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Oral History Interview with Stefan Judex

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

RACIAL UNREST 2020: EXPERIENCES FROM THE STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY
COMMUNITY DIGITAL PROJECT

Oral History Interview with
Stefan Judex

Stony Brook University Libraries Digital Projects

Stony Brook University

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history interview transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Stefan Judex conducted by Mona Ramonetti on April 13, 2022. This is a transcription of the spoken word.

This interview is part of the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project, created by the Anti-Racism Task Force of Stony Brook University Libraries.

Transcriptionist: Software and humans working in the Stony Brook University
Libraries Digital Lab
Narrator: Stefan Judex
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti
Session Number: One session
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[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Hello. There it is. April 13th, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Stefan Judex for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Again, Stefan, thank you for spending the time to tell us your about your experiences. First question, can you tell us how you're affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:29] Stefan Judex: So I came to Stony Brook in 1999 and I came as a post-doc, I was supposed to come only for two years. Um, I was essentially on a loan from the University of Calgary where I did my PhD and where I was supposed to go back after two years to get started with my first faculty position. But then, you know how it goes, uh, a year or two later, and now 23 years later, I'm still here. So I'm a professor here at Stony Brook University and, uh, we are still here.

[00:01:04] Mona Ramonetti: (laughs) And you are in the Department of—

[00:01:07] Stefan Judex: Biomedical Engineering. And so we are, um, affiliated both with CEAS, so the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences, as well as the Medical School. And, uh, we are sort of the liaison in between those two different schools.

[00:01:25] Mona Ramonetti: Very good. Okay, we'll get to the heart of the matter right away. When do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:01:37] Stefan Judex: So I read the newspaper, the New York Times, every morning and quite extensively. And I don't specifically remember the George Floyd story, um, you know, for that particular day, um, because there have been so many events previously that sounded a little bit like this one, and obviously there were lots of them after, um, the George Floyd murder. So when I read about it in the morning, and again, I don't specifically remember it, but I'm pretty sure it sounded like yet another police killing.

[00:02:18] Mona Ramonetti: So, um, what was your initial reaction about hearing and, or viewing George Floyd's death on TV, internet, social media, if you can recall?

[00:02:30] Stefan Judex: So I don't really watch TV, at least back then. Um, I wasn't watching TV now. I watch TV a little bit, uh, simply because of what has happened in the Ukraine. Um, but I remember watching the video.

[00:02:45] And so this is when, this was, I think you had asked me at some point something about pivotal. And I think this was really pivotal for me watching the video. Um, it's something I had never seen before. Um, it was such a horrific, um, experience, um, watching somebody essentially being murdered in slow motion.

[00:03:11] Um, it was, it was terrible. So that's what I really remember. And how did I get to that video? Um, I'm not sure. Maybe there was a link from the New York Times website somewhere and, um, yeah, it, it, it made such a huge impression on me. I had never seen anything like that before.

[00:03:40] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah.

[00:03:44] Did you seek out communication with anyone from Stony Brook University during this time?

[00:03:52] Stefan Judex: No. So this must have been at the beginning of the pandemic, right? This was the summer of 2020 and the pandemic probably started the beginning of 2020. Um, we did not go to the university. So I did not speak to anybody at Stony Brook about it, at least not that I remember because I was not in the office and, uh.

[00:04:16] Certainly at home, I talked to my wife about it and friends who we were seeing occasionally, but not at Stony Brook.

[00:04:30] Mona Ramonetti: Many who witnessed the murder, described it as a pivotal moment in American history. Do you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:04:42] Stefan Judex: I think it was pivotal. At least for me, it felt pivotal, again because of the presence or the existence of that video. And it just made it clear in such a stark manner that, uh, there is so much more awareness, um, that needs to be done to address racial inequalities.

[00:05:05] And I think it made very obvious to me at that point that systemic racism still exists.

