“SH”

Interviewed by Allison Seyler

March 6, 2019
SH: “SH”

AS: Allison Seyler (AS)

Date: March 6, 2019

AS: Alright, so this is Allison Seyler here with “SH” on March 6, 2019 at the Eisenhower Library and we’re conducting first-generation college student oral history interviews. My first question for you today is where were you born, and if you could elaborate and tell me a little bit about your family.

SH: So, I was born in a town outside of Philadelphia called Worcester. And I’m the youngest of six children, so it’s a busy household.

AS: Yeah, that’s a lot of kids. [Laughs] Could you tell me about your parents a little bit and maybe their education and professions?

SH: Mm-hmm, so my parents started a family instead of going to college, and my dad and his brothers inherited my grandfather’s car dealership, so that’s what my dad does. And then my mom takes the photographs of the cars for him and puts them on an inventory website.

AS: Okay, so they have sort of a family business going?

SH: Yes.

AS: Okay, and did either of them receive any formal education past high school?

SH: No.

AS: Do you want to talk about where you grew up and maybe your experiences in high school and what that was like?

SH: Mm-hmm. So my town, Worcester, is kind of in the middle of nowhere. [Laughs] It’s like 15 minutes out of suburbia I would say, like 15 minutes to the first grocery store and shopping center. And I always went to school like 40 minutes away from my house because my parents did really emphasize the importance of education for me, so I went to private school. And I went to private
school in Philadelphia for high school, which was fun, I liked being in the city more than in my farm-ish suburb, yeah.

AS: Yeah, so can you talk a bit about your siblings too? Did you guys all go to private school, or what was that experience like?

SH: Yeah, so my oldest siblings are 15 years older than me, so there’s a bit of an age gap. And the closest in age to me is six years older than me, and they all did go to private school for at least high school. But, I am the first one to actually get a bachelor’s degree in the conventional sense. My oldest sister who is now 37, just completed her bachelor’s online last year. So, I don’t really know why none of them really wanted to pursue college, but yeah, all of my brothers ended up working at the car dealership and my one sister who just got her bachelor’s is a nurse, and then my other sister is a stay-at-home mom.

AS: Okay, cool. It seems like definitely an interesting perspective to have. Did you do anything in high school that really prepared you for college? Could you talk about if there were any teachers or programs that you were a part of that set you up to succeed?

SH: My favorite classes in high school were always my English classes. And I had this creative writing teacher who went to Haverford College, which is right outside of Philadelphia also. So, after having him for two years, I was determined to go to Haverford. So that’s probably what got me really interested and determined to go somewhere, and then once I got into Hopkins, my parents kind of pushed me towards here because they wanted me to get away from Philadelphia for a little bit.

AS: Okay. Could you talk about that moment maybe when you decided to go to Hopkins and expand a little bit on the reaction of your family?

SH: Yeah. I didn’t tell anyone when I got in initially because I had already heard from Haverford. My whole family went and got sweatshirts for Haverford. We visited. So when I got the email from Hopkins, I didn’t tell anybody for a few hours. And then at dinner I was like “oh yeah, I got into Hopkins.” And then my mom was very, very set on that for me, and I pretty much waited until the last possible minute to commit to a school. But I’m happy with my decision; I think Hopkins was the right place for me ultimately.

[0:05:00]
Okay. Do you want to talk about the sort of transition from moving from your hometown to Baltimore City and maybe what that experience was like for you?

Yeah, so all of my siblings still live within like 20 minutes of each other, so it was kind of hard to be the first person to kind of step away from that. And with having six kids in a family, there’s inevitably like a lot of drama. And my first semester my freshman year I felt too distant from that, and I actually applied to transfer to Haverford. [Laughs] And yeah, that was the first time – my grandfather died my freshman year, and it was the first time I had experienced death. So, I just was not in a great place freshman year and I did not love Hopkins right away. And I think the transition was hardest just because I felt so far removed from my very tightknit family that was geographically located within ten miles of each other.

Sure. Did you live on campus when you moved here?

Mm-hmm, yeah, I lived in Wolman.

Okay. Did your family help with the move or did you come down by yourself?

Yeah, that was actually an event in itself. My parents are separated and they have been for ten years. They’re friendly, but at the time I was heading out to college, I was really nervous about them spending the whole day together. So we all came. My two sisters came with some of my nieces and nephews, and my aunt, and we were moving into my dorm room, and then I was very set on having everything set up before they left. And we didn’t have Command strips, so I sent my parents out to get Command strips, and they were gone for hours. And I was getting frustrated; no one was telling me anything. And then I found out that my dad had had a heart attack –

Oh my gosh!

Yes, on my move-in day, and he ended up having to go to Hopkins Hospital and staying there for two weeks. And now I joke that I was happy that I got to see them for an extra two weeks, but at the time it was very scary, he had to have bypass surgery here in Baltimore, and they always say thank god you went to Hopkins and we had access to that hospital.

