“L.A.”
Interviewed by Allison Seyler
April 12, 2023

Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection
Interviewee: LA (LA)  
Interviewer: Allison Seyler (AS)  
Subject: The personal and educational background of LA as well as her experiences as a first generation-FLI student at Johns Hopkins University.  
Date: April 12, 2023

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AS: So, this is AS and I'm here with LA on April 12, 2023 at the Eisenhower Library for the First Generation FLI College Student Oral Histories. We wanted to start these interviews by acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on the Hopkins community. The questions in the interview were actually written before the coronavirus pandemic, and therefore didn't directly ask how the consequences of the public health crisis changed the experiences of our students. But 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 that these students faced.

So, I'll start with just a question about how you feel the coronavirus pandemic impacted your undergraduate experience and what challenges or changes that it caused for you personally.

LA: Yeah, so, I just felt like I had – like, my college experience had a break in it where I wasn't progressing. I didn't really feel like I was able to effectively learn at home. I personally suffered with my mental health a bit – you know, like being inside all the home. You know, all of us experienced some form of, like, sadness and, like, you know, not being able to be motivated to do the work that we're supposed to be doing. So that's how it impacted me personally.

I was not tuned into what was going on at school really, especially once my – since the fall of 2020, so a lot of my time actually during then was going towards community organizing. So I was doing probably, 20 to 30 hours a week at that and very minimal schoolwork. I took a couple of classes pass/fail that semester.

Yeah, I mean, and I think I came back and I was still in a funk once we even got back on campus for a little while. So I came back spring of 2021, and I was – I still was not feeling great. Like, usually I take five classes; I took four classes that semester, even though I was on campus. I still got – I got a little bit more social connection in being able to reconnect with friends, which was good for me.
But yeah, I feel like I grew in some ways and I learned more about myself, but I also went through a really hard time, like, mentally, I think. I think the only thing that I really – that really kept me pushing was, the community work that I was involved with and, like, the people that I met through that and the strength of – I don't know, we just built, like, a really strong community within our organizing network. That still exists today. So that, I think would be the highlight, but everything else I feel like was not very good.

AS:  
Is that something – just to ask a quick follow-up for the community organizing component of, you know, like, your lifestyle here at Hopkins. Is that something that continued during the pandemic? Were you guys still, like, trying to organize or doing things virtually or things like that?

LA:  
Yeah, so we were virtual all of the pandemic except for the like, we had community services. But, like, our meetings together – we didn't meet each other face to face until, like – all of us still have not met each other face to face.

AS:  
Wow.

LA:  
But it is something that's still continuing today. Right now we're trying to take the next step in the organization in hiring a part-time staff member. So it's going be – hopefully if we can secure grant funding, it'll be one of our organizers that's been with us since 2020. So they'll be taking up the position. We have a fiscal sponsor so everything in that regard is arranged. We just – now we're looking to find, like, funding so that we can fund their salary and fund some insurance and benefits. Yeah, but I've continued being a – I'm still – like, I'm the one who, like, coordinated the fiscal sponsor so I'm still very involved with the organization. I'm just, not doing as much on-the-ground stuff. There are other people there that are doing on-the-ground stuff. It's definitely not as much as we were doing during COVID, but we're still – we're trying – especially with this push right now to hire someone to do part-time work, we're hoping to really increase our involvement back in the community again.

AS:  
Great. Yeah, I think that really changed the shape of a lot of the organizations that we participate in, is just the need – the necessity to be safer and meet virtually. So just to move back a little back in time.
I wanted to provide sort of like the context for, you know, setting you up at Hopkins and then sort of then the pandemic happening. Could you tell me a little bit about where you were born and more about your family, if you want to share?

LA: Yeah. So, I was actually born in the state of Maryland. I was born in Lothian, so it's in Anne Arundel County, right, like, on the cusp of Prince George’s County, so not too far from here, about maybe like 45 minutes south of Baltimore. And I lived there about eight years. My mom, my dad, my younger sister, so it's really just been us. Both of my parents are from Morocco originally, so they both grew up in Morocco for – well, now it's actually not most of their lives, both of them, now they've had most of their lives in the US. But they grew up in Morocco so that's, like – that's their homeland, that's where they define as, like, where they're from. And just growing up we would go back every other years, every two years, so I'm very close with my family in Morocco, especially my mom's side of the family, I just really love going back.

My dad, he has worked in construction since 1995, 1996, something like that. So he – right now he's like a manager so he works, like – actually I get to see him pretty often because he, like, works all over the DMV area, so sometimes he's near Baltimore, so sometimes he stops by. But he works as a manager at, like, different construction sites, making sure that trucks are arriving on time, and that's what he's been going for the last, like, 15 years or 10 years or – I don't know, he doesn't talk about his job very much.

But my mom has been a substitute teacher for the last 14 years in Manassas City Public Schools. So, she just, like, works – she doesn't work too, too much, it's just like to have, like, extra money, especially, like, for my sister and I so we can, – especially in high school, be able to do stuff that was fun. But we moved to Virginia in 2009 after the housing crisis. And we've been there ever since, my family’s still there. Yeah, and then I went to school in Virginia up until high school, and now I'm here at Hopkins.

AS: Yeah. Did your parents – can you tell me a little bit about their, like, educations leading up to – I guess they probably were educated in Morocco and then came over, or did they do any, like, educational things here once they got to the states?

LA: Yeah, so my dad actually only has a middle school education, and my mom finished high school and she did, like – my mom was – she worked in a factory but, like, she – so she was a sewer for a
long time, so, like – but she was learning on the side, like, how to create clothing. So, some of the, like, pieces that I have today, they used to be hers that she created. Like, she has a leather jacket that she had given me. So she was just, like, really crafty, really creative. She has lost – like, sometimes I tell her to, like, make me stuff but, she's forgotten a lot of it because it's been, like, 22 years now since she’s– 23 years since she's made anything. But she still like, hems my pants and things like that.

So, that was the extent of both of their educations, yeah. My dad actually still has, like – sometimes he has, like, trouble reading a little bit, so, like, my mom is the one who will help him sometimes, yeah.

*AS:* Yeah, that makes sense. So what – could you talk a little bit more about, like, where you grew up and if you want to elaborate and kind of talk about, like, your high school experience, I think you could do that, too.

*LA:* Yeah, so in Maryland, I have minimal memories. I grew up in Lothian, Maryland, actually in a mobile home neighborhood. So my parents owned the home. They had been there a couple years before I was born, I think, or, like, right when I was born. I don’t remember too, too much. We were the only non-white or non-Black family in the neighborhood.

*AS:* Interesting.

*LA:* Yeah, which is very interesting. My mom at the time did not wear a hijab. So my family is Muslim. But now she does, but at the time she didn't, so we weren't identifiably Muslim. But most of our neighbors were white but, like, very, very welcoming. We were really close with a lot of folks, like, very – like, if my parents needed a babysitter, like, my neighbors would babysit us. Yeah, so, like, very, very good relationships. That's the extent of what I remember in Maryland.

Moving to where my family lives now in Manassas in Virginia, it’s very diverse, very, very diverse. Actually, most of my city – it's like 60 to 70 percent Latino actually. And my neighborhood itself is, like – less than half of the neighborhood is white, I would say. But it’s still like a – it's more of a – it's like a small town.

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Like, Manassas is more of a small town, suburb of the DC metro area. So, like, it's very – it's still very suburby-like. And we were also really close with our neighbors. I had a good childhood. I have a younger sister, she's three years younger than I am. Some of my closest friends actually live in the neighborhood so, like, we grew up, like, biking to each other's houses. And, you know we all – like in middle school when, like I feel like in middle school, that's where a lot of, classes diverge for people, so, advanced classes and “regular classes,” quote, unquote. Like, a lot of my friends and I, we took the more advanced classes, so we became closer through our courses.

