"ME"

Interviewed by Allison Seyler

March 6, 2020
AS: This is Allison Seyler. I'm here with ME on March 2nd, 2020, at the Eisenhower Library, and we are recording some first-generation college student oral history interviews. So our first question for you today is: where were you born, and could you tell us a bit about your family?

ME: So, I was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I grew up there for a bit and then when I was five, my sister and my mother and I moved to join my dad who was already kind of established in Miami, Florida. And I've lived in Miami ever since and coming to Baltimore was my first time out of Miami since I'd moved. In terms of my family, I'm the eldest of three. Both of us – my sister and I were born in Haiti and my brother was the last one, born here. There's a small age gap between my sister and I. She's in her freshman year of college now as I'm leaving my senior year, which is kind of wicked. And my brother's a sophomore in high school right now, so he's about to turn 16.

AS: Excellent. Can you tell me a little bit more about your parents, and maybe what their educations were like?

ME: Yeah. So, both of them did the bulk of their education in Haiti. My mom, when she moved here, started community college classes to first learn English through ESOL programs, and then ended up being a teacher's assistant for a while, while she earned her nursing degree, or her nursing certification. So she's a licensed practical nurse back home. And she's been that since probably 2008 I want to say. So, she's kind of bounced around between hospice care and taking care of children in schools, but for the most part just doing geriatric and end-of-life care.

My father also did his education – got a later start just because he kind of financed his own education as he grew up – because he did...
come from a more rural family who really couldn't afford to send all their children to school because of how I guess privatized the education system is in Haiti. But he moved here first and kind of got his footing in by first being learning – or being certified as a lab technician. He went back to school around the time that I started middle school to become a respiratory therapist, and he was that up until he passed. He actually passed just two months ago.

*AS:* Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that.

*ME:* Yeah, so that's been a little tough. But he was a trooper. Both of them have been very involved in the health care field and that kind of inspired what I wanted to study for a really long time, and how I found myself here at Hopkins.

*AS:* Aw, okay. So, I guess maybe if you want to talk – to sort of go back a little bit to talk about growing up in Haiti or spending your I guess first few years in Haiti, and then maybe what it was like in Miami. Could you talk a little bit about growing up down there and what that was sort of like?

*ME:* Yeah, of course. In Haiti, I really wish I could say I remembered more, because I left so young, but there're still a few tidbits of memories that come in and out. I remember my parents both lived in a home that they were constructing as they were working together, so my dad – he worked at the Mexican Embassy before we moved. So he was kind of earning a stable wage while my mom was a stay-at-home mom kind of thing. And I just remember the cul-de-sac, and there were five or seven houses in the general area, and everyone kind of knew each other, and we'd spend a lot of time together. Sunday dinners were kind of really communal, so I remember the community aspect of growing up there a lot.

I also remember a bit of school because I'd started kindergarten before I'd moved there, or to Miami I guess. So in school I was very much – I don't want to say star pupil, but a lot of the report cards and the reports that my mom's told me and told old teachers who would come back – they were like, "Yeah, it was just very obvious that you liked to learn." And I've just always had that inquisitive nature, so it's really funny that over this last break, I dug up one of the older report cards, because we had kept those from before we moved. And it was like: "She was very helpful and willing to serve and very great in school." I was like, "Oh wow. I really wish this is actually what happens today." But no, I think being helpful and kind of fostering my love for school and reading started there.
And coming to Miami was very much a culture shock. And I remember the shock of it kind of more now than I feel like I did when I experienced it. Just because a lot of it has kind of come back in different ways since my college experience. So I came, not knowing any English, to restart kindergarten.

[0:05:00]

AS: Did you speak French?

ME: I spoke Haitian Creole and I was learning the basics of French, so French grammar and things like that were what I remember leaving off on. But I'd spoken no English, and we moved in the June of 2003 and school started in August. M.E. was in school in August [laughs]. So that was kind of – yeah, dumped in the water and I did my first kind of set of ESOL classes because they understood, so there was programs for transitioning students who had immigrated to the States, because Miami's a hub for a lot of Haitian immigrants, so there were classes to kind of bridge the gap.

I feel like I spent at least six months kind of in those courses to kind of learn English. And it's hilarious because I have this anecdote where on my first day of kindergarten there was this girl who asked me – I brought a doll with a comb – and she asked me what it is. And I was like – I say the French word for comb, and she's still looking at me asking me again or I feel like she's repeating the same thing. I'm like, "It's a comb!" And I get so frustrated, throw the comb across the room. And that's my first memory of kindergarten, just because: "Why can't you understand me?" So, I kind of dealt with the frustration of not being understood for a little bit.

And I spent a really short time there and then got moved to gifted and transitioned out of – I really want to say I was okay enough to do school English after a year. So, by the first grade I was out of ESOL and ESL classes.

And then growing up in Miami was kind of – it didn't feel much different than what I feel like growing up in Haiti was like, just because there was such a strong Haitian community. And not just Haitians. It was just strong pockets of little diverse ethnicities I guess. So, three blocks down the street is Little Havana and four blocks there is Chinatown, so I feel like throughout growing up in Miami, I really was privileged to kind of be exposed to the same diversity that I really valued in my time at Hopkins.
What else about growing up? What did I do? I was actually reserved growing up. My parents were very overprotective and it was like the immigrant mom and dad, kind of like: "I'm leaving for 12 hours at a time. You're not leaving the house until there's a fire." So, we didn't do much exploring. A lot of people were – the parks were the central hubs of kids and socializing, we didn't really do that, so it was like reading and kind of entertaining each other as siblings. What else? I was really involved in school to kind of circumnavigate having to be at home all the time. So, I was really involved in clubs and extracurriculars. I did debate for a little bit. All of my activities – my social activities centered around having to be at school, so I did spend a lot of time at school growing up. What else can I say about that? I don't know.

AS: Did you have a particularly close relationship with your siblings?

ME: It was a tough one because I was thrust into the role of being the third parent a lot. So, there was a really clear boundary between me as like their sibling most days and then me as like a pseudo authority figure, which was kind of strange. But I think my relationship with them has strengthened over the years, just because we've kind of, as siblings, gone through the same sort of thing, so there's some solidarity there, but also being able to toe the line from different perspectives has given me, I guess a respect for them that I feel like I wouldn't have had otherwise. So, yeah, we definitely grew up pretty tight.

AS: Yeah, it makes you appreciate the dynamic but also really identify what that dynamic is –

ME: Right!

AS: Absolutely. So, you mentioned a little bit about your extracurriculars, and one of the things we're kind of curious about is what your high school experience was like. So if you want to talk a little bit about that, and maybe those things that sort of set you up for college?

ME: Of course. High school was kind of tricky. I went to a magnet high school. But the magnet program was more on the vocational side. So, from ninth grade until my senior year of high school, I was on a "track," like a pre-health allied medicine kind of track. So during high school we had different courses like anatomy, physiology. We also had lab skill classes where we learned how to draw blood, kind of with the intention of: should we leave high school, we
would be kind of slated to enter the workforce. So, that's how like
the history of the school I went to, so that's kind of what I did,
considering – around seventh or eighth grade I started getting more
serious about wanting to pursue maybe a health career, just being
inspired by my parents and the stories that they told of their work.

[0:10:00]

So, I applied and got into that magnet school and I was pre-health.
The academy was called the Health Academy, and there were five
or six. I think there was agriculture, finance, business, and
information technology kind of thing. So each of them, by the end
of your time at my alma mater, you would be able to either,
through the internships that you worked in high school, kind of
land an opening in a job or kind of pursue that career. So, that kind
of expanded into – the school in general kind of expanded into
real-deal nursing programs, so by the time you got out of high
school, you could even try to get a nursing license, which is
wicked. A lot of friends of mine or people who have still been in
Miami, just start on their full-on careers right after we graduated.
So, I guess that in a sense was really a privilege, because I kind of
had the advantage of being exposed to things like internships and
work in research-related opportunities through my high school
programs. But, I chose to kind of toe the line to get into college
and college prep, which before I guess my class year, the school
had never really considered before.

So, the year I became a sophomore or junior they created this new
branch of the same program for the pre-health, the allied health
branch, for it to be just advanced medical sciences, so people with
the intention of getting or wanting to start with advanced degrees,
meaning you wanted to go to college first. So, through that
program a lot of it happened that we did more intense internships,
we got partnered with the University of Miami and went to
research labs as opposed to maybe shadowing a nurse or
shadowing a health practitioner. So, it kind of felt more like: this is
what it would be integrating into a lab, for example.