That’s definitely an unexpected circumstance. That’s really crazy, I’m glad he’s okay now.
Yeah.

Wow. So when you got here, did you meet any other first-generation college students or have you found a group of students with similar backgrounds to yourself?

Not really in terms of being a first-generation college student. A lot of my friends’ parents have master’s degrees and professional degrees. So yeah, I don’t think I’ve met –

Really met any?

Okay. Do you want to talk a bit about your program of study and maybe why you chose it and what you see or how you see that it will be valuable to you?

Mm-hmm. So, I always loved writing when I was growing up, so I knew that was what I wanted to study. So Hopkins was really attractive to me because it has such a good writing program. So I came in knowing that I wanted to do writing seminars, and then I thought maybe I wanted to double major in econ., which I was not an econ. person. [Laughs] So I stopped that goal after freshman year. And then I decided to take some international studies classes, because I never really was up-to-date with current events in high school and I thought that would be challenging and actually tangible things that I could learn. So then I started to really like those classes and I added that as a double major at the end of my sophomore year. So I’ve been having to take a lot of international studies classes my last two years to make up for adding it so late, but those have been some of my favorite classes.

Cool.

Mm-hmm.

So do you have any particular classes or professors that are sort of your favorite or most memorable?

Mm-hmm. For writing seminars, I really like Professor Greg Williamson. He teaches poetic forms classes. I didn’t like poetry coming into college at all, I thought I was more of a fiction person. But after taking his class, I definitely like poetry much more now. And I never thought that I would enjoy writing within form and meter, and the way he teaches it, I don't know how he does it but he really makes it like a puzzle almost, and it’s really fun to write it sestinas and sonnets and some more crazier forms.
So I’ve taken two classes with him and an independent study with him just all working within meter. And then for international studies, I have really enjoyed the classes I’ve taken with Professor Ilil Benjamin. For a little bit I thought that I might want to go into human rights law, and she teaches human rights classes; I’ve taken global health and human rights with her. And right now, I’m taking refugees and human rights. And they kind of push back on like your preconceived notions on what you think you believe on a subject, and you think obviously everyone has the right to health, food, education, but then when you look at these certain cultural aspects that interact with those rights, it makes for a really interesting conversation that I never thought about before.

AS: Cool that sounds like a really interesting area of study. So I guess one of the things we also are curious about is if you could talk about joining any clubs or doing any specific activities while you’ve been at Hopkins.

SH: Mm-hmm. Well like I said, I did not like Hopkins in the fall of freshman year. And I think also part of that was feeling like I was really in the “Hopkins bubble” that everyone talks about. So then I got an email about Writers in Baltimore Schools in the spring, and they were trying to revive this club that hadn’t been active for a few years. So I decided to get involved with that and it was just like three students at the time. And I think actually going into the schools and volunteering in Baltimore and engaging with the greater Baltimore community made this feel more like a home to me rather than just this bubble where I was going to classes and going back to my dorm.

AS: Okay. Can you expand a little about the program and describe what it does?

SH: Yeah, so Writers in Baltimore Schools is a nonprofit in Baltimore that has a chapter at Johns Hopkins. The founder, Patrice Hutton, graduated from Johns Hopkins and started the organization as a club while she was here, and now it’s turned into her life’s work essentially. I think she’s expanded into D.C. as well, which is really cool. But the student group particularly our job is to volunteer at the schools, and that looks like us going in for an hour every week just to teach creative writing. It’s structured but also not so structured at the same time, we kind of let the kids take the lead on what they want. And obviously some students are much more interested in writing than others, so a lot of different kinds of
work comes out of that. And then our job is to compile all of that work into an anthology for the students.

*AS*: Okay, very cool. Are they mixed ages or a specific age group?

*SH*: Yeah, I think they are mixed ages. The only children I’ve ever worked with have been in middle school. But I’m pretty sure that the actual nonprofit works with everywhere from elementary to high school.

*AS*: That’s really great. That’s a really neat experience to have too, to see more of Baltimore. Have you done any internships or jobs in your time at Hopkins?

*SH*: After my sophomore year, I interned at Philadelphia Magazine, because I wanted to spend another summer at home. That was interesting, it was unpaid, which was upsetting. But yeah, it taught me that I did not want to go into journalism. [Laughs] So then last summer I had an internship at the Maryland Insurance Administration working as a law clerk for their like pseudo-judge who hears all of the cases about people filing against their insurance companies.

*AS*: Okay, so using communication and writing for that?

*SH*: Mm-hmm, yeah.

*AS*: Okay. So you mentioned a little bit about going home, I wonder if you could talk about how you spent your summer breaks or your longer breaks?

*SH*: So, I still feel that like magnet towards home since everybody is concentrated there. So yeah, over breaks I go from the minute I’m done with my last class until sometimes like Monday morning I’ll drive back here from home to get to class in time. My mom really likes me to be home.