I went in middle school – so my neighborhood is, like, very interesting where it's, like – it was zoned – for middle school it was zoned to an affluent middle school, but for high school it's zoned to a low-income school. And our neighborhood is – we have, like, a mix of townhomes and single homes, so we're like a mix of various socioeconomics – so I live in a townhome. But for middle school, it was not very, very white, but pretty white because we were, like, mixed. We were very mixed. It was mostly more affluent students, not like crazy affluent but, like, more than us. So that was an interesting experience, and I think that's when I started to really realize – my mom had just started to wear hijab, like, two years before, and I started to realize my Muslim identity, becoming more aware of it, and I was very proud of it, I think for, like, the beginning part of middle school, and then in the middle I wasn't. I was, like, a little bit more self-conscious about it, and then my final year I was very proud of it again.

And then when I transitioned into high school, my high school was very diverse. It was ten percent white students – excuse me. Most folks similar – similar socioeconomic backgrounds to me, some folks, you know, like – I had a lot of friends who were undocumented or who had family who were undocumented, so definitely different social circumstances there as well. But just very – like I had said, my town is majority Latino. We were about 10 percent Black or 15 percent Black, something like that. Again, not that many Muslim students, so I didn't grow up with a lot of other Muslim folks. Yeah, I don't know if you any follow-ups?

AS: Yeah, I think it's really interesting, the diversity of your high school. So – and maybe, like, how that impacted you then when you got here at Hopkins, but that might be a question further down. I guess I'm kind of curious, too, about what your parents thought about, like, you going to school and sort of like what their thoughts were on education, if they were really, like, adamant that you had
to finish high school and go to college. Like, did they add any pressures to you in those regards?

*LA:* Yeah, so I always loved to learn, and my mom, like, she really fostered that when I was younger. And we would read together and she would, like, always take me to the library. So that was the big thing. She was always taking us, my sister and I to the library, and, like, she was really close with the librarians there and, like, they were really good friends and we would go to the different events. So, I grew up loving to read because of that. I was just, like – I was devouring books all the time. So she really fostered that when I was younger, and she, like – my parents, like, they were – I feel like my mom especially and my dad, he didn't really necessarily understand education, but he knew that that was the path. Like, that – you need to be educated. You need to be aware of the world, you know? Like – so my parents, like, until I was, like, 13, I think I never watched Disney Channel or Nickelodeon. My parents were very strict. Like, they limited the TV that we watched and I only watched PBS Kids – only – yeah. So that was, like – they really fostered my love for learning I think when I was younger.

And then once I got to middle school, I just, like – I just loved to succeed. When we lived in Maryland, I was placed in – I have a lot of problems with the gifted program and, like, the organization at school. But, you know, like, that program did help foster my, like, critical thinking, my analysis, you know, as a student. Unfortunately that's not available to everyone, to be able to have that opportunity, but I was able to get the opportunity. My teachers would tell my mom that I really like – like, in their, like, evaluations, that I really – like in the classroom, that I loved to learn and I loved to ask questions and that I was just very –

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present. And, like, that was noticed, and that's what put me into the gifted program.

And then when I came – when we came to Virginia – so I went to, like – like the same thing how I said earlier about, like, how I went to an affluent middle school. Elementary school I went to, like, low-income elementary schools in the Manassas – like, Manassas side of town and not the other side of town. But there, they didn't – there wasn't attention that was put on me to, like, put me into the gifted program or, like, to help me get into an advanced class, and there wasn't as much homework. So my mom, like – I think that's a really big signifier for her, on how much she valued our education.
that, like, she was really upset with, like, the way that the school, like – like, she didn’t feel like the school was well-preparing us, or like me especially, because my sister I think was in kindergarten. So, like, even though it was a hassle for them, they moved my sister and I to the schools on the other side of town because of that. Like, she didn't feel like I was going be able to, like, really succeed or, like, be nourished. And there was a bit of racism in the classroom, too, from the teacher. So, we ended up moving elementary schools for a couple of years to the other side of town. My mom was big on advocating for us, because she wanted to make sure that we had a good education and that we were well-prepared.

So – I feel like after elementary school they had already, like, fostered everything that they could have. And for me, I just, like, wanted to get good grades and I wanted to succeed and I wanted to learn everything that I could, and that continued into high school. Yeah, and my mom, like, I think in, like, some moments in middle school, like, also had to especially because of the difference there, my mom had to advocate for me, like getting into a language class. They originally didn't put me into a language class, right, like, things like that, like, my mom still advocated for me. But once I got into high school, I was able to advocate for myself and I really, like – it's because my parents really – they helped foster, I don't know, like the fact that you're not going be given everything that other people are going be given for stuff, so you need to fight for yourself. And second off, learning – like, it's not just important for your success, like, in the material world but, like, learning is also a very important part of religion, too. Like my mom, there's a surah, which is like a section of the Quran, and it starts with Iqra [in Arabic "أقرأ" which means read, so it's like knowledge is really emphasized and especially in my parents' point of view through the religion. So that – yeah, that was a bit long, but….

AS: No, I think that's really – I don't know, like, illuminating in your experience. I'm also kind of curious about, like, your high school experience in general, thinking about things that you started doing then. So like if you did sports or joined any clubs and things that maybe sort of inspired then your time at Hopkins, I would love for you to talk about those.

LA: Yeah, so, we didn't have a broad range of after-school activities. We did have sports, so I joined field hockey and I stayed with it until I was a senior. I was part of Key Club which was pretty big. That was one of the clubs that was pretty big at our school, and it's, like, an arm of Circle K, which is like the university branch, but it's
like a volunteer organization. So, I was doing a lot of service. What else was I involved with in high school?

**AS:** It's funny to think back, like, the throwback of high school. Did you play any instruments or anything like that, music or singing?

**LA:** No, but I was in art classes. I was in art classes. We didn't have anything after school related to art, though, but I really loved art. Even, like, in middle school I took art classes. I played an instrument in middle school but, like, that was – I feel like everyone did.

**AS:** Yeah. [Laughter]

**LA:** I think I was part of, like, a math club. I was big actually in STEM. That was where I succeeded a lot, and I thought I was going being going into engineering actually coming into college. Yeah, I do remember other things that I wasn't, like – I wasn't – they weren't necessarily clubs. I was part of student government for two years, and I was doing some, especially my sophomore year, I started doing advocacy work, just like locally, just in our public schools. And it was in relation to the Syrian crisis, the refugee crisis and just everything that was going on in Syria at the time and just like raising awareness on that, collecting donations for folks.

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And then junior and senior year, I was always, like – from my freshman year of high school, like, really – my friends and I, we all recognized – like, that's when we started to become aware that, like, we are not being given the same as other schools. Having people I knew from middle school call my school “ghetto,” or “oh, have people been killed there,” “I hear there are gangs there,” it's like, yo, these are people at the end of the day. Like, even if – like, even if there is maybe, like – like, gun violence was not an issue to that extent at our school, like, at all. But even if there is violence sometimes, right, these are people at the end of the day, right? Like, yeah. But that was something I became very aware of my freshman year, and we spoke out a bit here and there. But my junior and senior year that really ramped up for me, and that's why I was in student government. So, I was doing a lot of advocacy work on the basis of, like, our school needing more resources and needing more acknowledgement from our county because our county was very highly segregated, like I said. One side of the town and the other side of the town, it was very different.
But that really ramped up my junior and senior year, so I was doing a lot of stuff like that. I was doing a lot of fundraising for, like, student events. You know, like, my mindset was if we can't get funding for – our school was falling apart – like, we had a ceiling tile fall on one of my friends one day.

*AS:* Oh my gosh.

*LA:* Yeah, like, it was not – but you know, my mindset for the fundraising was, okay, if we can't fundraise right now for, like, the infrastructure of our school, we can at least fundraise for fun activities so that people can, like, feel like they're involved, you know, because that's an important part of people's success, like, feeling like they're part of the community. So that was a big part of what I was doing, and then, like, the advocacy work at the county level.