So, after doing that I kind of balanced trying to do the academics
or the academy-based education, so by the time I left high school I
think I had five or six health certifications. I was CPR certified,
basic life support certified, epilepsy certified, mental health
certified, I had kind of a well-rounded experience with the health
professions, which kind of lended to why I was so eager about
coming to Hopkins.
But throughout my time in high school I also balanced dual enrollment, so I was enrolled in community college part-time from my sophomore year.

AS: That's a lot.

ME: Beginning the summer of my sophomore year, I did both those things and, in the evenings, went to community college classes. So, by the time I graduated, I had all my certifications, my high school diploma, and my Associate's.

AS: Wow, that's incredible!

ME: [laughs] Thanks! In hindsight, I wish I kind of was more proactive about using the fact that I had an AA, because when I got to Hopkins I started all over as opposed to having transferred credits from my former degree. I think that at this point now, looking back at why I chose that, I was kind of like – I felt some inherent inferiority. I was like, "These are community college credits. This would never fly at Hopkins," so I see how, from the beginning, I've been kind of having an uphill battle against imposter syndrome, which is very interesting to reflect on at this point. But, anyway, by the time I finished high school, I was already kind of full-time into what college would be like. So it didn't feel that steep of a transition when I got here until I actually got here [laughs].

AS: [laughs] Yeah, you were ready for something slightly intimidating but –

ME: Yeah. It's like you don't know until you know, and then when you know you know [laughs]. Yeah, Hopkins was definitely that for me.

AS: Did your parents have any thoughts that they shared with you on education? It sounds like they were pretty supportive of you doing all of these things, and probably likely going to community college. Did they articulate those expectations or anything with you?

ME: Oh yeah, yeah. There is a very prominent kind of phrase in Haitian culture that translate – it goes: “L’école, l’église, lakay,” which translates to: “School, church, and home.” So those are the three pillars of Haitian life. All of those were prioritized when I was growing up and school was the number-one thing. My dad especially was very passionate about the idea that if you have an
education, no one can take that away from you and you can do whatever you – it's very self-actualized in a sense. Or like affirmative, I guess is the better phrase for it, but by the time I started going to school in America, it was just like: okay, straight As were the expectation because why not? Why can't you? If everybody else can, there's no question that you can.

[0:15:00]

So I kind of always had that drive to do well in school, and I kind of feel like I created my identity through my performance in school, just because that was just so central to what my family encouraged. And college was not a decision, it was: it's happening. There's no break, no step between this. I think in terms of expectations, they kind of really weren't realistic about what they expected, because it was just like: “Oh, you're intelligent. You're definitely going to Harvard, right? If you're smart, they'll take you.” I was like, “Oh, that's not really how that works.” Tell that to all of my acceptance/rejections. That's not – but in terms of prepping for college, a lot of the bulk of the work was just me doing it and then reporting back to them, being like, "Hey, by the way, this happened."

It's not that they didn't want to, it's more like it wasn't the same language that they were used to speaking. It was more like they are proud community college graduates and patrons and they know a bit of how the higher education system works here, but to the extent of a bachelor's degree, neither of them had gone that far, so it was definitely new territory for everyone involved.

AS: Yeah, the process was left up to you I'm sure.

ME: Yup.

AS: So, with that, you mentioned it a little bit earlier about maybe wanting to sort of go into related health care field, something like that. How did you decide to attend Hopkins?

ME: It was crazy. I was between – by the time I was getting into junior year, I was like, “Okay, I have a year and a half. College needs to start now.” So the type-A person in me started a spreadsheet when I was like 16 and a half about colleges and what tuition looks like and how much you pay for a year and where the places are, what cities I'd want to live in…so I started thinking about college really early. But in terms of choosing Hopkins in particular, I think my senior year I'd just finished an allied health summer program that encouraged students who want to pursue health care fields to shadow mentors and things like that at the University of Miami.
And one of the things that we harped on was that, because we were seniors and diversity initiatives are always trying to show people of color on campuses, try to look for fly-in programs for the schools you're interested in. And Hopkins does one called – is it HOME? I think it's HOME. HOME is the one that they do in the fall. But I flew here, I got accepted to the HOME program and got to stay with somebody who was a current – I think she was a sophomore when I met her – but it was crazy that she also happened to be from Miami and they paired us together and we spoke and I toured Hopkins. I was like – brick buildings, I'd never seen brick as a building before…because Miami's architecture's just not the same.

And taking a tour of Baltimore, I was just like: the city is so rich in history and culture. I wouldn't just be doing school if I moved to Baltimore. So, I think kind of being in the space where I kind of saw myself is what planted the seed, because before that trip I was like, “Okay, Hopkins is on there. But it's not what I'm gunning for.” And then being here and being here when it was the most – it was the ideal time to have been here, the fall was just here, it was crisp, I had never seen the rain, and it was just the perfect kind of introduction to what Hopkins would be like. And then speaking to somebody who was kind of from where I was from tangentially – like she was Hispanic. And I was like, “Oh wow, how did you navigate finding food here even?” And then having conversations like that kind of, like I said, planted the seed.

So then when decision times came around and I'd gotten word from the final schools I had gotten accepted to, it was down to moving all the way to the West Coast with no financial aid, moving up here to Hopkins for a decent amount of financial aid and being supported, and then staying at home at the University of Miami, where also I guess the financial aid packages were similar at University of Florida. So, my plan at 18 was very much to go as far as possible and explore, spread my wings, so I felt like the lesser of all the evils was Hopkins. But it didn't – not in all the evils in a sense, where I was just leaving and starting over, but by the time I got here it just felt – by the time I got accepted and decided that I wanted to go, it felt like: “Oh, I'm going to be here for a reason.” Everything just clicked at the exact time where I decided to accept my admissions letter, is that how it's called?

AS: Yeah, it sounds like you really made a sort of visceral connection almost, which is really cool – that doesn't always happen.

ME: Yeah, it was very much physical.
AS: That's great.

[0:20:00]

So, how did your family react when you said, “I've been accepted to Hopkins; I've decided I'm going,” and what was their reaction?

ME: That was a wild time [laughing] in my family! It was kind of like a mixed bag. They had always seen how hard I'd worked to kind of get to the goal of college. So, by the time I started getting acceptances or even rejections where I was really disappointed, they got it, but they didn't really get it. So I remember when I got accepted to Hopkins the day of, and I opened it in front of my mom, she goes, "Oh, hey, great. Congratulations!" It was like, “Okay, so what do you want for dinner?” It was more like, “it happened.” [both laugh]. But then I think a lot of the resistance came from my dad, who was kind of more passionate about me being closer to home and the overprotective dad in him was like, “What are you doing eight states away? No one knows where you are at 1:00 AM – what's happening?”

So, by the time – and he was always just like, “Yeah, you're not going.” I said, “Watch me!” [laughs] So I kind of had a twinge of defiance when I had accepted and kind of was like, “Okay, well, I'm going, and they gave me money, so there's no saying no here.” But he was definitely a lot more resistant than my mom was, because she's always just been like, “Whatever you feel like would be best for you to pursue with any opportunity that you think is positive, I'm there.”

My dad had a twinge of kind of like oddness about it, but as soon as he started – it was actually really crazy because, since I said earlier, my high school didn't really focus on garnering college acceptances, that year, I think everyone or almost everyone in the senior class – like 80% of them had accepted or signed on to a college, so we had like a sign-in day. And the local news came and featured me and another two close friends of mine who had both gotten into really awesome schools, so, he went to Harvard, another one was a Gates Scholar to the University of Miami, and then I went to Hopkins, so we got a feature.

So, his coworkers saw, and he was just like – they're like, “Oh my god, she's going to Hopkins? She's going be a doctor? Do you know what kind of school that is? That's just so great. She's just following your footsteps.” And he came home one day and was
like, “So, Hopkins?” And I was like, “Yeah, Hopkins.” And he was just like, “I mean, I didn't understand.” That was as close to an apology as I feel like I was going get at that point. He was like, “I guess I didn't realize how much of a big deal it was. But whatever you need, I'm there…considering.”

AS: “My reaction before…”

ME: Right. So, by the time everything started to settle, and I got accepted and wanted to start making the moves to kind of transition, they were both kind of on board as they needed to be.

