

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
MS.0404

“PS”

Interviewed by Jennifer Kinniff

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Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

Interviewee: "PS"

Interviewer: Jennifer Kinniff (JK)

Date: February 23, 2018

JK: Today is February 23rd, 2018 and I'm here in MSE Library with "PS," who is participating in our first generation college students oral history project. Thanks for being here today.

PS: Thank you for having me.

JK: Let's start by you telling me where you were born and a little bit about your family.

PS: I was born in the capital city of Iran in 1994, although I am not Iranian and my family is not Iranian. I'm a part of the Armenian Diaspora there and we emigrated to the United States in 2014. I started going to college two months after entering the US, and I started by going to Glendale Community College in Glendale, California for two years before transferring here to Hopkins. My parents both have high school diplomas. My sister is four years younger and is currently in college.

JK: So your whole childhood and growing up was spent in Iran?

PS: Yes.

JK: You said your parents both have high school diplomas. What do they do as a profession?

PS: Growing up, my mom was a homemaker after I was born. Before, she worked at a dental office as an administrative assistant. My dad had his own business and he made custom made parts using CNC machines. But now after moving here, he works as a manual machinist for a company that builds parts for airplane landing, and my mom works as a teacher's assistant at an elementary school.

JK: That's a really big change to move all the way here. What prompted that in your family?

PS: As far as I can remember, we always wanted to. Because you're in a—it's not as open of an environment, especially as a minority there. And obviously it's not an easy decision and they've been there their whole lives. They have their businesses and all of that, but at one point, I think it just—it became—I knew this was a move that I was going to make. I wasn't sure if it was going to happen with my parents at the same time, but—I think it was 2013 or so. One morning, they just told me, "Oh, we actually applied for this and your sister doesn't know, but we want you to know, but you're going to continue your life and your schooling as if nothing is happening." They were afraid that with this prospect in mind, I'm going to slack and not do things. They just emphasized that we are all continuing our daily operations as if nothing is about to happen, but so you know, we applied for this.

I was very excited. I remember as soon as I knew there was this other place that I could go, I wanted to. It became really real when the girl that I was sitting next to in third grade, they actually came over and that's when it became really real. "Oh, people actually do this and move around." And so since that day, I kept asking my mom "When are we going, when are we going?" And she would always say "Five years from now, five years from now." And then five years passed, and I was like, "Mom, you said 'five years' five years ago!" But they were trying to figure out the best time for my father to plan his retirement stuff and everything else with it, but yeah, it was a little late, but it came finally.

JK: Yeah, four months before you started college.

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PS: Yeah, I was excited. I always wanted to do this and then they were like, we're doing it. I was like, "Great, awesome."

JK: Did they ever think about going anywhere else or were they always interested in coming to the States?

PS: It's a little bit more complicated than that. First of all, they have family here and two, it's not as easy to emigrate to Europe as it is to the United States, especially with our case. We were a special circumstance case because we were a minority in a country that the US doesn't really have great relations with. That was an advantage

that we used, too, because of our minority status. We were seeking refuge in the United States. That's how that worked.

JK: Had your family been in Iran for generations?

PS: Yes, so the Armenian Diaspora in Iran goes back to about 400 years ago, the majority of it. Not all of it, but the majority of it is about 400 years ago during the Safavid dynasty. Shah Abbas brought some of them over to the capital city then which was Isfahan and they were settled in a suburb of that city called Julfa, and it's still one of the Armenian centers in Iran. My father was born there and then they moved to the capital city in Tehran. My mother was born in Tehran. Over the years, some of them have emigrated back to Armenia and some of them—most of them to the Europe and the US, especially during the last 20 years or so. It used to be about 400,000 Armenians in Iran. Now today, it's about 40,000 or so.

JK: Wow, that's really interesting. And did you grow up in Tehran or did you grow up elsewhere?

PS: Yes.

JK: And what was high school like for you there?

PS: Again, my high school experience is probably a little divergent from my fellow Armenians because I went—actually, Armenians have separate Armenian schools in Iran where we study the national curriculum plus Armenian history and Armenian language. In high school, I went to a regular Iranian high school and then in exchange, you go to do the Armenian curriculum over the weekends. That's how that worked for me. It was a little bit different. I went to a high school that is probably the closest equivalent to a private school in the US, but not exactly. It was a higher tuition. Not everybody can afford it. I think that's the closest thing we had to a private school, but it was also an Iranian school. I had to do the weekend courses as well.

JK: How would you describe your parents' or your family's philosophy about education?

PS: It's definitely a priority in terms of getting the best possible one. I remember even as a child, I was just starting elementary school and there are several Armenian schools in Tehran. And I went to the one that was probably furthest away from my house, which, not everybody did that. Over 8, 12 years, they paid a lot of money for

just my transportation getting to school and coming back to go to this school that's far away. Because they thought that it might be a better environment, so starting really early. And then for high school, again, like I mentioned, I grew up middle class but my high school and the cost associated with it was probably not something that people in the same financial situation as me would necessarily want to do. But my parents definitely prioritized that in terms of yeah, it might be a little bit out of our budget, but we're going to go for this.

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Because we think it would give you better opportunities, especially at the time, the prospect was, at least for the short term, we're still here and in Iran, you have to pass a national exam to get into a university. And the better you do on the exam, the better university you will get into. It's not as much "I choose to apply to Harvard and Yale and Hopkins." Their idea was you have to go to a good school to have a good foundation to be able to do well on this exam, to get into a proper university. I would say it was always something on my mind.