So then my senior year we had like a boundary battle, so that was a big thing that I was a part of and, like, really led the organizing in that. And that actually ended up changing a lot for our school. We got a multimillion-dollar deal after our graduation because of the organizing that we did. Our school didn't have windows, and they just put windows in this last summer, so, like, that funding is still – like, we're still seeing the impacts. They have a lot more programs, because we have a – like, most of our students don't go to college. Yeah, it's like – I don't know, I think maybe, like, 70 to 80 percent don't go to college, I don't think.

*AS:* Wow.

*LA:* But we have a lot more vocational programming now, which is really great. But that – like, a lot of that is because of me and my friends and my peers, like, we came together and we were like, “We're not standing for this anymore and, like, the people that are going here for the next couple of years, they need better.” So, that's – I feel like that's – I can't remember anything – I feel like those were, like, really significant moments. I can't remember being involved with other stuff. We didn't have very much, to be honest with you, like, after-school programming. I think we had, like, a model UN for like a year that I tried doing but then, like, it didn't end up working out.

*AS:* It sounds like you guys just kind of advocated for yourselves and created the things that you needed at the time. That's really incredible and those students are – that will go to your school will now really benefit from those changes. Can you tell me about, like,
deciding to go to Hopkins and maybe like your college application process, kind of thinking through what that experience was like?

\textit{LA:}

Yeah. So, I learned about college through one of my friends from high school, my former friends from high school. We were really close then. I don't – she's not nearby anymore – but she had two older siblings that both went to college. Her parents didn't go to college, but she knew a lot because of her older siblings, and they both went to UVA. So, I got to – like, just because her and I were so close and, like – I got to learn a lot about college through her, actually, which was really – it was really helpful. I remember we did like a college test at school, I knew nothing. And I just put my interests in and, like, the college test put out Radford University for me. It's a school in Virginia and I was like, "Oh, yeah, like, that test" – like, I remember telling her mom, "Oh, yeah, like, I got on the test thing that I should go to Radford University, so I think I'll go there." And her mom was like, "that's a party school." That is not, like – like, the fact that that test – like, no, that's not" – like, not to hate on party schools, but she's like, "To your intellectual caliber, like, that's not – and, like, how hard you've worked, like, you can go somewhere much better.” So, I got to learn a lot about college from the people around me. So, like, I think by, like – I didn't really have, like, Ivy Leagues on my radar or, like, top schools too much on my radar.

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So I was, like, really – I was expecting to go to the University of Virginia. I was like, "It's a great public school. I'll probably get in. I have great grades. I'm active in the community." That was just, like, my expectation. I was like, "You know? Yeah.”

And then I think in the summer I started researching. Like, my junior year and in the summer, that's when I was like, "I think can try to, like, aim higher, too. Like, let me try and aim for schools.” So at first I was looking at schools in engineering, so I looked at Columbia, I looked at Hopkins for engineering. And then towards the end of my junior year I felt like I wanted to do something more in, like, political science or international studies, so I switched my focus, and I decided to apply as an IS major to different schools. So actually I visited Hopkins over the summer and my friends came with me, and we just drove to Baltimore and we just did a day here. And we walked around and, yeah, I mean, I liked it. It was the one school that I really got to visit and, like, really see.
But for me, like, going into the summer, I was like, “Okay, let me at least keep the engineering on the table, so let me apply to schools that also have engineering, like, strong engineering, but I'll also apply to schools that don't have strong engineering just in case.” So I applied to, like – I don't know, would it be helpful to say –

AS: Yeah, of course.

LA: But I applied to Hopkins, I applied to Georgetown, I applied to Columbia University, so – I applied to American, GW, and then I applied to state schools, so UVA, William & Mary, and George Mason University. I think those were my schools – and NYU. Yes, I wanted to be close to home, too. I mean, I remember I applied to the HOME program at Hopkins and I was really excited, and then I didn't get accepted. And then from then on I was like, “I'm not going get into Hopkins. It's fine. I'm just going forget that I applied there. Whatever.” So, like, Hopkins, which is, like, very – I was like, “It's fine. No!” I had my eyes set on Columbia. I remember I was so – I was like – I wanted to be in New York. I was like, “Oh, my God, Columbia University, it's so cool there,” whatever. Did all my applications, so my top schools were Columbia, Georgetown, and then Hopkins would have been up there, but I just, like, was not thinking about it.

Come March, I'm actually on a bus to Baltimore for Key Club. We would have conferences, like, every year, and it's like a big thing and, like, the school would pay for it and, like, we got to stay in the hotel downtown, everything.

AS: Nice.

LA: Yeah, I'm on the bus to Baltimore. I didn't tell anybody that the Hopkins decision was coming out. I was like, “I'm just not” – because I just accepted it. I was like, “I'm not going to get accepted and, like, I just don't want to make a fuss.” I open it up – like, I'm really quiet, opened it up, and I – I don't think I've ever been more surprised. I feel like if I was, like, thinking about it, I wouldn't have been, like, so, “Ahh!” you know? Like, I just, like – I just expected a no, and then it said congratulations and it had a little confetti. And I just remember I got up on the bus and I started screaming. And I was friends with the – like, a lot of the people that I was going to the conference with. I just started hugging everybody. I started hugging my teachers, like our – whatever, like the – not guidance, what – the people that – whatever, the teachers
that were on the trip. Yeah, yeah, I was hugging everyone, so excited. I just like couldn't believe it. Like, I was like, “What? What is going on?”

And then I checked the financial aid and I was like, “What?! No way!” Yeah, I remember I called my dad and he was like – he was like – he doesn't know Johns Hopkins. He was like, “All right, but the money.” Like that's all he said. He was like, “Okay, how much is it?” That's what he asked, because my dad was very much – he wanted me to go to community college, so he was really pushing on that. So any, like – anything about, like, private or public universities, he was like,” But what about the money?” right?

But – yeah, then I also got accepted into Georgetown, so my final decision came down to Hopkins and Georgetown. I came to SOHOP and I loved Hopkins. I found the people here really humble.¹ Just like I feel like people here are pretty down to earth, like, not flashy, like – just, like, kind. Like, the people that I met here were just, like, very kind, just like motivated people. And it just felt like – I just really enjoyed it and I loved the campus. I fell in love with the FFC food, you know? It was like – because I was like, “Oh, my God, buffet every day? Wow.” Different opinions now, but – yeah.

And then I went to the overnight at Georgetown and it just – like, it just felt like I didn't fit, but it wasn't just that, I just felt like Hopkins was a school that could offer so many resources and I saw that from my weekend, like my SOHOP weekend. Like, I saw – like, I got to hear about the funding that, like, Hopkins offers for students and, like, the programming and just like the connections.

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And I didn't see that at Georgetown, like, at all, like, I just felt like there weren't resources to support students as much, and I was like – I feel like this school, even if it isn't, like, the top caliber undergrad for my degree, it's still, like, very – it's still a very good program, and I just feel like I'm going get a lot more support here. And that I think is, like, the most important thing, because it doesn't matter if you have the name. If you can't get support from your faculty, from other students, from programs and resources, then I feel like – especially for me coming in as first-gen student. I feel like I really needed that and I wouldn't have gotten that at the other school.

¹ SOHP is the Spring Open House and Overnight Program, an annual occurrence at JHU.
Also the financial aid here – so much better. Like, I would have paid double going to Georgetown than if I had gone here. And I just – I loved Hopkins. Like, I really – like the only thing that was like keeping Georgetown in the running was their program and, like, I was in the School of Foreign Service – that's what I got accepted into and, like, the caliber of that. Like, that was only – those were the two – and I'm so glad I chose to came here.

But yeah, that's how I decided and, like, I just – I really loved it. I was so excited, and I couldn't believe it for weeks.

*AS:* Yeah. So obviously your dad's worried about money, which makes a lot of sense. Dads are usually worried about money. But did your parents, like, react in any other ways? Like, what was your mom's reaction when you told her you were admitted and that's where you wanted to go?

*LA:* So, like I had said, my mom was very hands-off for me in high school, so she, like, she didn't really expect – she just expected me to continue my education. So, for her going to community college, for me she would've been just as excited. Like, she has no – she doesn't care, she has no knowledge about it. She said, “I see how hard you work and, like, you're going – continuing your education.” So, everything that I was doing was coming out of my own, like – my own drive. Like, it was – and, like, my own, like – through – I'm just someone who really goes out there and tries to, like, get as much information and as much support as I can. And, like, through that I learned that, like, going to a private institution that's going fund me in this way is going support me like no other.

