

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
MS.0404

“O.O.”

Interviewed by Allison Seyler

March 28, 2022

Johns Hopkins University  
Oral History Collection

Interviewee: "O.O."

Interviewer: Allison Seyler (AS)

Subject: "O.O." describes her family, her young childhood in Nigeria, and her family's move to the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, when she was young. She goes on to talk about her experiences as a first-gen student studying neuroscience at Johns Hopkins and her plans for medical school and a career as a doctor.

Date: March 28, 2022

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AS: Okay. So my name is Allison Seyler, and I'm here with OO on March 28, 2022, at the Eisenhower Library. And we're conducting the first-gen oral history interviews. So I'd like to start the interview just by acknowledging the impact that COVID-19 has had on the Hopkins community. The questions in the interview were actually written before the 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 this particularly challenging experience and the changes that the students faced. So I'll just kick it off with a question about how you feel the coronavirus has – coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience, and what are some challenges or changes that it caused for you personally?

OO: Yeah. So I do think, unlike most people, there were some pretty – I wouldn't say positive, but the pandemic provided some much-needed – it provided a much-needed break from campus life, to say the least. I would say I was one of the people who had a hard time my freshman year, my first semester. I had a hard time just going from small city, small school, small town to just thrown into this huge pond. So it was pretty hard catching up as far as academics and just meeting people from so many places. And it was a lot, catching up. I would say that I even considered transferring after that first semester of my freshman year.

But I was like, "Okay, let's start again spring semester. Maybe you get the hang of things." But I was still just having a hard time balancing everything. I don't know if it was study habits or just general things, but I was still having a pretty hard time. So I think the pandemic did what – when we used to have covered grades for freshmen, so that first semester doesn't count against you or

anything like that did. So since my freshman semester kind of hurt pretty badly, I think it was nice to have that spring semester and have everything become pass-fail, everything go online, everyone get to be home with their families. I think it was a nice, much-needed break. Apart from that, I would say it did negatively impact the amount of outside experience we got, especially for people with post-grad careers.

It was super difficult to try to shadow or get your clinical experience. And these things still are required of us as we apply for medical school and all these things this semester. But it's like, we only had maybe six months of the world being open to fit all of these things in. So I would say it negatively impacted that. But as far as campus life, it tightened circles, I would say. People who communicated with each other over the pandemic just became a bit closer. But it did limit how much people we got to interact with outside of our own circles. So...

*AS:* Yeah. I think that's really reflective, to think about the – what you were able to do because of it and maybe what you weren't able to do or the shortened timeline. So I want to also just do the traditional oral history thing where we move a little bit more backward in time to provide context for how the pandemic impacted you and your time at Hopkins.

And I wonder if you could start by telling us where you were born and a little bit more about your family.

*OO:* All right. So I was born in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. And – I was born in Nigeria. I lived there for about seven years. And during that time, my family has – and still is super religious, so I'm Christian. And I think that played a big role in my development because I always kind of had a strong faith and I always kind of – I don't know. That also affected the way I saw the world and the way I saw opportunity and growth and upward mobility and things of that nature, because of my faith.

And when I was about seven years old, my mom won – my mom won the visa lottery, and we were able to move to the States. And it was pretty difficult going from – I would say we were kind of middle class in Nigeria. And starting over from bottom, the bottom-up – we had to start over from scratch, move to Georgia.

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And my parents didn't – everything they had went towards – like yes, you get a visa lottery, but you still have to pay for the visas for

everyone else. You have to pay for the plane tickets and the passports, all of that. And that winded them out. They had just enough to get here. And we got here, started with nothing.

So all – my mom stressed, "All you have is school, all you have is your education." So I think coming to Atlanta, Georgia, where the education system isn't the best, there was – there was a lot of initial culture shocks, like certain things – I was seven years old. So we learned how to spell – we were learning how to spell. And things like color or favorite – I spell color "C-O-L-O-U-R."

And my second grade teacher's marking points off on quizzes and saying that's not right. So there was just a lot of relearning that I had to do. And I think it was fine because I think I was able to start at that crucial point, unlike my other siblings, who kind of started a little too late and my younger siblings who kind of only had the American system. I think I had a nice blend of systems that kind of put me ahead of my peers a little bit. So I think I was always kind of good at academics. School always came super easy to me. I grew up having a really good memory, so that was nice.

And as far as my family, I'm the middle child of five children. I have all the siblings possible. I like to always say that. When everyone's like, "Oh, what type of siblings do you have," I'm like, "I have all of them." I have a younger brother, younger sister, then it's me, and then my young – my older sister and my older brother. So I –

*AS:* One of each.

*OO:* Yeah. So I'm right there. And my parents – both of my parents grew up in our household. My dad did work abroad. And he works at – an – as an engineer at Shell. And for the first ten or so years while we were in America, maybe seven years while we were in America, he still kind of lived in Nigeria, working, and sending money over. And he would visit every three or so months. So that was that.

But apart from that, my school upbringing was really nice. I did great, won science fairs, won spelling bees, kind of always thought I was just the biggest fish ever. And I just kind of thought I would do amazing, I was the smartest person ever. And I come to Hopkins, I'm like, "Whoa, there's so many of you guys. You're all smart."

And it kind of reels you in a little bit and you learn a little bit more

about yourself. And I don't know. Facing failures and facing challenge is the best way to gain success. Because I think when you're staying stagnant in that small town where you're competing with yourself, you think you're going somewhere, but you're not really because there's no challenge. But yeah. I got into Hopkins.

I chose here because of financial aid. I think the only other schools that I got into and I would've considered would be UNC Chapel Hill or Cornell. And I think because of – and Emory, as well. But something happened with my – I don't know if it was my citizenship documents. I don't know. I'm a – I'm a US citizen. I became a citizen when I was like 12.

But for some reason, the documents got misplaced in my Common App, so my financial aid awards for other schools were just not –

AS: Were not as complete or –

OO: Yeah, they were not complete. But Hopkins was just kind of like, "I mean, sure. We believe you're a citizen," no verification. And I had the full scholarship. So I was like, "Hopkins it is." And *[crosstalk]* –

AS: Yeah. We'll get – we'll get – I want to definitely hear about the – your acceptance, too, and how that impacted your family, so we'll get to that in a minute. But could you tell me a little bit more about your parents, what their education was like in Nigeria? And then again, I know you said your dad's an engineer, but what did your mom do for a profession?

OO: Right. Okay. So in Nigeria, my – okay. They have – it's – I'll try to keep the timeline as soon as – as continuous as possible. My parents are ten years apart on – in age, right?

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So, when they got married, my mom was 26 and my dad was 36 or something of that nature. But they married because my dad's mom knew my mom and she's like, "Oh, that'd be a great woman for my son." And they got married. I don't – there's not a cute story behind it. But when my mom got married to my dad, she only – she had her bachelor's degree. She – I can't remember what she majored in, something like business.

And my mom had – my mom initially had seven siblings, but they all passed away.

*AS:* Wow.

*OO:* She has one brother now – not all. Most of them passed away. She has one brother now who's living, and she had a brother who recently passed in 2009. But apart from that, the rest passed away during childhood.

*AS:* That's so hard.

*OO:* Yeah. So it was just her and her brothers, really. Her dad also passed away when she was a child.

So it was – but her mom was alive up until 2007. But her mom – her mom was still pretty, I would say, local. My grandma didn't speak English – maybe a few words. I think she was just stubborn and didn't – I think she knew English and just didn't want us to know. But she – yeah, she didn't speak much English and didn't really have a Christian background either.

My mom came upon education and religion and everything on her own. And she would walk miles to go to the nearest church or something like that, like she would walk miles to go to school. She would always tell us about how she kind of pursued every – all her identity, she pursued those. Those are not things she was brought up with.

And so yeah, her older brother – so she did have a bit of a scholarship. But for the most part, it was her older brothers that paid for her schooling. But after that, she just kind of worked under her brother at his shop for a little bit. And then that was where she was when she got married to my dad. But my dad's upbringing was pretty interesting. I have this theory that I'm going to write a book about my dad.

*AS:* Okay!

*OO:* I'm going to. When I get the chance, I'm going to write a book about his upbringing.

Because my dad was born in 1960. And that was the beginning of the Biafra War. So I'm Igbo. That's my ethnic group. And it was a genocide, but no one addresses it like that because in Western Africa – when other countries in the Western world see conflict in Western Africa, they see it as tribal disputes, but it wasn't.

The dispute came from the fact that when Nigeria first got its independence, Nnamdi Azikiwe was the first president. He was Igbo. And he was the first president. But then after that, it was just very difficult for Igbo people to be in power. We were kind of seen as more Western and more liberal. And the other two main tribes were kind of not going for it.

