

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
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“AD”

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

March 6, 2020

Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

AD: "AD"

KD: Kristen Diehl (KD)

Date: March 6, 2020¹

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KD: This is Kristen Diehl, here with AD, on March 6, 2020, at the Eisenhower Library for the first-generation college student oral histories. Our first question for you is: where were you born? And could you tell me a little bit about your family?

AD: Sure. I was born in Paramount, California, which is a small city just outside of Los Angeles. I was raised in a two-parent household. I'm the youngest of six siblings. My mother worked as a small-time child-care worker for most of my life. My father worked a lot of odd jobs here and there, just cycling through a lot of manual labor, for the most part. My oldest brother is ten years my senior. And I have four other – no three other brothers outside of that. I have one sister. Yeah, that math adds up. And I'm the youngest of all of them. I think I mentioned that. So, for the most part, it was me and three of my other brothers under one roof. It's probably important that I mention that I have no full-blooded siblings. Those are all half-siblings. Either with a different mother, a different father.

But we grew up – so even though I was born in Paramount, California, I've lived in Los Angeles my whole life. More specifically, South Central. So I grew up around violence here and there. It didn't really bother me that much growing up. Just because it's all that I knew. I considered it really normal. So it wasn't really until maybe high school when I started going to school at another district outside of LA that I really started to piece together: "Wow, it didn't really have to be that way."

But I think I had a really happy childhood growing up. Even though whenever I talk to my parents about it now they always

¹ The University Archives wants to acknowledge that the interviews conducted with first-generation college students in March 2020 took place just before JHU campuses closed due to a growing pandemic (COVID-19). These interviews represent students' reflections on their time at JHU prior to having to make many adjustments, including completing their last semester of college online.

say, "Oh, we were very poor; we always struggled to make ends meet," I never really felt that way. I never felt poor. I was always happy to be around family, be around siblings. I had a lotta cousins growing up. I mean, of course it varied as more people were born. But I think right now, at 22 years old, I think I have 19 different cousins. So: big family. Really interconnected. Everyone's very loyal, respectful of each other when they can be, outside the family dispute that comes up every now and then. But, no, I really enjoyed time with my family.

I'd say now things have kind of changed. Well, more than kinda. Back in 2017, my sister was shot and killed at a party. And that had a really big impact on the family. I was in college at the time. I think I was a sophomore here at Hopkins. And of course it was real sad. It still is sad, going through kind of the waves of grief that come with a death in the family. But I think that if there's any silver lining in any of that madness, I think it kinda brought us closer. I think we had been drifting apart for a while, myself going to college, my brother joining the Marines, my two other brothers starting families of their own. It really just kinda brought back to a focus of: appreciate what you have while you can. Because it never really lasts. So I think we're all kind of more appreciative of each other's company now because of that. If that makes any sense.

And outside of that, I have seven nieces and nephews that I'm all very grateful to be an uncle to. They're happy to see me. I'm happy to see them. I like talking to them. I like listening to music with them. I like playing with them. And that's always a ton of fun.

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Let's see. What else can I say about family life?

KD: Does most of your family still live in South Central LA?

AD: Oh, yes. Very much. Very localized.

KD: Are you kind of one of the only people who has left in a substantial way?

AD: Yes. The first time I really left California was at the age of 15. I spent a night with an uncle in Arizona years before I was a teenager, but this was actually for my parents' wedding. They'd been together for 20 years but they weren't married until 2015. Which would've made me 17 at the time. But they were married in 2015. And we went to Nevada, Las Vegas, to go celebrate the

wedding. That was a ton of fun. But, yeah, everyone's back in California. If I had to put a number to it, I'd say everyone including aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins – we all probably live maybe within a 10, 15-mile radius of each other.

KD: Did your parents grow up there as well?

AD: Yes. My father was born in Santa Monica and my mother was born in Torrance, California, which are both I think part of Los Angeles County.

KD: You spoke a little bit about their professions, their occupations. Could you speak to their educations at all?

AD: Yeah. Sure. My father was a high school dropout and my mother graduated high school but, in her words, she said she didn't deserve it. She said she missed a lotta classes and that after begging some teachers she got a pity graduation – is how she described it. But, yeah, grandparents – I think on my father's side nothing past high school if that. On my mother's side, I know my grandfather was a high school dropout. And I think my maternal grandmother might have graduated high school. I'm not sure. But no college experience whatsoever.

KD: You've spoken about where you're from a little bit. Could you elaborate on kind of the area you grew up in, what it was like growing up in South Central LA? You said you enjoyed your childhood.

AD: Yeah. I attribute a lot of my best memories during my childhood to my parents, just doing stuff with them. Also I think it helped so much that we – I mean, that's also a story I like to explain. Just 'cause I think it's pretty significant to my youth. But I love the house that we lived in. It had a huge backyard. We had a tire swing. I think when I was nine we had a playground installed. Tons of animals. We had dogs. We had rabbits. We had chickens. We had quails. We had a tortoise at one point, like a huge desert tortoise just roaming through the backyard. So there was always something to do. We had a really crummy basketball court installed in the back. Tons of trees going along the perimeter that I remember me and my brothers all would make a challenge: "All right. The ground's lava. Climb the trees going from one to the other. Don't touch the ground."

It was great. We had a garden. I remember eating cherry tomatoes during the summer along with summer grapes. I don't know. I

mean, that's probably pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things. But I look back and that's the stuff that I really remember about growing up in LA. I mean, yeah, I remember waking up to gunshots. I remember finding bullet casings on the streets. I remember blood stains on the sidewalk. But all of that just seems so small when compared to some of the stuff that I actually enjoyed about growing up.

KD: Thank you. You mentioned going to high school outside of LA. Could you speak about your high school experience?

AD: I think it's pretty important for me to say that I was initially going to school in Compton Unified School District. So even though we lived in South Central, we lived just across the street from Compton, California, which is actually where most of my family lived at the time anyway. But going there, I also had a few brothers in high school at the time that were also in Compton Unified. And they were jumped at a race riot at their school one day.

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And one of my brothers was put in critical condition and sent to the hospital. And the whole I think three or four days he was there, no one from the district, no teacher, no representative from the school reached out to see if he was okay at all. And that destroyed my mother's faith in the district and the school system. So after that it was very clear to her that, "No, I don't feel comfortable having my kids go to a district where this is the norm." So she really made an effort to make sure that we went to a district outside of our immediate vicinity. And that was Paramount, California. Because my next-door neighbor at the time – I was very close to my neighbors too. That's another story, but just to stay on track. Her mother lived in Paramount, California. And she was nice enough to let me use her address.

KD: Nice.

AD: So it was one of those things to where – oh, "Say you live here even though you don't. Just so that you can go here. Because this is probably gonna be way better than what you experienced back in Compton." And I also had a speech therapist at the time when I was going to school in Compton, and he stressed to my mother – I think this was in first grade – that: "If you have any opportunity to take him out of this district, do it. Because just by his mannerisms, just by his intelligence level, I can tell you that he's smart but he's gonna play the dumb kid just to fit in." So my mother really took

that to heart, and, again, went ahead with the transition from Compton to Paramount, which I think was seven or eight miles away from where we were staying in South Central at the time.

KD: And you're the youngest in your family. So the rest of your siblings – none of the rest of your siblings went to Paramount.

AD: I have one sibling – I'll go ahead and refer to him by his – I guess I have to refer to him by his initials as well?

KD: I think you can refer to him –

AD: I'll call him Shane. His name's Shane. He went with me to Paramount. My other brothers went to another district in Gardena at the time. Just because our grandmother had already started using her address as their fake address to go to Gardena, which I think is maybe seven or eight miles in the opposite direction. So a lotta driving going on. But we made it work.

But, yeah, that was how that went. It was just me and Shane at Paramount. He was three years above me. And he didn't like it. I mean, he didn't like school at all, to be honest. None of my brothers did. I don't know if I mentioned this earlier, but of the six of us that there are, that I consider, well, my siblings anyway – 'cause of course they have siblings that I'm not related to. But of the six of my siblings, the oldest four did not graduate high school. And my brother, Shane, graduated high school and joined the Marines. And then I graduated high school and went to Hopkins.

KD: Could you talk about how high school was for you? Any particular classes you enjoyed? Did you participate in extracurriculars?

AD: Very much so. Just I guess as kind of an exposition into high school, middle school was a blast. I had great teachers that really saw a potential to kind of grow and be a leader among peers. So I remember befriending a history teacher and the vice principal that would really push me not only in terms of academics but also in social growth. So I was very I guess you could say introverted. But I didn't feel introverted. I felt very comfortable spending time alone. I remember lunches – *[laughs]* I was really into Stephen King books, which in hindsight seems kind of edgy for a middle schooler. But I would read a lot to myself. Didn't really have any friends in middle school but was totally fine with that because I was close enough with my siblings back home to where I didn't really feel that need to branch out socially in middle school. But

they pushed me to like: "Hey, try this; I think you might be into this."

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Or, "Hey, why don't you do that? I think they could really use your skill set there." And I think the biggest push came in terms of public speaking. Of course there were rallies and other different events that we'd have on campus. And they kinda looked to me as someone that: "Hey, speaking to you, I can tell you're very competent. I can tell you know how to use your words. You know how to use them well. Why don't you try to do that on a more macroscopic level?"

So I did a lot of public speaking practice in terms of different rallies and events that we had on campus. Loved it. Had a great time. I really liked the performance aspect of it. I don't know. That was something I was always kind of attracted to. So I carried that momentum into high school by joining student government my freshman year. And that branched off into a whole nother set of different activities that I was doing.

Also too, before I completely move away from middle school, I wanna mention that I was also overweight in middle school. And that was something that my older brother, Shane, would constantly pick on me about. And it was something where at first it came off as very hostile. But I started to piece together around seventh and eighth grade that in a way – I mean, I'm sure part of it was just bitterness and hostility, but –

KD: Siblings.