[00:05:14] Mona Ramonetti: Right. Uh, it was actually, it was brought to our, our television screens. Uh, and it wasn't, um, fabricated. It was real. We were watching this as, you know, it happened. Um, as folks witnessed it and, um, and I think a lot of people, uh, I think the difference they felt with this one was the aftermath.

[00:05:48] The, um, uh, rallies that were held or just, it was it things snowballed. So that's what a lot of folks are saying. Well, I think this was pivotal in American history because so many movements were mobilized as a result of this. Um—

[00:06:07] Stefan Judex: I, I would agree with that. And again for me, so, the initial spark really came from that video.

[00:06:19] Um, that was, was such a horrific experience to watch. And we actually attended a rally for the first time. So we brought our two kids who were, I would say six and ten at that point. And we attended a rally on (NY Route) 347 and it was very powerful, it was. And so this is why I was saying for me it felt pivotal, I think for other people, certainly by reading the New York Times and, um, we've all been, I mean, I've certainly been aware of, uh, social injustice, injustice or racial injustice. Um, but the murder of George Floyd um, really brought up an, another dimension or just made it, um, I think a lot more obvious for people like myself who, um, yes, have been aware of the issues, but not really have so directly, um, experienced it.

[00:07:26] And again, this video, for me at least, really changed something.

[00:07:34] Mona Ramonetti: Can you talk a little bit about, you said you, you took your kids to one of the rallies. Um, did you prepare them for this rally in terms of why they were attending it or did it, was this sort of a, just a, an experience for them?

[00:07:54] Stefan Judex: They were still relatively young at six and ten.

[00:07:58] Um, but I think both are, uh, reasonably advanced and we, we did talk to them about it and we prepared them and it appeared to us, and this is why we brought them in the first place because it appeared to us, um, that they, at least at a very basic level, they understood the issue.

[00:08:24] And, um, they were um, certainly kids can get excited about a lot different things and I wouldn't say they got excited, but they saw the importance of it and they really wanted to su, to support the cause. And this is why they were happy to come with us.

[00:08:44] Mona Ramonetti: Were you apprehensive about attending the rally or can you give me a sense of what you were feeling prior to, and while you were there?

[00:08:56] Stefan Judex: Um, I think I was a little bit apprehensive simply because I had no idea what to expect. Um, at that point, as you, as you were alluding to earlier, um, a lot of rallies were happening all around the country.

[00:09:11] Um, I saw on the New York Times website, on social media, um, how most of these rallies were peaceful, but not all of them. And I had no idea what the

dimension of that rally, uh, would be that, uh, we'll be attending on 347 by the mall. Um, how many people, uh, what it would look like, what sort of the atmosphere would be there?

[00:09:36] Um, would there be any counter protesters? So there was certainly a little bit of apprehension simply, you know, of nervousness, of not knowing what exactly is going to happen. Um, but at the same time, it just felt like this really, we really need to do this. We have to show our support.

[00:09:59] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. You know, um, we are not recording the video of this. We're just doing the audio.

[00:10:09] Stefan Judex: Yeah.

[00:10:10] Mona Ramonetti: And I wish just for your, your particular interview that we were doing a video. (Stefan laughs) And what I'm seeing, the reason I'm saying that was, um, when I first saw it, I saw it with my son and my husband. My husband is Caucasian, and my son is a mixture of what we are. And the look on your face when you were talking about it was the look I saw on my husband's face.

[00:10:46] And there, there are no words to describe it. It is, I, it—your mind is having a hard time wrapping around what it is that your eyes are taking in.

[00:11:00] Stefan Judex: I, I think I know what you're saying. And you know, now talking about it, um, again, the, the emotions that are felt, um, while standing there on 347 are sort of coming back.

[00:11:16] Um, and I certainly had tears in my eyes. It was, you know, it, the rally, and as, as you know, this is not a, it's not sort of a sad event. Um, but at the same time, simply because of the reason behind that rally, um, was that, uh, I had these tears in my eyes.