So Igbo people wanted to leave the country and become their own nation of Biafra. And since our voices weren't being heard and the other tribes were like, "No, we kind of need you guys. You can't leave. We don't want your opinions, but you can't leave" – so it was a huge genocide. My dad was originally born in the north, where most of the people up there are from the Muslim tribes and all the other groups.

And my dad's – when – I don't remember how old he says he was, but his home there got burned down, so he had to move to the east, where our roots-roots are. So his family home was burned down. He moved to the east and grew up with about the same amount of siblings as my mom, but he only has five – he has five siblings he's close to, and then five that comes from another relationship. Same with my mom. She has seven siblings, and then she has a few more siblings with another – her father had another wife. So as far as my dad, though, after that, after all the issues went down with first the war, second, the marriage disputes between my dad's – there was just a lot of issues.

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So my parents – I mean, their uncles and relatives would send some of them abroad. My aunt – my uncle who passed away this December and my aunt who's – is still in Georgia, they were both sent to America when they were maybe teenagers or in their 20s. I'm not sure. But my dad never got the opportunity to get sent to America just because he was – I think he was the middle child and it was just – like, his older brother got to go because he's older and his little sister got to go because she's little. So he just never – he never got to go.

But he still kind of worked his way up. He – right out of high school – he didn't go to college. He was a technician at Shell, a super basic job. But yeah, he stayed there, he did underwater drilling, petroleum drilling. He did – and he just kind of worked his way up, and somehow, without a degree, got up there.

But then once we were born and my mom went back to school to

get her financial degree at this technical school, my dad also went back and got his bachelor's degree. So he became a supervisor at Shell. And at that point, him and my mom were married. And she opened her own store, like a global – it was called GSM Palace, which – she sold cell phones or SIM cards or technology-based things. And then we were born.

They still remained in those same positions up until America. And then my mom, when she first came here, she became a teacher because that's what she always kind of wanted to do. She wanted to be a doctor at first, but she just did not have the education resources and all of that to do that. So she wanted to be a teacher.

So as soon as we got to America, she worked as a pre-K teacher for about ten years. She enjoyed it, but there was just a lot of conflict. There was a lot of conflict there. And there was also issues with her getting a degree and – I mean getting certifications and things of that nature. So after ten years, I think she stopped. And let me think. She went back to university and got her master's degree.

*AS:* Oh, great.

*OO:* Yeah. So she got her master's in business administration. And she was able to, from there, just get a degree in supply chain. And she did all of that while still working as a teacher. And she just thought opportunities would be better for her after then. But I don't know. She – in her mind, it doesn't seem – I mean, she's getting up there now. She's a supervisor at Walmart, so – but I think in her mind, she still thought she could've – someone with a master's in business administration should not have had to begin working from the top over again after that degree.

Because after the degree, she just worked at Walmart as an associate. Like, your master's – you have a master's and you're making a minimum wage job. And she just thought it was because of her – she thought she was discriminated against because of her accent. And people would say, like, "Oh, there's a communication barrier." But they can hear her if she's having an issue with them.

But as far as hiring her, they think, "Oh, there's a communication barrier," which wasn't fair because people from other countries with accents are able to work. And people would say, like, "Oh, it's America. Learn – " my mom knows English. My mom is very good at English. But an accent is just something you cannot get rid of no matter how hard you try.

AS: Right.

OO: So yeah. It set her back a lot and – but I think she's happy with where she is now.

My dad, though, he retired from Shell. And after that, he – after he retired from Shell, he got his severance leave. But the – it was just – he didn't retire because he couldn't work anymore. He retired because the money in Nigeria was just – the economy is so bad. Right now, I think 500 naira trades to \$1.00. So all the money he makes over there, by the time it gets here, it's nothing. So he was like, "Might as well just come over here and work a minimum wage job. That's the same thing, and at least I'm with my family."

So that was maybe five or six years ago. He started coming over here and working at – from UPS to DHL, just material handler jobs. So that's where he's at now. But I think – my younger brother graduates from college in a year. And after that, I think they really want to either move back and expand on – my mom has a lot of dealings in Nigeria.

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She visited this past December. She has a lot of dealings there, so hopefully they'll be able to go back. Because before we were here, they were businesspeople. They were globetrotters. So I think once my little brother's done getting his education, they'll be back in the field and trying to get to where they really want to be.

AS: Yeah.

OO: [Coughs] Excuse me.

AS: Yep. I guess they also – you probably also still have family there, so that's probably part of that, too, is maybe that they want to be near those folks.

OO: Yeah. My mom is super attached with her – to her only brother left. So she always expresses wanting to go back.

AS: Yeah, wanting to go back there. Okay. I wonder if we could – if you could tell me a little bit more about where you grew up, if you have memories of Nigeria –but then also what your experience was like in Georgia. And you can talk a little bit more about high school, as well.

*OO:* Mm-hmm. I have pretty decent memories of Nigeria. Most of the school memories I have are competition-based. A lot of the times, we would have spelling bees or we would have just certain competitions, like debates or things like that. And that was the best way for us to learn. We also did – I went to a private school, but we would – they were very disciplined. To learn multiplication tables, everyone would have to stand in front of the classroom, have their hands out, and the teacher would be by with a ruler.

*AS:* Oh my gosh.

*OO:* And – I don't know if this is – I don't know how legal this is, but it was Nigeria. And you have to kind of repeat it, like, "2 times 1, 2," "2 times 2, 4," "2 times 3, 6" – like if you miss a beat, you miss a rhythm, the ruler's coming down.

*OO:* Yeah. So they were super disciplined with their education. You didn't have time to want to be educated because you want to be or not. But we had tutors. I struggled in school in Nigeria. In America, it was a breeze.

But in Nigeria, they were expecting a lot of things. I learned a lot before I was seven. I learned a little bit of French. We had French courses. We had math courses. We learned how to count on abacuses. We learned how to –

I don't even remember, but I remember learning – I don't know. In the – before I was seven, I feel like I learned more than when I was seven to nine in America, elementary school. I don't know. Maybe history and stuff. That was the most of what I remember for school in America. But language and math and all of that, I think I got most of that down before I got here.

I would say another thing was service. They taught us a lot about service at school. We didn't have janitors. We didn't have any custodians or people who are cleaning up after you. We didn't have a cafeteria with people to serve you food.

You had to pack your own food and come to school. There was no – you kept your lunchbox. There was no general lunch. There would be a stand outside of the school gate with some – a merchant selling snacks. And if you had money, you can buy that.

And we didn't really get an allowance, but me and my older sister used to do this thing where – we had a lot of books. I don't know

where my parents got these books from. But it was funny. We would exchange – we would let people read our books for money.

*AS:* So you could buy snacks?

*OO:* Yeah.

*AS:* Great.

*OO:* So that was the only way we ever really bought snacks because my mom packed our lunches. And we had pretty good food – we would share our food, too. But for the most part, if we wanted snacks, me and my little sister had this system. We're like, "Okay, Sarah has had the book for three days. You need to ask her about it," because most of the people we did it with were family members.

And some were my age and some were my older sister's age. We had a whole system. It was – it was funny. And the other thing I remember is we had – instead of field days, we would have these things called open house, where you'd be randomized into this color, like green house, red house, and all of that.

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And you're randomized by age, all of that, so you have an equal composition of second graders, third – well, we called them – we did primary one, primary two, primary three, nursery one, nursery two. So we had different age groups of people in teams. And we competed for – it was a full-on Olympic event at the end of the year. And it was legit because everyone in our family – there were five of us, and there were five houses, and we all had different colors. I don't know.

They – well, my little sister went into wrong house one year, so she ended up in the same house as someone else. But we were competitive about it. And we had high jump, we had races, we had full-on athletic events that – and we would practice for these after our recess time. Between classes was kind of like – we would go to lunch, immediate – well, we won't go to lunch. It would just be lunch time, and you pull out – you find your lunch.

Then after lunch, it would be clean-up time. And you would – everyone kind of would sing this song and clean up the school. We didn't have custodians. We cleaned up after ourselves. It was kind of a race, like who picked up the most wrappers or things like that.

And then after that, we would practice for our fieldhouse. I don't remember what it was called. But that was as far as the social aspect of [*unintelligible*]. The school was called Denbec. It was a private school, but it wasn't super private.

We didn't ride the bus there. We walked there. It was pretty – it wasn't too far from my house, but we walked. Another thing they were super strict on was attendance. Everyone would come and line up for morning assembly. If you were late, you had to stand in the late line and have your hands up, and more rulers.

AS: Oh, my gosh.

OO: It was – yeah. So no one wanted to be late, no one wanted to be dumb, no one wanted to be – everything was very disciplined. And back then, it was not that enjoyable, but thinking about it, I think I prefer that to public school in America –

AS: More structure, more –

OO: Yeah.

AS: Yeah.

