Interview with Jack Wuest

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GRACE FANNING: Ok, um so can you state your name?

JACK WUEST: Jack Wuest.

GF: And I am Grace Fanning. The date of the interview is April 27, 2015. Place of interview is the library at Columbia College Chicago. This interview is part of the Columbia College Chicago Archives Honors Oral History project, Chicago ’68, that is part of collaboration with the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago. Can you state your year of birth?

JW: [REDACTED] ’47

GF: Thank you. Your place of birth?

JW: Chicago

GF: Where you were raised

JW: Chicago

GF: Your father’s place of birth

JW: Cincinnati, Ohio

GF: Your mother’s place of birth

JW: Fort Thomas, Kentucky

GF: Okay. Can you describe your childhood room?

JW: It’s just… I grew up in an apartment; a small apartment and I shared a room with my sister.

GF: What occupations did your parents have?

JW: My father was an accountant and my mother was a stay-home mother.

GF: Who did you live with growing up?

JW: My dad and my mother and then my stepmother; my mother died when I was five and my sister; she was six years older than me.

GF: Who was your favorite teacher in school?
JW: An English teacher in college.

GF: Okay.

JW: He was a nice guy. He got me excited about English literature.

GF: How was religion observed in your house?

JW: Uh-- pretty strict. I was raised Catholic.

GF: How did your relationship with religion change during high school?

JW: It didn’t really. It changed more in college. So it was a very kind of Catholic, by the rules and regulations and then when I got to college it was more or less the spirit of the religion.

GF: When did you first stand up to authority?

JW: I think it was like fourth or fifth grade, there was on the playground, there was a division between girls and boys and I organized all the boys to go into the girl’s side of the playground. So I had to go talk to the principal.

GF: Um, what were your aspirations when you graduated high school?

JW: Uh, just to go to college and not flunk out. The college counselor I had said I should go to college cause I was stupid.

GF: Can you tell me more about your favorite college professor?

JW: It was Ernie Fontana- he was an English professor. I had transferred to Xavier University in Cincinnati as a sophomore and it was the English class I had and he was just very enthusiastic, really liked the literature and got me excited about it too.

GF: So you said you transferred, where did you start college?

JW: I started at Saint Josephs in Rensselaer, Indiana about ninety miles from here.

GF: When did you graduate college?


GF: So what brought you to live in Chicago— you grew up in Chicago. Um…sorry. Who was the first president you voted for?

JW: Lets see— it might have been George McGovern.

GF: Do you remember anything about how you decided who to vote for?
JW: He was against the war and had a position on his platform against the war. And he ran in 1972.

GF: Okay. So were you anti-war before you were drafted?

JW: In freshman year, my brother-in-law was in Vietnam.

FANNING: Okay.

JW: Which was 1965. I remember arguing on behalf of the war and then in the second half of my freshman year I— they brought a few people to speak about the war and it raised a lot of questions. I felt torn because I didn’t want to feel like I was against my brother-in-law but, you know, the war didn’t make much sense at that point. And then I was drafted but I resisted the draft so I started a draft resistance group here in Chicago. There were two waves of draft resistance. One was in 1967-68 and we started the second one in ’71. People who would not cooperate with the draft— and in any was— just because the draft is a way to sort kids. The kids who knew how to play the game would get out and the kids who didn’t know would be drafted and sent to Vietnam. So, the idea was to not in any way validate the draft. I applied for a Conscientious Objector but then when that was not accepted then we started, I worked with a group of people and we started a draft resistance group in the city again.

GF: Okay, so you were out of college when you were drafted.

JW: I was out of college, yeah.

GF: Where did you work during the sixties?

JW: I had a job with a company that filed tax rates with insurance companies for a summer. And then for two other summers, I worked as a helper on a Seven Up truck and then two summers after that, including the time after I graduated from college, I worked at an experimental program funded by Health, Education and Welfare nationally to help educate parents who had been abusing their kids. And I worked with the younger kids- the boys about seven to thirteen years old.

GF: Okay, so do you know where you were working in ’68?

JW: Yeah I was working in that program. It was called the Juvenile Protective Association and the specific project was the Bowman Center and it had a comprehensive program to work with families. MSW’s working with the parents, childcare working with the younger kids, a group of young women worked with the young girls and guys like me working with the young guys. So it really was a comprehensive way to work with the family.

GF: Where were you living in 1968; where in Chicago?

JW: With my dad and stepmom in Rogers Park.
GF: What...sorry...what did you think about Lyndon B. Johnson declining the nomination?

JW: Uh I was glad I mean he had increased the war a great deal when he said he wasn’t going to do that. I was glad he saw the mistake and wasn’t going to run.

GF: Where were you when Martin Luther King was shot?

