“JC”

Interviewed by Annie Tang

February 20, 2018
Interviewee: “JC”

Interviewer: Annie Tang (AT)

Date: February 20, 2018

AT: This is Annie Tang with “JC” on February 20, 2018, at the Eisenhower Library for the first-generation college student oral histories.

JC: Hi, thanks for having me.

AT: All right – so for the first question, where were you born? And tell me about your family.

JC: Yeah, so I was born in Strafford, New Hampshire. I mean, I’m from Strafford, New Hampshire. I think I was born in Exeter. But I’m from a small town in Strafford, New Hampshire. Parents are S. and H.C. My father is an electrician, and he has been [since] before he got out of high school. So he’s been an electrician for quite a while. And then my mother, she was a stay-at-home mom until my sister and I were in middle school.

And since then, she’s become a veterinarian assistant, so definitely kind of more of a blue-collar background. And speaking of my sisters, my sister, S, is four years younger than me. She’s graduating high school this year, so that should be interesting. My graduation is on a Thursday afternoon, and hers is on the Friday afterwards.

AT: That is going to be a busy, long weekend for you all.

JC: Yes, it will be. Yeah. So a little bit I guess about Strafford, New Hampshire. So it’s the middle-of-nowhere, New Hampshire. The high school I went to was a regional high school. It had probably four or five towns kind of feeding into it, but there was still only about 500 kids out of all of those towns. And it was definitely a very different academic environment.
About half the kids didn’t end up going to college. They went straight into the workforce or dropped out. It’s definitely a different academic environment, but it was also I think kind of a good thing, too, because it gave me a little bit of a contrast to what I’m doing here.

AT: So tell me a little more about your parents’ education. You said your father was an electrician, and your mother eventually became a veterinary assistant.

JC: Yeah, so my father – and he went to high school, didn’t enjoy it, like most teenage boys, and he comes from a family of five, and some of his older siblings had kind of tried college and dropped out. But his father, my grandfather, had basically apprenticed him to someone he knew, SM, and I think he was like 10 or 11 when he started apprenticing for this electrician. And he just started working straight for him, and then eventually – as soon as he graduated high school, he started working full-time, and he eventually had his own business.

Once my sister and I were born, he is no longer officially an electrician that works for himself. He decided to work for an electric utility so he could get health insurance. SM is actually the namesake of my little sister. So that’s how that works. And then my mom, when she was in high school, she was a better student than my father. My father hated high school, just like my sister. My sister takes after him in that respect. I guess I take after my mom more in that respect: very studious.

But regardless, she did not want to go to school. It didn’t really seem like what she wanted to do. She just wanted to have a family. She wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, so she did. But then eventually my sister and I grew up, and she decided she needed to bring in some money for the household, and she’s always been an animal person much more than a people person, so she decided to look around. And she didn’t have any formal training at all.

Basically, she showed up to a veterinary office, a local one, that happened to have an opening, and she at that point was applying to be a veterinary assistant, which basically is just like kennel help, and just got the job on the spot and then has kind of been learning along the way.

AT: Good for her!
So I realized I skipped over a little bit. But can you tell me what it was like growing up in the town that you grew up in?

Yeah. I mean, it was definitely a very spread-out town. I guess I tell people when I try to explain how rural it was that we didn’t have any stoplights.

I mean, there was a couple stop signs, obviously, but there weren’t any stoplights in the town, so that’s how small it was. And I guess the one – like you could go through Strafford and not realize that you had hit a town – like a definable town. The only semblance of a town center was Bow Lake, which was just this really tiny beach that people like – that people kind of coalesced around.

What was the name of the lake?

Bow Lake.

Bull Lake?

Bow, B-O-W. People kind of coalesced around that. Going through middle school and high school, it was the same – I graduated with the same people I went to preschool with. It’s kind of this cohort of maybe 20 or 30 students that you know really well, and they’ve been there the whole time. I was fortunate to be pretty close to most of my family. My family is interesting. My dad comes from a family of five children. There’s only one other cousin though on that side.

A lot of people kind of moved out West, and only one stayed by to have a son, J, who, like I said, I got to see quite a bit as a kid. And then on my mother’s side, there were four children, all girls, and they all had two children each; so I had a lot of cousins on that side. My immediate family – my mom, my dad and my sister – were kind of a bit further away from that side of the family. I mean, physically, we were closer, and we did get to hang out with them a lot.

But you know, for example, I had an Aunt K, and her two children, one of them was pregnant at 17, dropped out of high school. My cousin, J, who I was actually supposed to graduate with him, he ended up not graduating. Same deal on my Aunt K’s side; two boys, none of them graduated high school. And then same on my Aunt B’s side; a couple teen pregnancies. Even though I was the
second youngest of my, I guess, generation of children, I was the first to graduate high school, which was a bit odd.

Our family – our immediate family, my grandparents, and my parents and my sister, we’re all very close. So that was probably what tied me to Strafford, I guess, more so than anything.

AT: Did you feel sort of like an outlier being the first to go to college out of this extended family?

JC: A little bit. There’s a lot of focus on me just as the academic one, which kind of had its ups and its downs. It was nice. Everyone just kind of thought I was working really hard and were supportive. But then there was also kind of a negative aspect to it, or I was like the uppity, educated one. That was a little bit tough, but at least my immediate family seemed to understand what I was going for.

AT: Speaking of your education, what was high school like then?

JC: High school was nice because that’s kind of the first time I got to meet people from outside my immediate family or the town, because like I said, it had people coming from I think like four or five different towns, so I finally got to meet some new people, which was nice. I think my high school experience – well, for one, it was dominated by cross-country running and academics. When you’re in middle school, I mean, I wanted to be a good student, and I think at that point I had realized that academics were my thing.

That was the thing that set me apart from everyone in my family and everyone in my – at school, was being good at academics. But then once I got to high school, that intensified because then it was – even as you’re stepping in freshman year, you’re thinking about college. So academics were a big part of it, but cross-country was also a really big part of it. I was on the girls’ varsity cross-country team my freshman year, and we were very lucky to have just a really good group of girls.

We’re this tiny town in the middle of nowhere, but my first year we got I think our first state championship in like six or seven years.