AS: And how did your siblings react? Were they excited for you?

ME: They were like, “Oh” –

AS: They were teenagers.

ME: Yeah. At that point, my sister was probably – because it was also her freshman year in my high school. So, she had just started getting adjusted to high school, my brother's in eighth grade. They're like, “Yeah. She's smart. We knew it, it’s cool.” [laughs].

AS: That makes sense.

ME: Yeah.

AS: So, could you describe what happened when you moved up here the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience, the transition from Miami to Baltimore? What was that experience like?

ME: Yeah. So that was actually – I feel like it wasn't as bad as it could've been, because I fortunately had gotten accepted to the Hop-In program. That's the bridge program that first started in the summer, and you're here for six weeks, you take your first class, and you're also getting acquainted with the resources and the pace of campus for a bit before you go back for I think two weeks and then start the full semester. So, I was the second cohort of that program, and it had just started the year before me, and they're still in the kinks. It's supposed to be a four-year kind of cohort-based program where the people you start the program with are the people you graduate with; and the advisors that you start with are the people you also leave with, or they help you through all of the facets of your transition as you adjust to Hopkins in all the ways.
In theory, it was cute. In practice, though, a lot of things kind of fell apart when the program itself started having a lot of turnover, so like the consistency that we were kind of hoping for at that point just didn't happen. And when the transitions started occurring, people were just piecing together resources as opposing to having a set artillery of things, so in the years since, I feel like the dust has started to settle. There are some people you can see between semesters, so it's started to be what it says it is, but during that time I kind of made some friends or a group of people that I was already comfortable with. And the way Hop-In is structured, it kind of affords a form of vulnerability with those same people, so we developed some really deep bonds in those first six weeks that kind of helped really smoothen the transition.

[0:25:00]

Because during orientation week when it was intense and everyone's speed dating to make friends I guess, and it's 150 people per event, that's just so flusterings for someone like me who's relatively introverted but can muster up sociability and be social. I have a very limited social battery. By 2.5 hours, I'm clocking out, I need a break, I need to go home. So that was very overwhelming for me. So, to have had avoided that because I made friends and had someone to catch lunch or coffee with after a week or go out during “O Week” with was really cool. It also kind of helped me get adjusted to the pace of what Hopkins was like instruction-wise, because I met my very first – one of my very first mentors was the professor to the first class I took here, that I took through Hop-In.2

So, intellectually or academically, the transition was very steep for me. Especially as someone who was comfortable enough with the idea of college to have some bearing as to what it was, like the extent to which you cover the same content is just not the same at all here at Hopkins, so getting adjusted to having to carve out time to just sit down and organize my notes, for example, or doing things like studying a week before a midterm as opposed to two days before it – it was just very different for someone who just intuitively “got” a lot of the work that she did so didn't really need to brush up before.

Making sure the concepts are solid was one thing, but sitting down to re-learn something, going to probe all of the material, and then taking the exam to see if you actually absorbed anything, and you

---

22 “O Week” refers to Orientation Week, special programming that serves to welcome new students to campus.
didn't, so you have to start back to square one – that experience for me was very different, especially kind of having to do it as quickly as I had to do well. Because covered grades – that was the last time it was going be a thing. And freshman fall was that cushion period for me.

I think a lot of growing pains started freshman year, or freshman fall particularly. But I think the biggest one would probably be geographically. Miami is not Baltimore. Baltimore is not Miami, and vice versa. It was like the culture that I felt like I was just surrounded by all the time and took for granted I really missed. So, being able to go around the corner to a Haitian bakery and get bread and hot chocolate on a Sunday morning was not a thing. The other week there was a Haitian restaurant that just opened maybe 20 minutes from campus, I wanted to cry because I'm just like: I have not had Haitian food that I haven't tried or put the pieces together in so long. So, it was sort of small things like that.

And then not being able to prioritize exploring the city like I wanted to just because I felt like I always had to be doing something related to school or I'd be behind. So, I kind of feel like I missed the chance to know the city for what it was up until very recently just because I was so focused on trying to compensate for that adjustment academically.

_A: And I think that also speaks a little bit to the imposter syndrome that you mentioned earlier._

_M: Ha! It was deep._

_A: Yeah, because you're constantly battling that, and that tells you that you can't just enjoy where you are geographically and the location and culture of Baltimore. So, it's interesting. I have a friend who also is a PhD student here and she experienced that a bit. So, you did mention the Hop-In program, so I assume that that's sort of the way you met other first-gen college students? Could you talk maybe a little bit more about that and how maybe you guys observed differences between yourselves and other students on campus?_

_M: For sure Hop-In was the very first place that we kind of touched on the idea of the identity of being first-gen. But it wasn't the central, I guess – it was in the idea that it was a diversity cohort where it kind of prioritized diversity and recruiting diverse populations and minorities who maybe in their neighborhood or region or family or
culture were the first people to go to college. But the idea of “this is an identity that you all share” was kind of implicit.

So, I know in terms of the conversations that were facilitated or made safe for us to have were around the ideas of race and what being Black at a PWI – a “predominantly white institution” like Hopkins would be like. Like anticipating that feeling, and based on where we all geographically grew up, how similar or different would that look like from our upbringings? So, kind of doing some damage control to kind of prevent the shock that may have come should an experience like that arise in our first years was kind of what our mentors harped on.

[0:30:00]

Other than that, we also talked about socioeconomic status a lot, where, since we were a lot of the first people to come to college, resources, financial aid was basically tipped the scale over for a lot of us. And we were the most supported financially here at Hopkins than we would've been at another institution that was a rival, I guess. So, kind of affirming why those identities or those facets of our identities were limiting factors for us and kind of how to overcome those being limiting factors was the focus of that program, and I could not be any more grateful that that was something that I did before I got here, because even after having done that program, I still experienced a lot of challenges. So, imagining what my perspective would have been like should I had not had these people who were in my corner because of trying to dismantle inequities that surround all of these things, is just unfathomable to me.

So, I'm very grateful that happened. So much so that when they decided, after the recent Bloomberg gift, to expand initiatives to recruit and kind of support first-gen students – the Center for Student Success that hosts the Hop-In program wanted to expand the first-generation initiatives, and I'm one of the people who is on the e-board, the executive board for the student organization branch. I also work in the center as the intern for that initiative. So, kind of being hands-on with what that change is starting to look like is a central part of other things that I do while I'm at Hopkins, and it's kind of just fueled by the fact that I would not literally survive without having had a program like that. And because Hop-In is such a cohort-based program and there's space and restrictions on staff, not everyone is able to have that contained experience of six weeks of a primer and then coming in. So, establishing a structure that works throughout the semester to kind of recruit
students and build community in a sense that kind of mirrors what Hop-In tried to do is something that I've been really passionate about and trying to actually work with other people who are interested in the same way to do.

**AS:** That's really fantastic that you've been able to find a way to give back and to –

**ME:** Pay it forward.

**AS:** Yeah, to sort of envelop yourself in the program in an even more important way. I think it's interesting the shared identity of being first-gen, and actually just saying that out loud and recognizing it – I think that goes a long way.

So, one thing we haven't really talked about that I'm really excited for you to elaborate on is academics: What are you studying? Or what are you finishing up studying at Hopkins? And maybe how did you choose that? And what do you find is valuable about it?

**ME:** Okay, the story to my major is kind of a really windy one. Just because, for the longest time, back on the imposter syndrome piece, I kind of felt like: “Hard science at Johns Hopkins University may not be me.” First, I guess, it's important to start, I'm a neuroscience major, I'm studying neuroscience. And after my time here and the experiences I've had, I want to kind of pursue I guess a tangential approach to neuroscience that would incorporate anthropology and Black studies. So, circumnavigating what looks like post-grad is a little tricky right now, but during my time here and kind of grappling with the idea that I wanted to do something that was STEM-related but also wanted to get in touch with the humanities, which is why I chose Hopkins – like fluid gen-ed / distribution format as opposed to a gen-ed where science would be the main focus, and if you're lucky you'd get something that exposes you to the humanities.