JW: I was in Cincinnati. And we could— form our dorm room we could see the smoke rising from a lot of buildings being burned.

GF: Wow. Where were you when Robert Kennedy was shot?

JW: Hm. I don’t remember exactly. He would have won the presidency and been able to change things substantially different than they turned out. I think he would have attracted the vote, some vote, from George Wallace and probably would have beaten Nixon. Wallace was the reason Nixon got elected because he took a lot of the Southern vote away from the Democrats.

GF: How did your family prepare for the threat of nuclear attack?

JW: (laughs) I used to think about hiding in the basement of the three-flat apartment I lived in and they would do drills at the Catholic school I went to in Rogers Park. They’d tell you to kind of sit down in the hallway or underneath your desk and be prepared which was totally absurd. The shockwave from a nuclear bomb would probably care eight or ten, fifteen, twenty miles in every direction so we would just be vaporized.

GF: What student organizations were you a part of?

JW: I don’t know. I don’t remember. I didn’t join stuff readily. Basically I organized different stuff in the university.

GF: How did you decide on the college major?

JW: Ernie Fontana, who was my professor at Xavier, sophomore year just got me excited about stuff and I decided to major in English.

GF: What was your first experience as an activist?

JW: Uh—we—I organized a—brought in a guy from the American Front Service Committee from Dayton to speak about the war and they had a movie about the Vietnam War. This was in the spring of 1966 or 67. I made leaflets and put them under every door and all the four or five dorms. When the speech was getting started or right before it got started—Xavier had a reserve officer training corps for the Army and you had to take two years of it. When the military guys came down the aisle way into the room of the auditorium, everybody applauded and then when the movie came on everybody booed and everything else like that. So I think the couple of professors who thought there should be a discussion, not a booing—people were pretty hostile and I think they were amazed. That this was not the way to carry on a dialogue. But Xavier was
a conservative university, relatively speaking, in the conservative town- Cincinnati and to have
officers coming, some of whom had served in Vietnam, people just thought— well it was pretty
evry early on before there had been any major demonstrations and I had gone to a demonstration in I
think—1967 on a bus that took off from the University of Cincinnati to New York for about a
half a million people for a demonstration. There were only three people from Xavier that went,
so it was a small group.

GF: Can you tell me more about that experience?

JW: it was interesting I thought I was going to bring a camera but I thought if I bring a camera
someone from the CIA or the FBI will probably be watching us and you know it was really silly.
I mean there was no one there to watch us they were half a million people. But I have never been
to a demonstration and it was just amazing to see how many people were protesting and raising
their voice against the war which was a real tragedy.

GF: When were you drafted?

JW: Well I got the draft notice— there was a lottery they did to see whether or not— If you had
a high number you were not going to get drafted if you had a low number you were going to get
drafted. So I had a low number. I think the lottery was in December of 1969. I thought about
not wanting to cooperate with the draft then and my number was low so I filed what they call a
Conscientious Objector status which means that you were objecting to that war and you would
fill out forms and all that and I did. The draft board denied it. You know the draft board was
made up of guys who had served in the war either Korea or World War II where you know it was
da different situation. They couldn’t understand why someone would want to object to the
Vietnam War. So I got an attorney. The draft board had done the wrong process looking at my
Conscientious Objector status—uh—I— January of 1971 I got a draft notice to be inducted into
the army. I—uh— that was a really interesting experience. I went to all the processing, they
collect your urine, they listen to your hearing and then before you get into the army normally
you’re lined up into different rows. And in the morning, you have to get there very early; I
passed out a leaflet to everyone going in saying that I wasn’t going into the army, why I wasn’t
going to go and the reasons. They line you up in this room and if you step forward when they
call your name, you’re in the army so I wasn’t going to step forward and another guy next to me
didn’t step forward and another guy next to him didn’t step forward. So we were all taken out
and then the FBI came and arrested us and we were brought down to the magistrate to determine
whether or not we were going to be kept in jail or you could get out on your own recognizance.
They determined we weren’t a risk for flying or fleeing so they—get— our own recognizance so
then I was released about six or seven hours later.

GF: Wow.

JW: The other funny thing was I brought— I carried a harmonica with me and in the middle of
our hearing test I played the harmonica and three of the other guys failed.

GF: Wow. You mentioned earlier your initial thoughts on the war were— You couldn’t decide
whether you were for it or against it because of your brother-in-law’s involvement in the war.
JW: Yeah he was in Vietnam—in combat.

GF: What do you think changed your mind? What was the tipping point?