[00:10:05]

Then each year, we just kept getting better and better, and we eventually won New England, and we got to nationals, and everyone was like, “Who are these people?” Like, “Where is this
team coming from?” But that was a great experience just because the whole team was – I mean, I love running, but – and I still love running, but at that point being on the team was mostly about the girls that I was with.

I feel like probably most students at Hopkins; I’m a very reserved, quiet person, focused on studying and kind of following a very narrow path. But the girls that was on my cross-country team were very different from that: wild, crazy, they would just run around and have fun all the time. But I think that was good for me, because especially in high school is kind of when it started – since I was focusing so hard on academics, fun was kind of pushed to the side, which again I feel like is definitely a Hopkins thing.

Being on the cross-country team kind of helped me get a contrast to that because these girls were just – and even the coaches, too. The coaches were – I mean, rather than just like go for a normal run on a normal trail, our coach would just say, “Hey, here’s a patch of woods. If we just run into those woods, I’m sure we’ll hit something eventually.” We call it “bushwhacking.” You know, just the whole team had a very free spirit kind of feeling to it, so it was a nice contrast to my academics.

I feel – the one thing I feel like I differ probably from a lot of Hopkins students is that, you know, a lot of people say that high school was extremely easy for them, and then they came to Hopkins and that’s when the real work started. But for me, that really wasn’t the case. High school was pretty difficult, and that’s without even a lot of upper-level classes. I think our school offered two AP courses. There was calculus and English – like English composition – and that was it.

So there weren’t a lot of honors classes or AP classes, but it was still – I don’t know. I’ve just always had to work very hard to kind of reach that level of academics. It definitely didn’t come easy.

AT: So what was it about high school that [made it] much more difficult than Hopkins?

JC: I definitely wouldn’t say it was more difficult. I’d say Hopkins is definitely more difficult, but I just feel like most people when they talk about that transition from high school to college, you know, high school was a breeze. They didn’t try. They didn’t have to study. And then when they come to Hopkins, then they have to like learn how to study and learn how to do that kind of stuff.
So in part, that was actually an advantage for me, because although Hopkins is quite a step up from high school – because it’s not like my high school was a premier, top-of-the-line high school, but just having already struggled in high school, I knew how to study. I knew how to work through things, how to get help. So while Hopkins was difficult, I knew how to handle it I think a little bit better.

AT: You talk about how you were already on varsity your freshman year and how you were really focused on academics. Were you recognized in any ways for sports and for your academics then?

JC: For academics, it was – since it was such a small school, and a big portion of the school or of the student body didn’t plan on going to college or – academics was definitely not their focus. I think the biggest clubs or groups in our school, one was track and field, which was nearly a quarter of the entire student body, and then the other was FFA, Future Farmers of America; that was like the other half of the student body.

It was very much divided between the “hicks” and the “preps.” Basically, if you didn’t wear Carhartt and work boots, you were a prep, and if you did you were one of the hicks.

AT: What was that first thing you said? If you did not wear –

JC: Carhartt – it’s a type of jacket.

AT: What type of jacket is it?

JC: It’s a winter jack – not even a winter jacket. But it’s something like a construction worker would wear – like someone who is outside a lot I guess. It’s almost like a hunting jacket.

AT: I see. And the students who were into agriculture would wear those types of jackets.

[00:15:02]

JC: Yes, I have one myself, but I don’t wear it that often. There’s kind of this divide. So the people who were very focused on academics, there’s probably a group of like five or six of us that were in all the same honors classes – we basically just saw each other all day because there were so few upper-level classes, we kind of just followed each other around. We got to know each other well.
But even among that group – I mean, well, I graduated valedictorian, which was surprising because there was this one kid, Eric, who was way smarter than me. He was incredibly intelligent, but he didn’t put any effort into it at all. I guess that was on the academic side. Everyone kind of knew me and the five or six other people as the brainiacs of the school.

Then as far as running and athletics, it was actually kind of similar to academics, because that varsity girls team, I mean, we got a lot of publicity as far as being the first team to come from this tiny town and go all the way to New England, win New England’s and then go to nationals. We got a lot of attention for that, because in the past, all we had ever done was like maybe go to state meet. It was this group of six or seven girls that were just – everyone kind of just knew that’s like the cross-country people. In that respect, everyone just kind of knew me as the person who ran and the person who was a brainiac.

AT: It’s not bad compliments, though.

JC: True.

AT: So segueing, but still related to education, you talked a little bit about what your family felt about education. Can you expand a little more about that?

JC: My parents, they obviously understood you need to do well at school, and you need to put in effort, but they never understood I guess the academics as having much value other than just to get a good job and it’s something you’re supposed to do, essentially. When I took a very strong interest in academics, I think they were a little bit confused why I would come home crying because I didn’t do well on an exam or [why] I took it so seriously, and I don’t think they understood why I took it so seriously.

But in the same vein, my parents were very open and accepting people in the sense that the big characteristics that they wanted to impart on both me and my sister were hard work and dedication and respect. Hard work and respect were probably the two things they really wanted to impart on us. It didn’t really matter what we were doing as long as we were doing it to the best of our ability. I think they were confused.

They didn’t understand it, but they appreciated that I was putting effort into it and not shying away to pursuing what I wanted to pursue. The rest of the family who I didn’t see as much or didn’t
understand it as well, I’ve just always kind of been like the overeducated one. But again, it’s mostly support. Mostly support as long as they realize that I’m working hard, and that’s what matters to them.

AT: Working hard at something you want to do.

JC: Yeah, yeah.

AT: How did you then decide to attend Hopkins?

JC: In middle school, I realized, academics are my thing, this is what I’m good at, and in high school, I kind of honed that. And I was a very nervous person in general – very, very anxious, nervous all the time about everything, and that was very pronounced in my junior and senior year of high school when the topic of college kind of came up.

But I’m a very methodical person, too, so I had a spreadsheet of, as far as picking all of these different things that I wanted for the college I was looking at. I wanted to be on the East Coast so I could come home at some times, but I kind of wanted to be outside of New Hampshire.

