“HT”

Interviewed by Allison Seyler

March 4, 2019
Okay, hello, this is Allison Seyler here with HT on March 4th, 2019, at the Eisenhower Library, and we are conducting first-generation college student oral histories. So my first question for you today is: where were you born? And maybe if you could tell me a little bit about your family.

Yeah. Cool. So I was born in a nearby town, McAllen. I live on the border of Texas and Mexico, so closer to the Gulf Coast, so a border town. I was born there, born and raised. So I was there for the first 18 years of my life. Then my family – so I'm the oldest of four, a family of six, fortunate enough to have both my parents. And then it's three brothers, and the youngest one's my sister. So we're pretty tight, close family, small house [laughs]. So we all shared bedrooms growing up, but, yeah, that's my family.

Cool. So, could you talk a little bit maybe more about your parents' educations and maybe your siblings' as well? What opportunities they had to go to school or if they did go to school in any capacity.

Yeah. So my dad was born in Mexico but he came over I want to say around middle school. Yeah, so he did his middle school and high school education here in the States. My mom was born in Texas, she was a migrant. I think they stopped around her high school years, from what I've heard. And then she took a college class or something right after high school but dropped out because she had me, yeah, that's the extent of the education.

Actually recently my mom decided to go back and did like an accelerated bachelor's program, so she beat me in graduation technically [laughs].

That's great. So, what do your parents do then for an occupation or for their jobs?
HT: So, my dad, growing up, one of his longest kind of jobs was he used to work at a frame shop at a local kind of – more in kind of a small-scale Hobby Lobby. And then he got laid off there and started working with a kind of managerial company. So he's been there – or in a manager position for a self-storage company. And he's been in that role for maybe eight years, so that's kind of more of my high school years when I was kind of deciding where to go. My mom – growing up she was trying to become a nurse, a licensed nurse, wasn't able to pass the state registration exam and then decided to use – or kind of just transferred what she could of her skills to being a teacher assistant. So she's not a fully-certified teacher, because she has to take some more exams before doing that.

AS: Okay, cool. It sounds like she was interested in education a little bit, so that's kind of cool.

HT: Yeah, so it definitely helped out – that career path change – for my siblings and I, because they're really kind of hard on us. Well, not in a bad way [laughs]. But they really pushed us to excel in school and just to do well, and so that was kind of the motivating factor, was my parents.

AS: Cool. So, I guess, with that, maybe if you could talk a little bit more about where you grew up, kind of what the atmosphere was like there. You know, the towns and places you grew up. Maybe you could touch on high school, if you liked school, that sort of thing.

HT: Yeah, so when we grew up, I don't think I ever put any real thought to it until maybe my junior or senior year of high school, on kind of the view of the mentality of higher education. Specifically, I liked high school, it's been a while, but I don't think it was too challenging when I was in it, it was more so long days. So the only sport I really did was football. It's Texas, so it was kind of [laughs] expected. But so it was long practices, and thinking back – I was actually just having a conversation recently with a friend on how – in high school we did so much but we weren't nearly as tired as we are here [laughs]. Yeah, up at like 6:00, my parents got up earlier than we did, and so we shared a shower [laughs]. So everyone had to take turns and everyone was up, and then we'd go to school, you have the eight-hour day, lunch, and then practice until we get home maybe around 8:00.

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And then eat dinner, do whatever. I don't think it was ever a substantial amount of homework, and then just go to bed and repeat.

*AS:* But it sounds like you're a pretty close family, everybody was doing everything together.

*HT:* Yeah. So I guess my sibling structure is my brother, the second son – he's two years younger than me. And then there's a three-year gap and then it's my other brother and then my sister. So they're a little closer than my older brother – my second-oldest brother and I. So it's kind of like in pairs. So everything I was doing, my brother was doing. We also took – I guess kind of because it wasn't really a challenge, my mom kind of wanted us to – we took a lot of math courses during the summer just to kind of get started earlier. And just because I did it first, my brother actually finished – he kind of still holds it over me that he finished all his math requirements like his sophomore year of high school, it was ridiculous [*both laugh*].

*AS:* It sounds like you both found your niche a little bit then.

*HT:* Yeah, and so it was fun. And we still kind of compete to this day, and it's hopefully getting healthier than what it was. But, yeah, it's good.

*AS:* That's awesome. So, I guess you talked about it a little bit: that your parents really thought education was this thing that should be pursued. Could you maybe touch on that a little bit more? If you could talk about how you felt as the first person from your family maybe going to college? Or how that was perceived maybe by your parents or supported by them?

