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Anne Zachary '93-Jacob Stolar 2008

Anne Zachary

Jacob Stolar

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Recommended Citation

Zachary, Anne and Stolar, Jacob, "Anne Zachary '93-Jacob Stolar 2008" (2018). *Alumni Oral History Project*. 13.

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Ann Zachary: This is Ann Zachary, class of 1993 and today I am talking with

Jacob Stolar: Jacob Stolar, class of 2008.

AZ: Nice to meet you.

JS: Likewise.

AZ: Alright, so, two words: Why Conn?

JS: Why Conn? I remember when I was doing, like, tours when I was a junior and senior in high school, I never felt—this is so cliché—quite as at home as I did like when I first stepped on campus here. I got a very positive vibe from everyone I talked to. I came from a small high school and I got the sense from talking to people and from visiting a couple classes that this was a place where even if the class was large, there were professors who were going to [unclear], yeah professors who would like take time to invest in the success of all their students and be available if you need to meet, which they certainly were, and often happy to see me. And, you know, the more I read about it, the more I talked to people, the more advice I got from people who knew the kinds of schools I was interested in I was pretty sure from day one that this was the place I wanted to be. It just kind of worked out.

AZ: Awesome. Now, you say you came from a small high school? Where was that?

JS: It was the Fieldston School in the Bronx in New York, one of those fancy private schools, but my graduating class was about 120 people.

AZ: Okay. Nice, and what did you study while you were here.

JS: I was a history major.

AZ: Me too.

JS: Excellent- excellent choice. So, my concentration was in South Asia. I did study abroad in India, you know, with the SATA- the SATA India program, but one of the things I liked about, you know, the way the program was set up here was that I could take a little bit of everything because, well, it's hard to pin one thing down to focus on specifically and the way it was set up here kind of facilitated that.

AZ: So a lot of the things, you know, people say sometimes is "What does one do with a degree in history?" you know, and I'm on your side here, obviously. So- so, what- so how did, you know, what you studied at Conn shape your life afterward, you know, if at all?

JS: Oh, definitely. Directly it's not easy to draw a line, because, you know, I did not become an historian. That said, I think—this will sound so simplistic—how stuff happened, knowing and, kind of, understanding why things happened gives you a leg up in understanding why things are happening today. Are you familiar with *The Onion*?

AZ: Yes.

JS: There's a fantastic headline I come back to, something like, "Nation's Historians Beg People to Look at What Happened in the Past Before Making Decisions." And, you know, if you read about history and study history, you can feel like you're banging your head against a wall, "No, we already did this." So, I guess that's not really history depending on how you look at it. In terms of being a history major and how that helps specifically: writing. The writing demands, not even in terms of volume, in terms of the pressure you have to write clearly, concisely, getting your ideas across. My job now, I work with engineers, who are brilliant, but a lot of them have a harder time expressing their ideas in prose that normal humans—I'm using the air quotes now—can understand. I find myself, just as I'm helping them reshape- reshape their language, but also doing a lot of- doing a lot of editing of prose written by engineers to be understandable to people without a technical background but still- but still- but still containing what- the essentials of what needs to be communicated. And I think just getting all the practice I did, writing down ideas clearly here, editing things over and over to make them understandable to someone who does not have a deep grok on what I am talking about, gave me a big advantage of what I am doing now in my career.

AZ: Awesome. Now did you know you wanted to study history when you came here or was that something you found out when you got here?

JS: It was one of a couple choices I was considering. I was thinking like that, maybe English, maybe Government and I- and I cycled through a couple. But I took like one class my first semester here, it was the basic American history survey course, with Professor David Canton. I don't know if he's still here, I hope he is because he is great.

AZ: He was not here when I was here.

JS: Yeah. No, he's, you know, very type A, very personable, boisterous guy with a clear love for his subject and coming at- and coming at things from a different perspective with a large focus on African-American history and even when that wasn't the specific topic of the course, coming from things from unexamined angles you didn't get in high school. And I had really good high school history courses also, but this was something at a different level, something I hadn't really done in depth before, encouraging students to examine things from unexplored directions and think harder about like why something happens the way it did and he did it in such an effective way. That was the big- when it came time to decide a major, that's what I kept coming back to: about how much fun I had in that class, how much I was pushed in that class, and how much

more I wanted to- to- time I wanted to- how much more time I wanted to spend with history. And that is what really pushed me over the edge.