AD: Yeah. I also started to feel a sense of concern underneath it. My brother was always kind of into maintaining his fitness, building a physique. And I feel like he wanted that same sense of purpose and that sense of self that comes with regular exercise – he wanted that for me. So we live next to Magic Johnson Park in South Central LA. And he would say, "Hey, I'm gonna go run a mile. You should come with me even if you can't run the whole thing. Just jog it, do that." So I did that. Hated it. Didn't like it. I really just went because we went to the nearby gas station for snacks afterwards.

KD: Nice.

AD: [Laughs].

KD: Sounds great.

AD: But I also had braces at the time. And I took the diet restrictions really seriously. This is gonna become relevant pretty soon [*laughs*]. So I started to lose weight because of that. 'Cause I wasn't drinking soda. I didn't eat pizza. I stayed away from candy. I didn't eat chips for I think the whole 2.5 years that I did have braces. Started to lose a lotta weight as a result, in combination with the change in diet and starting to do minimal exercise with my brother.

And the reason I bring this up is because in PE, I started to notice that my mile time would drop in middle school. I think in sixth grade I remember the first time they tested us for the mile I ran it in 13 minutes and 10 seconds, trying. And then after going through all of the changes throughout middle school, because of diet and my brother, by the end of eighth grade, I had dropped my mile time down to 7 minutes and 38 seconds. And I'd say that was probably one of if not the single biggest thing I was proud about in middle school: making that change. I mean, PE teachers would come up to me and tell me, "Hey, man, that's awesome. Good on you." And, again, that's a sense of pride that I still carry to this day.

KD: That's a significant difference.

AD: Yeah. The reason I bring that up going into high school: because my biggest commitment in high school was to the distance team through cross country and track and field. I didn't even [*laughs*] know what cross country was. I just knew that there was a lot of running involved, and I thought, "Wow, I've come this far. I'd feel really ashamed if I didn't at least try to commit a little further and carry that effort on into high school." So I joined cross country, was the slowest one on the team. But I loved it. I think there were a couple times during the summer – like the first time I was actually doing speed workouts where we were doing half-mile repeats – there were days I wanted to quit.

I remember going [*laughs*] into freshman year, my mom told me to buy a PE uniform. I told her, "Mom, why? I'm going to join the cross country team." "Buy it just in case; I promise" [*laughing*]. And I bought it anyway. And I remember wearing it to practice, saying, "Why do you have that? You're gonna make the team." "Oh, really? Cool" [*laughs*]. I did that. I barely made the cut for track and field, doing the mile and 2-mile, occasionally the 800.

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And that I think was the single most important thing I did, not only in high school but just as a youth. The sense of brotherhood I got on that team, the sense of community, the sense of self, the sense of accomplishment – I wouldn't trade that in for anything. And that's so weird because even looking back on all the other huge things that I did in high school – well, I mean relatively huge: winning state competitions for public speaking, getting accepted into Hopkins, straight As. For a lotta people, those are, yeah, big things. But, for me, running a mile under five minutes was a high that, to this day, I seldom feel.

And even when I talk to other students that were asking me, "Hey, man, how do I do something even remotely like what you do?" it'd always come back to: "Join a sport. Work out. Do something. Because the sense of power that you get from that – it's gonna go into everything else you do." And that was high school *[laughs]*.

I also befriended a whole lotta teachers. There were a lotta teachers that I met that I still keep in touch with to this day. I feel like teacher's an understatement. Genuine role models. Every sense in the word. First one that comes to mind is my student government teacher as a freshman. Name's Frank. He gave me a signed copy of his own personal copy of *Wooden* by John Wooden, a UCLA basketball coach. Talks about the pyramid of success, the different qualities that you should build in yourself in order to reach your maximum potential. It's something that I still try to read at least every other year just because I know it meant a lot to him. He'd been carrying that book for years. And for him to give it to me meant a lot.

Sophomore year I met a teacher named John. I'm referring to them by their first names but at the time I'd never *[laughs]* do that.

KD: Sure.

AD: But John was my chemistry teacher for honors chemistry. I had him for two years for honors and AP chemistry. And he was fun because he actually went to Paramount High School. And he always had stories about how things changed, things that he did then compared to the way they are now. And also had a really nerdy sense of humor *[laughs]* that I thought was really cool to see in a teacher. Never afraid to challenge his students. Always encouraged us to go for our best, settle for nothing less, that kinda thing.

I had another teacher, Anthony. AP Lang teacher. He actually taught my brother when he was in high school. And he was my brother's favorite teacher. That's how I actually knew about him at the time. My brother liked him just 'cause he swore a lot in class. He was one of those teachers who were like, "Oh, man, I been here for years. They're not gonna do anything to me" *[laughs]*. Very comfortable with his students. But, again, always – never really encouraged academic success but just encouraged a growth in passion. He always said, "Hey, man, I know you probably don't care about much of school as your parents or your teachers want you to. But just find something you're into and follow it. Because at the end of the day that's gonna mean more to you than a grade. I can tell. I can promise you that." So I found that really refreshing, just to hear that.

Like I remember at the first semester, he talked to his students because – of course it's the end of the semester so a lotta people are saying, "Hey, what can I do for extra credit? What can I do to make up this assignment that I didn't do?" But I think he ended the semester by saying, "A lotta you guys jumped through all these hoops for these grades. And I don't know if anyone's tell you this, but grades aren't real. That's in your imagination. It's just ink on a paper, man" *[laughs]*.

KD: It's an arbitrary system.

AD: Yeah. I just thought, "Oh, man, he's the best. He's great." Still keep in touch with him to this day. I'll usually text him happy wishes over the holidays, stuff like that. But, again, someone who I really grew close to. Also the way high school is set up at Paramount High was that there's an entirely separate campus for freshmen compared to sophomores through seniors.

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I think at the time we were the biggest high school in California, with 5,000-plus students. I mean, the division made things easier administratively I assume. That's probably why they did it.

KD: You mentioned finding a sense of community in cross country. Did you find that that was kind of a main way for you to make friends in high school? You were coming from a different – outside of the district, and how did you kind of navigate that in high school?

AD: Yeah. It's so weird. Because at the time, in high school, I never considered any of them friends. I still very much considered

myself kind of a loner at heart. But they were teammates for sure. I don't keep in touch with many of them. But if I ever seen any of them on the street, it's always very much: "Oh my gosh! Jerry, man! What's up? How's it going?" It's very empowering just to see them and to have that enthusiasm in a greeting reciprocated. So, no, I called them teammates – is usually how I referred to our relationship. I mean, maybe it wasn't until after high school that I started to get in touch with some of 'em, that I felt comfortable enough to call them friends. But I don't think that kind of diminished the way we treated each other at all.

I mean, especially I'd say the freshmen and sophomores when I first joined. There was always a sense of: "Hey, man, even though it's an individual sport, you're out there running, doing everything you can do. Yeah, you can't really tag out or anything. But just know that everyone out there on the course with you is doing everything that they can, at least in spirit, to make sure that you have the best race that you can."

Aw, man. Even when you're running your absolute hardest against a team that you hate that's beaten your team in league every year for the last ten years and you cross that finish line and they finish in front of you, but they stop on the other side just to shake your hand and give you a hug when everything's over. Damn, that feels good [*laughs*]. Oh, man. Yeah. Just community respect. That's really how I feel out of all of it. But, yeah, didn't really consider them friends.

And as for the whole balancing living so far away, I was fine with it. Because I'd go home – I was really into video games. So it was kinda like, "Oh, man, what? *God of War* just came out? Oh, let's play that. Oh, what? The new *Call of Duty*? Let's go." So, yeah, didn't really have any social itches that needed scratching in high school. I was never really invited to anything anyway. I always kinda gave off the vibe – I don't ever think it was intentional. But a lotta people kinda said that I was on some degree intimidating in high school. Just 'cause it was very: "Oh, man, AD – that guy doesn't play around. He's honest. He's focused, knows what he wants. He'll go get it. Yeah, he's polite; he's nice and everything. But outside of that, he does his own thing and that's him."

Which I kinda thrived on, in a sense. I mean, it made things easy: having to go home and not worry about hanging out with friends. I really liked the division of just going to school, treating school like school, being friendly but not necessarily friends with people who were there, and then you leave and that's it. Your home life is your

home life; your school life is your school life. I think not having them mesh in any way at all made it a lot easier to navigate. Yeah. Looking back on it. At the time it was just the way things were. That wasn't a conscious decision on my part.

KD: Sure. So, kind of throughout high school, as you're doing all of these sorts of extracurriculars and taking these classes, what was your perspective at that time on going to college? Did you have any sort of college prep or idea of what the college process would be like? And did your parents have any input on that? What was their perspective on you going to college?

AD: This goes back to elementary school. I'd say a very key part of my identity as a child was that: "Oh, I'm smart."

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"Teachers tell me I'm smart all the time. My parents tell me I'm smart all the time. That's just who I am. That's what I do." So, keeping that in mind, I knew from a very young age that I'm going to college. An alternative to college didn't even cross my mind growing up. It was just: "Oh, I'm smart. What do smart people do? Smart people go to college. Oh, I guess I'm going to college then." And by the time I got to high school, I think that had manifested in a sense of confidence that really boosted all of my efforts to get into college. Like I remember going through the application process.

I mean, by the time – I think in middle school is when I started thinking, "Oh, well, a key part of deciding what you wanna do in college is: what do you wanna do after college? What career do you wanna do? Oh, okay, well, I like math. I like science. I think it'd be cool to build stuff, maybe work with computers." So just halfway doing research online: "Oh, what's the crossway between all of that? Biomedical engineering. Oh, okay. What's the best school for biomedical engineering? Oh, Hopkins? I guess I'm going to Hopkins then."