JW: Well there was an interesting—at Saint Joe—I wasn’t at the football game but our political science teacher told us about, this was a political science class we had on a Tuesday, or maybe it was a Monday and he said he was appalled because there where demonstrators at the Saint Joe football game and people came out of the stands and started beating on them and the guy said, “Well even if you don’t like—if you’re for the war, why are you—what are you doing if you’re stifling dissent and freedom of speech? You may not like it but beating on them is another matter so maybe start thinking about it.” [pause] Of course he was right. You know it’s hard if you have people—like again my brother-in-law was in combat so I felt torn and conflicted but on the other hand I saw that… You know it was right to object it. And then it was only a handful of people cause this was 1965 we were ahead of the times when people started to ask questions about the war and deciding it was not a thing that should be done.

GF: Why did you decide to become an activist?

JW: Well I don’t know. I’ve just—I’ve always—if there is something going on I think shouldn’t be or should be, I feel the urge to do something about it.

GF: Tell me the story of your experience during the Democratic National Convention in 1968.

JW: Uh—The kids I was working with, we would take them in a van and we would take them passed Lincoln Park where there were people organizing to protest and I thought well, I didn’t think much one way or another. Uh I hadn’t planned, uh, the kids would sort of mockingly wave at them and say, “Hey! What are you doing you hippies?” and stuff like that and we would tell them to shut up and be quiet. So as we drove by, and we did it a couple times because we were taking them down to Lincoln Park to play and to the beach down on North Avenue. Uh I had no intention to go down to the Democratic National Convention and a friend came in from Cincinnati and said why don’t we go take a look at it. So we went down on Saturday night over to Lincoln Park where people were going to gather—and—you know in Lincoln Park to do some kind of demonstrations there cause the convention didn’t start until I think Monday. So we went down and just look at—the people—you know there were a lot of hippies and stuff and I didn’t consider myself you know a—obviously I didn’t think the war was smart and shouldn’t have been done but uh—there were just a lot of different people in the park. The cops told everybody they had to get out of the park by 11 o’clock, which was sort of stupid because it then forced a confrontation but all the other stuff that was going on was building to a confrontation anyway. They had talked about putting LSD in the water. Daley, The Old Man, used a kind of heightened sense of aggravation between the hippies and the demonstrators and the city had had major riots and buildings being burned down on the west side and Daley said that he gave the National Guard orders to shoot to kill and that was really controversial. And then, and then when Bobby Kennedy died I think a lot of people just sort of gave up hope you know that Hubert Humphrey wouldn’t really come out against the war, which he didn’t. So the two sides were really split, enormously. When the police gave the order to get out of the park, people said screw
it we’re not going to get out of the park— it was a public park. And then the cops started lobbing
 tear gas everywhere and then people really got mad and started fighting back. There was a lot of
 press there and the cops started beating on the press and I remember leaving the park with a lot
 of other people being chased by the police, down LaSalle Avenue and then up North Avenue and
down another street— Sedgwick and we just kept running to get away from the police. So that
was Saturday night. And then at that point I thought well I’m going to go down on Sunday. I
went down Sunday and the same sort of thing happened. This time there was a lot of negative
press because literally the police beat on the press and you know it was just interesting because it
was up to the point where the cops had forced confrontation and said everybody had to get out of
the park. You know there was a lot— There were people playing Christian music. There were
all sorts of people doing stuff. They were handing out leaflets about LSD but they meant
Lakeshore Drive and you know just a bunch of interesting shows going on with people just you
know on hock. So you know it was something to watch and just sort of experience. They forced
the confrontation and again everybody ran. Some big windows were broken while people were
running away and you kind of had to just stay away and get outside away from the teargas too. I
was a poet, Allen Ginsberg, who was there and he was trying to calm everybody down by
“ohming” you would go “ohm ohm” there’s billowing teargas and people are running
everywhere and it was really a crazy situation, funny. And while he’s “ohming” he’s sees a big
NBC truck filming all of this so he’s running as quick as he can to be seen in front of the truck
“ohming”. And he was a well-known poet from the 50s and 60s.

GF: How did you know about the protests?

JW: Oh, everybody knew about it. Again we drove, we went with the kids from uptown— we
just went— we had driven through— not really to look at them but saw them because there is a
parkway between the park on the east side and a park on the west side. And so we drove on the
parkway and we could see everybody demonstrating- you know practicing their demonstrations
with big long poles staying in sync and in unison so they could supposedly breakthrough the
police lines.

GF: How were you involved in the protests?

