First-Generation College Student Oral History Project

Interviewee, "ED"

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

March 3, 2021
Summary: “E.D.” is a member of the Johns Hopkins University graduating class of 2021. In this interview, she explains how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted her college experience and she talks about her life so far, education, and future endeavors.

KD: Kristen Diehl  
ED: Interviewee

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KD: This is Kristen Diehl here with ED on March 3, 2021, over Zoom for the First-Generation College Student Oral Histories. We would like to start this interview by 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 change 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 and changes these students faced.

So our first question is how do you feel the coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience? What are some challenges or changes it caused for you personally?

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ED: Well, for me personally, the pandemic has – it has made my college experience less I don't want to use the word "desirable," but somewhat less desirable because there were so many opportunities that I was looking forward to during my junior year.

The pandemic started in the middle of my junior year. I had a research position that was going great, and that kind of declined because you couldn't be in-person anymore.

I wasn't the type of student that went out and that was really social, and so I told myself that, "Once senior year starts, I'm gonna go out more. I'm gonna be more engaging." And so my plans got ruined.

Also I hoped to have more of a personal relationship with my
professors and even my faculty advisors, but that's kind of difficult to do over Zoom. So that was a downside.

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And also it affected me financially as well because I'm able to afford off-campus housing by working, and though I am still able to work during the pandemic, my hours got cut by a tremendous amount. And so I wasn't getting paid that often.

And it was -- it wasn't good for my family financially as well because one of my parents works in a place where if somebody gets diagnosed and they have COVID, all the workers on that floor, they have to take two weeks off. I don't think there was any pay during those weeks, and so money was being cut for those times as well.

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And it was also a little depressing because I knew some people or I knew some people that knew other people who died during the pandemic. I know one person specifically that somebody that they were close to died. The person was perfectly normal.

I don't know, ever since the pandemic started, I just kept seeing posts on Facebook about somebody's dad dying or somebody's mom dying. They had COVID. And I'm like, "That could have been me. That could have been my immediate family members."

It's difficult to keep seeing in the midst of that and still be a Hopkins student and still do well. And then I'm also pre-med. I'm trying to get my grades up, applying to grad schools or med schools and things like that.

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KD: Wow, that is a lot at once, and it sounds like a really overwhelming time that I'm sure a lot of us can relate to. So thank you for sharing that.

Moving backwards in time to provide some context for your life today and how the pandemic has affected you, could you tell me a little bit about your family and where you were born?

ED: Yes. I was born in Nigeria. I was there till I want to say two-and-a-half, and so I came here with my family, my dad and mother, my
two brothers. One is older; one is younger.

Actually, my dad was – he was here in America. He was actually in the Army, the US Army. And so I think that was what made it easy for us to come here. So, yes, we're all Nigerian.

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I have one sister, though. She wasn't born in Nigeria. She was born here.

And I mainly grew up in Maryland, different parts of Maryland. When we first came here, we were obviously living on base, a military base, and then once my dad left the military, we kind of shuffled in different places in Maryland. So we lived in Edgewood. We lived in Joppatowne, Aberdeen. So it was pretty interesting.

We were a family of six, but my parents got separated and then later divorced when I was – I think I was – I think they got separated when I was in my freshman year of high school and then finally got divorced right when I was about to start my senior year.

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But today they're both remarried to other people. Right now I don't really see my two younger siblings anymore. They stay with my mom, and my brother and I, we are with our dad and our stepmother. It's a little different dynamic, but I'm thankful because things could have been a little worse than that.

KD: Could you tell me a little bit more about your parents' or guardians' education?

ED: Yes. So none of my parents have any degrees from a four-year college. My mom didn't go to – I think she finished high school in Nigeria, so secondary school. They go to secondary school there.

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I'm not sure if she completely finished, but that's her highest level of education. What I heard last time I was in contact with her, she does little certifications here and there, but other than that not really much.

My dad, on the other hand, he has his associate's degree, but it took him years to finally get it because he went from community
college to community college. When you're trying to raise four kids and you're not earning that much and you're trying to pay for school, it's a lot. So it took him a while to get that, but that's the highest he's – his highest level of education is just an associate's degree.

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KD: Thank you. You mentioned that your father was in the military. Could you speak maybe to what he does now or what your mother's occupation is or has been?

ED: Yes. So I can only speak for my dad. Right now I don't really know exactly what my mom does. I don't really talk to her like that, I mean, though we're trying to maintain that mother-and-daughter relationship, but it's not really there.

But my dad, he's a materials handler, but he's employed by the government. I'm not sure if you know what a materials handler is.

KD: I don't. If you could explain it, that would be great.

ED: The thing is I don't know too much about it. There are different types, and I think you can work in different places. So some work in warehouses.

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And I think he – there's this big warehouse on base where he works, and that's where he does most of his duties.

I don't know detail for detail, but one thing I do know is there are some perks to being a materials handler, at least in his case, because you'll see some things stores, they throw out but they're new. There have been many times in the past when he would bring home a new desk. It's brand-new, and nobody has ever used it.

I don't know why whatever store that brought it to the warehouse, why they were trying to get rid of it. But they were trying to get rid of it, and since it was gonna go – since it was going to get disposed anyway, he was like, "Why don't I just take it?" And it's free, so why not? I can't really say anything other – anything more than that.

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KD: Nice. You mentioned moving from Nigeria to Maryland to an Army base. Have you lived in Maryland your full life since then? Could you maybe talk more about the towns you grew up in and what that was like?

ED: Yes. So I have lived – I have never lived outside of Maryland. I don't think we lived on base for too long. So my dad left the military because of an injury, and the military is really strict with if you get injured. For them to retain you, it takes – well, it has to be something really minor. So he left.

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But I've never lived outside of Maryland, though there were times years ago when we would go to New York 'cause we have family – I'll call them family members/family friend in New York. So we would go, and I think the longest that I've ever lived outside of Maryland was about a month. So we stayed there for a month. I forgot why. But, yeah, my life has revolved around Maryland.

KD: Same. [Laughs] What were your family's thoughts on education? How was education spoken about in your household? What were their thoughts on the college process or their awareness of it?

ED: Like every other parent, they had high expectations regarding education.

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And I'm not sure if this was self-imposed, me self-imposed on myself, or it was influenced by my parents, but there's this mentality that as an immigrant you're coming to America. Your parents sacrificed so much. You probably had to sacrifice a lot as well, depending on how old you were when you came here, and so there really isn't that excuse for you not to succeed.

So that has kind of been ingrained inside myself and my siblings, and my dad is really big on education. When we were younger, it was As or nothing. He's the type of – I'm not sure if you're familiar with African parents, but, for example, if I were to get a test back and I had a 98 percent – 98 is an A. That's a wonderful score.

And he'll say stuff like, "Where is the remaining two percent? The other people that have 100 percent, do they have two heads?" That type of thing.
But he's really, really big on education. I would say that when I first started elementary school, he was a really big help. But once I started to get older and I started to take classes, things like calculus, my parents can't help me with that.

I kind of felt like I was on my own, kind of. I guess the person I could also look up to regarding education was my older brother because he would have already experienced – had those experiences. But if we're talking college specifically, I definitely felt alone.

Like I said, my parents didn't go to college, and even if they did, it wouldn't have been here. Well, my dad did, but it's a little different. Community college is a little different.

