

**Perspective of Change:
The story of civil rights, diversity, inclusion and
access to education at HMS and HSDM**

Interview with Chester Pierce | January 13, 2015

JOAN ILACQUA: [00:00] Hello, this is Joan Ilacqua. Today is January 13th, 2015. I am here with Dr. Chester Pierce at his home in Jamaica Plain, and we are conducting an interview for the Center for the History of Medicine. Dr. Pierce, do I have your permission to record our interview today?

CHESTER PIERCE: Yes, you do.

JI: Excellent. Thank you for inviting me here. So as I had mentioned, my first question is, could you begin by telling me about yourself, where you grew up, a bit about your childhood, if you don't mind?

CP: Well, it was a long time ago. (laughter) I grew up on Long Island in a town called Glen Cove, New York, a small town. And I went to school there. And I much enjoyed -- you know, [the?] life in the small town that I grew up. And then I came to Harvard to college, and I've ended up staying a long time in Boston.

JI: Excellent. And when you went to Harvard College as an undergraduate, what did you decide to study? What did you specialize in?

CP: Well, I knew I was going to be a doctor, so I took a lot of pre-medical courses. And then, of course, the demand was to take lots of distributed -- courses distributed over a wide variety of courses, which was -- you know, which I did and enjoyed.

JI: Excellent. And did you do any extracurricular activities, in addition to your pre-medical courses?

CP: Well, I guess the major thing was I played sports. And I was in lots of, you know, activities like house government and things like that. But the major thing I did was I played sports.

JI: And did you -- as an undergrad at Harvard, are there any particular moments or memories or stories that really stand out about that time in your life?

CP: Well, I guess the most outstanding thing was I had the great honor of being elected a marshal in my class. I guess, you know, I was very flattered and honored about that.

JI: And so to be a marshal, your fellow students elected you? Were there --?

CP: [Yes, ma'am?].

JJ: (laughs) Was it a particularly -- I don't want to say coveted position, but it was something very esteemed?

CP: I think that would be safe.

JJ: And so were -- as a marshal, you had certain duties at graduation, right? I'm trying to understand what --

CP: Yeah. And -- well, and in -- we were also part of the permanent class committee, we -- to keep the class going for X amount of time. But -- so the commencement duties were very brief and short, but the long range was to be sort of a permanent part of the class and kind of keep us going.

JJ: Excellent. And actually, I had read somewhere in my research that at maybe your twenty-fifth reunion, you were honored with a scholarship. Did that have anything to do with being a marshal? It was --

CP: No.

JJ: I'm grasping at straws. (laughs)

CP: The class just decided to do that. But I forgot [all that?] -- I forgot about that all. The -- but that had nothing to do with being a marshal.

JJ: Mm-hmm. So after attending Harvard as an undergrad, you went onto medical school at Harvard Medical School. Was there a reason you decided to stay in Cambridge?

CP: No. The trick was to get into medical school and, of course, Harvard was a great medical school, so I was very glad to get in, and so I was happy to stay.

JI: Excellent. And you had mentioned that you knew that you wanted to be a doctor as an undergrad.

CP: Well, for -- I can't remember life without wanting to be a doctor. So I grew up as a child, thinking I was going to be a doctor. (laughs)

JI: Was there a moment that you decided to specialize in psychiatry?

CP: Well, there must've been a moment, but I don't exactly know when it came. I just -- I guess, during the rotations of -- into psychiatry, in medical school, I liked it. And I just said, "Well, I think I'll do this." But there was no evolution [05:00] or great moment or anything.

JI: Yeah. Sometimes there's not an epiphany when you -- you find your calling to something, and all the pieces make sense, but -- so while at Harvard Medical School -- and you were there in the late '40s and early '50s -- you had at least worked with Drs. Charles Bonner and Francis Bonner. And do you recall anything about the relationship you had with them?

CP: Well, I knew them, of course, before I went to medical school. And they were both very supportive of all

students, and particularly students going into medicine. So they were, [you know?], just sort of a grown up support system and cheering section, that they provided to lots of us going through school at that time.

JI: Excellent. And did you continue to have a relationship with them after you had finished medical school? I understand Francis was in the same -- she studied psychology, or --

CP: Yes. She was a psychiatrist.

JI: -- she taught in psychol-- yes.

CP: Yes. She was a psychoanalyst. I guess I do. But I guess, like all things, it attenuated, and -- but it was -- I'm sure I kept in touch with them, and they were always a great support to me.

JI: Excellent. And so eventually, you came to teach at Harvard Medical School, but between graduating and teaching, you spent a lot of time in the Midwest. And we had talked a bit about your internship and residency at the University of Cincinnati. And I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about that time in your life.

