"PM"

Interviewed by Allison Seyler

March 6, 2020
AS: My name is Alison Seyler and I am here today with “PM” on March 5th, 2020 at the Eisenhower Library, and we are conducting first generation college student oral history interviews. Our first questions for you today are where were you born, and if you could please tell me a little bit about your family?

PM: Okay, I was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, but I only lived there for one year and I moved to South Florida when I was around one. And so, I was mainly raised in Parkland, Florida, and my family very big. So, my mom and dad were raised in Jamaica, my dad from the really rural part of Jamaica, my mom from the city, and they both raised in very impoverished, I guess, environments, and then they came up here as adults.

So, on my mom’s side I have five siblings, and then on my dad’s side I have a sister as well. And I guess the age range, we’re all five years apart, so I’m 21 and my brother's 26, and then my sister is 31 and then my oldest brother is in his mid-thirties, late to mid-thirties, and then I have one younger brother who's 19 and then my sister is 20, so it's kind of all over.

AS: Yeah, that's a lot, a full house for sure.

PM: Yeah, and my parents are separated, so I mainly lived in Florida with my mom, and then I saw my dad during winter break usually, when he lived in New York, but now he moved back to Jamaica and then my mom's moving back as well.

AS: Could you tell me a little bit about your parents’ educations?

PM: Yes, so they went to high school, in Jamaica they call it think “sixth form.” So, after middle school-ish, that's when the government stops paying for your school, then you have to find

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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, worldwide pandemic (COVID-19). These interviews represent students’ reflections on their time at JHU prior to facing many adjustments, including completing their last semester of college online.
tuition to pay for your school. So, then you go up to high school, and then if you want to go past that, it’s usually the college level there, but they stopped at high school and now they do real estate stuff. So, my dad has a business where they build houses and rent them out to people, and my mom's in the same business.

AS: Wow, that's really interesting. So that's what they ended up doing for their occupation?

PM: Yeah, and they still do that, to this day.

AS: Yeah, cool. I guess most of the time, that type of thing is certifications rather than -

PM: Yeah, so, it’s weird. I never thought about it, but now I think about it I’m, if they were doing that here, they probably would need a college degree or something. But in Jamaica, I don't know, I'm not sure if they ever got tested or got certification or anything, but yeah.

AS: I guess it’s a little bit less formal, maybe.

PM: Yeah, definitely, and there's a lot of, the main tenants are Americans usually if they're working in companies that are trying to expand because they have Burger King and Pizza Hut over there and stuff, so they’ll have Americans there a lot of times, so they usually live in those houses.

AS: Interesting. Okay, so you did talk a little bit about what your parents do professionally. So, I guess the next question we have is if you could tell us a little bit more about the towns and places you grew up in, maybe what Parkland was for you?

PM: Yeah, so, okay, Bridgeport, I don’t really remember, but I know it’s mainly Jamaicans, a lot of Jamaicans either go to Connecticut and New York or Florida, and those are the Jamaican hotspots. And then I lived in Weston until I was five, but I barely remember that. So, Parkland was five to college, it's basically, it’s a predominantly white small town. I mean, it's known now because of the horrific event there, but when I knew…it's a very rich area definitely, like the median income is six figures, that’s a whole thing in itself. And it's predominantly Jewish, I definitely went to a lot of Bat Mitzvahs, B'nai Mitzvahs in seventh grade. That was the highlight, so yeah, rich, Jewish, white town. So, we're right next to Boca Raton, and that's where a lot of snowbirds live, a lot of elderly people, so there's a lot of elderly people in the area.
AS: Yeah, yeah. [laughs]. So, when you were in Florida, what was your high school experience?

PM: Yeah, so kind of the same stuff. It was a pretty big high school, around I think 4,000 or 3,000-something people, and it was the only high school in Parkland, so everyone in Parkland went to that high school, and then some people from the neighboring Coral Springs went to that high school. And I was kind of an outlier, I’m still an outlier from my family, because they didn't take AP courses or any of that stuff, like starting from when I was way younger, I was always in classes that they weren't in. So, it was kind of really random, but yeah, so I was in a lot of AP courses, I think I took ten totals. [both laugh]

AS: Wow, that’s impressive!

PM: Yeah, our high school is kind of on the competitive edge, the competitive side. They had rankings and everyone is 752 and you had a number in that class and you knew your number, everyone else knew all the top people’s numbers.

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I don't know, I thought it was more cutthroat than here, which is really funny. Yeah, and then I played soccer. I played travel soccer growing up. So, I was on the varsity team for two years, but then I realized I didn't want to play in college because I wanted to be premed, so I stopped. And then I got a job, so that took up when I usually played soccer, and I guess otherwise I was in national honor society, the math honor society. What else did I do in high school?

AS: It was an overall positive experience?

PM: Yeah, it was really positive, yeah, I really liked it. My teachers, my teachers are really good. They were really motivated, but I feel that’s because I was in the more advanced courses, I’ve heard different things from people in I guess the regular courses than the AP ones, like they weren’t as invested. And something I didn’t know that they actually paid for us to take AP tests and I didn’t realize that other students at other places paid for themselves to take the AP testing.

So, it's definitely a very well-funded and I think it had a lot of resources that prepared me for life here. They even had an SAT
mini prep course thing and we all took the PSAT paid for and stuff like that. So, I didn't realize that was a privilege that I had having so many resources within my high school.

*AS:* Yeah, that's impressive. So, when you were in high school, did your parents share with you their thoughts on education and maybe you know, what they wanted for you in the long run?