[0:15:00]

I think especially because I’m the baby it’s hard for her to see me like growing up. But yeah, over last summer while I was working at the Maryland Insurance Administration, I would still go home every weekend.

*AS*: Okay.

*SH*: Yeah.
AS: Yeah, I mean it makes sense if you’re a homebody and you enjoy that.

SH: Yeah.

AS: Could you talk about your support system at school and then maybe elaborate a little bit more on your relationship with your family while you’ve been at Hopkins and away from them?

SH: Yeah. So I was really lucky to find a good group of friends pretty much during orientation that now those four girls are my roommates, so I’ve really spent all of my college career with the same people. Of course, through clubs and stuff I’ve made other friends, but they are definitely my core support network. They celebrate with me when I get a good grade or commiserate when something goes wrong. But yeah, those are probably my main support system here.

AS: Great. So when you have been here, how has your family supported you? Do you guys talk on the phone? Is there financial support? Maybe talk about that a little bit.

SH: Yeah, I talk to my mom every single day on the phone and I have since freshman year. My other siblings we have like a group chat, but that’s about the extent of our communication; everyone is so busy now. But yeah, my mom will usually fill me in on what’s going on with everyone at home. And there’s definitely been times where she’s been telling me things and I felt more like I just want to block out the drama and remain in Baltimore. So in a way, coming to school at Hopkins has given me the selfish room to distance myself to some of the family stuff. But I’ve been privileged enough that my parents are paying for my college, so there haven’t been any financial issues. Yeah, I pay for my rent and food while I’m here with jobs I’ve had over the summer, I tend to take on a lot of odd jobs. [Laughs]

AS: Yeah, that makes sense. That’s very strategic, so that’s good. Yeah, I wonder sometimes about if first-generation students feel sort of socioeconomic difference with a lot of the other students here, so I don't know if you have any thoughts on that.

SH: For me personally, I know that my family is fairly well off. I went to private school, I haven’t really had to worry about money in ways that some people have. My friends who I live with are substantially more well off than me, so sometimes I have a hard time acknowledging that I do still have that privilege and that I’m
living very comfortably and I get to go to school. But yeah, I don’t think I’ve felt ever socioeconomically marginalized at Hopkins.

AS: Okay, that’s good. So how would you describe you life in general in Baltimore or Maryland? You know have you encountered anything in the city that you find interesting or were there any sort of historic moments in your time here at Hopkins?

SH: I really love Baltimore and I’m sad to be leaving. But I don't know, I like exploring new restaurants, I like going to the farmer’s market in Waverly. [Laughs]

AS: Nice. Yeah, there’s a lot to see and do here for sure.

SH: Yeah.

AS: So what do you plan on doing after Hopkins, and do you have any comments on what you’re going to do academically or professionally once you’re finished your degree?

SH: Next year I’m starting law school.

AS: Congratulations!

SH: Thank you! I’m going to Penn, so I will be back in Philadelphia for a couple of years. I don’t plan on staying in Philadelphia for the rest of my life yet, but hopefully after law school I’ll work in New York or another east coast city before going back to my family finally.

[0:20:00]

AS: Yeah, it’s good to expand a little bit while you can.

SH: Mm-hmm.

AS: Congratulations, that’s very cool.

SH: Thank you.

AS: Do you have a specific area of law that you’re going to study or are you yet to be determined?

SH: Yeah, yet to be determined.

AS: Okay, cool. So I guess overall, do you think you would recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students, and is there any advice that you would offer them in their journey here?
Yeah, I definitely would. I think Hopkins definitely has some resources for first-generation students if you seek them out, I didn’t really. My main advice would be grades still matter in college, because I remember my parents in freshman year when I was stressed out my mom would be like “you’re already in college, grades don’t matter.” But they do. [Laughs] So that was probably the biggest thing as a first-generation student that I didn’t know.

Okay, that’s good advice. So after all this time and after the experiences that you’ve had, is there a way that you would maybe summarize or describe your experience at Hopkins?

I think I would summarize it by saying that even though I wasn’t in love with Hopkins at first, over the course of the past four years, I have really fallen in love with it. Not even just Baltimore, but my classes. Writing-sem starts out a little rough, because you’re taking classes with science majors who just need the writing credits. But for any writing-sem majors, it’s definitely good to know that the classes get way more intimate and personal and you get a lot out of it for your final three years. So yeah, I’d say that it’s been an upward trend for sure.

Okay, I think that’s a really great point. So I think I’ve run out of questions for you, but are there any other things that you want to add or talk about during the final moments of the interview?

I don’t think so.

No? Okay, awesome. Well, thank you for speaking with me today; I really appreciate it.

[End of Audio]

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1 SH refers to “writing-sem” which is shorthand for “Writing Seminars.”