CP: Well, it was a [University?]. The major place we had operated as a medical school was a general hospital, a general city hospital, and so it was very active. And they had a large training component and excellent teachers, and

[a variety?] of patients, of course, so I felt that it was a very, you know, wonderful time of my life.

JI: Excellent. And so from Cincinnati, if I have my timeline correct, you enlisted in the Navy for a while, and --

CP: Well, yes. It was, you know -- it was a time when they had a doctors draft, and so I went in the Navy for a couple of years, and came back, and finished my residency in Cincinnati.

JI: Excellent. And so, while in the Navy, I understand you were at Great Lakes.

CP: Yes ma'am.

JI: And --

CP: You've done a lot of work.

JI: (laughs) Well, we've talked a couple times, and -- but, yeah. I like to research, so -- but while at Great Lakes, you had been studying bedwetting?

CP: Yes.

JI: (laughs) And --

CP: It's a very -- I was at a recruit training station, and so recruits would come in. And it turned out there was a large problem in terms of people being able to stay in the Navy. So, you know, I got very interested in that large problem. It was really a problem of some magnitude of

young recruits coming through, and a great number of them had bedwetting. (laughs)

JJ: And so was that -- I'm not sure exactly what I want to ask. It was a large research project and --

CP: Well, I continued it -- yeah. It was a large issue, an important one to the Navy. I mean, you couldn't be having people sleep in bunks or hammocks and -- (laughs) so it was a big problem. And so a lot of people were discharged, you know, because of that, and loss of manpower, and it would take a lot of money and everything. So it was a -- technically a big problem to the Navy. So I did stay -- I got interested in it as a research project.

JJ: Mm-hmm. And so while you were researching, you were also -- were you also working as a psychiatrist? Were you also practicing?

CP: Oh, yes. Well, I was [billeted?], as they [called it?]. They gave me the [10:00] job in the Navy as being a psychiatrist, so I worked as a psychiatrist in the Navy.

JJ: And did you -- I know, at some point, I -- in prior conversations, I had asked you if you knew that you wanted to teach. But I didn't really get into, did you know that you wanted to research, as well? There's a lot -- it seems like a lot of car-- (laughs)

CP: Well, you know, a lot of life, I guess, is serendipitous, and I -- while I was in the Navy, a big problem in the Navy was bedwetting. And, you know, recruit -- of course, I was at a recruit station. So people would come through as recruits and we had to discharge a number of them because they wet the bed, and they were a waste of time, and money, and effort, and so forth. So I got interested in that as a problem. And so that got me interested in sort of research, and academic things, and so on.

JI: Mm-hmm. And so after your tenure at the Navy, you went back to the University of Cincinnati to finish your residency, I believe.

CP: [Yes ma'am?].

JI: And after Cincinnati, you moved onto Oklahoma.

CP: Well, yeah. I stayed three years on the faculty, as a junior faculty member, at Cincinnati, before I went to Oklahoma.

JI: And was there a reason you decided to go to Oklahoma in particular?

CP: Well, I guess reason was the research going on there. The colleagues I would have there were interested in things I was interested in, and I liked the people, you know, so it was mostly, I guess, that I wanted to be with that group of people.

JI: More so than being in Oklahoma, maybe?

CP: Well, because --

JI: I -- (laughs)

CP: Because the same -- it was in Oklahoma. You know, I went from Cincinnati to Oklahoma. And I went to Oklahoma because of the work that the people were doing there, and we all had the same interests, and so on.

JI: Excellent.

CP: And I liked the people so much.

JI: Well, that's a big part of working anywhere. Is having --

CP: Yes. That's right. (laughs)

JI: -- colleagues that you enjoy and work that you enjoy doing.

CP: Mm-hmm.

JI: And so, while at Oklahoma -- or while working for Oklahoma, you also worked in Antarctica, correct? Or --

CP: Oh, yes. That's right. Well, [we were?] interested in -- [or should I say?] -- at that time, people were concerned about how long [you?] could work effectively. And the Russians said they had found a way to keep working -- people working effectively 20 hours a day. That caused great consternation. You know, if that was true, they could be -- it's more productive than we were. So -- and it was also said that people in the high latitudes slept less. That is up in the Arctic -- supposedly little

children stayed awake long hours and things, you know, at different light cycles and things. So it caused some degree of consternation among some people in research and military societies, organizations. So I got involved in that kind of research.

JJ: Mm-hmm. And so do you think -- did your time in Antarctica influence other parts of your career?