*HT:* I think they saw it as kind of like the way to – I guess—this ideal of success, so they really pushed me to it. And then kind of on the other end, still going back to high school, our counselor kind of – the mentality that I felt that the high school itself saw was: it's a success if you get into the local community college – and not to knock the community college. But their goal from the high school perspective was to get someone into a college as opposed to Hopkins or any of these higher-tier universities. And I think my parents were pushing us to just do well, but it was never really like a solidified goal. And so it was kind of just me in the beginning trying to figure it out by myself.
And it was stressful, because there was a lot of things I didn't know, and that can be kind of some of the tension that my – my brother says that I took out a lot of stress on him /laughs/, as the two older brothers. But that's been – yeah, so that was kind of – they pushed me but it was never really with a set goal. So it was kind of like – a lot of it was on my shoulders to kind of figure out – I eventually did get some help. But because of the school, that mentality of my high school was kind of focused on getting into a college – I was fortunate enough that a girl that went to high school – I guess she was older now; she was my mom's age – during the time turned out to be the financial aid officer for college at another rival high school that had just recently opened up. And so my mom reached out to her like, "Hey, what should H do?"

So she definitely – every now and then I would go over to her place to just kind of review my essays or see if I was doing something right. And then I guess something to note would be the intersectionality of – so we were also a low-income family – and so that was another challenge. My parents were like, "Yeah, go really hard but you're going to end up going wherever they give you the most money." And so that was kind of also on the table at the same time when I was looking at schools. It's kind of why I didn't go to any private in-state schools like Baylor; they gave me no financial aid. Hopkins is actually the best school in terms of aid. I didn't apply to a wide net, I was really content with staying in-state, because I think that was the scope of my mindset. So Baylor is a Texas school who's maybe eight hours north. And so it was what I had heard of as kind of the best school in Texas.

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And I had really no real idea of what an Ivy League was or what Hopkins was, any real competitive schools, and that would be a co-feed for Hopkins. And so I was content, I did early action for Baylor, got in, and that was kind of the – it was less stressful – because I had a place to go. And so Hopkins and all the other normal-deadline applications were kind of just me trying to do the best that I could, and I think it really released a lot of stress towards the end.

AS: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense: sort of having not necessarily a safety net but having something identified that is feasible, that you'd be comfortable with, and then maybe having a few “reach” sort of things that would be dream or best case scenario. That's awesome. So I guess the next question I have sort of talks about maybe why you decide on Hopkins. If you could talk about how
you decided that, and sort of with that, because it's a twofold question, what were your parents' reactions when you told them that you really wanted to go to Hopkins or that you had been accepted?

HT: So, I came upon Hopkins kind of the time that I was starting my kind of search for colleges and what I'd be interested in. My younger brother kind of started looking into colleges also, and so he was a freshman at the time. So there was really no need. [laughs] But I think he was just looking in to figure out – because I was doing it, he was kind of doing it also. And he's actually the one that came upon Hopkins. And he's like, "Oh, this is my dream school." And he told me one time, "They have the best public health undergraduate major and they're the one that started it." So he tells me all this stuff, and I was like, "Oh, okay. I'll look into them, it sounds cool."

So I looked at it and they had the best – or they still have the best neuroscience program, and that's what I was interested at the time. I chose neuroscience because my grandfather suffered a stroke my sophomore year of high school and so with that it kind of really pushed me into thinking about neuroscience. And so the goal would be – I guess my goals now would be to apply to med school, and figuring that out right now. So that was my motivation to pursue neuroscience. And then so Hopkins had a really good neuroscience program, so it made the list to one that I would apply to. So I applied.

Like I said, I'd applied early action to Baylor and so that was already in. And then I applied to only five other schools, because I wasn't really too interested in I guess applying to a lot of equal-level schools to Baylor. So it was kind of a lot of reach schools. So it was like Harvard, Stanford, Hopkins, and like Dartmouth. I forgot what the other one was.

AS: That's a lot of work.

HT: It was a lot of essays, yeah. Kind of a lot of the same topic but you had to rehash it for each one. Other students applied to 23 schools, I don't know how they did it. But I stayed in the limit of our fee waivers. So in high school you get fee waivers to do the applications then your secondaries, they came off of the SATs. So there was a lot of fee waivers that I used, and so the max was eight. And I was like, "I'm content with five. I'll just not use them all."
So then my brother and I were at a competition for HOSA, which is like this health student organization for high school students, and we were in a different city, and that was four hours away, in San Antonio, competing. And that's when all the decisions came out. So my brother was the first one to find out because I got a lot of nos and a maybe [laughs]. And then Hopkins told me yes. It was the last one I actually checked because I forgot about Hopkins. I made this mistake on my essay. I kind of wrote it off; I was like, "I'm not going to get in." Yeah [laughs].

AS: It sounds like it was a trial-by-error or something. It was just a tough spot maybe to be in, to get the rejections and then be waiting for a response from Hopkins.