[00:11:37] Mona Ramonetti: Right. Yeah. I remember my son, actually, he is a teenager. He was a, a junior, I think a junior. Yes. He was a junior in high school and he was all, you know, always fooling around and joking. And I just remember him turning to me and the look on his face was that of confusion. It was normally he says something flippant. This was not a moment where he couldn't come up with the words to (Stefan: yeah) figure out what he was looking at.

[00:12:16] And, um, I mean, I was, uh, at a loss for words as well, because I think, um, fact is scarier than fiction. And in that particular instance, when I saw the reactions, I thought out, wow, this is, parenting, all those parenting books don't prepare you for this. (both laugh)

[00:12:38] Stefan Judex: It's it's, it's, it's true. At the same time, I was really happy that we brought our kids and, uh, I think it's something, um, clearly they learned a lot from it and, uh, it was in that sense, a good experience for them.

[00:12:55] Mona Ramonetti: Right, right. Okay. Um, What good do you hope will come from the events surrounding George Floyd's murder?

[00:13:09] Stefan Judex: I have my, obviously my own, um, hopes, um, which may be different or similar to what experts on this, uh, uh, topic would think. But for me, I think, I do hope that there will be an increased awareness, um, increased tolerance, um, increased acceptance, um, that people understand what an even playing field actually means.

[00:13:47] Um, and I think to me, this is one of the critical points and this is, um, I was become aware or, um, it is being highlighted, uh, especially in academia, when we talk about, uh, affirmative action and I'm always, well, I wouldn't say dismayed, but I'm, I'm very curious when people, especially from outside of academia, talk about affirmative action and why they're so adamantly opposed to it.

[00:14:20] And I sort of understand where they're coming from. But I don't think they're really, they really have thought about what an even playing field actually means. And so, um, maybe affirmative action is just an unfortunate, um, choice of words at this point and maybe should be renamed altogether, but it's this even playing field that I, uh, coming back to your question as to what my hope is that people are realizing what an even playing field actually is.

[00:15:00] Mona Ramonetti: What would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced?

[00:15:09] Stefan Judex: Hm, that's a good question. I have not really thought about this. Uh, (both laugh) maybe, maybe you can ask me again in a couple of years. Um, I, I don't have an answer, I think.

[00:15:22] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. That's fair enough.

[00:15:23] Stefan Judex: It's it's it's it is, as I was saying earlier, it's it's something and I, I always have to come back to the, to watching that video because this was such a, um, new experience for me. Um, and so, uh, it's certainly has affected me, um, profoundly and I'm sure sometime in the future, I can express a little bit better as to how it changed me.

[00:16:00] Mona Ramonetti: That's fair enough.

[00:16:03] Have you or someone, you know, been the victim of racial discrimination.

[00:16:14] Stefan Judex: So similar to you, I am also married to a non-Caucasian. Um, my wife is Asian, um, mixed heritage, half Chinese. Um, she has experienced some, um, racial discrimination. Um, probably not to a horrible extent. Um, probably more at the level of micro insults, uh, um, which certainly, uh, can have a large impact over time as well.

[00:16:52] Um, I have not experienced, uh, any sort of discrimination, um, based on, on, on color or, you know, a lack of it, or gender. So, you know, even visiting countries where I'm the, the complete minority, I remember. So my, my wife grew up in Singapore and they used to travel quite a bit, going into Indonesia and especially some of the Indonesian small islands and Malaysia.

[00:17:28] And so when I got to know my wife and then we started traveling together with her family and went to Indonesia and Malaysia. And, uh, it seemed that there were some villages where at least some of the kids, um, had rarely seen a white person. Um, and so I was the, the object of curiosity. And so the family is still laughing about how all the kids were running behind me because they thought I'm the guy who has the money and they were asking for money.

