

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
MS.0404

First Generation College Student Oral History Project

JO  
Interviewed by Kristen Diehl  
April 11, 2022

Johns Hopkins University

Oral History Collection

**Summary:**

During this interview, Kristen Diehl discusses with JO about his experiences attending Johns Hopkins as a pre-med student. Throughout, they discuss the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on his classes and his internships as a nursing aid. They also discuss his hometown, family life, and experience during high school. When discussing his time at Hopkins, JO talks about his support systems with his friends and professors, his work as an RA and research assistant, and his membership in the Alpha Epsilon Pi Jewish fraternity. To finish the interview, JO describes his thoughts on Baltimore, major events on campus such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the Russian war with Ukraine, and his advice for future first-generation students.

**KD:** Kristen Diehl

**JO:** Interviewee

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**KD:**

So this is Kristen Diehl here with JO on April 11th, 2022 at the Eisenhower Library 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 coronavirus pandemic, and therefore do not directly ask how the consequences of this public health crisis changed the experiences of our students.

However, we thought it was necessary to begin our interview with a couple of questions related to the pandemic in order to recognize the particularly challenging experiences 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?

**JO:**

I mean, wow, we're in our second or third year pandemic right now almost. And I don't know, for me, it definitely took a little bit of that in-person learning aspect away. Definitely. I lost a year of that combining the spring semester we were sent home and then the fall semester that was completely online.

With that, I feel like I lost some aspect of some of my courses because some of the professors took a few semesters to really adapt and learn how to teach their classes online in I guess what you would call an efficient manner, but yeah. So with that, definitely lost some in-person learning, I guess you could say capabilities, but I did gain some things from the pandemic for lack of a better word.

I'm also a pre-med. So with the pandemic, I actually, a lot of pre-meds

talk about how they didn't have any opportunities to do anything, but this nursing home around the town where I grew up was actually really short-staffed. So I was able to work there and gain a lot of experience and really work the front lines of the pandemic and see if pre-med was really for me.

And it turned out I still really want to do pre-med. So that was nice. But I think it both gave and took away certain things like that. So I got more experience from it, but probably didn't learn as much just from classes being online and kind of being on a back burner a little bit because they were online.

KD: Yeah. Had you taken online classes before?

JO: No, not before the pandemic.

KD: So did you find it to be – how did you find it, you know?

JO: I found it to just be easier, because stuff was open note. But yeah, and also kind of I feel like a little less manageable, because I feel like with them being online, professors tend to overcompensate and give a lot more work because of the fact that it's online and then add in all these extra things like quizzes. So people don't do as bad on exams, even though exams were open notes.

I feel like people were doing better, but I don't know. I just feel like they were trying to overcompensate for being online by providing more assignments in general and it just made it a lot harder to manage it all.

KD: Sure. Yeah. Could you tell us where you were born and tell me a little bit about your family?

JO: Yeah. So I was born in Edison, New Jersey. I grew up in Elizabeth, New Jersey. My parents have been divorced since I was about eight, nine years old. And my mom is Columbian. My dad is American, but family goes back to Eastern Europe. So I also have a younger brother, he's 16 now and I have two younger half-brothers that are about 10 and seven.

But yeah, family's pretty well. It was a rough divorce, but my parents are pretty friendly now, so to speak, which is nice. But yeah, growing up, especially throughout high school and college, I would see my dad a lot. I don't want to not give him any credit, but he was there a lot, but financially it was really my mom doing everything.

My dad pays child support, but that's about it, because he has two other kids, so it's hard for him. And yeah, I guess it kind of really influenced where I got to go to school because believe it or not, you would think Hopkins would be expensive, but it was actually the cheapest college I

had to pick from. So ended up working out. So, yeah. And I guess at home I'm actually really close with my younger brother. So, yeah.

KD: Could you tell me a little bit more about your parents' educations?

JO: Yeah. So my mom and dad both graduated high school. My dad tried to go to community college, but didn't find that it was for him.

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So he dropped out, I think about after a semester. I think in total he had five credits, I'm not sure, but he did not like it.

And my mom tried to go to business school for a little bit, but she didn't really end up liking it. She was already an office manager at the firm she works at. So she was at that point, doesn't really matter. So she also just dropped out of that. So they both tried to take some higher form of education past high school, but for the most part just completed their high school degrees.

KD: You mentioned your mom isn't, or at the time, was at least was an office manager. Could you speak about what their occupations or professions are now?

JO: Yeah.

KD: Yeah.

JO: So my mom is still an office manager at that law firm. She's been there, gosh, if I'm 20 now, she's been there for probably 21, 22 years. My dad works as a service tech for Slomin's the alarm company. He also drives oil rigs for them in the winter. He's been there for, I would say around the same 21, 22 years.

KD: You mentioned Elizabeth.

JO: Yeah.

KD: Elizabeth, New Jersey. I wanted to say Elizabethtown, which I think is the name of a film. Anyway –

JO: No worries.

KD: – could you speak about the town that you grew up in, what it was like?

JO: Yeah. So Elizabeth was pretty diverse in a sense that it was – It's kind of an oxymoron to say it's diverse and also predominantly Hispanic. But when you talk about Hispanic or Latino, Latinx population, there's a lot of different subcultures in that. And that's what I really mean by the diversity.

We had Colombians, Ecuadorians, Peruvians, Brazilians, El Salvadorians, Mexicans, Cubans, all a ton of different types of Hispanics. We also had a large population of African Americans. We had some Jewish neighborhoods in our city. So it was very diverse.

The thing I do love about Elizabeth is they have probably the best Hispanic food I've ever had so far. Can't find anything like it, anywhere else. The Columbian bakeries there are to die for, but being that it was a really diverse, urban – It was definitely a city population of around 150,000.

So it was pretty big. We didn't really get the same opportunities that I found that a lot of my peers had in high school. So I would talk to some of my peers that went to certain high schools and they would tell me about these projects they got working on or what they were able to do, especially stuff in research. I was like, "I could never do anything like that."

I did one EEG study and that was a struggle to get it approved and stuff. It's like have the resource to actually be able to go out and do it. It was hard, but I don't think it comes that hard to a lot of other people. The school district itself too is just, I never felt that it was managed well. They just prioritized certain things over others that didn't make sense to me.