HT: Yeah, well, fortunately I had the early action so I wasn't too bumbled. So I submitted my Harvard essay to Hopkins in the Common App, so that's why I had written it off in the very beginning, because you can't switch your essays on the Common App. So it was a mess. [laughs] So I wrote Hopkins off, so Hopkins was the last one I checked, and then when I checked it I found out I got in and I let my brother know. So that was a good moment, because I found I got into Hopkins. I was like, "Okay, I think I really want to try this school," because Baylor – I would’ve had to pay $20,000.00 a year outta pocket or something like that. That was kind of when – the financial aid packages started coming out around the same time. So Baylor was about $20,000.00 and then Hopkins was about $6,000.00 a year, which is definitely much more feasible than Baylor. [laughs]

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So I told my parents and they weren't too excited [both laugh]. So they're like, "Okay, that is the best option. We'll just figure out how we're going to do it." And then fortunately I was applying to another scholarship and then I think want to say financial aid packages came out around April? The beginning of April, and then the scholarship didn't get back to me until maybe mid-May, yeah. So my mom came in with a big envelope and was like, "What's this?" And it's already open. I'm like, "You know what it is. You opened it." And so it said that I got the scholarship. It's a full ride. And so I was like, "I'm going to Hopkins." Yeah, it was a good moment.


HT: Thank you.
AS: That's something to be really proud of.

HT: That was definitely one of those moments.

AS: That's a lot of hard work and it paid off, so that's really great. I'm curious: were your parents reluctant about the distance? Is that what they were sort of hesitant about?

HT: That one's hard to guess quantify. I mean, I know my mom was really nervous, but they fortunately let me do what I wanted to do. Maybe they were but they didn't express it as much as — so, my aunt and my uncle — so my cousin — he was a year younger than me — also got into Hopkins a year after me. And so everyone was like, "Oh, that's awesome." I don't know what it was within his family but his parents didn't let him go. So fortunately my parents weren't exactly like, "No, you can't go; it's too far." They were like, "Well, if you want to go, you can go."

AS: It was just going to be a big change.

HT: Yeah, so my mom was nervous about it happening, especially being the oldest, the first one to leave. My parents — when my mom was a migrant, she would go to California or to Michigan, so it's not like she was afraid of traveling. It's just that it would be a far — to them it was kind of a far distance if something was to happen, they wouldn't be close. Like it wouldn't be really feasible to just book a plane and go because it's kind of expensive. So that was kind of the biggest hang-up.

AS: Okay, that makes sense.

HT: I was definitely set on going so they couldn't change my mind. 
[both laugh]

AS: Sure. Well, that's funny, I think we all deal with things like that with our parents. Okay, sort of shifting gears then, maybe could you talk about the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience? What happened when you got here? How was the move? What did you think of Baltimore once you first got here? That kind of thing, the transition I guess.

HT: Yeah, the transition. My parents did some questionable things and took out a loan to come, which really set them back financially for a long time, up until now really. So they spent a week here with me moving me in, and it was something they wanted to do because I
was the first one. So it was good in a sense because they got to see Baltimore. [Laughs]. Not knowing the place, we kind of drove in some sketchy parts so that really scared my mom. So they were kind of like, "Oh, are you safe?" But I was like, "Hopkins is completely different from what I've seen, and they take care of their students." So that was interesting for them to see, but I spent a lotta time with them that week.

And it was good because I was with them, but at the same time I think it really hindered kind of my transition. It wasn't as fluid because I didn't do much of the – I didn't do a pre-o, which I could have done.

**AS:** What is a pre-o?

**HT:** Like a pre-orientation. And they have – there's an organization that I was a part of, or I'm still a part of: Johns Hopkins Underrepresented in Medical Professions. So JUMP is the acronym. And they have a pre-orientation before orientation where you go – it changes locations – but you go and you hang out with other students who are in the same program of your same cohort, and so you build relationships off of people with similar identities. It's just people that you can relate with. So it's minorities, low-income, first-gen, and who all say that they're on a pre-medicine track.

And I forewent that one to spend the time with my family when they were here in Baltimore. And so I think that kind of hindered my transition and finding friends, because I was in a triple in Building B, which is one of the dorms here. And the two other roommates were football players and so they were here for two weeks already, and so they already formed a relationship with each other, so that was kind of the dynamic. And then personally, I'm a much more introverted person, especially at that time, first year, first two years here. And so it was just kind of a set of circumstances that didn't really let me – I just didn't feel comfortable reaching out.

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And so Building B – their dynamic isn't the quintessential freshman dorm with your door open and people coming in and out – because it's kind of temperature-controlled, everybody has their door closed. And so it's not a very social dynamic, as some of the AMRs, those dorms. So my first year was kind of different, it was a big transition, but it was good, it was tough. The rigor of the
courses was tough. So that was a big transition. I spent a lot of time studying for chemistry, specifically, intro to chem. I would study in my room. I wouldn't study in the library a lot. And it was tough, it was definitely tough. We had covered grades so it didn't affect me that much the first semester. But regardless of – the second semester was just as tough.

So, it was a rough transition. I think a lot of things happened, I was far from my family. And in high school I was just kind of – I mean, I was there for 18 years – I was kind of a little fed up. So I was ready to leave and then it really bit me in the butt [laughs] when I came here.