OO: Definitely more structure. Yeah. And as far as America goes, when I came, elementary school, I went to school in Riverdale, Georgia. That's a part of metro Atlanta.

And I would say in Atlanta, it's very easy to become assimilated. I feel like if I would've ended up somewhere like, I don't know, Kentucky or a Midwest place, I would've still been – I would still have my accent. I would've still been super Nigerian. But in Atlanta, because the Black culture's so strong there, it's super easy for you to keep up with the Joneses. It's very easy to lose your self-confidence.

Because sneaker culture, for example – my parents just could not afford sneakers. But you go to school every day and people have – it was just so easy to focus on the wrong things in school in America. Because in Nigeria, we all wore uniforms and all black leather shoes, white socks. Everything was good. All you really could do was your hair. My mom did hair, so it was okay.

But in America, we all had a color of shirt for uniform and a color of pants we could wear. But still, we had different shoes, we had

different hairstyles. So I always kind of felt like – I don't know. Growing up, I wouldn't say I disliked my life. But I did always envy my peers for things that honestly just did not matter, little things. So I think one thing that helped me out of it was education.

The only – the same way I would sell books in Nigeria, in America, we had an AR system where the more books you read, the more points you get to spend at the book fair. So I'm – I've always been an incentive-based person. Snacks drive me, snacks and games. So the more books you read, the more points of these you get. So I was like, "Okay." I mean, I couldn't have new shoes or anything, but I can read all these books, get points, and end up with a cool wristband at the book fair and everyone would be jealous or something. So that was really, for the most part, the only way I could get a one-up on everyone.

And then in third grade, I – my current best friend, we're both Nigerian, go to the same church – I ended up in the same class as her that year. And it was super easy for most of us in the friend group to be good in school. And for our birthdays, we would get rewarded. For anyone who gets the highest – high score in math would get ice cream at lunch.

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There was just a lot of incentive-based things that I was looking around like, "I don't get this at home." We had ice cream, right? But McDonald's? No. Just general, fun things that most other kids had, I – we didn't really have. We got toys at Christmas or stuffed animals for holidays. But routinely going and getting you toys was just not a thing. We watched TV, though.

I think my social upbringing was pretty okay. I never really got bullied or anything, maybe my name. Sometimes people would – my name was super long. And every time a substitute comes, I would just dread them trying to pronounce it. I'm just like, "Ugh."

OO:

Well, my dad named me my first name and –but my – I always went by my preferred name. So – in high school. It was until I started going by that. Middle school was about the same. I was still super competitive, but – and still always ended up at the top of my class. But most of the other people around me were also at the top, too, so there wasn't really much issues. I had a lot of close friends. We'd go skating, go to parties.

I think my social life in middle school was probably better than it

was in high school just because my mom knew most of those people I surrounded myself with and it was normal to meet the parents. And my mom didn't let me go anywhere unless she knows those people's parents. But in high school, since people's parents were just not as involved in their lives, if I asked my mom, "Can I go somewhere," she's like, "Do I know their parents?" I'm like, "No. But I'm not setting up a phone call. I'm 15. I'm not doing that." And she'd be like, "Well, you can't go, then."

I never snuck out the house or anything. I just gave up. I'm like, "Ugh, okay. Guess I can't go." I don't know why, but I guess I just had a lot more to worry about in high school. I kind of racked up on AP classes. We didn't have that many.

Our highest math was – they didn't have calculus by the time I got there. I had to go – I had to take calculus at a community college.

*AS:* Interesting.

*OO:* We didn't have physics. Yeah, I did dual enrollment in high school, and I got my associate's degree when I graduated high school. So I was able to – I would say high school was easy for me, too. There was probably a lot of drama and stuff. I think one thing that caused a lot of issues in my social life, where a lot of conflict was – there's a way a lot of people in Hopkins behave that you kind of know they're smart, but I think I – I don't know if – I don't know if it's a overly confident thing I do or –

I don't know what it is, but I've never felt the need to prove myself to people. So I would – I wouldn't talk when the teacher's talking, but I was not this great student. The teacher still always ended up liking me because I did my work and I did what I was supposed to do. And I think a lot of people just didn't get that. A lot of people just didn't understand why I could do well in school and still also be not a teacher's pet, not this prim and proper person. And there would just be a lot of – like if I do well on a test, would be like, "Oh, she probably cheated" or it'll be like – I don't know, just a lot of things that people would kind of envy me for because I didn't – I don't want to say I didn't work as hard as them. But I didn't – I didn't visibly struggle for my success. I mean, I probably struggled when I got home and things that they didn't see, but I didn't – I didn't visibly struggle within school for my success.

So during senior year, it was pretty rough and I lost a lot of friends. When I was running for student government, no one – I've been the only person consistently representing our class for years, so it was

natural for the senior class president to naturally run for student government president. So I was running. And then I hear a lot of backlash and people are like, "Oh, she already has to give a speech because she's valedictorian. It's not fair for her to become president." And it was one of my friends saying it. And then I was just like – so that friend was like they're going to run just because.

I was like, "You know nothing about how the student government functions. You're not going to be able to lead. But I mean, you can run, though. It's fine." But it was just pointless drama for nothing. I got elected. And I didn't give two speeches. That doesn't make sense.

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I didn't give two speeches. I just gave my one speech and combined them. I don't know what people wanted. So it was just kind of hard to kind of be villainized for racking up on all these accolades. But, you know, that was a –

AS: Yeah. It sounds like people were skeptical and that you were pretty humble about it, just doing your thing, staying in your lane, you know?

OO: Yeah.

AS: So I know you talked a little bit about what your parents thought about education and how both of them were really supportive of that as a way to sort of advance yourself here in the States. Could you tell me a little bit about, then, the college application process and how you decided to go to Hopkins and maybe what their reaction was when you told them you got into Hopkins?

OO: I think my mom is a little – my mom does this thing where she redoes her standards when she sees certain things.

AS: Okay.

OO: So my older sister – my older brother and my older sister – my older brother didn't do too well in school. He did okay, but – I mean, I'm glad he made it out, he's in college and everything. My older sister did really well. She was ranked sixth in her class or – she was ranked pretty high, too. But my mom – whatever. My mom just was not super appreciative of it. She was nice, but whatever.

And then when I ranked valedictorian, my mom – I always knew I wanted to be valedictorian. And I calculated how many classes I needed to take, how many AP classes. I'm that kind of person. I'm not super edgy about it, but I just kind of am – I always knew how to do the GPA system. I wouldn't check my grades. I would just kind of look at my GPA. I'm like, "Okay. Sounds about right." But if it's off by one semester, I'm calling the counselor's office.

I'm like, "You weighed my chemistry class as three. It's supposed to be weighted as a four because it's a community college class, not a regular – " I was – I would say I was kind of an A-hole about that. So I always knew what I needed to do to become ranked, because my best friend also was ranking too. So the end of the day, I showed her what to do and everything. But since I knew first, so – I had two or three classes of a jump on her. So when she kind of caught up, she just remained salutatorian and I became valedictorian.

And we were happy with it. We would've been happy if it was switched around. But we went up there together.

*AS:* That's great.

*OO:* And we knew no one else was – knew it was that easy, like, "If you want to get this, just stop taking high school classes and take more AP classes or more college classes." But we already knew. So my mom kind of knew going – leading out of that, I was getting up there.

And then when it came time for applications, she was like, "Oh, where are you going to apply to?" I'm like, "Harvard." She's like, "Wait, you think you can get into Harvard?" I'm like, "Yeah, I think maybe." And she's like, "Hmm, okay." And she's like –

Hopkins was definitely one of my top options maybe 10th grade. But I applied to HOME or something and I didn't get in.<sup>1</sup> So, I was like, "Oh, Hopkins is so stuck up. I'm not going to that school." So I was thinking I would end up – my top three were Harvard, Columbia, Stanford, just because of the cities, that there's nothing – well, Stanford, the city isn't great, but Cali is –

*AS:* Yeah, California – the state. You get the state.

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<sup>1</sup> HOME stands for Hopkins Overnight Multicultural Experience.

OO:

Yeah. That was literally it. When I wrote in my essay stuff about research and everything, I think that was only true for Hopkins. The other schools have great research but the only one that had the adrenoleukodystrophy research I was super interested in, like Tourette's research, was Hopkins. So that was the only genuine application I filled out. The other ones were like – well, for Cornell, I got in. But I wrote something like, "Oh, you guys have a particle accelerator. I watched that on *The Flash*, and I thought it was so cool." It was just things I looked up on their website and just kind of – yeah. And Columbia, I wrote about their buffet. It was just – it was all so bad. So I was like, "An all-you-can-eat buffet is – describes my exact college experience." It was bad. But I thought it was great at the time. I thought all my metaphors made sense. So my mom – if I think I can do something, my mom also thinks I can do it because – I mean, she didn't – she didn't apply to school here. She knows the big names and she knows what's good and what's not good.

