First Generation College Student Oral History Project

RD
Interviewed by Allison Seyler
March 12, 2021
“R.D.” is a member of the Johns Hopkins University graduating class of 2021. In this interview, she discusses the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on her college experience as a transfer student. She discusses her education and future endeavors.

AS: Allison Seyler  
RD: Interviewee

AS: Okay, so with that, I'll go ahead and I'll get started. This is Allison Seyler here with RD on March 12th, 2021. And we're doing a virtual interview for the First-Generation College Student Oral History Project.

So we'd like to start this interview by just acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on the Hopkins community. The questions in this interview were written before the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and therefore do not directly ask how the consequences of this public health crisis changed the experiences of our students. However, we thought it was necessary to begin our interview with a couple of questions related to the pandemic in order to recognize the particularly challenging experiences that our students have faced.

So, with that, I'll just start with a question about – how do you feel the coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience? And what are some challenges or changes that it caused for you personally?

RD: So, it definitely impacted my experience because I was a transfer student, so the pandemic actually happened during my first year at Hopkins, even though I was a junior. So, then I graduate now as a senior, and the COVID pandemic is still going on, so I feel like I lost out on a lot of my undergraduate experience.

Overall, though, classes online have been a little more difficult than in person, which I was not expecting. But overall, the pandemic has kind of just lessened the overall experience, shifted more into academics, and I think my family responsibilities really shot up because of the pandemic. Before, I had mild responsibilities; now I'm the tutor for all my nephews and nieces. So, I think that definitely changed with COVID-19.

AS: Yeah, it's been a lot of adjustments for everyone, it's difficult. So, I think it would be really helpful if we moved a little bit backward in time to just provide some context for how the pandemic impacted you. Could you tell us where you were born, and tell me a little bit more about your family?

RD: So I was born in Havana, Cuba, but I came here when I was about two years old, so I don't really remember anything. My parents and I came
under the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy at the time. So my mom tells me a million and one stories about coming here on a boat and how difficult it was and the ocean, but I personally don't remember anything.

I grew up with two older brothers, but one of them was forced to stay behind in Cuba, so I didn't get to meet him until I was like eight years old. So that was kind of weird having an older brother that you don't meet for a long time. But overall, I have five nephews and nieces, and I think that's my main role in the family: I'm the auntie. So, I'm the bus driver for school, I'm the tutor for homework, I basically do everything, so that's kind of my main responsibility in my family.

AS: So, could you tell me more about your parents and then about their educations in Cuba?

RD: Funny enough, I don't know a lot about my parents' education, because I don't think there is a very strong education system in Cuba. I don't think it's as strict as it is here where you get a high school diploma or a GED, in Cuba it's more like just show up to class and that's it.

So, I really don't know that much about my parents’ education back then. I know that my dad used to be a mechanic when he was over there, and I don't know if he graduated high school or what the equivalent of high school would be over there. And my mom was a seamstress, and I also don't know if she graduated high school, I have no idea how that works in Cuba.

AS: So, could you tell me, then, about their occupations, like if they continued to do those things when you guys emigrated?

RD: So, when we got here to this country, my mom left behind being a seamstress, because it didn’t pay as well and we needed to sustain ourselves. So, she went a couple times to a trade school to learn English, but it's really hard to learn English when you’re in your 30s. So, she just decided to open up her own daycare here at home, and basically she took care of kids, got her license, and that's what she's done my whole life. I grew up with a daycare inside my own home, so doing homework was not fun.

And my dad, when he got to this country, he left behind the mechanics, because cars in Cuba are completely different from American cars. So, when he got here, he pretty much did anything and everything that was asked of him, so wherever there was a job, he would go. And eventually he opened up his own construction company, and he pretty much just does landscaping and construction.

AS: Yeah, it's really interesting, and it sounds like you have a little bit of your mom in you if you're a caretaker, so that's really neat. Could you talk a
little bit more about where you grew up and the environment when you were growing up?

RD: So, I grew up in Miami, Florida, and luckily, I never moved a lot. My parents bought a house when I was about five, and we’ve been living here ever since then. So, I never moved around a lot, my life has always been in Miami, so I know this city in and out, completely. I kind of love that I have a place where I can call home, which has definitely impacted me because now, whatever career I choose, this is where I want to come back to, basically to have my own family and establish my life.

I went to school in my same neighborhood all throughout, all the way to high school, and all my friends are from here. It’s not really a small town; it is a big city, so moving to Baltimore was a little different, even though Baltimore is a big city. But Miami is more – cars everywhere, and everything's kind of far apart – you can't just walk over to the nearest McDonald’s, you have to get in your car and drive over there. So, moving to Baltimore was a little different, but it was a new experience.