They were making us take – We had mandatory AP exams or AP classes, which made no sense to me because not everybody wanted to take AP world history and was interested in it, but we were all required to as a freshman, which makes no sense. I don't know how that prepares us for college, especially because if it's required. Some teachers aren't going to teach it at a college level, it's just a requirement to. It's like, "What's the point?"

But yeah, I mean, I don't want to dis the school district too much because they did get me where I am now. Their music program was absolutely fantastic. I was in their jazz band for a while, and their orchestra. Everybody that teaches music there is amazing. But yeah, it's definitely got some things to work on, but yeah, that's my city for the most part.

KD: Yeah. And thank you. My next question was just what was high school like? And you've already touched on that a little bit. And you mentioned music. Were there any specific subjects that you were interested in or extracurriculars that you participated in?

JO: Yeah. So I found myself particularly good at AP chemistry, AP biology. I was always at the top of my class in those courses. And I found that it was actually pretty reassuring because I've been wanting to do medicine for the majority of my life.

And then when I ended up being good at those classes, it was kind of like, "Oh maybe this is really what I'm meant to do. We'll see, we'll keep going down the road." But yeah, the music stuff was really a fun time. Every time I think about it, it was so much fun. We were actually a pretty competitive jazz band in the state. At my senior year within our rhythm section in the band, all of us were really close friends, all seniors.

So we all knew what we were doing in a sense, but we actually got third in the state at one of our jazz competitions. My best friend and I actually went to the Allstate band together and played there. So it was a lot of fun.

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Definitely music at that school was the biggest highlight I had there.

I made a ton of friends doing that and the performances were just – The adrenaline you get is like, I haven't been able to find anything like that since. But not something I would ever want to do full-time just because working with people in the Allstate band, the Allstate band was fun, but a lot of those kids really want to do music for the rest of their life.

And getting to know them, and I was like, "I don't think I'd want to interact with you after this," *[laughter]* because they were just very snobby. If I didn't listen to this one obscure jazz artist, I was a fool, but it was like, "Nah, I'll do it for the fun and the hobby, but after that I'm done."

But music was a huge part, and the orchestra there too was fantastic. And I really owe it all to the instructors at that school. They were really passionate. A lot of the kids in this city didn't really have money to rent instruments and stuff. And so they fought with the district to get instruments supplied to the school that we could borrow from the school and not have to worry about anything. They were absolutely fantastic, all of them.

I forget their names, Mr. Core, Mr. Schwartz and Mr. Dylan, all of them were great and very passionate about teaching, not even just music, but just teaching, trying to get us to really understand and learn music. But yeah, and some of the STEM teachers in at school were really good too, like AP chemistry and AP bio.

Those teachers were very good and always – If they found a student that was pre-med like me, they were trying to push them to stick onto it and really keep going with it because it was rare for that to come out of our school. Yeah.

KD: That's great. What were your parents' thoughts on education?

JO: Yeah. So my parents didn't want me to make the same mistake they did. I wouldn't call it a mistake because they're fine, but what they call a mistake is they started working too young, and since they started working too young, they got used to the idea of making money and didn't bother going to college because they figured they were making money already. What's the point?

They didn't want me to fall into that sort of mindset that they had. So college for me was going to happen. Whether I really wanted it or not, they were, especially my mom, my mom was going to push me to do it. Luckily in my case for what I want to do and for what I think a lot of careers nowadays, you kind of need college anyways. So it was going to happen regardless.

But my parents have been, both my mom and my dad, but a lot more so my mom, have been pushing me to, especially when they found out that I was slightly interested in medicine, they've been pushing me to keep going for it ever since. They're pretty supportive on it. Yeah.

KD: Yeah. And you briefly touched on this, but how did you decide to attend Hopkins?

JO: Yeah. So Hopkins, the primary reason, and it's nothing against the school, but the primary reason was the money. So secondary and every other reason after that follows very closely. It's got great opportunities for research, which is important if you're applying to med school, and it's got –

I mean, you have one of the best med schools in the country here as well that you can get resources from. So all of that was huge as well. If it weren't for the money, I would've wanted to come to Hopkins as Hopkins was my number one choice anyways, but it just worked out that what ended up happening, when I was applying to all these schools and I got accepted to places like Cornell, UNC-Chapel Hill, and sent me the financial aid package and I was like, "Oh, this is a little steep. I don't know if we'd be able to pay this."

And I sent an email to every school I applied to just to see what happened, and then got accepted to including Hopkins. And Hopkins was actually the only school that never emailed me back. Just dead end. I never heard anything back. I was like, "Oh, that's funny." And then I just get an email like, "Your financial aid package was changed." And I look, and it was crazy difference from before.

And I was like, "All right, if you're not gonna reply, that's the best thing you could do." *[laughter]* So yeah, I don't know how that happened, but they bumped their financial aid up a ton for me after I sent an email explaining my situation wasn't exactly reflected. I'm like,

I forgot the IDOC or whatever it is, but they didn't say anything. They just changed it.

And that was a big thing for me. It looked like even going past that, looks like the school, from my first impression, was not willing to say as much, but just to do, actions do really speak louder than words. So from there on, they were my cheapest school to attend and they were the one I really wanted to go to for all those resources I previously mentioned.

So it ended up really coincidentally working out really well. Maybe not coincidentally because financial aid here is really good. And I found out after I got in. But yeah, pretty much just for money and the other resources you can get here among research and medical school resources.

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KD: Sure. And what was your family's reaction when you were accepted into Hopkins?

JO: They were thrilled. My mom and dad actually at first, they weren't as happy as you might think because they just didn't know what Hopkins really was. They've heard it before, but it was never really important for them before this. So they just never paid any mind to it.

But it really actually came out a lot more surprising when my mom started telling people. The firm she works at, she would tell her boss, his lawyer and he's like, "Oh my God Hopkins?" He would have that reaction. And then she started having that reaction. Then she would tell my dad and then he would start having that reaction.

So once they understood what Hopkins really was, because I don't think they ever really grasped how hard it is to get into a place like this and what you have to do and the work that it takes to stay here, because it's a lot of work.

But I don't think they ever really grasped it until they, I guess, started telling people and people were giving them their reactions and then they kind of started to understand, especially because my mom watches Grey's Anatomy. And then every time they bring up Hopkins now, she'll send me a video of it *[laughter]* and I'm like, "Oh my God, not in their med school yet. Geez."