CP: Well, I guess, you know, like everybody's career, one thing leads to another, and these opportunities that you could not have, or would have, only because you went, and so on. So I guess you could say, like everybody, that period in my life was impactful in shaping it and guiding it.

JJ: Mm-hmm. And as a -- almost a segue, but you had mentioned that you have a mountain named after you in Antarctica, correct?

CP: (laughs) Yes, that's right. But that's in such a small society, and so many mountains, that if you went down there -- there weren't that many [who?] went down -- lots of people have geographical things named after them down there, if you knew the people who name things. And of course, you would (inaudible) [because?] there's so few people. So lots of us have, you know, geography named. So it -- I'm very pleased and proud about it, but it was just

that I went there, and like many people, I have a geographical name.

JJ: (laughs) It's still an exciting [15:00] fact about you, though.

CP: (laughs)

JJ: So you had been teaching and researching at the University of Oklahoma and had spent some time in Antarctica. And in the late '60s, you came back to Boston. And I'm wondering if you could tell me a bit about how you returned from the Midwest. We'll put it that way.

CP: Well, I was here on a -- kind of a fellowship, like a sabbatical leave I had. So I was here on a fellowship. And my boss, whom I much liked, became the Chair at UCLA. He wanted me to go to UCLA, and I thought that I didn't want to go. I didn't particularly like Los Angeles and I didn't want to rear children in Los Angeles. I had [little?] children at that time. So I said, "No, I don't want to go there." So I had the opportunity to stay at Harvard.

JJ: Excellent. And --

CP: I liked that boss very much. It was a regret that I didn't -- I wasn't able to stay with him.

JJ: But he went to LA and --

CP: And I stayed here.

JI: And you came here.

CP: Because I was here on a fellowship -- sabbatical.

JI: Mm-hmm. And then the fellowship --

CP: They offered me the chance to stay here. At the same time, I had the offer to go with my boss with him, when he was moving to UCLA. So I decided to stay here.

JI: Excellent. And then you stayed here for -- and you taught for --

CP: Oh yeah. For --

JI: -- several decades.

CP: Yeah. I stayed here from then on. Yes.

JI: Yes. And so around the same time -- and I have a few questions about working for Harvard throughout the later part of your career.

CP: You've done lots of research.

JI: (laughs) But we had talked very briefly, prior to our interview, about how in 1969, you helped to form the Black Psychiatrists of America. And I was wondering if you recalled anything about that organization, and --

CP: Well, it was a time of, you know, a lot of social ferment around issues of race. And people were organizing and talking in all sorts of ways. And so it was not unusual for a group to get together, like a group of psychiatrists -- black psychiatrists, or whatever. And so we got

together and, you know, of course, we had specific agenda items which we wanted to achieve, and by organizing, we had a better chance of getting a positive response. So I -- like everybody, I was hostage to my times, and that's what we r-- my times called for, my people were doing in my time, and I took part.

JI: Excellent. And you were the -- I think you were the first president of the --

CP: Yes.

JI: If I recall correctly.

CP: Yes, of the Black Psychiatrists of America.

JI: Excellent. Did you stay involved with the organization after your --?

CP: Well, yes. I stayed involved. And, of course, there's still lots to do. (laughs)

JI: Yes.

CP: So people -- there were all kinds of organizations and things, which most people belonged to lots of them at that time, and worked, you know, as much as they could, through the various organizations.

JI: Excellent. And so -- let's see. Well, I'm not sure what to ask next, because -- I'm curious if you could tell me -- and now I'm jumping out of order. But --

CP: Oh, it's OK.

JJ: (laughs) Well, it's hard. You know, things happen linearly, but when you begin talking about the past, you can go from A, to B, to D, to wherever you'd like to go. Could you tell me a bit about what you were teaching at Harvard in the -- actually, throughout any of your tenure there, if there was something you specifically focused on.

CP: Well, I was in the Department of Psychiatry, of course. And so most of what I did was do clinical teaching and supervision work at Mass General. So it was mostly what I did in my teaching. And -- which, you know, is expected, I guess, of faculty members, you're -- who worked in hospitals. And so I worked at [20:00] Mass General, and that's what I did.

JJ: And Mass General's -- they're -- and I should've written down the exact title. But you have, I think -- is it -- the Division of Global Psychiatry is named for you at Mass General.

CP: (laughs) Yeah. That [kept the course?] years later. Yes. That's right.

JJ: Mm-hmm. So you had -- your career had an impact --

CP: (laughs)

JJ: -- at Massachusetts General. Did you enjoy being a teacher?