JK: Did you grow up with that expectation that you would be going to college, even though that was something that your parents didn't do?

PS: That is another interesting difference, I find, between how Americans view higher education—I don't know. It might've even been because when you're a woman and you're a minority and all of those things compound, and you have to do as much as you can to do something in life, especially when the country doesn't have as many opportunities whatsoever. For me personally, I never even thought about it as an option, something I can opt out of. I was like, "Of course I'm going to go to university. What do you mean? What am I going to do with a high school degree?" For me personally, it was always an obvious definite thing and then in the US, people more regard it as an option. I may or may not want to choose to go to college and that always interests me and I was really curious. Even a college degree right now is not giving me as much of an advantage, let alone just a high school diploma. For me, I always wanted to and growing up, it didn't have this option aspect to it. I don't think it was especially because of family pressures or anything like that, but it was just how I saw this. Obviously I'm going to go to college.

JK: You just always saw yourself doing it.

PS: Yeah, but then also as I grew up, even when it was really uncool to like school, I really liked going to school. And even right now, I'm in my last semester and I am so not ready for this to end. I just love the experience of going to class, sitting in the classroom, even the really, really dark days of seeing sunset and sunrise while I'm sitting in Brody. At the moment, it feels like oh, I really want to sleep, but then in the grand scheme of things, I always think I have so little responsibilities that I can afford to spend an entire night just sitting and studying this material. I don't know. I just get all the fuzzy feelings. I really like it.

JK: That's nice. I like that. Cool. There's always grad school. Tell me about this time when you were moving here and then figuring out how and when to apply for college. What was that like? That sounds like a really hectic transition.

PS: Yeah, I think it's still kind of not over. I obviously got here. It was June of 2014 and so first of all, you're bombarded with information that's not always accurate from friends and family. All with good intentions, they want to help you, but they just keep giving you information left and right, and not all of them are exactly accurate. I remember one day, a family friend took me to Glendale Community College. It is in the city of Glendale, and we settled there because we had family and it also happens to be the largest Armenian Diaspora outside of Armenia. All the people who have emigrated throughout the years built a center there. I wasn't thrilled about that at all. I really sought a new environment and new people because growing up, I never felt like I fit into that environment and those people. And that's why I was so excited to be here, because I could interact with new people who might understand me better, but also at the same time, it wasn't really plausible right off the bat.

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I obviously couldn't start off applying to four year schools because I had no education history in the country. I should've started with a community college, and then there's obviously the financial situation. We had just moved and everything is starting again. Not everyone has a job yet and especially in LA, there's the transportation aspect of it. I didn't have a car for the first few months. I had to go somewhere that was close, that was cheap, and that would accept me. Even though I was very, very resistant and I wasn't very happy about it, I enrolled at Glendale Community

College. For the first semester, my mom would drive me to and from every day.

And I remember I started with—throughout the years, my uncles or family who we have here would always tell me, “Oh, you gotta work on your English and you have to know English.” First you do the assessment and everybody was holding their breath. “Oh, are you going to get into English 101?” I was like, “Of course I’m going to get into English 101.” I already came in being fluent in English. I started with English 101 and I remember in class whenever I said something or the professor would ask something and people found out oh, it’s only been two months that you’re here. They would always be like, “Oh my god, how are you even in English 101?”

JK: You must’ve studied it pretty intensively in Iran, right?

PS: I took English classes from the ages of 10-11 to about 15-16. I started pretty good because many people coming from my background spent the first couple of years just learning English. I started with English 101 right off the bat and I remember that family friend taking me to campus. “Here’s the assessment center. Here’s what you’re going to do and then you’re going to go here and then you’re going to apply here. Here’s the registrar” and I just—I knew I had to do it, but I also didn’t want to do it. And I was like, let me explore other options, but really there weren’t any other options. There are so many things that come in. Just the factor of transportation—it seems so little, but at the same time, it just wasn’t practical.

Then I got involved with the scholars program at the campus, which is their honors program, basically. And then I really was fortunate enough to have really good faculty members that I still am in contact with today. I still want to do fashion design, but again because of the economic situation this is my only option right now, and there is no fashion program here in this college, and also looking towards the future, I couldn’t see myself affording a fashion school, especially because they don’t give out financial aid and you have a lot of equipment you have to buy. I had to start doing the general requirements first and see where this goes. I went back and forth between what major I should pick and I actually ended up transferring to Hopkins without a major. I just took classes that really interested me and I think that I wanted to learn more about. Even though I knew I am never going to go into politics, I figured I don’t know anything about it and it’s especially

important to learn about it, especially being at a new country. Maybe a couple of history classes.

And then, especially my second year, I became more active. With the faculty relationships that I had built, I did some independent research on fashion and feminism. I wanted to know how they have positively contributed to each other. And I did a survey of first, second wave feminism and all the changes in between, the 20's, the 50's, the original bloomers.

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I did an overview of that for women's history month on my sophomore year with the help of a faculty member and I presented that on campus. I did a couple of model United Nations conferences, which again, I knew it wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do professionally, but I always want to get an inside look on different things even though I know that that's not what I want to do. I'm very happy I did that. It gave me another perspective of, this is how the UN works, and plus I got to go into the General Assembly room, which was pretty cool.

JK: That is pretty cool.