They didn't know about the college application process. I don't think they understood the financial aid process. I kind of have to do financial aid myself, and I just ask him, "Hey, what's your income," and asking those questions. But other than that, me and my older brother, we're basically on our own, even things like applying for scholarships.

We all know that applying to scholarships is good, but if you go to a school like Hopkins and you're familiar with the financial aid process, you will know that for the fact that you have so many scholarships, it doesn't mean that you won't pay anything. I'll give you an example.

I had a lot of renewable scholarships coming into Hopkins, and so my freshman year was okay. I didn't have to take out any loans. However, Hopkins knows – they have a record of all of my renewable scholarships. And so what they'll do is they'll have a set family contribution, and once those scholarships start to come in, they'll subtract it from my JHU grant.

And so even if I were to continue to apply to all these extra scholarships, it's not going to change my family contribution. And so it's things like that that my dad didn't understand. He didn't understand the fact that I can't just stick with academics.
There was a time in high school when I would do these extracurricular activities, and he was like, "Why are you doing all this? Why can't you just focus on your academics?"

And I'm like, "That's not how it works. I need to be a well-rounded student or else I won't get seen or chosen by the top schools." It was things like that he didn't understand.

But generally they're really big on education, and they want the best for their kids, especially considering the fact that they didn't have that opportunity in Nigeria.

KD: Thank you. You mentioned, just backtracking a little bit, your high school experience. If you could talk more about your high school experience, I think I skipped over that question, and you touched on it naturally, especially what subjects were interesting to you at that time.

You mentioned extracurriculars. Could you talk about your participation in those and whether you felt that those provided some sense of preparation for college?

ED: So I went to a magnet school for high school. It was originally a vocational school, something like a trade school. Back then students would go to their normal high schools, and then in the evenings they would come. They have multiple tech areas. It wasn't until years later that they turned it into a high school, so a magnet school.

I was in the nursing program. I think now they call it the Academy of Health Professions. By the time I graduated, I was able to get my CNA, GNA\(^1\), and CCMA. That's the certified clinical medical assistant certification. That was just really good.

However, the downside is I'm not sure if it's changed now, but when it comes to the core subjects of mathematics, just pure science, and all that stuff, I don't see that school as being up there. I would rank it as average. I don't think I felt challenged by my teachers in those types of classes.

\(^1\) “CNA” stands for Certified Nursing Assistant. “GNA” stands for Geriatric Nursing Assistant.
I think the priority was on our tech areas, which it's understandable because you can pass all your core classes, but if you don't do well in your tech area you won't graduate.

Even AP classes, when I was taking them, I thought, "Wow, I'm being challenged. I'm taking these hard classes." And then I actually take the AP – the actual AP board exam. I really don't know anything.

I didn't realize how much I didn't know or how much I didn't learn, not just while I was taking those AP exams, but even when I came to college and I'm like, "I really don't – " I took honors chemistry and AP chemistry in high school. I came to Hopkins and I took intro chem, and I was not doing well.

I was like, "This doesn't make any sense." I don't think that my high school prepared me well, at least well enough for Hopkins. College, yes, just college in general. But Hopkins, no.

There were some areas, for example, English. All my English classes, I personally feel like because of the kind of teachers that I had, I felt prepared. I did well in my writing intensive courses. But other than that, I don't think I felt well prepared.

So that's with academics. Now extracurriculars, I'll be forever grateful that I had the opportunity to do extracurricular activities despite the fact that my high school was I want to say a 35-minute drive, maybe 40 minutes, no, not 40 minutes, a 35-minute drive from where I live.

I was fortunate enough to be in a school system where a special bus will come, and they will go to individual houses, not houses, but individual neighborhoods to pick up students that go to that school. So that was a good thing.

But with extracurriculars, though, I did music-related activities. I was in band. I was in the choir, the chorus, the choir. My senior year, I brought back the step team. I'm not sure if you know what step is, but it's kind of like creating – yeah, okay.
So I brought it back. It was a thing years ago, and it just died out. I brought it back my senior year. I was like, "This is coming back." That flourished. Obviously it's not flourishing now because we're virtual. It's kind of difficult to do that now. But before the pandemic, it was still going great.

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I was in Speech and Debate. I'm trying to think of everything I did. I was in the National Honor Society, the National Technical Honor Society. I think I had a blast. I also was part of the theater company my sophomore year. I was part of the Hairspray cast, and I was Motormouth Maybelle. So that was a wonderful experience for me.

I did all-county band, auditioned for all-jazz choir. Well, let me think. I was also fortunate enough to get accepted into the Maryland all-state choir, the mixed choir, and the women's choir. So that was my junior and my senior year.

I think I had a blast in terms of extracurricular activities in high school, and I'm glad I did them because it made my high school experience more meaningful outside of academics.

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But that kind of changed when I came to Hopkins.

**KD:** What instrument did you play?

**ED:** So I started off as a clarinet player during elementary, and then I continued to I think – I switched to bass clarinet my sixth-grade year and then from sixth grade to 12th grade I played bass clarinet.

And trust me, I feel like that's the best instrument that anybody can ever pick up. I don't know what it is. I don't know if it's the resonance, the sound. Honestly, I felt like it was my boyfriend.

**KD:** Yeah, you light up while speaking about it.

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Have you been able – you touched on this a little bit, the transition from high school to college. Have you been able to keep up with playing bass clarinet or other musical pursuits?
**ED:** Instrument, no, because I never owned my own instrument. I used a school – the one that my school gave me. Obviously it was cleaned and fixed and stuff like that. So I didn't have to pay.

But I just never owned my own instrument, and when I asked about playing an instrument at Hopkins, I think what I heard was I had to rent it, and obviously if you rent something you've got to pay. I'm already on financial aid. My financial aid is not that great. I can't afford this. So I did not stick with playing an instrument at Hopkins.

However, I am part of the gospel choir here, and currently I'm the president of the gospel choir.

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We do not have a choir director or music director because of finances and being able to pay and stuff like that. So up until when the pandemic started, we had a director, and then after that we just didn't. And since I have a music background, sort of, I kind of stepped in as a student music director.

Basically everything that's directed I'm doing now along with being a president. It's pretty interesting, and especially trying to do it virtually. I guess the only difference is that I am not playing an instrument. I'm not playing the keyboard or piano. But I try to find other ways to _____.

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**KD:** Yeah, a virtual choir sounds really difficult at times, so I'm sure it's interesting to manage everyone.

You talked a little bit about Hopkins compared to other colleges, the potential differences there. How did you decide to attend Hopkins? I know personally, growing up in Maryland, I was aware of Hopkins. But I know that's not always the case for everyone. Is it something that you were aware of before the college process? How did you decide to apply?

**ED:** So I always knew about Hopkins, but I didn't want to go there – go here. I should say "go here." The only reason why I applied to Hopkins is because my dad made me. If that wasn't the case, I would not have touched that application.
It wasn't because I didn't think Hopkins was a good school. No, that wasn't it. I just didn't think it was the right school for me. I didn't think it was a place where I could thrive. I didn't think it was a good place for my mental health and just socially, and I just feel like it was just way beyond my level.

But I still applied, and the interesting thing is if I can – if I'm getting my facts correct, I think I applied a little late. I applied regular decision, but I used Common App.

If you're aware of the process, you'll know that when you submit your application electronically, there is a timestamp. So they can see the day, and they can see the time. I believe I was a bit late, so my thinking was that they won't even look at the application.