[00:20:00]

I didn’t want to be too close to home. I love my parents, but I needed a little bit of space. I wanted to be on the East Coast, but outside New Hampshire. I obviously wanted to go to the best school that I could go to. I realized if academics are my thing, I might as well go full-force. And I wanted to be in a city. I had never been – the biggest city I had been to was Manchester, New Hampshire, which is not a big city. I really wanted to go to a big city – not even a big city, but just a city, and kind of get that experience.

I had visited a bunch of schools. Me and my dad – I was lucky – we got to go on kind of like a college road-trip I think the end of my junior year to all of these schools that I had found on paper that seemed fine. And it was actually a really good chance for us to bond. We were living out of the back of his car, eating peanut butter sandwiches and just driving all across the East Coast.

Anyways, after applications and everything, it came down to Hopkins and – well, I was accepted to Hopkins, Georgetown and UPenn. It was actually a quite stressful time because the first
acceptance I got back was my safety school, which was Northeastern, which is a relatively good school, but it was definitely a safety for me. I figured I would be near the top of their applicant pool and therefore financially it would be easier.

It turns out it wasn’t. I got that financial aid package – I mean, especially being the first one to go to college, I think the most confusing and the most stressful part of it was figuring out how to pay for it. They hadn’t saved for college at all partly because they couldn’t and then partly because they hadn’t expected – it wasn’t assumed that you would go to college in my family.

That was the hardest part was we had no idea how financial aid worked, how scholarships worked. I applied for a bunch of local scholarships, but we were kind of banking on financial aid. And when I got the financial aid package from Northeastern, we kind of just had a family meeting, and there was a lot of tears, and there was a lot of like, “How are we going to do this?” It was a scary time.

AT: Was that the main contender at the time because of the fact that you had heard back from them—that they had accepted you?

JC: At that point, that was just the first and only college I had heard from. The reason it was so scary was because I knew I was going to get in there, and I figured since I was at the top of their applicant pool, getting money should be easier there. I was like, “Okay, well, if they’re not giving me a very good financial aid package here, what are these even more difficult schools going to give me?”

At that point, I didn’t realize that bigger schools typically have bigger pockets – or deeper pockets. So I got the packages from here at Hopkins and then UPenn around the same time, and those are both equivalent packages as far as finances. It’s definitely still difficult. Paying for college has never been easy, but it was finally doable. It was like, “Okay, this is possible.” That was a big relief.

And then it came down to these final two schools. I had come. I had visited them. I had stayed with a student, and honestly it came down – I think a lot of – I think my parents kind of were thinking that – I think they were leaning towards UPenn, you know. Philadelphia – I think they liked the city better and it just – maybe an older campus – I don’t know.

AT: It was their preference.
JC: It was their preference. But I think honestly what it came down to for me was when I sat down and looked through classes that I would have to take – people don’t actually talk about that often. They talk about class size or they talk about academic programs generally, but people don’t I think when they’re planning school don’t actually sit down and plan out what classes they’d have to be required to take, which really seemed like a no-brainer because that’s why you’re there.

But anyway, when I looked at what I needed for Hopkins, since it’s focused on distribution requirements rather than specific core courses you have to take, that’s what I think drew me to it, because I could kind of design my own courses or my own education.

[00:25:09]

I have a lot more freedom here than compared to somewhere like UPenn where you had to take all these like Greek philosophy courses and like just all of these obscure courses. I think that’s one thing I do hold over from coming from a background of kind of a working class family is that while I do value my education it has to be practical. The idea of just taking a class because, “Oh, that’d be interesting,” doesn’t really jive with me. That’s how I chose Hopkins.

AT: You kind of talked about how you chose Hopkins because they gave you a great financial aid package. Can you talk more about when you got the acceptance letter though?

JC: Yeah, so at that point I had been I had been rejected from a couple of schools, and then I had gotten into some lower-level schools that I couldn’t financially afford. So I was pretty stressed out at that point. I was kind of at my wits’ end, and like I said, I’m a nervous, anxious person to begin with. Especially once I got the package from Northeastern, which was not so great, I remember I was crying in my coach’s office. My cross-country coaches and I were very close, and I’d just be sitting in their office crying, and they couldn’t really help me.

Anyway, so I remember it was actually before practice on just some random afternoon, I was sitting in an empty room – I think I was trying to finish up some work before practice, and I’m just sitting in this big, empty room, and I just got the email, and I was super excited. I was near the guidance office, and I was pretty close with my guidance counselor. Her name was AO, and she
helped me out quite a bit, so I was excited to tell her about it. And same, I told my coaches afterwards.

It was kind of strange because when I was initially applying to stuff, applying to schools, Hopkins wasn’t one that was like standing out as far as, “Oh, you know, this is my top school,” or anything. But once I got accepted, there was just kind of this like slow build-up of – you know, when I first got the acceptance, I was like, “Okay, great,” but it was like throughout that afternoon and that day where I just started, it just started building up, and –

AT: It feels more real when they actually say “yes” to you.

JC: Yes, I could kind of really start seeing myself go there, which like I said I wasn’t expecting it, but it felt more and more real, and there was just kind of this feeling of relaxation that washed over me, and it seemed like, “Wow, I could actually go here.”

AT: Once you got accepted, how were the first few weeks of the undergraduate experience? Tell me about the transition from moving from New Hampshire to this different state, different city.

JC: I remember the actual logistics of moving into a dorm and – that was extremely new to me. I imagine like all students I was pretty anxious. I think my mom honestly was more anxious than anyone. My dad’s a pretty relaxed guy, but my mom is very anxious. One thing is they had never seen a college dorm. They didn’t even know what it looked like. So that was one thing I remember my mom saying was she was like, “What does a college dorm look like? You’re going to live with someone in your room?”

She just didn’t get it at all, so she was very nervous. And we were doing the move-in, and that was obviously – it was very nerve-wracking. I had never been away from my parents for more than probably a week or so at a time. The drop-off was a bit scary. I think I was more excited. I think my mom was very nervous. I talked to my dad later on, and apparently she cried the whole ten hours home. It was difficult for me to know that it was difficult for her. But I kept up with them, calling every couple days.