So, between my first and second year I kind of played around with the audit for a little bit. I was like, “Medicine, science, the humanities.” And then I was still kind of on the fringe of being pre-med and deciding whether or not I wanted to pursue the pre-med track while I was here as well. So, I think what swung me over to neuroscience though was my relationship with one of the mentors that I met during Hop-In. My first class was Introduction to Neuroscience. That was taught by Dr. Stewart Hendry, who's no longer faculty at Hopkins anymore, but he was the first professor I'd had here, and he was a gem. He made science feel poetic in a
way that I have yet to really experience with another professor: someone who is studying, literally day in and day out, something that's so rote and monotonous, and just to find poetry and beauty and eloquence in that was just – I had so much respect for him.

So, by the time I'd finished that first class, I really gelled with the way he taught and the way that he kind of presented material in a way that was challenging but it was a challenge that I wanted to take on, it was like: “I need to prove to you that I know what you're talking about, and I want to do it every class you're in.”

[0:35:00]

So, we kind of started that connection, and that kind of started to tilt me over. And then I took my second set of gen-ed courses, and the curiosity for the brain just, especially in the context of diversity, started to call to me more as I studied it. Then the concept of learning and memory was wicked to me. It was just like I could talk about the brain for hours and found myself willingly talking about it for hours, so by the time I was juggling between medicine, science, the humanities, and trying to find ways to minor in neuroscience – which doesn't exist at all – just like: “I just need to find a way to still include neuroscience in how I'm studying school,” so, I just committed to the major.

Sophomore year was like a trial by fire of neuroscience. I had changed – okay. So there's this – it used to be this stigma in neuro that the first real set of neuroscience courses that you take your sophomore year, which used to be called Nervous Systems I and II, you're either neuroscience for real after that or you've committed to something else like public health or something just not as intense. And he capitalized on the fact that people were very afraid of his class, and he's like, “After this, you're either a doctor or you’re public health.”

AS: Wow.

ME: And it was like – not to really just harp on the fact that I guess he felt like public health majors weren't as – it wasn't as intense as studying the ins and outs of capacitance and neurons or whatever. But by the time you went through sophomore year, if you didn't want to just run for the hills – that's what made you a neuroscience major, and I was like, “I don't know, I don't know if this is what I'm made of.” So that first semester – it wasn't ideal, but I had just gotten into the hang of studying really dense science material, and
I was like: soul would leave my body as I'm looking through lectures and trying to analyze diagrams, it was awful.

So, trying to learn how to first digest scientific material in a college level, where I've always kind of had an inclination for science or wanting to know how things work. So like, “Okay, no brainer that I'm a science major tinkering with neurons.” But, no, no, it was just like, I, every step of the way, was just so hesitant in my abilities and doubted myself and didn't really gel with it but also thought it was really cool. It was just like very lukewarm up until literally the very end. By this time, I'm still just like, ugh!

But it's just this pull that I keep coming back to just being curious about it, so I feel like the curiosity has driven me in ways that logic [laughing] – they kind of feel diametrically opposite by the time – kind of wanted to do what's in the best interest of a GPA for the long term, and that's not how it happened at all. I would take a neuro exam or a neuro class, bomb whatever exam it was, and then still come back and just be like, “I still think this is cool and I'll figure it out the next time.” And making it out by the skin of my teeth almost every intense neuro class [laughing]. And it's like, I still wanted more.

So, I kind of just stuck with the fact that even though it took every ounce of effort for me to kind of try to wrap my head around concepts or do that, the fact that I could apply it to something larger than what I was learning in a classroom and toward the purpose of the health industry, education, just so many parts of human life kind of would be centered on discoveries in neuroscience kind of really drove why I still wanted to learn about it and why I still kind of see the value in suffering for four semesters long [laughing] through gen-ed requirements and major requirements and things like that.

Because it’s like, I don't really want to use the word suffering lightly, just because I'm so grateful for the education that I've gotten here through the neuroscience department and through the people who have been affiliated with the neuroscience department, that I don't feel honestly I would have gotten anywhere else. Any other institution I attended would not have had the same kind of roundedness to the education that I got and the materials that I was exposed to, which I feel like is unmatched at Hopkins. But it definitely was an uphill battle the entire time, and still I am not at the top of the hill yet [laughs] and I think that's what I'm looking forward to.
I think that's something to be really proud of, you stuck with the challenge. That's part of what being human and making the world a better place is about, is really rising to the challenge.

I really hope so [laughs].

I think that's great. I don't know how you did it.

But you're almost at the end. [laughs] So you did mention one of your memorable professors. Are there any other professors or classes that really made an impact on you that you wanted to talk about?

Yes, actually. This kind of stemmed the idea of why I wanted to bridge the gap between aspects of social – or society and neuroscience. I was briefly considering in my jumble of deciding a major between freshman and sophomore year to pursue a social policy minor. And in the first class that I took, “Intro to Social Policy,” it was just this round of professors, and I really want to say all three professors were women, question mark? If I'm remembering correctly, there were at least two of the – no, all three of them were, yeah. So, it was really powerhouse women and trailblazing their respective – there was like sociology, economics, and political scientist, and they were all just all talking about structures of social policy and how that's affected things like redlining and gentrification. And this class in particular was the first place I kind of found a theoretical name to what I was experiencing, living and being a Haitian or a person of color in Miami. Like gentrification is something that I didn't know there was a name for until I got to this class. Redlining, yeah, of course on the other side of the train tracks it's a better neighborhood, duh. But there's a name for it and there's a systematic kind of way it's been ingrained into American society, and the implications of that and how that is worked into policy is kind of mind-blowing to me. The fact that there're people who get paid to research systems and provide research and pages and pages of research – yeah, the government is moving like we're in 1962, but there're scholars who are just years ahead of theorizing what's – it was just insane to me that people got paid to just watch stuff like that and talk to people about it.

So, one of my professors in particular, she had just started her time here at Hopkins, her name was Dr. Weaver. And it was really wild
because I have this instant connection to her because one of my mentors in high school who really kind of drew me into my blackness and centering blackness into what I wanted to pursue – her name was Dr. Weaver. And I was like, “What?!?” And she talked about passing and racism in policy. And I was like – Dr. Weaver back home was like, “It's meant to be. I need to know her” [laughs]. So, I got really excited, I met her in office hours and I was just like, “I'm in awe of everything you're doing, and this is a cosmic connection.” She probably thought I was crazy the first meeting, but I was like, “I need to know you!”

So, we briefly kind of developed a relationship throughout the class where kind of during the readings – she brought really thought-provoking points to our class. And I would stay after class for minutes, running into my new class that I should be in, just trying to talk to her, talk through material with her, which was really engaging. And I kind of really saw the worth of college in classes like that where you're face to face with someone who sits there and does this research every day. You may have come across a book or a reading from them in another class and they're in your face, it's just kind of like this academic celebrity-ism that pervades Hopkins that I'm just like never not shocked by. So, having to speak to her and talk to her about the project that she had in the works and seeing her work be featured on the internet. I was like, “She's just down the street, she's in the building over.” I just –

**AS:** “I get to talk to her every day!”

**ME:** Yeah! Every day in class for fun! So, just being in spaces like that kind of really made me grateful for the kind of things that I was learning at Hopkins. And then people like Dr. Weaver who were really excited to talk about their work and excited that students were excited. So, yeah, I think that kind of just grounded me in the fact that neuroscience is not really as theoretical as everyone wants it to be. It's really tangible, and things like social policy and neuroscience – you would think they're so opposed but the way systems are built kind of informs a lot of how people think and how people function in these systems, and the implications of that biologically are really important, and I don't think there's enough research out there for it to kind of bridge those gaps, which I hope to kind of do one day. Yeah, we'll see.

**AS:** That's awesome. That's a really neat connection that obviously took a little bit of time for you to put into words.

**ME:** Yes.
AS: We also are kind of interested in your social life. One of the things I was wondering if you could talk about is your dorm or apartment life experience at Hopkins.

[0:45:00]

I know freshmen and sophomores I believe are required to live on campus, so maybe you could talk a little bit about living situations.

ME: Aha. That's been a trip too. It's weird, because I didn't really have to think about the kind of person I was until I started living with someone else. And a lot of it – how I am according to the mood also, because me when I'm stressed is very much different from me when I'm leisurely and lounging, and to put someone else through that just took a lot of: “Oh, okay. We’re not in a vacuum.” So, freshman year I feel like was kind of smooth because I had a roommate who, neither of us knew each other, blank slate, and we kind of worked to adapt to each other, which was cool. Sophomore year, it was kind of like when I felt like I started getting a social life, because I'd lived with friends I’d made in my dorms and we decided to room together as a quad.