So that is how I initially garnered interest in Hopkins. But then after high school, doing a little extra research and finding out: "Oh wow, Baltimore's actually kinda cool. It's kind of one of the cultural meccas of the East Coast. You've got DC to the south. You got New York to the north. It's got the four seasons. The campus is really nice. Baltimore's a pretty popping place." So I only grew in interest in Hopkins as high school progressed.

And I remember hearing teachers say, "Hey, man, look into safety schools. You never know. Even smart people get denied from a school like Hopkins." And I always told them the same thing: "Yeah, not me though." It was just *[laughs]* – in hindsight, I had no reason to be that confident. But it was cocky for sure.

KD: So is Hopkins the only place you applied?

AD: Yes. Which is like *[laughs]* woah.

KD: And it worked out.

AD: I applied early decision. I mean, I applied to two UC² schools. I applied to UC Santa Barbara and UC Davis. Just because I promised my calculus teacher that I would. But I knew that: "I don't wanna go there. I wanna branch out. I wanna do something different. I've lived in California my whole life. I've lived pretty much in the same neighborhood, talking to the same people. I feel like there's so much more out there, so much that I wanna do, so many people I wanna meet." And I just feel like anything less than Hopkins would be a compromise that I wasn't willing to make.

So I applied to the two UCs with no intention of going. But once I got my early decision acceptance from Hopkins, without the acceptance at the biomedical engineering program, I went back and I terminated my applications. Just 'cause I knew, "Oh, I don't wanna waste their time. I could be accepted and end up taking two spots of people that really do wanna go there." So Hopkins was the only school I ever got a decision from. I mean, the rumor kinda spread around that: "Oh, man, AD only applied to one school." But whenever someone brought it up to me, I always felt that I had an obligation to say, "Kinda. Not really." But it was the only application that I let go all the way through.

KD: Sure. When you were accepted, were your parents on board with Hopkins, with you moving to the East Coast? How did they feel about it?

AD: Oh yeah, for sure. Oh, man.

KD: They were excited?

AD: So the day I got accepted – hopefully I'll get the date right – December 12th I think decisions were released at 3:00 PM Eastern Standard, which was 12:00 PM Pacific Standard Time. And I

² AD refers to "UC" schools, which is shorthand for University of California.

remember there was a student rally going on that day. And even though I was the master of ceremonies, Autumn, the student government advisor, let me loose for the day just so that I can go be with my mom waiting in the attendance office as I got the decisions. And I remember before the decision came out, my mom was there with one of my nieces that she was watching.

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And she gave me two marbles, one red, one green with a white stripe. And she said, in regards to the green marble, "I want you to remember that whenever you look at this marble, this marble's small, and just don't forget the small things. This is a real big moment in your life. And this is gonna be the start of a journey that you have to make. But regardless of the big ups and the big downs, I just want you to remember that there's always a lotta small stuff that you could be looking to that's probably just as important." And the other marble, she said, "Just like the way this marble's never gonna change, regardless of whether the decisions a yes or no, how I feel about you's not gonna change." Yeah. My mom was always on board. Dad was on board. Family was on board. Yeah. 'Cause they knew it was something I wanted.

Also before I go on about any more of that, one thing that I do wanna address is my living situation. In middle school and high school. So, the house I grew up in in South Central actually belonged to my grandmother. Not my actually grandmother. One of my brothers' biological grandparents. But the house belonged to her father. But she was the one that would collect rent and everything. She was our landlord. And my mom paid rent, \$500.00. And a two-bedroom house with a living room, a kitchen, bathroom, a garage, and a huge backyard that was maybe 50 meters in length. And looking back on it, that price is absurd for California. I don't think we would've been able to afford a place to live otherwise.

However, when I was in seventh grade, the owner of the house passed away, my grandmother's father. And his daughters all wanted the house. They said, "That's part of our inheritance. That's ours. You've gotta leave. This isn't yours. You don't even pay the full rent the way that you should be paying it." And my parents were scared. I mean, there was a good couple of months where they said, "Hey, we need you to be gone by the end of October. We don't really care what you do afterwards but you can't live here. This isn't yours." And I remember my mom crying a lot during that

time. Just because we thought, "Wow, we really might end up homeless."

But my brother, who at the time just was maybe six months into his new job at an oil rig just off of Long Beach, was able to take out a loan and buy the house with his fiancé. And that was a godsend. That was a blessing for him to be approved to do that. Because without that, I don't know if I would've been in a situation where I could do what I did in high school to set myself up for Hopkins. I mean, there was the stipulation though that – you gotta keep in mind: he had two kids of his own at the time. "This is temporary. I'm doing this because I want you to have time to get yourself together, set your affairs in order so that you can find your own place. But I wanna live here with my family. I wanna raise my family here. And I don't think that there's gonna be room for me to do that comfortably if you and dad are still living here."

So my mom was fine with that. Totally understood. I mean, having gone from thinking you're gonna be homeless to being able to live in the house that you've lived in for the last 20 years for an extra 4 years – no complaints. No complaints at all. And that was the way she said it too. "Just let me live here until AD graduates high school. And we'll be outta here by the end of that."

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So, yeah, that happened. We moved to – well, during my freshman year, my parents were in the process of moving to a small apartment in South Gate, which was just outside of Paramount actually. So, now during the summers whenever I go back I'm actually a lot closer to the people that I was hanging out with in high school. But, again, really lucky to be in that position. I'd say around this point – I'd say towards the middle of high school, my dad had done a lot less job hopping and finally settled on a career with Edison. Specifically with one of the contractors that work for Edison, Pacific Coast Tree Experts. So he'll drive the trucks, go around cutting trees, throwing the branches into the shredder, whatever you call it.

Yeah. So, because of his financial stability, things were able to work out. My mom had always – even though she's technically unemployed, she always kind of helped contribute somewhat through watching kids for the family, grandkids, nieces, nephews, that kinda thing. I mean, having raised four kids herself, she was really comfortable around children. And other people kind of trusted her to kinda take on that role.

KD: Big help that she's providing.

AD: Yeah. For sure. So that was that. Also just random memory that I'm eager to share [*laughs*]. So, when my dad was doing a lotta job-hopping, one of my favorite things in middle school was going with him on the weekends to help. That was one of the ways that I really kind of connected it to my dad: through going to work with him. Just doing odd jobs at people's houses, help fix things up. He was working for a jumper company so I would go with him at the end of parties and help roll up the jumpers, put all the tables and chairs away and everything. Also we would usually go play games of pool at the pool hall afterwards, just us, talk, listen to music, make jokes, that kinda thing. Even though I am really connected to my mother, I think I'm equally as connected to my father as well in that regard.

KD: Thank you. Kind of transitioning to your time at Hopkins, could you talk about the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience here and what the transition was like into Baltimore and onto the Homewood campus?

AD: Sure. My transition was a little different in the sense that I did a summer program with a group called Hop-In. And that was five weeks during the summer before first semester of freshman year. And it was interesting. Just 'cause I'd never been away from home for that long. The most I had been was maybe for a week during the summer for camp experiences for cross country. But it was weird 'cause I was forced to be social in a sense. Because I'm living in a dorm with I think 39 other people that're all living on the same floor. I never came into conflict with any of them but it was always – it felt very new to have to be in that social sphere 24/7 to where I don't really get to – I just kinda turn off and just go occupy my own space like I was used to.

KD: Right. That separation that you experienced in high school was out the window.

AD: That separation was gone for sure. Yeah. It was something I didn't really know how to handle but I just kinda improvised. I mean, I got the impression that everyone really liked me and enjoyed my company. A lotta people said I was sweet. A lotta people said that I was honest, funny, charismatic I guess. But it really kind of – there were a lot of experiences that summer too, bonding experiences where we'd all go to a floor one night, kind of open up about hopes, fears, that kinda thing. I never opened up. But listening to

other people open up gave me a new sense of respect for them. We all kinda bonded over that.

And I remember towards the end they were asking people: "Is there anything you wanna say to mark the occasion?"

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And I remember standing up in front of everyone and telling them that, "Hey, just like all of you, this is really new for me. This is a space I'm not really used to occupying. But if there's anything that I take away from this now that pretty much this is over, I really do think of you guys as friends. I don't think I've ever been comfortable enough with another person to say that. But when I look at everyone in this room, I feel like to say anything less than that wouldn't be the truth."

And I said it and I meant it when I said it. But as the transition went on into freshman year, I didn't mean it as much. I just kinda realized that: "You know what? I don't really like hanging out with these people" [*laughs*]. The thing that, from day one, annoyed me about the people I've met at Hopkins was the complaint culture. And it's something – I'd say that's been my biggest obstacle with forming friendships here at Hopkins: just the readiness to complain about anything and everything.

And don't get me wrong. There're people going through genuine problems here. I get that. It's hard here. There're people with different stuff going on at home and everything. There's people that're sad because of stuff that's outta their control. I understand that and I respect that. But at the same time, I myself could never get behind that attitude, the whole: "Oh, man, this sucks. Oh, I wanna die. Oh, fuck that professor," or whatever. And I don't know. It always came off as intolerably petty. And a lot of it was passed off as humor too. Like: "Oh, I get it; they're trying to be funny. This is the way people connect here. This is the way" –

KD: Commiserate.

AD: Yeah. But, to this day, I can't do that. That's beyond me. So that was something that really came apparent very early on. And even what few – I called them friendships at the time, but looking back on it, I think acquaintanceship is probably a better word. Even what few acquaintanceships I did form through Hop-In felt kind of trivial in the grand scheme of things.

KD: Yeah. You're starting with a small subset of people. And I think naturally as you meet – the context of your experience grows, you can reflect back on that differently than at the time.