I mean, even now I think as a senior I still call my parents almost every day, which may seem excessive, but my immediate family – my parents and I are very close. Anyway, those first couple weeks of school were very interesting. My roommate and I were civil. We got along, but we weren’t super close. I ended up actually becoming quite close with my neighbor. Her name is Rebecca, and
we still hang out up to this day. But as far as the academics side of it, I remember I was very nervous about picking out my classes.

[00:30:02]

I had taken a pretty light course load. At that point, we still had covered grades, but despite that, I still was extremely nervous. I was like, “I’m not going to” – basically, my philosophy was that I don’t want to act like I have covered grades. I want to pretend I don’t have them and just get into that mindset of doing it the right way. I was very nervous, and then I distinctly remember getting back my first college exam. It was for Introductory Chemistry, and I had studied so much.

But I remember we got back the exams on a Friday afternoon, and I think I got like a 64 on the exam. At that point, they didn’t have an information about the statistics of the exam, and I was already nervous to just be at Hopkins. I was one of the only students in my school who had gone to that caliber of school. I thought I was in over my head, and that kind of tipped me off. I remember that whole weekend, I had basically convinced myself that I wasn’t cut out for Hopkins. Someone had made a mistake in letting me in, and I had all these fears.

I was like, “I’m going to have to go home,” like the whole world coming down around me, “I’m going to have to go home. I’ll go to UNH,” which is where most of the students went from my school. And then on Monday morning, we had class, and we finally got back the course – the test statistics. The average ended up being like a 61, and I got an A in the course, so I was above average, and I just remember it was kind of this moment where I had completely underestimated myself.

I saw myself doing that a lot the first two years, and it wasn’t until later on in my academic career that I finally started to realize, “Okay, I actually do deserve to be here. I got in here, and I’m doing well.” But especially that first semester, and even that first whole year, the whole time I was like – I’m surrounded by children of doctors and lawyers and I definitely felt out of my league. So it took some time for me to – semesters of straight A’s to be like, “Oh, okay, I guess I’m not doing too bad.”

AT: I’m glad you got over that first hurdle to feel like you belong here now. Speaking of the other students, have you met any other first-generation college students at Hopkins?
JC: I’m sure I probably have. I don’t know very many of them, and I definitely don’t have any close friends who are. It seems most of the people I know, like I said, children of doctors and lawyers and I remember at one point freshman year everyone was still kind of in that environment of meeting each other and learning about each other, new friends, and at one point we were talking about our hometowns, and we actually had gotten out Google Earth, and we were looking at each other’s childhood homes.

My best friend, Rebecca, she’s awesome, but I just remember her and looking at her and her friends – our friends’ houses, and I was like, “Holy crap! These people live in mansions!” She would casually mention something like, “Oh, yeah, you know, the cleaning lady” – you know, bringing up something like that, and I was like, “You have a cleaning lady?” and like, “We were the cleaning lady – my sister and I.” So yeah, I don’t personally know any first-gen students – first-generation students, but I’m sure I have met some.

AT: Did you feel different from the students whose parents did go to college then?

JC: I think I felt slightly different. Like I said, it was good and bad. Part of it was mixed in with my own not trusting myself or not thinking I could do it. That was part of it. But then the other part of it was it did kind of give me a background where a lot of this stuff that was going on around me was very new. Like, the concept of going to college was very new.

But I think it also kept me grounded, which was probably a good thing.

AT: On to academics again, what is your program of study? How did you choose it, and what was valuable about it? And I will definitely repeat all these questions again. What is your program of study?

JC: I’m studying Environmental Science and Applied Math. I started off when I first came here – so the program is called Global Environmental Change and Sustainability, but I just tell people Environmental Science, because that’s essentially what I’m studying. I started off with that, which was my initial major. I kind of mentioned earlier that there was a lot of hesitance on my side as far as whether or not I was cut out for Hopkins.
I was very cautious in what courses I took, and it wasn’t until about halfway through – kind of like that transition from sophomore to junior year, I was realizing I had taken all the difficult courses for the GECS program, and I had done very well in all of them, and it was kind of like, “Oh, I could do more.” So I had reached out to a couple professors trying to figure out what I should be doing, and basically I landed on AMS, Applied Math and Statistics. I wish I had thought of it earlier.

Maybe I could have made it into a major. But at this point it’s a minor, because I kind of thought about it so late. But it also means that I’m shoving all of – four years’ worth of classes into a year and a half. But it’s done well.

**AT:** You chose math as your minor. What made you choose Environmental Studies as your major?

**JC:** In high school I had kind of gone back and forth. I knew I wanted to do something environmental. I thought maybe environmental law or something. At that point, I guess it wasn’t even environmental. I kind of knew I wanted to do something in law, and when I applied to Hopkins, I said I wanted to be a history major so I could do, I guess like a law degree.

But I took some law courses at the end of high school and did not enjoy them, so I was like, “Okay, going to have to rethink that.” I remember it was quite strange; over the summer break before college, I had I guess an epiphany. Since my mom was a vet tech, we always had animals around the house. We lived in the middle of the woods. Camping was a big part of my childhood. Being close to the environment always made sense to me.

I’ve been a vegetarian since I was six years old in a houseful of essentially carnivores, so – and a big reason for that – one was obviously the moral side of it. I don’t like the idea of killing other beings for my sustenance. But the other half of it was it’s much more environmentally sustainable. I remember that summer I kind of had that epiphany of where, you know, it’s like, “I’ve been following – I’ve been practicing this strict diet for my entire – essentially my entire life, and environment’s always been important to me.” I kind of was like, “Why hadn’t I realized this before, that my career and my personal beliefs should kind of coalesce into one?”
As soon as I got to Hopkins, I declared the Environmental Science major. And at the same time, I became vegan. My parents were open to let me become vegetarian at the age of six, but they didn’t like the idea of me becoming vegan. But then once I was here, I was like, “Okay, I have free rein now.”

AT: Speaking of your program of study, do you have any memorable professors or classes?

JC: Definitely. One – it’s kind of interesting because all of these professors – the department is pretty small, so you kind of see them all. I think my first class, Darryn Waugh, was in it, and he’s still my advisor, and he’s a great guy. He’s –

AT: Darryn Waugh?