AS: Did you live in AMR I and II?

ME: I lived in the AMRs, AMR II, Jennings House, right there, still very foggy when I walk past [laughing]. I’m like, “Ugh, dark times.” Yeah, so that was the era when there was no air conditioning in those AMRs. It was like literally the semester right before they started air conditioning. And I remember the September that we moved, it was like 90 degrees every day, and all we had was a box fan. Awful. But I'm very grateful that freshman have AC now [laughing]. But friends who were in houses adjacent – we'd socialize a lot, and then that's how I ended up meeting my sophomore year roommates.

I also joined a sorority in my sophomore year, which was the bulk of my fall semester – just kind of being initiated and just kind of learning about what that new role meant for me. Our chapter's really small, and we basically had to kind of do the chapter operations of like someone – a larger chapter that was running was like 12 or 15 people. At its greatest, our chapter was made up of 10 people all together, but right now we're at about 7 or 8, with the majority of us being seniors, and two of our members being the only ones left. So, that has been a big part of my social life since my sophomore year.
And then junior and this year actually I feel like I gained a different aspect of being social, which revolved around being an adult and being homey and having responsibilities and paying bills. It was really a weird concept for me to adapt to that I would not eat unless I fed myself; and not only fed myself, I would not eat unless I went to the grocery store.

AS: Right, there’s a lot of steps.

ME: Yeah! There's a lot of – it was very much different when I was living at home and there was just always pasta and always something in the fridge that I can shake together. That's fine, I can do that...but the idea of budgeting grocery money for this week, then making sure I get to Giant or Safeway, and then making sure I cook all the food before it goes bad – it was just so many intermediaries that I just had never thought about up until I started living on my own. So, I'm a big fan of brunches. I do brunch a lot. So, a lot of my friends – we just come together and do dinners a lot of the time. I love to socialize over food, so that's kind of been the bulk of my social life. I love to socialize about music, so, from my freshman year up until now, I've probably been to about 20 to 40 concerts.

AS: That's awesome.

ME: It’s very expensive [laughs].

AS: That's your extracurricular budget or something...

ME: That is my extracurricular activity not budgeted sometimes, very impulsive other times. But I’ve been to a lot of concerts, I go to a lot of music festivals, a lot of the connections that I've made in my social circles have started off because of music and through music. So that is kind of my one great equalizer. I'm part of a lot of different niche friend groups because of the music taste that I have, so, that's really interesting to kind of think about now at this point. But, yeah, music has been a central part of my identity here. I remember when I made my list of schools in my spreadsheets, my priority was cities that were big enough to be concert stops for really big venues or cities that had really intimate venues that were just small coffee house open mic type thing.

[0:50:00]
So, Baltimore's the best of both worlds because we're right outside of D.C., so if someone big is coming they're probably going be in D.C., and if someone mid-range is coming, they're going be in Baltimore. It was just the best place I probably could've moved besides maybe New York or Boston, for the goal of going to concerts.

*AS:* I see what your motivation was… [*both laugh*].

*ME:* Yes! You have to be there. The ambiance of a big city! Anyway. So, I've been to a lot of concerts. I started an inventory the other day, which is why I can confidently say 20 to 40. Going through the artists, I was like, “I spent a lot of money on concerts these four years!” [*both laugh*]. But, I think they've always come at a very opportune time, when I'm about to be really burnt out from school or just: I’m about to have five exams, I need something to look forward to, there's a concert about to be in three weeks so I need to get all my stuff together before two weeks in advance so I can fully prep and drown myself in all the albums so I know all the words! So, having something that central to look forward to as a catharsis event was just very very important to how I stayed afloat in Hopkins for as long as I did. I'm also a big fan of the slam poetry, coffee house scene where jazz nights and open bands – that's what I've been doing for a bit too.

*AS:* Do you know Kondwani Fidel?

*ME:* I do not.

*AS:* He's a local Baltimore poet who performs live, and you should look him up.

*ME:* Nice.

*AS:* I mean, I think you can put that budget under your mental health when you are doing your budgeting.

*ME:* Honestly, very open [*laughs*].

*AS:* I mean, I really do believe in the power of music, so I think that's awesome.

*ME:* I agree.

*AS:* That you sort of made that connection. So, you did talk about your sorority a little bit. Are there any other groups or clubs that you
were a part of that you'd like to talk about? And then, also I'll just throw this in there too, have you had any internships or professional experiences that you want to talk about?

**ME:**

Sure. My sorority has been the bulk of my social life or extracurricular life for a really long time just because it was really demanding of my full attention. But I was involved in and out through the MERIT program, which when I was – it was like this bridge – not this bridge program, it kind of mirrored the programs that I was in in high school where they showed you interns or professionals from higher education and the medical fields to kind of give you a sampler. So, it's a nonprofit in Baltimore that kind of partners with Hopkins students as volunteers and teachers’ assistants, so, for about a semester and a half, I was volunteering with MERIT full-time.

Every Saturday I'd go with a class of local high school students who were accepted into the program to be their TA for – I think it was a college etiquette class – and then the semester after that it was a leadership development course where they kind of learned how to interview and set up LinkedIn profiles. And I was like, “I did not know how to do that until freshman year.” So, it was a very valuable program to kind of show them what people who were on the other side of where they want to be at look like, and that they can look like them. So, that was really valuable for me, just because I knew that that was something that was valuable for when I was making my decisions to kind of see someone in a place that I wanted to be at that I kind of identified with.

And so, throughout the program it was kind of intertwined that we would help them with college prep. So, a lot of financial aid and considering scholarships and writing their essays and editing their essays we helped a lot with as TAs, regardless of the class that we were part of. So, that was really important to me for a really long time. For the time being or afterwards, I started getting more involved with building the skeleton of what the “I'M FIRST” Student Organization looks like. So, it is the first-generation – or the student organization / community-building piece of the FLI Network, which is that newer initiative to kind of support students who are first-generation or limited-income on campus. So, throughout the past year I'd say, the president and I have kind of been working with the directors of the Center for Student Success to kind of look for a vision for what a first-gen club would look like in a way that's informal, but also affirming, but also provides resources, but also doesn't feel really rote, but also feels really warm, like just what the sweet spot is to kind of encourage
students in the way that we felt encouraged in Hop-In. So, that has been another thing that I do.

I've also had a lot of jobs [laughs] since I've been here. I've worked a lot since I've been here, so, a limiting factor to all the clubs that I wish I could have joined was limited by the fact that I had to make up for my time by working.

[0:55:00]

And most recently – it's really crazy that you said you mentioned that you saw the power of music in my life, because I'm doing a research project right now that's wholly funded by the KSAS, the Office of Arts and Sciences, that I'm looking to see whether a music intervention works for people who have Alzheimer’s disease. So, I'm working with a geriatric psychiatrist at Bayview who – at the end of this year, hopefully – I'll be able to either conclusively say it does or it doesn't work. But the goal was to kind of make playlists for people who, based on their former music preferences, would listen to for a month – and then see if their symptoms or the major mood symptoms, the major cognitive symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease kind of wane a little bit, and, if they do, to what degree. If they do, is there stratification by race?

So, that's been the central point of what I've been trying to do recently. And if all goes well, that can matriculate into something that’s a project that's shared at a conference and kind of builds up the portfolio that I want to use to apply to graduate school in the future.

AS: That sounds amazing. That's such a neat and worthy experiment, I guess? That's amazing. So, obviously you probably worked over summers and breaks.

ME: I did.

AS: But are there any other things that you did during summers or breaks away from school that you want to talk about? Maybe if you went home, did you see your family during that time?

ME: Yeah. So, the majority of my summers, with the exception of this most recent one where I started my research project, I spent at home. Just because it was the most cost-effective thing to do. But being at home is also when I worked and got my first – I was going say “big-person job.” Just because it was not in the context of: “Oh, she's a high school intern; she's looking.” I was actually a – corporate America was eating me alive – great time.
But what I did basically was this private learning company has this method that they use that recruits cognitive behavioral – not therapy – but also just like the practices to kind of teach people of all ages who either have dyslexia or developmental learning disabilities to read. So, I was trained for about three weeks in the program and the instruction for two of them. One was reading comprehension, the other was – how do you say? – phonetics, like learning to read, the structure of words, the other one was a bigger picture, like “What's the main idea?” kind of thing.