PS: It was my first trip to New York as well and I always wanted to go to New York. And I kept telling my parents, "We should really go and settle in New York. Why do you guys want to go to Glendale?" And so that was my chance. To be fully honest, I took that class because I knew this conference was coming up and I would get to go to New York.

JK: Nothing wrong with that.

PS: It was the most exciting—I just couldn't believe it. I walked into Central Park and I kept repeating to myself, "I'm in New York City. I'm in New York City." That was pretty awesome. I got a couple of really, really good experiences there. I traveled to Seattle for the Northwestern Model United Nations conference, which again, I really, really loved Seattle. And then the normal route is—especially in California—being in community colleges, if you're ambitious, you aim for the UC colleges. If you're slightly less ambitious, you go to Cal State and that's just the route everybody takes. I think they have quota requirements to take in transfer students from California community colleges as state sponsored institutions.

But me growing up with this idea of this other place that I want to go and all the experiences I want to have there, I also had this image of going away to college and I really, really wanted that experience. This comes back to the piece of inaccurate information from relatives. This was all they had seen. They kept telling me this is the way it's done and I remember one day, I was just sitting doing my homework and it suddenly hit me that I don't have to transfer to UCs if I don't want to. I could transfer anywhere and so that's when I decided, I'm transferring to Ivies. I walked into my counselor's office one day and I was like, "I want to transfer to Ivies." And he said, "Forget about it."

JK: Really?

PS: Yeah, with good intentions. He's a great, great person and we're still in touch, but that was his first reaction and I'm not blaming him because—

JK: He was trying to be realistic.

PS: —that rarely happens from community colleges and all of that. I was like, "Watch me." Again, the story goes back to when I was probably in middle school or so. I remember I was watching *Gossip Girl* and I kept hearing Ivy League, Ivy League. I was like, okay, what is this? So I Googled it. I hadn't heard of any of them before, except for Harvard, but then because Harvard is there you realize what type of a list this is. So, I'm thinking I want to go to New York because I want to be a fashion designer. I started looking at them one by one and none of them are in New York except for one, which was Columbia. And that's when I decided this is where I want to go and I still remember that Wikipedia page loading and me seeing that it's in New York City. And I was like, this is where I want to go.

With that mindset, that epiphany moment I had of oh, I can transfer anywhere, that's when I decided I am not going to UCs. For one, they were too big for me. I was looking a smaller college experience and two, I really, really, really wanted the "moving away to college" experience. I started applying and I applied to seven colleges or so all on the east coast. And my parents were fine with that. They just said we are not going to pay for anything. Not because they wanted to punish me, but because they simply couldn't.

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I was like, “I want this. I want to go away to college and that’s fine if—I don’t expect you to pay or anything.” They were like, “Okay.” Then I apply and we’re waiting. It was just—the application process—and this is probably where the first generation thing comes in. I had to figure out by myself what—how to fill out a FAFSA and how to—what’s the CSS profile. What do you mean I have to apply to this and then upload documents here? All of these, I had to figure out by myself, turn in all of my documents and everything, and I actually distinctly remember, I almost—I went to the registrar’s office while I was in the process of applying, at my college. And I had requested my official transcripts to be sent out to Hopkins earlier that day and I went in the afternoon. And I was like, “I want to withdraw that request.” I withdrew that request because I thought, I’m not going to Baltimore. There’s no way I’m doing this.

JK: You just weren't interested in it?

PS: Yeah, I had four or five schools that I really wanted and then I added a couple just to be safe, and my safe schools were Hopkins and NYU. I’m a little ambitious.

JK: Those are ambitious!

PS: I’m a little ambitious, yeah. And then I remember just, “I’m not going to go to Baltimore anyway, so why apply and why go through all this paperwork?” So I withdrew that and then I went back that day for the third time. And I was like, “Actually I want to reinstate that,” because I just panicked. Who knows? I don’t know what’s going to happen. “Just to be safe, let’s just send this over.” And so I almost withdrew my application to go to Hopkins and this is probably not helping my case, but I also finished my application hours before the deadline was due and I submitted that through the Common App. Because I knew—I finished my application really last minute for Hopkins and all of that, I was not really expecting that I was going to get in.

And I remember, I think it was May 5th. I didn’t know that I’m supposed to get results at this point in time. I was expecting it maybe a week or two later and so I’m in class. I took a heavy semester my sophomore fall at my college so that I could take a lighter semester for spring because I wanted to start a fashion program in another community college in LA. Now that I had transportation and I knew what things were going. I was attending two colleges my sophomore spring. I was in my fashion sketching class and I got an email and it said you have to log into your

account to see your decision. And I remember I wasn't happy about it because I was so sure that I'm not going to get in. I didn't want my train of responses to start with a rejection, because Hopkins was the first one that sent out the response. I was very caught off guard. I was like, "Okay, I guess."

Drove back home, opened—I had a class in my community college that afternoon. In the mornings, I would go to LA for my fashion courses and then I had a lunch break that I would come back home and quickly eat lunch and go back to my college. I came back home, opened up the computer, and logged in. Because I'm a transfer, it doesn't say welcome to class of 2018. It just says "You've been admitted to Johns Hopkins University," and I remember I opened up the page and this headline is there big and giant. And I was looking for the button to open up my decision. I thought that was a general headline and now I have to click on a button to open my individual decision.