*PM:* Yeah – kind of, but not really, because like I said I was an outlier from when I was little. So, my mom never had to look if I was doing my homework, I would *always* do it. I read a lot when I was in elementary school and middle school and stuff, so, she would always be on my brother's like “Do your homework, do this, do that.” But I'd just come home and do what I have to do. So, she always knew, so, it's kind of weird because she always knew I was doing well, and then I remember one time, there's this gem math program that you're in starting in sixth grade. So, you take pre-algebra in sixth grade and then algebra and then geometry two years ahead, and you can't really, once you come out of it, you can't, there's no way to go back in it because you’d just be behind. So, in fifth grade, so in elementary school I wasn't tested as gifted and there’s a whole I was going to skip a grade thing, but then I didn't do that. And then so when I got to sixth grade, I remember jumping from fifth grade regular to pre-algebra and everyone else was tested gifted.

And so, they had a little bit more background and I was just like, “I can’t do this. I want to drop out.” And I remember my mom was like, “No, you can do it.” But I was just so tired. I remember, it's funny now because it's like when you're multiplying, there's that little dot in the middle. I didn't realize that was a multiplication sign, and that just threw me so off and I was like, I can’t do this.

*AS:* It’s kind of ironic.

*PM:* I know, because of where I am. And yeah, but she really motivated me. She believed in me that I could do it, and then I stuck in that program. So, then I was able to go all the way up to AP Calc in high school, and if I came out starting in sixth grade, I wouldn't have, you're just not able to go up to that level. Yeah, so, she really motivated me there.

But I think other times I was just like, I'm kind of a perfectionist, I always strive to do the best. I take the hardest classes myself. So, she was always like, “Okay, I'm not worried about PM. I'm not worried about her. I’ll focus more on her brother,” stuff that.
AS: Yeah. Did your dad, so obviously your mom kind of expected you to go to college. Was that something your dad expected, or did he ever talk to you about that?

PM: No, not really. When it came to academics, we were all just like, “Oh, she's good.” I wanted to be a doctor since I was little, so they knew that was the path I was going to take eventually, but yeah, so it was kind of expected.

AS: Very self-motivated it sounds like, that's awesome. I guess maybe a related question, do your siblings attended university or did they attend college?

PM: Okay, so, my older, one of my older brothers went to, he went away to school, but he'd never finished it. So, he went to a four-year school, but he stopped after his sophomore year. And then my sister’s the only person with a degree, but she went to community college first and then took a few years off. So, it took like, I think she got around seven years after, and then my youngest brother, he stopped going.

He was going to go to community college and then he decided that wasn't the path he wanted to take. It’s also kind of weird because just a few weeks ago, I was eating dinner with my friend and her family when I was visiting her and, well, I don't know the family that I was with, she knows them, and then we were just having small talk and they're asking me about my siblings and they're like, “Oh, what colleges did they attend?”

I feel like that's a common question, but when they don't really attend college or they didn't attend college and it’s like, “Oh yeah, they stayed local.” So, it’s weird because I guess Hopkins is such a huge name college, so they assume that because a lot of people’s siblings here go to top colleges as well. So, it's weird that my siblings, they didn't attend or took longer or just stopped going, so yeah.

AS: Yeah, I mean, everybody's story is different, so I don't think everyone absolutely has to go to college, but that’s a really valid point that you’re around, you’re in an environment where it’s sort of this expectation, right?

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PM: Yeah, people are like, “Oh, my sibling goes to Harvard, and my brother goes to Princeton.” I’m like, “What?”

AS: Yeah, it’s slightly intense. So how did you decide to attend Hopkins?

PM: Yeah, so my oldest sister, one of her closest friends went to Cornell and then Cornell Law, so, she helped me a lot with my college application. I don’t think I would have been able, like I wasn’t even going to apply to Hopkins, it wasn’t on my list or anything, and her parents and her sisters all went to Cornell, so that was a thing, like a family thing.

AS: Wow!

PM: Yeah, so, she was like, “Yeah, you get good grades and all your stuff.” And I was like, I don’t know, I don’t really know anything about Hopkins. I knew it was good for medicine and stuff, but she helped me make a list and with all my essays and she still helps me to this day, I’m just so thankful. She’s helping me with my med school stuff and it’s just nice because she had the experience, she went to a four-year elite institution like that and helped her sisters get in. She helped me write my essay and everything, and it was just, I just don’t think I would have been able, because I didn’t really have that support otherwise. Even through the guidance counselors, although they were like a resource, there’s just so many students. So, I didn’t even get that through them. So, I think without her, I wouldn’t even have – no, she pushed me to apply here and I was like, “Oh, okay. I guess.”

AS: I think it helps to have somebody who knows the system or knows the structure on your side. So, what was the reaction of your family when you sort of announced or told them that you were accepted and that you decided on Hopkins?

PM: It was weird. So, I was going to a scholarship dinner for another school, I was in the car going there. So, I opened the email. I was like, “Oh, I got the email.” And I opened it and I was just, I was driving with my sister, she was driving me down and I just was, “Oh my god, I got into Hopkins.” I was like, “What?” But we were both driving so we couldn’t be like screaming and everything.

But I was just, so, I was really shocked. I knew I did well in school and I had a job, and I played sports and stuff, but I just didn’t really expect it because it’s such a good school. And then I had to forget about it for a second, because I was going to talk about how much
I love this other school to get their scholarship, so, it was really weird, the timing, but I was really happy and then my friends are really happy for me and stuff that.

*AS:* Yeah, I guess you were still at the time kind of feeling out vibes for acceptances elsewhere. So, when you, was there ever any question about the distance since you’d be moving from Florida?

*PM:* Yeah, kind of not. Okay, so I got a full ride to a school in Florida and it’s a good school, but my mom was like, “Yeah, I'll just drop by when I'm going to the mall. And then I was like, “No.” And honestly, I think it was that. I've never been to Baltimore before. I went to D.C. for a soccer tournament, but I'd never been to Baltimore, but it was just my mom thinks she's going to stop by and all that stuff.