It sounds a little weird, but I was a little relieved because I was like, "Obviously they're not gonna look at the application. I won't get in. It doesn't matter because I don't even want to go there."

But I got accepted, and when I got the acceptance, I was happy because I was like, "Wow, I can actually get into this school." But I was a little sad because I'm like, "Now I have to go. Now I have to go here."

And the decision, I think it was the national decision day, it was between – I got into other schools as well. But last-minute, last-minute, it was between Hopkins and Cornell. I was a little sad because I knew my dad was gonna make me go to Hopkins.

And let's just say that the process of coming to that decision was not that great. I wanted to cry.

And another interesting thing is when I – I submitted my application to Cornell regular decision, and I got my letter early. I didn't get it – I think I got it in February. You're supposed to get it in March, but I got a little, "Oh, hey, you got into Cornell," type of thing.

I was like, "Wow, I'm the first person in my family, maybe a little – maybe even extended family, that has gotten acceptance into an
Ivy League institution." It doesn't matter which one. I felt important. I felt great. And I was like, "Why not? Of course I'm gonna go to this school." And I was so interested.

And then when I told my dad, I didn't get the reaction that I expected. I mean, yes, he was happy. But he was like, "Oh, yeah, for the fact that you got in, it doesn't mean that that's where you're gonna go."

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I was like, "But this is where I want to go, though." But he wanted me to go to Hopkins in the case that I did get in.

And I think a lot of people, they get the med campus and the home campus. People who don't know Hopkins, they think, "Oh, Hopkins." But they're only thinking about the med campus and don't know so much about Homewood undergrad.

But that was the process of me coming to Hopkins, and I didn't do so well. I wanted to transfer to somewhere – another place, even if it meant going to UMD or anywhere. But that didn't work out, and I'm still here.

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KD: Why do you think that your dad was so intent on you going to Hopkins? I know it's probably – it's closer than Cornell. Do you think that's part of it?

ED: See, I will say two reasons. One is location, but – so I'm not gonna touch too much on location because for the fact that I am closer to home than – I'm closer to my home than Cornell. It doesn't mean I'm going to go home often.

The funny thing is I don't go home during the summers. I stay here in Baltimore. Initially I thought it was because he wanted all his kids to be closer to him, but how often – we don't even go home as often as people who don't live in Maryland.

But I do think it was also because of the name that comes – the name and the prestige comes with Hopkins. Who wouldn't want to go to Hopkins, I guess?

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And, yeah, it was just that name and prestige. I think that was it for him. And there are so many opportunities that comes with being affiliated with Hopkins. So I think that was what he was thinking.

And one of my biggest role models in medicine is Ben Carson. Let's think of Ben Carson before he went into politics, so we're not gonna talk about that. But before he went into politics, he was my biggest role model. I'm actually a Carson Scholar.

He went to Hopkins not undergrad, but he worked at Hopkins. And so you hear these big, big names, and so Hopkins is just big in your head like a balloon.

So that's what I think my dad was so bent on, the name and the fact that it's closer to our house.

KD: Sure. And you had been sort of moving into the health care industry in high school. So do you think that there was the expectation that you would come to Hopkins and proceed with going to the medical school and that kind of trajectory?

ED: No, not necessarily. Yes, there is that expectation that I would continue to pursue either medicine or anything else within the health care professions, but not necessarily coming to Hopkins because the nursing program that I was in in high school, many people go straight into nursing.

So there is a community college across the street, literally across the street, from my high school, and they have a nursing program there. And so what many people do is after graduating high school they go into the nursing program there, and they continue this process of trying to be a nurse, an RN. So one of my friends just recently became an RN. That's what most people do.

There are some people that go to college, but there isn't that expectation that, "Oh, it must be Hopkins." But they do expect that students that graduate – that leave that program go into some nursing-related profession.

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2 "RN" stands for Registered Nurse.
KD: Could you describe the first few weeks of your undergrad experience here, maybe the transition from home to Baltimore, the orientation process?

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I know there are a couple of first-generation orientation programs, if you could describe if you were involved in any of those and just what the transition was like for you.

ED: I don't mean to make this interview sound a little too negative, but my transition was bad. It was terrible. So there is something called Hop-In and JUMP\(^3\). So you're aware of that.

And I got an e-mail asking if I wanted to apply to be part of the group, and from what I can remember it was during the summer. By this time I kind of knew that I had no choice but to come to Hopkins. And so I think I was trying to fill out my application, and then I found out that they sent it to me late.

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So the application was already closed for both Hop-In and JUMP, and I was like, "What is this?" So obviously I wasn't in any group for minorities. Now I am in JUMP because they opened it up for any level – any I guess academic level. So I joined JUMP this past September. But then application closed. I couldn't join.

And I was in this phase where I was really hesitant, and I didn't want to go to Hopkins. And so even getting my dorm supplies – just think of anything that you would need to move into college as a freshman.

My dad told me to give him the list so we can go shopping. I didn't do that until two weeks before I was supposed to move in. And it wasn't because I was trying to be a rebel or stubborn. I just, "I just don't want to come here." I was just so scared.

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And he was really frustrated about it, too. We were rushing to buy stuff. Things were already going out of stock in stores, and that made him really upset.

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\(^3\) "JUMP" stands for Johns Hopkins Underrepresented in Medical Professions, a learning community for pre-health students who identify as underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities and/or first-generation and limited-income students.
But I finally made it here, and orientation was actually – orientation was okay. I think there were some things that – just a lot of stuff happened during orientation week, a lot. I know I was tired throughout. Other freshmen were also tired. But I met some really good people, some people that I still keep in touch with until today. One is actually my roommate. So that's good.

But after orientation, it was difficult staying or having some type of steady ground in classes.

Part of it is because the financial aid office, they didn't process my scholarships on time, and my intention was to use those scholarships to buy my books. So I didn't have any money to buy any books.

I didn't know there was anything called free and for sale on Facebook. I wasn't aware that people traded books. Keep in mind, I didn't know anybody at Hopkins. I don't know anybody from my school or anybody from my county that's here, so I didn't have anybody to ask any questions.

So I thought I had to pay full price for everything that I needed for my classes, and guess what? That's exactly what I did. But I didn't have the money, and so I ended up taking an emergency grant to get all my supplies. But I didn't find out about the emergency grant until like two weeks after classes already started.

Keep in mind, I don't have any books, and the only way I was able to do my assignments and stay on track was to share with other students.

And I'm sure you can possibly imagine how difficult that is trying to share a textbook with another student, a student that probably has other classes and is also as busy as I am.

And so one class I actually had to withdraw from because I was already so behind that there was no way I can catch up because I didn't get my books in time, and my grades were just plummeting down. So starting Hopkins was a mess for me.
KD: Well, I appreciate your honesty. Yeah, that sounds incredibly difficult. I'm sorry about that.

Have you met any other first-generation college students at Hopkins in particular?

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ED: I know you especially at first weren't involved in those – the Hop-In program and other programs. But maybe throughout your time have you met other first-gen students?

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ED: Yeah, actually a lot of them. I feel like I was able to navigate Hopkins through that community. I didn't become part of JUMP until this new year, but I knew of the people who were in that group and who were in Hop-In, and they were good resources.

They also referred me to other people. I think also FLI⁴ – I didn't know about FLI until somebody else told me. Somebody who was part of JUMP told me.

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ED: So I was able to meet people who were also first-generation students, and it was nice because I no longer felt alone and I could go through that college experience with someone else.