AS: Did you feel like you were able to meet other first-generation college students once you got started? And maybe did that give you a level of comfort? Or did you not really find them easily?

HT: I didn't find – first gen isn't something that a lot of people display very I guess – yeah, it's not something that you really see compared to maybe like race or ethnicity that's something on the forefront, neither is someone's income status. It's not really something that you would really see unless you're in a conversation with someone. So I don't think I really met a lot of low-income or first-gen – yeah, I'm trying to remember who –

AS: Yeah, it's maybe not a qualifier that people put out in order to find others.

HT: Yeah.

AS: Okay. This might be – and you can feel not to answer this if we want to move on. But did you feel sort of that abruptness with socioeconomic status when you got here? Did you feel a sort of – I'm trying to think of how to phrase it. But just a very clear divide between yourself and some of the other students?

HT: I think I felt it most starkly with my roommates, just from where they were coming from. I know – we had some good conversations – they're great guys: their experiences were just different than mine. And so seeing that as a first-generation student, not knowing what college was like, I think I saw that – well, I'll describe it this way, so, growing up, I thought I was middle class, run-of-the-mill working middle class. And then I got to Hopkins and I was like, "No, I'm not middle class. The ceiling's a lot higher." [both laugh]
And so it's a funny way to describe it but that's kind of how it was. Especially with just maybe prep courses or things that they did preparing for college because they knew what they needed to do to prepare for college because their parents were I guess – one of the guys in the room, both his grandparents were CEOs of some companies.

AS: Gosh.

HT: And he had a weekly or a monthly allowance to spend on stocks, which was a large sum of money. Yeah, so it was just different. He had a meal plan but would still spend a lot of money on Subway [laughs]. And so it was different, it was just a very stark contrast. Which I don't think I felt bad, I think it was kind of interesting to see, it was definitely fun to talk to him because he was a funny guy [laughs].

AS: Yeah, it's almost like a social experiment or something just to see how other people had lived or are still living.

HT: Yeah and his experience was different than mine, so when we would have conversations he would explain things or I would explain certain just cultural things that I grew up with, yeah, it was interesting.

AS: That's really great that you could have those conversations. There are some people that are very closed off to even having that conversation.

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HT: Yeah.

AS: So that's good.

HT: No, it was good.

AS: Okay, so you did mention earlier your program of study. Maybe could you elaborate a little bit more on that and talk about why you really chose neuroscience, and how that evolved maybe in your time here?

HT: I chose neuroscience kind of blindly. And so I remember one of the first kind of – it was during orientation and we met with our department of study and I spoke to the department head and I showed her my schedule. And I took intro to neuro and then Brain,
Behavior, and Cognition? BBC, which is the acronym. And I was
taking those two classes at the same time, and she was like, "Why
are you doing that? You don't need to do this. This is too much.
Take one only." And so I definitely came in thinking, "I'm just
going to take all neuroscience classes and that's what I'm going to
do." And, yeah, it definitely wasn't feasible, even what I did take –
it was really tough. So that's kind of one of my regrets as a student,
is not taking the time to really spread out my course load.

AS: That's not really something I think that you know though when
you're 18 and you're signing up for school.

HT: Yeah, I definitely didn't know. because you think it's kind of like
high school where you just show up and then they're lecturing at
you. Not considering the fact that you have to put maybe – to every
hour of class, it's two hours outside of class. And that's definitely
not something in high school that you really learn. Or it's not the
same. It doesn't hold true for high school, as it does for college.
And so I chose neuroscience, I took one introductory neuroscience
course and I really liked it, and I think it was much more
interesting than intro chem or what I was taking at the time, so I
stuck with it.

Neuroscience itself is a huge field. There's like cognitive
neuroscience and there's molecular and cellular, and there's general
systems. So it was a really broad field and I've taken – to continue
through kind of the major path, you have to take certain classes in
each field, and then you figure out which one you like. So I think
in my senior – this year and two years ago was when I started
taking classes that were more attuned to the neuroscience that I
was interested in and I had a more enjoyable time taking those
classes.

AS: Yeah. So you mentioned – I don't know if you want to elaborate on
it anymore, but you mentioned your grandfather, so maybe that
was a motivating factor for you to study the brain I guess, is that
kind of –?

HT: Yeah, so he suffered a stroke and that left him hemiplegic. And so
it was really tough on my family, so it was my mom's dad. And so
it was really tough on my mom at the time. He became completely
physically dependent on my grandmother and culturally, he
wouldn't accept help from anyone except for my grandmother. So
it was really tough on her. She lost a lot of weight because it was
just physical – like lifting him. I think that had an impact on my
youngest brother. So, M1 would be the second one. M2 would be
the youngest one. So it had a really big impact on M2. He was maybe about eight at the time. And I remember him crying to me the day it happened, and then he was really worried. Just for seeing a hospital too, just being there.