So, being trained in that instruction and then working all the summers basically full time until I came back to school. In that time though, it was really kind of neat to see that it was an application of neuroscience in a sense, because they use findings from research papers and Georgetown articles that I had read in my cog-neuro class literally the semester before I got the job. I was like, “This is wicked. They do teach that” – it was just a very full-circle moment for me when I got that job. But working in the industry where I got to work with kids a lot and be in a teacher role and kind of seeing what that looks like and just day in and day out, making this connection, and actually seeing the progress that people have when you put neuroscience to use – it’s mind-blowing, it was really beautiful to see.

But it also really helped that I was in Miami doing it. So, the branch was back home and they have I guess regions or buildings across the country – it's a diverse learning force – and so there was a chance that I almost also got to work through the same school here, or the same program here in Baltimore, or nearby. But it just never ended up working out because they're a little far out and I don't have transportation that's not shuttles and public transit.

But during the summer, when I worked there full-time, it was a really dynamic space just because a lot of the other teachers and instructors were relatively young and in their middle age, so I kind of was primed to be an adult when I was 19 [laughs] and kind of being at happy hour with people who were old enough to be there but not really just because we couldn't drink and just sitting there like, “Okay, I'm an adult, but not really.” So that was a nice taste of what work life would be, so I did that full-time for two summers.

My favorite part was the kids. They were just gems. And between week one and week seven or eight – because it's around six or seven weeks that the full instruction is going on – they're just so attached. It's like, “Oh, Ms. M.E., I'm never going come back here
again,” or “Ms. M.E. can we have lunch?” so knowing that people and children were kind of the central of it. And then the semester afterward I ended up doing research for a little bit during the semester with kids and kind of using the same kind of skills that I would have been able to run tests on children. And I was like, “The kids, I do love the kids!” [laughs]. So that was my two summers, and I did that full time for the most part.

And then the second summer, or my sophomore summer, I also did an observer-ship through the University of Miami’s neurology department where I sat in and shadowed another neuropsychiatrist who worked with Parkinson’s patients. And their work in particular was trying to see – to screen Parkinson's patients for a device that they would put in to kind of implant or abate their tremors. So, the neuropsychiatrist that I would be working with would be running those tests to see and then running back to have a meeting with the team of doctors and medical students about whether or not they think this person needs the device or not. So, I did that for about four weeks. And that was a really cool experience too, just because I got to see – be in the board room and be in the space where people were making the medical decisions about someone after having seen them perform an exam. It’s like, I saw that summer the medical aspect of neuroscience and then also the very corporate / learning, educational aspect of it.

It kind of helped sway whether or not I wanted to do corporate America for a bit and do neuroscience and health care. And I ultimately decided: clinical research is kind of closer to what I want to do, so that's basically what my summers were, just dry runs for adulthood. Can I be a functioning adult, by myself, by the time I'm graduated? To be determined. I have one more summer left to figure it out [both laugh].

AS: Right. That's pretty amazing to have that real-world application and to be able to see maybe which genre or –

ME: Very much a Robert Frost rendition of “Two woods diverged – yellow wood” kind of thing, whatever he said [both laugh].

AS: Okay, so, what was your support system like when you were in college?

ME: This is very multifaceted. We’ll start there. But Hop-In and the mentors that I met through Hop-In were my primary set of – I call them “rant partners.” I would just go into anyone's office who was
available and just rant and have an existential crisis every couple weeks. But another large part of my support system was Dr. Hendry and going into his office hours, sometimes for just: “explain every single thing he explained in his lecture.” The other time was just also, “I have no idea what's going on with anything in my life.” [Both laugh]. So, the duality of that was also – I was really grateful for a little bit before he had left.

My parents – I've really had a closer connection to my parents. Distance really made the heart grow fonder on both sides when I moved, just because we would talk to each other when we didn't really have to. I yearned to hear my mom's voice, and I would call her, like, “Hey, just want to – you can talk. I'll just listen.” So, she’d tell me a story or something about her day, and that would probably be the highlight of doing that. And I remember even at times where I’m leaving the library at midnight and just exhausted, I’d call my dad and he’d be like, “All right, you got it! You have a semester and a half left, or two semesters left.” Like, “Okay, dad, I don't know what I'm doing,” and I'm just crying at midnight, and he's just picking up the phone and he's just listening and he's just there, and that was very important to me for a really long time too.

Just like my home community. Whenever I’d be back home, everyone who’s at our church or in my high school would ask my parents for me, and when I'd go home I’d come see a lot of my teachers that – I have such a close relationship to at least four or five of my high school teachers just because they've kept up and reached out and was like, “Hey, how's college? Is there anything you need? How can I support you in a way that I can?” Being that open for someone when you didn't really have to; this relationship could've stopped when I graduated. But they have – my teachers and my mentors in high school – have always been really supportive.

Like my group of friends here has been an anchor that I really just would not – I would not still be here if I didn't meet the people that I met. In terms of other support systems, I’ve recently started using external support like the counseling center, and trying to unpack a lot of things that I feel like hindered my experience or the fullness of my experience here just because I didn't get in touch with them sooner. So, professional help like that has also been really helpful, and also even learning this senior year / post-grad transition and what that's going look like.

Hmm, support. There’s just like the Office of Student Support, yeah, they have been there [laughs]. They've been very helpful.
Especially I remember in junior year when things started to get tumultuous with my dad’s health and that happening, as soon as I realized that that was a resource, they were always just like so receptive and ready to help. And even in this transition when my dad recently passed, they were the reason why I was able to go home the same day I found out. So, just different institutional supports but also just through the people who cared enough to invest in my wellbeing through being here at Hopkins and in Baltimore in general has been really – again, I would not be here without it.

[1:05:00]

AS: Yeah, that's a testament to them really not just doing their jobs but going above and beyond to sort of support you.

ME: Of course.

AS: That's great.

One of the questions, too, which I think you spoke a little bit about, but if you feel like elaborating, is about Hopkins' support for first-gen students and FLI initiatives, I guess. So, you did mention the Hop-In program. Are there any other specific initiatives that you found helpful? And then if you have – I think you're actually already doing this, but if you have any suggestions for how the university could increase its support or what’s a practical or tangible way that you feel is something that they can change or add to the programming.

ME: Right. Besides Hop-In, I think there're a lot of other cohort-based programs that're more loose I guess, they’re less structured, and the intention is not to introduce you to resources and people, but to kind of give you a community. So, MAP is a program that does that here. JUMP, in particular, which is another structured cohort program but for pre-health professions, it kind of gives that same support and access to resources and community aspect that I guess is a corollary to Hop-In but more specific about pre-med and tailoring the pre-med experience for a person of color at Hopkins.

There’s a recent program that has been started by the Office of Academic Advising that I was for a little bit involved with. It's called HULA. So they pair you with a first-gen mentor during the summer to kind of help you navigate your first schedule and kind of your study habits, so they are with you throughout I want to say the first semester of the first year, like you're, between each semester, meeting with them and checking in sort of like – what is
that called? What is that other program? Study consulting. Yes, so, it's sort of like a built-in study consultant/student academic advisor that they're doing. And they're really trying to recruit first-gen and kind of limited-income students who have done that experience to kind of be mentors, so, that was really cool.

But in general, I'm just really happy that the lens has been focusing on FLI students and the FLI identity and FLI resources. Even to the extent of the counseling center offering a discussion/therapy group for FLI-identifying students – I think is very valuable. The school in general has been taking a lot of steps in the right direction, and the people who are kind of creating these programs with FLI students in mind have been an asset to the diversity that Hopkins has been touting for a really long time. They're actually kind of just showing you the proof in the pudding with initiatives like this, so, I'm kind of happy to be on the end to have seen it start as opposed to hearing about it as an alumni and being one of the first few students to both benefit from it and kind of set the infrastructure for students to come.

AS: Yeah, and I think that's ultimately one of my biggest takeaways from hearing you speak is – you also contributing to the structure and dynamic of those programs – because without your voices as first gens and FLI students, you're not going to be able to sort of make the programs what you need –

ME: What they need to be…

AS: – unless you're actually listening to the people that you're serving. So, I think that's really important. We talked a little bit about living situation and also your extracurriculars. But are there any other things that you want to talk about of your life in Baltimore, what your experience was like living here in the city? Were there any historic moments that happened while you were here? If you want to reflect on that.