AZ: Great, and so you were- did you focus, no, you focused on Southeast Asia?

JS: Yes, yes, but also, you know, this is what I was saying, like I took some, much more, American history classes as well, including African-American history, again with Professor Canton. And I was glad I was able to fit that into my schedule, because it was one of the most challenging but most—I don't want to overuse the word interesting—but one of the most fascinating on of the most fascinating classes I took. And it- it- I got to read a bunch of sources that I probably never would have thought to push myself to read otherwise, so ...

AZ: Okay, so you liked your intro to American history and obviously Professor Canton's African-American history. Were there any other courses, history or not, that- that stood out to you as you know being particularly wonderful or particularly the opposite?

JS: Well, in the history department, one of the reasons I wanted to focus- focus on Southeast Asia was I took intro to Indian history with Professor Ed Brodtkin and he basically spent three-quarters of the class- of the course teaching us incredible stuff about, you know, the history of the subcontinent and the other twenty-five percent leaning on us to sign up for his study abroad in India the following fall. And it was very effective because that's what I wound up doing. But it- that- I came in pretty much knowing nothing about India besides maybe the very basics. There is so much fascinating stuff that we read in that class. I took a second-level course next semester and then I did study abroad in India doing a very self-directed sem- seminar course and I got to write a- a long study on the history of Judaism in India, which I knew less than nothing about going in. It was something that he touched on briefly in the intro class and I was like "Wait, what there's Jews there?" So, you know, point to that as something that I never would have thought to dive into if I had not taken that class.

AZ: Me neither, before this conversation. I'll tell you ...

JS: There's not many left. A lot of them moved to Israel. But there's a couple small communities left and a long, long history of Jews there, which, like, "Wait, what?"

AZ: That's really interesting. Now I- now I want to know about that.

JS: Let me find some books for you.

AZ: That sounds great. That's okay.

JS: Yeah, so I would say that and, outside of history, I came in as like, you know, definitely not a science person, but I had to take a science class, so my friend and I signed up for- for astronomy.

AZ: Me too. That's really funny.

JS: This is like the only, like, big, large lecture class that I took when I was here. It was, like, in a stadium-style seating kind of thing. You know, I was interested in space. I knew- I knew some stuff. I had never taken a real course on it. This is again where I encounter a professor with a A. such a clear love for his material that he was trying to convey to us ...

AZ: And who was this professor?

JS: I cannot remember his name. He was a visiting professor I think, I'm not sure if he's still here. I was just talking about him last night with my friend who is here with me this weekend. We, like, "What was his name? He was so great." Now I can't remember his name. But, just, let me put it this way, in order to demonstrate, like, electron- electron levels and and- that whole concept, he demonstrated this by sitting on the stage in a spinning chair, spinning around and we would throw balls at him. And he would only catch, like, the certain kind of balls, like where electrons stay on the atom and so on. Like, you're willing to put your body on the line like that.

AZ: My astronomy course was not like that at all. I think I might have enjoyed it more.

JS: And this is another example even beyond just the- the weirder stuff that happened there, we had, you know, a midterm and a final and he [unclear] he said "I'm going to be in my office at 3 pm on Thursday. I will stay there until nobody has any more questions about the material."

AZ: Very generous.

JS: Yeah, and he was there. Like, we grilled him and he just kept explaining stuff over and over with infinite patience. I hope if I am ever teaching something, I can demonstrate his level of patience and commitment, so ... It- that was such a great class and it was- if I had to take a science course, I'm glad it was that one.

AZ: Wonderful, so we talked a lot about academics, so let's talk about your social life. What dorms did you live in?

JS: Four dorms. I kept moving north on campus, so Freeman, Blackstone, where is that, Larrabee, and then Wright.

AZ: Okay. And what was your residential experience like? Was your roommate situation good?