But yeah, no, they were kind of melodramatic at first. Didn't really have that much of a reaction, but once they figured out where I was going was really big, then they got very excited, and now it's all they talk about. And my dad is, especially my dad is not one to, he wears almost the same outfit all the time, but when I got him the Hopkins hoodie and all, he wears it everywhere now *[laughter]*. Especially

doing service calls, he talks to people if they ask him.

He's never one to really talk either, but if they ask him about it, he'll start talking about Hopkins too. I think it's really nice. But yeah, they were really happy about it once they understood. Yeah.

KD: Yeah. Can you describe the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience? Maybe the transition to living in Baltimore, moving into a dorm, things like that.

JO: Yeah. So I actually did pre-orientation here, so I moved into my dorm really quick and then left for a week, which was a fun time. I met a lot of good friends during that pre-orientation I actually am still close friends with, I would say, thinking about it, probably four or five of them now, still today.

I highly recommend pre-orientation to anybody coming to Hopkins because you just find your friend group so easily. After that, we had orientation and all of that. I found that to kind of be a drag, the FLI groups and stuff, because it's like – At least with pre-orientation, we were all really building connections with each other because we were all at a hostel for a week and didn't have access to our phones.

So we were all kind of forced to talk and then – But not even, it was still very natural. I don't know how to describe it. We just stayed up late. We talking, there was a piano there. We'd play piano, just chill, have a good time. But for orientation, the FLI stuff, it just did not feel the same. I felt it to be very dragged and I was always ready for it to be done so I could just go out with my friends that I already made during pre-orientation.

But again, that could also just be because I already made these friends. So I didn't really see a point in doing any of that other extra stuff, but yeah. Then when it came to classes, it was definitely an adjustment at first. I was taking organic chemistry, calculus two, among other courses. And it was definitely an adjustment at first.

At first it was kind of easier because you didn't have an assignment due every week like you did in high school. There's a lot of self-studying. But after a while, it definitely started to pick up during first exams. But overall, I wouldn't say it was that bad. I feel like I adapted pretty well to college level curriculums. And living by myself, I feel like I also adapted well to that.

I had a roommate, I was in AMR II. So him and I got along really well. We still get along really well. We still keep in touch. But yeah, I think the transition for me just worked out a lot easier. I was also excited. I wanted to live alone. I was kind of tired of living at home. I was ready to be able to go out and do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, not having to worry about checking in or really.

So there was all of that. But I think for the most part, that adjustment really came easier than I hear other people had going through it. Of course I missed home and I would go back home once every four or five weeks. But overall, it wasn't bad.

KD: Yeah. What was your perception of Baltimore, moving to the city?

JO: Oh, yeah. So that's actually a great point.

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And coming into Hopkins, I feel like a lot of people, when you tell them it's in Baltimore, they give that very like, "Ooh, Baltimore. Oh, you better be careful. Don't leave too far from campus." That kind of thing, which to be perfectly honest, I was very cautious at first too, because if that's all you're gonna hear, then you get nervous and stuff and you get nervous about walking too far away from campus and stuff like that.

But after the pre-orientation, which was very service-oriented and we really got to see different aspects of Baltimore, kind of learn that it's definitely not what people portray it as, or what it's portrayed as in the media.

Baltimore gets such a bad look. And it really just has such a rich culture underneath with the media, portrayed as it being a dangerous city. And as in the media, different forms of media too, I've never seen the Wire, but I hear that it really portrays Baltimore as a crazy, dangerous place. And that's a lot of people's just impression of it overall. And I just think it's blatantly wrong.

There's so many cool things you could do here. Yeah, you have to be safe, but you have to be safe anywhere. This is like every other major city. If you go to New York, I mean, there are places in New York where it can be dangerous, but as long as you're calm, cautious, and you have common sense not to do certain things, then you're fine.

I wouldn't go walking around at 3:00, 4:00 AM. But when I walked down to Remington to our house at, I don't know, 7:00 to 8:00 at night or to get dinner, yeah, why not? Nothing's really going to happen. We had the shuttle and everything. I just don't think – I think I was hyped. People were hyping me up a lot more in a bad sense about the dangers of Baltimore than it actually was.

I've never had any issues here. Never been confronted or mugged or anything like that. I never even had that danger. Not in retrospect, not smart, but I walked through alleyways at like 11:00, 12:00 getting home from certain places and nothing's happened to me. But again, I don't want to speak as in generalizing it, that that's probably what

happens to everyone else because I'm also a bigger guy.

So nobody probably wants to, at first look, would want to start anything with me, probably not even worth it. But yeah, I mean, my impression of Baltimore at first was that it was going to be dangerous, but it really, especially after pre-orientation, I learned a lot more about how that's all just a stereotype to really try to give the city a chance. And once I did, the city's beautiful, different neighborhoods are all awesome.

KD: Yeah. Thanks. Have you met any other first-generation college students at Hopkins?

JO: Yeah, I'm actually really close with one of them. I don't know if I'm allowed to say his name or not, but he's a really great guy. Him and I take a lot of similar classes, both pre-med. We are both on that grind. And yeah, I think when it comes to pre-med, he's definitely my closest friend in that aspect because him and I are very supportive of each other and very –

We always try to push each other in a kind of competitive, but not that competitive way. But it's competitive in a sense that we're kind of trying to be at the same level as one another, but not competitive in a negative, I guess, mental effects that you can have with that. We're always trying to support each other.

And if we do hit a bump in our road, we're always comfortable with talking to each other about it and really just trying to work through it together. He's a great guy. Also FLI, my girlfriend is also FLI. She was pre-med and then pre-dental, but now she might not be anymore, but she's always been my biggest supporter getting me through a lot of different things.

Just one thing really being MCAT studying. She really kind of got me through that. It was four months in my life that is just grind every day and she really pushed me through that as well. So, definitely my girlfriend and that other guy, Andre Vu, both really great people, allied network that really helped me through a lot of stuff.

KD: That's great. The next question, which you've already touched on sort of extensively, but maybe we could talk a bit more about your program of study, how you chose it and what you feel is valuable about it.

JO: Yeah, so I'm majoring in neuroscience. We had different tracks. I think I had the classes to both be on the systems and cellular molecular track. So at that point it really doesn't matter, but I've been wanting to do medicine since I was around three or four years old, ever since like being exposed to it with my great grandfather in the hospital.