And so I think his fear kind of was what motivated me to not let that happen. And so that's why I – in my head I was kind of envisioning studying neuroscience so I can learn how to become a doctor and study vascular surgery – and so that was kind of the idea at the time. And so that's what motivated me to sign up as neuroscience. And then they also had – or Hopkins is the best or the highest-ranked program, neuroscience program and so I'd be studying something that was interesting that had a personal effect or a personal kind of aspect to it, and then it's from some of the best professors in the country.

AS: That's amazing. That's a really sort of motivational story and something that is a testament to your character too.

HT: Thank you.

AS: Thank you for sharing that. So, speaking of that, I guess, were there any classes or maybe professors that really stood out to you in that program? Or things – I know you said recently it's clicked more; you've been able to take classes that're more appropriate to what you like to study. But are there any people or classes that really stand out for you?

HT: Someone that really stands out – I know other students may mention him in the neuroscience program – is Dr. Hendry. So he's a really good professor, unfortunately he's retiring this semester, so I was able to take one of his last courses.

AS: Good timing.

HT: Yeah [laughs]. He teaches really well. I don't think – I had to take – the two kind of big heavy courses for the major would be Nervous Systems 1 and 2. So they're semester courses, and he teaches them.

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He expects a lot more out of his students I think in terms of application of just knowledge or understanding kind of areas in relation to other areas, and what happens if this is damaged? So it's a lot of conceptual knowledge and understanding how to apply it
and how it relates with each other. So his exams are open-ended. That was something I wasn't [laughs] really prepared for. His kind of exams were really tough, I didn't do so well. In the courses in general, his courses, I didn't do so well.

And I don't think I was really comfortable reaching out for help in the first two years. And maybe I think – I don't know if it's a first-gen thing or it's kind of maybe just a culmination of cultural, first-gen, low-income, where you don't really ask for help. I kind of applied to college by myself for the most part, and I figured it out on my own. Culturally you're taught – I'm Mexican-American, and you're culturally taught to just kind of work hard and you put your head down and figure it out yourself. And so I tried that for that year or just for like a long time and so that was tough.

It was a lot of information. I just didn't have good study habits. I was used to in high school kind of just reviewing something the night before and it would stick. Or it wasn't too in-depth. I didn't have to really review – read before class, take notes during class, revise the notes, and then go back and watch the lecture again, and so it's definitely a lot more just repetition, understanding, testing yourself in different ways. And so the first courses I took with him I didn't do well. This course [laughs] is kind of a redemption time. So that's the reason I took the course before he retired: just because I need a good grade [both laugh] from Hendry. So, yeah, he's definitely a professor that sticks out as –

AS: Okay. And I think that's interesting and good commentary too about not feeling like you should ask for help, or maybe even not knowing that you can. So I think that's a difficult lesson to learn, especially when you are an independent worker and you're very headstrong in a good way, that you've developed your own work habits and they've worked for you and so you're going to continue to do them and you don't necessarily feel comfortable asking for help. So that's definitely interesting and I think a lot of people are probably that way, or a lot of first gens are probably that way.

Okay. I'm also curious about the maybe clubs and activities that you have participated in while you've been at Hopkins. So maybe you could talk about that a little bit.

HT: Yeah, so, I joined – my freshman spring – I applied to the Latino Pre-Health Honor Society. And so I applied to that because it was pre-health, they're also Latinos, and so it was a group that I kind of identified with. That was one of the clubs that I was a part of kind of a lot. My freshman spring, sophomore year, and maybe junior
year. Oh, yeah. I'm still in it. So the thing I guess to really lay it out was: this is my fifth year, I don't know if that was clear. But so I spent all of last year, which would've been my senior year, abroad in Spain.

AS: Oh, cool.

HT: And so it really threw a wrench – I think, club-wise, it really threw a wrench in my club experiences because I had one or two years with certain clubs and then I left, and then when I come back the faces are completely different; everyone's changed. And so – also because I kind of don't feel like it's my turn to be in leadership roles. So, for LEM, for example, which is the Latino Pre-Health, I was in a co-vice-president position, so my senior year I would've applied to run for president or whatever, but I left and so I didn't feel comfortable coming back to apply for any e-board positions I kind of felt like my time was over [laughs]. And so my club experiences have changed, but LEM would've been one that I applied to, I'm still in.

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I applied to Alpha Epsilon Delta, which is another pre-health honor society, on a whim, but it's a really good club. And those are two. I'm part of JUMP, like I said, I came in and that was one that I really enjoyed, I was a mentor for that one for other pre-orientation students that came in my junior year. So we would go on the same retreat but as just kind of: "This is what you can expect, and this is my experiences," and there's a lot of panels and professors come out to talk to them, and advisors, so it's a good program. And I think that's when I figured out: "I should have done this," [laughs] because it's some really good stuff. There's a lot of good resources. Even though as was a first year I probably wouldn't've taken advantage of it as I should have. It's really hard, they say hindsight's 20/20.