AS: So what was high school like for you? Did you do any extracurriculars, or were you part of any clubs or play any sports?

RD: I started dancing when I was little, and I begged my mom to put me in classes. But dance classes are very expensive, and I didn’t know that at the time. So, she put me in dance classes for a couple months when I was in middle school, and then I continued it on through high school. I got out of the actual dance classes, and that's basically what I did, I was on the dance team in high school for all four years, which, looking back at it, as much as I love dancing, I wish I would've focused more on other extracurricular activities, done more clubs. It really took up a lot of my time, but it was a fun experience, and it definitely kept me in shape.

And when I was in high school, I also did this other program called “Police Explorers,” because at the time, I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wasn’t like everyone else that kind of knew ever since they came out of the womb, I figured it out very late into college.

So in high school, I did pretty much everything, to figure out my career path, and it still didn’t work. But I did “Police Explorers,” and I learned a lot about leadership, but I definitely learned that I don't want to be a cop. [Laughs] It was a little too difficult for me.

My high school experience was pretty good. I had a lot of friends, and because Miami is very Hispanic-centered – I mean, I think our Hispanic population is like 70 percent. – so, all my friends were Hispanic. Spanish was more of my normal language growing up and in high school, even my teachers were mostly Hispanic, so sometimes my teachers would start counting in Spanish and they wouldn't realize, and the 2 percent of the kids who didn't speak Spanish were always confused. So that's one thing that Miami has definitely given me, a lot of Hispanic culture.
AS: Yeah, that's really interesting and I think I would just say that a lot of us still don’t know what we want to be when we grow up, so just putting that out there. [Laughs] But I think it's a much more fluid thing these days than it was in our parents’ generations. Speaking of your parents, could you tell me a little bit more about their thoughts on education and maybe when you said to them “I want go to college” or if maybe they were the motivating factor for you to go to college?

RD: My parents never really knew anything about the education system in this country, so my entire guidance to college was my dad’s bosses. So even though he has his own construction company, he had contractors, and they were college educated, they went to school, so they knew a lot about it.

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And they would tell my dad all the time, “Oh, she has to pursue a college education.” So, my dad would come home and pretty much repeat everything that they would say to him to me.

So, I knew I wanted to go to college. My mom really always told me to just do whatever I was good at. She always told me, “I'm not going to force you to go to college. You do whatever you feel comfortable with.” She also didn't know a lot about the education system. When I took my SATs, I came home and I told my parents my score, and they just stared at me, and they had no idea what to say. They were like, “Is that good? Is that bad? I don't know what to tell you.”

So when I finally told them that I wanted to go to college, and I decided to stay home at an honors program at the community college, they were just kind of happy that I was still studying and that they didn't have to pay for anything. [Laughs]

When I had the scholarship – I mean, they had always heard college was really expensive – which I think is why it took me so long to figure out what I wanted to do. For a long time, I tried to find careers that avoided going to college, which is partly why I did the “Police Explorers,” because in order to be a police officer, at the time you didn’t need a college education. So, I thought, “Okay, well, this is a great way to save some money for my parents. Maybe if I like this, I can pursue this.” And I did that a lot, until finally I realized that I wanted to go to college, I wanted to further my education, and I kind of wanted to do something that nobody in my family had done before.

AS: Yeah, that's really interesting. I think that's such a unique perspective, to try to minimize the financial burden of your own education, so that's really interesting. Can you tell me how you decided to go to Hopkins? I know you mentioned that you were a transfer student, so you could talk a little bit about that moment maybe where you decided you wanted to move on from community college.
RD: So, I actually decided that I wanted to go to Hopkins back in my junior year of high school. But at the time, that seemed kind of impossible, I mean, I went to a small public school. I don't even think it was an “A” school or anything that prestigious. So, at the time, I kind of thought, “Okay, well, this is probably not going to happen.”

So, I actually was, like, obsessed with the Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, because I am, like, a STEM nerd. I really liked all their projects, and I used to follow NASA constantly. I would watch everything, and I would see the way Hopkins was involved, and I always thought, “I really want to go there.”

I got accepted to a couple universities here in Florida, but I figured that the honors program at the community college was kind of my gateway to Hopkins. So, I could do two years there and then transfer, whereas if I went to a regular university, I was going to do my four years there and my dream of going to Hopkins was kind of over.