He had brain cancer, but I never really understood it. I was too young to really understand what was happening.

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But you see these big, tall men and women and in white coats coming in and out of the room or in scrubs and I was always curious about them. And when I found out they were brain surgeons, they were kind of my first role model in a sense that that's what I wanted to be.

And it's just kind of stuck through ever since, **you know?** I never really wanted to do anything else. And majoring in neuro and really learning about the brain, it's the most complicated thing in the entire universe. There's nothing that's more complex than it. And I don't know, just learning more and more about it and learning how much we really don't know about it, is just exciting.

I've definitely fallen in love with the academia and stuff behind the brain as well, what we know, and trying to contribute in a way. And I would want to contribute through neurosurgery to really just be able to help a lot of people the same way these men and women were trying to help my great-grandfather, but also maybe when I get older, just start focusing more on research and make my own contribution to the field as well. So that's really how I picked neuro and what I wanted to do. Yeah.

KD: Do you have any memorable professors or classes?

JO: Let me think. So neuroscience cellular and systems here is our, I guess, our weed-out course for neuro. Definitely one of the most interesting classes I've ever taken, but just so much material. It was ridiculous. We covered everything that was possibly known about the nervous system, not in a specific depth, but a very broad depth, but everything that we possibly know about it within a year-long course.

And it was so much material, just so much. But the main professor in that course, the one that really organized everything, Dr. Jallo, is very approachable. And I know that's like said about a lot of Hopkins professors, but I never really felt that with a few of them, especially the ones that people say they're approachable. But with Dr. Jallo, it could be the week of the exam and you could ask him about one of the first lectures that's covered that's for that exam.

And he'll explain it to you without any judgment. Just such a nice guy. He has my highest respect as a professor. He's so approachable. You can talk to him about stuff that ideally you should have known a day before the exam, but he'll have no judgment on you. He'll explain it very well.

Even though he doesn't teach all aspects of the course, he understands

everything in the course and will sit down with you and make sure you understand it as well. Whereas the other two professors in the course really only stick to the topics they teach and don't really know much past that. But he's a great guy.

And a lot of people put him down because he has such a heavy accent, but it's really not that big of a deal. You get past the accent and it's a great professor that really knows what he's talking about. And actually, for lack of a better word, knows how to explain it better than any other professor that I really had with neuro. That's just in the general class.

But for upper levels, like Dr. Trageser, I took for neuroeconomics. That was a really interesting class, all about how brains make decisions basically. And he's a very passionate instructor, very passionate professor and explains things very well and always tries to make sure that the student isn't stressed, which I really appreciate.

And I'm taking Dr. Farah now for neurobiology and diseases of the peripheral nervous system. Also, crazy, crazy smart guy that knows pretty much everything going on in the course because it's all related to his field and what he does. And also keeps the course very interesting and also manageable. Also, cares about us not being super stressed and overworked. So definitely those three professors, Dr. Jallo, Dr. Trageser, and Dr. Farah. My best professors here so far.

KD: Okay. Could you talk about your overall dorm or apartment life while here?

JO: Yeah. Yeah. So I lived in AMR 2 my freshman year. And that was a fun time. AMR 2 is objectively the best *[laughter]*. But it's a very social dorm and I find that I can be a very – I'm usually a social person. So I had a great time with that. A lot of my friends lived there, so we just hung out.

After AMR 2, yeah, we got sent home that spring semester. Then that fall semester, the next one was online. And the one after that, I was actually – I'm still an RA. I was an RA and Wolman, which was okay. Pretty small room and nothing really memorable.

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And then now I'm currently an RA in Charles Commons. The room is a lot nicer. It's fun. I'm just not that passionate about the job anymore.

I'm pretty done with it, especially now that I'm on my way out. I'm ready to be done with that job. But yeah, being an RA has actually shifted my perspective on the dorm experience, because now you're an enforcer of policies and sorts. Especially with COVID, I don't know, there were just certain things that never really made sense.

We were told at the beginning, when we came back last spring that we weren't supposed to let people hang out in the common areas more than three at a time. That was the limit. But then I would tell that to these residents, and then I see them all just get up as a group and then go outside and hang out on the beach together.

And it's like, it doesn't make any – At that point, let them stay here where it's not cold. What difference are we really making, especially now when they're hanging out outside? They don't have to wear a mask or anything. So, I don't know. I feel like a lot of things that res life may be doing, just doesn't make sense to me.

And also there's sometimes we get information – I learn about information after my residents have already learned about it. They don't inform us properly at all. My residents asked me about a new policy change and I'm like, "Where'd you hear that from?" Like, "Oh, they just sent out an email." And I'm checking my phone and I'm like, "Oh, I didn't see that. Sorry I was in class for an hour and a half. I wasn't going to –" But yeah.

The other thing I'll really touch on about res life and being an RA is, as hard as that neuroscience cellular systems class was, I felt like Dr. Jallo understood that we had a life outside of the class, which is why we only had four exams. And he wasn't strict on attendance at all. He understood if you didn't want to come to lectures at first, just watch the recordings, whatever.

He really did not care in that aspect. He was like, "You have your own life." But when it comes to res life, I feel like they expect us to be here every weekend, always ready to do something like the last minute meetings. And I'm like, "That's just unreasonable." Telling us on a Tuesday that we have to sign up to volunteer with interviews for new RAs on Friday and Saturday.

And we have to sign up for two shifts when each shift is four hours long. And I'm like, "I have plans, I'm sorry. I was planning to go to DC and I'm still going to DC. I'm not signing up for this crap. You're crazy." But yeah, I feel like they just don't understand that we're – Even though we're students and we're working for them and we're getting paid, if we're not scheduled to do something that weekend, we already have plans in the beginning of the week.

We're not looking to – Most of us aren't just doing nothing and waiting for you to give us an assignment, you know? But yeah, that's pretty much my dorm experience.

KD: Sure. Did you have any other internships or jobs?

JO: Yeah. So I've been working at a research lab since fall of freshman year. And it's with Dr. Agnetti. Still working with him now. After I

graduate, I'm gonna be working with him for an additional year. He'll be paying me a salary. His lab is focused on – I should say what it's about. It's a cardiovascular biochemistry lab. So it's a lot of proteomics, doing a lot of wet-lab work pretty much with proteins, especially we're really focused on desmin, which is an intermediate filament cardiac tissue.