JW: Um— I went down every night after that. I went down Monday night and I don’t
remember— That’s why I was asking you about the books— I would like to look at the different
days and what happened each day. Uh there was one time I remember there was music. It was
playing in the Grant Park shell, the band shell that used to be down on the south end of the park
then someone got in a ruckus and there was tear gas everywhere again and people were
scattering all over the park area. There was another night that I guy named Dick Gregory who
had done a lot of, well he used to be a well-known comedian and really got involved in the civil
rights movement and he told everybody, I think it was Tuesday night, “I’m going to take you out
of my house.” And the police wouldn’t let anybody demonstrate where Democratic National
Convention was over in the old auditorium— not the auditorium— where was it? It was about
4500 South so Dick said, “Well let’s all go down to my house and you can go two by two down
the sidewalk.” And his house happened to be in Hyde Park so— It was kind of funny. You’d go
down to his house and then you would go over to the demonstration at the amphitheater- that’s
what it was- and there’s railroad tracks and an overpass on Michigan Avenue Down around 18th
Street and as we got closer, five jeeps pulled up each with a grill of Barbwire and formed a wall across the whole area going underneath the railroad tracks so you couldn’t go any further. And then they started lobbing teargas again and everybody started running back on Michigan Avenue going north. And I ran into a friend from high school and Phil said, “What’s going on? I don’t understand this. I just got back from Vietnam. What’s going on?” You know “Why are they lobbing tear gas at everybody for demonstrating?” And I said, “Well you see it. This is what they’re doing.” So everybody ran back and I think that was Tuesday night. I think — I don’t know if it was Wednesday night or Thursday night — I stayed all night. Peter Paul and Mary played music and we slept out on the grassy area East of Michigan Avenue across from the Conrad Hilton where a lot of stuff was happening. And there was a confrontation at the Conrad Hilton earlier in the night and everybody was being chased all over again and teargas was billowing and the cops were waiting in the crowd beating them and my wife’s sister got hit in the head a couple of times – she was in from out of town. But at that time the cops just weren’t taking anything, they were doing whatever they wanted. You know I was dating a girl at that point and her parents were editors of one of the main papers in Cincinnati and they said it’s amazing — Well at least nobody got killed. Which, given what had happened, was pretty amazing. But there is this massive protest, and people were fighting back and beating on the cops and the cops were beating on the demonstrators, which is all part of the incredible divisions that were created because of the Vietnam War.

GF: Um you mentioned a friend that had served in Vietnam; did you know a lot of people that were serving?

JW: Not many. As I think of it, no. There was one kid who we were in high school with who got killed. Uh, but no. Other then my brother-in-law and Phil — most of the guys I knew — well this was too early because — Phil — um I’m not sure why Phil went in. I think most of the guys I had graduated with had gone to college so they still had a deferment. And it really didn’t — the draft didn’t breath down your neck until you graduated from college which was — for me, my class was 1969.

GF: What parts of Chicago were you protesting in during the convention?

JW: Well first it was Lincoln Park on Saturday and Sunday night and then out in Grant Park- all over Grant Park. You know I was glad I was young and I was fast (laughs). [pause] I ran into another friend in Grant Park one of the nights and he had said how he had socked some cop and I didn’t really think that was good but you know I understood it because people were fighting back. Cops literally were just wading into groups and billy-clubbing them.

GF: Can you tell me more about what your interactions with the police were like?

JW: I just got as far away as I could. (laughs) I was — I wasn’t for getting on the frontline of any kind of confrontation. I also just didn’t want to get beat on either so I made sure I kept my distance. Most people did. I mean most people— some people, in the case of a crowd- they just happened to get stuck on the front. And some people I think went out after the cops too. But I mean I just know that one friend I ran into was so pissed and so angry that he was glad he got his licks in.
GF: Describe the scene you encountered on the first day of protests.

JW: Well that was Lincoln Park and again that was—uh Larry came in from out of town and he said let’s take a look at it and I said I hadn’t even thought about it. You know all I had seen before was what I mentioned. The kids- you know we drove past the protesters and the kids kind of went and you know they had a little thing they said— Dougie- he was a kid from uptown- he’d uh— he’d lean out of the window and go “Peace! Pot!” and he’d go, “Pussy!” (laughs) And we’d say, “Stop! Stop! Dougie Stop!” But then when Larry came in on Saturday I went down with him and again you know it was interesting up till 11 o’clock when the cops decided they wanted to get everybody out of the park and then you know the confrontations came about. And the teargas and the people wouldn’t leave. People were in different clumps of folks who wanted to stay and then the cops teargased them. And then everybody ran and then I think people started throwing some stuff back at the cops and the cops were billy clubbing people and then I just remember running out of the park down LaSalle up north and down another street until I felt I was safely away from it.

GF: What did you see of television coverage of the event?

JW: The only thing I can remember was that story I was telling you about Allen Ginsberg. Now they have these mobile trucks that are you know small little vans. This was a huge bulky truck that had— I think they had a camera on top of it and was shooting the scenes of the Lincoln Park- the confrontations and all that on Saturday and Sunday night. Other than that I don’t remember too much of the press other than reading about how the press got beat on by the cops. But you know the cops reaction was don’t take a picture of me beating on someone or I’ll beat on you and when that happened, the newspapers really got angry and provided a lot of accurate coverage of what was going on.