Like I said, I can't really do much with my – I can't really use my parents as a resource because they didn't go to college, and even if they did, they don't know anything about the college process here in America. I definitely feel like the first-generation students were helpful for me.

KD: That's great. On to academics again, what is your current program of study, and has that remained consistent throughout your time here? How did you choose it, and what do you feel is valuable about it?

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KD: You mentioned premed and your early interest in medicine. I'm curious if that's remained consistent through your time here.

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⁴ “FLI” stands for the First-Generation, Limited-Income Network.
ED: So my current program of study is cognitive science, and I'm minoring in music. But I started off pre– so every Krieger Arts & Sciences person starts as a pre-major and then you choose your major.

So when I chose my other major, I was neuroscience, and I ended up switching to cognitive science because I was not doing well in my neuro classes. I was kind of narrow-minded. I chose neuroscience because I was just really fascinated about the brain and the nervous system, everything. And if you think of whatever that would connect to the brain and neurons, that fascinated me.

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I wanted to do something related to that at Hopkins or anywhere that I went. I was not doing great at all. And so I hesitated to switch my major to cognitive science, but there was – I don't know if I'm – I don't think I'm allowed to mention his name here.

But there was an academic advisor that helped me make my decision. I don't think he's an academic advisor anymore, so I'm not gonna say his name. But he was really helpful.

Honestly, I feel like cognitive science is one of the most flexible majors at Hopkins. It's not easy, depending on what your concentration is, 'cause there's like five focal areas.

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But I think it was really flexible for me, and it helped me take classes that not only was I interested in, but still had some overlap with neuroscience. So it wasn't like I was completely deviating from neuroscience.

And it also didn't jeopardize my GPA. My GPA was already crap. It started off as crap. But it didn't help bring it down even more. It actually helped to raise my GPA a bit.

I think it would be very valuable to me even after leaving Hopkins because it is interdisciplinary, and so it has connections to computer science, psychology, neuroscience, linguistics.

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I don't know. I didn't realize that I liked coding until I became a neuroscience major. I took a class, a coding-related class, and I
was like, "Wow, I actually like coding." I do love Python.

So from there, I started to take more coding classes. I do like being a cognitive science major, and I'm glad I made the decision.

KD: You mentioned I think five focal areas in cognitive science. What is your focal area?

ED: I am linguistics and computational approaches to cognition right now. Before it was neuroscience and linguistics, but I realized I actually like other things beyond neuroscience, so I switched it.

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KD: I think a common theme I hear with students is their GPA at the beginning of their college career and struggling with academics and how they progress now towards the end of it.

What do you think made the difference from now to then? Have you just adapted do you think to the course load or were there any academic services that you worked with or study habits that you acquired during your time here?

ED: Yeah, I think it's a combination of a lot of things. I guess I can talk a bit about some I can easily think of. Number one, your academic advisor – who your academic advisor is makes a difference.

And I'm talking about one that won't continue to bring up – I'm sorry, one that won't continue to bring up the fact that you have failed.

[0:46:00]

The thing is I know I failed, which is why I'm coming to you for help. Please help me get back on track. And I don't think my first academic advisor was great in that sense, but the second one that I was assigned, though, was so wonderful.

I'm not ashamed to say this. I was on academic probation. I didn't know I was on academic probation or some type of warning after my fall semester, and then I did even worse my spring semester of freshman year.

I was put on academic probation. I think it was financial aid. It was a financial aid warning before, and then it was a financial aid I don't know if it's called suspension or probation. I was panicking.
But this academic advisor that I was assigned was wonderful, and she just helped me I guess – I don't know, helped me get back on track.

I was able to build this relationship with her beyond academics, and just she wanted to know who I was as a person. So that was great.

Another thing would be new study tactics, and high school was a little different. I didn't really have to study so much, and I think other people are like that. I don't crack open my books and study, study, study, unless I'm cramming the night before, which helped me a lot.

But then once you come to Hopkins, you realize that cramming is not going to help, and you are going to fail. That's exactly what happened. I just didn't know how to study. I did get a study consultant my spring semester of freshman year.

It helped only to an extent, and I figured out why. Because I wasn't doing so bad, I kind of stopped believing in myself. My dad used to bring up this thing that's called a game of mind. If you know you can do it – I know you've probably heard it before. If you know you can do it, you will definitely achieve and whatever.

But I was kind of like going with the flow, and I was like, "Oh, if I do it, I just do it." I didn't actually think that I could succeed at Hopkins.

And so even when I took exams, I would have the mentality that I'm going to fail even before I had the exam in my hand. And guess what? I definitely did fail because I'm carrying that mentality and that behavior.

It's going to affect how I study. I'm either not going to study at all or I'm going to study – I'm either not gonna study well or I'm just not studying at all.

I can vividly remember there was a day spring semester. I was
studying for an exam, and we were allowed to have cheat sheets. I did everything. I actually studied. I created my cheat sheet. It was nice.

The morning of the exam, I woke up on time, but you know what I did? I told myself I wasn't gonna go to take that exam, and I went back to sleep. It was that bad. I was like, "I'm going to fail." And guess what? I didn't do well. It's just things like that.

And so I had to find other ways to change my mindset and to change my thinking, also other resources. PILOT⁵, I didn't take advantage of that my freshman year, but definitely PILOT.

Something that I started using now actually, the Life Design Lab and the Writing Center, too wonderful, so wonderful. It is just amazing, really.

Also I am so used to not asking for help, which is why I hesitated a lot. One thing that I don't -- I haven't taken advantage of is the counseling center because I keep having these constant thoughts like, "How much are they going to help me?"

And it's kind of hard for me to articulate my emotions and my thoughts to people, and so I have this constant fear that they won't understand where I'm coming from.

So I just never went, even when my roommates recommended the counseling center with me. But that's my trajectory.

**KD:** Yeah, it seems like you have learned a lot, and you were able to -- it's good to know that some on-campus resources were eventually useful to you.

You mentioned your specific academic advisor being particularly important and memorable to you. Have there been any memorable faculty members that you really enjoyed taking courses with or any particular courses themselves that you especially enjoyed?

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⁵ "PILOT" is a loose acronym for peer-led-team learning, a program managed by the campus Office of Academic Support.
ED: Yes. Sorry, you kind of cut off a bit, so let me make sure that I understood your question.

KD: Sorry about that.

ED: So you're asking if there were any faculty members or any classes that I really enjoyed?

[0:52:00]

KD: Mm-hmm.

ED: Yes, but they aren't that many. So I'm not allowed to say anybody's names, but I will say my professor for bio was amazing.

KD: Sorry, I will say. If you mention a specific faculty name, that's totally fine with me, if you're comfortable.

ED: Oh, okay. I just didn't know if I was not allowed to.

KD: Sure, go for it.

ED: But Prof. Roberson, amazing, so amazing. I actually hated biology for the most part of my life because my biology teacher in high school ruined it for me. And so I was like, "I'm staying away from bio." But then being in his class made me enjoy it, and I did well.

[0:53:00]

My faculty advisor for my major was also helpful. He was kind of like my academic advisor that I had before that didn't stop bringing up the fact that I failed so many times and kind of helped me get back on track. But he was more focused with my program of study, though. I would like to say that he was very helpful to me.

There were certain classes that I also enjoyed. This past semester I took written language. It's language disorders and stuff like that. And the professor was amazing and wonderful. We did a research proposal. I have never done one before.