AD: And it's so weird for me too. 'Cause I like hanging around people. I like learning about people. I find it very empowering to be part of a group. But the way people go about doing that here – it's just something that I couldn't really do. And even with the floor that we had freshman year in the dorms – that was something that I just couldn't really be a part of. Like I tried my best to be nice. Because I understood that, hey, other people are going through a transition too. This isn't just about me. But I don't know. I could never get past just simple politeness.

I will say though that my roommate and my suitemates – I got past it with them. At least I don't know if I did freshman year, but given that they're the only people who I still talk to, I'd say I at least kind of moved past it a little. Hopefully. Again, that's still something I haven't really figured out.

KD: So in Hop-In, you're meeting other first-generation college students I think?

AD: Yes.

KD: How has your experience been as a first-gen student throughout your college experience? Is that something that people are open about or that comes up that much? Or do you notice differences in maybe – what is the socioeconomic culture on campus? If you could speak to that experience?

AD: I don't know if I could really speak to the campus culture just 'cause I feel like I'm pretty detached from it. But as far as myself, it was always something to where – I never dwelled on it. It was always something that was just more matter-of-fact than anything.

[0:50:00]

Like, "Oh yeah, I'm a Hopkins student. Oh yeah, and I happen to be first-generation." It never felt like a core part of my identity as a student here at Hopkins. And I think that one of the things that pushed me away from other first-gen groups and first-gen organizations here was that, for a lotta them, it was a core part of their identity. And even if it wasn't, it always came off that they wanted it to be. And, again, that was just something that I had trouble relating to. Yeah. That's kinda how I feel about it.

KD: Onto academics. Could you speak to your program of study, how you chose it, and what have you felt is valuable about it?

AD: So, I mentioned that I came in for biomedical engineering. And once I got denied from that, I thought, "Oh, okay, well, what else is kind of a cluster of all the different STEM fields? Biophysics. Yeah. That sounds cool" *[laughs]*. Again, just going about it really superficially but still willing to commit just as hard nonetheless. So I came in as biophysics. But doing six hours of lab a week through physics and chemistry, I just found out: "Wow, I really don't like spending time in lab. And what do you know? That's a really big part of working in biophysics. Hm. Well, guess it's time for a change." So, doing a little more fiddling around online, I eventually came to the conclusion that: "Well, I really like the calculation and the analysis aspect of lab. So why not just do something in applied math?"

Also too I noted to myself: "Oh, what? They got less writing requirements? Only six credits? Let's go." So, went into applied math. And then I think by the time sophomore year rolled around, I – I should note that *[laughs]* I told myself coming into Hopkins, "Oh, man, I'm just gonna do one major and that's it. I'm gonna be like a monk and just focus on that one thing. I'm not doing any second majors, no doing any minors. That's just gonna dilute my field of study." But came in and realized, "Okay, well, we're doing applied math now. There's a lotta crossover with pure math in the Krieger School. So why not add that just for the laughs?" So I did that.

And I was under the impression at the time that I added it that I had to fulfill all the requirements for both Whiting and Krieger, not knowing that, since the Whiting major was my primary major, I only had to fulfill the distribution requirements for that major. So I thought, "Well, if I do the pure math, I also gotta do the writing requirements. So I guess I'll also take IFP and oral presentations on top of everything else that I'm doing."

KD: What does IFP stand for?

AD: Oh, Intro to Fiction and Poetry. It was one of the classes I took. And then it started to become clear to me around sophomore year that: "Man, I really have trouble keeping my GPA above 3.0 here at this school. So let's try to boost it by focusing on some easier classes." So I think I remember – I don't think I took my first psychology class as a sophomore. It wasn't until junior year. But I

remember people saying that the intro psych classes were pretty easy. And I was interested in psychology too. I mean, psychology, history. I remember just making an effort to read articles every now and then whenever they'd show up online. So I thought, "Okay, let me try. If I like it, I'll add the minor and focus on that just as kind of a GPA booster."

So I did that. So at this point in junior year, the goal is: "So we're doing the applied / pure math double major and we're doing the psych minor." And then senior year I tanked – I'd say one of my deepest academic shortcomings is taking Intro to Probability at the 400 level as a junior, getting a *D* in that class, thinking, "Well, I need to get a *C* or above if I want that major; so let's just retake it, get a better grade next time," retaking it, getting a *D+* [laughs] and thinking, "Well, I tried" [laughs].

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Dropped that. But by that time – this was senior fall that I got the second *D*. By that time I'd already fulfilled all the graduation requirements for the pure math major. So I thought, "Well, fall back on that. Switch schools. Leave it at that." Add a applied math minor. I mean, I'd done enough classes to get the minor. So I was fine with that. And then now I was taking one of my final classes for the psych minor. I wanted to take Human Data, realized that it required a level of programming that I wasn't really capable of, so dropped that class, wasn't able to add any other classes that fulfilled the minor requirements, so dropped the minor. So I went from biomedical engineering to pure math major, applied math minor.

KD: What a journey.

AD: That's where I'm at now [laughs]. It was in a constant state of flux. And, you know what? I just had this conversation with a friend about a week ago. Looking back on it, the class I had the most fun with here at Hopkins that I enjoyed in the deepest sense was Intro to Fiction and Poetry. I mean, I'd always been into words. Whether it was through my speeches or even in my English classes. I've always been a recreational reader. So, just getting to see kind of the gears that go into: what is a good story? What is a good poem? And just kind of going into that at the collegiate level. That was exciting. That was fun.

But two reasons that I think subconsciously I turned away from pursuing that as a college major was, one, I always knew: "You

have to do something STEM-related. You have to make money. Your parents are gonna depend on you. Your family's gonna depend on you. If at the end of the day you're struggling because you wanted to major in English or writing seminars and they're struggling because of your decision, you gotta answer for that at some point."

KD: That's a lotta pressure.

AD: Yeah. I don't think that was something that I ever fully admitted to myself. But looking back on it, I know the feeling was always there. And I worked at phone-a-thon sophomore year.

KD: Phone-a-thon?

AD: Phone-a-thon. So that's part of the calling center here at Hopkins where they have students call alumni and other affiliates with the university in order to get donations for different scholarships and programs that we have going on here on campus. And one of my favorite parts about the job was establishing rapport with the different people that I would meet through the phone calls. I mean, some of them had great stories. Like, "Oh, I met my spouse here. Oh, I landed my first job because of someone I met at Hopkins." And that felt empowering. That felt uplifting.

But at the same time, I got calls that were devastating, calls that left me in tears just because of the sense of hopelessness that some people said that they got here and carried on to the rest of their lives. I mean, in hindsight, yeah, maybe they were being kind of dramatic. But it didn't really feel that way at the time.

One call that really stuck with me was one person who I asked for a donation and their response when I'd asked for a dollar amount was, "Hey, you're calling my number. So is there a profile that you have on me somewhere on a computer that you might be sitting at right now?" "Yeah, there is actually, now that you mention it." "Oh, okay. Cool. Do me a favor. Does it say anywhere on that profile what my major was when I went to Hopkins?" "Let me double check. Yeah, right here." "Oh, okay. Read to me what it says." "It says that you majored in writing seminars." "Oh, okay. Cool. The reason I bring that up is because I'm gonna tell you this right now: while you're in college, pick a major that's gonna match the lifestyle you want. Because I am not in a position to donate to you or anyone affiliated with Hopkins right now." Hung up the phone.

At the time it was just like: "Wow. Wonder what's wrong with that guy. I hope he's doing okay." But looking back on it, that was something where I kind of internalized what he said in a sense.

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Again, I think that just kind of contributed to that feeling that I already had where: "You gotta do STEM. You gotta do STEM."

KD: Right. I'm gonna pause us right there so we can flip over the recording and then we'll come back to it.

AD: Got it.

KD: Okay. So we're back. You mentioned talking about Intro to Fiction and Poetry and how you enjoyed that class but you felt a sense that you needed to go into a STEM field. If that kind of pressure wasn't an object and you had the sense that you were free to study whatever, do you think you would've gone more into the social sciences or the humanities in your major?

AD: I think so, yes. Well, too – and this is something that I found out recently while thinking about questions for this interview. I went back and looked at the requirements – I know there's a foreign language requirement, and I thought, "Oh, geez, would I have been able to get that one in?" I don't know. With enough work, I'm sure that probably I could've, with the right assistance. But even though my last name is Hispanic, it's something I've always kinda struggled with. I have very poor Spanish skills, if Spanish skills at all I guess.

KD: Do your family members speak Spanish?

AD: My mother is white and Native American mix. So, no Spanish on her side of the family. My dad is full-blooded Mexican. But even though he speaks Spanish, he never spoke Spanish to me growing up. And the weirdest thing too – I guess this goes back to cultural identity, which I haven't really addressed. But even though, yeah, I might have some physical qualities that one would attribute with a traditional Hispanic, I never really felt like I belonged to the culture or the community growing up. Just 'cause I was never a part of it.

KD: Was that highly present around you growing up?

AD: No. I actually grew up in a mostly black neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles. So I felt like I was more understanding of that culture than anything else, if that makes sense. I mean, not that like, "Oh, you know, I had black friends so I knew what it was like." That's not really true. But in comparison to the Hispanic culture, yeah, I probably felt closer to that than anything. And that comes from my dad too. My dad – he was actually pretty heavily gang-affiliated in his youth. For me, it was more so about growing up near Compton in the vicinity of different African American gangs.

KD: Growing up in Compton, did you feel that presence in your community? Your dad moved out of that kind of activity, but –

AD: I don't know. I didn't really grow an eye for race or culture till I came here to Hopkins, if I'm being completely honest. Yeah, it was something that you noticed I guess in your periphery of what you pay attention to. At least it was for me. But, no, I grew up in a black neighborhood. When I was going to school in Paramount, I think, if I remember the statistics correctly, about 92 percent of the students there are Hispanic. I don't know. It was just something where it was just kinda the way it is but I never really dwelled on it. Like I never – for me, race or ethnicity was just about skin color. To me it was just as important as whether you were left or right-handed. Race and culture was never part of my identity growing up. To me, my identity was more built off of things that I did rather than things that I was.