And I was like, well, I don't know about all that. So, I was looking at other D.C. schools actually, so it was really random that all the way from Florida. But I have one kind of uncle, he's not a real uncle, but he’s in Silver Spring. So, it was kind of close, but I wasn't, I don't know, I wasn't worried about distance as much as I probably should have been a little bit, yeah.

*AS:* I know some parents are sticklers for that. So, what were the first few weeks of your experience like at Hopkins? You know, what was the transition coming to campus like, you know, moving to a different state and city?

*PM:* Yeah, so, we drove up, which I definitely wouldn't recommend it. I was like 16 hours or something.

*AS:* Oh my gosh.

*PM:* Yeah, but I did a pre-orientation, which was probably one of the best decisions I've ever made at Hopkins. Wait, can I say the name of the one I did?

*AS:* Yeah, absolutely.

*PM:* Okay. So I did JUMP and it's Johns Hopkins Underrepresented Medical Professions, but they also have one called Hop In, which I was debating, but that when you come in the summer and you take a class, and I didn't want to leave home that soon. So, I did the one that was just a week before. So, I got to move into my dorm early and stuff, which I liked, and then they took us to a cabin.
So, we said bye to our parents, but then we're going to see them in a few days, so it was kind of weird. And they took us to a cabin and they took away our phones, so we had to talk to each other and it was just really nice because I didn't, it was all underrepresented students and the girls that I met at that are still my best friends to this day. We’re going on a spring break trip together.

\textit{AS:} That’s amazing.

\textit{PM:} We’re still so close. Yeah, and then they just showed us all the resources and all the tools that we have at Hopkins and the advisors even came on the retreat and advise us on what classes that we had scheduled. So, yeah, I think that really started my experience really well. And I really liked my roommate, we matched on the roommate quiz thing and she was foreign, so she went to boarding school. But yeah, I think really liking her and then having my friends from that pre-orientation, I thought it was smooth socially-wise, because there's a lot of events for us, the Black Student Union and the other culture groups put on a lot of events the first week.

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So, we always had things to do and it just seemed really fun, so that was nice. And then academically, chemistry was \textit{so} hard. It was just, it was a unique course, I don't think they have it anymore, but it was for people that had limited background in chemistry to take Chem I and Chem Lab together, so it was smaller, it was only 20-something students. So, it was better that way, but I don't know, I just didn’t…it was very hard. And then I think it even kind of hindered me when I took Chem II because everyone was already used to how to do Chem I and how to do the lab with that person. And since I took it not the easy route but smaller scale, it was definitely harder for Chem II.

But I had covered grades, I'm one of the last people on these archives that had covered grades, so that was very helpful. It didn't do horribly, but that was the worst semester that I've ever done. So, I was really like, I was actually really upset that they took it away because especially kids that are coming from, and they don't really, they didn't even have parents to ask or siblings to ask about advice. I didn't realize that classes changed second semester – no one ever told me that. That was the thing that I guess people assumed that you would know that you'd take different classes in the spring. And I thought it was just like high school, like Bio I and then you go on break and then you take Bio I again, you finish it. So even
just little stuff like that that they don't really explicitly say when they send you all the information was weird.

And I don't know, the lecture sizes I kinda got used to, but I didn't really go to office hours or anything. I didn't really know how to approach that because it was, they’re the professor and they’re standing up there and then going to office hours and they're all chill. It was weird, but I definitely could have used office hours more. But I used Pilot and I think I learned about those resources through JUMP, so that helped me out a lot, but yeah.

AS: So, you mentioned covered grades. So that's something that happens for your first semester as a freshman or it used to?

PM: Yeah, it used to, so it used to happen the first semester you get a satisfactory or unsatisfactory for every single class that you take.

AS: Interesting. Okay.

PM: So, your GPA is 0.0, everyone's GPA and it's supposed to help you transition into college life, and if you don't know what you're majoring in yet, you can explore. I came in biology, but you don't declare it until the end of freshman year. But then I took a public health course and I ended up switching it, not switching it, but I ended up declaring public health.

AS: Cool.

PM: So, with covered grades I liked it because you can learn about your study strategies and how to balance, literally, doing your laundry, going to get food with your friends, going to late night, and studying. And there's just so much stuff to balance, especially when you just moved to a new place and you have no family near you.

So, and they took it away, I think because some people were – I guess it was harming them because they were saying that people weren't creating good study habits and then they were bringing that over to second term or second semester when it actually mattered. But I don't think that was the norm, I don't think that was most people. Sometimes you'd be like, okay, it's covered grades, but it was really a joke because we all, we're all very motivated academically of course. So obviously we don't want to do badly, but it was nice just knowing you had a little blanket just in case something went wrong. And so, it was just really unfortunate that the students here don't have that, I feel they're way more stressed
out about it. I heard them talking about in one of my clubs, they're
talking about how they pulled an all-nighter and I was like, “why
would you do –? I've never pulled an all-nighter here. I don't
recommend it!” Yeah, I don't know, it's really disappointing that
they got rid of that just because a small few were not utilizing it.
And also, when I applied to summer stuff, they had me uncover my
grades anyway, so it still mattered, so, yeah.

AS: Right. It's an interesting, program or I guess policy more like – and
I do think, you know, it probably was very helpful for people
transitioning with the academic rigor for that level.

PM: Yeah, especially for first-gen students. If you don't know anyone
that can explain what's going to happen and you just have so much
more spare time than high school to figure out your study plan and
to be organized, stuff like that.

AS: Yeah. So, when you got here, I guess in the pre-orientation, you
likely met other first-gen students. Do you want to talk about that
at all? And maybe if you guys noticed any differences between you
and other students once you got on campus after pre-orientation?

PM: Yeah, so I didn't meet as many first-gen students as they thought it
would meet. Well, some of them were, but even the ones that were,
had siblings that were in colleges or had siblings that were doctors
and stuff like that. So, I still found a difference because I'm first-
gen and my siblings don't go to college. So, it was like, I don't
know, it was super different still because they could at least talk to
their siblings.