So, I got to my community college, and my advisor asked me, “Okay, where do you plan on transferring to after here?” And I told her Hopkins, and she wrote it down on my file, and we spent – we went onto the Hopkins website, and we tailored everything, like my whole schedule and everything, to the Hopkins schedule. Hopkins was always the goal.

AS: Yeah, that’s neat that you had that connection so early on and that sort of drive. When you got accepted to Hopkins and you decided you were going to move to Baltimore, what was your family’s reaction to that?

RD: So, my parents had no idea what Hopkins was, they kind of were surprised. I called them while I was at work, I was sitting at my job, and I got the notification, and all my coworkers knew that day was a decision day, so they all huddled around me, and we were super happy.

So, then I leave work, and I call my mom, and I tell her, “Oh, I got into Johns Hopkins,” and she tells me, “Well, what is that?” And I'm like, “It's a school in Baltimore.” And she told me, “But there's a school here. Aren't you in school right now? What are you talking about? There's universities here in Florida. I don't know what you're talking about.” And I was explaining to her, “Mom, Hopkins is the number-one research university. It's an amazing school.” And she kind of just didn't get it, but she was really happy for me regardless. She could hear the excitement in my voice, so she kind of just told me, “I'm so proud of you. I guess we have to sit down and figure out what's going to happen.”

I called my dad, and he happened to be at work with all of his coworkers. And I told him, “Oh, I got into Hopkins.” And he gave me the exact same response. He said, “What is that?”

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And I explained the whole thing all over again to him, and then he looked
over at his coworkers and told them, “Oh, my daughter got into someplace called ‘Hawking.’ I don't know what that is.” And all his coworkers were like, “Oh my god, that's amazing. That's an amazing school.” And my dad was just like, “Okay, I guess congratulations. I hear this is a really big deal.” So once his coworkers kind of pushed him into it, my dad was a lot more accepting of me going to Baltimore.

They didn’t like the fact that I was moving to a city so far away. It took them a lot to get me to move; I remember at the airport, my dad just wouldn’t let go of me. So, it was a lot harder than the other experiences. I saw all of my friends: their parents just kind of came up and just kind of said their goodbyes. Like, my dad just would not let go of me.

And then they ended up flying up to Baltimore a week after they left me up there, because my dad was – that's a big thing in the Hispanic community – fathers are very close to their daughters. So, he was very, very sad, he got depression and everything. My parents were – it was hard convincing them to let me go up there. [Laughs]

AS: Yeah, that sounds like quite the experience, and just the fact that you’re growing up and that this is a thing that you need to do for your career, even though he has this deep emotional connection to you. What was it like when you got to Baltimore? I mean, obviously, if your parents are coming up a week later, you're probably talking to them pretty often. But tell me what it was like when you got to campus, and I don't know if you want to elaborate on where you live, too.

RD: I actually – since I was a transfer student – I didn't get to live on campus, so I moved into an apartment right across the street, the Blackstone. So we came up, and my dad saw all the apartments and goes, “You're getting this one, because it's right across the street. I cannot let you live anywhere else except for this place.” So, I ended up moving in there, and I was very fortunate that I found a roommate who had been in the same program that I was in, at the honors program at Miami Dade. In fact, it was I think it was five or six of us transferring from that program.

So, we all kind of got in touch over email, and when we got up there, we all met up on campus, and they're all Hispanic as well, I mean, it's Miami. I was very fortunate that I didn't have that culture shock when I moved up, because I still had a little piece of home. When I moved up there, I still had all my Spanish-speaking friends, and we all cooked rice and beans and pork when we got up here, and we still had the whole experience.

Going onto campus, I was expecting to feel a lot more sadness, missing home and everything. I mean, Baltimore's very different. But I was just really excited, and I think that was the main feeling that I felt when I was up there. I was just really, really excited for classes to start, to step foot inside a lab and just meet professors, it was very exciting. I don’t think I felt that sadness or homesickness that I expected to feel.

AS: Yeah, that’s really – it's like invigorating, almost, when you get there.
I wonder if you could tell me if you've met other first-gen students on campus and maybe what that experience has been like. I know some students don’t typically – like, that's not the first thing they tell you, that they're first-gen, but I just wonder if you've met any other first-gens on campus.

**RD:**

My roommate was actually first-gen. She is Hispanic as well, was born in Venezuela, and then emigrated over just like me. So, we shared kind of the same experience growing up, and then all my friends from Miami were also first-gen students. It was a group of about five or six of us that were all first-gen, and we pretty much had the same experience growing up: public schools, kind of like a normal life, it was very different from everyone else’s experience. Some of the friends that I’ve met, a lot of them would tell me about their private school experiences or – I know I met somebody who went to boarding school and I had no idea what that was – I had never even heard of that before.