KD: And do you think that has changed since coming to Hopkins? You said you sort of notice those things more?

[1:05:00]

AD: I mean, I can more readily acknowledge it just 'cause I know it's a big thing for a lotta people. But as for myself, maybe a little? I recently took a DNA test that my mom bought me for Christmas, and it just kinda confirmed what we had already suspected. Well, my mom never knew her dad. She was always told by her mother that her dad was Italian. But we took the DNA test and found out, hey, there's no Italian in us at all [*laughs*].

KD: It's funny what those tests have been revealing about families.

AD: I mean, I always grew up telling people, "Oh, yeah, I'm mixed. I'm Mexican, Italian, Native American." But, no, it turns out it's –

again, mostly Hispanic, a lot of English on my mom's side, and some Native American as well on my mom's side.

KD: Back to your program of study. You've mentioned some memorable classes. Are there any others that come to mind or any memorable faculty members?

AD: Oral Presentations – again, a class I took sophomore year – was a breath of fresh air compared to everything else that I've done here at Hopkins. I mean, it was kind of the easy credit just because it was kind of posed as intro to public speaking but I mentioned earlier that it was something I took up in middle school; it was something that –

KD: You're very comfortable.

AD: – I really focused on in high school. So I came in there and immediately rose to the top of the class. And it got to the point to where it wasn't even about whether I was gonna do well or not do well on an assignment; it was more about: how can I do this in a way that's gonna give me the most pleasure as a presenter for this assignment? And I feel like the professor kinda picked up on that at some point in the class. And it got to the point to where I would even break the rules for the assignment just because I knew: "No, it'd be more fun if I did it this way though. The audience is gonna pick up on that for sure." You can always tell if someone enjoys what they're talking about compared to if they don't.

So I think we had conferences at some point during the semester and my professor for that class had told me, "I don't really know why you're in this class but I'm really glad that you are. Just because I think you set a great example for everyone else that's in here too."

KD: That's great.

AD: And, in that same conference, he offered me a job as a CA³ during the next semester, and I jumped on that immediately. Even though I wasn't qualified for it at all. I think to be a CA in the leadership department you have to have a GPA above a 3.5. I think at the time my GPA was 2.6? And I addressed that concern as well. And he'd said, "Don't worry about it. You're too good at this. I'll put in a good word for you." So he did. It worked. I was the CA for three semesters that followed, and I think that's probably one of the better experiences I've had here at Hopkins.

³ AD refers to "CA" which is shorthand for Course Assistant.

I felt really knowledgeable whenever I was talking to students, whenever I was giving them pointers on how they could improve their presentations; how they could improve their style; what they did right. And I felt that everyone else in the class kinda benefited from that. I felt like I made Professor Kulanko's job easier just because it was something that I was excited to do; it was something I was excited to help with. Yeah, it was just something that I really kinda looked forward to every week.

KD: You mentioned being a CA. Did you have any other internships or jobs while you've been here?

AD: No. Not on campus. I had mentioned working at phone-a-thon. I was a CA. But outside of that – I mean, there've been one or two other times where I told myself, "All right, we're gonna get that internship this semester, start focusing on career skills." But whenever I reached out to a professor or some other person of importance to kind of capitalize on that effort, it's something that I always kinda fell flat on halfway through it before it ever got started. Just because it was like, "Oh, but you're already doing so bad in your classes.

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"Do you really wanna add more onto this?" So, no, no research. No internships. Nothing besides those two work experiences.

KD: Go ahead.

AD: And, again, that mostly came out of a place of: "My grades are bad enough as it is. I don't wanna risk it by going through anything further." And I guess maybe I could've said the same thing about phone-a-thon and my CA experience. But the money I got from that helped pay for groceries. So I kinda did that out of necessity.

KD: And that also applied to other kind of non-internship or jobs, just kind of clubs and activities in general? Or were you involved in different clubs?

AD: There were a couple clubs here on campus that I looked into. Again, this was mostly freshman, sophomore year. But *[laughs]* I tried out for I think Ketzev, the Jewish a cappella group, and I didn't get in *[laughs]*. It's just something I did for fun.

KD: Just on a whim?

AD: It was very much on a whim. It was very much just walking around the fair that they have for different clubs, and them saying, "Hey, you wanna join this?" "What is this?" "Oh, it's a choir but we don't really sing. We just kinda hang out and make memes." "Yeah, dude, sure, let's go." So I did that. Didn't get in. But had fun performing anyway. I sang a song from *The Book of Mormon*, Matt and Trey Parker's musical. Had a blast. There was a club for Rubik's Cubes enthusiasts here on campus. And it was something I liked just because they had a lotta puzzles that I'd always wanted as a kid but never knew where to find, never had a chance to play with. So I did that. But, again, just couldn't really handle the social dynamic of being a part of a club. So, quit after maybe a couple weeks.

And outside of that, here on campus? Hop-In was – or, well, is – supposed to be kind of this four-year-long thing. So I would show up occasionally. Mostly for the food. Didn't really like talking to other students. Again, just because of complaint culture. Again, just because of the whole, I don't know, identity kinda politics that comes with being a part of a group like that. Which I respect. I'm happy that it works for them. But it's just something that I didn't feel like I could comfortably be part of.

KD: You've mentioned complaint culture on campus a couple of times. Do you think that's something that's specific to Hopkins? Or do you think maybe something that might be happening generally on other college campuses?

AD: I have no idea. I've had conversations with friends where they asked me, "Do you think it's like this at other schools or do you think other schools like this – do they go through what we go through?" I don't go through another school. I don't know anyone that goes to another school. All of my friends that I have managed to keep from high school – they all dropped out of college after freshman year. I don't know anyone else other than the people at Hopkins that're in college. So I have no place to speak to on it. Is it here at Hopkins? Yes. Is it specific to Hopkins? I don't know.

KD: Could you talk about your overall dorm and apartment or living situations you've had on campus?

AD: Yes.

KD: Kind of where you might've started in possibly AMR⁴ and maybe transitioning to different buildings?

AD: So, during the summer I stayed in Wolman, which I thought was pretty cool. 'Cause they have this plaque outside of Wolman which says – man, what's the guy that wrote *The Great Gatsby*? Fitzgerald?

KD: F. Scott Fitzgerald.

AD: F. Scott Fitzgerald. It said, "F. Scott Fitzgerald stayed in this building." I thought, "Whoa, that's amazing. I love this place, for no other reason than that." So that was the five weeks of summer. Then I moved into McCoy, which was just across the hall. And it was funny: when they had us pick our freshman dorms on the living assignments page or whatever, the only reason I picked McCoy was because it had the most stairs, which I thought looked kinda cool. But then I found out you don't even have to take the stairs to go into the building. You just go through these little doors on the side. I don't know. That was a bummer [*laughs*].

But I stayed in McCoy for all of freshman year. Shout out to Carrie, my RA. She's the best.

[1:15:00]

I could tell that she really made a solid effort to make everyone there comfortable, which I appreciated. Lived with Keone, was my roommate. He's a student from Guam. Across the suite we had Jason and Rushabh. I think Rushabh left after his freshman year. I think somehow he had stockpiled an abundance of credits through other colleges or something. I don't know. We didn't really stay in touch. But Jason and Keone I stayed in touch with throughout sophomore year. So sophomore year I lived in Rogers House, which is this very small dorm kind of outside of campus. It technically is a part of campus 'cause you still have to scan in to go inside the building. But I think the whole building only houses 20 students total, plus an RA. But the time I was there, I was living in a single.

And during this time, sophomore year, I didn't really talk to anyone other than Keone and Jason, who lived together in McCoy. Not by choice. That was their last pick for the housing assignments. But they made it work. They had a cool futon. They had tons of space because they both got their beds lofted. We'd kinda hang out, play

⁴ AMR stands for Alumni Memorial Residences, a group of residence halls on the Homewood campus.

board games, listen to vinyl records, watch movies sometimes. I think one reason I was really comfortable hanging out with them was because neither of them drank or smoked. Neither of them was really into the party scene, which I very much wasn't about, still am not really about. So, in that sense, given their laid-back nature, I found them very easy to hang around.

And, yeah, it was just fun times for the mot part. Never really got into too many personal conversations with them. Always kept it funny. Always kept it light, which I kind of appreciated. And, yeah, they still kind of dabbled in that complaint culture that I was talking about. But I don't know. Given that I had spent so much time with them kind of out of necessity, just because we lived together freshman year, I just kinda grew to like them. And plus it became apparent to me, especially sophomore year, living in a single, that: "Wow, now that I'm not living with my family and I'm not living with people in a suite, I'm socially starved. I don't feel good a lotta the time throughout the week." So Fridays and the weekends, going to hang out with them, I'd say almost became a necessity. Just to maintain a sense of wellbeing.

KD: Makes sense.

AD: And I don't think I ever really opened up to them about that. But that was definitely the case sophomore and junior year. Junior year I also lived in Rogers House, again in a single, still kind of maintaining that pattern of just going to hang out with them whenever I got the chance on Fridays or the weekends.

One really interesting living change that did occur junior year though was that – so, while my brother was in the Marines, he was stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. And I think the hurricanes were coming through around that time, Hurricane Florence if I remember correctly? And they were ordered to evacuate the base. So at the time it was him, his wife, their dog, and their pet snake. And they said, "Hey, can we come live with you for the weekend just to dodge the Hurricane?" "Let's go!" I love my brother. So, yeah, that was a no-brainer for me. I asked the RA. He said, "Technically that's not allowed." But he's not gonna say anything. So that's fine.