[0:40:00]

But when I tell her, "Oh, since I have this SAT score and this GPA, I can get into here," in her mind, she's like, "Whoa, this girl thinks she can get into Harvard. We're going to Harvard." So she was like, "Oh, if you get a – if you get into – "because we pushed Hopkins to four and we did Harvard, Stanford, Columbia. "If you can get into these three, I'm going to buy you a car." So she set that.

And I applied. I made it to the interview process for a lot of them. And I think I did pretty okay in my interviews. My Stanford interview was super good. I don't know. Then as the application – but leading up to the application process, the hardest thing for me was maybe my testing, my standardized testing. I was star student, so I had the highest SAT score within my school, but I just knew it was not competitive enough.

But my ACT score – I noticed that I just never finish the ACT. The SAT, I will finish it and not do well. So I'm just like, "What do I do?" But for the ACT, I would just never finish. So [*unintelligible*] was, "I'm going to stop studying for the ACT. I'm just going to train myself into answering the questions or filling out a consistent – like if you – if I put C on every one I haven't completed, I have a 25 percent chance of getting them right, right? So just training myself on how to take the test. I kept training myself.

I would consistently make 28s. But for some reason, I just wanted to try again. And then I broke 30. I think I made a 32 at my highest

try, which is pretty good for my school – my county, even. So I finally broke and made 32 in October. And that was the last time to submit early admissions applications.

And I told my – the plan was submit Harvard application or two or three applications early admission, but the others later on. But since I only just broke, in October, 27th, ACT – so I received those scores sometime in November, so I didn't have time to submit my applications. So my mom didn't – I don't think my mom noticed how much of a boost early – applying early would've done, but she didn't think it was a thing. She just saw it as like, "Oh, you got a higher score. You can do better now."

So I applied to all the schools. Again, went for all the interviews, and then I just kept having early admissions. I got into Vanderbilt early, Hopkins early, Cornell early, and Emory early. And I would get these packets and they're like, "Okay, it's not the decision date yet, but we're inviting you early because we have this pre-O program that we want you to come to because you're first-gen, low-income-type," stuff like that.

And they would just invite me to all these things. So my mom saw these packets, so once she got the Hopkins packet, she was like, "Nice." She just kind of – she did not care. I didn't care either, honestly. Because in our mind, it was like more to come. But after the Hopkins and Cornell packet, I still got some more packets from other schools like Georgia Tech, UNC Chapel Hill.

Then it was Ivy Day, time to open all the letters, on March 31st. So I'm opening them. I'm like, "Okay. Didn't get in here. Didn't get in, didn't get in." Duke, Rice –

I didn't get into any of those schools. So it was just all these acceptances at once, back to back to back, then all of this rejection all at once. I got waitlisted to a few schools, but I just don't believe in waitlists. I just don't. I got waitlisted from a couple of schools. I just kind of saw it as like a –

I wish it was reversed. I wish I would've been rejected first and then – I wish I would've opened those first.

*AS:* That's like a half "no" or something.

*OO:* Yeah.

*AS:* Mm-hmm.

OO:

I wish I would've got those rejections first, then got the Hopkins application. Because after, it was like, "Well, there's always Hopkins." It was – I feel like that was taken away for me. When I watch videos of people being so excited to get into Hopkins – I just never had that feeling because I was waiting for the other schools, and I didn't get into them.

And when I think about it, Hopkins probably was my dream school for a long time. I just forgot about that once I thought I could do better. But – technically not better for anything else. I noticed my top priority was research. So I don't know what I would've done at Brown or Dartmouth. I mean, they have nice research programs, but it would've totally been different.

[0:45:00]

And I think my parents, now that they know I'm going here and all of that, they started claiming it. They're like, "Oh, yeah, we're going to Hopkins" and all of this. And they're super supportive about it. They kind of dialed back – they were like, "Hold on, let's dial back a bit." And since then, they were pretty supportive, pretty excited. My mom came down to Baltimore with me for move-in process. She was always supportive. Even when I talked about possibly transferring out, she was like, "Whatever you want."

I don't know. I think my mom trusts me a lot with my education compared to a lot of people's parents or a lot of people's siblings. Even if I'm failing a class – a lot of people – "Oh, I'm scared to tell my parents." I tell my mom, "Mom, I'm failing. I didn't study. Tried my best, but I just can't be [*unintelligible*] study."

She'll be, "Oh, It's okay." I feel like I've built enough reliability for the past 18 years to where she just trusts me with my education. So I've never had issues with them about that. It's always been support, you know?

AS:

Yeah. The transparency, I think, is a good thing. It's – and that communication.

So I know you mentioned, too, just the difference of coming to Hopkins. Could you talk more about that, what it was like to move to Baltimore and be on campus at first and what the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience were like?

*OO:* I think it was really exciting. I think I had a pretty different experience than I imagined because I got to know my roommate. I was looking at the Twitter admission stuff, and I noticed my roommate was also Nigerian. And I kind of was like, "Oh, I definitely want to be her friend," so I reached out. And I also had the Gates Scholarship coming in. So before I came, in July, we had a Gates Scholarship three-day conference in Dallas. And I met one of my other close friends there too. So I didn't do any of the pre-O programs because I wanted to spend time with my family just a little longer.

So when I finally came here, I kind of already – it was me and my roommate and then some people from my FYM group. But I barely even hung out with them because then me and my roommate, we also had another circle of other Nigerian girls that we already kind of knew. And we all just always hung out. From those first two or three days, it was established that we're a unit now. So I think growing up in Atlanta – I grew up with such a homogeneous set of people. I thought coming to Hopkins, I would get to meet so many more different people. And I saw them in class and I saw different people in research and lab. But as far as having lunch together or doing – I do feel like I missed out on a lot by already having a group. Because Hopkins does this weird thing where everyone kind of moves in packs.

In my FYM group, I had people of very much different identities as me that I was friends with and I got along with. But –

*AS:* Can I ask you what FYM stands for?

*OO:* Oh, yes, First-Year Mentor.

*AS:* Okay.

*OO:* So you had a first-year mentor. And then that person has nine or so other mentees. And you're all in a group, and you move through orientation and stuff together. So my initial group was – and my first-year mentor also happened to be pretty significant in the Black community, whatever. So I think I had a cheat code or something.

The first weekend in, he's like, "Oh, here's this party. You guys can come. You're going to be let in because you're my mentee. It's fine." So we already were able to go to all these parties, me and my group.

But it was weird because every time I would try to catch in – or catch up with my other – the other people within my group that were of different identities as me, there was kind of always something missing. It would be like, "Where were you at the last event?" I've always kind of been that person – like, back in my hometown in high school, or just in any group I'm in, I'm kind of the person that likes – like a lone-wolf social butterfly, someone's that's – is not attached to any other – I just don't like being attached to a certain group or a certain type of person because I feel like I don't want anyone else's actions reflecting on me unless it's my family. I can 100 percent back any of their actions or something. Even if it's not great, I'll be like, "I tried my best with them," blah, blah, blah. But I don't want to be backed by any – I don't want to be attached to anyone else. So I like hopping between different friend groups. I just wasn't able to do that at Hopkins.

*[0:50:00]*

I had my main friend group. And I was always accepted there. But every time I would try to hang out with my other niche of – my other niches of friends, it would just be always something kind of missing, always like, "You've ditched us for three days. You can't just come back now." So I felt like – I think everyone had this experience at Hopkins. You kind of find your people and you're forced to stick with them. You're not allowed to branch out.

Maybe some people have been successful. But I think a lot of people are just kind of forced to move in packs and move in their established circles. And I don't know. That kind of affected me mentally and emotionally because the party scenes that I kept ending up at, I didn't enjoy. I just did not enjoy going to party with those people. But those were our only options.

It just – it was pretty – to say the least, when we would try to enter any other fraternity parties or things of that nature, they were just kind of like, "Who are you? We don't know you. You can't come in." Because you never got this socialization with these other groups of people. We only hung out with our group of people, so we could only party with them.

So most of the times, you just kind of feel rejected from the other circles a lot because you were not loyal to that circle or something like that. And in the beginning, it was easy to think it was definitely an ethnicity or race thing. But afterwards, you – once

sophomore or freshman year hit, a few of my guy friends that were in my initial circle joined different fraternities, and they were able to let us in – or sometimes I'll come to a random – I don't know if I can mention those houses, but I'll go to –

*AS:* Yeah, you can mention the names if you want to.

*OO:* Okay. I'll go to BT House or something, and someone'll be like, "Oh, I know you. You're so-and-so's friend. You can come in." And I was just like, "Oh, I thought you guys just didn't let people who looked like me in here." But it was – it was just they didn't know you. You could be a random stranger off the street. And if you're never socializing with them, you're never going to be in the – in the group.