AS: That's very true. Well maybe do you want to talk about your study abroad experience? That sounds really cool. And maybe – you mentioned the dorm living before, but maybe you could talk too in that about where you've lived, different places you've lived, if you've always lived on campus, and then now obviously you've lived in Spain, so that's really cool.

HT: Yeah, it was a long time. It was a good time. So, I guess, first generation, low-income – it was the first time I'd left Texas, coming to Hopkins, so that was a big thing. I was here for three
years. So I didn't speak Spanish before, growing up, because I grew up in a town that's kind of – it's in the border. Everybody – it's 95, up to 99-percent Hispanic, mostly, maybe 80-percent Mexican-specific ethnicity. So there was never any cultural defensiveness, it was kind of: everybody of the same kind of culture.

And so coming here to Hopkins, I met a lot of other students with different intersectionalities or intersectional identities, whether low-income or first-gen or Hispanic, and their experiences in other parts of the country were kind of: they had to defend their culture that they had, and so they held much more tightly to this idea of speaking Spanish or of traditional customs, when I didn't have a lot of these traditional customs. I would say it was much more Texan than Mexican. So Spanish wasn't – I wasn't a Spanish speaker, I didn't grow up – my parents are bilingual, but the education system was English so I didn't learn. So that was kind of the motivating factor for me to go to Spain, just to learn the language. Also because I was on scholarship and it was something that my family had never done, and so, yeah, I left for a year.

AS: That's amazing, that's very cool.

HT: It was an amazing experience. I was definitely blessed to have that opportunity. And I'm glad – it motivated my brother – so he's currently in Nepal.

AS: Oh wow.

HT: Yeah, after I got back, he's like, "I'm going abroad." So I was like, "Yeah, dude." It was one of the greatest experience I did. So he's currently abroad. My living situations, I think because of that year, has really – not in a negative way – but I've just kind of been bouncing around different places. So my first year was in one dorm. My second year, another dorm. Which was a little better but not – it has a low reputation in terms of sophomore housing – McCoy Hall, but it was a good place, I liked it. And then I had to find housing. So I went to 9 East, the housing across the street on 33rd. When it first opened it was a lot cheaper before, so when I was leaving, they kind of raised the rent a lot. So it was an affordable place when I first moved in. And that was interesting. Then I lived in a homestay, so with a family in Spain, for the first semester. The second semester I moved into an apartment on my own.

AS: Very cool.
**HT:** So I was a little more independent, I got to cook for myself. So that was fun, it was something I missed. And then now I live in an apartment, in a studio by myself down the street, which was much more affordable than 9 East.

**AS:** Yeah, that seems like a good spot to be, especially your last year, kind of be a little more independent.

**HT:** Yeah, definitely.

**AS:** That's great. So my dying question is: do you speak Spanish with your parents now then, since you are fluent?

**[0:40:00]**

**HT:** I spoke Spanish to my dad – so, before I left, I spoke Spanish in terms of memorized kind of phrases that you tack on to ends of sentences, that's how I talked to my dad. Now I'm able to have a fluent conversation with my dad. My mom won't – my mom speaks English to me. The only person [laughs] she I think really speaks Spanish to is maybe in a work setting or with her students or to my dad's mom [laughs]. So she doesn't really speak Spanish so much, but I do speak Spanish to my dad.

I guess a funny story about that one: I came back – I was here at Hopkins and I was trying to make this traditional pumpkin candy that my dad's dad makes. And my dad's parents are only Spanish-speaking, my mom's parents were English and Spanish. But so I called my dad's dad, because my dad was adamant: "Just call him. Ask him for the recipe." I was like, "Okay. I'll call him." And I'm talking to him, asking him, "What pumpkin do I use? What do I do? What's the recipe?" And he's like, "Yeah," and he starts telling me and then at the end he's like, "Why don't you just look it up on Google?" not realizing the fact that this is the longest conversation I've ever had with him in my life in his language. Yeah [both laugh].

**AS:** That's pretty great.

**HT:** Just to him it was like: "Just Google it" [laughs].

**AS:** That's awesome. That's a sort of story that you don't expect your grandparents to tell you to Google something, that's great. Okay. So, I guess we talked a little bit about your academic year and what
that would look like. Did you do anything cool over your summers or did you work any jobs that you want to talk about?

HT: So, pre-professional office will tell you to kind of use your summers to do experience that will bolster your application. My first summer I didn't, I went home, especially after that first freshman year. I went home and I guess it's of note: I also went home for that Thanksgiving. So I went home for Thanksgiving, I went home for Christmas. Thanksgiving – my scholarship covers flights to – they don't cover Thanksgiving or spring break, I guess it would be better to say. So they covered Christmas break, so I was able to go home for Christmas break, but I also went home my first year for Thanksgiving, and then I went home for the summer. And that summer I shadowed, which would be something I guess considered an experience, but I wanted to be home especially just after that first year. So that was my first year.