So we have a ton of different projects on that, but Dr. Agnetti has actually been really, really gracious with me for lack of a better word, but also very trusting. Ever since I worked there this past summer, I put in a lot of work into the lab and contributed a lot to certain projects and he recognized that.

And now he has me on my own project. And once I finish this one, he's got another one lined up for me. So he also knows that I'm pre-med and he actually, more so than I've heard from any other PI, he's trying to build my application, giving me publications and asking me to present at a – Let me explain this first.

We're part of an international group of scientists as well called the Duke, scientists that are based all over the world from Israel to Hamburg, to UPenn, all across different areas. There's a semi-annual meeting where we all give different presentations. He allowed me to present what I was working on and it was crazy because I was the only undergrad. Everyone else was PhD and postdoc presenting.

But he definitely gives me my opportunity to shine and do those presentations or really work on projects by myself and get data for him and even interpret data with him.

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And whenever I don't understand something, again, it's not like from what I hear with other PIs, it can be very judgmental or not easy to learn from, he'll put on the gloves and he'll stand there and he'll show me exactly what to do.

And then I'll forever remember from there. But yeah, that's been my biggest extracurricular I think at Hopkins so far, like internships and stuff. I have other extracurriculars as well, but they don't really count as internships or research, but –

KD: Yeah, if you could talk about those, any other clubs or activities, extracurriculars, that would be great.

JO: Yeah, for sure. My biggest group besides research would be I'm a member of Alpha Epsilon Pi, which is a predominantly Jewish fraternity on campus. I'm not Jewish myself, but I found that I aligned a lot with some of their values. They were actually suspended in spring of 2019 when I was a freshman. Actually, no, that was before I came in as a freshman.

Once I came in, they were trying to restart and they were the only fraternity that, when I was around rushing, that I talked to every member and I had absolutely no qualm or I felt like I could sit down and talk to this person. They were nice and not full of themselves or anything like that, which every other fraternity I rushed, I felt like there was at least one or two or three guys that were like, "I would not want to be alone with this guy."

The way he talks or the way – I would not be able to connect with him in any sort of way. So that's what drew me to Alpha Epsilon Pi. Also, a lot of their mission to really create a safe space for Jewish men on campus with them being a minority and perhaps not having any real safe spaces besides Hillel. I kind of resonated with that too, just as a Hispanic.

Even though I'm not Jewish, I understood like what they were trying to do. But I've been a brother of that fraternity since spring of 2020 as a founding father because we had the restart. But ever since then, I did two semesters of the recruitment chair and I'm currently president of the fraternity now.

It's a lot of work, but I really do love the guys. And I feel like I really only ran for president because at the time, since we are restarting a lot of our class is young or a lot of our group is really younger, and I didn't think any of them really had the ability to take on a role as president yet. So that's why I ran for it. It's not something I really want to do, but it's something I have to do because everyone else that could, has already either been president or are graduating.

So I'm just sure because I have to now to kind of keep us together. But great group of guys, all really dedicated and, well, definitely one of the highlights I have here as well. A lot of the stuff we do together, besides of course the stereotypical parties and whatever, a lot of core memories I've formed with these guys.

We actually rented out a theater to watch Batman. 30 of us just went and it was such a fun time to do that. Or we all went paintball. We all went to paintball. We're planning on laser tag and mini-golf in a few weeks. And honestly some of the closest friends I've ever made here as well and definitely going to be keeping in touch with them after college, that kind of thing.

But yeah, Alpha Epsilon Pi has been a big highlight of my time here. And although it's been a lot of work, it's been rewarding. Being president has taught me so much about delegation, leadership, conflict, mediation. There's always drama going on. So I have to learn how to resolve through that. And a lot of it is also trying to stay neutral because you might be on a topic that you're particularly passionate about, but as a leader, you can't be, especially if it's something that the

group has to vote on, you can't interject with your opinion.

You just have to let democracy do its thing and provide a little bit of advice if you want, or a little bit of your opinion, but you can't be so passionate as to lead the vote in any sort of way, but it's all about learning how to stay neutral in those situations, and really I think more rationally and emotionally. It's been a lot. I've learned a lot. But yeah, wouldn't trade it for anything else, to be honest.

Trying to think of what else I do on campus. Oh, I was a tour guide for a little bit. That was fun. Got to interact with a lot of parents, which was – Actually a lot of people say it's not fun. I thought it was pretty fun *[laughter]* because I always felt like I would always give them a little bit of extra information and I felt like they were like, "Oh this tour guide is giving us the low." Once on the downlow I'm like, "Yeah. Okay. Whatever."

But parents are funny.

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What else do I do? Oh, I'm also part of Lambda Epsilon Mu, the Latino pre-health society. That, I'm not that as connected to at all, but I'm friends with some of the people in there. So they're pretty cool too. But yeah, that's all I can think of right now.

KD: Yeah. That's great. Can you talk about how you spent your summers or breaks at Hopkins. I guess also sort of including maybe the *[laughs]* pandemic as well. That probably changed things.

JO: Yeah, no, definitely it did. During the summer where we had just been kicked off campus, sent back home kind of thing, that summer was when I was working as a nurse aid at that nursing home during the pandemic. I worked there until first or second week of July just because I had some issues with their administration there.

They wanted me to work a lot more with female patients and I just wasn't comfortable based on one of the other male nurse aids was telling me that they made him do that before, and then the patient accused him of sexual assault, but the patient was, for lack of a better word – They were suffering from dementia, for lack of a better word. And then when cops came in and asked the patient, the patient said it happened in 1929.

So it's like, I just did not want to be put through that, especially if I'm a temporary nurse aid, not interested in that. No thanks. But I worked on different floors. I worked with a variety of different patients that ranged from either being pretty independent where I really just talked to them for a bit, made sure they were doing okay, to being completely dependent in sort of comatose or vegetative states that needed full-time

care.

I worked with those. When it came to COVID, I worked with people that were completely clean or people that have COVID tested positive. I did all of it. The other thing I didn't agree with that administration on was they had separated people that were exposed and people that were positively clean. They would have one nurse for the whole floor on a night shift. So they were going back and forth and it made no sense to me. It was ridiculous.