JS: I had roommates both freshman and sophomore year. Freshman, I had two roommates because my first roommate transferred after the first- after the first semester. And they were, you know, both nice people, we just didn't have a whole lot in common, so, you know, no conflicts, just not much to talk about. Second semester, I got a bad lottery- second year, rather, I got a bad lottery number, so I was one of those sophomore doubles. And then I was roomed

with a guy kind of sort- kind of knew, wasn't close friends with. You know, it was fine. We were not- we were never close, but he was- he was a nice guy and I heard some stories of roommate conflicts and, just like, even if we were not best friends, I'm glad we're not actually fighting, so I can't- I can't complain too much about the situation.

AZ: Did you have a favorite dorm that you lived in?

JS: I was partial to Larrabee just because that was my second semester junior year, we, me and two friends were coming back from study abroad, we had put in- filled out forms, like "Please put us near each other, we'll be coming back," and they put us 1, 2, 3 next to each other on the hall.

AZ: Very nice.

JS: So like, wow, that that's- that worked out very nicely. So that- the dorm was fine, I was just really happy with my living situation.

AZ: Okay, so while you were here, what was the campus climate like? Were there any events that, you know, shaped that particular time, you know, of, you know, of the College or the country? Or any events that stood out?

JS: Let's see, I don't remember it being that politically active of a campus but I don't want to say, like, you know, I know everything that was going on, because I definitely didn't. I did some stuff with the College Democrats, but I was never super politically involved. I don't remember any, like, huge protests during- or anything like that. In terms of the overall climate, it was, you know, the waning- the waning years of the George W. Bush administration and near the end of it we were- a lot of us were getting into the 2008 election Hillary-Obama Hillary-Obama, forever and ever, so I had some interesting conversations with- with my friends on that topic. Big events? I- I know this might be tunnel vision on my part, I just can't think of any big events that took over or roiled- or roiled the campus that I was super involved in.

AZ: Okay. What groups or activities that you were involved in?

JS: Yeah, so I did- I worked at the College radio station all four years. I had a show my freshman year, my senior year. I was-what was my exact job title?-I was like the managing director. I had the whole roster of students with shows and also community members with shows. I was the guy who put together the schedule and tried to manage the various interpersonal conflicts that came up there because ...

AZ: What kind of conflicts come up there?

JS: Oh man, so the people that get involved ...

AZ: Can of opened worms everywhere ...

JS: I actually just ran into our station manager last night. We had some fun reminiscing about this. Basically, so half the djs are students, half the djs are people who live in the- live in the area and the people who live in the area, they are interesting people. We had two shows, two slots dedicated to polka music.

AZ: Oh?

JS: There's a large Polish population around here.

AZ: Okay, I like to hear that. I'm part Polish myself.

JS: Yeah, there you go. So, one was run by one gentleman. One was run by a husband and wife. They could not stand each other. They had endless battles over who played what music, who had to do what, you know, what duties. And they just couldn't stand each other, so it fell to me and our general manager to- to mediate that. We also had- so WCNI, the radio station, was not commercial, we don't play ads but we do have to read PSAs twice an hour. We had two gentlemen who did not want to do this. And they decided to drop an F-bomb on the live mic to tell me how mad they were about this. And one FCC fine for bad language right there could wipe us out, shut down the station. So I had to like ... yeah.

AZ: He's making the slashing motion across his neck, just so you know.

JS: So that was fun. We had to talk people down- talk people down from the ledge there. Interest- interesting personalities were involved there.

AZ: Did you say you had a show- you had a show yourself?

JS: Yes, I did.

AZ: What was your show?

JS: Jazz and blues, I did- Saturday evenings. That was a lot of fun.

AZ: The midnight to 3 slot or ...

JS: Only my- only my first year. No, I got- when you're the bottom of the totem pole, you get what- you're talking about my first show was 1:30 to 3 in the morning, but once I was a little higher on the hierarchy, I got to do 6 to 9 pm, which was a lot more conducive to someone with a sleep schedule.

AZ: Right, yeah, absolutely. So, do you keep in touch with your classmates? You said you were here with a friend.

JS: A couple friends. So, yes, definitely. I just got married last April and ...

AZ: Congratulations.

JS: Thank you. And three of my friends were in my wedding party and they are all here this weekend and we- all of us- the summer after we graduated we went on a cross-country road trip together in a minivan. We've all stayed in touch since. And yeah, so those are, like, the ones I've stayed the closest to, three friends there. And then some others who, you know, we see when we see.