[0:54:00]

I liked taking the class even though it was virtual. I learned a lot, and taking the class also opened my eyes to other areas of I don't know if I should say medicine or health care that I probably haven't thought of within the neurology space or neurology branch.
So that class was an ace. She's actually writing my recommendation letter for grad school, so it's nice.

I would say also my music classes. I love all my music classes. I'm currently taking electronic music production. The professor is actually a Peabody professor. It's wonderful even though it's virtual. So I enjoyed all my music classes.

[0:55:00]

Let's see. And all my language classes as well. Any language-related class I loved. Written language, the one I was talking about earlier, that was the first neuro-related class, the first one that I ever actually liked. All the ones that I took in the past I just didn't.

I took nervous systems. A funny thing, I took nervous systems, which is actually a requirement for neuro majors. I'm a cognitive science major, meaning I have no business taking that class, though I could if I really wanted to.

I took that class, and I'm not ashamed to say that I failed. I actually failed. But good I made the class pass/fail so it didn't really bring down my GPA.

But I learned a lot in that class, don't get me wrong. Although I didn't do well, I learned so much. You can ask me anything today, and I will tell you all about it. I can tell you about AMPA receptors and NMDA receptors.

[0:56:00]

But it's the test taking. Taking the test, that's the problem for me. I didn't enjoy that aspect of the class, but the actual content I enjoyed.

KD: Sure. A couple times you mentioned recently having to take classes virtually. Could you just talk about what that's been like over the past couple semesters now? Do you find that it's been different but okay or especially difficult, or maybe it varies depending on the course?

ED: It varies depending on the course. But when the pandemic first started and classes had to switch to being online, I can say that for many students it was difficult to stay engaged. And me, too. Honestly, it was – I actually stopped trying in some of those classes.
I'm like, "If it's pass/fail, I only need I think, what, a C or a C-minus to pass the class." And we had no option of uncovering our grades. So it wasn't like I could struggle to get an A and then get an S, a star, and then later be able to uncover it.

But because of that, I know a lot of people – that willingness to try and aim for a high grade, it was just out of the question. Like I said, it was difficult to stay engaged. The motivation was gone. It was just out the window.

I took two summer classes. I took physics, and it was a little different because it was no longer pass/fail. You were actually getting a grade. But that went okay.

I think, depending on what kind of class it is, for things like exams, they might give you a big window to take the exam. So 24 hours or maybe two days, and then you pick whichever timeslot to take the exam.

A class that I took last semester, you literally had unlimited time to take it within the 48-hour window. If you wanted to, you could spend two days on the exam. And it was open book, open notebook. But we all know that if an exam is open note, it doesn't mean that it's easy. They will make it difficult. So it just depends.

I also have had classes that you will get a normal time. So if it was in-person, you would normally get 50 minutes or an hour and 15 minutes. You would still get 50 minutes or an hour and 15 minutes.

But those classes, though, I don't know if it was – if it's just me, but they just seem longer. The exams seem longer. I recently took an exam, and it was 27 questions long and we had an hour and 15 minutes.

The professor had said that it would be multiple-choice and short answer, but there was only one multiple-choice question, and they were all – you had to give explanations. I'm like, "This doesn't make any sense. There's no way."
And if we have Internet problems and our computer is just freezing, that also plays into – that's also an issue because the time is gonna keep going. And so that was something. But generally I think it just depends on the class.

**KD:**

Sure, that makes sense. Could you talk about your overall dorm or apartment life during undergrad?

**[1:00:00]**

**ED:**

Yeah. I was in dorms freshman and sophomore year. I lived in the AMR's my freshman year, and I lived in McCoy sophomore year.

It was interesting. It was interesting because I was – I'm living with someone I don't know. But I don't think my – I don't think they were bad. They weren't bad. It was just interesting. That's all I'm going to say.

Although I did not like McCoy – I think my Internet connection is probably unstable. But although I did not like McCoy, I do like having – I like the fact that I had three other people to share that experience with. And even today sometimes we'll bring up random events that happened while we were living in McCoy.

**[1:01:00]**

It was really nice. I think there were times where – there was one time where the water – there was no hot water, and I had to go to my friend's place in Charles Commons to take a shower the night before. It's just things like that. I don't know. But I guess I'm glad that I was able to experience those things with other people.

But junior year and senior year, now I'm actually off campus, and I like it. I'm not in a place where it's too expensive, but it's not extremely cheap, either. I also have roommates. I feel some sense of independence that I didn't feel even after I moved out – moved into college initially.

**[1:02:00]**

Now I don't have a meal plan. I go buy my own groceries. I have to pay rent every month, [laughs] which is different 'cause you don't do that freshman and sophomore year. You just pay it all at once.

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6 “AMR” stands for Alumni Memorial Residences, the name of two campus residence halls.
I guess a downside is because of where I live, it's a bit of a walk to campus, and there are times when I had 9:00 AMs. This is when we were in-person, I had 9:00 AMs, and I would have to wake up at I think 7:00 or 7:30 because I don't like rushing and I don't like sweating on my way to class. So I wake up extra early so I can just take my time and walk.

But I think it was nice. Honestly, I feel like regardless of where you live, if you have other people to experience those things with, it makes it more I guess meaningful. So that was my case.

[1:03:00]

KD: Sure. It seems like a lot of undergrad students live in Charles Village. If you don't mind saying, is that the neighborhood that you live in or have you lived in more than one neighborhood?

ED: No, I live in the Remington area. I'm not sure if you know where R. House is.

KD: Yeah.

ED: So I'm right there.

KD: Earlier on you mentioned the gospel choir. What other, if any, activities or clubs have you been a member of at Hopkins? Student orgs, I guess.

ED: I don't think I did much. So I'm a normal member of the African Students Association.

[1:04:00]

I don't engage too much. I don't go to a lot of the events. I did my freshman and sophomore year, but mostly my freshman year, and after that I kind of stopped going to a lot of the events. But I am African, so I guess I'm still part of the association.

Not that anything is wrong with it, I just – I don't know. I think at one point a lot of the events fell on days that I had rehearsal for other things, so gospel choir. They had their fashion show on a – I think it was on a Sunday, but we normally have our gospel choir concerts on a Sunday, and it just overlapped.

[1:05:00]
If I really wanted to, I could have left and finished at the concert and then went straight, but that day I was too tired. So it was just things like that.

So I'm part of ASA; DBH, Dunbar Baldwin Hughes Theater Company. That's the first and only I guess Black theater group on campus. Right now I'm the technical director, and since we're virtual I do all the audio and video editing. If there's any videos that need to be created, I do all of that.

And I didn't know about DBH for the longest time, and I think my roommate told me about it during the pandemic. So I'm part of the e-board now. Because we're trying to implement some sort of in-person but socially distanced part for our production this spring, I will have to go in.

We're trying to use Shriver just to shoot – to record some stuff and make use of whatever equipment is there. So that's going to be an experience.

My freshman year I was part of Temps d'Afrique. That's the African dance group on campus. It was really nice to be able to do an activity with other people that love what you like to do.

I didn't continue after that. I'm not gonna say too much, but I felt like my experience could have been a little better. Maybe part of it was leadership, but overall it was a really, really nice – a really nice group.

Even after I left my freshman year, I came back to help out for their competition sophomore year, and the dynamic was a different – I felt like I was still part of the group even though I wasn't a member.