So, I think their experience, being near them and knowing that they shared the same experience as me was kind of helpful in my transition to Hopkins.

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Like, “Oh, I got here just like they did,” whereas some other people that weren't first-gen – I think if I wouldn't have had them, I would have felt weird, having grown up in such a different household. I mean, their parents sat down with them and did FAFSA; my parents had no idea how to fill out FAFSA, they couldn't even read the application to begin with. A lot of them would tell me, “Oh, well, my parents were the ones who signed me up for the SAT,” and I was sitting there thinking, “My parents don't even know what the SAT is.” [Laughs]

So it was nice having my own group of friends that were also first-gen, so we would sit down and fill out the FAFSA together, and we were all equally confused, whereas my other friends who weren't first-gen, they would just call their parents and say, “Hey, FAFSA opened up. Can you please go take care of that?” It was nice having my own group of people who experienced life the way I did.

**AS:**

Yeah, I've always been really curious, and I think it's even more evident when you get to school and people have had such vastly different experiences, and for first-gens, especially with the college application process just generally, it's not always – it's not something that's intuitive or taught, and for people who are in higher economic brackets and their parents have gone to college, it's a much more clear process for them. So, it’s interesting to hear you say that, and I'm glad that you found your tribe of people to work with and to be with.

I'm really curious about your academics. You mentioned that you are a STEM person, so I would love for you to tell me about your program of study and how you chose it and why you think it’s valuable.
RD: In my junior year of high school, I ended up taking AP Chemistry, because my teacher made me. [Laughs] She kind of saw the potential that I did not see at all, so she kind of – she signed it off on the form without even telling me – and I just saw my schedule the next day, and it said AP Chemistry on it, and I kind of just fell in love with the subject. I was super intrigued. I would stay after school and ask her to do experiments with me. And we would sit there, and she would teach me how to do IR and NMR, or she would start teaching me advanced topics, and I loved it.

So, when I got to college and I had my first advisor meeting, she asked me, “Well, what do you want to major in?” And I heard my dad’s voice in the back of my head say, “Do something that you can make money with. Be an engineer, or be an accountant.” And I was thinking, "Oh, that's boring, I don't want to do that, that's not for me.”

So she was staring at me, like “You need to make a decision. Hurry up.” And I just blurted out, “Chemistry.” And I thought, “Well, if anything, I'll change it later on.” And as I kept going through the classes, I kept enjoying it more and more.

And then transfer came around, I got to Hopkins, and they asked me, “Do you plan on sticking with chemistry?” And I had no idea what I wanted to do with that. I just knew that I wanted to pursue chemistry in general. A small part of me always wanted to be a doctor, but it was just way too expensive. [Laughs] I mean, medical school is a lot of debt.

So, I completely strayed away from it, and I told myself, “I'm not going to do that. I can watch Grey's Anatomy on TV and just live vicariously through this TV show.” And so, I just kind of never did that, I never pursued it.

And then when I got to Hopkins, people kind of showed me – I met a lot of other pre-meds who were first-gen just like me or were low-income just like me – and I saw them doing it, so I thought, “Well, why can't I do it?”

So then halfway through my experience through Hopkins, I think right at the start of the COVID pandemic, that’s when I decided, “Well, you know what, I'm finally going to pursue my dream,” because I just didn't find anything else that I liked more than medicine. There were other things that I enjoyed, I was a tutor, so I considered teaching. And I worked in a lab, so I considered doing research, and as much as I liked both of them, I didn’t like them more than I liked medicine.

I ended up becoming pre-med I think in my junior year of college, which is extremely late compared to everyone else. I mean, everyone else was a freshman and they were already shadowing doctors. I kind of got into it a little late, but [laughs] I got into it.

AS: Yeah, and like I said earlier, I think there's still people that are in their 30s and 40s and trying to figure out what they want to do for their career. So I
think maybe it's not as advantageous when you're applying to med school programs that you haven't been in the pre-med program longer. But that's amazing that that's what you've decided you want to do, and I think you'll really excel at that, so I'm excited for you. Do you have any memorable teachers or classes that you've taken at Hopkins?

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RD:

At Hopkins, definitely my advisors, both of them. So I have my academic advisor, Ami Cox; she met up with me when I first visited Hopkins, and she was very, very sweet. She kind of made me feel – I think I was very nervous going to such a big university from such a small community college I mean, I just thought, like, “Am I really prepared for the rigor of these classes?” – and she kind of made me feel confident. She boosted my confidence. She told me, “You know, it's really not that bad. You're going to be fine. You're very well prepared. Your grades are good.” So, she played a big role in my transition.