CP: Oh, I enjoyed it very much. And I'm equally proud -- I'm very proud, of course, of what you just mentioned. I'm equally proud that they had a research [society?], which they named after me, too, for minority researchers. And, yes, I much enjoyed teaching and working at Mass General.

JI: Excellent. And there -- actually, and also, as part of your legacy as both a Harvard student and professor, there is a portrait of you in the Lowell House now. And I was wondering if you could tell me anything about that.

(laughs)

CP: Well, I -- as a matter of fact, until you told me, I didn't know it was still there. (laughs) And let's see, now. I forget now. I know that the picture was painted, and the man did it, and they put it up. They had a little ceremony when he put it up. But I thought it was probably, by now, long since taken down. And, you know, Harvard has literally hundreds of portraits that they've had over the years, and most of them were taken down, so I figured mine must be taken down. So --

JI: It's -- (laughs)

CP: I'm not sure it's fair.

JI: As far as I know, it is in the -- from what I can tell, it's in the Junior Common Room, above the piano.

CP: Oh, wow.

JI: But --

CP: It's still there, [then that's?] --

JI: But I haven't --

CP: Wow.

JI: -- gone into Lowell House to double check.

CP: I'm surprised.

JI: But that's where they tell me it is.

CP: Well, I'm surprised, and delighted, but I'm surprised.

JI: (laughs) And so are there -- like I had said, and like we both mentioned, you had a very long career at Harvard.

CP: Because I've had a life -- a long life.

JI: You've had -- (laughs)

CP: Fortunately. (laughs)

JI: Yes. And are there any particular stories or moments that really stand out as important to you, as part of your Harvard career?

CP: Well, let's see. I mean, I enjoyed it all, and people were very good to me, and I -- and I think, you know, that they gave everybody lots of latitude to do what you wanted to do, which lots of places, I don't think, provide. And if I came in and said I wanted to go to Antarctica, (laughs) you know, they'll probably bat an eyelash and say OK. And so that kind of spirit I always liked. And, of course, the fact that there's such nice collegueship, that you could

find colleagues to do anything you were interested in, and there were always interesting things they were asking you to do, too. And so it was a very wonderful way to spend a life.

JJ: That's a really wonderful answer. That's almost -- it's almost poetic. (laughs)

CP: (laughs) Aw, thank you.

JJ: And -- oh, you're welcome. And so we had -- I mentioned the portrait. Do you think that you've left a legacy at Harvard? You've definitely left a legacy at Mass General, and -- with the Global Health and Psychiatry fellowships that they have. But -- (laughs)

CP: (laughs) No. I'm old enough now to know that there were thousands of people who went through Harvard before me, there'll be thousands coming after me. And, you know, I went through my time like everybody else goes through their time, and I enjoyed it, and I was pleased by it. But, you know, I don't know what to say.

JJ: (laughs) Well, that is a great answer, too. It's a thoughtful way of putting it.

CP: Well, thank you.

JJ: (laughs) You're welcome. And so I've reached, essentially, the end of my list of questions today. [25:00] And it's -- this last question is really open. Is there anything else

that you think that we should record for posterity about you, in the Center for the History of Medicine?

CP: I don't know. That -- it both overwhelms me and underwhelms me at the same, you know, to try to answer a question like that. I don't know what to s-- I don't know how to answer that.

JI: OK. (laughs) Well, it's very open-ended. But I wanted to make sure that if there was any story or moment in the back of your mind that I haven't asked about, to give you an opportunity to bring it up. And --

CP: Well, Harvard was always very generous about letting people do what they wanted to do. And lots of people -- lots of places I know wouldn't have given me the latitude to pursue things I wanted to pursue, and did, such as, you know, spending lots of time in Antarctica, you know. And lots of places just wouldn't have been indulgent of that. But Harvard is indulgent -- lets people indulge, you know, their pursuits. And as long as they think they're gainful enough, you know, there's no resistance, much encouragement.

JI: I think that -- my own comment on that -- but that's part of what makes Harvard what it is, is that it does allow people to pursue what they're interested in. And that's

why so many interesting -- both innovations and people come out of Harvard.

CP: That's very perceptive and I agree.

JI: Well, thank you. And so I think that concludes our interview today.

CP: Well, that's [easily enough to done?].

JI: Excellent.

CP: That's good.

JI: Good.

CP: Well, thank you very much for coming. It's gracious of you.

JI: Oh, well thank you so much for having me. It's -- you beat me to my punch line. I'm very pleased to have come out here to speak with you today, Dr. Pierce.

CP: Well, thank you.

JI: Thank you.

CP: Yeah. Now, let's see --

END OF AUDIO FILE