I loved how everybody I guess related to one another regardless of whether you were a freshman or a senior, and I think that leadership that year was just amazing. Obviously things are different now that we're virtual.

*KD:* How about internships or jobs? Have you had either of those during college?
ED: I didn't do many – I didn't do any internships because I just never qualified for any internships. But I did have a lot of jobs from temp jobs to long – I don't know if I should call them long-term.

[1:08:00]

I worked in the rec center, the welcome desk and the equipment room. I did that for about a year and a month or two. I worked in the Wyman Building for the – not the Krieger, the Whiting School. I think it was development and alumni relations, like Office Assistant, but I helped out with projects.

I was a student monitor at the Education Building. I worked in the Biophysics Department, work-study. Wow, a lot of stuff, like I said, temp jobs that I can't even remember anymore.

Right now actually it's a job, but it's also like a research position. I'm a Research Assistant for the School of Public Health.

[1:09:00]

The Epidemiology Department, they are into the HIV and AIDS study. They call them MACS and WIHS, so the MWCCS. And so I'm a Research Assistant there, and I've been doing it for over a year. So June will make it two years, actually.

Everybody there is wonderful. I'm glad to be part of the team. Through that, I've been able to connect with investigators and authors, many people who have had publications and things like that.

And I also just – I don't know if I should say. It's recently. But I have a job as a finance or accounting assistant with HEMI, the Hopkins Extreme Materials Institute.

[1:10:00]

It's virtual, but it is something, and I get paid, 'cause I like counting money. [Laughs] It is a lot.

KD: That is a lot. Thank you. We touched on this a little bit. My next question is talking about how you spent your summers or breaks

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7 MWCCS stands for MACS/WIHS Combined Cohort Study. MACS itself stands for Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study, and WIHS stands for Women's Interagency HIV Study.
between semesters. You mentioned not going home super often, if you could talk about that.

**ED:**

I didn't go home because I didn't want to be home. Because of where I live, it's not the type of place where I want to stay being idle, and if I wanted to do something – so this is before the pandemic.

[1:11:00]

If I wanted to do something, let's say I go on to get a job or something, I would have to find a reliable transportation, and I don't have a car. I didn't have a car, and I still don't have a car. And the only way I could possibly get there is if my dad were to drop me, or my stepmother. And their schedules are completely different, so that's not a reliable transportation.

And like I said, I don't want to stay idle at home, and so the best thing for me is to stay here. I'm literally walking distance from the school, and I can get employed.

So I spent my summers basically just working. I tried to get – I guess to do actual research labs or with faculty members. But like I said, you have to apply to those positions.

[1:12:00]

I don't know how that works with other departments, but you have to ask, "Is there a position available," or apply, and I never got it. Somebody else would always get it. So I'm like, "Well, I can't cry about it, so I guess I will just keep working and make that money."

But I wasn't making money just to make money. For the most part, I was saving up because, like I said, after my freshman year I didn't – I wasn't getting good financial aid anymore. And so on top of loans, I was working.

And so a huge chunk of that was going towards saving up to make sure that I have enough for rent and food and just things like that and personal expenses. So I spent that time working. But this past summer, though, I took two classes, two summer classes.

**KD:**

And how has your relationship with your family been while a student at Hopkins?

[1:13:00]
ED: I don't think it has changed. Obviously we're not seeing face-to-face. Hmm. It hasn't really changed. Sometimes it does feel a little awkward when you haven't been home for months and you now go home and it feels like things are a little new.

I used to have this problem whenever I went home. I just didn't know where things were. Actually, after I started college, my dad moved. Sometimes stuff feels new to me now even though it's been, what, four years.

But I would go home and won't know where a certain pot goes.

[1:14:00]

I know where the pots go generally, but you have the good – the other pots and the special pots. I just didn't know where stuff were. And then they would be like, "Oh, go and get me, I don't know, the scissors."

I'm like, "Where are the scissors?" [Laughs] I can't find it. And so I guess sometimes I do feel like I'm a visitor. I don't know if this is weird, but sometimes I feel bad if I'm eating too much, 'cause I'm like, "I don't want to finish their food."

I don't know. But other than that, it hasn't been a bad relationship, I think. I think being intentional about your communication, that's it.

KD: And aside from your family, and perhaps this includes your family, but what do you feel has been your primary support system while you've been here?

[1:15:00]

ED: Hmm, my primary support system. I would say it would be the Black students at Hopkins, just the community in general and also individual people that I call my friends. The Christian community, for sure.

And I'll also say my gospel choir family because, yes, we are performing arts and we would go into the religious category. But we do see each other as a family because in a way we are likeminded people. We have one goal, which is the minister the word of God to people. And so we are a family.
And so I see the gospel choir and Christian community and Black people here as a strong support system.

KD: Great. We've touched on this, or you have, throughout this oral history, but just sort of generally have you felt supported by Hopkins as a first-generation student? And the second part of this question is how do you think the university could increase support for first-generation students?

ED: Hmm. I feel like I am supported, but only to an extent, and the problem is this. There are so many — I guess so many — there are resources, right?

But before you can get ahold of those resources, you need to either know someone who knows someone or just did some extreme research. So we all know about PILOT, hopefully. You've probably heard about the Writing Center. You've probably heard about the Life Design Lab. They send you e-mails all the time.

But there are some other things beyond that that we don't know. For example, if you need — let's say I need funding for a project that I'm doing. Yes, we've heard about the PURA\(^8\), but there are some other grants that you can apply for. But you are not gonna know about that unless you know somebody that tells you.

I don't know if it's that they don't want people to apply for these grants. I'm like, "Why is this a secret? Why are you keeping it away from students, and you still have the money?" It just doesn't make any sense to me.

So I think the resources — so the really, really beneficial resources, they're there, but they're hidden, and you've just gotta do your digging. But I'm like, "Why should I —"

The only reason why you would go and dig for something is if you know what you're digging for. And so obviously you're not gonna go and dig for anything if you don't — there's no goal to dig for.

\(^8\) "PURA" stands for Provost’s Undergraduate Research Award.
So I think that Hopkins can make – just like how they promote things like PILOT and all these other resources, I think they should do the same with these other things that they're hiding. I don't know, I keep using the word "hiding" 'cause that's what it feels like. It feels like they don't want us to know about them.

You set money aside for students, for minority students, but no minority knows about it. It doesn't make sense. So I think they should be more intentional. Do you want students to take advantage of this? If the answer is yes, then make it open. Make it available.

[1:19:00]

If you don't want students to take advantage of it, just get rid of it. Stop making it a thing. I think that's what they should do.

I also think that Hopkins is all about diversity and all that stuff, which is nice. But I feel like what they do for the most part is talk and not action, and a lot of actions that they do take as well doesn't really benefit us.

So if you say you're going to do something, actually act upon it. We're not asking for 100 percent implementation because a lot of times that's impossible during the first year. But, please, we need reassurance that you're actually doing something.

I know this is diverting a little bit off from the question that you asked, but it really touches me. I don't know if I'm allowed to – can I continue?

[1:20:00]

KD: Sure, of course.

ED: Thank you. This actually reminds me of when they wanted to bring the on-campus police. If your goal is to protect students, students of any color or any race, then bringing that on-campus police force was a wrong move. It was a wrong move.

There was a time – and I'm thankful that they got rid of this. There was a time that – you know when a robbery goes on around Baltimore, say somebody got robbed.