But I think when we got to campus we definitely, because a lot of
us are from kind of similar backgrounds, like we may have went to
a well-resourced high school, but we wouldn’t say we're
financially very in the top top.

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And so, when we came here and people are just, “Oh, I need to do
research.” I didn't even know what research was. I know this is a
research institution, but I don't even know what that really is – like
no one really said what that is – so, then we lived in the dorms.
People were like – “Oh yeah, I'm doing research. I’m doing this.” I
was like, “Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.” They’re really intense. People
were as soon as they come here doing research or doing this or in
this club and this club.
But yeah, I think we did notice a little bit of a difference because I feel like we were super collaborative but some people weren't, especially our little chem class because there's only 20-something of us. So, when I went into the normal chem that was really weird because there’s a lot of people and, I don't know, people just weren't as collaborative in that class as opposed to the first semester one and the first semester one was actually a lot of JUMP students in there.

**AS:** Yeah. So, obviously, you know, you decided to major in public health. Could you tell us a little bit more about that and how you chose that program? And maybe it's a dual part question – what do you think is valuable about that major?

**PM:** Yeah, so I took a course with Peter, can I say his name? Peter Beilenson and he used to be the health director of Baltimore City, which is a huge deal. And I remember we went on a few field trips and I think that was the most shocking. So, one was we had to go to Roland Park and then we had to go to an area next to, we took the Jimmy, so it was next to the hospital, but we had to walk a few blocks and then we just had to describe the built environment, what we saw.²

So, we went to Roland Park, it kind of looked like Parkland. It was just like there's a bank, there's a Whole Foods, there’s bicycle lanes, you can walk, people are walking their dogs, people left their bicycles outside, I was like, okay, yeah, I’m used to this.

Then we went to the other part, the part by the hospital, and it was pawn shops, everyone was outside, there was a lot of fast food and stuff like that, and he made us write an essay comparing the two. And it wasn’t a huge difference, at least in my mind, I don’t know because – so I go to Jamaica every summer, or used to before summer internships – like growing up, and since my parents are from a poor area, they brought us back to there.

So, I think I always thought of poor areas like that’s Jamaica, violence and crime, that’s Jamaica, because that's what happened when I went to Jamaica, but then when I was in South Florida, it was the only thing weird was alligators. You can jog at night, it's fine and it looked like Roland Park. So, I think I thought about all those issues were in developing countries and didn't really realize that it was also in cities, like literally a few miles away from where I was living.

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² The “Jimmy” refers to the Johns Hopkins University shuttle service available to students, faculty, staff, and affiliates (it includes stops near the Hospital campus in East Baltimore).
Obviously, I knew there is poor areas but didn't realize how, how close it is sometimes and how some areas are like developing countries. Some areas in America are like developing countries elsewhere, and just the resources that they have. So, that trip really sparked that thought. And then the other one we had to go on a needle exchange truck, which is like a harm reduction approach that people that are suffering from opioid use disorder, there's no questions asked. They just come in and it was really shocking. They came in with a bag of needles, probably 60 needles, and they put them in the sharp waste bin and then they get 60 clean needles, like no one asks any questions. Of course, we know what they're doing with it, but we don't want to be like, “Oh, you shouldn't do this. You’re a bad person.” because they're not going to come and that's a spread of disease and stuff like that.

So, I think just hearing that, and while on that truck, the worker, she actually was a, like she recovered from having that disorder. And so, she was just talking to us about how that was and how people treated her. So, I think that just really sparked like, “oh my gosh, public health is really cool” because I'm also pre-med. So, it was kind of like, I like understanding why people were getting sick and what barriers to care they had. Even just walking around the hospital, they were so close from the hospital, but when you walked to the hospital, the streets are much cleaner. There are bicycle lanes and there's water fountains and there’s places to walk your dog, but just a few blocks over when a physician will tell you, “You need to lose weight, you need to work out more.” But do they have access to a gym? Is it a safe environment for them to actually work out?

So, I think going into my medical profession instead of just giving that vague advice, knowing that they're not actually able to do that, I want to be able to do research on why and help them, give them solutions that they can actually achieve and not just generic advice that only people that have access to a gym can use.

AS: Sure.

PM: Yeah, that was really long, but yeah, I really like public health.

AS: Yeah! It's interesting to hear you talk about this “enlightenment” almost that you experienced when you started here. That's really kind of beautiful. So, speaking of the program of study, you did mention one of the professors that you had. Are there any other
professors or classes that you would highlight from your experience?

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Yeah, so I actually studied abroad during intercession, and Dr. Mieka Smart went here and she was a public health undergrad here. So, it was really nice seeing what she does now, how she's using her degree now, even though she's not like, she wasn't premed or anything, but how she's using her degree otherwise, but she still teaches this Uganda trip. So, I went last January for intercession and it was amazing! It was so fun.

I've never been to, I have only been to Jamaica and I went on, I went to Europe once, but it's like Uganda was a whole different world. It was actually pretty similar, I don't know, I found a lot of similarities, I kept comparing it to Jamaica like, oh, we have this here too, we have this here and I really liked it and she is just, I don't know. She's just such a great professor.

We had reflection sessions every day because it was like a lot to take in, especially some, I know some people that went with us have, one person was from like a rural area and she's never been out the country. So, a lot of the stuff was a shock for her and I was like, “Oh yeah, that happens in Jamaica.” I was like the cultural person like, “Oh yeah, that happens in Jamaica too, like it’s fine.”

But yeah, so the professor handled, I feel like she handled a lot of situations really well, and we stayed in a rural homestay and that was an experience,

AS: What is a rural homestay?

PM: It was in Rakai, the Rakai district in Uganda, and it was very rural. I've been to the area where my dad's grown up, but now it’s getting a little more built, they have toilets and everything, but this place was, it was like pit latrines, they had goats in the backyard and stuff that. Once it’s nighttime, you don't really go outside anymore. And I think the main part for me is there was no refrigeration, so, and they lived on a farm, it was a lot of subsistence farming.