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It took me a full five seconds to realize that was the decision and I remember my dad was taking a nap, because he was working in the afternoons at the time. He would come back home really late. Didn't want to wake him, so I just covered my mouth and screamed in my hands really loud, and my mom just understood that I got into something. She didn't know what exactly. I was just really excited that this wasn't a rejection.

Okay, great, I got in, and I remember I took a picture with my phone and sent it to one of my professors at the college who was also the director of the scholars program to just let someone know. And again, it's another part of being a first generation student. My parents wouldn't have necessarily understood the magnitude of this. I had to send it to a professor to be like, "I got into Hopkins," and when my letters came in and I got into this and I got rejected from this and that, that's when my parents—Columbia was a huge deal and Hopkins was a huge deal, and I knew that and I was so excited. And I knew when my professors hear about it, they're going to say "Oh, wow, that's awesome," but to my parents, it was just oh, a university. It didn't have that magnitude. When I got in, that's when my dad would look them up on the internet and he would tell me with amazement and wonder. He's like, "Oh, this school is about 250 years old. Oh, this school is number ten." I was like, "Dad, I know."

JK: You're like, "Yeah, that's why I applied."

PS: Exactly. It was just kind of like, “Oh, these are really good schools,” and I was like, “Yes, yes, I know, that’s why I applied.” Anyway, that’s when I got in.

JK: And did you pick Hopkins over some other schools?

PS: I did, I did. It’s actually a great story. Again, not so great, not helping my case at all. I got into my dream school, which was Columbia, and I got that decision much later. It was in June, I think. For about a month, I was waiting and still not responding to anyone because I didn’t know. And I remember I also got a scholarship. As a member of scholars, our director would nominate some of the members to receive scholarships and I remember receiving a scholarship as I was transferring out.

And I had two decisions, and when I was in New York for the Model United Nations, my professor for that class knew how much I wanted Columbia. So I already visited Columbia while I was in New York. Because I had this break between high school and college because we were moving here, they internally transferred my application from Columbia College to School of General Studies. School of General Studies is exactly the same academically, but they don’t have as much financial aid. There was absolutely no way I could afford to pay and I didn’t want to go under a huge amount of loans just for my undergraduate studies. I’m going to go to grad school. I had to make a decision whether I’m doing this or Hopkins, and obviously it was really hard because I [had been] fantasizing about Columbia all the time since I was 15 or so.

And I get in, which was the impossible part! I never thought that would happen and then I couldn’t afford it. So I thought okay, I will defer Columbia. I will work and save money to go there, but to be safe, I will defer Hopkins as well. So if that doesn’t work, I still have this option. But transfer students don’t really get the option to defer. I got that option at Columbia because it was the School of General Studies and it’s geared towards nontraditional students. I didn’t know that about Hopkins until I decided okay, if I’m going to make this decision to defer, I have to visit Hopkins as well.

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I used my scholarship money to fly in, in the morning early August and to fly out at night, just to visit Hopkins. I came over here. I

visited the campus and I remember while I was on campus, I went to the admissions office and asked about this. “What if I want to defer and how would this work?” They said “You can't because you're a transfer.”

That's when I knew I had to make a decision now, and so that flight back home was a really, really rough one. I went back home, locked myself in my room, didn't eat, didn't sleep, and cried for three days, and then finally after three days, I was like, fine, I'll go to Hopkins. Which now is very funny because obviously I knew what Hopkins was and what it meant, and I know there are so many people who dream of coming here. In the grand scheme of things, my problem wasn't really a problem. It's just that it takes me a long time to adapt to change, especially because I have this tendency of having things preprogrammed in my head and I'm a very type A. I need a plan. And I had a big plan and my plan was based on me going to Columbia, and now because I had to let go of that plan and create this new one, I was very resistant to that.

JK: That's a decision that takes a lot of maturity because you had to factor in the financial aspect of it. It's a hard choice.

PS: I was going to be in New York, supposedly close to fashion jobs and internships and all of that, but yeah, so I kind of [said] “Fine, I'll go to Hopkins.” I don't want to come off as—to a third party, I realize that Hopkins and Columbia are not that different and there are so many people who dream of going to Hopkins. I'm in a top institution in the world, which after only—well, now it's been four years, but I got in after only two years of even putting my feet onto the United States. I understood that. It was just hard for me to let go of this plan that I had. So because of that, because my decision was made so late and my entire plan changed within three days or so, it was hectic after that. “Oh, I guess I'm going to Baltimore.”

So started packing and again, didn't have that traditional experience of, my entire family comes in and we're looking for housing and all of that. Actually as a junior, I applied for on campus housing. I was rejected and so I come in with my mom about four or five days before move in day to try to look for housing. It's our first time ever on the east coast and we're looking for places around here and we can't really find anything suitable. I walked into the housing office on move in day and just told them, “I was rejected for housing. I'm a transfer student and I still don't have anything. Do you have anything for me?” And so I was put in with three other sophomores in Charles Commons. And I took the place of their roommate who had gotten into a study abroad

program for the year. She removed her housing application and that's why I got that room.

And so it was very hectic. I basically found my housing in a day and because I didn't know where I was going to be, I didn't have sheets with me. Then I kept ordering sheets and it kept coming into the wrong size or the wrong color. I even slept on that mattress plastic cover for a month or two into the semester at Hopkins. I was excited to be—this was my first time living by myself, but the first semester also was a very, very, very rough adjustment.

I transferred in with straight As, 3.9 GPA, and I had to drop two classes in my first semester.