But my mom – like, I was like, “Oh, this is a big deal.” And she's like, “Oh, I'm excited for you!” And she saw the money and she was said, “Oh, my God, like, the fact that this is the price tag of the school and they're going support you” – so, just very excited, just like happy, like, happy that I'm happy. That's more so what her excitement came from.

My dad was just not convinced. He wanted me to continue my education and for him, he was like, “What's wrong with NOVA? Everybody in the community goes to NOVA.” Like, you can continue your education there. You live at home. You save money.” Whatever. For him, he thought that the financial aid that they were offering me was, a scam for the first year, and then the second year they would, like –

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2 NOVA stands for Northern Virginia – a region familiar to many folks in the area.
AS: Oh, that it wouldn't be there.

LA: Or that, like, they were going charge me everything after I finished college. So that's what he thought, and he wasn't understanding. Well, now he understands, but they – I mean, they were just like – they would've been happy with whatever I chose to do.

AS: Were they glad that you were going be relatively close to home?

LA: They were also glad about that, yes. They were happy about that. It was hard – I know it was like – even just, it's still – it's not far but, I don't get to see them very often, but –

AS: It's far enough, right?

LA: It's far enough, yeah, but, like – so that was a harder transition for me and also for them, too, but….

AS: Yeah. Do you want to talk about that, like what the move to, like, Baltimore was like for you and kind of the first semester that you spent here? What was that experience like?

LA: Yeah. I – it was so – there were so many adjustments which were so scary, and in a lot of ways I was uncomfortable, especially being away from my family, also adjusting to – even though the people here are wonderful, amazing, just adjusting to that here. Like I said, I have a lot of friends that didn't go to college. So it's just very different, just very different people, and adjusting to that was hard. But I had, like – it was definitely hard but I wasn't ever like, "I hate it here." I was always, like – I was learning something new every day. I was going – and that's a big thing I really wanted to do freshman year, is that I didn't get really involved with organizations. I just like – I just wanted to explore. I just wanted to take everything in. So, the fact that I was able to go to different events and, like, learn about different things and just, like – what else did I do freshman year? I just, like, got to – I just got to explore so much and meet so many different people from different backgrounds and, like – that are, like, interested in different things and pursuing different things. I don't know. That was just, like – that was just so incredible to me, and it still is to me today.

AS: Yeah.

LA: Yeah, so it was definitely not the easiest thing, especially my first year.
Did you meet any other, like, FLI first-gen students when you started or do any sort of, like, orientations and events with them?

Yeah, so I did preorientation with the CSC, the pre – not pre, the Hopkins Corps, and I met actually most of my friends through that, that I'm still friends with today, and a couple of us were FLI. 3

Who's FLI in that? Yeah, a couple of us were FLI. There was a good amount of us who were FLI. So, I met quite a few FLI students, and I also just, I feel like – there's a certain cultural element that – if I see the way someone acts a little bit maybe and, like, they're a person of color, I can maybe be like, "Are you FLI?" And they're like, "Yeah, I'm FLI." It's like, "Hey!" You know, so I feel like culturally there's kind of like a recognition that, like, even though maybe I wasn't in spaces with those people that through maybe going to events I was able to, like, connect with FLI students that was. I didn't have too much FLI connection, which I feel like would've been nice. I think there's a lot more programming set up for that now than there was my freshman year for FLI students to meet each other. I know there's Hop-In, which I just wasn't here over the summer, but otherwise I probably would've done that program and probably would've met a lot more FLI students.

Yeah. Did you, like – I guess, you know, I like to also, like, ask students about the – this might – we might've already answered this with a cultural thing. But, like, did you notice a lot of differences in socioeconomic status, like, with other students? Was that something that was, like, apparent to you when you got here? Because I'm always curious about, there's the Hopkins students that are here that clearly, like, can pay for their Hopkins education or, their parents can or whoever can, and then there's the students that are on financial aid. And I've seen, like, funny Tik-Tok videos where it's like people ask students around campus if they know where the financial aid office is, and then some of them have no idea. And so I just wonder if that was, like, part of your experience, to kind of see that and see those – feel those differences at all.

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3 CSC is the Center for Social Concern, you can learn more here: https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/socialconcern/. Hopkins Corps is a pre-orientation program within the CSC, an immersive, service-learning, and leadership development experience for First-Year JHU students, you can read more here: https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/socialconcern/programs/hopkinscorps/.
LA:Yeah. I feel like it's – compared to other schools, it's a lot less visible here. But, like, there is still some ways. I remember one thing I noticed freshman year was the Canada Goose coats.

AS:Oh, interesting.

LA:Yeah, yeah. So, there's this – I just noticed that everyone – like, not everyone, but a lot of people had these, like, big coats with this logo I had never seen before. And I remember, like, asking. I was like, "What are those coats?" And then someone was like, "Oh, that's Canada Goose." And I was like, "Oh, yeah, dude. That's, like, crazy money." And I was, like, "What?" And I remember looking it up and it was like $3,000.00 a coat and I was like, "Oh, my God!" So that was something, like – that was one way I kind of noticed it.

I think in some of my classes, especially, like, as an IS student, there aren't that many FLI IS students. I think in my year there's like, three or four, there's very few of us. But I just notice a lot of people knew a lot about world politics or, like, had experiences that they could draw their comments back to in class and they were freshman. And that's where I noticed the difference. And I was like, "Okay, well, these people have obviously been able to get internships or, like, have parents that are more familiar in the field and that have been able to provide them with knowledge about what we're learning about." And that made me feel like I was behind a bit, so I did – I struggled with a bit of – especially in my classes sometimes, with that, like, imposter syndrome.

But I realized by my sophomore year – because then I started picking up on the knowledge and, like, the – I don't know, the poli-sci talk, right? I started, like, understanding what that was by my sophomore year, junior year more so, and I started being able to use that language. And I started being able to draw on my experiences that I've been able to have through Hopkins and, like, internships and things like that. And you know, like, now I realize that it was just because I was not at the same place as them experience-wise and knowledge-wise doesn't mean that I wouldn't have been able to get there. We were just in two different spots. But I definitely struggled with that freshman year, and that's where, like, the finance – that came up for me. I was like, "Okay, they're able to do that because they probably come from a wealthier family."

AS:Mm-hmm, yeah, yeah, just that general exposure. So obviously you decided international studies, poli-sci maybe when you got
here. So could you tell me a little bit more about, like, what you – how you chose that and what you feel will be valuable about it kind of moving forward?

LA: Yeah, so I – now I'm international studies and sociology, and sociology is more of my focus. And I'm also – I'm a minor in Islamic studies and a minor in film studies so I've been taking a lot of film studies classes lately. But –

AS: That's a lot. [Laughter]

LA: Yeah, a little bit, but I'm – I really wanted that film studies minor. But I feel like for me coming in, I wasn't as pleased with IS as I thought I was going be.

[0:40:00]

I thought it was going be a lot more people-focused. And I remember thinking – I thought that everyone that went into poli-sci or IS wanted to help people. That was, like, my – kind of like it was – I just – I didn't understand what the field was, right? Like, I didn't understand anything about academia at all. I was like, "Oh, yeah, all these people, they want to go in and they want to go work at nonprofits or, like, go work for the UN and, like, that's what the vibe here." But you know a lot of people have different reasons for liking politics, right? Like, some people just like the game of politics or, like, learning about – you know, so it's like – it's very different and I realized that very early on, because I didn't meet a lot of people that were studying it, because, for me I saw, like, yeah, I've experienced a lot. I've seen a lot of my friends or my peers or my community experience a lot of hardship because of global politics and our global system and the way that that trickles down into the everyday life. And that wasn't the mindset that a lot of people had, especially coming in, I think. Maybe some people have developed it because they've learned about it through class.