My other advisor, Dr. Christopher Falzone, he was amazing. He showed me all the ropes of the chemistry major. He taught me everything I needed to know. And pretty much every professor ever since then has been really helpful. I mean, I expected professors at Hopkins to be a little more, like, standoffish or not as involved with students, since they had their research and they had bigger titles than the community college that I went to. But it was the complete opposite of what I expected. They were so engaged with the students, and they were so ready to offer research experiences, and I did not expect that at all. I think every professor had a really big impact on me, but definitely my two advisors.

AS:

That's really great to hear. I am also really curious if you – you mentioned sort of connecting with your peers and other first-gens and Hispanic students on campus. So, I'm kind of curious if you've had the chance to join any clubs or do any sort of activities while you've been on campus. I know with the pandemic that’s probably been pretty limited, since there aren’t a lot of gatherings that are acceptable. But maybe you could tell me a little bit about if you’ve connected with any groups or organizations.

RD:

So when I first went to the student fair for the clubs, I ended up finding this club called CAUSA, which is a Cuban club, it's for all the Cuban students on campus, and I pretty much knew everyone that was there, because they were all from Miami and I had known them while they were in Miami. I pretty much got there, and it was kind of just like hanging out with all of my friends all over again. So, I joined that club, and that was a great way to stay in touch with all my Cuban peers.

And then I joined a club called Lambda Epsilon Mu. So it is a pre-health honor society for Latin students. I joined the club because, at the time, I was on the fence about medical school, I wasn't sure, and I thought, “Well, this is a great opportunity to finally make that decision.” So, I joined LEM, and it was great. I kind of just met a bunch of students who were first-gen, Hispanic, just like me, and they were all pre-medical. So, that
was kind of that eye-opening experience of, like, well, all of these students are doing it, and they're pursuing their dreams, even though they're not from a really high-income family or they're first-gen just like me, so I can do it too.

So that club played a huge role in my decision to go to medical school. They would host events where doctors and current medical students would come visit, and they would talk to us about their experiences. And all of the doctors and medical students were Hispanic just like me. I remember this one doctor telling us about her growing up, and she had such a similar upbringing to me, with two parents who knew nothing about college, and I was thinking, “She's so successful. It doesn't sound like we had the same upbringing.” I think that was a big factor in my decision to finally pursue that dream.

AS: Yeah, I think just having representation really matters. And I was kind of curious about that in the context of being a woman in STEM – if you have encountered other women in leadership positions or in roles in the STEM field – I don't know if you could speak to that at all or if that's your experience or if it's not your experience.

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RD: Growing up, I never really experienced anything too demeaning as a woman in STEM. I was never too discouraged. When I became a tutor at the STEM center on my college campus, I realized that there were a lot of males, but it was never a thing of where we felt discouraged. It was more just like, “Well, this is the population here, so this is what it's like.”

But I never really felt discouraged. I always felt very uplifted. I never experienced anything too bad. I think maybe, like, once or twice I did feel like I had to prove myself in a group of guys, where – for example, I had taken calculus already, and they hadn't – so I was trying to explain something, and they really just couldn't see eye to eye with me, even though they knew I had the right answer, but they were convinced that their answer was correct. So, I felt like, in those moments, you have to prove yourself just a tiny bit more than you would. And finally, when they looked it up online and had, like, a male YouTube person explain it to them, then they were like, “Okay, now it makes sense.” And I'm thinking, “It always made sense; it just didn't make sense when it came from me.”

So, little things like that, I think that's happened to me two or three times, maybe, but I also think that it's a lot more progressive now than it was before. I think we’ve made so much progress. I know my chemistry courses have a lot of females in them, which I was not expecting at all.

I definitely think that in engineering and physics, it could be a little better. I think those could definitely have a lot more representation for females, but I didn’t take a lot of engineering courses, so I can't say. But I was very happy to see so many women in my chemistry courses. A lot of the males
that I’ve interacted with at Hopkins in my chemistry courses have always been very uplifting and just very nice and caring, and I never felt discouraged as a woman in STEM. Maybe like two or three times I had to prove myself, but nothing too bad.

AS: Yeah, it’s really interesting. I know there's a lot of women – now there’s a lot more women professors in some of these fields, and I think Hopkins does a pretty good job of trying to amplify their voices and their projects, so, I hope that continues.