GF: How did the mood of the protests change as the days went on?

JW: Well people got— it got more ugly and people were—you know the Saturday and Sunday nights were sort of fun and I think they called it a “Be-In” you know kind of fun music and all that. And then as it went on with confrontations people got angrier and people would fight back and throw stuff and the cops would chase them and catch them in some cases. And people would urge uh not getting violent and not attacking the cops and there were just repeated confrontations and they sort of circled back on themselves where the people might have not been that aggressive but then the cops were more aggressive and then the people were more aggressive back and forth. Again, as the days went on it got tougher and angrier.

GF: What made you want to keep coming back each day?

JW: Well the first time I went down because I thought it would be kind of fun and the second time I was angrier about what was going on and then every time after that it was a chance to really voice demonstration against— in opposition to the Vietnam War and the opposition to being threatened with not even uh threatened with confrontation of not demonstrating against the war and being afraid of not you know being apart of the voice
against the war. So the more they pushed and tried to stop the demonstrations, myself and
other people got more firm and committed that we would demonstrate against the war.

GF: How did your college classes influence your views on the events of 1960?

JW: Um when I went to Xavier in '66, I had not— I have kind of gone to some of the dates at
Saint Joe in the spring of 66 and like that thing I told you earlier that demonstration when
they had the political science professor in October of 1965 who said what are we fighting
for if people can voice their dissent. When I went to Xavier I got to be friends with some
seniors and we talked a lot about the war and we did that demonstration— I mentioned
that demonstration— we did the uh forum with the guy from the American Front Service
Committee and the movie about Vietnam— I had gone— I had heard about this big
demonstration that was going to be in New York in the middle of April 1967 so I went there
too. And that pretty much started to solidify stuff I had read and the big debate on Vietnam
was that it was supposedly two different countries and one was... You know the north was
the aggressor to the south and I mean you know that really was bologna. Vietnam was one
whole country and then went France lost control of you know their colony- the whole
Vietnam- then the powers that be decided to split it between north and south and the north
was going to be quote unquote communist although it was much more nationalist than
communist and the south was going to be more the continuin of the colony. Although
France pulled out, the United States _____ (??) South Vietnam was... the leadership was
manipulated literally the Kennedys, at some point in the early sixties had the head of
Vietnam killed— and the CIA— they ended up trying to get someone to head up South
Vietnam who would do their bidding, “their” meaning the United States. So you know
basically it wasn’t even a civil war— the war that we were trying to maintain some sort of
control of South East Asia and then we just got involved with massive numbers of troops
the only reason we didn’t quote unquote lose the war is that we dropped I think it was
three ton... three times the tonnage of bombs we dropped in Vietnam than we did in all of
World War II- which was crazy. Not to mention the Nape bomb and other things that would
defoliate the forest supposedly would make it easier for us to find the enemy when the
enemy really was native-born people and the irony is that we had become the colony— uh
the power with the backing of World War II, kind of the world power in the same way Great
Britain was the world power in the 1770s and where we fought the colonial power of
Britain, we had become the colonial power of the 20th century, fighting against people who
wanted to get control of their own country- Vietnam. Which doesn’t mean that they were
not brutal warriors— you know they were, but we were even more so and it put our noses
in the middle of a war that we shouldn’t have been in. Ho Chi Minh made overtures United
States in 1948 or 47 for (unintelligible) and we rejected it. And basically Vietnam had a
long history of being— uh we thought it was the domino theory that if Vietnam fell, then
Thailand would fall and then other countries would fall but by fall we meant not
necessarily coming under our control. And there had been a long history of Vietnam being
kind of antagonistic to China and China had always kind of... would want to take uh...
extend its power so Vietnam was kind of pushing against that extension of Chinese power.
And what we would do through the war, we ended up moving Vietnam closer to China,
which was kind of screwy.
GF: Who did you protest with?
JW: Well I went down with my friend Larry the first two nights and then I just went on my own. I just went down. I really wanted— I had sort of followed Students for a Democratic Society but I didn’t really belong to groups uh so then I went down and was sort of participating as one person among many in the whole demonstration. So that was Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.

GF: Were you scared at all to be by yourself and be a young college student?
JW: No. No the only fear I had was just getting caught by the cops. You know I haven’t really done anything I just had demonstrated and I just wanted to make sure I didn’t get beat on the head with a billy club.

GF: When did you know the riots were coming to a stop?
JW: I don’t know if I would call them riots you know they were you know massive demonstrations you know pushed by the cops and then they called it a police right as much as it was a riot of the people demonstrating— more accelerated by the police and Richard Daley Senior really did get kind of suckered by Abby Hoffman Jerry Rueben and these guys who had done a lot of outrageous kinds of things talking about— they released a pig and called it Pegasus and said that was their candidate for president. Again, they were releasing thoughts that they were going to put LSD in the water filtration system in the city and anything to sort of just provoke and people— Daley and his staff got really provoked, which I can understand but they really bought into it and got suckered into it so what was your question again?