ME: The only thing I think of when you say history is freshman year when Donald Trump got elected and it was just like, it's collective mourning [laughs].

AS: Collective mourning, okay.

ME: Oh my god. No, that was awful. I feel like that was the most significant I guess national historic event, like that 2016 elections, I vividly remember being in my dorm the night of the election and being with friends we had just met and sobbing [both laugh].
“Why is this man in office? What happened? What do we do?” And then the next day I think I had a chemistry class and she just e-mailed; she's like, “I understand. Class is canceled for the day. We're going try again Wednesday” [both laugh]. And that happened while I was here, and I think that next day everyone wore black, everyone I saw, all my friends were just donned in black, I was in sweats, I was like, “I don't – don't talk to me.”

[1:10:00] And then I remember next door, someone two doors down in my dorm at AMRs had purposely propped their door open because they had a cutout of Donald Trump and just like as you passed – I was like, “No! Get out!”

AS: That's terrible.

ME: I exploded on this man. I was like, “Sir, this is terrorism.” [laughing]. And everyone else in the dorm was just coming out and peeking in the door to see what the rant was, I was like, “Rip it up or I will rip it for you!” Just ultimately ready to get violent, and I was like, “No.” [both laugh].

AS: Was he trolling everyone or was it serious?

ME: I really hope he was trolling them because all of his other friends – I was like, “You can't be serious. There are people sobbing two rooms down. Stop.” But, anyway., that happened. But in terms of other things that I feel like I was really grateful to be in Baltimore for, I met a lot of people who were natives of Baltimore, my current roommate is actually – she grew up like 15 minutes from here, and her family is around here, so, learning the city through people who were natives was really cool.

I really wish by the time that I had realized that excursions were a really big part of what was important to me mental-health-wise that I had kind of explored the city earlier. So, going to an obscure taco shop in Patterson Park because I'm craving authentic tacos and I'm not in Miami, so, finding that. And then going to the art museum just to spend the day in art and taking the MARC to D.C. like I did yesterday for a book club. Things like that to kind of enrich outside life I feel like I didn’t get into soon enough but I'm grateful that I started doing for a really long time.

What is living in Baltimore like?
I wonder too – I know you mentioned –

I've never critically reflected.

Yeah, well, I know you mentioned blackness in general, and I wonder if maybe you could talk about that dynamic, because it's very different being from Haiti and being from Baltimore.

Yeah, I think, in a lot of ways, from the Black natives that I met here in Baltimore, our stories are kind of parallel, just because of how I grew up in Miami. So, Miami's urban dynamic is a lot similar to Baltimore's urban dynamic, especially with the relationship with the police and community preservation in the same, it's the same in neo-Haitian communities in Miami, so that was cool to watch or see the parallels of. But in terms of blackness specifically, back to that visceral connection to – I moved to Baltimore because there were Black people here – Nina Simone lived here for a bit, that's insane to me! Zora Neale Hurston, who's one of my intellectual, academic idols, walked down the Inner Harbor…Edgar Allan Poe, who's my favorite of all time, breathed here…the air that Baltimore produces Edgar Allan Poe breathed, so, I was in awe.

My senior year, one of my closest friends gave me an anthology of Edgar Allan Poe poems, and that's like framed on my wall next to all of my other Baltimore – just the culture and I guess the intellectual culture that was in Baltimore and the creation of culture itself that's always been centered in – something's in the water in Baltimore. And it's really beautiful about prioritizing blackness and empowering blackness. Being Black in Baltimore – it’s painfully beautiful in a sense because of all the other dynamics that kind of tarnish that I guess “experience.” But it's just the art that comes from Baltimore and being Black in Baltimore, the music that comes from here – I could talk about it forever.

But in terms of just being Black in Baltimore, it kind of opened my eyes to the politics of blackness too. Just because I've never been, as first-hand, exposed to Black Lives Matter, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Baltimore riot⁴ was right before I got here, so, the aftershocks of that still were throughout the city when I first moved.

So I guess being Black in Baltimore now just kind of makes me – it put a lens on my blackness that I didn’t kind of know existed, in the sense that being here was the first time I’ve met other Black

---

³ M.E. referenced the protests in 2015 that erupted in Baltimore after Freddie Gray’s death.
people who weren't African American too. My first time meeting someone who was from any part of the African continent that's not Caribbean or just Black was in Baltimore, and being here and still realizing that, regardless of how broadly cultured and varying our cultures are, we're still Black here in this space collectively was just mind-blowing to me. So that experience has been – I feel like I'm still experiencing that and kind of absorbing that experience for what it is to kind of not be able to fully reflect on that experience.

[1:15:00]

But, I think through what I've been in so far, in my experiences with blackness, it's kind of been like a homecoming in a sense, where: okay, I've never been to Baltimore before and it feels like home as soon as I'm here because of all the greats and all the people who've absorbed the city as their own as well.

AS: Yeah, that's beautiful, thank you.

ME: Thank you.

AS: So, life after Hopkins…

[Both laugh]

AS: Do you have any plans?

ME: It's till very scary.

AS: It's a little intimidating, but it can be theoretical.

ME: Yes. I'm learning to be less afraid of that question as the time flies right next to me. We're in March [laughs]. Graduation is May. So that's – ah, that's so crazy to me. Even in this interview, it feels so strange to be reflecting on four years' worth of time. Just because it hasn't felt like four years, it's just felt like one long clump. And I was talking about this to my roommate last night about how college is literally a social experiment. There is no other social construct that can mirror what college does for you anywhere else. What else is there? A sabbatical? I don't know.

It's just like, we all come from different places, we leave our home bases to be in this secluded pod where we just interact with each other for four years, and it's just a different connection of – and then you leave and you never have an experience like that again.
There’s nothing that looks like college after this. And I'm just like, “What have I been doing for four years?” [both laugh]. But I feel like it's been helpful in kind of informing what I want to do after this, and I feel like I never want to leave school.

I really want to pursue higher education and doing research and learning in neuroscience and how that applies to anthropology specifically. So, kind of elaborating on my knowledge of anthropological methods, just because that was not as extensive in my time in undergrad, so either finding programs to do that or like trying to find a way that I can incorporate it as soon as I get admitted to a PhD program that I plan to pursue in a bit of time. I definitely intend to take a break from school for a bit just because I've been “foot on the gas” since like seven [laughing]. So, I’m definitely taking a break for a bit to kind of explore being a person and what that looks like outside of school, and I think the biggest theme for this year for me especially was trying to figure out who I am without the identity that I've built through school. Like I've harped on that, and being in school was the bulk of my social life, the bulk of my academic life: everything else just revolved around either school or my involvement in my community. So, learning to know me as me and not as the student is something I look forward to after I graduate.

Let's see. What else? I really look forward to having free time [laughs]. Like, I look forward to actually not leaving my house until noon because I've made breakfast and cleaned and made my bed and not just scrambling to make it to my 10:00 AM. I really look forward to just lounging.

But, long term, I really want to be traveling or doing research that kind of connects the ideas of diversity in neuroscience to blackness, so hopefully maybe traveling across the diaspora or a couple sites in the diaspora to perform research or maybe be involved in a project in the future….so that's what I want to do.

*AS:* It sounds great. It doesn't have to be set in stone, I think that's –

*ME:* That's what I'm also realizing. Yeah, coming from a place where I had everything figured out, especially since I was basically pre-med out of the womb, and high school did all these things that put me on such a set path to being pre-med, and then kind of destroying that identity and being like, “Hey, I don't really know if I want to do this anymore.” And being open to that flow has been really scary, but, I think it was honestly one of the most
empowering things I've done since, yeah, moving here on my own [laughs].

AS: Yeah, those'll be the pillars of your experience. Yeah, I think you're going to do well whatever you end up doing, so.

ME: Thank you.

AS: In general, do you feel like you would recommend Hopkins to other first-gen, FLI students? And is there any piece of advice that you would give them if they started a journey here?

ME: Oh, honestly, if you asked me the same question maybe a year and a half ago, I would say no.

[1:20:00]

AS: Interesting.

ME: Just because I really wasn't feeling supported in the way that I felt like was what I needed support in. So, at one point where I was struggling academically and not really understanding why I was doing so badly considering I put all this work in, and not acknowledging the fact that I was burnt out – it was stress, it wasn't ineptitude, it wasn't just needing accommodations.