So we have me, two other people, and two animals living in a single [*laughs*] in Rogers House. And it was fun. Like, overall, I had a great time. But, man, that put a detriment into my schedule pretty quick. I don't know. I just felt like I had to kinda look after, helping him out if he needed anything. And it was the first time I'd

seen my brother in a year or two. Just 'cause of him being in the military.

[1:20:00]

He was on tour in Syria earlier that year. And we were grateful to have him come back. So, just knowing that he was in harm's way and then now he's back here living with me on the East Coast, I felt like I had to spend as much time with him as I could, if that makes sense.

KD: It does.

AD: But, yeah, a week in turned into, "Hey, can we stay here for a week? Hey, can we stay here for two weeks?" So I think maybe about two weeks is when he'd finally left. And it was basically just me playing catch-up for the rest of the semester. So that was living situation junior year. By junior year, Jason and Keone were living in their own place. They had a row home that they were living at with another friend of ours. So when Jason and Keone were living in the suite sophomore year, they also had two other friends living in the suite, Jeff and James, who, by spending time with Jason and Keone, I also became friends with in the process. And Keone became an RA. Jason, Jeff, and James were the three tenants that were living in the row home junior year. And James had moved out and so since there was a spot opening, I asked if I could move in, and they were for it.

So I moved into the row home senior year. And, wow, what a chance of pace. That was amazing. Living off campus compared to on campus is infinitely better in every regard.

KD: Is this in Charles Village?

AD: Towards that way. It's on Abell Avenue. But, yeah, it was great. Like I said, those social starvations that I'd kinda put myself through, I haven't had to go through that senior year just because I'm always coming home to friends or people that I at least look forward to sharing their company and I think they look forward to sharing mine. So that's cool. We have another buddy, Sarah, that's always hanging out at our place too. She's a ton of fun. So, yeah, that's how living arrangements have been. At least here on campus. Back home – I don't know if that was also part of the question.

KD: Yeah. My next couple of questions – you've mentioned seeing your brother. You mentioned your sister's passing. Could you talk about

how your relationship with your family has been while you've been at Hopkins, and maybe how you spent your summers and breaks?

AD:

Oh, yeah, that's a great question. So, when I got accepted, it was very much cheers from everyone in the family. Like, "Hey, we're proud of you. Hey, you're doing great things. Keep up the good work." And that felt really good. I mean, having put in so much effort into being where I was, that felt very reassuring. But then I'd say by the end of freshman year and coming back and then my parents expecting me to – "Oh, you're making a lotta friends, right? Oh, you're at the top of your class like you were in high school, right? Oh, you're doing all this other stuff, right?" And it was just always kind of awkward to explain to them: "No, this is different. This isn't like high school."

And trying to figure it out myself and trying to help my parents figure it out as well was something that I kind of struggle with. I don't really talk to them about it anymore. Which is so weird for me to say and feel. Because my parents – my mom – she'd pick me up every day of high school. And the first thing she'd always ask me is, "How's your day?" And I was always so excited to share with her the intricacies of what it's like to navigate my high school experience, what it's like to have to do this assignment for this class but also try to maintain an acquaintanceship with this person because I like them; I feel like that they kinda add a lot to my high school experience; I feel like they kind of understand the way I think about this class. Trying to balance sports, trying to maintain certain positions within clubs, trying to make sure that I get this writing deadline done for this newspaper article that I wanna write for the city paper.

[1:25:00]

And she was always excited to hear it. I was always excited to talk about it. But there's none of that now that I'm in college. A lot of that just from the fact that I don't know what to say. Because I know that a lot of it, whenever I have tried to explain it, I don't think she really gets it. And I think sometimes she becomes frustrated with my inability to get a point across. Which I don't hold that against her. I mean, if I had the words, I'd say 'em. But I don't. So whenever I do call, it's usually me asking, "Hey, how's it going? What's the family like? See anything interesting on TV? How're the kids doing? Me? I'm doing all right. I'm hanging in there." It's usually a one-sentence response whenever she asks me what school's going like.

And a lot of it too comes from the fact that I don't think my parents know how much I struggle here at Hopkins. And I made an effort to keep it that way. Just because, given everything that they've gone through, everything that they're going through, I would hate to put the burden on them, for them to think that: "Wow, my son doesn't think that he's gonna be able to make it through Hopkins." That's a burden I've never wanted to share with them.

KD: That makes a lotta sense. Did you find a support system while you've been in college here?

AD: Keone, Jason, James, Jeff, Sarah. And, you know what? I hesitate to call them a support system. They're friends. Again, I have to think before I use that word. But I feel like that's probably the closest word I could use to describe the kinda relationship that we share. But, again, even when I talk to them, I don't really – I kinda keep a lotta my own griefs and burdens to myself. And whenever I do share it, I always just try to pass it off as a joke. Just because I don't – they're in their own thing. They're worrying about grad school, keeping up with their classes. I'm very uncomfortable with the idea of having people worry about me.

But there was – through Hop-In, we would have advisor meetings. This was through – we'd meet maybe once a month. And I've rotated through I think three or four advisors over my four years. Just because a lot of them have left the university, new ones have come on, that kinda thing. But if anything ever got really bad, I'd open up about it. Like when my sister passed, sophomore year. Just because that – stuff like that left me paralytic, to where I felt like I could barely even function as a student. But when it came to things like worrying about whether or not I was gonna pass a class or worrying about whether or not I'm cut out for the university, that was something I very much wanted to keep to myself.

And I guess you'd also asked about my sister passing and how that affected family relationships. I got a text from my brother one morning and he'd said, "I don't know how to" – well, he called. I was asleep. Then I read his text. It said, "I don't know how to tell you this but our sister was shot and she died last night." It was one of those things where you read it over and over because you're not sure if you read it right. And I didn't know what to feel at the time just 'cause it didn't feel real.

KD: Sure.

AD: And, I don't know, the fact that I wasn't there to grieve with my family – that's something that still bugs me for sure. And when I did talk to – 'cause some things were like, the very same day. "I gotta talk to someone about this. I don't wanna hold onto this." My advisor scheduled a call with one of the counselors here on campus. Talked to them. Got in touch with the dean of student life here on campus. And Hopkins paid for my ticket to go home.

[1:30:00]

In hindsight, I should've taken a semester off. I shouldn't've forced myself to go through with just everything that comes with being a student here at Hopkins. But it was one of those things to where I didn't wanna acknowledge weakness in a sense. I mean, maybe that comes with growing up in the hood or just how I was raised. I don't know if it's innate. I don't know if it's something that – I don't know, something that's innate. But it's something that I have. I know that's a quality about myself.

This happened the first week of November and I didn't go back until Thanksgiving break. Just because I thought, "I don't wanna miss class. I don't wanna put myself in a position that's anything worse than what I'm going through right now academically." So I kinda halfway did everything until Thanksgiving break. I went home, shed a lotta tears, got a lotta hugs, went to the funeral. Was lucky enough to deliver a eulogy. Came back. Finished the semester.

And I'd mentioned this before, but we're all a lot closer because of it. I mean, whether it's with my parents, my siblings, my cousins. I feel like even people in general. I walk away from that time of my life with just a really deeper appreciation for human life in general and mortality. Yeah.

KD: I'm really glad that you were able to get home. And thank you for sharing that with me. Were there other times throughout Hopkins that you were able to go home?

AD: During the summers. So, I never went home for spring break or Thanksgiving break. But I always made a point to go back home during the summers. Just because I felt so close to my family that I didn't really wanna be away from them longer than I had to. And when I would go back, I'd usually take up odd jobs. Whether it be as a tutor or as a high school coach or as a *[laughs]* – one of my brothers works security at a weed shop. And he'd also run a valet business on the side with some of the people that he'd meet

through his work there. So I'd spent a day during the summer working with him as a valet out in Bel Air in LA. And not relevant to my academic experience, but I've got some fun stories that I can share because of that.

KD: I can't even imagine.

AD: I'll tell you: the most consistent job that I held was as a high school coach. I coached cross country during the summers.

KD: Back at Paramount?

AD: Back at Paramount High School. Yeah. That was a ton of fun. Got to work with some athletes that were actually freshmen when I was a senior on the team. So, being able to interact with them, give them some pointers, being able to kind of guide their performance and help them make progress in the sport was something that I was really grateful for.

KD: This question is back to this idea of a first-generation experience here at Hopkins. You've mentioned the Hop-In program. Are there other initiatives that you found helpful or is there any way that you think the university could improve or increase its support for first-gen students?

AD: I've asked myself this questions before. And I love Hop-In. Hop-In was there for me when I needed them. I think they pushed me in ways that I needed to be pushed. But I just don't think I'm the type of person that benefits from a majority of the things that they offer. And I think that goes for just first-generation programs in general. Just 'cause, like I'd mentioned earlier, that's such a small part of how I identify that I don't feel like I'm in a place to speak about whether or not I can say whether a program should or shouldn't be offered. Like, "Oh, what's useful to the first-generation experience?" I don't know.

[1:35:00]

I just feel like the first-generation experience is so unique to – and it's not a unique experience. But my version of it is so unique to me, I feel incapable of telling someone what would I have liked to have seen. I don't know what would've been helpful. I don't know what would've been harmful. It's all very confusing. It's something I'm still yet to make heads or tails of. And, I don't know. Maybe I will; maybe I won't.

KD: Right. Well, thank you. You mentioned way earlier, when you were thinking about coming to Hopkins, what your thoughts were about Baltimore. Could you speak about living in Baltimore and what it's been like living here or how it's been different from living in South Central Los Angeles?