They will send the alert that, "A robbery took place," or whatever, and they'll give the description of maybe the suspect. What they
would do then was they would give very vague descriptions: "Black male," "Black woman," "Black male in Black shirt," "Black man in whatever this."

[1:21:00]

Just Black, Black, Black, Black. I keep touching this because it's really hurtful. Why is the description just "Black male," "Black male"? There are Black males on campus.

And it wasn't until – I can't remember who it was, but I want to say it was the BSU president, the Black Student Union president, that addressed it and was like, "This is unacceptable because if you keep saying 'Black male,' there are so many Black males that are Hopkins students. Do you want them to be targeted?"

So I'm not sure if it was him or if it was somebody else, but thank God they went to fix that.

Now the on-campus police – let's not lie to ourselves. If we saw – not we, but if they saw a Black male at night with a hoodie, a black hoodie, hoodies are normal. Everybody wears hoodies.

[1:22:00]

But a Black male with a black hoodie, and let's say his hair was scruffled, and let's say he just woke up out of bed and then, I don't know, he wants to go get coffee to study or whatever.

And you have this on-campus police force. He will be targeted. Let's not lie to ourselves. He will get targeted. And I don't know if that was their intention, but that is what I'm getting.

And it's making people like me feel unsafe. Regardless of what their intentions were, even if they were good, it makes people like me feel unsafe.

If they were to implement that, it would get to a point where I would – even if I did have my J-Card showing you that I'm a student here, you would probably end up having to ask me more questions about my identity. Why should that be the case?

[1:23:00]

And so I am glad that – I'm really hoping that they don't go back to trying to consider the on-campus police force because it's not
needed. It is not needed.

And that whole thing with Garland and arresting students who were peacefully protesting, there was no violence anywhere, but you brought police to come in and arrest these people. That was wrong. And I'm sorry to say this, but they should be ashamed of themselves. There was no reason to do that. There are so many ways that you can handle this, but that was not the way.

And then when I think about the whole Hopkins, I expected better, honestly. And some of the people were actually traumatized by that. The people who were actually arrested, they were actually traumatized by that. That shouldn't have had to happen. All because of what?

We're asking to be protected. We're asking you to peacefully please do not bring this on-campus police force here because we're not going to feel safe.

[1:24:00]

Other than Black people, too, even people who are part of the LGBTQ community, they also don't – won't feel safe. I don't know. So it's just things like that that are really hurtful.

And even on that as well, getting rid of – I need to bring this up. I am so sorry. But taking down Mattin and I believe they're trying to take down Swirnow, I don't see – other than Peabody because Peabody, it's specifically for music and stuff like that.

The Homewood campus, I do not think they put any – I don't think they prioritize the arts, which is understandable because when you think of Hopkins, you think of medicine and stuff like that, and research.

[1:25:00]

But they do not acknowledge the arts. You can see that in the kind of funding that they give us. For people like me who need the arts to feel sane, I guess it wouldn't affect me too much because I am graduating. But I'm thinking about the students after me.

Also, other than extracurricular activities, let me tell you, Mattin is one of the biggest or the only place that you can think of having a music class. So all my music classes were where? Mattin.
And so where do you expect professors to teach their music classes once Mattin is gone? I don't understand. There's so many things that we use Mattin for.

Where do you expect choral groups and a cappella groups to rehearse? The room that they usually use for rehearsal, the main reason why they use that is because of the acoustics, and it's good for rehearsals and concerts and things like that.

Where do you expect them to go? And you're getting rid of Swirnow. Now we have to fight over Shriver.

I mentioned that I'm part of DBA, the Dunbar Baldwin Hughes Theater Company. To the best of my knowledge, and I'm not completely sure because this is my first year part of it, I think we would use – we would normally use Swirnow, and I don't think we would ever consider using Shriver.

And we all know that the symphony – I think it's the symphony orchestra or symphony band – they have priority. If you're thinking about any arts groups, they have priority over Shriver, and we can't beat them.

I guess maybe after the symphony orchestra or band, it would probably be the Choral Society. I'm not really sure. But now there's that competition for who gets what space, and that's not – I don't think that was necessary.

Also I'm not really sure how they came up with the decision to take down Mattin or not. I personally think that there was – they could have done it some other way. I think there's another space on campus where you could have put that student center.

And the thing is this. I think that they're going to turn that student center into another study space. We all know how Brody is. It's all intense. Everybody's studying, studying. I guess it's just a natural thing, especially with the environment at Hopkins.

We're going to turn that student center into another study space. And I know that was not the intention, but that's what's gonna
happen. So you turn another place, a place for music, a place to
destress, into another study space. It just makes the environment
more stressful.

But, hey, I'm just a student. I don't make the rules. I don't make the
decisions. And that's what I have to say.

**KD:**

Well, I really appreciate all of those insights and perspectives on
the number of issues that you touched on. I'm as a staff member
also really interested to see what happens.

It does seem like just space on campus is so – it can be really
contentious, and that competition is not conducive to just a
comfortable environment for everyone. So I really appreciate you
sharing that with me.

[1:29:00]

My next question kind of moves off campus and asks just what you
would say in general about your life in the city of Baltimore or the
state of Maryland. And I know you're from Maryland. I think this
question hits differently for out-of-state students. But what would
you say about living in Baltimore?

**ED:**

I feel this sense of independence. I can walk and do anything that I
want. I've never lived in a city type place. I think Baltimore has –
so even outside of the Hopkins bubble, I think Baltimore has some
really nice places like Hampden, the area closer to Peabody, and
stuff like that.

[1:30:00]

I think the different places that I could go to made my stay in
Baltimore really nice, though I haven't been everywhere. That was
actually my intention before COVID to do all of that my senior
year, but it's okay.

I do feel more independent especially being off campus. I have that
luxury of going wherever I want. I don't have to ask anybody, "Can
I go to this place," or whatever. And I feel like I would have
probably felt that way even if I wasn't living – even if I wasn't at
Hopkins and I was going to somewhere else and there were places
around and I had that freedom to go and do whatever.

[1:31:00]
And I don't think there were any major events that I probably experienced living in Baltimore. I wasn't a student when the whole protests – I'm not sure. I think it was probably the year before I started, or two years. But I heard that there were some protests, and maybe a fire went off I think it was somewhere closer to Peabody. But I didn't experience that.

I think generally my life in Baltimore was pretty good. I can't complain. Security is pretty good. I think you can walk at night and feel secure that you're not – at least within the Hopkins surrounding you can feel secure that you're not gonna get mugged.

[1:32:00]

KD: That's always a good thing. If you wouldn't mind speaking on your plans for the future for life after Hopkins, whether that's professional, personal, academic or otherwise.

ED: So I mentioned that I'm premed, but my intention is to go to – start grad school fall 2021. There are SMPs, special master's programs, and I plan to use them as a bridge or use it as a bridge to med school. I am taking two gap years. It took me a lot to come to that decision. I feel like two is a lot, but it's okay. Everybody's journey in life is different.

[1:33:00]

So if God is still allowing me to go down that path, definitely med school after those two years. I have a list of branches in medicine that I want to go into, but number one would be neurology.

When I was younger I wanted to be a neurosurgeon, but we all know to be a neurosurgeon, or any surgeon really, that's years of residency after getting – after becoming an MD or getting your MD degree. So that's talking about professionally.

I'm a big music person, so I plan on sticking with music, even if it means performance. I do songwriting, and so I have considered maybe writing for people.