GF: Um when did you know the—
JW: Oh the riots? Well the demonstrations and the things that were to “Be-ins” on Saturday and Sunday were not harming anybody but the cops decided they had to have control and moved everybody out of the park and then the confrontations from there just accelerated on Sunday night and Monday night and Tuesday night.

GF: What are your thoughts on Andy Kaufman (Abby Hoffman) and the other leaders who are getting a lot of media attention?

GF: Right.
JW: I don’t know. I just thought the stuff was kind of goofy. It was just all theater you know, looking back on it. I mean it was just provocative but there was so much context with what was going on you know the FBI had targeted the Black Panthers and systematically killed a lot of them um over the mid to late 60s. Uh there were you know the SDS started as kind of a group form what’s called the League for Industrial Democracy and that was just an out
growth of the unions. And the (unintelligible) statement really read really well about
people participating in politics and in government making a change and a difference. As
things got on, the more people protested, the more the other side dug in and people got
frustrated so— What was the question again?
GF: What were your thoughts on the people—
JW: Oh Jerry Rueben— I just thought it was— The stuff is kind of ridiculous. But you know
the people who were the powers in Chicago took it seriously when they probably shouldn’t
have but who knows. Who knows if they would’ve tried to put LSD and water system?
GF: You mentioned your wife’s sister encountered some police brutality; can you talk more
about that?
JW: The only thing I know about it is that Maggie got— was kind of on the front line and
the cops went in after the people on the frontline at the Hilton Hotel and she got hit a
couple times and I think she was arrested and they had to bail her out.
GF: So you had—
JW: But I wasn’t with her because I didn’t know her at that time.
GF: Okay.
JW: Yeah, I didn’t meet my wife until eleven years later.
GF: Right, Okay. How aware of you were— how aware were you of the events happening
inside of the convention?
JW: Not much. Only later did we find out Ribicoff was saying things and Daley called him a
“fucking kike” or “Jew” or something like that. I mean— It was just a— And then I
remember the interview that Walter Cronkite did with Daley and he just wussed out I mean
he didn’t really confront Daley on all the stuff that had gone on. But I wasn’t really going
back watching TV coverage because I’d get home late, go to work in the morning then go
on— you know go onto the demonstrations at about 6 o’clock at night.
GF: How did you see Chicago change after the protests?
JW: I didn’t really, I mean and I was living up in Rogers Park and you know everybody was
going about their day-to-day lives— you know doing stuff and there might have been I
don’t know how many eight or ten or maybe fifteen thousand people at the
demonstrations. I don’t think there were more. And a lot of people came from out of the
city and a lot of people were sort of like me, they went back kind of, you know, upset or
disillusioned about the demonstrations. Everybody, you know, went back and was
working. So I didn’t see any real change day-to-day because I just absorbed back into my
neighborhood.
GF: What was it like to go back to your job and your daily life after the protests?

JW: It was hard. I thought about not going back to finish my senior year of college. You know everything I saw and experienced kind of boggled me—boggled mind. You know it amazed me and I thought what kind of country is this if this happens? And I’m not sure what I would’ve done if I hadn’t gone back. But I just—It was so upsetting that I just didn’t see the sense of finishing college and going back and studying and all that. I did go back and then I barely—You know I barely got through the first semester and barely got through the second semester to graduate. But it was definitely a huge impact in terms of my thinking.

GF: What made you decide to go back for your senior year?

JW: I don’t know. I just—I thought if I don’t do it now, who knows when I’ll do it? And it just seemed like I ought to finish it up and get it done with.

GF: How did your protest experience in 1968 influence your decision to challenge your being drafted?