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I fell below 12 credits, which means probation, and I had never dropped a class in my life, even in the add/drop period. I would always just add classes, never drop any. And then I had to drop two and one of them later on in the semester. I had to take a W for it and I couldn't realize what was happening. I couldn't pinpoint what it was. The material isn't exactly hard, but I also can't—I couldn't seem to just get the As that I was getting all the time. The first semester was really, really, really rough. I dropped courses, so then I had to make up for—and then the other hand, I have this—I have two years to finish a major and to finish this credit hour requirement. I took Intersession to make up some credits and then took more classes in the spring. Even though I had more classes, I did better, much better. Stayed for summer, took another class and worked full time.

JK: What do you think clicked for you that you started getting the hang of things in that spring?

PS: I think it's just the natural curve of it that I went through. Don't get me wrong, I still struggle to get As here. I still very much struggle and whenever I see—I have friends who are 4.0s and they've been here for four years, and I just always wonder, oh, my god, what are you doing? Because for every B I get here, I put in so much effort that I never did before. I just got the As. I'm still very much struggling with that. I don't know what exactly it was in the first semester. I feel like it's a lot of factors, but one thing that—on my worst day at Hopkins, the one thing I never even thought of was that maybe I should've stayed. Maybe I should've stayed closer to home. Maybe I should've transferred to UCs. That thought never ever occurred to me. Even on my worst days, I would still say I'm

still very, very happy with my decision to move away to college. Just that experience of—that first move in day, everybody’s—there’s traffic and everybody’s screaming and there’s boxes and luggage and people are coming and going in and out of the hallways. I just really wanted that and I never knew if it was going to happen.

I was just really happy that it happened at a time where I could experience my college years here and I was just so happy with the decision to move away to college and be by myself. I really love living on my own, the autonomy. It was very, very matching with what I wanted. Other things, academically and socially, got better and over summer, I needed to do a class if I were to graduate on time. Then I had to figure out strategies to get that class because the class wasn’t fully covered by my financial aid. I worked full time over summer, took that class, and I also applied for a summer research grant that was supposed to cover my living costs. And I’m actually going to present for that in April, this coming April. I had to adjust and find ways to make it work because I couldn’t just call my father and be, “Oh, by the way, I’m taking calculus over summer. Can you send me the tuition?” I had to make it work for myself and then last fall was actually my heaviest semester, and I did so, so that I could have a lighter spring as my senior spring. And also now I have to apply for jobs and other side projects that are coming.

JK: What did you decide to study here or what's been your major?

PS: Right, that’s a good point. I forgot to mention that entirely! As I mentioned, I moved in without a major and when I was doing the initial meetings with my academic advisor, we were exploring. For some reason, I thought I might be interested in neuroscience and so she suggested, “Oh, take BBC, Foundations of Brain Behavior and Cognition. It will give you a good idea of whether or not you want to do this.”

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I definitely did not want to do it, but I took that class and explored. I declared psychology, which I was always interested in. I just never thought I want to study it as a major for some reason, but it was a reasonable choice because one, I was interested in it. Two, it was within the timeframe that I—it was possible for me to finish the requirements within the two years, especially because I transferred in with a lot of women, gender, and sexuality courses. And so I also was able to do the WGS minor. Mostly my minor

was mostly done by the time I transferred in. I completed my minor and then mostly focused on doing my major requirements for psychology. I'm obviously interested in psychology, but that's the route that I took.

JK: That's good and it sounds like—I was really impressed when you were talking about the community college with how engaged that your professors seemed in helping you succeed. Have you had any professors here that have stood out as being particularly helpful or that you just really got a lot out of their classes?

PS: The transfer experience is really, really unique. I come in with so many baggages. I'm a transfer. I'm a first generation. I'm a first generation emigrant and everything. There are so many layers that make my experience maybe different than just a regular first generation student. Here, I was just struggling to find myself and where I am and what's happening, but also at the same time, passing my classes and I had to take certain classes. I didn't have as much freedom in terms of exploring. "Oh, this one sounds interesting. I think I'm going to take it." I also did that, but I also had to keep in mind that there are these requirements that I have to complete if I want to graduate.

I wouldn't say it was fully me choosing specific classes or people, but just by my major, I've had a couple of classes with Dr. Papadakis so far and I think I would say she's the person who knows me best at Hopkins in terms of professors. Just because we've been in contact a lot and I've talked to her about what I might want to do in the future. Because again, coming here at Hopkins, the environment is mostly science focused. We do have great humanities programs, but everybody seems to know exactly what they're doing for graduate school. I was exploring, maybe I should continue psychology to grad school and I kept talking back and forth about this with Dr. Papadakis to see whether or not this is the best choice for me. And she's obviously also a psychologist, so that side also helped in terms of, she would tell me that, "I think you're doing this not for the right reasons." Which I also knew, but say I want to be a fashion designer and that entrepreneurial ventures really are uncertain. I think part of me was looking for some certainty. So that if that doesn't work, I have something to fall back on because I can't fall back on my family. It's really scary.

I think part of that was that pressure of me thinking if I get a PhD in psychology, then I'm smart and no one can deem me as un-smart because I'm interested in fashion. But also if that doesn't

work, I still have a PhD. And she would tell me, “I feel like you're also avoiding fashion,” and I told her, “Yeah, I am because I don't know what's going to happen.” I would say, probably, Dr. Papadakis knows me best. I actually very, very regret the fact that I didn't get as much contact as I would have with different faculty members had I been here for four years. People start doing research since their freshman year and I just was all over the place.