So I think these two questions kind of coincide, so I’ll just ask them together. Could you tell me about internships or jobs that you've had in your time at Hopkins? And basically, I’m assuming that you've been using your breaks in between semesters or the summer in between the semesters to do those, so just if you could talk about your summers and breaks and working or doing research assistantships, those types of things.

RD: Prior to Hopkins, when I did my two years at the community college, my main goal was to make money – and I know that sounds horrible, but it was kind of a necessity. I mean, I wanted to go to Hopkins, and I knew it was going to be expensive. So, I told myself I would save up as much money as possible.

But I did do jobs that I liked. I was a tutor, which I loved, and I got involved with some great organizations, and I did research, that was paid. My main goal while I was at Miami Dade College was to make money. And then when I got to Hopkins, my parents told me, “I don't want you to work. I want you to focus on academics.” My dad had heard from his coworkers how rigorous classes were there. So my dad told me, “I don't want you to focus on anything else but classes.”

I got there, and my second semester I had started doing research at a lab, and it was amazing. It was very cool seeing the research at Hopkins compared to the research at Miami Dade College. While both are great, I think there's a level of advancement that I was not expecting when I got to Hopkins. I mean, for example, everyone here gets their own fume hood in the chemistry labs; and we don’t have that over there, everyone kind of has to share, so it was really amazing.

But that was great, and then when the COVID pandemic hit, I stopped doing research because I had to come back home.

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And then over the summer – I took the entire summer to study for the MCAT. I got that over with, thank God. [Laughs] So that was great, and then once I finished the MCAT, I decided that I wanted to do something clinical, because I'm one of those people who really likes to confirm their career choice before pursuing it. I started working at a clinic, and I was very fortunate that they would take me during COVID, and I was very careful, we always wore PPE, so everything was fine.
I loved it. I think it was the first time that I was excited to wake up at 6:30 in the morning, and I did that throughout my whole fall semester, I'm still doing that now. I received my phlebotomy certification. I mean, it was just amazing, I loved working with the patients. And I think that was a big factor in confirming my passion for medicine, because I always loved it, but I had never interacted with patients prior to this. Doing that on my own, being able to sit down with a patient on my own and help them, it was amazing, I really enjoyed it.

**AS:** Yeah, that’s such a confidence-boosting thing that you're choosing the right thing or that you're at the right moment in time, so that's great to hear. I guess a little bit backtracking, but I’m really interested, too, in your relationship with your family when you moved to Baltimore, and you were spending the first section of your time at Hopkins. Could you talk about your relationship with them when you were in Baltimore? And then you could also talk about it now because I know you’re still taking classes and doing all that stuff at home – and maybe just with that, describe what your support system became or was when you were away.

**RD:** I think I’ll start this off by kind of mentioning that I’m essentially the secretary for my dad’s company. I do all of his invoices, all of his estimates, I mean, any type of paperwork that needs to get done, I do that. It was very easy while I was in Miami, because he would just come into my room and drop the papers on my desk and tell me, “I really need these by tonight,” and I would kind of drop everything I was doing and help him with that. So then when I moved up to Baltimore, that was a really big concern. It was who's going to manage all the invoices, who's going to do everything for the company, because my mom has no idea how to do any of that.

So, when I moved up there, I was just constantly on FaceTime with him. He would text me, and he'd be like, “I know you have classes, and I know you're doing stuff, but I really, really need this invoice.” We came up with a schedule, so, I think that was one of the biggest things when I moved away, was kind of like still managing my dad's company while being in Baltimore. It was a little difficult, but we managed it.

It definitely changed the way I was with my nephews and nieces because – I mean, my nephew’s 14, and I think when you’re at that age, you don't really like to talk on the phone with your aunt while you're playing video games. That was a big factor that made me kind of homesick while I was away at Hopkins, was my nephews and nieces, because I didn’t have that contact with them like I used to.

My parents were a little difficult because they expected me to call them every morning when I woke up, send them a text when I left the apartment and was on my way to school, send them a text when I got to classes, let them know when I got out of classes, text them a picture of my dinner, and I just didn't have the time for it. So maybe, like, the first week, which is orientation week, I was able to do that. But once I started classes and
started getting into the flow of things, I could not manage that, and my parents thought I had, like, abandoned them. They thought, “Oh my god, she’s not calling us. Is she dead? What's going on?” So, then they would call me, and they would tell me, “Oh, we're just checking to make sure you're okay.” And I'm like, “Well, I spoke to you like an hour ago. I'm okay. I'm in the apartment. I haven't done anything. I haven't left. No, I'm not walking around in the middle of the night. It's okay.”