So I don't know. After realizing that, I kind of regretted my first-year experiences a bit. And I wish I would've tried harder to become in a lot of other groups. Because I never have issues with the group I'm in. I just have issues being tied to a group. So it wasn't ever the quality of the group, but limited amount of groups I was able to freely socialize in. Because it also affects your academics. My main – my two best friends, we just could not study together. One always got it, the information, didn't know how to explain it, and one never knew the information. And we just were kind of helpless to each other.

And I would – the only way I made other friends was if I would study with other people and stuff like that. But it was just hard having to do that all the time because I didn't want people to feel like I'm using them for their – "Oh, she never hangs out with us all the time but when it's time to do homework, she's saying – " I overthink a lot, so... Yeah. I think that was the only part I would regret. But apart from that – coming to Baltimore was very interesting. I would say Baltimore's a blend of what I imagine London to be plus Atlanta. I see it as like a British Atlanta all the time. That's how I see it.

Because there's a lot of culture here. But there's still just a lot of things that are just strange – the infrastructure of it all and the block system. In Atlanta, I lived in a suburb, but near the city. So the lack of transportation – I did not understand how public transport worked. It scared me. I didn't get onto Jimmy for the first time till my junior year.

It was so simple, but I just did not understand the concept of standing somewhere and waiting and hoping the bus shows up. I

just could not. So the – for the first few years, I just kind of felt trapped in the campus because I didn't know how to get around. But once COVID hit and none of the shuttles or anything were really running, I would rent Zipcars – before I brought my car up here, I would rent Zipcars to go places, me and my friend. And that helped me see the city more and become more involved in the community a little bit and feel a little bit more at home here. So yeah.

[0:55:00]

AS: Yeah. Yeah. It's funny how the transportation developed in Baltimore and how it's sort of stunted, almost. So have you – did you meet other first-gen or FLI students when you came to Hopkins? And yeah, did you – I guess just did you connect with any folks that had similar backgrounds?

OO: Yeah, for the most part. Another shock to me was – I don't know how ignorant this may sound, but a lot of people that I met that were of my ethnicity, I kind of just assumed we were all first-gen, FLI. I thought we all had the plan that, like, "Okay, our parents came from nothing, risked it all for our education. We're here to become doctors and become rich and all of that so we can take all this money back to our countries." But then – that's what I assumed the entire first semester.

But then winter break hits. And then you're seeing everyone's stories and you're like, "Wait, wait, wait. You guys are rich? I thought – how are you affording a \$75K tuition?" Some people that I've been hanging out with all year were just no financial aid.

And I was just like, "This is ridiculous. You – you're the imposter here." I just kind of felt like, "That's ridiculous." But my super inner circle, I – one of them, I met from the Gates Scholarship, so we're both pretty low income. So I never felt out of place in that regard. It was never like, "Oh, let's go shopping at this expensive place." And I've heard that, in a lot of college students ending up at these big top ten schools, they just feel like they can't keep up with their peers. But I was able to.

My main circle, we knew how to be resourceful. We all kind of knew we were on financial aid. We were all pretty good in that regard, as – like at Hopkins, you have food, you have your place. There isn't really much to purchase. We never went on these random trips because we all – for the – sometimes we were sending money back home. My sophomore year especially, I sent a lot of money home because I lived off campus, so I was able to –

my refund was just a larger chunk. So I connected with them. But every time I see the outer circle and how everyone else kind of lives, it just makes me feel like – I don't know, like I've – I don't want to say I was sharing experiences with the wrong people. But I just kind of felt like, "Wow, were they judging me this whole time when I would complain about things like – " I don't know. I would just make a lot of comments about like – I don't know. I made a lot of – we would all discuss about – I don't know if it's just this generation, but the whole "eat the rich" thing. Everyone is very big on making jokes about being rich and being poor and things of that nature.

So to realize a lot of people in my friend group were just not, I felt very played. I was like, "Wow. You guys have been imposters this whole time? That's crazy. Share!"

And even over spring break, you would kind of see everyone going to these ridiculous family vacations and doing all these things. And you're just like, "Why didn't I get the memo?" And it's easy to feel the same feeling I used to feel in second grade, of not being able to keep up with everyone. And – but for the most part, I think the general consensus between everyone is – everyone in this ethnic background, most of us Nigerians, we just kind of assume we're low income, even though the majority of us are not. So it's very weird. So it's nice in a way, so no one ever feels – people who are actually low-income never feel out of place or anything. So –

*AS:* Yeah.

*OO:* Yeah. And it's also weird because a lot of people's families may be rich, but they're not that rich. A lot of the people –

I would say a lot of people with actual low-income backgrounds probably have more spending money than the others whose parents have to send them money. Because I kind of worked for all my money. I've never – people will come in my closet and stuff and be like, "Why do you have so many shoes and clothes and all these things?" I'm like, "I bought all of them." They're like, "My parents would never buy this much stuff for me." I'm like, "Okay."

I guess maybe that was the meet in the middle, or – even randomly going out and doing things without asking for permission or paying for something like a large purchase without having to wait for the money to be sent, I guess that was different. Because I had less money than a lot of people, but it was my money, not my parents'

money. So I think that was a – another weird discrepancy, as well. But yeah.

AS: Yeah. Okay.

[1:00:00]

So I would love for you to tell me a bit more about what you study at Hopkins and maybe how you choose your major and what you feel is valuable about it.

OO: Okay. I study neuroscience. I came in as a biology major because at the end, after medical school, after I'm done with research, I would like to be a doctor without border or whatever Sanjay Gupta is, like a medical correspondent. I don't want to be in a hospital setting. But I do want to just go out and treat –

I feel like I'm not – I don't think we're overly saturated in America or anything. There's definitely still a need. But I think there's a huge discrepancy between amount of health care available here versus the amount of health care available in underprivileged or war-torn areas. So that's initially where I want to be. So coming into Hopkins, when I was picking a major, I was just like, "Eh, whatever gets me in medical school."

But then I noticed with the biology major, there are just a lot of classes I wasn't interested in, like cell bio, with these nitty-gritty parts of the cell that I just didn't think interested me. I'm more so interested in cognition or neurodevelopmental disorders. Most of my research that I'm interested in, it just comes from those uncontrollable diseases that just kind of spring out of nowhere and people are – those diseases that kind of spring out of nowhere, people are unable to fight back against them. I don't know. I feel like those are the things that people have just not discovered yet.

I feel like in biology, we kind of already know what to do. The brain is still just so uncharted. So in my mind, I was like, "I'm super smart. I think I'll make some nice discoveries here."

I feel like I'll be of better use here than just kind of – I don't want to say biology's just feeding off of what's already there, but neuro, there's just so much more that's undiscovered. So I switched majors during pre-O, pre-orientation. And – with the intent of either doing pediatric surgery or trauma surgery or just staying in neuro. But neuro's just pretty invasive within itself, so I don't know about that. But I do want to do research majorly in neuro. When I first got here, I – that first year, I received the Woodrow Wilson

Fellowship, where I can do research on anything of my choice. Then eventually, I met my mentor and ended up doing research on Tourette's disorder. And it's just very –

I don't know. It's just a weird disorder to me because it doesn't seem that complicated. It's just lack of inhibition of your motor inputs or something like that. It's just – the fact that your brain can do what you're not telling it to do and you can't help it is just super interesting to me. So things like that, or Alzheimer's and dementia, are my major aspects. And I feel like a lot of courses I take within the neuro major help me explore that, help me get a lot of background on it.

They're super difficult. I think neuro is the most difficult classes. People say the retention rate between Nervous Systems I and Nervous Systems II is 50 percent, like you have 200 people in this class, and then 100 people in spring because it's so difficult. But I think the pandemic helped me a lot. A lot of our exams were open book for that year. They were all open book, and they gave us three hours. So I don't know if I had the same neuro experience as other people.

But I kind of felt the effects. Junior year when we came back, this one course, Diseases and Disorders of the Nervous System, I just was not expecting that. It was very interesting. I'm like, "Oh, this is fun stuff," like, "Fun, fun, fun," learning all about it.

And then I'm sitting for the exam and they're asking these elaborate questions. It's not fun. You were supposed to be drawing substantial conclusions and evidence and claims and all these things that I was just like, "Whoa," not ready for. I didn't do well on that quiz at all, had to withdraw, actually, and I had to take a withdraw from that course. And I think that may reflect poorly on my transcript, but I'll – I could not – I think there's just sometimes – when I was struggling with my freshman year classes, I just kind of pushed through because I was –

*[1:05:00]*

I mean, I don't care about the grade at this point. But that course was just so difficult in that it had only three exams or four exams, maybe, and they're all weighted evenly. So –

*AS:*

And that's your grade.