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There was also Dr. Evelyne Ender, who agreed to be my PI for that independent research project. I found out about that about a week before the deadline. I needed to put together things really quickly. It was fortunate because I already had my background survey research from my community college. I wanted to expand on that and I already knew that, and it just so happened that I had already talked to her at the beginning of the semester about this, of possibly doing it just completely independently. And then when I figured out about it, I just ran into her office and told her about this funding opportunity I found, but the deadline is really close. We talked about this already. Would you agree to be my PI? And she has been very helpful as well, which, sometimes it's a little intimidating. You're aware that you're working with world-class faculty and then oh, I think I'm just going to pop into her office and chat with you or grab your books and ask you to comment on my—whatever it may be that I'm doing. It's interesting and I keep reminding myself how—just this fact that—especially when things get harder and you're like, oh, I don't have all the privileges of people around me.

We have people from really, really different backgrounds than what I come with and sometimes when you're struggling with a class or something, you're like, well, at least you don't have to worry about working and I have to work. I'm not working to go to the movies over the weekend. I'm working just because I need to eat. In those moments, I also have the parallel thought of yes, I might be having it harder in some ways within the Hopkins community, but within the larger scheme of society, I'm in the top very little, tiny percent of the people who even got to have an education. And then a top notch education and at a top notch institution, so that does help you see the bigger picture of okay, I'm already super privileged in terms of the larger society. I think it's okay that I also have to work in addition to studying. That gives you perspective and it's an interesting combination.

JK: Yeah, definitely. That makes me think. Did you meet other students here who you felt like were—your life story and trajectory is pretty unique, but did you meet other first generation students or students that you felt like were having to work hard in that way you were just to be able to stay here?

PS: Through working, some of my colleagues have to also do this just because they have to. I don't know. A lot of students here work as well but only a few of them do it because they absolutely need to, but I think still it's very admirable to add that on top of all the things that you have to deal with at Hopkins. But then I've also met a couple that have a more similar situation to me. Like you said, I'm—I wasn't holding my breath of finding anyone exactly with the same factors as me, but I have met a couple that are financially independent. It's interesting.

JK: What have your work experiences been? Maybe you've had more than one job or different kinds.

PS: Oh, yeah. I actually started with working at the Dean of Student Life office as the student assistant there. That was my main position for the first year that I was here and then over summer, I started working as a program assistant for Baltimore Youth Film Arts through the Film and Media Studies program. I was there over summer. I also started working at the Office of Student Financial Services then. I had those two jobs, and I'm still at the Office of Financial Services.

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That continued. I'm also a student consultant through the Office of Academic Advising, which I actually very much enjoy. Last year when I was having the hard transition, I signed up for the study consulting program myself and my consultant was a senior. She graduated in May and by that time, my GPA had improved a little. I was eligible to apply. Right now, starting basically my entire senior year, I'm working at the Student Financial Services Office and I'm also a study consultant. Sometimes I go to special events for Film and Media Studies still, but that's more of an on call basis.

JK: Have you had any time for any extracurricular stuff, clubs or activities you've been in?

PS: That was one of the harder challenges, especially Hopkins students, they're very different. I have friends who are doing triple

majors and are in five clubs and doing independent research, and in addition to five other side projects. That's very overwhelming. I joined a couple of clubs my first semester, but then because of that rough transition, I had to drop most of them. I've been mostly and consistently involved with Sexual Assault Resource Unit, SARU, which is the first club I joined and the mission and the work that we do is very close to my heart.

I've been involved with SARU since the beginning of my time at Hopkins, and I also signed up for trainings for the student run hotline we have my first semester at Hopkins. I started being on the official hotline staff the spring of my junior year, basically. And I'm still involved with SARU. This year, I actually hold a position on e-board. I'm the PR co-director on SARU. And so that would be my main club involvement. I'm on the e-board for SARU and I'm also on the hotline for it. Yeah, I didn't really have many club affiliations just because I wanted to focus on one or two really important ones than do five and six, but not really invest anything in them. That was my strategy going in.

JK: Makes sense. You've really only had one summer here, right?

PS: Mm-hmm.

JK: But you've had breaks. I was wondering what your relationship with your family has been like since you've been here and do you ever get to go back? How do you stay in touch with them and help them understand what's going on with you?

PS: That is a very interesting question. Obviously after the first fall, I did go back for Christmas break, although it was just a week or ten days because I had to come back for Intersession classes. I remember before actually getting there, I would talk on the phone and every time, I just kept reminding them that when I come back, I do not want to hear anything about Hopkins. Because I was so stressed and I just was looking forward to go away and just take a break. And I knew if I went away, my entire family is—I'm the first person to go in college. I was expecting them to ask me questions. "What's it like?" I was just so overwhelmed that I didn't want to talk about it and I just wanted to go and relax and forget about this. I kept telling my mom on the phone, "I don't want to hear anything about Hopkins when I come back."

JK: That's probably all they wanted to talk about [laughs].

PS:

Exactly! So I went back for the Christmas break first year. Had a pretty good time. Got back here for Intersession and then spring went by. Yeah, also I didn't go back for Thanksgiving break or spring break and I didn't even travel here because I just couldn't. And I remember just I spent my entire first Thanksgiving break just in my dorm doing nothing and then I went back for Christmas. Came back for Intersession. Spring break, again, just sat in my room, did nothing.