JC: Yes, he’s a very chill guy. He’s a great advisor. Then I took a few classes with someone named Ben Zaitchik, so those were the two professors that I think I had the most courses with kind of the first half of my career here at Hopkins. During that time when I was transitioning from just having the major, and I got halfway through, and I realized, “Okay, I can kind of start expanding.” I didn’t know that AMS was going to be the right thing for me to do.

I was kind of reaching out to a bunch of professors, and Ben Zaitchik when he kind of found out I was interested in energy, he put me in contact with Ben Hobbs, and I had a conversation with him. He’s great. He’s actually in the Environmental Engineering Department, and he kind of helped me parse through what kind of options I had as far as academics. Those are some professors that really stuck out.

That kind of segues into – that transition going from sophomore to junior year, there’s a few different things going on. For one aspect was adding the applied math minor figuring, “Okay, I’m doing well. I can challenge myself.” But another part of it was every summer, I’ve always had either a job or an internship, and I’d had an internship in the industry. I realized I think halfway through junior – sorry, between freshman year, I had taken an intersession course on the energy industry, and it seemed like a great industry to be getting into.

I’m interested in climate change and energy production is a really big contributor to that, so it seemed like a pretty natural fit. I think
my dad was also interested in it because being an electrician and now working in the electric utility industry – we haven’t been able to talk much about academics since I think, like, fourth grade they stopped being able to help me with my homework, but that was the first time my dad and I could talk about what I was doing in school.

So anyway, so that was freshman year, and then the summer after my sophomore year I had an internship in the industry, and I enjoyed the content of what I was doing. I knew I wanted to be in energy. But just having a 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. job in a utility or in some organization was not as fun as I thought it was going to be. One thing I like about school is you’re learning something new every day. But it seemed even over the course of two months, it just kind of got very monotonous very quickly.

And so at that same time, I was thinking about AMS, I was also thinking about career options, and I was like, “Well, should I be going to grad school? Should I” – I had no idea. I was completely lost. And when I first came to Hopkins, like the idea of research, I didn’t even know what research was. I didn’t really understand what that meant. Everyone kept – like this buzzword, like, “Oh, you should do research. I’m doing research.” I didn’t even know what that meant. Like, really, what does that mean? So it was at that point when I [was] kind of having this mini-crisis, and that’s when I talked to Benjamin Hobbs.

So he helped me. For one, he helped me figure out that I wanted to do the AMS minor and that that would be helpful because even I don’t know exactly what I want to do, having more math skills is never a bad thing. But he also kind of helped me steer in the direction of doing some research and kind of starting off with that. The expectation had always been, you know, although I was the first one to go to college, was that I would get the degree, which would be great. Basically, the utility of getting a college education was so that you could get a job that pays more.

The expectation was I would graduate, and I would go get a job. But he kind of helped me see that research was a possibility. At that point, I had reached out to a couple professors, started realizing, “Okay, this might be something I want to do.” I remember a few professors were not as conducive as others. They didn’t want to work with undergrads or – being that I was the end of my sophomore year, beginning of junior year, I didn’t have very many math courses.
I just kind of had this hodgepodge of environmental science courses; wasn’t the most appealing. There was this one professor who Ben Hobbs had actually kind of recommended, and same with Ben Zaitchik – this whole group that kind of does this systems analysis work, and they had pointed me to Sauleh Siddiqui. He was the first professor when I walked into his office and asked him about doing research, he was so excited. He was extremely enthusiastic and accepting and supportive.

[00:45:01]

I just remember because I had gone and talked to a few other professors, and they were just – I left feeling kind of defeated. I was so happy because he was so happy, and he was like, “I have all of these different projects that you could work on, and we’d love to have you aboard the research team.” It was a really great experience. So I started working for his research group, which was the Mathematical Optimization for Decisions Lab, and that was nice because as I was taking these new AMS courses, I was kind of putting them to use at the same time.

I continued over the summers doing internships in the electric industry. Worked at ISO New England, which is an Independent System Operator. Basically, they operate the New England energy grid. I worked at a utility in Vermont. That was one thing is even as I was starting to do this research, and I was starting to really enjoy it, I kind of still always had this backup plan that I was going to graduate and then get a real job.

I started really enjoying research. So the project we’re working on – currently still are working on – with Sauleh Siddiqui, is we’re looking at the nexus of food energy and water systems in Ethiopia. Obviously, being interested in energy, I kind of clung onto the energy part of it, and I’ve been helping out with that. I was working one-on-one with the grad students, and it kind of slowly started dawning on me halfway through junior year, I was like, “Oh, this is kind of fun. I like this.”

All of a sudden, I was like, “You know, this could be a job.” Doing research actually is a profession that people do. I guess I liked the content when I was doing work in the industry, but it always felt – everything you were doing was just to kind of keep the company operating on a day-to-day basis. It didn’t feel very purposeful. It was just kind of daily tasks. What I liked about research was even though it can be tedious when you’re looking at this huge dataset or something, but it was always for a bigger purpose.
I might be sifting through mounds and mounds of data, but we’re going to find out something about how biomass is – how people in Ethiopia use biomass and how that changes their carbon emissions or something. It just seemed like the scope was bigger. I realized that I could do academics as a career, and that’s actually when I went back to Ben Hobbs, because he specializes in energy systems. So I went back to him, had a conversation. I think this was actually the last day of my junior year.

My dad was picking me up, and I had the chance to see him in his office like the day before or the morning that I was leaving. I was just starting to consider graduate school, and we were kind of working – we were talking through it, and basically it came up. And he’s like, “Well, if you wanted to get a Ph.D., you could do that.” And I was like, “Am I competitive for a Ph.D.?”

It all kind of happened so fast, just a year before I was adding AMS, and just realizing I could survive at Hopkins, let alone apply to graduate school. So he told me that, “Yeah, you’re a competitive applicant,” especially once I got that AMS work in there. And so that was the last day of my junior year, and then over the summer I started studying for the GREs. This fall of my senior year, I applied to graduate school. So that was kind of rambling, but –

AT: No, no – you jumped straight to the end, but we can talk about more things as well.