So, we were out there, like we picked the tomatoes and then we cooked the tomatoes, and then we ate the tomatoes. At one point, she gave us so much food and I didn't finish it and I felt so bad because there's no refrigeration, it was just going in the trash and I really wanted to eat it because I picked the food and I cooked the
food and I just really wanted to eat it, but I couldn’t, I was so full. I don't know, it just showed me, like there's no running water and everything.

So just showed me how much I truly take for granted. I know that sounds cliché, but how much I truly take for granted. We couldn't even put it in the refrigerator, eat it, warm it up, and eat it tomorrow, that wasn't an option. So, it was really like, it just showed me how much we waste here, basically, but the professor was really nice.

AS: That's awesome. That sounds like a great program. And I assume it was funded?

PM: Yeah, I applied to the Gilman Scholarship. It's a national scholarship and they try to have people study abroad in unique places, yeah.

AS: Okay, great. So obviously you have to live someplace while at Hopkins, could you talk a little bit about your dorm experience and maybe if you live in an apartment now, I know freshmen and sophomores have to live on campus.

PM: Yeah, so my dorm experience was really nice, I really liked my roommate. Sometimes we had passive-aggressiveness with our suitemates because we felt that they were kind of messy in the bathroom, but I don't know, I guess that taught us just to communicate because we would just be passive aggressive in group chats and they'd be passive aggressive back. So, we really learned just to talk it out and say what you are comfortable living with and then they can say and then try and find a medium. So that was something different than what I grew up with.

And yeah, I really my dorm experience and it was near everything that I needed. And then off campus transition I thought was kind of weird because they kind of kick you off campus. I wanted to stay on campus and not be an RA, but I wanted to live in a dorm still because, I don't know, I just felt more comfortable doing that, like one of the apartment-style dorms, but they said that the incoming class is too big, so there was no space for upperclassmen to live on dorms and other upperclassmen I knew lived in dorms, so that's why I had that idea in my head. So, of course “90” is the place to live, like “Woo! 90,” and you have to sign up for it super early, but it was just really expensive. And my friends are all living there because some of them are on scholarship where they have different types of funding. And I was like, “Oh, I can't live there.” It's very
expensive. So, I had to, I use the off-campus housing office a lot, I really like them and they helped me find other places.

So now I live alone and I really like that. It’s one of the best decisions I've ever made. Yeah, and I can see my friends whenever I want. At first the first month I was like, hey, it's kind of lonely, but then I started to really like it because once you put something there, it's there and it’s your own space and it's nice to decompress and just come back to your own space.

AS: Yeah, I think it also allows you to have a little bit of your own schedule and you know, you don't have to answer to anyone.

PM: Yeah, definitely.

[0:30:00]

AS: Yeah. So, were you involved in any clubs or activities while you're here? Student groups? Can you talk about that?

PM: Yeah, so I'm mainly involved in Knotty by Nature and I'm the Vice President, it's a natural hair club. So, it started two years ago, it started my sophomore year by two freshmen. And then I joined a secretary last year and then this year, I'm Vice President.

Basically, so like natural hair in the black community has been, there’s a trend or a different, I’ve always worn my hair natural, but a lot of times, black women have felt that they wanted to straighten their hair and use harsh chemicals and stuff that. Even my sister, it just happened that my mom didn't do that to me, so just really about promoting and accepting your hair for what it is. And I don't know, I really like it because just a sense of everyone just talking about their bad experiences and then learning about their hair.

We have a lot of guest speakers and we learn about different products you can try and some of the more important events I think that we did, there's this Crown Act that's in legislation now to try and end hair discrimination in the workforce where people that may have locks or they might feel that it's unprofessional and stuff like that, or they don't get certain jobs. I know at Hooters and stuff, you can't have braids, which is a staple kind of in the black community with the hair. So that we had a legislator come in and talk about that. So that was something I felt that was really impactful other than just trying new products, stuff that.
And then tomorrow actually we're going to an elementary school, because I feel it starts very young learning to love yourself and love your hair, so, we're doing a, there's this short film, that won, I think I won an Oscar this year called *Hair Love*. I don't know if you've heard of it.

AS: Yeah, I've heard of it, I love it.

PM: So, we have an event about that. So, we're showing it tomorrow with the kids and we're just going to talk about the experiences about people, what have they said and their favorite shows and whether their favorite shows, people have natural hair and stuff that. And just start the conversation early to get them thinking about why they should like it. I think it'd be nice for them to all see us with our natural hair in college, doing good things. So, that was like a new program that I really wanted to do, to go back in the community and talk to little kids and start the conversation while they're young.

AS: Yeah, that's really amazing. That's such a neat and unique sort of initiative to start.

PM: Yeah, and then another club, I'm in Thread, since freshman year. It's a mentoring program where you mentor high schoolers who are low achieving, they're in the bottom 5 percent of their class, and it's usually because of systematic barriers, not because of them. So, I've been with my mentee, the same mentee since freshman year and he was a freshman at the time too, and it's been lots of ups and downs.

But I think, I don't know, I felt really bad because a lot of the things I was learning in my classes, in my public health classes, that they were happening to him, he said his school didn't have air conditioning or they didn't have heat, so they were closing that or their buses were too full and so he wasn't able to get on a bus to school. So, there's a lot of systematic things. So, I could see why some individuals sometimes fall into the life of crime because if there's so many systematic issues with you trying to get education and you feel there's another way and you need money and stuff like that. So, I don't know. It just brought a lot of perspective into my life. So, he's born and raised in Baltimore, so he has lived with a lot of violence and a lot of the stuff that goes on in the city.