So it was really difficult with my parents, kind of – making them used to not talking to me 24/7 – instead of talking five times a day, kind of minimize that to two times out of the day. So that was a big factor in my move to Hopkins, was readjusting how many times I spoke with my family over the phone.

AS: Yeah, that sounds just like a huge change for everyone. [Laughs] I know you mentioned, too, your support system of friends, so I assume that that's something that has continued. Did you guys engage in any things around the city? What was your life like in Baltimore? Did you guys interact? And I'm also really curious if you found any good Cuban food in Baltimore.

[0:40:00]

RD: I did not find any good Cuban food. When we got up there, all of our parents met each other. I think that's one weird thing about Cubans: if two people are friends, their parents have to be friends; I don't know why.

So, my roommate and I became really good friends, and our parents became friends. Then the two people who lived right above us were also from Miami Dade College, they were our friends. Then their parents became friends with our parents, so it was this giant group of parents. Then all of our parents collectively agreed in, like, this secret meeting that Baltimore was very dangerous compared to Miami and nobody could leave their apartment past a certain time. So, they would just tell us constantly, “Do not leave the apartment, do not leave the apartment. If you see that the sun is slightly going down, stay inside.”

So we kind of – for the first semester, we just always hung out in my apartment with my roommate, and they would come over, and we would just cook – that was the big thing. I mean, Cubans have this thing where we can’t hang out unless there's some type of food. So, everyone texted me, “Oh, we're coming over,” and then my roommate and I would start cooking. She would make something; I would make rice and beans. Everyone would come over and we'd have a huge dinner. And that was just – we never really explored Baltimore so much. We went to Inner Harbor. We went to Hampden and we explored, which our parents were freaking out the whole time. My mom was texting, “Are you okay, are you okay, are you okay?” And I'm texting her, “I'm fine. It's been five minutes. Nothing's happened yet. We're not even at the ice cream place yet.” So, we explored Baltimore a little bit, but I think if we would've had more time to
get comfortable, we would have done a lot more. Also, our parents were kind of freaking us out. [Laughs]

AS: Yeah, I feel like you just didn't have enough time to build that comfort level. I mean, not to say it's anything the same as Miami, but there are factions and groups of Hispanic communities throughout Baltimore, and so I feel like there's – you have to find the, like, authentic taco place and things like that, and they exist in the city, so maybe one day when you come back and visit for alumni weekend or something.

RD: Hopefully.

AS: Yeah. [Laughs] So let's see, what else? I am also really curious about your – I guess this makes sense for the next question about your plans for the future. So, what is your plan for life after Hopkins? And that can be in an academic sense, but also just a personal one. I know you're at home now, so I don't know if you plan on staying there in the immediate future, so could you speak about that?

RD: I definitely plan on going to med school, if all things go well. My parents really want me to stay home for med school, that's no surprise. As much as I would love to stay home for medical school, I definitely recognize that studying has been a lot harder at home, because the kids kind of show up unexpected. I think right now my parents just went to go pick up my nephews, and they're on their way here, and all my time that I was going to do my homework, I am now spending it doing a water balloon fight with them. So, my plans change a lot while I'm here, and I don't think that's something that I would want to do during medical school, because med school, from what I've heard, is a lot harder. [Laughs]

I hopefully plan to stay in Florida. I would like to, just because the weather down here is so much nicer. I'm hoping to do that. After medical school, I'm looking at a million and one different specialties, right now I just like medicine as a whole. I don't know what specialty specifically I want to do. I definitely think my family plays a huge role, so I definitely want to come back to Miami once I'm done with medical school. I would like to do residency here if that's possible and work here. I mean, being Hispanic, one of the main aspirations that a woman has is to have kids and be a mother.

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And I know that times are changing and that’s no longer the main priority, but I think Hispanic cultures are still a little farther behind than other cultures. My dad is always telling me, “Well, when am I going to be a grandfather?” and I'm like, “You're already a grandfather. You have five grandkids.” He goes, “I know, but I want more.” And I'm telling them, “You have to wait.” So, for example, my mom tells me, "Oh, when I was your age, I already had a kid.” And I’m like, “No, times are changing. You guys need to adjust.”
So, I think a big factor in my decision in the future will definitely be settling down and having my family and everything. But I’m not too concerned about that. I'm a little more focused on my career. I don’t think my parents are too happy about that, but they're just happy I’m going to school.

AS: Maybe they’ll come around. I think all the decisions that you’ve made thus far have made a lot of sense and been very logical and have led you to success, so hopefully they’ll see that as another decision that will do that for you. [laughs]

I'm also really curious if you could just speak about if you felt supported at Hopkins as a first-gen. I know you mentioned identifying the transfer students that were coming from your same school. But would you describe if you felt supported at Hopkins as a first-gen, and then maybe if there's a way that the university could increase support or if there's other things that you think would be helpful for first-gen students?