JC: That’s what I figured.

AT: To directly ask you, so that is your plan for the future: graduate school?

JC: Yeah, Ph.D. program, straight to the – that’s the thing is it all happened very fast. I went from not even thinking I could handle Hopkins and then halfway through thinking, “Okay, maybe I’m doing okay here,” and then six months later being like, “Oh, I could get a Ph.D.”

[00:50:09]

AT: What programs or schools are you thinking of?

JC: I finished the applications in November of last year, 2017. So far I’ve been accepted to Carnegie Mellon’s Engineering and Public Policy Program. They have a very strong focus on electric systems,
so that would be pretty cool. Also the University of California Berkeley, Energy and Resources Program. It would be nice to – I’ve never been to the West Coast, so I’ve been accepted to those two programs. Then I also have an interview coming up with MIT for Social and Engineering Systems.

I applied to other schools, but honestly those are the three that I felt most connected with, that I felt like best suited my research interests and my goals. I’ve got accepted to two of them, so I’m in very good shape. Another reason – you know, I was kind of hesitant as far as going straight from undergrad to the Ph.D. I was like, “Man, do I have to get a master’s,” but a lot of it kind of came down – I mean, this probably isn’t the best reason, but it came down to a master’s you basically have to pay for.

I mean, it’s possible to get fellowships and stuff, but master’s are definitely – it’s harder to get funding for that. So I figured if I went straight for the Ph.D., it would just be funded, which is very nice. Carnegie Mellon so far full funding package, and Pittsburgh is a very cheap city to live in, so it would be a very livable wage. Berkeley, I have not yet gotten the financial aid package, but they nominated me for one of the university-wide fellowships, so if that turns out it will be very nice.

I was extremely surprised, because all of these programs, they’re very much focused on – I guess that was one thing when I decided that I was going to get a Ph.D. A Ph.D. most people think is like the most impractical thing you could do. So coming from my background, I was like, “Okay, well, if I’m going to be getting a Ph.D., I want to make sure it has real-world basis. Don’t want to be just sitting in some ivory tower.”

The programs I applied to very much have a real-world applicability to them, and because of that usually they only accept people that have a few years of work experience. Sometimes they’ll accept people with a master’s or something, but they explicitly say that quite often on the websites and in the informational brochures and everything. It’s like, “We prefer students who have a couple years of work experience,” and I didn’t.

I had three years of summer internships directly in the industry, so I thought, “I think that helps.” But I was flabbergasted, because these very reputable programs accepted me. Not only did they accept me; they’re not – like Berkeley, for example, out of almost 300 applicants, they accepted 18, and then they could choose 2 for
these fellowships to nominate for a university fellowship, and they chose me. I just remember when they told me that – I was on the phone – they told me over the phone, and they were like, “So do you have any questions?”

I was just like, “I’m still processing. I did not expect it at all to get this kind of response.” But I really have to shout out to Ben Hobbs because if there hadn’t been someone I respected telling me that I was a competitive applicant, I never would have thought that I could have been. I think another big help was I had some great recommendations from Sauleh Siddiqui and Benjamin Zaitchik. They helped quite a bit.

AT: Would you say that in a way they were kind of your support system – the Bens and Sauleh support system?

JC: Yes, it’s interesting, we even have another Ben on my research team. There’s just a lot of Bens. Because that was the thing is I didn’t have any – like back home, my support system were my family, and they were always supportive. But then when it came to academics, they didn’t understand any of it. They didn’t know what was going on, and I didn’t really either.

I think what helped me get through those first few years at Hopkins, you know, there were a lot of academic resources to help me through classes and stuff, but when it came to thinking about post-graduation, it was really a matter of getting mentors to guide you through, what kind of stuff can I do after graduation.

[00:55:13]

That was big to have people tell me “Yeah, you can do this,” or, “Have you looked into this?” because a lot of this stuff I wouldn’t have even known. Even when I was applying to Ph.D. programs, people were like, “Oh, have you applied to fellowships?” and I’m like, “What’s a fellowship? Do I have to apply to that?” I had no idea.

I was going into it completely blind, so it was really great to have people who were giving me a little support system.

AT: While you had an academic support system here, you mentioned how you talk with your parents on the phone every day. How was your relationship with them while you were here?
MS.0404 Johns Hopkins University Oral History Collection

JC: Honestly, I think it’s better. Like I said, I love my parents. But especially now having been living on my own for four years, being in the same house in close quarters with my parents can get a little – there can be some tension. Me and my dad get along – we’re both very relaxed people. Or not necessarily relaxed, but we just – we get along better. My mom and I are very close, but when we’re in close quarters there’s some tension. But I think what’s nice about being here is that we’re not constantly on each other.

Like, “Did you do the dishes?” or just all the little stuff that comes when you’re living with someone. But it’s nice because we can kind of call and check in every day and talk about our day. So yeah, it’s a very good relationship. They like to hear about what I’m doing, and then it keeps me grounded because here I am talking about these advanced classes, talking about energy systems and all these big ideas and grad school, and your head can kind of get up in the clouds a little bit. So it’s nice to go home or call my parents at home and talk about our dog getting into something at the house or –

AT: What’s your dog’s name?

JC: We have two. We have Isabell, who’s a chocolate lab. We have Kenzie, who’s this mutt. We think she’s terrier/greyhound. She’s a very odd-looking dog. They get into a lot of mischief, and it’s nice to hear about all of the little things that are going on at home. Like the other day, my dad was talking about bringing in firewood, and I just remember in my childhood carrying firewood into the house constantly. It just kind of grounds you a little bit. It’s nice.

AT: Speaking of close quarters, let’s go back to your dorm life or your apartment life. So you said that you weren’t terribly close to your first roommate, but talk about your overall dorm life and your friend, Rebecca, who was your neighbor.

JC: I consider myself a pretty introverted person. Like, I’m good when I’m with people, but I need time to be alone, I think, more so than the average person. I need my alone time. Freshman year was a little bit rough, just sharing a bedroom with someone, and she was a very social person, so there was always people in the room. So I honestly am not sure how I got through freshman year. We weren’t close friends or anything, but we respected each other. We were both clean and respectful.