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The plan was, I'm going to go back for summer and try to maybe find an internship in Los Angeles over summer, but April was when I got the funding to stay for summer. Then I had to look for housing because I was moving off campus for next year anyways. And now that I'm here over summer, I had to look for housing. I started looking for housing, found the current place that I live in, and so I basically told my mom I'm not coming back for summer. Once the semester starts, they keep calling. "So are you coming back or are you not?"

And I never really know because I don't know what's going to come up and that was the situation. I kept telling them "I don't know. Maybe I want to stay here." I didn't want to initially, but then, like you mentioned, I thought it's my only summer that I'm in a real college. And I always imagined if I were to go somewhere for four years, I would want to spend at least one of those summers wherever I'm going. I figured this is my only one and so that was the idea of, maybe I want to stay for summer, but then I couldn't. Again, due to financial situation, but then when I got the funding, I was like, okay, this is the opportunity. I started looking for my new job, which was the Office of Financial Services, and stayed for summer. My parents were prepared that they weren't going to see me until at least the new year next year or maybe even possibly graduation.

But then the last week of summer, I just decided to reward myself a little for working all summer and I just booked a ticket back home. Didn't tell my parents. I just told my sister because she had to pick me up from the airport. And yeah, surprised my parents the last week of summer. I just went back for a week, just to take a break before semester hits again because I knew I will have a heavy semester ahead. And then came back after a week, started my very heavy semester. I actually did pretty well compared to how much work I had to do. Then again, of course during

semester, my mom calls. “So are you coming back for Christmas break?”

And this time, I didn’t go back. I instead traveled over the east coast and went to Boston and I went to New York, and I also had a class for Intersession. This time just for fun, but I figured I have to come back for Intersession anyways, so it’s not going to be that long of a break and I’ve already been there at the end of summer. I mostly traveled over on the east coast for this Christmas break and now they are going to come over for my graduation, but it’s interesting because my mom was the only who dropped me off. For the rest of my family, it’ll be their first time on the east coast and my grandparents are also coming. They’re mostly excited about being on the east coast and possibly visiting DC and New York. And so because I’ve been there, they keep calling me and asking about how should we reserve the tickets to New York? What’s the best way to get to New York? Where should we stay in New York? How do we go to DC?

And I get really, really mad because hopefully I will do better things in life, but so far doing Hopkins and graduating hopefully from it is the biggest accomplishment of my life. And I’m very, very proud of it just because of all the highs and lows that I went through the past two years. And so for me, this is a big moment and I’m sure it is for them as well, but I just—every time we get into a fight over the phone, they keep asking me about this and I keep telling them, “This is my graduation. This is not your vacation.” But it’s also kind of their vacation because they’re taking time off work and they’re flying all the way here. I understand and I try to be sympathetic to their cause, but part of me also really feels that gap of people around me versus me in terms of some of them, their parents have gone to Hopkins. And all these two years, I never—they barely—I don’t really tell them all the processes. I do all of my paperwork myself. I don’t have an authorized user on my account because—

JK: They wouldn’t do it.

[1:04:59.1]

PS: Right, every time and there are some emails that for some reason still get sent to my parents even though I always put in my information. Every time they get an email, they just forward it to me because they want to make sure it’s done the right way and I always get mad. Every time we’re on the phone, I always tell them, “You have to go Google and use the internet and you have to know

about this.” But then also at the same time, I understand why they don’t and why they can’t. It’s always this discrepancy of me trying to understand and be sympathetic, but also part of me wishes that it wasn’t the case and that I could possibly call and seek advice. “Hey, Dad, do you think I should take this class or should I not take this class?” They have no idea, which has pros and cons. Because they didn’t, I was completely free in choosing what I wanted to do and they always supported.

They always were sure that I was smart enough and capable enough to make my own decisions, and that’s what they told me from the beginning. They were like, “You can go to Columbia. You can go to Hopkins. It’s up to you. Just know that you’re responsible for this and here, pick whatever major you want as long as you like it. It’s fine with us.” It has its pros and cons. Really sometimes, yes, I do wish that they knew more and they would come in for parents weekend and know what I’m talking about when I said “It’s orientation” or “It’s senior toast.” Sometimes I wish that, but sometimes—I also understand why they don’t.

But on the other hand, it’s also given me full freedom because sometimes I hear people talk to their parents on the phone and their parents are mad about them not wanting to do pre-med. And thankfully I never had that problem with my parents, but just the autonomy that I had here. I kind of like it. It’s hard and it’s a responsibility and all of that, but it’s also—it’s pretty great. Like I said, going away to college was the best decision of my life so far even though it was also the hardest two years I’ve ever done.

JK: You couldn’t maybe call up your parents for advice or you maybe didn’t want to bother them if you weren’t doing well in a class or something or scare them. Did you have people here that you could talk to about that, roommates or advisors, people like that?

PS: My academic advisor, we have this, now, tradition that I go at the beginning of every semester and really, really nag about everything. And so there has been that. The counseling center has been a great help. I know sometimes people underestimate it or they see it as a necessary thing if you’re diagnosed with depression or anxiety, but it’s a great support to have. Again, in terms of academics and future endeavors or anything like that, my professors both here and back at my community college, the ones that I’m still in touch with. Every time I went back, I did make sure to visit them just because they were the only people who I could talk about the Hopkins experience and they understood what I

mean when I say I thought I was going to get an A, but it was a C. Definitely, I want to say my professors. That would be probably the biggest because they were the only ones who understood what I was talking about.