AZ: How did you meet most of your friends? Was it through dorm life or was it through the radio station or, you know, classes or other activities?

JS: Honestly, one friend I met just because I went to one of those pre-semester events in New York City organized by an alum- by an alum there and that one person there when I got on campus we ran into each other, she introduced me to her roommate. The original person I met transferred after one semester, but her roommate has become one of my dear friends that I was mentioning before. And others, no joke, just sat down randomly at my cafeteria table during orientation looking for someone to hang out with and he was in- he was in my wedding nine years later, so ...

AZ: Very nice, very nice. I'm going to ask a question that was asked of me when I was interviewed earlier, just because I think it's a fun question. If you had the money to endow a building to donate to this campus, what would that building's purpose be?

JS: Well, obviously, a massive radio station. No, that's a good question.

AZ: Hey, if it's a massive radio station, it's a massive radio station.

JS: I'm being parochial, but could you get us some new microphones? Anyway, that's a really good question and I'm going to need time to think about this one. I would have said the library when I graduated, but now that's all spruced up, so ... I mean, I would say, honestly, some of the dorms are getting pretty dingy. It's- it's they have a real old- real old feeling to them, so I think, you know, a resident- if you're going to have a residential college, you should be able to have dorms, I'm not talking luxury here, but just in terms of better lighting, better ventilation, it can feel- it can feel more like home, home away from home, especially for people who are leaving home for the first time. So I would say, you know, looking into a new dorm or renovating the ones that we have. That said, honestly, I would have- I would have always said the library, better stacks, better electronic records, better study spaces, and they've done that, so ... I know we can't do this, I wish I could go back and think about this one and get back to you. But these are the first ones that come to mind, like better ...

AZ: But, do you know what? That your first response is usually the correct one.

JS: Yeah, so you know what I would have said five years ago and now what I would have said based on, maybe I'm biased because I am staying in the dorms this weekend and- and- and going back in there. But, no, I'd say- I'd say- I'd say- one more thing that I would say is renovating some of the run-down classroom buildings, New London Hall, Bill Hall, which, when I was taking classes there, they were feeling a little- they were feeling a little dingy. They could use better lighting, better furniture. It does make a huge difference in the way a school feels.

AZ: Yeah, hasn't New London Hall been redone recently?

JS: I haven't been inside.

AZ: Oh, you haven't? It was- I think it was pretty new about five years ago.

JS: So that was- It was my first time back- It was my first time back in ten years, so ...

AZ: Oh, I see. I think that's been done and I- I've heard that Bill and Fanning are next, besides the arts center which is going to have ...

JS: Bill- Bill will definitely be needed, so they're- they're- they're stealing all my ideas.

AZ: Yeah, well you know far everybody has said dorm, including me.

JS: Well, there you have it. There you have it.

AZ: Exactly. Let's see, what- do you have any favorite memories that you'd like to talk about, in any capacity.

JS: Favorite memories ... I would say as a general memory, just being lucky to have- make some really good friends who are really smart and inspired me to keep up- keep up with them and push myself, be like, you don't want to look like you're the slacker here, like not- not pushing yourself, taking harder classes, taking on more activities. And I'd say in general just being able to make those kinds of friends who are great in your personal life and just by being awesome are pushing you- are pushing you to do more. In terms of, like, major ev- like events, one-time things, I would honestly say study abroad, like as a- as a general thing. That was a big reason I chose to come here, the study abroad program and it lived up- it lived up to expectations. I never would have gone to India otherwise.

AZ: Yeah, now I wanted to- now I wanted to ask, because there's something I didn't get earlier, people listening may have, I don't know. Because you were talking about Professor Brodtkin's class and about 25% of it prepared for the study abroad program. Was this something that you were convinced to do when you were in the class or was it you were taking the class in preparation for the program?

JS: The first one. I had- I had considered- I took this class on a whim. Like, I needed a requirement and "Oh sure, India, that's interest. Let's try this." And, you know, the work in the class, how interesting it was and he sold- he sold us on this program, basically, so I was considering the study abroad options and, like, you know, why not? I enjoyed his class. I would never get this opportunity otherwise, so let's take this dive.