But he's actually *so* nice. He's so nice and he's so smart. So, at some points it’s really sad to think about all the things he faces when he’s so smart and if he was anywhere else, he'd be going to a
top school if he had any other upbringing. So, it made me really feel really privileged about my upbringing, although my parents worked hard and they came here, but they were able to give me that opportunity to go to a really well-resourced school and stuff like that. But yeah, we're still Thread mentor and mentee today and his birthday's coming up, so we're doing stuff, yeah.

AS: Great. Is he graduating in May?

PM: He is a little behind because there's lots of ups and downs, but he's doing, yeah, he's doing a reformative school program thing, so hopefully in the summer.

AS: Okay, yeah. Fantastic. That's a, that sounds like a really, really useful program, especially for Baltimore City. There are so many traumatic things that people experience.

PM: And it’s like a family, so, there’s me and a few other mentors, and we all work together, so, he has a lot of people to lean on.

AS: That support. Cool. So, you also mentioned working over the summer. Do you want to talk a little bit more about your internships or jobs that you've had while you've been here?

PM: Okay, yeah. So now I work at the Center for Diversity and Inclusion and I worked there for the past two years-ish. And that's what I do, I work there during the school year, so like 12 hours a week, depending on the week. And then in the summer I've done internships that all recruited underrepresented people in medicine. So, the first one was, it was on Hopkins campus, it was through JUMP, actually.

[0:35:00]

Only JUMP people could apply and it was called Biophysics Research for Baltimore Teens where teens that were like high achieving, so, it was a spectrum of teens I've been working with that were high achieving. They came into the labs in the UTL and we taught them basic biology things and we each had three mentees that we worked in a group. And then, towards the end of the summer, as the mentors, we got to intern in wet labs at the med campus. But I really liked the program, really liked my mentees, but I realized wet lab research it's not for me. And I did not the pipetting all day. It’s just not for me. Yeah. So, then the next summer I looked for something different and I basically just

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3 UTL is short for the Undergraduate Teaching Laboratories.
Googled “summer programs for underrepresented students.” Because I felt that, I mean, of course I could apply to other programs as well, but with those underrepresented programs, I don't know, I built a network of people that are underrepresented in their schools and they have same experiences as me and we're all striving for the same goals, so I really liked that. And I still talk to everyone that I met in my program today.

And so, I did one at Yukon, and it was a health disparities summer research fellowship where I did nonprofit research with a homelessness nonprofit, like fighting against homelessness. So that was way different than wet lab, and I really liked it. I found it really rewarding and they were just doing like a public health approach to end homelessness and putting people in housing first and then getting them the behavioral and medical care they needed instead of doing it vice versa, because if you don't have a house to go to at the end of the day, how are you going to find a job? Stuff like that.

So, I really liked that. And then this past summer, I've done a lot of programs. It's kind of rare, I feel like, to do a program every single summer, but I really enjoyed them, and they all give stipends and they all really advance you in your path, they really motivate you.

AS: I think they also determine what, can determine what you know you don't want to do, right?

PM: Yeah, I know I don't want to do wet lab, so that's what I learned from that one. But I did want to, Sidney Kimmel Medical College in Philadelphia, so that was nice to go and that I can get to go to different cities and meet new people, which I really like.

And that was the MCAT prep course, and that saved me a lot of money because it was completely free, they gave a stipend and they gave us all the MCAT books and a tutor, and we took an MCAT prep course through the program, and there was shadowing involved as well, but it was mainly MCAT focused. So, then I took my MCAT in August after the program.

AS: Okay, that's great. I assume you got your results back by now?

PM: Yeah, I'm not retaking, so yeah.

AS: That's awesome. So, what, I guess that speaks to a little bit about your summers. You mentioned going home at some point, did you go back and forth to Florida during summers or breaks?
PM: I would go right before, because these programs usually started in June, so I would go right before. And then I would just fly to the program from Florida and then I would, sometimes I went back during Thanksgiving, but it’s just super expensive because also Florida is a touristy destination. I would always go back during winter break because that was like a longer time, but Thanksgiving I stayed here for I think the past two years. I just went with my friends that are from the area, I went to have Thanksgiving with them because the flights are just crazy because everyone's going to Disneyworld, I guess.

AS: Right, and Harry Potter World.

PM: Yeah, and Harry Potter World. Even I feel like at normal times, the flights are just crazy to Florida and Fort Lauderdale, it’s just like people are going on cruises.

AS: Yeah, there's a lot of expensive travel. So, can you talk a little bit about what your relationship was like with your family while you've been at Hopkins?

PM: Yeah, I talk to my mom every day – my mom and my sister – we have a girl chat because my brothers get annoyed when we talk in the other one all day long. So, we have a girl’s chat, but yeah, I don’t know. I think it’s kind of rare, but I talk to my mom every day. She texts me “Goodnight” every day and people are like, “That's so weird.” I'm like, “Well, sorry.” Yeah, so, I don't know. I think I'm really like a tight bond with them. I think sometimes she worries, because I'm the only child that went so far or just went away in general. And she knows that I work really hard and stress myself out sometimes about how much I want to strive to get to achieve, so I think she worries about that, but yeah, I talked to her quite a lot.

AS: Yeah, that's a good thing, I think. So, let's see. One of the other things that we're definitely curious about is your support system at Hopkins. So, you know, that could be family, friends. Do you want to talk about that for a minute?

PM: Yeah. So, I think talking to my mom a lot, but then I also feel like she doesn't understand a lot of the things that I do. I remember when I was studying for my MCAT and she’d call me and try and talk for 30 minutes. I'm like, “I need to study.” And she's like, “Oh, the test is not for three months.” And I’m like, “I need to study.
You don't get it.” So of course, nice to talk to her, but it's also nice to talk to friends that are in the same path.