It’s interesting, because when it came to deciding for a roommate for the second year, I ended up living in Bradford, which I was
really excited about. The reason I chose that versus some of the other – like Charles Commons or something – was because I really wanted to be off the meal plan. Being vegan – I mean, they try to have vegan options, but they might have one or two options a day, but when that’s what you’re trying to eat every single day as cafeteria food, it just gets old after a while. I was very excited to have my own kitchen.

AT: Where is Bradford, by the way?

JC: So Bradford is right across from the Barnes & Noble. Yeah, so it was very nice. I enjoyed that, because I got my own room, which was – I shared – but anyway, so I had kind of formed a bond with my neighbor freshman year, Rebecca. The only problem was that while she’s very nice to hang out with, she’s a very messy person, and I am extremely neat, very organized, very clean. Like, my room has to be pristine all the time. And she is not.

[01:00:00]

We have this story where her room was kind of like the hangout room for a bunch of my friends, and she had this couch – it wasn’t even a couch. It was like a futon that they had made into a couch, and I’m pretty sure it wasn’t supposed to be there because it was a fire hazard, but it was there anyway, and I was sitting on it, and she had opened her mini-fridge to get something, and I saw all of these what looked like cucumbers in her fridge – like seven or eight.

I was like, “Why do you have so many cucumbers?” And she just looked at me, and she’s like, “What are you talking about?” I’m like, “All those cucumbers in the bottom of drawer,” and she’s like, “Those are bananas.” And I was like, “How long have they been in there?” And she’s like, “I don’t know.” She’s just that kind of person, so we knew for the sake of our friendship we should not live together.

I ended up finding this girl Anne who lived in the same house as me – I lived in AMR II. She lived in the same house as me. We hadn’t really talked, but we were both very quiet, reserved people, so we were like, “You know what? This could work.” So I remember it was only a week or two before room selection for next year. We had like a lottery system. You got a number, and we kind of knew each other because we had lived in the same building, but we weren’t very close or anything.
Neither of us really had someone to live with, and we’re both clean and neat, so we were like, “This could work.” That worked out really well. We had a double in Bradford my senior year. We weren’t the kind of roommates to hang out and do friend stuff, but we worked very well as roommates. We both respected each other’s space. She was very neat and clean, and she’s a really great person. We still keep in touch.

She actually graduated early, so that was weird. We caught up before this past Christmas because she was graduating, so that was a little strange. But then when it came to junior year, I decided I wanted to live by myself. They don’t guarantee housing for juniors, and also it’s cheaper to kind of go off on your own into apartment living. I really wanted to live by myself, but I knew that could potentially be expensive, so I was lucky to find an efficiency, while it was extremely small, it was cheap enough that I could live by myself.

I did that, and that was great, and it was also nice because that year I could live in the same building as my friend, Rebecca. Sophomore year, we were kind of on other ends. She was in Homewood. But that year, we were in the same building, and that worked out really well because we could see each other pretty often. Then for the senior year, the financial situation at home kind of changed, so a tight budget became even tighter. And I was able to find another efficiency – a dirt-cheap efficiency, so that’s where I’m living now. It’s a little bit further down. It’s on 30th, but it’s kind of a sketchy apartment, but –

AT: 30th and – what cross-street?

JC: Right between St. Paul and North Charles. So it’s –

AT: Is that – “efficiency” – is that a term that’s used a lot at Hopkins when it comes to housing?

JC: I’m not sure how many people – I mean, it’s basically like a studio. I think everyone has a different definition of the difference between a studio and an efficiency. But for example, the place I’m living now is 120 square feet. It’s basically the door, my bed, the kitchen and the bathroom. There’s not much room for anything else. But it’s mine, and I get to live by myself, and it’s not too sketchy. But I still don’t live too far from some of my friends. So it works out well.
AT: You’ve talked about your dorm life. Did you join any clubs or activities when you were at Hopkins or even right now?

JC: Yes, freshman year, I think most freshmen, they kind of overextend themselves, like, “I’m going to try out everything.” But I realized pretty quickly that I needed to focus on academics, so I wasn’t a part of too many student groups. I had tried to be, but I didn’t have the time. One group that I did stay in touch with or that I participated in was Green Lead, which is this program that the Office of Sustainability puts on. So it’s not so much a club as it is a program that they use to kind of introduce students to sustainability at Hopkins and how they can start environmental initiatives.

I had come back as a mentor my sophomore year because it’s specifically designed for freshmen, and they have sophomore-year mentors.

[01:05:00]

But the Office of Sustainability has been undergoing some changes. I ended up being a mentor my junior year because they just didn’t have anyone else, and they needed someone, and then it became a paid position. And then senior year, I was like, “I’m not going to do Green Lead this year. Okay.” Then I got a call from Jason, a guy in the Sustainability Office – out of the four people who worked there, three quit, and they’re like, “We need your help.” I’m helping run that program again this year.

That’s the only student group that I’ve really stuck with. But as I mentioned, running was a pretty big part of my life, and I didn’t want to run on the team here. I wouldn’t consider myself a competitive runner. Competition never really interested me. The only reason I did it in high school was because I was with such a nice group of girls. Here, I wanted to continue running, and I didn’t like the fact that the Hopkins student group – running group, they always ran at weird times, like 3:00 p.m. or something.

I’m like, “I’m a morning person,” which is also very odd. You know, even like freshman and sophomore year, I’m that kind of person who gets up at like 5:00 a.m., which for a college student is a bit odd. But I like to work out in the morning, so I ended up finding this community running group of Baltimore natives, and it ended up being a really great way to see the city and meet all these new people, you know, because if you’re in a student group, you’re just meeting more students.
But it was nice because I got to meet all of these Baltimore natives that had been living here for a while. They had cars, so they could drive us to all these cool places. I went on runs that I definitely wouldn’t have gone on those runs by myself and got to see parts of the city I wouldn’t have seen otherwise. As far as exploring Baltimore, I think that avenue – the group was called the Baltimore Pacemakers, and that group definitely helped me see the city, see the people who lived in the city and also see both the good sides and the bad sides of the cities just through running through it.