[1:34:00]

Or I could just become an independent artist, really. I don't know. And I don't know how I would be able to do that in the future with my profession as a doctor. But you know what, if God says yes, I guess it's yes.
I also want to go into philanthropy. I want to be a philanthropist. I love to give, and when I give, I give big. And just also giving – also being able to see people who grew up like me get opportunities that I wasn't able to get. I would like to impact the lives of others not just as a doctor, but even if it means financially.

[1:35:00]

KD: I'm curious. If you don't mind talking about just what specifically interests you about medicine, is it this willingness or interest in helping others? Do you think that's it, what it boils down to?

ED: Yeah, definitely helping others. And I don't think I realized how – realized the number of people and the number of communities that don't have access to health care, and I would like to serve those communities.

But other than just having the heart to help, I think it's just fascination and how much there is to discover in the medical field.

[1:36:00]

So I said that I'm really – I'm passionate about neuroscience and stuff like that, even though I'm not a neuroscience major because I didn't do well, but it's okay. And the thing with neuro is the fact that even though we think we know a lot, we really don't.

And I learned one time that the number of brains that have been used for studying purposes is significantly less than the number of – this is weird – the hearts and other organs that people use to study other systems or people use in other branches of medicine.

And that kind of makes sense. I don't know I feel like there's so many things to – so many things that's still left –

[1:37:00]

that's left undiscovered, so many things that still need to invented, and we just don't know what they are.

And when I think about what I could possibly do, what I could possibly contribute to medicine, I get excited. I don't know, there is this one movie, Something the Lord Made, and it was talking about the story of Vivien Thomas.
He was a Black surgical tech. He started off as I think maybe a custodian. But he worked alongside Dr. Blalock. It was this whole discovery with the baby blue syndrome and things like that. And it just got me thinking about how much I myself could also contribute to the field of medicine.

I don't know, I just want to do something big, because I come from a family where, yes, we have our strengths in our own area, but I want to – I don't want to be a normal person. I believe I have a purpose beyond being a normal person, whatever "normal" means to you. And it's not about fame or prestige, it's being satisfied with what I'm doing in life.

And the way I see my life right now and the way I see my future, it's not an office type job. It's not being a normal doctor. I don't know, it's way beyond that. I can't pinpoint exactly what it is, but it's just that need for me to fulfill my purpose in life. That is what I'm going for, and medicine is part of it. Giving back is part of it.

Thank you. That's really inspiring to hear, so that's great. Overall, would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students, and is there any advice you would give to them?

That's a tricky question because it is normal for me to be biased. I will say this, though. College is not for everyone. It's not for every single person. You can get educated in other – and when I say "college," I'm talking about your traditional four-year college. It's not for everyone.

There's so many professions out there that you can go into without going to college. I'll say that first. And if that's the case, that means Hopkins is not for everyone.

Now for first-generation students, if you – if Hopkins can get to the point where it will make all possible resources readily available to first-generation students and those first-generation students feel like they are ready even if they haven't started their undergraduate career, then I'll say go for it.

So I'm talking about maybe in the future when things have changed
a bit. But right now, I'm sorry, I think that first-generation students can get – would probably be better off somewhere that won't crush them.

[1:41:00]

Like I said, this is just based on my experiences. I've met first-generation students that they're wonderful. I know somebody, and I think their GPA is 3.7, 3.8. That is amazing. But not everybody is like that. A lot of people fail, just like me, but then end up – they find a way to get up. Some people never get up, and they have to leave.

But I will say that if their mental health is something that's important to them, save yourself the stress. Save yourself the tears and the unnecessary depression, 'cause you're basically coming here to be depressed. In a way, Hopkins for me was a catalytic – it was an acidic catalyst for my depression and all of that stuff.

[1:42:00]

So it depends on how they're starting. If their mental health is important to them and they're someone that's coming from a dark place and they're still in the state of recovery, please, if you can go to another school that is just as good as Hopkins, please do that.

You don't want to spend four years of your life miserable, because let me tell you, yes, people do heal from certain things. But there's some people that to heal takes them a long time, and it leaves behind scars. But if they think that they're ready and they feel like they _____ [break in audio] go ahead and go for it.

My advice to them would just – it would be don't be afraid to ask for help.

[1:43:00]

That was one thing I wish I had done, 'cause like I said, the way I grew up, I was kind of used to not asking for help and kind of doing everything on my own. But then you realize that you actually can't do it on your own.

You're going to get to a point where even to do ordinary homework assignments, you're going to have to work in a group, depending on what kind of major you're in. I know civil engineering – I'm not civil engineering, though – a lot of times
they do their work together. They study together.

Don't ever think that you can do it all on your own. If you need help, go get help. Don't wait till things get rocky. Don't wait till you have fallen in a pit, and I'm talking a pit metaphorically. Get that help immediately. So that's my advice.

[1:44:00]

KD: Thank you. This question's always funny to me because you've been doing this this whole time. If you had to succinctly or more conclusively summarize your time at Hopkins, how would you do that?

ED: Hmm. My time at Hopkins, it was an experience that has added to my growth and my development as a person, and it has remolded me into a new version of myself.

Despite everything that I have gone through, I am grateful because I'm glad that I am learning certain things now and not much later when I'm older, 'cause it's easier to repair – I heard this. It's easier to build up a child than to repair a broken man or a broken woman. So I'm grateful that it's happening now.

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It was loads of experiences. It could have been better. Other than everything that I've said, I don't think I could say more.

KD: Well, I think that's great, and I just want to thank you again so much for interviewing with me today. I really appreciate your thoughtfulness and your time, especially during this wild pandemic, to say the least.

Is there anything else you would like to add before the interview is over? Any areas we didn't touch on or things you would like to say?

ED: Hmm. I think I may have said this when I was talking about diversity, but it's nice that we talk about diversity, but it's even better if you act on it.

[1:46:00]

Yeah, I don't know if I said this, but just a quick drop. When it comes to funding student groups, I think we should – I don't know
who does the funding and stuff like that, but I think more funding needs to go to certain student groups, and I think SGA\(^9\) does a lot of that.

For example, the gospel choir got zero dollars this year. We didn't ask for much. DBH got half of what they requested. We are in a pandemic, but that pattern has been seen before where student groups just get less and less and less and less in funding, and the main reason isn't because there is no money. The money is there. But you're not allocating money correctly.

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If it's because biases are being put into play or racism or whatever, that needs to stop. That really needs to stop. I don't understand how you give a group zero dollars. It doesn't make any sense to me. You didn't give us a dime, but you would give other student groups exactly what they – maybe not exactly, but you give them loads of money.

I think they should be really fair in how they allocate funds to student groups because, for example, the gospel choir, how are we able to – we can't really be a gospel choir if we don't have correct instruction and direction, and we're able to do that by paying what? A director.

This year, we just happened to be – I guess we just happened to be lucky because I kind of stepped in even though I was already president. I was like, "Okay, I'm gonna take over the responsibilities of the music director."

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But if we didn't have someone who can do that, then there is no gospel choir for the schoolyear, and that shouldn't have to happen. We're just asking money so that we can pay a director.

When you talk about diversity, I think it should be put into action and actually implemented to do exactly what you say. And I think I've already said that before.

KD: Well, thank you. Thanks again, and have a great rest of your week

[End of Audio]

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\(^9\) “SGA” stands for Student Government Association.