INTERVIEW