My second summer, I decided to stay here. I really enjoy Baltimore, Baltimore's a great place. It's not I guess the most popular opinion with the students here, but you have to get outside of the bubble to really see what Baltimore has to offer. And so I really enjoyed it. And so I was able to get into an internship doing research at the School of Medicine and so I did research for the summer, was able to see a lot of Baltimore.

And then my third summer I stayed in Baltimore living but I would commute to the APL, so the Applied Physics Lab with Hopkins. And that was an interesting experience, it was a lot more engineering-heavy, something I wasn't familiar with. So there's a lot of good learning experiences, what I like and what I don't like, and just code in general is tough. So that was another summer.

And then this past summer I went home. I was studying for the MCAT and so I was like, "It's cheaper to just stay at home." Also I was gone for a while and it had been a long time since I spent ample time with my family as opposed to just a one-off week or something like that.

AS: Cool. So you mentioned a little bit about Baltimore. Do you want to elaborate on that at all? Maybe about life in Baltimore or what that looks like? One of the things I'm kind of curious about too is if there were any what you would say historic moments or memorable moments sort of in the city during your time at Hopkins?
HT: Oh, historic moments. I think Baltimore has a lot of nook-and-cranny places that you can – I mean, there's a lot of good things to really look at in terms of – or to do that are fun that kind of cost money or something, good places to eat, good places to go. It also has a lot of genuine people. When you go, you can kind of see – Baltimore's also like a hurting city, and so people are really afraid to really reach out and do things in different areas.

[0:45:00]

I've become a big fan of Patterson Park, which is kind of the Hispanic area of the city. There's a lot of mom-and-pop shops, really authentic food and the people are really good. Historic moment, hmm, I don't know if I have one that kind of really sticks out. There's the Patterson Park Latin Festival was one that was one summer that I stayed that they had over there, and so it was a lot of community members just selling stuff that they make or there's a taco place over there that I really love [laughs]. So if I need to get off campus, that's where I'm going.

AS: That's where you go? Cool.

HT: Yeah.

AS: Okay. I guess if maybe – I'm trying to think of a good transition but there's not really one. [both laugh] Could you talk about your support system while you were in school, maybe who you relied on? And with that, it's like sort of what your relationship with your family was like during that time, because for a lot of students your family is your support system. So maybe you could talk about both those things.

HT: Okay. I'll talk about I guess kind of the support system I had physically here at Hopkins first. There was an advisor for JUMP who I got really close with, Ms. Nance. And she was here and she was someone that was down to earth and I could talk to and just kind of explain kind of the adjusting and things that I was facing, the challenges and what I saw. So she was a really cool person to talk to, she left for a different job I think working with high school students in Baltimore, maybe last year. And I talked a lot in the pre-professional office to Ms. Cruit, just amazing person. She was also down to earth and was really supportive of anything I wanted to do and not necessarily pushing me down kind of the checklist that they have a lot for pre-med students.
And so she's someone that – Ms. Nance and Ms. Cruit definitely my first two years – without them, I probably would've transferred or dropped out or just gone home [laughs]. Because it was a rough time, but the two of them definitely helped me out a lot in terms of just sticking it out and then really finding my place. But unfortunately she also left my sophomore year, so she's at the school of public health, I still keep in contact. And so I actually recently had lunch with Ms. Cruit, but it was good to catch up. It had been a while, especially since I was abroad.

AS:

I'm sure they're both curious about how you're doing so that's good.

HT:

Yeah [laughs]. So that was my support system here. Dr. Ferguson, who's the Dean of the Center for Student Success, is also a person that I go to now. And she's awesome. She's really down to earth also. I think that's [laughs] really cool people when they're down to earth. So I met her through – when they created the Center for Student Success, they kind of absorbed and wanted to create a place for all scholarships, people that came from scholarship backgrounds, and so she was our advisor, and that's how I got to know her and talk to her a lot. So she's kind of someone that I still go to now and see kind of frequently. So those would be the people that I reach out to here as a support system.

My family – I guess in high school I would say, maybe because I was a guy in high school, my dad and I bumped heads a lot. And also we were in the same room, so there was a lot of time I need my own space, so you just go to the room and close the door and just listen to music or something. So it was kind of the opposite, I needed a lot more time by myself in high school. And then coming to college, the first year, I didn't talk to them that often, I know that's kind of the stereotype, that you kind of lose contact with your family. So I'd call them every now and then and it was just a rough time and I slept a lot. If I wasn't sleeping, I was studying. And that was kind of the cycle, and I think maybe my sophomore year I started calling my parents more, and so now I call my dad every day. And my mom – she's not really a phone talker. So it's tough to get her on the phone [laughs]. If I talk to her for five minutes, she's like, "Okay, here's your dad," and just hands it over. So I keep up with her through my dad a lot [laughs] to see what they're doing.