JW: That was all part of thinking that the war— that we shouldn’t be fighting the war and I wouldn’t join to go fight it, it was pretty straightforward. In the beginning it was, rather than out right resistance to the draft, and the injustice in the whole sorting process and you know a lot of young men not knowing how to play the game and get out of the draft—I applied as a conscientious objector you know I was conscientious and said I objected to the war. It was denied and then when it was denied and met a lot of other people. We formed a draft resistance group and we got the names of 300 other guys who had been arrested and started you know we sent a mailing out and we met with them at a bigger meeting and we started a month—Monday potluck and got more strength by meeting with other people who thought the same way that the war was unjust and we shouldn’t do anything to support it, which meant not do anything to support the draft itself. One of the guys I met—the first guy I met, actually ended up resisting the draft. I got lucky because when I was arrested, the case was dropped because they had blown the process of looking at my conscientious objector. By that time I had decided that I wasn’t going to do a CO but I was just going to resist the draft. So for about a year and a half I thought I was going to go to jail and that was the hard part. Who wants to go to jail? But you know they were going to take me if I was going to state my conscience. The guy I first met—the first guy I met, he was raised on the southwest side and his dad was a construction labor. Steve had no idea of conscientious objecting and his brother Pete had gone to the war. Pete was my age and he said, “You’re crazy you’re not going to this war” when he came back. And they literally duked it out and Steve began thinking about the war. He traveled around the country and then he got his notice—a 1A they call them—his eligibility for the draft or being drafted.
And he said no. He just resisted the draft. I met him because he was part of the group of those names I got who had been arrested by the FBI about three hundred guys again. And he ended up spending two years in jail, the last year in isolation because he wouldn’t go along with the prison industries. They kept the prison going and wouldn’t support it. Then
Nixon had backed off the draft for his reelection bid in ‘72. I had gotten the 1A and they dropped it— I mean they just— So for about a year and a half I thought I was going to be taken to jail. Steve, As a part of Nixon’s reelection work, he began offering— I don’t know if it was Ford or Nixon in 73 or 74— releasing them, pardoning them. Steve wouldn’t accept the pardon because he said, “I didn’t do anything wrong”. So he continued to be in prison another four or five months I think. And then they finally just kicked him out but he would not admit to anything wrong that he had done. And then his uncle who had been a colonel in the army you know agreed with what Steve was doing and you know other— His family agreed to it too even though it was hard. My dad had agreed well I don’t know if he agreed with me but he respected me and didn’t reject it or be in opposition to it in terms of my resisting the draft.

GF: How did your experience in the protests inform your activism later on?

JW: It just accelerated my thinking about the war. That it was not the world we should be fighting. It was— we shouldn’t have been in there. And again I was doing odd jobs after I graduated and I became a caseworker at the Department of Children and Family Services for foster kids and I just did all this other stuff while we were paralleled with this having those Monday night dinners as a way to support everybody. We called it the Draft Refusers Support Group. So you know you’re living your life with all the stuff here and meanwhile this other thing, it may cross your path to the extent of if they do draft me again and I resist again they’ll take me away from what I do day-to-day. So it just made me more aware of what was going on. It made me read more and it made me more convinced that the war was wrong.

GF: How did you come to work with the Alternative School’s Network?

JW: I was working with, a new guy came in to head the Department of Children and Family Services and I was working in the Department of Children and Family services and this guy wanted to do a lot of community resources as preventative stuff to see if he could provide stuff for kids before they went into the child welfare system and I worked at the Juvenile Protective Association, a really creative program working to keep kids together with their families instead of taking them away from their families into foster care, so it is something I thought about and uh as part of our Draft Refusers Support Group there was a guy who had helped start a thing called the youth network council, his name was Mark Tenas and he knew Stan Davis and a bunch of other people, he was doing his conscientious objector work at a youth agency called the Bethel Youth Center, I think, it was, no it was Grace Lutheran Church Youth Center over in Lincoln Park before Lincoln Park got groovy, and I got to be friends with Mark from our Draft Refusers Group and Mark was working on the Youth Network Council and I was the guy who headed up these events in 73 and wanted to do these community-based resources and I began working and Mark and I sort of brainstormed what we could do and we started with this festival of preschools the American Front Services Committee had done and they had a workshop on starting a federation of alternative schools or free schools— A federation of free schools, which is kind of a contradiction- free schools wouldn’t want to be part of a federation. So Mark and I talked about it and he said why don’t we go in there and— you know Mark had organized a
youth network council why don’t we develop an alternative schools network? And that’s where we started in May '73. And it was all... came out of the draft stuff too because I wouldn’t have met Mark— him doing his conscientious objector work with the youth network counsel – he started it with him. And I don’t know— I’m not sure what I would be doing if the draft hadn’t happened and I gotten my— lottery number had been high— confront the draft head on. Who knows?

GF: How did the events of 1968 change you?

JW: Oh I think it made me much more aware of the Vietnam War and I already was but it may be much more against it and it made me much more critical of, well, both parties but especially the Democratic Party that Hubert Humphrey hadn't come out against the war.

GF: What is your most vivid memory of the protests?

JW: Uh geeze I don’t know. I mean a few. One is Dick Gregory telling everybody to come down to his house for dinner. And then that wall of Barbwire on the front of each of the jeeps and all the billowing teargas there, and then in Lincoln Park all of the teargas. Allen Ginsberg “ohming” to get in front of the TV camera, the demonstrations right out in front of the Conrad Hilton where the cops were beating people, all of those are pretty much equal in terms of standout.

GF: How did the protest compared to future protests you took part in?