That's why I really the summer programs because they could kind of understand that, especially if their parents weren't in medicine in general. And they could understand what you're going through. So, I think a big part of my support system is definitely my friends I met through JUMP, yeah, that's the definitely probably the biggest support. And also the staff at where I work at OMA, I just sit in their office and just rant about something or just talk to them about something. Yeah. So, yeah, the staff and my friends.

[0:40:00]

AS: Yeah, great. So that does confirm that you've kind of felt supported as a first-gen student. Would you care to elaborate on that? I know you talked about pre-orientation and JUMP, but do you feel like Hopkins has supported you as a first-gen and in your opinion, are there any ways that the university can increase their support for first-gen and FLI students?

PM: Yeah, I think the initiatives with FLI being a thing now, like that network, and I just go back to JUMP, but let me think about general Hopkins. I don’t know, I feel like, because I'm just thinking of professors and just the general talk people have – I don't know, I don't think it's that supportive for first-gen students because, again, people will just be like, “Oh yeah, my parents, I shadowed my parents.” I’m like, “Oh, your parents are doctors, I guess.”

That's very common here. I did not know a lot of people have parents that are doctors, at least one parent. Sometimes they have two, and I'm like, okay, that's so much. But I think it just the type of people that we recruit here. So, I think the initiatives like FLI and finding spaces that you feel really comfortable and just to be like, yeah, I didn't even know that you changed classes in the spring, just to be open. You can laugh about it now, but at the time I was like, “what is this? What's going on?”

So, I think just like, I don't know, I guess it goes to funding because to have those networks and to do the retreat like that, you would need funding. So, I guess the biggest thing Hopkins really could do is fund those types of programs and help them increase reach and increase like, because there's some people if they didn't do that pre-o, they might not know about all of those opportunities.
So just be able to have more people that work in it. because I feel there’s a lot of turnover in those offices, so, I'm not sure why that is… but if it has to do with funding or anything, increasing that so you can have a stable support system throughout your four years, because I know the other program that I mentioned, Hop In, the seniors, my fellow seniors, they've had a different advisor. You get a Hop-In advisor and they've had a different advisor every single year. And my JUMP advisor just left a few weeks ago. So, if that turnover is so big, there’s clearly an issue or that people are just using it, not using it, but people are just there until they figure out what they want to do. So, finding people that are really motivated and stick for a few years so people can have that consistency in college that would be really helpful.

AS:

That's really, really thoughtful feedback. So, I know you also mentioned living in an apartment. Could you talk a little bit more about your life in Baltimore or your life in Maryland? You know how you have interacted, and maybe if there's any historic moments that happened while you were here, you want to talk about? That’s a big question.

PM:

Yeah, let me see. Well, I went to the inner harbor for, my birthday is in September, so I went to the Inner Harbor the first week of school and that was like, I guess “that's Baltimore,” but yeah, I don't know. My friends and I really like trying new restaurants, so we go to brunch a lot, which we're trying to cut down to save costs, but we do go out to eat a lot and I think that's a good way to just explore the city, just by trying different foods at different restaurants.

I realized I don't like crab cakes, which is a huge thing [both laugh]. I know it’s like a huge thing, but it's just too fishy and it just, they're so thick. I don't know, I realized I didn't like them at Spring Fair. But I think through Thread, I've been able to learn and BRBT, that first summer program I did, because those kids were also from Baltimore, so, I'd be like, “Yeah, tell me where is there to go around here?” and stuff that. And then Thread, we went to rock climbing, which I didn't even know that was a place around here.

And so, I think doing those things, I guess they’re more official processes to learning Baltimore by going through the youth, I guess. And I also, so my freshman year before I started working at OMA, I worked at Village Learning Place, which is like an afterschool program where you're a teaching assistant, and those were like third graders. And they actually taught me a lot about
Baltimore because that was my freshman year, and they would tell me, and they had accents, so I learned about the accents there – I learned how to understand the accents.

AS: Nice, Baltimorese.

PM: Yeah, so, they would tell me what they do for fun and stuff that, and their childhoods are just so different than what mine was, because I played soccer growing up, but a lot of them would tell me what they do – kids will just tell you everything. So, I think I learned about Baltimore through formal things like mentoring and working, but also just exploring the city with my friends.

[0:45:00]

AS: Cool, yeah, it’s a good place. So, what does life look after Hopkins for you? You know, you can talk academically, professionally, immediate, or more long-term.

PM: Yeah, so, I'm doing an AmeriCorps service year in D.C., so I'll be moving a little bit, not too far, like 45 minutes.

AS: Congrats! That’s exciting.

PM: Thank you. Yeah, I'm doing “city year,” so I really like, although I'm pre-med, I really like teaching, but I feel there’s a lot of teaching in medicine anyways, and I want to go into pediatrics, so, a lot of my experiences is with little kids and with teens and stuff, because I really like that demographic.

So, I'm going to be teaching for a year in a third through eighth grade classroom, I don't know what year yet. So, I'm really excited about that and it's kind of like a break from academics and it's relaxing. And then, so I'm applying to medical school now because it’s a yearlong interview process, and then I'll be starting in fall of 2021 hopefully. But also, on that note, so applying to medical school.

So even if you are not first-gen but you don't have family in medicine, I just feel there’s so many things that you need to figure out about the application process and about taking the MCAT. I think my summer programs and the advisors, I guess the pre-prof advisors, but more the JUMP advisors have helped me a lot through that path and just budgeting because they can be so expensive. I didn't realize you had to fly to the interviews and get a hotel the night before or an Airbnb nowadays for the interviews.
And that’s not something that the schools pay for?

No, they only pay for – if you get accepted, there's something called “second look weekend” and that's when where they want you to come because they already accepted you, so, they will pay for those. And you could sometimes stay with a student, but just even realizing that you have to buy a suit and you have to be able to have a little book where you can have all your stuff in and look professional, and I feel like I learned a lot of those things through JUMP, because we've had professional retreats and stuff that.