AD: I love Baltimore. Oh my goodness. But that was not the case when I first got here. I got here with a very profound sense of enthusiasm for Baltimore, thinking that: "Oh, this is gonna be new. I'm gonna meet people. It's gonna be great." But then I think once homesickness started to kick in, I started to misplace a lot of my frustration onto the city of Baltimore, saying, "Ah, this place sucks! I don't wanna be here. I wanna go home. This place feels like a prison." Again, never vocalized any of this. But was something that I kind of held onto nonetheless.

But I don't know. As I started to go out more into the community and just kind of hang out at different concert venues, visit more parks in my running routes, go to different neighborhoods, go to different museums, go to different movie theaters, just go to different parts of the city, I just kinda realized, "You know what? This isn't that different than South Central" *[laughs]*. It's got a lotta the same things going for it. Yeah, it's got more – at least along the great L, here in Baltimore, I feel more comfortable navigating it to and from. Full disclosure: I don't really feel comfortable walking the streets of South Central. But here in Baltimore, it's not so bad. I'll get by. Yeah, I've had a few instances to where like: "Huh, that was kinda shady."

But I feel comfortable walking around in Baltimore. I like the community here. I like the farmer's market. I don't know. I like the Otto bar. I like Hampden. I like the parks that they have here. I feel like they're all kind of conveniently located at a distance to where I could run from one to the other, and like: "That was a good run."

KD: It's a good route.

AD: Yeah. And people here – whenever I try to strike a conversation with the locals, man, they're just good people. Yeah, some of 'em can be kinda frustrating, especially in traffic. But *[laughs]* I don't know, man. Something about Baltimore – I dig it. I vibe with it. Also – this might be *[laughs]* kinda insignificant. But I feel like one of my most profound experiences here in Baltimore is watching *The Wire*. I mean, I don't know if you're familiar, but it's the TV show, five seasons.

KD: Yes. Did you watch that while living here?

AD: I watched that while living here. So I watched it once – no. I started watching it when I was here upon the recommendation of my friend, Jason. 'Cause it's like, "Bro, you live in Baltimore. You gotta watch *The Wire*." And then I watched it two times back home. And I'm actually in the process of watching it a third time with my friend, Jeff. But it's a show where, by the time it's over, just because a lot of it focuses on places that are here in Baltimore, it makes me feel like I wanna do something that matters to the people around me. I wanna do something that's gonna benefit my community in one way or another. And I feel like watching that show while being a resident of Baltimore just kind of really added to that impact as a show.

KD: Could you speak about your, as you come to the end of your undergraduate experience here, plans for life after Hopkins?

[1:40:00]

Would you want to stay in Baltimore? Or what are you thinking about as next steps?

AD: I love Baltimore. I could see myself living comfortably here. If not for the fact that my family's back in South Central. The idea of leaving them for another community doesn't even seem possible to me. And part of me has gone back and forth about that. This might be kind of a cruel way of saying it, but am I prisoner of my environment to where I feel like I can't leave the hood? But another part of me thinks that it's my responsibility as someone who's able to make it out to go back and try to benefit it in any way that I can. So, I don't know, those are two ideas about going back home that I kinda conflict over a bit. But, yeah, I have to go back home. That I know for sure.

As for career-wise, I told myself, mostly sophomore and junior year, that I was going to join the Jesuit volunteer group once I graduated. But after having a long conversation with a friend that I met through cross country, he kind of called me out on the fact that: "You're not joining 'cause you really want to join a group. You're joining out of fear because you don't think you're capable of handling professional life after receiving a college degree." And it was one of those things where like: "Wow, I didn't know how right you were until you said it." So I backed off on that even though that was what I was banking on for probably more than half of my

time here at Hopkins. So now it's just me thinking: "Hey, I'm just gonna take whatever job pays."

I mean, I wanna use the degree that I'm gonna get 'cause I know that's gonna be more money for myself and my family. But at the same time, I know it's something that: "Well, I'll learn to like it, one way or another." And there was one other thing I was gonna say. Must not've been important.

KD: Okay. Thank you. Would you recommend Hopkins to other students or other first-gen students? And what advice would you give to maybe freshmen about Hopkins?

AD: Don't quit. Just don't quit. I mean, it's hard. It's not easy. Your view of yourself, your view of everything around you, your view of your goals will probably change. Don't quit. Don't quit. Don't quit. That's seriously – don't quit [*laughs*]. Just because – I don't know. I think about the opportunities and the life that I'm gonna be able to live because of my time in this place, and I really hope to god I'm in a position to where I can say, "Hopkins was a pretty difficult experience but if I had to do it all over again, I would just to be where I am right now." I really hope that's the case.

And, you know what? I'm banking on the fact that, worst-case scenario, knock on wood, I graduate with a degree from an elite university, debt free, with a good credit score. I think if that's worst-case scenario, I could tell myself 'we're doing all right, honey.'

KD: That's a great position to be in.

AD: We're doing cool.

KD: My next question you kind of just have already answered, but we always ask participants how they would summarize their time at Hopkins, which might be kind of how you just did, or just in one or two sentences.

AD: You know what? I look at Hopkins as simultaneously the – no. Yes. Simultaneously the best and worst years of my life so far. Worst in the sense that the blow to the sense of confidence I had coming in here is mostly gone.

[1:45:00]

The nervousness that I carry because of my family life. I mean, not only the things that happened to my sister, but just other bad things that have gone on in my family. Another thing too – I didn't talk about that – really had a really big impact on me was: one of my nephews was stillborn. And that – with all of the stock that I put in caring after my family and my nephews, and to have something like that happen that's just out of your control and the sense of powerlessness that comes along with that, and knowing that there's nothing I can do to help my siblings feel better because of it, that's awful. And this goes back to more socially speaking – I don't know if this is relevant at all to what we're trying to get at. But the sense of heartbreak and loneliness that comes with trying to navigate as a student here sometimes – that's pretty not fun.

So there were two instances where – 'cause, yeah, I assume most adolescents have crushes throughout high school that they try to go after and everything. But for me it was always like, "Oh, no, just focus on school. No, focus on school." But here, there were – one junior, one senior year – people that I really thought I loved. And, I don't know, that was a really new experience for me. But having all of that just turned aside, rejected, not reciprocated – like, "Aw, man, that hurts" *[laughs]*. So I don't know. That's small. But it feels big, I guess I should say.

And going home and watching my parents feel helpless – that's not fun. My mom crying because she feels like the best years of her life are behind her – that's something I don't like having to see but I'm grateful that she feels comfortable enough to share with me. Just 'cause I don't know if I could do the same.

But I wanna say the best years of my life because I feel like I'm so much closer to God because of everything. I read the Bible cover to cover while I was here at Hopkins. And, again, I feel like my biggest moments were things that didn't really have anything to do with school; just happened to take place while I was here at school. Reading the Bible. I went vegetarian freshman/sophomore year, went vegan junior year, and staying strong to that ever since. I feel more comfortable in my skin than I've ever been because of it. I feel like I have a much better sense of my limitations and my strengths because of my time here at Hopkins. I learned how to swim while I was here at Hopkins *[laughs]*.

KD: A lot of growth.

AD: Yeah. Definitely a lot of growth. I mean, one of my biggest reasons for coming out here on the East Coast, and coming to

Hopkins in general – I knew it wasn't gonna be easy, and that's what attracted me. Because I told myself, "I'm not coming here because I think it's gonna be easy. I'm coming here because I think it's gonna be a challenge, and I don't think that's something I've had up to this point in my life." So, am I gonna badmouth Hopkins because I got what I asked for? No. I can't. But I do think that I'm a better person because of all of it.

I remember – I don't know where I heard this from. It's probably a cliché. But you grow the most when you step outside your comfort zone. And I think every day here at Hopkins has seen me be outside of my comfort zone on one level or another. So I think, as a result, I've probably made more growth during the last four years than any other four years that you can cherry-pick out of my life so far.

KD: Thank you. That's a really great summation. Those are all of my questions. Thank you so much for being so candid and willing to share your experience with me. Is there anything else you would like to add that maybe we didn't cover in the questions, or anything comes to mind?

[1:50:00]

AD: I feel like this has been really thorough *[laughs]*.

KD: It has.

AD: Not relevant to anything we've been asked, but my favorite memory from the last four years. So, after my sister died it was hard to talk with my dad. She's his daughter, my mom's step-daughter. But me and my dad always made it a point to joke and laugh with each other. That's just kinda how we built our relationship with each other. And after she died, there wasn't any of that. It was very practical conversations for the most part. And I think one of the ways that I kinda dealt with those emotions was getting a little deeper into my running than I usually was. And for the first time, I wanted to do a half-marathon. I told myself, "Oh, this is what you're building towards. You did four years of cross country. Why let your abilities go to waste and just let them atrophy and not do anything about it?"

So I signed up for a half-marathon in Irvine, California, the winter following her passing when I went back home. And I didn't have any way to get there. I think it was about a 40-minute drive from

where we were staying at the time. So I asked my dad if he can drive me. He said yes.

So the race starts at 8:00 in the morning. I planned to be out the door by 6:00 just 'cause we have a drive there; I wanna make sure I warm up properly; I wanna make sure I know where the check-in is and everything. My dad comes in: "AD, I thought you said you wanted to leave at 6:00." "Yeah, I set my alarm for 5:30." "It's 6:00." "Oh, we gotta go!" So I'm scrambling, trying to get everything together: food, clothes, water. We get in his truck. It's dead-end traffic. I could tell he's kind of upset just 'cause he sees that I'm not prepared the way I thought I was gonna be. He was in dead-end traffic; he doesn't know if we're gonna make it on time. He's worried that I just spent all this money to join a race just for what might end up being a dry run.

Traffic lightens up after about ten minutes once the accident clears. We get there. Check-in ends at 7:30. We pull into the parking lot at 7:25. I hope outta the truck and just start running. "AD, where are you going?" "I gotta check in. Check-in's almost over." "All right. Fine. Go, go." So I go, check in at 7:28, go use the restroom, go on back retracing my steps, just trying to look for my dad, see where he is so I could toss my stuff off to him so I can go do my warm-up. Can't find him in the crowd. It's a big crowd. I think maybe there's about 2,000 people in the race that day. A big turnout. So I go to the truck thinking, "Okay, I'll just open the truck, leave my stuff in there."

