

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

Interview with Thomas Sequist | Part 1 of 2 | May 18, 2018

JOAN ILACQUA: All right, so I'm Joan Ilacqua from the Center for the History of Medicine, here to do an oral history interview with Thomas Sequist. Today is May 18th, 2018. And Dr. Sequist do I have your permission to record?

THOMAS SEQUIST: Yes.

JII: Awesome. So my first question is hopefully an easy one. Could you just tell me a bit about yourself, where you grew up and what your background is?

TS: Sure. So, I grew up in New York State, in the Hudson Valley a little bit north of New York City. About, I don't know 45 miles north of New York City. I am the fifth child in our family, so the youngest of five, my family is actually -- my mother is from a Reservation, an Indian Reservation in New Mexico, Taos Pueblo. My father is from the East Coast actually, from New England. They met out in the Southwest. So I -- well I grew up in New York and I have a lot of the memories of New York, I actually don't have any family there anymore my family is all in New Mexico. So when I finished high school, my family moved

back to New Mexico, and my memories growing up and trips are all going to New Mexico. So that's me.

JJ: Yeah, so did you know from an early age that you wanted to go into medicine, or did you ever -- was there a role of medicine in your early life?

TS: I did not know that I wanted to go into medicine. So my mother is a nurse -- oh well, was -- she's passed away, but she was a nurse. She had, at the time -- you didn't have to have a bachelor's degree to go into nursing. She had finished like a two year program to go into -- like an associate's degree to go into nursing. So that's the exposure that I had growing up but it wasn't really, I wouldn't say that at the time that I went to college even that I wanted to go to medical school. I actually wanted to be an engineer.

JJ: And so where did you go to undergrad?

TS: I went to Cornell University in New York.

JJ: And so when did you decide that you wanted to switch from engineering to premed?

TS: So I studied chemical engineering and actually had a specific interest around biochemical engineering and sort of its applications to the biologic sciences and sometimes some bit of medicine as well. But I spent a while doing an internship that Cornell offers, where you can basically

take no vacations and work straight through so that you can take a semester or two and work in industry. So I worked for a while at Intel. And at the time Intel, you know the chip maker...

JI: Mm-hmm.

TS: So at the time, this was in early '90s, they were sort of developing a lot of their microprocessor chips, sort of a new thing. And they had these you know fancy clean room environments where they were fabricating these wafers. They make these chips on these round wafers they look like small records almost, and I went to work there for a while. And thought that technology was really awesome. It was very fun, but it wasn't... I didn't think a long term career for me was a very -- so engineering groups are small, by their nature, and not very outward facing. So I just felt like I was probably looking -- I wanted something in science but probably I wanted something a little bit more people interactive than what I was getting there so -- but there was a little bit of a scramble because I actually did that internship in my junior year. So then sort of realized oh, I don't -- it was the fall of my junior year and sort of realized I don't know that I want to do this I think I might want to go to a medical

school. So then I scrambled for lack of a better word, to try and get ready to go to apply to a medical school.

JI: Hmm and so...

TS: But I would say, just in fairness, I did that with not a lot of insight into what I was doing. So I didn't really actually know that I'd never met a physician other than my own pediatrician growing up. I didn't really know physicians who were doing it as a career, and had talked to them about doing it, I actually didn't know any of that. Like I said, my mom who was a nurse and yeah had brought me to the hospital sometimes when she was -- when I was little and -- but I didn't really actually know what it would be like. So in retrospect, I always describe to people -- it was a little lucky. I feel like I've stumbled around and gotten lucky a bunch of times in terms of what I -- how I progressed in my career. So at the time, I was like, I think medicine only because like there's science involved, and there's people's interactions involved. That seems good, that seems what I'm looking for, but really had no idea.

JI: And so, what led you to Harvard Medical School from there you took the classes and then did you go to immediately into a medical school or did you --

TS: I did. I went directly to medical school so I applied whatever the timing is, during my senior year college of at Cornell, and then came here. [05:00] So I've been in Boston since 1995 which is when I started Harvard, so almost -- well, I don't know how many -- that's over -- well, I was going to say almost 20 years ago, but that's more than 20 years right?

JJ: Yeah I think it's 25.

TS: Almost 25 years. (laughter) I -- so with medical school like with many students, I applied to a lot of schools. And I had a couple of criteria. So where I went to school in Cornell, in upstate New York the weather is pretty brutal. So I knew that I wanted to go somewhere with nicer weather. Believe it or not Boston has nicer weather, than Ithaca. Ithaca is right around the Great Lakes so you get all this lake effect weather, which can be -- it can come on quickly, without a lot of warning, and be really harsh like all of a sudden it could be just a blizzard. And I knew that I just needed to get away from that. So I had actually narrowed it down to Stanford and Harvard, and I'll be honest. So Stanford is obviously weather wise way better than here in Boston. I had -- I ended up coming to Boston because I came here, and I -- you know, you make these lists sometimes when you are applying to medical

school about how many -- how many days per week do I -- am I in classes versus in the hospital and what are the sort of hours and what's the curriculum like, and you end up with this massive amount of information after you've applied to so many schools. I at the end of the day decided, where did I feel like I'd fit in okay. And there were some places that I would go that I just thought, "[Oh no?]. I'm not sure that I really fit here." Just as I was walking around and interacting with people. When I came here to Harvard to -- they actually have this thing called the second-look weekend -- that may not be exactly what they call it. But it's for minority students to come back, who have been accepted and their -- I think it's sort of like a recruitment type effort. And I met a student who was a couple of years ahead of me who was a Native student. He had reached out to me and said, "Hey, I heard you got in, this is great, you can stay with me for the weekend, we can sort of look around." And starting with that interaction with him, but then broadly with all of the other students that I sort of interacted with at that minority recruitment weekend, I thought, "Oh I feel like -- I feel like more, like I fit in here I don't feel so out of place here." Which I'll be totally honest; is not really what I expected in terms of Harvard. So I thought, I don't

think I'm really going to feel right there. But it -- but so it was like a totally judgment call. I mean I my background is -- I said my mom was from a Reservation, we, you know I'm the youngest of five children, none of my brothers and sisters finished college. My parents didn't really finish four-year colleges, there were no sort of -- there were no physicians or other folks in my family. So I had like all along had been just sort of winging it. I think I had very loving and supportive parents. But they didn't really know any of the sort of pathway that I was trying to take so, a lot of this like I said before, I just feel like I -- especially back then was a little bit kind of stumbling around like trying to figure out what I wanted to do. So my -- the short answer of like why did I end up at Harvard, is because it sort of felt right to me.

(laughs) And this is not the most scientific approach to it.

JJ: Well it's everyone's approach is different. Everyone's story of how they get to where they are is totally different. Although I've had a lot of people tell me, you know, the right thing happened at the right time.

TS: Yeah.

JJ: It seems. Like that, yeah it's not a typical story but a story that happens a lot. I'm curious when you came to

Harvard Medical School, you mentioned the second -- the revisit weekend, or part of the revisit weekend. When you got here were there any groups or clubs that you started to get involved with or that you gravitated toward?

TS: When I started?

JI: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. Can I -- can we pause for a second?

JI: Sure.

TS: I just --

END OF AUDIO FILE