*OO:* That's your grade. That's what they told us about in college – I mean in high school that – said that's how college would be. But I was – that was the first time it actually was like that, and right after the pandemic, where your brain is still kind of not in the education setting yet. So it was rough. Apart from that, though, everything else has been pretty fun. I don't know. A lot of things we learn in the major are pretty invasive because a lot of this – the diseases I'm interested in, like Alzheimer's and [*unintelligible*] can only be diagnosed postmortem. You have to check for amyloid plaques in diseased patients and stuff and things like that. And when I read about that, I'm just like, "Am I actually going to be able to get into this?"

It's fine, but it just feels super invasive. Like with Hopkins' history, I'm just – everything I read about, I'm just like, "Um, did you guys get permission first?" And just all these other things, I just – I'm kind of straying away from pursuing it after my undergraduate career just because I don't want to – I don't want my ethics to be challenged that much. I think they're already going to be challenged pretty well when I go to medical school and hopefully make it past the residency and everything. But I feel like research, you're actively – you're actively testing your ethics. So I kind of want to stay away from that kind of research and just do cognitive development research and things of that nature. Yeah.

*AS:* Yeah. Cool. Did you have – are there any particular professors or classes that really stood out to you as your favorites? I know you talked about a difficult one, but were there ones that you really would recommend?

*OO:* Neuroeconomics with – can I say the professor's name?

*AS:* Yeah, that's fine.

*OO:* Oh, yeah. So Dr. Trageser. I'm not sure if I pronounced that correctly. It's this course – I took it during the pandemic, which is weird, for me to enjoy a pandemic year course, because most of them, I just kind of clicked through slides, wanted them to be over. But this course was super interesting because it weighed out how your brain values things, how your brain values decisions. And it was super interesting – maybe a bit difficult, but the questions were pretty straightforward if you read the slides and everything. And it was – it would be just certain theories that made you question a lot of things. There's this one theory, I forgot what it's called right now, but – it's some sort of fallacy, I think. But it'll ask you something like, "Should you believe in God or should you not

believe in God?"

The reward for believing in God is eternal happiness and all of this. The punishment for believing in God is nothing, right? And so not believing in God, if God is real, you're – I mean, to believe that God is not real, you can – if you're on Earth believing that God is not real, your reward is nothing, really, but then your punishment if in the case he does so happen to be real is eternal damnation. So it's like, why not believe in God? It's not hurting you. And if he does happen to be real, you are going to be affected. It was just weird ways to think or weird ways your brain should value things if you are a rational thinker. And it just helped me understand how to process a lot of difficult questions or answers that I didn't have context to.

I would just kind of backtrack and be like, "Well, did this happen? If that happened, then sure, you can go ahead – " like if someone asked me for advice – I use it in day-to-day life a lot. Phage log or phage – where we collect bacteriophage, is a different class. That was also super interesting. I took it freshman year. We would just go out by the fresh food café and collect samples of dust and samples of mud and try to collect bacteria out of it and just grow that phage in a plate. And we would create our own colonies and just keep diluting them and making these homogeneous colonies of phage.

*AS:* Cool.

*OO:* So it was pretty interesting.

*AS:* Yeah.

*OO:* Yeah.

*AS:* I didn't realize there were experiments like that on campus. That's really cool.

*OO:* Yeah. It was so low stakes – I mean, it was pretty high stakes. We had a full semester-long thing to follow.

*[1:10:00]*

But it was Dean Schildbach that taught it. And he's just the best. And he was just very much like, "Do what you think you need to do." And if you have a pretty good lab partner – it was fun, yeah.

*AS:* That's great. So were you – did you join any clubs or do any activities or be part of any student orgs while you were here at Hopkins?

*OO:* Mm-hmm. I did Student Government Association and African Students Association. I was also a math mentor for a – two years or so. And the other clubs I was just in a membership capacity were like Female Leaders of Color, Black Student Union, Knotty by Nature, which is the natural hair club. But as far as African Students Association, Student Government Association, those are my primary orgs on campus. For African Students Association, I was the treasurer.

And it was pretty nice because they – we attempted to create this home away from home. And we would have these general body meetings where we're speaking in our accents or making fun of each other and competing, like which tribe or which country has the best jollof rice or things of that nature. It was super fun.

*AS:* With goat or chicken, right?

*OO:* Yeah. So it was just – yeah. We would compete a lot about stuff like that. We had a recipe competition one time, too. It was – it was cool.

I was the treasurer for that for – since my sophomore year. And I'm still part of the organization right now, but I kind of backed up into just administrative capacity. I'm not a full-on member. And then Student Government Association, I was a class senator for a year. And then this past year, I've been a – this past year, I've been a – the finance chair. I blanked for a minute.

It's a lot of work. It's – being the – being – having to chair the entire registry student organization allocation and funding. It's a lot. So I don't know. The position, I wouldn't say was super difficult. It was just the fact that I was the only finance member who came back. Everyone else switched out because it's such a hard committee to be in. So even though I was only a senator for one year, I was able to take on the chair position. And I work alongside the executive treasurer a lot.

And we just – we have to do a lot. We experience a bit of conflict with clubs being like, "Oh, no. We're experiencing budget cuts? Why would you guys do that? You can't – " we had to fight off so many angry mobs all the time. Because when you're the one who

controls where the money's going, everyone is coming at you with their pitchforks.

And you have to explain – you're like, "Your budget isn't being cut. We're trying our best." So it taught me a lot about public relations, a lot about understanding where people are, a lot about leadership and things of that nature. I also have a job at the LEED office, which is closely related to Student Government Association. I'm the manager there. And that also taught me a lot about organization and public relations and having to talk to people and have – having to manage schedules and having to make sure people are doing what they need to do while still being a friendly person. That was pretty difficult for me, to have to put on my manager hat and be like, "You're not supposed to be doing that" or, "Why haven't you done this," things like that. So –

*AS:* Yeah.

*OO:* Yeah.

*AS:* That's all a good learning experience, probably, for med school.

*OO:* Right.

*AS:* Could you tell me a little bit more about where you lived on campus or what your life was like, just in apartments or anything like that?

*OO:* Yeah. So I lived in McCoy freshman year. And McCoy was – I don't know. Everyone hates McCoy. They're talking about it and how it's – but McCoy was my first option. I picked to live in McCoy. So I was like, "Am I missing something?"

It was nice. I lived with my roommate. We had a little kitchenette. We had – we lived in one room, and then we had a suitemate that had her own room. It was pretty rough. We –

It wasn't super rough, but we would have little squabbles, where it would be like, "No one got the toilet paper today." Because for some reason, they were not delivering toilet paper to our room, or we would just use it up too fast. I can't remember what the issue was. But we'd have issues like, "I went and got the toilet paper from the housing office last week. No one else has gone to do it."

*AS:* It's your turn, yeah.

[1:15:00]

OO:

Yeah, or – we never had issues like, "Oh, why do you have someone over late," or – we never had any of those kind of social issues because we had the same friend group, me and my roommate, at least. And our suitemate, when she would have guests over – now I'm like – or if she did, we didn't hear much. There has been a few times we've had guests over, me and my roommate had guests over, and my suitemate had to knock and be like, "Oh, you guys are too loud." But it was always pretty understanding. I feel like if you just communicate that – she communicated it instead of telling our RA or something. So it was like – I had a good experience then.

Sophomore year, I feel like Hopkins kind of put the sophomores on the streets. They were just like, "Um, yeah, sure, you guys can come back." Then a week before we came back, they were like, "Nah, you guys don't have any housing. If you want to come back, you can get a lease." So I had to sign a lease at, what, 19 years old, which is pretty normal for other colleges, I guess, but I was just not prepared for that.

And the fact that all the other places had been booked up, we had slim pickings. I lived in an off-campus apartment, super nice, an executive studio place, had a balcony. So I – it was the much-needed relaxation I needed in 2020. A lot of things that I've heard from my friends was like – we had to do a lot of growing. One set of friends, they showed up to their apartment and they were just kind of like, "Why is the light not – the light and electricity, why is it not working?" And they're like, "Oh, we have to call and get it put in – " so many things that no one told us about. And we were just kind of forced to grow up.

It was just me and one of my friends that were in Baltimore. Everyone else was still home. So we just kind of helped each other with the moving process and everything. Then last year, I moved to a final apartment.

But renting out a U-Haul and moving one block over was pretty funny. It was like having to try – learn how to drive a U-Haul was funny. It was a cool experience having to – it was just us, two girls, just moving these things. Because one of our friends was supposed to help us, but he kind of flaked. So we were like, "Oh, we don't need you. We're going to do it anyways. We're not pushing this

back another day, because I have to move out by today." So that was it.

*AS:* Yeah. That's really interesting. So what did you do between your semesters? For summer, did you do internships? And I guess since you have such an interest in research, were you able to do – actually do some research during the summer?