JW: Um, we ended up having different demonstrations against the war as part of the Draft Refusers Support Group. We did silent vigils instead of big demonstrations. So we did silent visuals and I think somewhere overnight in front of the federal building down on Dearborn.

Are there many more questions?

GF: No.

JW: Okay. I just have to be back to my office around 2:30.

GF: Okay.

JW: This is fun to do though.

GF: What part of the experience had the biggest impact on you?

JW: The demonstrations?

GF: Yes.

JW: I think just being part of the demonstrations and then having the police working to break up the demonstrations— that solidified my thought that the demonstrations were important and being against the war was important. If there hadn’t been all the other
things that happened with the confrontations, who knows how much of this— were there
people on the other side... the demonstrators were trying to confront the cops.

Undoubtedly there were. But again I think saying it wasn't going to happen... The
atmosphere was too charged but if they hadn’t pushed people out of Lincoln Park for two
nights—the press— I think it might've been or could have been different. But the
atmosphere again, where the cops and the National Guard during the black riots after King
died had been told to shoot to kill, you know that was at least provocative.

GF: What are you most proud of as an activist?

JW: Organizing a draft resistance— being able to take that stance myself and providing a
chance to support a lot of other people to act on their conscience. Doing the Alternative
Schools Network continues— that sort of work you know people in the neighborhoods
control and have a say over their own lives through education. But you know participating
in the demonstrations was important because the strength of any kind of country is going
to be is tolerance for the people who disagree with those in power and that’s what really
was happening substantially in the 60s and someone into the early 70s in massive kinds of
demonstrations.

GF: What parallels do you see between society then and now?

JW: I think the main one is that anybody that’s in power doesn’t want someone to tell them
they’re wrong or what they’re doing is wrong whether or not it’s a small organization or
whether or not it’s a country. The tolerance for listening to dissent is really crucial because
sometimes the people who dissent have something to tell you that other people who have
been busy around you telling you what you want to hear— you’re not seeing what you
need to see.

GF: What was the most regrettable consequence of the Democratic National Convention in
‘68?

JW: Geeze I don’t know. I don’t know. The whole thing was kind of regrettable. There
were these demonstrations that were— Attempted to be suppressed by the police force.
There was a report done by a guy named Dan Walker who was then the corporation
counsel for the Montgomery Ward he wrote a report and called it a police riot and people
were just shit on the city side—the police didn't riot- the other people rioted. I think the
whole thing and just gave a huge black eye to the city. I think Daley was already reeling by
the black riots because he thought he had done so much for the black community but he
really hadn’t and didn’t have a clue what was really going on in the neighborhoods. And
this was again he didn’t have a clue about this issue. I had read that he was actually against
the war and said it privately to Lyndon Johnson but didn’t want to be saying this publicidy
for telling tales out of school you know being someone on the outside who was really on
the inside against the war. I think a lot of people, even Johnson, thought the war was a
mistake. But he had— at some point he didn’t want to be the first president to lose the war.
Which was just an unbelievable tragedy. You know 59,000 guys were murdered or you
know died in Vietnam and probably 1 million Vietnamese. We have a good friend who’s
husband served in Vietnam and he died of cancer from Agent Orange. And her son died of
cancer at about the age of 23 and I think it was the same kind of genetic problems that
happened from Agent Orange that they talk about. And who knows how many hundreds of
thousands or millions of people have been affected that way no one really makes a
connection you know there certainly has been plenty of stuff done on the harm of Agent
Orange. Second and third generations even. That was just a real mess.

GF: What was the most positive consequence of the convention?

JW: For all of the beatings and all of that I didn't get beat. And I got to see Peter, Paul and
Mary and other people saying in front of the Hilton Hotel. I think that was on Thursday
night. I saw a bunch of friends in and out of the demonstrations. There was a lot of music
and a lot of fun that way besides the demonstrations and the beatings. I'll always remember
Gregory saying “Come on down”. He was on this hill where that statue is over here on the
east side of Michigan and he said “Come on down to my house for dinner”. And everybody
one down nice and neat, two by two and then hitting this road blocked on the train tracks.

GF: Why did you agree to do this interview?

JW: Well Stan I think had told me and you were persistent and I thought it would be fun to
sort of talk about this stuff and it would be interesting to see how much of it jogged my
memory. I mean I don’t sit and write about this stuff. There were all sorts of other things
going on. The French students nearly shut down and changed the government in France. I
think— I don’t know if it was in ’68 or — in Czechoslovakia— There was a push in
Czechoslovakia. Dubcek was overthrown but they were demonstrations there too. There
was a lot of stuff going on around the world- so just remembering that. I get caught up in
the day to day of trying to have all of our programs survive these cuts that the Republicans
want to do.

GF: All right, that is it. Thank you.

JW: Good, good.