Yeah, so I just felt that disconnection there. And then I took “Issues in International Development” and I met a lot more people in that class that had a more similar mindset or, like, that were studying – because sociology is a lot more people-focused whereas, like, poli-sci and, like – I feel like a lot of IS classes are just like broad-range, institutional, nation-state focused, and I just really loved the people-centered focus. And I thought that's what IS was going be, but I found that through sociology.
And I just – I really – just even the questions that my sociology professor asked or, like, considered in our discussions compared to my IS classes, like, they were people-centered. Like, our first question of the class, I remember, was like – oh, it was "What is happiness?" Or no, not what is happiness, "What is" – something along the lines of, like, “what makes a good life,” right? And, like, people were saying, like, a good salary, a place to live, and I remember I had said “happiness.” And she was just very responsive to that. You know, so just being able to, like, consider the more human sides of, like, study and academia, I really liked that.

So I struggled a little – I didn't declare sociology then. I just was nervous about career prospects, just like – especially during COVID. Just, like, I was worried about money a lot. I started to worry a lot about, like, my future with money. So I just kind of like – I put it off, and then I declared officially end of my sophomore year, I think, or beginning of my junior year.

**AS:** Yeah, it's hard – that is always the question, right? What are you going do with that or, like, what's your plan for your degree? So I think it's – when you're at the beginning of the program, it's a little harder to kind of see the possibilities. Are there any professors or classes that you've found particularly, like, memorable or useful in your experience at Hopkins?

**LA:** Yeah. I've taken a lot of questions with Homayra Ziad. She's actually, like, one of – I would say she is the faculty member that I'm closest to at Hopkins. She just has been a wonderful mentor for me. She's the Director of the Islamic Studies Department is her title and she's a lecturer here, but all of her students love her. She loves to connect with people individually and just, like, puts a lot of care into the material that she brings to the class. She's very innovative with the way – like her pedagogy and she almost always has a community-based learning class. So at Hopkins – are you familiar with the community-based learning classes? Or?

**AS:** Yeah, you can explain it for the record.

**LA:** Okay. Yeah, but – so basically, like, those classes are in partnership with, like, a community organization or they have, like, a community focus. So, there's a lot more, like – there's a lot more incorporation of, like, field trips or maybe, for example, with working with a Baltimore or local organization directly and, like, focusing the curriculum of that class to fit within that. And she's just very big on doing that and connecting Hopkins students to
Baltimore and to the work that's being done here, both, like, community organizing work, political work, advocacy work, you know, things of that lens. She's just incredible.

I have a couple more, I feel like. Ryan Calder, he's my advisor. He's also very caring and just, like, likes to connect with students as well and just has, like, really helped me as a writer. And then I would also say, like, the Center for Student Success, like Brent Fujioka and the folks out there, just have really been, like, a source of support for me.

[0:45:00]

AS: Did you – for the community-based learning classes, like, do you remember any of the, like, organizations that y'all worked with? Was it based – I was just kind of curious if it was based in the curriculum with Islamic studies. So were they, like, Islamic groups, like community groups, or was it something different? I mean, I don't know if the class was that explicit.

LA: So, one of them was with a Muslim organization based out of DC called “Justice for Muslims Collective.” And we did oral histories of Muslims and, like, Muslim organizers in the DMV area and their lives before and after 9/11 and, like, especially their organizing work and how that changed. So we worked directly with that organization. In the other community-based learning class I took with her, we were working – our plan – because of COVID, we didn't get to do it. Our plan was to work with Morgan State students that were also taking an Islamic studies course, I believe. And we were going work with, like, the National Library something…. I'm forgetting exactly what the project was going be, but we had met with Morgan State students and that was -that was really cool. And I feel like I wish I really could've done that, like continued with that, because I've never connected with another university in Baltimore like I did, like, in those first moments before COVID hit..

AS: Yeah, and the HBCU connection would have been really worthwhile. Awesome. So what was your living situation like while you were at Hopkins? Were you doing dorm life, apartment life? What was that scenario for you?

LA: Yeah, so I did dorm life my first year, and then when I came back spring 2021, I lived off campus with a roommate, and we live in the same place. We still live together to this day, yeah.
AS: Was that the – I guess was the experience living off campus a lot different than being on campus? Like, are you in a neighboring community? What was that like for you?

LA: Yeah, we both really wanted to be close to campus, so we live at the Marylander, which is on St. Paul Street, like North St. Paul Street, right near University Parkway. But I feel like the changes that I had – like, that was, like, really starting to live – I really felt like I was starting to live on my own. I learned to cook a lot more dishes, like home dishes when I moved. I just became, like, more aware of nutrition, I feel like, especially with FFC. It's just like a huge buffet and a bunch of stuff and, like, you don't know who's preparing it or how food is being prepared but, like – especially with COVID, like, I wasn't going out or eating out. I was cooking at home.

And I just, like, started realizing the value of, like – I feel like I started realizing the value of budgeting more, too, at that point just because, a lot of my living expenses were already, like, covered within my scholarship at Hopkins, right? So, like, my sophomore year, I started getting the stipend back, my refund from Hopkins so that I could afford for my living expenses and that was up to my discretion. So I feel like that was one thing that changed.

Also, like, I guess like the social aspect changed a bit, which was hard a little bit. But, my roommate and I are – like, she's one of my best friends in the world, so that just – she's always been a great support and, like, home is home and it feels great being there, so yeah.

AS: That's awesome. So I know that you're a pretty active personally obviously, and I'm kind of curious about, like, activities or groups, organizations that you joined when you were at Hopkins. I know there's, like, probably different leadership roles that you took on, so would you like to talk about that for a little while?

LA: Yeah. I feel like I didn't get to do as much as I wish I could've while I was here. I feel like I've been involved with things, but I haven't really – I wasn't able to take as much leadership as I wish I could have here. I think a part of that was because, I have, like – in the semesters that I've been at Hopkins, I still have been really involved with, like, the Mutual Aid work that I was doing back home, and I was still doing that really heavily virtually, so that was a big part of it. But I also – COVID, the fact that, like, COVID, like – I wasn't involved with any organizations really at Hopkins for, like, a good year. So that really put a damper in a things.
But freshman year I was a part of the Freshman Fellows, which was hosted at the Sheridan Libraries. There's four different fellows.

[0:50:00]

You're able to do archival research for a full year on anything that they desire. So that was just a really – that was a really, really great experience for me, and I researched the history of activism at Hopkins and had found one of the first Black students that attended Hopkins who was the only undergrad at the time that was involved in racial justice organizing. And I got to meet him and do an interview – oral interview with him actually right before – I think the week before we got sent home for COVID. So my plan was to make that a larger project, but that's where it ended up – it just ended up being on that one person, his name was Donald Perry. There's actually an oral history of him as well in the Hopkins Archive.

But freshman year I was also involved with – what was I involved with freshman year? Sorry, I have to take a moment.

AS: I think the BSU?

LA: The BSU?

AS: Yeah. The – were you a part of the BSU or part of – I know you also helped with – what was that lecture series in Shriver Hall where you had an environmental activist come?

LA: No, no. Ah, I remember now. I was involved with the Hopkins Votes.

AS: Oh, okay. Yeah.

LA: I was involved with Hopkins Votes. So, I was doing a lot of, like, trying to get people registered, especially ahead of 2020, just getting people a little bit more involved, especially on the local end. I was doing a lot of tabling. That was a big thing.

I do remember another thing. I was involved with “United We Dream,” which is not an organization out of Hopkins, but it's a national organization that fights for rights for undocumented people. And that's just something that means a lot to me, especially 'cause I have a lot of close friends that are undocumented, have family that are undocumented, like I mentioned earlier. But I was
doing some organizing work on campus for that, so the big thing – so I was just like, first off, just trying to get people on campus signed up with United We Dream and tapped into their, like, petitions and their organizing work. And the big thing that I helped organize was a Hopkins cohort of people going to the, like – being, like, the Hopkins branch of United We Dream on campus and, like, going to support the national protests in DC. So, there was about 20 of us, and I coordinated rides and Jimmies and, like, I helped, like, oversee the – so we had, like, different waves of people going at different times, so I helped coordinate leaders at each time. So that was a big thing that I worked on.