*OO:* Yeah. The first summer, I did Life Design Lab, summer between freshman and sophomore year. Life Design Lab helped me put a lot of things into perspective and imagine my ideal – my ideal lives and what would bring me the most fulfillment post-college, post-education and everything. It was super good.

I was able – was still able to volunteer with the Red Cross a little bit. And I just was like a blood donor screener. And I would just communicate with people about how to get their forms filled out and things like that. Then after that was – I came back here. Oh, then the next summer, I didn't do anything with any of my intersessions. I just took a few classes or research or something.

But then summer between sophomore and junior year, I started my EMT stuff. I do a volunteer fire station. And I just got sworn in and everything. I've been kind of slacking on that. I'm supposed to be getting eight hours a week, but right now as I'm preparing for med school applications and MCAT, I've just not been able to go over there. So my membership is probably probationary right now. So that was what I did with that summer.

I also did do research. Since I was beginning my Tourette's study, I watched a lot of videos to where I just coded tics, tic severity, tic intensity, global improvements and things like that, where I would just watch a video of a clinician actually coding how severe or intense someone's tics are by asking them a few questions and then me coding on my own. I watched probably over a hundred videos of these sessions. They're called – on the YGTSS scale, the Global Tic Severity Scale, I think.

[1:20:00]

And we would – just rate those on my own and code them into a system called REDCap. And that provided the basis for my research. It kind of helped me discover what I wanted to do for my research, which is motivation to suppress tics. Because I noticed sometimes in these young kids – obviously, not everyone has the choice whether they can suppress tics or not.

But sometimes people are more likely to do it if they have stricter parents, if they are girls, because it's less socially accepted to get up and leave your legs uncrossed or something. So you would see the parent kind of coaxing the girls a little bit more than you would for the boys. The boys would just be able to kind of tic as they please, right? And so just little things like that helped me come up with what I wanted to do for my research, which is – which is testing motivation and testing to see what is actually influencing not your ability to suppress tics, but your will or motivation to suppress tics and how you value, "Should I risk ticking now and lose all my friends, or should I risk ticking now and be a little late on an assignment," like, how do tics affect how well you do on things and how well you live your life?

So I think watching those videos over the summer helped me nail that down and nail down that that's where research – that's where the research field was missing some info on. And I wanted to explore that. Yeah.

*AS:* Yeah. Is there an age range that you're particularly interested in for that?

*OO:* I wanted to initially do kids, but – kids from ages 9 to 12 or something like that. But given the basis that I did choose to graduate early, I kind of have to speed up my research because of my award. And the easiest way would be to launch an online survey. And so I just kind of have to do adults, and hopefully some 18, 19-year-olds are sprinkled in there. But my final project is for adults, yeah.

*AS:* Okay. Cool.

So I know you mentioned feeling supported with your friend group and all of that through your time at Hopkins. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what your support system was and if you relied on your family a lot while you were here. Like, what did you – did you guys talk regularly, did they visit, or anything like that?

*OO:* Right. So my initial support system, I would say, would – I talk to my family a lot. But my initial system when I first struggled at Hopkins – I would say when you come to Hopkins, you go through so much that a lot of people turn to a lot of things, like partying or drugs or things of that nature. But my major support system, I would say, was Anchored, which is a small – it's a small – a Bible study group, a Bible study small group, that was a part of

InterVarsity. And at Anchored, you just kind of see everyone not being these perfect Christians. Everyone is complaining, like, "Oh, I didn't get to pray today because I was too busy studying," "Oh, I did bad on this test."

They weren't perfect Christians. They weren't perfect students. A lot of them were pretty much of similar ethnic backgrounds and face the same societal and family pressures as I did. So it was very easy to feel seen and heard there. But then during the – even during the pandemic, over the summer, we would still have our little sessions. And that really did help me. That was –

We'll have prayer requests and praise reports where you would say what you're struggling with for the week. And by the next week, you would notice that you're just not struggling with that anymore. If you were, then you'll notice that everyone in the room is praying for you, to help you through it. But after I fully began SGA, at one point, our time went from 8:00 PM on Tuesdays to 7:00 PM on Tuesdays. So it conflicted with Anchored. And I kind of did have to ask my mom what is more important.

And she was kind of like, "Your faith is important. But at the end of the day, your faith is within yourself. You – " and I think at the end of the day, Anchored being – ended up being the one that had to leave, which was pretty rough. I had to do – I had to download the Bible app and try to stay in the group chat and try to stay in just to – you kind of have to sacrifice your ability to meet with your support group just so you can make sure your college résumé has enough leadership experience and has enough of all these other experiences that being a senator would've granted me.

*[1:25:00]*

So I don't – I wouldn't say I regret it. But I would say after that, my mental health did kind of take a little bit of a decline. It was harder for me to feel supported. It was easier to feel lonely. And it was easy to feel – it was easy to rely on my parents a little bit more, actually. My mom is kind of my best friend now because the people I was super close to freshman year, I'm still super close with them but I think there's just always a lot of context missing, like not being in the same classes anymore, not being in the same vicinity as each other. In order to rant or vent, you kind of have to have the context of – there would be all these questions that they're just difficult because everyone has their own things going on. So

my mom is my major person I call now when I have a issue with something or if I'm panicking about something. So –

AS: Mm-hmm.

OO: Yeah.

AS: Yeah. That's – it's an evolution of things. And that's – I'm sorry that you had to choose between the two because that seems like it was really probably a difficult decision.

OO: Yeah.

AS: So in general, do you – have you felt supported by Hopkins as a first-gen FLI student? And were there any specific initiatives that they have that are related to that that you found helpful?

OO: Yeah. I mean, sometimes.

We have the laptop program, where they can only give you a grant for a technology grant if your laptop is not doing well. But apart from just granting financial aid, there's not much. We have JUMP, which kind of helps with medical school application stuff. But apart from that, I just can't think of anything, that's not tabling events or these workshops that is actually helping anyone. I've been experiencing issues with affording parking at my apartment building or paying for – I kept – I keep getting parking fines because everywhere on the street – apparently if you live in an apartment building that has a garage, you're not eligible for Baltimore city parking.

AS: Oh, for the resident parking.

OO: Yeah. So our spots were full. And even the only spots [*Unintelligible*] were the tandem parking spots, which are like \$175. I can't afford that.

AS: That's way too expensive.

OO: So I wrote to Dean of Student Life. I wrote to Student Outreach & Support. And they're all just like, "Oh, we don't handle that. Check with them," "Oh, we don't handle that. Check with them," "We don't handle that. Check with them."

Eventually, I did a review of budget adjustment for financial aid to reconsider me for it. But I think they just ended up closing the

case. They said lack of activity – I was like, "Lack of activity on whose end? Like it was – you guys didn't respond to my case, so why'd you close – " I was just like, "Okay."

And it's not even like I'm requesting money. I'm requesting the need so my Gates – I would talk to my Gates advisers and they would say, "Gates – " the Gates Scholarship has probably only covered maybe \$2,000 a year for me. They have not covered much. They – it's a need-based, last-dollar scholarship. If I needed \$70,000, they would pay for it. But the fact that financial aid would just not say that these things are a – are a necessity just forces me to have to – I have to work a lot. I have to –

I don't have work study, but I just have an off-campus job that I work at a lot and – I mean an on-campus job that I work a lot, the LEED office. And kind of have to just make ends meet because – I don't think Hopkins is – I think they try to be and I think the initiative is there, but the – there are just not enough rules or laws in place to actually support – or even when they send out these surveys, like, "How are you doing? How's your mental health," blah, blah, blah, and you put, like, "No. I'm not doing well," they're like, "Thanks."

*AS:* And then there's no follow-up.

*OO:* There's no follow-up.

*AS:* Yeah.

*OO:* Even the counseling service or whatever – when you go to the counseling service, there's a 45-minute initial thing, and they're like, "Okay. When in the next two weeks do you want to meet again?" If someone is coming to you with experiencing these mental health issues, they don't want to meet in the next two weeks. And they're asking all these questions and setting up these routinely two-week things.

There's a place to talk where we can go to at any time. But to my knowledge, the Counseling Center has this walk-in advising, but they're always booked. They're always full. So there's just – there's no on-demand support. So by the time you're feeling a certain way – I'm going to be over it in two weeks. So I just cannot afford the time to go through the hassle of – even the whole scheduling process for counseling things, it's just so difficult. So I never feel the need to waste time.

I wouldn't say my mental health is a waste of time, but if I'm doing it and I'm sure I'm going to get someone that's consistent and routine and that actually works, that's fine. But I don't want to sit there for 45 minutes, have myself vent, and someone write things down. I don't need help opening up.

[1:30:00]

I'm pretty good at opening up. I need solutions. And those 45-minute sessions just are like an echo – not an echo chamber, a chamber of –

AS: Yeah.