But definitely got to see the pandemic on the front lines at first hand. And when people were kind of downplaying it, going into the summer, I'd be like, "No, it's actually pretty real. I see people move up and down. I see people leave the home, presumably not for any good reason a lot of the time." But other than that, when I left in the middle of July or first or second week, I ended up actually just going to bartending school, just because it's something I wanted to do.

Learned how to bartend, did a couple private events, worked at a bar at a Portuguese restaurant for a little bit. Got some money and then came back to campus. And then this past summer, I just worked in the lab that I'm still at. So I work there full-time over the summer and really contributed to different projects, stuff like that.

KD: How is your relationship with your family during your time at Hopkins?

JO: Yeah. So while I've been here, there have been definitely moments where it's been a little strained, especially being the first one here. My parents want me to call them every day. And I really do try my best and it gets hard sometimes when you have three exams in a week. I just stay up late. I lose track of time. And then they send me those passive aggressive texts and passive aggressive voicemails, especially my dad, my dad's good at that, with the calling stuff.

And my mom just gets mad. She doesn't really get that passive aggressive. But it gets kind of crazy. And then I try to explain to them that it's a lot of work to be here. I'm trying to manage everything, and they don't really get it. And can't blame them because they just haven't really been exposed to anything like this. So I'm not upset with them about any of that. It's just something I have to go through.

But I'm hoping that by the time I get to med school, because they've heard about how hard med school is, I'm hoping by then there's a lot more leeway. But yeah, sometimes it gets strained when I'm not keeping in touch.

When I like go off the grid for a little bit just to, even for things like just to recharge my social battery because I find that I'm very social, but things at least once every two weeks, I need a day to just do

nothing and just regain my thoughts and be able to, I don't know, just recharge. But yeah, sometimes I don't really think they get that.

But for the most part, our relationship is great. They're always proud that I'm here.

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When I tell them certain things, they get really excited. Our fraternity just won an award from the school for excellence and recruitment. I send them a picture, they're like, "Oh, that's so nice." Or when I get on a new publication, I'll send them the abstract. And they'll try to read it and don't understand it.

And they'll be like, "That's a lot of big words in one paragraph." And I'm like, "Yeah, it's a lot. Don't worry. I think I'm decently intelligent and it took me about a year and a half to understand what kind of research we are doing at this step." So yeah, but overall they're really proud and they're happy with what I'm doing here. Even the fraternity stuff, they were kind of cautious at first.

But when they started seeing me steps like leadership roles and see that I was passionate about it, they also really supported it. And the one thing I do like about my parents and my family is that I can be pretty open with them about stuff at Hopkins, like that I drink and I party a little bit. And they're always like, "As long as you're safe and as long as you get your work done and you're focused, it's fine."

And that's pretty much my attitude, work hard, play hard, and they fully support that. So I'm kind of thankful to have that open relationship with my family because I know a lot of people that don't, can't say anything like that, but yeah.

KD: Okay. You mentioned your fraternity and your girlfriend. Could you talk a bit more about what your support system has been like while you've been here at college?

JO: Yeah, no, absolutely. My girlfriend's my number one supporter here. She was actually at NYU originally for engineering, but she found that at NYU, unlike at Hopkins, she was there for the engineering program, she was gonna be forced to do engineering. There was really nothing she could go out of it. But she found, she actually was accepted to both Columbia and Hopkins when trying to transfer and she was trying to make that decision.

But based on Columbia's core curriculum and these extra classes you have to take, and at Hopkins, we have nothing like that. She were to come to Hopkins, she could still explore like pre-med, pre-dental and keep her engineering major and figure it out that way. Whereas if she went to Columbia, she would've had to do engineering.

There's no way she could've fit the pre-med classes inside her schedule. So she decided to come here, which I'm really grateful for because she really helps me out a ton. We've taken similar pre-med classes together. And the way her brain works fascinates me because she's such a smart person in the exact opposite fields that I am. I'm very bio and chemistry driven. She's very math and physics driven.

So when we had to take physics as a pre-med requirement, she carried me through the class, really helped me out. And when we took bio/chem together and upper level bio, I was helping her out a lot too. I didn't get A's in physics, but if it were not for her, I definitely would not have done as well as I did.

And she's definitely my biggest supporter academically and just keeping me focused. When I want to sleep in, she'll wake me up, tell me to go to class. Sometimes I'm annoyed by it. But yeah, she really tries to keep me all together, which I really appreciate. And of course when I'm really stressed and just need someone to talk to, she's there always, as I am for her as well.

But the fraternity actually is, I never thought it would be as big of a support system as it is now, especially now as president, A lot of the guys, they'll see me come to the house and they'll see me visibly drained and exhausted and they'll just talk to me and we'll just talk it out.

And they're honestly very supportive as well, especially because they know the stress I'm under as president and what I have to do just to keep us all afloat. And they're very understanding with that. Everybody provides their criticisms, but I feel like with them, they're not being critical, they're just actually trying to help me through the process. And that I think is huge.

And if I'm struggling on a bunch of other stuff, especially my e-board, I feel like I can be very honest with them and be like, "Guys, I need this done by the end of this week. Can somebody please do this because I just can't?" And then someone will always step up and help out. And I feel like our fraternity more than every other one on campus is always about helping each other out, not leaving your brothers high out to dry.

Yeah, a lot of the guys there are huge supporters and we always celebrate stuff that we do. One of our brothers just took the MCAT on Friday.

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So even though he has no idea how he did and he feels shaky we were like, "At least you took it. You did more than a lot of us did. So, congrats." We actually genuinely get excited when we hear that we're

moving on to other places bigger and better.

One of them got, he's accepted to a PhD program for biochemistry, Seattle in Washington University. So we're all hyped about him and it's a great support system. It really is. I feel like if I'm ever struggling with stuff, I could go to them as well.

KD: Okay. So my next question is, have you felt supported by Hopkins specifically as a first-generation student?

JO: Yeah, I would say I felt supported. I don't know about being specifically as a first-generation student. There are certainly – I'm trying to think of different perks and stuff that I've taken from being as a first-gen limited income FLI student here. I think the main one is I got my cap gown for free. That was pretty big and I really didn't have to worry about it and got senior portraits.