[00:18:01] And for, you know, not that I knew what they were actually saying, but they translated for me. (laughs) So they wanted to have money from me. But I was the only one who had no money (Mona laughs) in my, you know, it's, it's, it's hot there all the time. It's like 90 degrees and 95% humidity. I had my shorts on and since I didn't have to drive, you know, I literally had nothing in my pockets.

[00:18:26] And so, um, so I've been the subject of curiosity, but certainly not of discrimination of any kind.

[00:18:35] Mona Ramonetti: All right. My brother, um, this was, oh my gosh, decades ago and he. He was also married to a Caucasian woman at, at the time. And, um, he was traveling, travelled a lot for work and he went, I'd like to say Thailand with her [and their daughter]. She (their daughter) was about a year, about two years old, and I know they're going around going through different spots. And I remember he came back and he said, So many people wanted to take a photograph with her (*their daughter*) because they've never seen (both laugh) this combination.

[00:19:25] Stefan Judex: Yeah.

[00:19:25] Mona Ramonetti: And, and he, to this day, I don't know if he was offended or if he indulged them. I don't even think we got to beyond that. We were in disbelief, but we were also laughing. (laughs)

[00:19:41] Stefan Judex: Yeah.

[00:19:42] Mona Ramonetti: Um, so, you know we live in this, this tiny little world, even though America is huge, but you know, many of us make these assumptions that when it comes to different, you know, cause we are, are we homogenous? I don't know. No, we're not.

[00:20:02] Um, But, you know, you step outside of these, when you start to travel and you get to see these different things. Um, and I just, you know, your story just reminded me of that. Um, you know, the flip side. (both laugh)

[00:20:19] Stefan Judex: Yeah, no, I, I think that's a very important point. I have another little funny story again. So when I was saying 20 years ago, I have to correct myself because that was more like 30 years ago.

[00:20:32] But at that time also, we were in Indonesia and we visited my wife's, um, parents' friends on that island. And so they allowed us, so we were invited to their house. They invited us inside for dinner. And so we go inside and we've probably would have been having appetizers and one, and they have, I think, two kids.

[00:21:03] And so one of the kids maybe at that point was four or five years old. And so he comes into the room and he had not seen us before. And so he comes into the room. And even though at that point, I probably am. I'm sitting rather than standing. Um, he comes in, runs outside, like, uh, um, he just saw something incredibly horrible and screamed, (both laugh) "There is a giant in my house. There's a giant mommy." (laughs) So, right.

[00:21:36] So he had never seen somebody as, as tall as simply because most people in Indonesia are pretty short. (Mona laughs) Um, yeah. Interesting.

[00:21:49] Mona Ramonetti: Out of the mouths of babes. (laughs)

[00:21:52] Stefan Judex: Yeah.

[00:21:53] Mona Ramonetti: Ah, let's see. Um, what do you think of Stony Brook University's response to this particular thing, to George Floyd's death? The aftermath, you know there were a number of things sent out, but know what was your impression?

[00:22:12] Stefan Judex: Right. I think typically, so if I, if I can sort of give a general response, I think typically Stony Brook University is pretty good and certainly we have seen our fair share of presidents, but I think they have been consistently pretty good in sending out messages, um, offering help.

[00:22:35] And I do remember in response to the George Floyd murder, um, and the aftermath that emails were sent out, um, providing anywhere from phone numbers,

to contacts, to a, um, overall message of support. So, um, I felt they responded, um, appropriately. Uh, respectfully.

[00:23:08] Mona Ramonetti: All right. Good. Okay. That is the end of the questions. Um, would you like to offer anything else before I hit the stop button?

[00:23:23] Stefan Judex: Um, yeah. You know, I, I wish I would have to—no, I think I I'm good. Thank you.

[00:23:37] Mona Ramonetti: Alrighty. I'm going to hit the stop button. Thank you, Stefan.

[00:23:41] Well, thanks, thanks for having me. So, uh, does the entire project, how is this going to, like what, what, what is the end product going to be?

[00:23:52] We'll discuss that. Just let me hit the stop button and then we can chat some.

[Recording stops]