**AT:** How’d you find out about this group?

**JC:** I honestly just found them online. I was looking for Baltimore running groups. It was kind of sketchy, because basically there’s this guy, Bob Hilson, who runs the group; no pun intended. He basically just gets everyone’s email, and he has this huge email chain, and just every week he sends out the information of where – the runs are typically on Saturday mornings. He just sends out the where and when; where we’re meeting up and how far it’s going to be.

I had gotten on his email list, and I had communicated a bit with him directly. And I remember the first run I think was at the Station North Arts Cafe, but that was my first week here in Baltimore. I didn’t know where it was. I had gone down there – and this is at 5:00 a.m. They start super early, and it was still dark out, and that’s further south of campus in not the greatest place to be by yourself at 5:00 a.m. So I remember I kind of cut my losses, and I went back, and I emailed him.

I was like, “Yeah, I couldn’t find you guys.” Then he was like, “Well, I can drive you to the next one, and then you can find someone to drive you back and forth.” And I was like, “Okay, that’d be great.” Then at some point the night before the next week’s run – next Saturday run, it kind of dawned on me that I was going to be getting into a car with a strange man I didn’t know at 5:00 a.m. in Baltimore, and I’d been here for two weeks.

So it kind of – that dawned on me, and then I was talking to some friends, and they were like, “That’s a bad idea. You shouldn’t do that.” And I found this kid, Will, who was in my freshman dorm, and I knew he was a runner, so I was like, “Do you want to come with me, just so I have someone in case things go south?” and he was like, “Yeah, sure.” Bob ended up picking us up, and he brought us – I think our first run started around Inner Harbor, and he introduced us to this woman named Mai Yu [phonetic], who’s
actually a professor over at Loyola, and she kind of took us under her wing.

Since then, she’s the one who drives us back and forth, and me and Will – we – so I’m currently injured, so I haven’t been going for the past year or so. But yeah, we just have this great bond, and we just went with this running group every week.

AT: What interesting things have you seen in Baltimore? You said you’ve just been pretty much all over?

JC: One thing, like I said, is just seeing the city. I kind of get really bogged down with work, and I’m not someone who will just, “Oh, let’s go out and go to a cool restaurant,” or something.

[01:10:04]

It kind of forces me to go out and see parts of the city. I remember where Bob, the guy who puts it on, is a Baltimore native, he’ll bring us everywhere. I remember after the riots I think two years ago we had gone right through the center of everything. This was obviously after the riots, but we saw all the torn out windows and – we saw everything.

Coming from lower middle-class, rural, white New Hampshire, I think it was a very good experience for me to actually see Baltimore, because I feel like a lot of people stay on campus, and they see other college students, and they see Charles Village and maybe Hampden. So I guess just seeing the real Baltimore. But it’s also great because I get to meet all of these great people who live in Baltimore, and I think that’s what defines the experience more so than anything I saw was the people I got to hang out with and the relationships I got to make.

AT: I think that’s great that you burst past the bubble – the Hopkins campus – or even campuses. I know a lot of people around here who go here can hop between the campuses.

JC: Yes, just on the shuttle and that’s it.

AT: Would you recommend overall Hopkins to first-generation students?

JC: Definitely. All the resources are there for you. You have to be comfortable with going out and reaching for them, inviting them, and just take all the opportunities that kind of come to you. I know
for example, when I first got started with research, before I actually reached out to Ben Hobbs and got serious about it, I had taken this position. I was looking for a part-time job because it was around my junior year that the financial situation at home had changed, and I needed to get a part-time job.

This class I was in, Professor Szlavecz – don’t ask me how to spell it – but she teaches Population Community Ecology in the EPS Department. Her name is Katalin Szlavecz. And I was in her class, and she just mentioned she had a research position. It was paid, and I was like, “You know what? I need a part-time job. That’s on campus. I’ll do it.” It ended up being kind of my introduction to research.

It wasn’t in the field that I wanted to do. I was basically sifting through soil samples. It wasn’t in the area I wanted to be in, but it kind of got me started. I remember she has this very dry sense of humor, and some people don’t really get it, but she’s a very, very nice lady, and I remember I had stayed here in Baltimore for Thanksgiving that year. Flights back and forth to New Hampshire can be kind of spendy, so I had stayed here for Thanksgiving, and when she found that out, I ended up doing research with her all Thanksgiving break.

We would go out to the field the day before Thanksgiving, and then she offered if I wanted to come to her house for Thanksgiving. I think the biggest thing is finding a mentor and having that support system, because all of these great opportunities are there. It’s just a matter of sifting through what you want to do and how to use it.

AT: That’s great, because you actually answered my [question] – what advice would you give to incoming students? That’s great. All right, we are coming at the end of our session, and we have one last question. After all this, after all the years that you’ve had here, how would you summarize your time here at Hopkins?

JC: It’s definitely been a whirlwind. Like I said, I don’t think I totally knew what I was getting into. But I’ve learned a lot. It’s not so much a matter of learning factual information, but just kind of how to be an independent human being and figure out what I want and how to go after it. I think Hopkins gives students a lot of flexibility and a lot of autonomy to figure out their own path. And being able to do that – I’m in the process of applying to grad schools, and one thing they wonder when they’re looking at someone straight out of
undergrad is whether or not you have that ability to kind of reach out for opportunities and basically construct your own path.

[01:15:05] And that’s something that I could confidently say that I was able to do here at Hopkins. People sometimes complain. It’s a lot of work. There’s a lot of hours in the library. That’s something I’ve also gotten better at is a little bit better at the work/life balance. I got a cat last year, so that helps. I get to go home and have a little furry friend to cuddle up with.

AT: What’s your furry friend’s name?

JC: His name is Dexter.

AT: All right, Dexter.

JC: Just having little things like that to kind of get your mind off of all the work. But just like my parents – that’s all they ever wanted for me was to work hard at what you want, and that’s what Hopkins has given me the opportunity to do.

AT: Well, I think that’s a really good point to end on – points, that is: cats, work/life balance, a social life, and working hard at what you want to do. Thank you so much for interviewing with us today. And anything else you would like to add before the interview is over?

JC: I think we’re good. Thank you.

AT: All right.