I had one professor at one point recommend that I go see disabilities just because I was like, “I'm not really – this is not gelling with me and I just don't understand why it is but I'm doing all these efforts.” They're like, “So maybe you should probably get tested.” I was like –

AS: That's a tough moment.

ME: The eye twitch – I don't know. If I could replicate that moment and make it a cartoon, it's just me trying to keep the straightest face possible with one eye just uncontrollably twitching just because of how uncomfortable that made me. I was like, “I learned English in six months and went to gifted, miss. I'm not dumb” [laughing]. It was just – I felt like I had so much to prove the entire time, and the underdog had started to become a narrative that I was too comfortable identifying with…and so, because I was like, “Okay, no one is going tell me how to do this. It's not like I can call up my mom and just be like, ‘Hey, this professor just tried me.’” She's just going be like, “Well, maybe you do need to go get tested” [laughing]. It was just like, I didn't have a precedent for kind of
experiencing what burnout was, or kind of understanding that burnout seeps into everything.

The way I feel like I needed to be supported did not exist. And it wasn’t until I started speaking to people who work through the CSS and people who I could harp back on my Hop-In mentors or the people I met through Hop-In a lot, and they’re just like, “Yeah, so you’re stressed. This is not anything that has anything to do with your ability to perform. You're not leaving. You're not transferring. You're stressed. Take a break. This is burnout.”

But, since then, and after knowing that people have been actively trying to create something that seems to encompass and account for that when students make this transition, I feel like knowing that has existed and knowing first-hand how active people are in building that space for people, and also even seeing the beginnings of that effect on students and how there's freshman who we took to our first ever pre-orientation program who was like, “I would not have friends if I didn't go to this program” – just things like that where I'm seeing the ripple of; “Wow, this is exactly how I felt when I made these friends.” I'm so happy that there's someone who, without Hop-In, can experience that kind of bond and connection and vulnerability through their identities.

So, in terms of advice, I'd probably say hm, “unroll scroll.” I don't know. I just have a lot of just gems I feel like people need to start considering when they make a decision that involves so many changes at one time, especially through the lens of being first-gen.

Being a first-gen and going to a school in Maryland when you're from Maryland is one thing, you can go home, you can drive home. You can go back to your own neighborhood.

AS: Right, it's easier.

ME: Right. You can go get a pizza from your favorite spot and just eat your feelings maybe sometimes if you want to. But you’re a first-gen, as a college student, you're first-gen as an immigrant, you're also first-gen as someone who lives nine states away – there is just this isolation that is just so sobering that I feel like if that is someone else’s experience that they find as many outlets as possible or things that kind of ground them in a sense.

So, for me it was music. For me, it was not food because we can't find it, but for me it was also just making the active effort to keep the connections that reminded me of home. So, I’d say prioritize that, like if you need to call a best friend from home, set up your
calendar to afford a two-hour FaceTime, I have done that in the past where I'm just like, “These past two hours I'm FaceTiming until midnight and that's it. I'm not doing any more work.”

Other things I'd probably say is – I'm still learning to do this so I don't really – I really hate giving advice that I can't follow or haven't followed before… but, asking for help. I’ve really struggled with that, especially being tied to my identify of first-gen, and learning how to do my parents’ taxes and learning how to file my financial aid on my own, and applying to magnet school when I was nine and just made my mom sign the form, and I was just like, “Hey, mom, just sign this. It’ll be fine.”

[1:25:00]

Things like that have just been so ingrained in me doing it myself that by the time where I was here, there was not enough hands for me to do all the things myself. And reaching out and saying, “Hey, I'm burnt out.” Even accepting the fact that someone told me I was burnt out. I was like, “What do you mean, burnout? I’m doing all the things, I'm doing fine.” With like three cups of espresso in my hand and the snappiness that comes with caffeine overdose, I guess. But just the fact that – I don't know…

It was like: know what your limits are, and be realistic with yourself about what your limits are, and don't be ashamed of the fact that that is your limit. Because for a long time for me, outside of the imposter syndrome, there was a really looming self-doubt and shame around not being able to do the same thing that everyone else was doing, without kind of realizing or acknowledging the really big elephant in the room was the fact that I’m not from the same place that these people are from. And just accepting that for what it was as opposed to making that a crutch for me was something that I had to really work through, especially my first couple semesters getting adjusted and kind of being in class and being like, “This makes sense on paper, so this exam is not computing. My score on this exam does not match what I thought I understood.”

Even to the point where there're people who were in organic chemistry in 12th grade. I'm like, “Bro, I couldn't tell you what an atom was in” – I took AP chem just because it looked nice. I couldn’t tell you what general chemistry looked like in high school. But it was just like: “How are you in organic and doing a lab and you have a PI? You knew what a PI is before you got here?” Shaking. Just the fact that I was almost ashamed in a sense.
I was like, “How do I not know?” With the exception of PI, because I had the opportunity to do a bit of research before I got here, I was like…culture shock in the most absurd way. It was very much *Twilight Zone* by the time semesters one through three were – the new normal, I’, trying to break the simulation kind of thing. Yeah, it was tough.

So, I'd kind of extend the – to not be too long-winded about that, just acknowledging that because you're different does not mean you're “less-than.” And just harping on the fact that it's never too late for you to catch up. It's never too late for you to kind of start over also. It's also never too late for you to pick up and continue, which is something I'm also working on. So, yeah, just keep going. Yeah.

*AS:* That's awesome, I think it’s key: we're all works in progress. Yeah. So, finally, after all this time, after these years that seem to have flown by, is there a particular way you would summarize your time at Hopkins? Or is there a final note that you want to put on your experience here?

*ME:* Wow, that's –

*AS:* This is the toughest question.

*ME:* Wow, that's so poignant! I don't want to be too corny, but I also don't want to be too trite. Oh, gosh, this is a lot of pressure. I'm getting really flustered just because this interview and the recent couple weeks has been the first time, I'm critically reflecting on my time here, what that's been like.

*AS:* Yeah, and the time is seemingly so short that you will be here.

*ME:* Yeah, it’s so wild. This feels like such a simulation, okay, let me see.

Wow. I think I really want to say: you are always going be where you’re meant to be. Regardless of what the present feels like and what the past has kind of led you to believe, wherever you are in this exact space and time is exactly where you need to be to learn a lesson, or not even learn some monumental lesson that changes the direction of your life, just everything that you’re in at that specific moment in time is meant to add something to your narrative, and it’s up to you whether or not you acknowledge that for what it is or you make the best of that for what it is.
Yeah. And one of my closest friends, a favorite quote of hers when she went here – she has just graduated and started her first year of her PhD program, every day on her mirror she wrote in permanent marker, “What I want is already mine.” And that was the hardest thing for me to – I was like, “What do you mean? What are you working for then? What am I doing?” But I think beyond what I was really superficially interpreting it as, it was more like the fact that I’m here at Johns Hopkins and being where I am, and doing what I’m doing, I’m living the truth that I feel like I see for myself. I’m making the steps to live in that truth. So it was more like: yeah, where you are is where you're meant to be…and if you found yourself here, you’re supposed to be.

AS: That’s very well spoken.

[1:30:00]

ME: Thank you.

AS: So, I just want to thank you for interviewing with us today. We're at the end of our questions here. I’d also like to give you the opportunity to add anything else that we didn’t talk about, or if there’s any other sort of endpoint that you would like to put on the interview, I’ll give you that opportunity now.

ME: Oh, cool. I don't know, I feel like that's the harder part of the question: what do I want to end on?

AS: It's also okay to just end here, we have talked about a lot of things.

ME: We have.

AS: I like to open the question because if there's a question that I didn't ask or an area where we didn't get to expand upon, that maybe you did want to…

ME: Yeah, for me, especially around everything that's been happening at this particular moment in my life, I really am just in awe of how far someone with my name has come. So, I know I briefly mentioned that my dad had passed recently, but my dad was the hardest-working man I knew. He worked when he was 13 to put himself through elementary school by raising a farm, selling produce on a plot of land. From having someone who's not even that far removed in my family to come here, make a living for themselves, make enough of a living to be able to see their daughter off into college – and even though he won't see me walk
the stage, the fact that somebody like that made it to the fact that their daughter is somewhere here is like unfathomable to me. So, I'm really grateful. Yeah, I'm very happy.

*AS:* Well, thank you very much for that.

*ME:* Thank you. Oh, I didn't mean to cry.

[End of Audio]