Truck's locked. So I'm carrying maybe about 13 pounds of gear on me, roller, rope, stretching equipment, and thinking, "Okay, you know what? I'll just warm up with all of this on me right now. I'll see my dad at the starting line, pass it off to him, and then just run the race like normal." So: warm up. Time passes. "Don't see him anywhere. He'll be at the starting line. It's fine." So I'm at the starting line. I'm stretching. Five minutes till the gun goes off. See one of the race officials. "Hey, do you guys have lockers or anything that I can store my equipment in while I run the race?" "No. Sorry, guy. We don't. Hopefully you could pass it off to anyone that came here with you?" "Yeah, I'll do that. Thanks" *[laughs]*.

So, gun goes off in a minute. Dad's nowhere to be seen. And I've got a gallon of water with me. So I just think, "Let's just empty that so I'm not carrying that with me during the race." And I run the whole race with a duffel bag, a thermos clipped to the duffel –

[1:55:00]

bag, a water also clipped to the duffel bag as well, and I stuff my sweats in the duffel bag. But people were looking at me. I'm getting pointed at. I'm getting laughed at. And, don't get me wrong, I think it's funny too. I'd laugh if I was them. I think they'd be pretty weird not to laugh. And I run the whole race like that. And it's challenging just 'cause it's clunky; you got all this stuff –

KD: Awkward.

AD: – just shifting around you, all this weight that I'm not used to being displaced on my shoulder. I start cramping up halfway through.

I don't stop though. And there's this one older gentleman, looked about maybe be in his mid-40s, kinda notices my situation, runs with me. We're battling, doing a little back-and-forth run, mile seven through ten. I'd say around the 11th mile, he surges, takes the lead between the two of us. I can't keep up. And then he just looks back: "Get your ass up here!" "I'm running." And I stick with him for maybe another half mile. But he takes off. And at this point, I just want it to be done. This did not go the way I wanted it to. I know I'm not gonna hit the time I wanted.

And as I'm coming up on that final straightaway, I see my dad. My dad sees me. We make eye contact. And that was the first time I'd seen him laugh since her passing. And that made it all –

KD: All worth it.

AD: Yeah. So. *[Laughs]*. Making fun—"you know how stupid you look?" *[laughing]*. Yeah. Just having that conversation on the way back home. That was the best thing that happened the last four years: being able to laugh with him again.

I guess this just serves to emphasize the fact that most of my best memories don't really have anything to do with Hopkins *[laughing]*. But I'll still probably look back at this time and make some loose association, nonetheless.

KD: Okay *[laughs]*. Well, thank you so much, again, for sharing your story. And that's all I can say. Thank you.

AD: That was fun *[laughs]*.

KD: Okay. We're back.

AD:

One particular experience that I did want to describe was a project that I had sophomore year at the end in one of my computing classes I was taking at the time. So, again, like most of my other classes, it was a class where I completed the assignments but I could always tell that I was always one or two steps behind kind of the learning curve for the class, where kind of expectations were. I'd gotten probably a grade that would translate into low *Cs* and high *Ds* on most of the exams. But there wasn't gonna be a final for this class. Our professor had announced that we would be doing presentations as well as a coding project instead, which we would be I think developing algorithms to de-noise images that he would provide. De-noising meaning just make it less blurry, make it more readily visible and clear.

So I was working with two other students from the class, people that I didn't really know them beyond name. And as we were working on the assignment, we're going through the common struggles of: "Okay, how're we gonna do this? What do we wanna do? How are we gonna implement it?" That kinda thing. The whole time, me feeling very lost. Just because not only are we working with a conceptual knowledge that I'm not fully understanding but now I'm applying a conceptual knowledge that I don't really understand.

[2:00:00]

But, again, it was one of those things where I made a constant effort. I really wanted to do it. Not only for my sake but when you're in a project, you don't wanna upset the people that you're working with either. And the day of the project, the presentation went fine. I'm pretty comfortable with giving presentations for the most part. So I was able to at least put on the guise that I was very confident about what I was talking about [*laughs*].

But the day – so, the way he wanted to grade the coding assignment was that we'd submit it through him through e-mail and then he would interview everyone in the group one by one and ask them pretty simple questions about what they saw in the code. And I thought, "Okay. Well, I don't know if I'm too familiar with the details but I think I know enough about the overarching process in order to get a somewhat respectable grade on that portion of the final."

So that day two other people go into – so it's three members in the group. First group member goes in, comes out maybe 10, 15

minutes later. "Okay, next person." Person goes in; 10, 15 minutes later: "Okay, that was done. That was pretty easy. Should be fine." "Oh, okay, cool." So I'm feeling excited because they're saying it's really nothing I should worry about. So I go in, exchange pleasant greetings for the most part to start with. Then he asks me about one line or couple of lines of code in particular. And I give what I think is a correct answer. And then he replies by asking the same exact question. And I give maybe the same conceptual answer with a different wording. And then after a slight pause, he says, "All right, I'm gonna ask you to step out of my office, take a few minutes to think what you're really trying to say, and then come in when I ask you so that you can give me your real answer."

And that came as kind of a shock. But I just kinda rolled with it. I'm trying to be polite. I feel like this is an interview setting. So part of the grade is how I handle any type of obstacles that're thrown my way in an interview. So I just say, "Okay, thank you. Sure thing. Really appreciate the extra time. I'll be sure to come in when you call me."

So I go out into the hall. Two friends are there. "Hey, he's asking about this. Am I explaining this right?" "Oh, are you saying this, this, and that?" "Yeah. That's how this works, right?" "Yeah. But you know what? He didn't really ask us about that. I don't know what's going on with that." "Huh. Okay. Here, let me just reference the notes real quick. Yeah. I think this is – that does this. All right. We'll try again." So, go back in, asks me the same question. I give a new response, only to get the same response from him: "All right. I'm gonna give you another five minutes. Really think about what you're saying and then come in when I ask you." Again, maintaining politeness: "Yeah, sure thing. Thanks." It's more of a nervous politeness at this point.

So I go in. And at this point I'm kind of panicking. So I'm just asking my buddies: "Hey, I'm just gonna look something up online. Maybe there's an article that can explain this better than I can. If I cite the article instead of just lifting the explanation, making that can serve as a somewhat decent answer." So I do that. I come back when he calls me. I give my new answer. "Where are you getting this from? This isn't in line with anything that you were just saying a while ago." Pull up my laptop. "Oh, this article, written by this professor, says that this ideally should function like this I assume." "Okay. Well" – him glancing at the article [*gestures*]—you're not recording.

KD:

Right.

[Crosstalk]

AD: Him glancing at the article that I'm presenting to him on my laptop, he then looks at me and says, "Whoever wrote this is an idiot. So, really go back, think about what I'm asking you, and just give me an answer." So at that point it's just like: "Is there something in my notes that he's specifically asking for? What's going on?" So I'm just flipping through pages.

[2:05:00]

I come up with something that's vaguely reminiscent of maybe concepts that you'd pick up in Calc 2 that I think kind of explain what the code's trying to do since there's some integration involved. And I go back to him. And now that I'm spitting calculus concept back at him, he responds by saying, "Where did you learn calculus from? Who taught you calculus?" Give him an honest answer. "I learned calculus in room 32 of Paramount High School from Mr. Polhemus." "Okay. Well, it's a good thing you didn't learn it here. Because that'd be pretty embarrassing if you're a product of this math department."

So I could handle being belittled myself. But him belittling someone I respect – that was harsh. And I just shut down after that. Halfway answered all of his questions, didn't really feel like making eye contact. Even when it was all said and done and I kinda went in for that final handshake that seals the deal, I could tell there was no enthusiasm from either party in regards to that. And, yeah, I went to the stall across the hall and I cried for half an hour.

And I feel like after that, I don't think I ever asked for help from any professor. I think that just kinda shut that out of me. And it's weird too. Because the professor I'm talking about – he's not at this university anymore. He was actually let go because apparently he was being verbally abusive to one of his TAs while he was here.

KD: Wow.

AD: But I don't know. I feel like I had made a halfway decent effort at reaching out for help for my academic struggles here at Hopkins, whether it be through going to office hours, going to help rooms, signing up for pilot programs. And they all kind of helped a little bit. But after that experience, I – nothing. I just wasn't comfortable asking help from superiors.

KD: What year did you say this was?

AD: This was sophomore year this happened.

KD: Wow. That's really too bad. And I kind of don't blame you. That doesn't sound like a very positive – it was not a positive, welcoming learning environment.

AD: Yeah. And it was one of those things to where, at the time, of course you kinda think, "Dam, why am I like this? Why am I so stupid? Why am I not getting it? Why am I not achieving this standard that's set before me?" But it wasn't until a lot of reflection that I kinda came to the conclusion that: that wasn't really about me.

KD: It wasn't. No. Not at all.

AD: Yeah.

KD: Well, thank you for sharing that.

AD: Yeah. I felt that was – 'cause I look back – I know that years from now when I look back at Hopkins, that's gonna be something I could remember pretty vividly.

KD: Unfortunately.

AD: Yeah.

KD: Well, again, I'm sorry that happened.

AD: We ended this on a good note [*laughing*] but I feel like it wouldn't be complete if I didn't share that.

KD: No, that was a formative – we want honest reflections, positive or negative. So I'm glad that you shared that with us. And I hope that – you said he doesn't work here anymore. But I hope wherever he goes, it doesn't happen again.

AD: Yeah. Fingers crossed.

KD: Well, thank you.

AD: You're welcome.

[End of Audio]