And then I worked with the Office of Multicultural Affairs for a little bit on just, – not, like, direct – it was informally. It was just, like, about spaces for undocumented folks on campus and resources. And I was working on that once COVID hit, which then, like, stifled a lot.

I was also involved with the Muslim Student Organization but just attending events and getting to know people. Yeah, nothing too – I can't remember anything else right now, but I think that was all at the time. I just wanted to be very chill, and I attended a lot of meetings of, like, different things. I just wanted to get to know the campus and get to know people.

Oh! I was part of the Baltimore Collegetown Network, which they hosted a class here at Hopkins, and it was a class from students all across Baltimore. So, it was really awesome. There was only, like, three Hopkins students in the class. I was one of the youngest people in the class. And we got to learn a lot about Baltimore, and part of our – so it was, like, a year-long project and the class was the first semester, and then for the second semester we worked on a community project, and we – my group was working on workforce development. So that's what I was, like, supporting with. So that was, like, a big part of the work that I was doing freshman year, too, and that was, like – that was more of a commitment as well. And I just got to learn so much through that, yeah. That's all I can remember right now. I feel like I was just involved with things, but I wasn't in leadership at that point. I was just, like, very chill, getting to know the campus, getting to know people.

AS: Yeah. I feel like it's – you put your head to the ground, like this idea of just, like, kind of always knowing what's going on a little bit, you know, from different communities and different types of people. It's a good way to kind of like have a college experience
where you know what's going on for everybody as opposed to just
your one little group.

LA: Yeah, yeah.

AS: So, did you do any work while you were here, like internships or
work any – do any jobs in between semesters? Do you want to talk
about those?

LA: Yeah, so I did an internship the past two summers.

Yeah, so, my sophomore year I was a TA, so I got paid for that.
But I think that was the only semester-long work that I did. My
parents are very big, like, even growing up – like, I wanted to
work. They're very big on not working when I'm going to school
and they're like, "We don't care. Like, if you need extra money,
like, we will give it to you. Like, don't work. You can work when
you graduate." So, they were very big on, like – they just, like, did
not want me to have to worry. They wanted me to be able to
explore while I was here.

So I didn't take too many, like, jobs during the – like, I think that
was one of the two jobs that I took over the semester and it was
very chill. Right now I'm – I write notes for students and I have,
like, three classes, like, for the SDS. I don't know, the –

AS: The Student Disability Services or something?

LA: Yeah, so I'm like a notetaker for those for some classes. But for
internships, I did – my sophomore year I did an unpaid internship
with Maryland PIRG, and it was all virtual. And – did I get
funding for that to be able to do that or did I get credit? I don't
remember.

AS: What is Maryland PIRG?

LA: It is the Public Interest Research Group. So they do different, like,
advocacy, research and, like statewide Maryland issues. When I
was doing work with them, a lot of what I was participating in was
the – motivated or, like, doing work around the passing of the
Student Voter Empowerment Act – the Student and Military Voter
Empowerment Act. So I was doing actually, like, some virtual
organizing on campus, well, not on campus but at the school for
that. And that was my first internship, yeah. I think I might've
gotten funding to be able to do that. I don't remember. Or, like, I got funding over the summer, something like that.

But then the last two internships, they were over the summer. I worked at Democracy International through the DEI Collective, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Collective that was started here at Hopkins, I think two years ago to help students of color and FLI students to help them get internships. So it's an international development organization focused on democracy and they were based out of Bethesda. That was a really enriching experience. I got to learn more about the development world, and I felt like I kind of learned that I didn't know – I didn't really think I wanted to go into it from that. But the people I worked with were really wonderful and, like, they paid us for our work. And also I got funding to do, like, mutual aid work that summer as well on the side, which was really, really amazing.

And then last year I worked at Wide Angle Youth Media which is based here in Baltimore. It's actually right on North Howard Street, about a 20-minute walk from campus south. And I did that through the Community Impact Internship program, which is hosted at the Center for Student Concerns here at Hopkins, which was a really, really great experience. I got to know, like, my peers a bit better. There's a lot of FLI students that do the program, so just got to get to know more FLI kids at Hopkins, which was really wonderful.

AS: Cool. I'm going ahead and stop this for a second since we're right about an hour. [Pause in audio]

Okay, so we just finished talking about sort of internships and those experiences. Obviously, like, some of that might've happened during summer or breaks, but were there any things that you did I guess during summer or break that you want to mention? I know you also had the opportunity to do a semester abroad, so maybe if you want to elaborate a little bit more on that.

LA: Yeah, so my breaks, like, I guess – like, intersession, you mean?

AS: Yeah, intersession, yeah, if you took classes or, I don't know, how you kind of used that time.

LA: Yeah. For intersession I took a class my freshman year. My sophomore year I took two classes over intersession. And then this year I took one class. So just, like, I really – I liked the intersession classes, they're just, like, very chill, you get to learn about something really niche. I learned about my first year – I really love
art, so I took a modern art class and we got to visit different Baltimore museums. It was part of the B'More program I think that they have for freshman.

AS:
Fun!

LA:
I think that's what it's called. And then my sophomore year I took a class, and – one of the professors – both of them were really great. One of them, she's one of the best professors – I had her for a week; I would say she's one of the best professors I've ever had. Like, and you can just tell – I could just tell from – like, all of us could tell from that first week. Unfortunately she's no longer at Hopkins. She's at Michigan. But her name was Ashley Cureton – really incredible, really kind. And the insurrection actually happened during our class, and just the way that she handled that was incredible.

[1:00:00]

The other class I took was on Muslim mental health, which was really, really interesting. And the professor was a – I believe she's a PhD candidate at the School of Public Health, or maybe by now she's already gotten her PhD. But the class that I just took was Cryptography Through the Ages. The professors were both really nice, just very chill, a virtual class. So I've only taken one intersession class in person.

And then spring breaks have just been very – spring breaks and winter breaks have just been very chill. My freshman year I got the chance – I got funding to be able to shadow an international organization in Jordan for a week, which was a really, really cool experience, especially during that time I thought I was going go into the international world. So we got to, like, go shadow the work that they do with Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

My freshman year I was supposed to go on the Center for Student Social Concerns alternative spring break. The past two years have just been very chill, just hung out with friends during my breaks, just like taking the time to rest. And then I studied abroad this past semester, fall of 2022. I studied abroad in Amsterdam in the Netherlands, yeah.

AS:
So, what was the program there like? Were you full time taking classes? Were you able to travel a little bit? What was it like to be in Amsterdam?
LA: Yeah, so if it was my choice, I wouldn't have taken full-time classes. I did end up taking full-time classes. But I was very much, just living. My goal going there – my focus was not school. I did make sure that I put effort into school, but I wanted to go experience the Netherlands and I wanted to go and just like – I wanted to travel. I'd never gotten the opportunity to travel before, like, beyond the US or my only travel growing up was going to Morocco and seeing family, but it was to see family, not to actually, like, see the world. So, I got to travel a lot actually, which is really, really cool. I'd saved up a lot of money, so, like, the past couple years I'd been saving so that I would be able to, like, go abroad and, like, really just, like, live and, that's another thing that comes back to I feel like how much Hopkins has been able to provide me. I got, like, full – like, housing, everything covered, and then I got a stipend, like a generous stipend. It was also because of my financial aid, right, but, like, the stipend that usually would be going towards paying my rent I got to use as, like, my living expenses, which was just eased so much for me and, like, eased so much worry that I had had going into it. So I was able to travel. I was able to use my savings and, like, still have a little bit left over for this semester just for living expenses, which was really nice. Yeah.

AS: So, where all did you go?