OO: Yeah.

AS: I think the acute – I think you make a really good point about the acute help is what's really necessary, that very short-term, immediate sort of solution versus the –

OO: Yeah, full-on, organized – like, no...

AS: – long-term therapy.

OO: Most of the things – yeah. Most of the things Hopkins students struggle with is like, "I just failed this exam. It's stressing me out."

AS: Right, "Help me work through this."

OO: I just – it's always consistent, right-now issues. It's never like an – I mean, sometimes it's ongoing. But I feel like a lot of people are able to deal with those things before they get to campus. A lot of the things we deal with start off from campus. So –

AS: Yeah. Well, that's good – that's helpful to hear, I think, about what could be more useful for students or more helpful. So it – do you – one of the other questions we like to ask, too, is just about your life in Baltimore and if there are any historic moments or things that happened while you were here.

So I don't know if you want to reflect on that for a minute. I know you did talk about having a car helping you get around Baltimore a little bit more. But are there any other things that you want to mention just generally about the culture or big things that happened?

*OO:* I think one I can remember is going with one of my best friends on her birthday. She wanted to give out sandwich bags to the homeless. She called this one homeless shelter beforehand. And I don't remember what they said, but when we got there or when we were trying to get there, they were like, "Oh, you can't give out these sandwiches because you are not on the schedule. You're not on the calendar."

She was like, "What do you want me to do with 70 sandwiches?" She was like, "I don't know. Find another shelter." And I'm just like, "Okay, capitalism is not the problem. It's definitely bureaucracy," like all these rules – even with the whole parking situation – there's just so many rules that Baltimore has that just never make sense. And we showed up –

*AS:* They make it more difficult for Baltimore people.

*OO:* They make it so difficult.

*AS:* Right.

*OO:* And we brought these sandwiches to a different place that didn't schedule, but they were like, "Oh, these have to be prepackaged." We're like, "Can they just have the chips or something? We have chips here." And they're like, "Oh, no – " I forgot what they said. They were like, "The dietitian has to check," and all these other things, like, "We can't just give people food or we'll be liable." And I'm just like, "Okay."

And then we're asking, like, "Where are the homeless people? We usually see them all around." And they're like, "Oh – " someone randomly told us while we were outside, looking, like, "Where are they – " Because we were like, "We'll just drive around and give it to them." But we barely saw them. So we're like, "Oh, are they off the streets?" And someone was like, "If you go behind the post office on – " I don't know what street it was.

They were like, "They're all there." And I was like, "Okay." It was – I can't remember where they are. I'm bad with directions.

*AS:* It's downtown, maybe, or –

*OO:* Yeah, somewhere downtown.

AS: Yeah.

OO: And then we drive there and we're looking around. And we turn a corner. There's a horde, a horde of homeless people just behind a building. I don't know what it was, but it was just – it just threw me all the way off. I have not seen something like that since I've been in Nigeria.

So many people on the streets – so many people were laying down, you couldn't even tell if they were deceased or not. You could not tell. There's flies everywhere. There's – it was ridiculous. And I was just like, "This is America in 2022? You're kidding me," right?

AS: Right.

OO: And we have all these food and all these people willing to help. If college students near this place was a thing, they would be there every single minute, racking up their community service hours or just for the goodness of their hearts, wanting to give.

But it's the fact that the city drives these people off the streets, but they're not going into homes. They're just being shuffled into one big pile. And it sucks. And we gave away the most we could, but we ran out. We ran out of sandwich bags. We ran out of food to give those people. And it – even then, it's like, "Okay, they have their food, but now what?"

It was just a lot. It was like when you want to do a job and then you see it's more than you can handle and the most you can do is just look. And I just kind of felt bad. It was like I couldn't do more. I probably can – if I had the – more time, my service project would be getting the Baltimore homeless off the street. But we have so much more things that are pressing down on our futures and stuff that we have to – we have to just kind of walk away.

[1:35:00]

And never really processed it again, never really thought about it again. So...

AS: Yeah. That's – it's really difficult, I think, to see the disparity of wealth and everything here at Hopkins and then what you see with normal, everyday people. So that's a really good example of just what it's like to be in Baltimore. So you have mentioned also your plans about life after Hopkins. So if you want to talk about for –

that for a minute, I would love to hear more about sort of what the next steps are.

*OO:* Yeah. So right now, I'm taking my MCAT the end of the month. So once MCAT –

*AS:* Good luck.

*OO:* Thank you. Once MCAT is done, it would be applying to medical school. After medical school, wherever we end up, I would love to be back in Georgia, maybe Emory would be nice, to be back with my family. Because I don't know. I think a new city would be pretty rough.

And staying here is also "eh." It would be okay, but I don't know.

*AS:* Are you going to apply to Hopkins or –

*OO:* I mean, yeah, probably. But Hopkins's the hardest – I mean, I'll still apply but I don't even know if I would go if they threw money at me.

*AS:* If they offered it, yeah.

*OO:* I don't know. I can't – I don't know.

*AS:* You'll make that decision when you get to it.

*OO:* Yeah. So after that's medical school and residency and all the other fun stuff. Then after that, I would like to be a medical correspondent, yeah, and just – whenever I pick my specialty, I would maybe open a practice here. Would love to open a practice in Nigeria. But for the most part, just be pretty – while I'm young, before I have kids and everything, or even after my kids are a little older or something, I would like to be a globetrotter, physician-type person like Sanjay Gupta, just exposing disparities and – while still taking care of people.

I feel like that's the highest level of good humanness you can be. I just – I don't want to say I don't want to be a doctor, but I only want to be a doctor to have the ability to help someone in any capacity. You can always help someone in everything else or – I guess I can't be their lawyer. But I – you could still advocate for someone without a degree. But actually physically help someone, I would need the degree. I wouldn't say I want to tack on a medical

degree, but that's really what it is. I want to be a full-on humanitarian and just have my – be a doctor after that. So...

*AS:* Cool.

*OO:* Yeah.

*AS:* We also like to ask if you would recommend Hopkins to other first-gens or FLI students and if you have any advice that you might give them if they choose to come here.

*OO:* Yeah. I mean, I would recommend Hopkins.

I haven't been to other schools, and I can't imagine they're much worse or better or anything. But I would definitely recommend Hopkins to – people with context, though. I feel like if they come in expecting this wonderful place, I think they'll be in for a bit of a rude awakening. I feel like if they come in expecting to not be the smartest person, if they come in expecting to have to work a bit harder for their social interactions – and to get out of Baltimore – I mean get out of campus, like see Baltimore, actually go out of your Hopkins bubble, I think they'll enjoy themselves here.

I think it would also help to know that closed mouths don't get fed on this campus. A lot of times, if a professor or someone is just being very displeasing, just e-mail – start an e-mail chain. I think that always helps. Because at the end of the day, get over yourself. You're not the only one experiencing that.

Ask other people. Most likely, everyone else is experiencing that same issue, too. But I don't know. I think a lot of the issues with Hopkins has to do with the cultures here. So I can imagine it being very different with a different set of people. So yeah, I would recommend it, but with reservations, yeah.

*AS:* Yeah. I think that's really helpful, especially the point about communicating if you're having issues, because it's likely that other students are also experiencing those things.

*OO:* Yeah.

*AS:* So after all these years, after you've been here at Hopkins, is there any way that you would summarize your time here or is there something you would want to say in closing as you head on to your next journey?

OO: Give me one second. Let me –

AS: Sure.

OO: Okay. So a – like a final –

[1:40:00]

AS: It's like a philosophical point, you know?

OO: I don't know. Failure builds character and strength. I don't know. Challenge yourself. Hopkins is a challenging place, but – I can't – I can't think of any other place where I would've been more challenged. I would say that.

And I do feel like once you've been challenged as much as this – a lot of people I talk to who've graduated always say the courses – the premed courses they took at Hopkins were more difficult than the actual med school courses. So this is the best place to prepare you for anything you want to do because it challenges you the most. And I feel like you should see that challenge as a blessing and a preparation. Because if you fail at med school, that's it; you're done. But you can fail here a couple of times and redeem yourself and learn and grow rather than just it being the end. So this is the best place to prepare, again. You have more help.

Yeah, there are resources if you actively seek them and reach out for them and – or even create them sometimes. Like if there's no study group, create one. And just things like that. I think that would help – yeah.

AS: Yeah. Okay. Well, thank you. Those are all the questions that I have for you today. Thank you so much for your time and speaking with me. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that we didn't talk about or that I didn't ask?

OO: No, I wouldn't – I don't think so. Yeah.

AS: Okay. I think we hit most of the questions and sort of nooks and crannies of what happened and how you – how your experience was here at Hopkins. So again, thank you for your time. I'll go ahead and stop our recording.

[End of Audio]