And it just wasn't something I knew about going forward. So now that I'm going to be interviewing in the fall and even, I don't know, I guess this is a tangent, so, the service year that I'm doing, they don't offer that many days off, so I think it's more for like, if you take a gap year, people usually do more lucrative things like consulting because they'll have the spare funds to take time off and go interviewing, but since I'm doing something that's more invested in community service work, it's not really made for interviewing, which is also like a weird balance I’m going to have to…because they don't want you to leave the kids because you're supposed to be their support system and stuff that, which I understand. But also, you're building for your future at the same time. So that's a weird thing that I'm balancing with now and trying to, so hopefully I get a lot of Monday interviews, I can go on the weekend and not miss too many days of the service.

So, it's also weird because I feel like the pre-prof advisors say, “Take gap years, take gap years.” But when they say that they mean like do research or do consulting. Those are the two main paths that they'll ask you about that you're doing and I'm like, “Oh no, I'm doing service.”

Right, it’s not clear.

Yeah.

With the AmeriCorps. Is there a way to set up substitute plans? So, like if you do have to miss a day, is there a teacher?

Yeah, so you get 12 days off, but they're like, “Only use this if you're really sick.” And I'm like, well, I'm going to use these for my interviews, so…but they said it depends on the site. They know that it's only a year and it’s only for people 18 to 24 so it's obviously they're not going to stay there that whole time you're
going to do something after. So, they understand that you’re still building your career and stuff like that. So, they said they can be more flexible, but we’ll see.

AS: Do you want to reveal what schools you're applying to or do you know yet? Do you have any idea?

PM: I know I’m applying East Coast, so you set up the ones that you, not the “safety” because no med school is safety that you'll get in, but the ones that you should get in because you have higher GPA, higher MCAT. So, for me, I guess that’d be like some of the Florida schools, like University of Central Florida and stuff like that, I’m higher just statistics-wise, so I should be getting in.

And then there's ones that you should get in and you'll be fine going there. And so that's like, for me, that's George Washington and D.C. I really like that area, because I'm interested in getting MD MPH and using those, both of those degrees in my career. And then there's ones that are like “reach, reach, reach.” Even if you have the stats, it's still a reach for anyone. So that'd be like University of Pennsylvania for me, yeah.

AS: Great, well good luck.

PM: Thank you.

AS: I think you’ll do well.

PM: This is good prep, actually.

AS: Yeah, lots of reflection. So, do you think overall you would recommend Hopkins to other first-gen students, and is there any piece of advice that you would give them, if they were to start their journey here?

PM: Yeah, I think I would. I had a really good time here. I think, not even, putting it pre-med aside, there are just so many opportunities and there's a lot of funding for things. Like with one of their research posters I did, I had gotten funding from the undergraduate research office to go present it and I presented at Harvard.

AS: Great!

PM: Yeah, and so, I think there are a lot of resources, so, I definitely would recommend it. And although you're first-gen, there’s always, there's going to be obstacles anywhere, you're always
going to be first something, and other first gen people have done it. Like I've done it and I'm almost done! So, I think advice-wise, definitely don't compare yourself to people...I guess only compare yourself to yourself because everyone's coming from a different background. I'm first-gen, but I had a resourced high school. You might be first-gen without a resourced high school, so you can't really compare yourself to me or you can't compare yourself to your roommate and how they're doing.

[0:50:00]

So, I think I had to learn that definitely, because I know that when they give exams back, they put the lowest score and the highest score and the median. I'm like, “well, why are you putting all of that information? I don't need to know I got the lowest score,” stuff like that. I think learning to not compare yourself to people and that you will get to where you want to go eventually, you will.

Yeah, and I think just talking to advisors and upperclassmen a lot because the advisor told me about these programs originally, like the summer programs originally, and I would know nothing about them and leaning on people that have similar backgrounds as you has helped me a lot, just because you know that they're feeling the same way in some classes that you are and you can just rant to them. So, yeah, that’d be my advice.

AS: That’s great. Sort of finding solidarity too.

PM: Yeah, finding a support system.

AS: Yeah, so this is the heavy question. After all this, after the years that you've had at Hopkins, you know, is there a way that you would summarize your time here?

PM: Hmm. I would definitely say it was rigorous. I'll go break it down in themes. Academically it was very rigorous and yeah, it was just very rigorous. There is always a lot to do, especially if you're premed. Of course, you don't want to just think you're checking the boxes, but at some point, you have to, you have to do the research, you have to volunteer, you have to have good GPA, you have to have good MCAT. So, if you know you want to do that, you have to do that. It's just very rigorous. Sometimes you'd be like, okay, I'm dropping out. That's what people joke about. But it's very tough and it'd probably be tougher than high school, wherever you went to high school.
And then socially I had a lot of fun. I had a lot of fun at Hopkins, I made a lot of great friends, but I also think you have to seek out the social activities more. You have to go to the events on campus.

You have to – me and my friends, we rented a Zipcar and went to Hershey Park one night and that was so fun. So, you just have to have a good balance. So, if you know that there’s a formal coming up that you really want to go to, do your work ahead of time and when I say do your work, go to a cubicle, don't just sit with your friends because you won't be able to do it. But yeah, I think I would say it was really rigorous but also very fun. And I met a lot of unique people that have very different interests, which I really enjoy. I want to do MD MPH. Some of my closest friends are interested in neuroscience and Spanish, or one of my friends is in a band, I think that's so cool how we all have different interests, but eventually we're all going to be colleagues in the medical field, which I think is really cool.

**AS:** That’s great. Thank you. We’ve reached the end of our questions. I just want to thank you for interviewing with us. I also like to ask it everybody if there's anything else they want to touch on that they feel like we didn't get to talk about in the interview, so that, so now would be your time to do that.

**PM:** I think we've touched on a lot, yeah.

**AS:** Okay, awesome. Well, thank you very much for your time.

**PM:** Thank you.

*[End of Audio]*