Then generally for more personal development or improvement stuff, it would be my counselor and my academic advisor.

[1:09:55.1]

JK: And so you weren't excited about coming to Baltimore at first. Do you like it better now that you've been here for a while? Still not New York, I know.

PS: True. I remember my entire first year, was also part of it that was hard was because I was also still thinking of the discrepancy between what I thought it would be and what it is. And people always kept telling me that it will grow on you and I remember always thinking, obviously wherever you make memories, it will grow on you. And I have explored Baltimore, not as much. I definitely am happy that I got to spend my college years here just because I think it's a unique experience that not everyone gets to have. And part of the reasoning that helped me with my adjustment was that I could always be in New York. I could always go to LA, those big cities. And chances are I will go there just because of the jobs that I'm going to find, but one doesn't necessarily sit and plan to go to Baltimore. And I got to have this different experience of, I've also experienced this due to the fact that I went to college there. I'm actually pretty happy that I got this experience.

It's probably different from what I imagine for myself in the long term, but I have this thing with experiences. And if you've seen me during the past four years, you know this about me because almost everything I have done was because I wanted to have the experience. Starting from the Model UN conferences all the way to moving away to college or just going to college for me was about the experience. And that's another part of why I didn't necessarily pursue fashion school, just because I wanted this traditional experience and I'm actually very happy with my decision. I really wanted this. Art schools are different. I wouldn't have the same experience of move in and the social events and clubs and it's just a totally different experience. And I said to myself "That's something that I can always pursue on the side, but I really want this traditional education experience." That's why I aimed for more traditional schools and I'm happy to report that I'm happy with my decision.

JK: That's good. What is it now? We're in late February, so you have a few more months here, a couple more months. Do you have an idea of what's coming next or what you would like to have happen next?

PS: Here's another thing that Hopkins taught me. Starting with the decision to come to Hopkins, it was pretty catastrophic. It was built on the ruins of my dreams and as I was going through Hopkins, things like this kept happening. Whether it's academically or socially or however it may be, whenever I thought "I think I got this," Hopkins would crash it down, which was great for character building. Now I actually have no idea what's coming next, which is very, very strange for my type A personality. I need my plans and I don't have any right now, but also at the same time, I feel like I've been so well versed in this situation in the past couple of years. I've been trained that I perhaps don't feel as uncomfortable with the thought in terms of eventually it's going to be okay. I have my ideal situation. I have a couple of possible situations that might happen, but I really don't know in exact terms.

Obviously the big definite point in the future, I want to go to graduate school, hopefully pursue an MBA and then start my own business. And definitely want to travel extensively, perhaps before starting grad school, so working, saving money to travel, and then apply to grad school.

[1:15:00.7]

And then perhaps even after grad school do another round of traveling before really delving into what I want to do. I still want to be a fashion designer, hopefully. It would be great if I can get any sort of position within the fashion industry just so—I have so much to learn. It doesn't matter what position it will be. I will still learn the process. Ideally, that would be the case, but I have to start applying for positions. I am really not ready for college to end. I'm already slightly older than the traditional undergraduate population and if I weren't, I would probably pursue ways to prolong my experience here. In the long term you wouldn't be so happy if you were at the same place ten years from now. I get it, but right now, it's just I'm already feeling nostalgic about it and I don't want it to end.

This last semester, I started it with the mindset of "I have four more months to make the most of this and I really want to go deep into this college experience while I can." And considering it's

already the end of February, it's coming really fast and while I'm excited about—this is going to be a really big accomplishment for me and exciting things, I'm sure, are ahead. I'm excited for those, but at the same time, part of me really does wish that I got to have a little bit more time in college.

JK: Yeah, I can understand that. You worked so hard to get here [laughs]. If there was another first generation college student, or a transfer student, because that seems also really important to your experience here, do you have any advice that you would give to someone that might be interested?

PS: I believe I'm quoting Michelle Obama. In one of her interviews, I think, or was it a speech, she mentioned "Don't look at your disadvantages as disadvantages. They're assets that are going to help you." I'm not a rosy, fluffy butterfly person, so I'm going to tell you that it's going to suck. It's going to suck real bad and it's going to be really, really hard. You're going to have moments where you're going to feel like nobody understands you and it's probably true. Nobody will fully understand the scope of what you're going through and maybe I wouldn't, even, because it's just so unique, but know that with all these hurdles and disadvantages that you might've had, you're still in the same place as your peers.

You're not really different from them. In fact, you were able to overcome more than they have so far, which makes you a more capable, more skilled and more independent and stronger person. All of these are going to help you no matter what you do in life. I think the most important, probably, if I had to put it in one word would be "resilience" because you don't really have a choice of giving up. Whenever something goes wrong, you just have to find a way of coming back from it and while you're doing this, you're just thinking "I'm so alone and this is so hard." But after it's over, you're looking back and realizing it took a lot of resilience to get to this point. And yeah, I think you are a resilient person and being resilient is probably the single most important quality and skill that you will need just to deal with life. I'm proud of you, whoever you are. Yeah, and you should be proud of yourself, too. There are pretty sweet things in the midst of all of this. And I hope that they get to experience them too.

JK: Okay, awesome. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. It's been really fun to get to know you.

PS: Thank you.

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