That was pretty big just because I have so much on my plate right now and I did not want to worry about ordering a cap and gown. It was just like, "Oh you just come in, give your name and your height, you could get it." I was like, "Ah, that's huge." That was really easy. Other than that, I can't really think of any other benefit that I got from the program.

Oh, I feel like I got a lot of other benefits that everyone else at Hopkins gets, like the pilot as a learning resource and the learning down, the writing center. Everybody has access to that. And don't think it changes anything. Those are great programs. They helped me out a ton with organic chemistry and different writing classes and stuff like that. But just on its own, I'm not sure if being first-gen has helped me out that much other than the fact that –

I don't mean in a way that I didn't have extra resources. I definitely did, but I just don't think I really used them. I didn't have that need to use extra resources or have – I think we have our own separate advising group that we could talk to. I felt like I got everything from my academic advisor, so I just didn't feel the need to. But I'm sure if people did, those would be great resources.

KD: Yeah. Well, is there a way you can think of how the university could increase its support for first-generation students?

JO: I mean, it's hard for me to say because again, I don't really think I needed much more support than I had throughout my time here. Yeah. I think I used the university's resources pretty well. I don't think I ever really struggled, struggled. I mean, I struggled in physics, especially physics one, was the lowest grade I've ever gotten.

But that B plus was pretty well deserved on my part because I just did not try that hard with that class. I was kind of already down struck

going into it, thinking I probably wasn't gonna be that good at it. I was my own worst enemy. And I did not actively look for any resources. I kind of just threw the towel in, in that class.

But yeah, I don't know. I don't think there would've been much more that I could've done with university resources or even FLI resources that could've helped me a lot more. Yeah.

KD: Yeah. That's fair. What would you say in general about your life in Baltimore or Maryland? We've talked a little bit about Baltimore and your kind of perception early on. How has it been throughout your time?

JO: I've learned that everybody here really likes their Old Bay *[laughs]* a lot more than I would've thought. But no, Baltimore is a great city. Maryland itself is –, I mean, I've only really been in Baltimore, so I don't want to say it's a great state, but the Baltimore part of Maryland is pretty great. A ton of different things to do, between going out to places in Fed Hill or nice restaurants in Fells Point.

You have the Inner Harbor, which I've gotten bored of that by now, but there's still places I've yet to try. I heard Highlandtown actually has really good Hispanic food. I want to go there to really see, give my opinion on it. But yeah, Baltimore itself is a really great city. Not as expensive as a lot of other cities.

I mean I'm from up by Jersey and everything in Jersey is so expensive. And New York is crazy expensive. I found that Baltimore just isn't that expensive, which is nice. It's kind of more approachable for like me that I don't have that much money to spend. But being in Baltimore is, I can still do my fair share of things and have fun.

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Yeah, I really do like the city. But I feel like, especially as my time here has progressed, I've only liked it more and more. I've only grown to appreciate more and more different things about the city.

KD: Yeah. Were there any events or historic moments that happened while you were at Hopkins? I know the pandemic is a big one for sure, but any other sort of national or global events?

JO: Yeah. While being at Hopkins, it was actually – I wasn't currently in Baltimore because it was right after the time we were sent home again in that summer. The whole thing, well I want to call it the whole thing because it really was a huge movement with BLM, George Floyd, all of that. And it's still going on to this day. A huge, huge moment that hasn't really impacted my time at Hopkins because again we weren't present in Baltimore during all that.

And I really don't know what happened in Baltimore during that time. But I mean that was definitely changing a lot of perspective of different things. And I felt like that just sat with me for a while because it really is a terrible situation, the police force around the country, that they're able to do this type of thing for so long and get away with it. And everybody being all about defunding the police and stuff, which I'm not sure how I feel about that, but I do think that the police definitely needs more training.

It should not take police officers what they take – I don't know. The amount of time it takes for them to train to become an officer is so short compared to what I thought it would be and what I think it should be. They definitely don't have the training that they need. And they definitely don't have the screening process that they should have. There are certain people that are cops that are like, “Why are you a cop?”

No way. How does that even happen? But that was a big historical momentous issue. And I really, I'm not that educated on it to give that much of a credible opinion on it, but I'm just speaking my mind that I think that the cops and a lot of – There are good cops, but there are a lot of bad cops.

And if that's the case, then it's just not worth it to have those bad cops, those bad seeds, because they cause a lot of damage. They hurt a lot of people. They ruin a lot of people's lives. They kill people that shouldn't be killed, and it's just not right. And I don't know what we have to do, but we have to do something. But other than that, of course, the Ukrainian Russian war going on right now.

It's been hard. Not for me, but my big in the fraternity, he's predominantly Ukrainian and he has family there. And it's been hard for him, especially because he talked to his cousins there a few weeks before the invasion happened and they were all souped up. "If they invade, we're going to sign up and fight them back."

And he hasn't really heard much from them because Russia's been destroying cell towers and stuff. But he's very nervous, but I do one or two things. I either try to reassure him that I'm sure they're okay. Try to give, even though I have no idea, but I feel like it's just the right thing to say. Either that, or just try to distract him, go out and do something.

We all went as a family line to Charles Village Pub to get dinner, stuff like that. Just to keep his mind off of it because I'm sure I could never understand. I've never had anything like that with my family. There was never any Columbian war going on that I had to be worried about my family, like he is.

And all of that is just, this war is just insane. I've been nervous about the state of the world and I've never really felt this way before, but just nervous that when you hear news that Putin and some of his people are

going into bunkers and stuff, and it makes me nervous about what the next step could be. If the next steps are really bad, then what am I putting all this work in for now?

It's kind of rough mentally, but I think I'm just psyching myself out half the time. But yeah, it really just was not a justified invasion and it sucks. But I'm always just glad to hear that the Ukrainians are fighting back harder than everybody could ever think. And I just hope it doesn't escalate further. I just really hope that, for lack of a better words, I just hope Russia gives up, because at this point they've lost so many men and resources to this war that for them, there's no way this is really worth it.

The way I think about it, if they were to even take Ukraine, it would be like someone taking the American south. Yeah, you can probably take it over, but you're never going to be able to hold onto that region with people hiding in swamps and forests, trying to attack you, especially a lot of conservatives I feel like would do that.

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And guerrilla fighting, you would never really be able to beat that. Nobody really has in history been able to defeat guerrilla fighting.