So I talk to them. I don't know if they're a big academic support system. They know that I'm doing something but it's just out of their experience. They only know to the extent of their own
experiences. So it's not something – I was talking to my mom one
time – I think it was junior year. And I was taking nervous
systems. And I was just like, “Mom, I'm struggling here. It's
tough,” and I had just stayed up a really long time doing work, or I
had an orgo exam, or something. Those semesters were rough
academically, but I was better mentally. That was kind of the thing
of my junior year, it was much more learning how to study. And so
I'm telling her that it's tough; it's a lot of work. And [laughs] her
response was, "Just study harder." And I was like, "No, mom. Pass
the phone to dad" [laughs].

 AS: Like, "That's not helpful." [laughs]

 HT: "Talk to you later." Yeah.

 AS: Okay. I think your relationship with your parents is always an
evolution. I'll tell you that now.

 HT: [Laughs].

 AS: Okay. So you mentioned earlier about life after Hopkins a little bit.
So maybe could you talk about that and what direction you're
moving in, now that you're almost finished your degree.

 HT: Yeah. Wow. It's been a while. So, I think coming in I kind of
expected to either go straight to med school or to take one gap year
and then apply to med school after graduation. But going to Spain I
think really slowed me down, just trying to see the culture that they
had in Spain and it was much more relaxed. It's a stark difference
from Hopkins, so coming back I think I'm not in any rush. So now
I applied to a program that would keep me in Baltimore because I
feel like because I had these years of just kind of jumping around
from place to place, having two years in a single place would
really allow me to get settled and just kind of get into a routine and
really invest in Baltimore the way I did in Spain. I think I was able
to really get to know the city in a way that I haven't gotten to get to
know Baltimore.

 And so I applied to a program. I actually made it past the first kind
of “triage” round. And so fingers crossed. And so it's a two-year
program and I'll be doing research at the med campus and then
applying to med school after the first year. So that would take care
of my gap years, I'd be doing something productive.

 AS: Well, good luck. Hopefully that turns out positively.
HT: Yeah. Fingers crossed.

AS: That's awesome. So, would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students? And maybe do you have any advice for them if they did end up here?

HT: I definitely would recommend Hopkins. I mean, my first two years were rough, like I say. But then once you find kind of your niche, your friend group, people that identify with you and just good people, people that you can not just talk about school with – because there're certain people that when you're with them it's for a purpose and it's kind of: "What'd you get on this? How are you doing this?" And people that are very focused on school. You need to find people – I think it really lines up with major – so a lot my friends are outside my major. I think I only had one friend who was a neuroscience major because it tends to get too competitive or – yeah [laughs].

Hopkins is a tough place. But when you find people that understand I guess the culture that Hopkins has and is able to dissociate from that, it makes Hopkins – you learn to appreciate the quality that Hopkins offers – because you can step back and not get stuck into the toxic part of it, but appreciate what it does have to offer. So Hopkins I definitely – I don't regret my time here, it was definitely a learning experience, it helped me grow a lot.

And something I would recommend – I think it's really – not for first-gen or low-income students specifically – I think it's just in general to take it slow, because that was one of my biggest regrets – is I packed on all my requirements in the beginning, struggled academically because I wasn't prepared to do that, and then when I left and I came back, it's much more – it gave me the opportunity to fill in that year because I had so much time to just take it all learning Spanish. And now that I'm back, I'm taking a much more balanced course load, like I took one of my hardest courses, prop stats for engineers – I don't know why I did that one [laughs] – but that was one of the hardest courses I've taken but I took it with an art class that I was interested in and an intro-level computing course because my internship at the APL really got me interested in computing. So it was much more balanced and I think I was just much happier than I was the first two years and it's much more manageable.

AS: Yeah, so balance.
[0:55:00]

HT: Balance.

AS: Balance is a good point.

HT: Instead of just -- you talk to people, and students are really quickly -- especially freshman year I think, I was in my calc course as a freshman. Someone behind me was like, "Yeah, I'm already published." And it's like, "We've been here for like a month. Why are we just talking about this?" Yeah. It's interesting, I think it comes from the quality of student that Hopkins recruits. You just get these high-achieving students and then you put them in a room and you're no longer number one all the time and then it creates this competitiveness, but I think it's still a good place if you try to take a step back and realize, or just look at the bigger picture.

AS: Yeah, I think that's a really good moment of advice and realizing that you all are high-achieving, and that means you're all going to continue to high-achieve, or achieve high. So just kind of realizing that you're in it together and that it should be something that you should support one another in maybe.

HT: Yeah.

AS: Okay so, I guess I have run out of questions. So I just want to thank you for interviewing with us today.

HT: Thank you.

AS: Is there anything else that you'd like to add or is there anything that we didn't touch upon that you'd like to talk about at all?

HT: Not off the top of my head. I think that was kind of a lot of it [laughs].

AS: Okay, awesome. Well, I think we covered all the bases, and thank you again for sitting down and talking with us.

HT: No, thank you for having me.

AS: Awesome.

[End of Audio]