AZ: Yeah, awesome. Alright, do you have, you know, anything that you would have done differently?

JS: So I mentioned before I had friends who, just by existing, pushed me to do more, take on more. I think I would have- if I had to go to like back with my memories of how this was going to go, I would realize oh, this four years is going to go fast. Do not pass up opportunities. Like, try a cool thing. Get involved in a new club, take this interesting class, because you don't know when you are going to have this chance again, and, you know, suddenly you will be looking for a job. And so I would say, like, let's say I would have gone for being involved in student government earlier on or I would have gone for leadership roles in- in clubs before- before senior year. I would have taken more advanced-level classes, rather than ... There's one time I chickened out from taking a hard class, which I have regretted ever since, just because, you know, I met the professor and he laid out, okay this is going to eat up all of your time, was like, literally what he said to me. I was like, maybe not. And now I'm wishing ...

AZ: What class was it?

JS: It was something for the- I can't remember the title of the class but it had something to do with the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. It was this seminar-type class, so you're going to be doing all ten different projects, writing all this stuff. I was like this was too much work. I'm going to take this other thing instead. I didn't think I could have done it. And now, you know, I took a similar- a similar class later on and did fine. Maybe I could have done that.

AZ: Yeah. Sure. What is your wish for Conn students today or for the future?

JS: Like, what I would tell students coming in or ...

AZ: Sure, yeah, like what experiences do you want them to have, like if you want to say what you would tell them.

JS: What experience would I ... I would say, I I- think this goes into both. Don't miss the chance to interact with professors, office hours, through talking- through talking after class. I didn't realize until after I graduated that professors love when people come to see you, like you're not bothering them. It's hard- it's hard to get- to get that out of your mind when you're 18 years old and you're coming in and it feels very intimidating. So, I would say, no, take advantage- take advantage of their time. If you're interested in what they're doing tell them and ask them questions and they'll be happy to talk with you about it. You make- you learn stuff and you make a connection that's going to pay off later on. In my- I hope, you know, students who are

coming in, you know, dear God, the class of 2022, I hope they're aware of all the opportunities that exist here, they're coming in knowing what- knowing what's awaiting them and that they're going to be able to manage their time to take, you know, interesting and challenging classes, but also get involved in these activities that are, you know, they're not only fun but they're a great way to, you know, as I saw myself, make- make lifelong friends and connections even if it may not seem like that when you're 18 and the ends seem- and the ends seem so far away and I hope those opportunities continue to exist and expand. I was looking up the list of clubs that's posted on the wall of Cro last night. Like, you know, some of those definitely did not exist when I was here. They sound awesome.

AZ: Like what?

JS: Well, like some of the- some of the arts organizations. The Center for Race and Ethnicity- Center for Race and Ethnicity was just getting started when I was here. It looks like it's been developed a lot, so I- I'm glad that they are doing awesome things. And yeah, that's- I'm glad that exists. I hope we have more brilliant students that have more great ideas and that continues to expand and more opportunities continue to grow here.

AZ: Great. We have a- just a little bit of time left, so is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to say?

JS: You know, I came in here because I felt like it was a really friendly environment. People were able to talk and I was coming in as a really intro- introverted kind of guy and I would say, you know, for any students coming in here, don't be afraid like to go ahead and say hi to someone, because that's literally how some of my best friendships developed. Everyone's, yeah, everyone's coming in here almost always not knowing anyone, knowing very few people. A lot- everyone's just as intimidated by the- by the environment as you are. You're not alone there. So, you know, don't be afraid to be bold and say hi to someone new. Try something new. The upside is huge, the down- the downside is low. And I hope that is being communicated to- to incoming classes. But in general, I'm here for the reunion because I, you know, I still look back on these four years as a formative time in my life in terms of what I've learned, friendships- friendships I made and how I grew as a person, and I hope that incoming students can get that same experience

AZ: That's great. Alright, well, Jay, thank you very much. It's been really nice to meet you.

JS: Likewise. Thank you very much. This is a great project, so thank you for sticking around to be my interviewer.

AZ: Thank you.