RD: I honestly got a lot more support than I expected to. When I got to Hopkins, I didn't really expect – I had never really heard of “first-gen” until, like, my second or – actually, when I went to Hopkins, because Miami Dade College is full of first-gen students, so it’s kind of like the normal. And a lot of those students are working and have kids and families, I mean, they’re grown adults.

So when I got to Hopkins and I heard “first-gen,” I was thinking, “What are they talking about?” And I realized that it's actually not normal to go to college and be the first person to go to college, I thought that was just kind of, like, something that people did. And then I realized that that's considered something kind of out of the ordinary, I would – I don't know if that's the way I would say it, but kind of – it's at a disadvantage – I didn't realize that other people had a certain advantage by having parents who did go to college, I just thought everyone was the same.

So, I felt really supported, a lot more supported than I expected. They had a lot of programs. I joined JUMP, which is a premedical club or organization for low-income families, first-gen students, and everything. And just a lot of resources that I wasn’t expecting to have just for being first-gen, and I also didn’t understand that it was different for students who did have parents who went to college, I just thought it was like that for everyone. So, I felt very supported at Hopkins.

AS: Yeah, it's good to hear – I think that the structures are working or that the system and the programs are helpful to students, so I really appreciate your thoughts on that. I guess with that, overall, would you recommend Hopkins to other first-gen students, and is there any advice that you would offer them for making that transition?

RD: So, I would definitely recommend it. I was actually, I think – a couple months ago I went to a virtual fair at the honors college program that I did
here, where they had alumni come back and kind of share what schools they transferred to – and I was telling everyone to go to Hopkins. Because, first of all, the financial aid is amazing, they really do such a great job at seeing the necessity that each person has and determining how much financial aid to give, and they're very supportive, and they're great with contact, and I think that's a resource that first-gen students need most.

So having that financial aid support – I mean, I had a lot of acceptances from other schools, and nobody compared to Hopkins in terms of financial aid. I mean, if I just had even the smallest question, I would call, and any help I needed – when COVID hit, they didn’t want to cancel my lease, and I immediately got in contact with the financial aid office – and I told them, “Well, I'm not living up there, and I still have to pay rent. Can you guys help me?”

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And they were so understanding and so quick to help. I think that was the biggest resource at Hopkins. So, I think that's my biggest advice for first-gen students, is get in contact with the financial aid office, and they're going to be a very big resource. Also, just don't feel intimidated by the academics, because I know I let myself get intimidated when I first got there. For example, when I took my first writing class, that's my weakness, is writing, and English as a whole. So when I took my first writing class, I thought, “Well, how am I going to make it through this class?” And it was actually a lot easier than I expected, so I feel like I psyched myself out for no reason. My biggest advice to all first-gen students is to just kind of take it step by step. It's really not as hard as – I mean, this is what my advisor told me and what I would like other people to understand – is if you got in, you got in on your own merit and you got in for a reason, so you're meant to be here.

AS: Yeah, I think that's really a helpful reflection, because I think sometimes, we just see the sort of endgame and how large and intimidating everything can be, but if we just take it step by step, it's a much easier thing to tackle, so hopefully that will help some students in the future.

I guess my final question for you is, after all this time, a couple of years here at Hopkins, how would you summarize your time at Hopkins, if you could just put an endpoint on it and sort of reflect back on your time?

RD: I think I would say it was a very transformative experience. It was very maturing, for me at least, being – I was never away from home, and I was constantly at home. I would get home, and my mom was here with all the kids, and she had lunch prepared for me and everything. So, moving away, it was a very maturing experience.

I knew how to cook, but I never had to do it. I think that's, like, a Cuban thing. You need to learn how to cook when you're like five. I always knew how to cook, but I never had to do it because I always had my mom to do it for me, same thing with laundry and everything.
And going to Hopkins myself was a very maturing experience. Going into my first research lab and being handed a bunch of tools and having to figure it out on my own, I mean, it really taught you how to think critically about everything around you, and I think that's what Hopkins really gave me: I matured, a lot.

AS: That's great, and I'm really excited that you got all your lab experiences, that's really wonderful. So, I just really appreciate you taking time to talk with me today, so thank you so much for doing this interview. Is there anything else that you'd like to add before we finish?

RD: No.

AS: Okay, awesome. Well, I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording.

[End of Audio]