LA: I went to – so I really wanted to go to Switzerland. I wanted to go hiking. I didn't care about anything – I just wanted to go hiking through the nature! So, I, like, didn't really know people very well. I met a couple of – I had a couple of friends that I got really close with, but none of them really were into hiking or really wanted to go. So, I was like, "Okay, I'll just tap into my program and see if anybody wants to go." And I ended up coordinating with these two other girls who I became good friends with. And we planned our trip and we went to Switzerland. We ended up not hiking in Switzerland. We hiked in France because it was cheaper and also still beautiful. So we went to Chamonix. It was really, really cool. And one of the girls knew someone who lived in a town nearby so we got to stay with her and had, like, a really French experience and, like, her parents, it was kind of like we were, like, hosted. It was really, really nice.

And then I realized – like, at first, I thought I was going travel with friends a lot. But I realized a lot of people – especially the friends that I made – again, like, I was friends with people – there were a
lot of people who were very, very, very, very wealthy in the program. Like, I knew a billionaire in the program.

*AS:* Wow.

*LA:* Like, that is – here it's not obvious, this I think, goes to, like, speak to what I was saying earlier, that other schools, the wealth disparity is much more obvious than it is here. Here I know people who are apparently very wealthy here, but if you look at them, you wouldn't think.

[1:05:00]

Or, like, if you – just the way that they act, you wouldn't think that they are, you know, like, just very humble. Like, I know someone who's very wealthy who dresses in very similar clothing all the time, like, just very humble, down to earth.

Like, there, it was the complete opposite. It was like a lot of people in my program were very wealthy. A lot of them were traveling every weekend, like, ate out all the time. So it was, like, very obvious. So for me, my friends that I made didn't really want to travel too much, and they were like – they were saving their money more towards Amsterdam experiences, just because I had budgeted differently. So I didn't really, like, have close friends to travel with, and at first I was like, "Ah, I need people to travel with." But then I was like, "I'll just go on solo trips."

So, I went to Ireland. It was my first solo trip ever. I went to Dublin and then I went to Galway – really, really cool. Yeah, I just, like – just I read, like, Sally Rooney, who's an Irish author and, like, I just felt so safe there and just so welcomed and they were so nice.

And then I was going do a solo trip to Italy, but I ended up convincing my mom to come and meet me. So we met in Milan, which was, like, the *craziest* experience ever. And we met outside the train station. She's like, "I can't believe I'm meeting my daughter at – who?" – she just, like – again, like, we didn't travel growing up, you know? Like, it wasn't in the budget, right, like, a lot, for a big chunk of our life. Getting to Morocco was already hard enough. Like, thankfully, like, now, my parents – you know what I'm saying? Like, we're not – we used to be, like, very low-income, about maybe, like, seven to ten years ago. You know, now my dad – it's not as much. So it's like we're not struggling as much as we were, right?
But you know, like for her, it was just a very surreal moment. Like, I am with my daughter in Milan, in Italy right now. And, like, it was so great, because I didn't expect her to come. I just threw it out there 'cause she's a very humble woman. My mom doesn't really like material things very much, she just likes experiences and nature and just, like, being in her home and reading and things. But when I told her I was going go – sorry – I just want to talk about this for a second.

AS: I love it.

LA: When I told her, I was like, "Yeah, I booked a ticket to Italy." And she was like, "Oh, you should really to go that Lake Como. Like, I saw videos on YouTube about that That looks really beautiful." And I was like, "Yeah, Mama, I've already – like, I'm planning to go. I'm just, like, looking for, like" – I already had it planned out, dah, dah, dah. And I was like, "You and Lena should come," my sister, my younger sister. And she was like, "What? Crazy." And I looked up tickets and they were really cheap, because it was, like – I went in, like, October, so the weather wasn't, like, ideal at that time, so the tickets were really cheap. And she had a place to stay – we organized it where she came back to Amsterdam with me.

AS: Oh, cool.

LA: She had a place to stay, right? Funny enough, the billionaire that I did know was my roommate, but because she was a billionaire she was able to find her own place. So, like, thankfully with, like – otherwise if that wasn't the case, my mother wouldn't have been able to stay with me, right, because I would've had a roommate. But – yeah, so we got to do that. She came back with me to Amsterdam. Her sister lives in Belgium. A lot of Moroccan people, they, like, live in Europe. Sorry, I ranted a bit about that, it just made me so excited. But yeah, I went to Italy and then went to Belgium. That was my first time in Belgium. I got to see my aunt. My grandma was in town. I got to see my uncle; it was very nice. And then I went to – I have a cousin who lives in the south of France. I went to the south of France. And then I went to Barcelona, and I think that was it. Yeah – no, wait, yep, that was it. Yeah – sorry, that was a bit long.

AS: No, I love it. I think it's really – it brings you a little full circle to have that experience with your mom, too. I think that's really – it was probably really special for her.
LA: Yeah.

AS: So that touches a little bit on, like, your support system while you were at Hopkins, but I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about, like, your relationship with your family in your time here. Like, did you guys stay super close? And then also, like, how did you – what kind of support system did you develop here, like, other than your family, I guess, you know, a network of friends, if you want to kind of elaborate on that?

LA: Yeah. So, I'm still very, very close to my family. Like, my mom, my sister, and my dad, they mean the world to me. I think in some ways, those relationships got closer. I think part of that is because I've grown up more and I understand my parents a lot more than I used to. But they're always, like, a support for me, like in my personal – I'm very open. My mom and I, we have some differing views on the world at times and, like, the ways that I live my life, you know? But she's always been, like, very supportive, and I just, like, can openly talk with her about anything that I'm struggling with, same with my sister. So yeah, just very close there, they've always been a support for me.

[1:10:00]

And then just like at school, I have, like, really, really amazing close friends that I've had consistently. Like, I just, like, genuinely have – like, was a big thing for me, too, is, like, coming in to freshman year, I noticed that a lot of people – like, of course it's a big transition, so people, they just were, like, trying to find people and, like, just stick together with them. So for me, I, like, really just didn't want that. I wanted to develop, like, genuine friendships with people. So even though I'd met a lot of my friends initially, I had taken a bit of a step back when I started school because I was like, "I want to be able to meet all the people and just, let me see who I really want to be friends with and who I really connect with genuinely and, like, who I think is, like, a person that I admire and, like" – and I ended up coming back to those people. They were just wonderful people. And I think it also speaks to, like, the fact that they wanted to spend their first week before coming to Hopkins doing service work, was also, like, a part that spoke to that. But yeah, just had, like, a really strong – I feel like I can trust them and rely on them.
I've had a boyfriend for the last two and a half years and he's the most wonderful human ever. He's a big support for me, too. So I met him my sophomore year through one of my friends. Yeah, I just feel friend-wise very supported.

Network-wise, like, the Center for Student Success has been, like, a really big support for me. There were some folks at the Office of Multicultural Affairs, especially my freshman year, that were a big support. Like Rezwana she doesn't work here anymore, but she was wonderful. Also, like, faculty, Dr. Ziad, like, a huge support, especially, like, as a Muslim woman in, like, an academic space. She just has been able to provide so much insight for me, both personally and in my professional path as well. Yeah, I just feel – I've been able to connect with the right people so, like, even if I have run into any issues with a student or a professor or, like, with anything in my personal life, I've had people that I can rely on.

AS: Yeah, you've been able to navigate those situations. So, I guess we talked about it, like, financially, and I think you did mention some of the programs, but I just wanted to see if there was anything else you wanted to add about, like, feeling supported as a first gen student here at Hopkins. I know that's, like, just something – I'm just curious. It sounds to me, from your reflections, that you did feel supported, but I don't know if there's anything else that you would add to that.

LA: I'm a part of the Kessler Scholars program here, and that started my sophomore year, and – excuse me. So it's run out of the Center for Student Success, and that's a big part of how supported I've been able to feel, not just, like, personal support but also financially. So part of being a Kessler Scholar, you get a stipend to pursue a, like, summer internship every year, and now I believe it's up to $5,000.00, which is – that can change so much for a person. It just changed so much for me and it, like, really allowed me – I was able to continue doing – I was able to do a lot more organizing work over my summers, like, with Mutual Aid because of that funding. So that was a big part of it, I would say.