And I feel like even if they were to take over the country militarily, you're not going to win against that with the guerrilla warfare. So I don't know, that's just been a lot of stress that I've been having in the back of my mind, wondering if we're all really that safe because we don't know what's going to happen, but yeah.

KD: Yeah, a lot of uncertainty for sure.

JO: Yeah.

KD: Do you find that events like this impact the sort of campus wide? Do you find students are mobilizing or organizing around certain events?

JO: Yeah. when it comes to the Ukrainian Russian war going on right now, there's definitely people painting the blue jay statue the Ukrainian flag, there's stuff like that that I see that I really like that. There are also certain student organizations that I see. Hillel for example, were doing a challah bake and I bought one of the challahs, and they said all the money was going on Ukrainian refugees.

And I was like, "Oh, then I'll take the bigger challah. Why not?" But I really like seeing stuff like that. I feel like on this issue, campus is actually more unified than it has been on previous issues. As far as I know, everybody's on the Ukrainian side. We want Ukraine to – We respect Ukrainian sovereignty. We feel like this is a very unjustified invasion. And we're just hoping that Ukraine holds out and really

makes it through on other international issues.

It hasn't really always been that unified, the whole issue with – Again, I'm probably the least educated on this issue, but with China and Taiwan, there was a big protest, I think like a year ago where they had a speaker come from Taiwan to talk about their independence and all of that. And you had students that were supporters of the CCP coming and protesting it.

And then now you have students that are supporters of Taiwan coming in and protesting that. And it was pretty ugly. It almost got very physical. So there was that. And of course the Israeli-Palestine issue is something that people aren't that unified on on campus. And again, I have no idea about anything about that issue. I haven't looked into it to really make my own opinion.

But yeah, there's certain issues on here that are international issues that we don't have as much unification, but it's refreshing to see that when it comes to the Ukrainian and Russian conflict and war, that it's pretty much unified, I would say, all for Ukraine, from what I've gathered it should be.

KD: Yeah. Okay. Switching gears a little bit. You've touched on medical school and the lab that you work in. Could you elaborate a little bit more on your plans for the future and life after Hopkins sort of academic, professional or otherwise?

JO: Yeah, for sure. So after I graduate in May, I'm planning on a little vacation. But after that, I will I'll be working in the lab that I've been working at for a year on a salary, making some money and getting more publications and getting more presentation experience, stuff like that. Yeah, after that, attending medical school. Don't know where I'm going yet because I have to apply this cycle, but fingers crossed, I get somewhere.

After that, I go to med school wherever I end up and try to apply to residencies for neurosurgery and specifically I wanna do pediatric neurosurgery because I felt like if I were to dedicate my life to helping people, I'd rather help kids that were just dealt on a fair hand in life, had really no choice, but were born a certain way or had certain genetics and they need help more than ever.

I feel like I'd rather just – Especially with three younger brothers, I feel like I've always been good with kids. I'd rather help the kids. That's what I would rather do than help an adult. But yeah, those are my plans. Not sure where I'm going to go after that. Probably do neurosurgery for a while. I want to work in a hospital for a while, maybe get my own practice.

But I think by the time I start getting older and get tired of waking up

so early to do surgeries anymore, I probably want to like just dedicate the rest of my life to doing research and trying to make my contribution that way as well.

And a lot of that sounds very career driven, but I also do want a family. I want to have a couple kids. I want to make sure they're well off and that they have access to resources and stuff that I had, but also still grow up with humility.

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I think that's pretty important as well. Yeah.

KD: Overall, would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students? And is there any advice that you would give them?

JO: I would definitely recommend Hopkins to other first-gen students. Absolutely, especially when it comes to the money issue, again, Hopkins is very, for lack of a better word, they're very workable, that you can work with them on what you're supposed to pay them and all that. They're very flexible with it. Besides that, the actual experience being here as a first-gen student, I don't think I would've gotten it anywhere else.

Looking back, I can firmly state that I wouldn't have wanted to pick another school to go to. I really did appreciate my time here. I learned so much in respect to my courses, but also about myself and I feel like I've matured a lot with the exposure I've gotten here, both in different aspects. I've matured academically and research. I've matured as a person by being a president of a fraternity, which I don't think I would've been able to do anywhere else, but yeah.

And everybody here is also so driven to do what they wanna do. And some people look at that as a bad thing. And that might be why you hear about pre-med unhealthy competitiveness and all of that. But for me, it's pretty motivational, especially when you hear, not even just in pre-med, but when I hear engineering brothers getting offered jobs somewhere or computer science ones, getting offered jobs or getting their masters and stuff like that, it's like, "Wow, they're doing really great. I want to do good like that too."

And that just might be my mindset. But for me, I would recommend this institution for any first-gen student. I feel like there's not that hard of an adjustment, at least in my case. And I feel like you can also make friends pretty easily here. Just keep an open mind and reach out. You're not going to make friends by not reaching out. You have to be the one to put yourself out there. I think that's a really hard thing, but once you do, I think that's well worth it.

KD: Sure. The next question is the last question I have is, something you've already kind of naturally started doing, but just after all the time you've had here, how would you summarize your time at Hopkins?

JO: Definitely enriching. I'm not the same person I came here as, and for the better. I feel like I've learned a lot in so many aspects of my life, how to manage time better, how to prioritize certain things better and how to maintain a relationship going through college and how to delegate, how to have true leadership, how to mediate conflict and all that. I feel like as a person, even though I learned a lot more about neuro, I'm graduating with a neuro degree, yeah, I know a lot more about the brain sure.

But I don't know. I feel like just as a person, I've matured so much more than I have beforehand, and it's very weird to think about, but I just am not the same person I was anymore. And kind of makes you wonder like, am I going to keep changing after I leave? You don't know. But yeah, I think out of everything Hopkins has given me, I've just developed here in a way that I think looking back, I would've wanted to develop. I have to thank the school for that for helping me develop in a better way.

KD: Those are all of my questions. Thank you so much for interviewing with me today. Is there anything else you would like to add before the interview is over, any parts of your Hopkins experience that didn't come up or that I didn't specifically ask about?

JO: No, I think pretty much we covered a lot.

KD: Yeah, we did. Great. Well, thank you.

JO: All right. Thank you.

[End of Audio]