AS: Yeah.

LA: The financial support is so important, so, so important. And I'm just really thankful that I was able to be a part of the program, I still am.
AS: Yeah. [Clears throat] Excuse me. I didn't ask you explicitly, but could you explain the, like, Mutual Aid work that you do? Like, what does that mean?

LA: Yeah, so the organization is called Prince William County Mutual Aid, and we support people – we do organizing work on youth detention most specifically and policing, but a big focus of our work is support in the community, like support services, so like with food, groceries, mutual Aid requests for, like, formerly incarcerated folks or just, like, people in the community that can't get resources, like, through the government or at local feed pantries that just need that extra bolster of support. We've also been able to provide, like, financial support for folks, like being able to crowdfund for, like, medical bills, rent, utilities.

AS: Cool.

LA: Yeah, yeah. I haven't given the Mutual Aid description spiel in a long time, so that's not the most refined. But that's a gist of the work that we've done.

[1:15:00]

AS: Yeah. I mean, I think it's, like, kind of filling the gaps, right? So, like, filling in for, like, things that the government or, like, other services and things – like healthcare and things that are, like, lacking, right? I guess, you know, kind of just – filling – plugging in the holes, filling in the gaps for people who need help, so that makes a lot of sense.

LA: And especially with – I had mentioned we have a lot of undocumented folks in our county. So of course, like, everyone who is documented in the US got a stipend but they did not, so that was a big gap that we were trying to support with –

AS: For COVID you mean?

LA: For COVID, yeah, the COVID stipend. Yeah, so those folks didn't get support from the government, so that's a huge community that we serve. And we have about, like, half of our organizers speak Spanish, so being able to, like – and a lot of the people we supported were sole Spanish speakers. And at the time my Spanish was much better, not as much anymore because I haven't been doing that. I haven't done that work directly in, like, a year, but….
AS: Yeah, very cool. So – let's see. I know there are a couple of, like, historic moments that happened while you were here, and I think if I'm remembering correctly you were also here during the Garland sit-in, maybe? No?

LA: Uh-uh.

AS: Ah, it was the year before you started. So are there any, like, historical moments or things, like, that happened in Baltimore while you were here that you want to mention or talk about?

LA: I was home at the time, but while I was a student at Hopkins, the 2020 election, that was a huge stress. Like, I remember not even – I remember feeling like I couldn't even do work during – yeah, that was huge. And I feel like there had been so much buildup up until it. And like I had said, my freshman year I was doing a lot of, like, voting work, getting people registered. You know, and that was, like, in part – of course it's something that I believe, that everyone should vote even if they don't vote – everyone should, like, turn in a ballot, even if they say, "I'm not voting for anyone." And that was, like, of course motivated by the 2020 election but also by, like, the fact that I think, like, people should be voting in all elections, in, like, local elections. So, I feel like it's ground zero. Like, it's not – you know, there's much more we can do as well, but yeah.

What else has happened while I've been at Hopkins? Brandon Scott became mayor while I was here, and I know that, like, that was a really huge election and there was a lot of interesting stuff going on with the mayoral race with certain candidates. And I know a lot of people in the community, because I think he's the youngest mayor of Baltimore ever, or maybe, like, the youngest mayor –

AS: Generally.

LA: Generally, or something, yeah. And a lot of people had a lot of hope with him. And I know that there has been some issues, especially with the private police force where, like, he hasn't been 100 percent on. But I know he's helped a lot of people in a lot of ways.

AS: Yeah, do you want to take a minute to talk about the private police or anything – like, your reflections on that process here at Hopkins?
LA: Yeah. I've been, like, tapped in to what's going on. I've helped out with some organizing against the private police force. I'm not, like – not very, very much – yeah, I think a lot of people – because there's moments in organizing where there's, like, the high moments and the lower moments, and I think we're just – the past couple years have been, like, the lower moments.

AS: Yeah.

LA: Yeah, I can't speak too, too much to it just because I haven't, like – I was never involved with organizing as, like, a leader within it. I was more of a participant and, like, doing more collaboration work than anything.

AS: Yeah, and it has been paused technically for most of the pandemic, so you know – but now it's moving forward. So that makes sense. There wasn't a whole lot of movement while you were here as a student. So is there anything that you want to add about, like, living in Baltimore, you know, what that experience is like for you or – I don't know – what it's been like to live in the city?

LA: I'm going miss it.

AS: Yeah?

LA: I'm going miss it. Especially during COVID –

[1:20:00]

Because there wasn't really anything else to do, I got to explore the city a lot more. So my roommate and I and, like, the few friends that we had on campus, we'd rent Zipcars and just, like, go to different neighborhoods all the time. My favorite neighborhood in Baltimore is Highlandtown. I love Highlandtown so much, and I just, like, love the Patterson Park area. So we got to go down there quite a bit and just walk around, and even though we weren't doing anything specifically, like, we got to walk around and there was a bakery that was down there that we loved and we got baked goods there, yeah.

I mean, I love Baltimore. I think it's just, like, such a dynamic city. Like, I saw a kid a couple weeks ago, like, 9:00 p.m. at night riding his bike and it didn't have a front wheel.

AS: But he’s standing it up? Yeah.
LA: Standing it up! Like, you're incredible, my gosh. You know, just like people make it work here and, like, it's just a really beautiful city, and I'm glad I've gotten to know it. I know a lot of the neighborhoods, I've been, like, tangentially, like, connected in some way, shape, or form with a couple of organizations in the city. I've been tapped in, like, not directly into the politics, but like, I'm tapped into what's going on locally. Yeah, I can't think of anything else right now.

AS: Are you – so what – I guess it sounds like you're not staying in Baltimore, but what are your plans for the future? What are you doing after Hopkins?

LA: Yeah. So, I've not been officially accepted yet, but I got accepted into the Coro Fellowship for Public Affairs and I'm going be at the New York City branch.

AS: Okay, fantastic.

LA: Yeah, so I'll be doing that for the next – well, starting in September – nine months.

AS: Okay, very cool. So you'll get to move to New York after all, I guess.

LA: Yeah.

AS: Awesome. So, do you have, like, a plan after that or are you kind of going see how that goes and then kind of make a decision I guess, like, job applying, or do you know what type of job you want?

LA: Yeah, I don't know. I don't know yet completely, I have some ideas. I would like to come back to school. I really – I love to learn, and I'm really going miss the school so much, so – ugh, so much, just being in the classroom, just being, like, around knowledge, like the lectures that are going on, the different speaker events. Like, I just – that's something I'm going miss a lot. So I will definitely come back to school, whether it be for a Master's, or if it's in the plan, a PhD, yeah.

AS: I could easily see you doing that. [Laughter]
LA: Oh, no, we'll see. We'll see what works. But I am considering more of a PhD now, just because I just – I love the university space. Yeah.

AS: Yeah, it might help you get back here faster.

LA: Yeah.

AS: So, I guess there's just a couple of last questions for you, and one I think is kind of implicit in your answers. But would you recommend Hopkins to other first gens and is there any, like, advice that you would give to them if they choose this path?

LA: Yeah, I would. I think especially from experiences from other people that I've heard who are first gen at other universities, here you will find your people. And even if they don't come from the same socioeconomic background as you, like, there are, like – a lot of my friends, like – not a lot. I would say half of my friends do not come from the same socioeconomic background from me, but they are, like – they are down with what I believe in, like, support me, love me, we share, like, very, very similar – like, especially core values. We share the same core values. And you'll find, like, people who just, like, want to – even especially as someone who comes from the humanities and the social sciences, like, there's wonderful, wonderful people here, and there's just so much support that's available, a lot of money, so much money in this school, whether it's through Center for Student Success, whether it's through the Life Design Lab, the research grants. There's money here. So the support goes beyond personal support, there's also financial support, so much of it.

Yeah, I would recommend it. I'd recommend it. I think this school, like, genuinely changed my life. There are so many issues with Hopkins, right? It's unfathomable. I was able to go, like, spend a semester abroad, like, traveling the world and, like, learning through experience. Like, but yeah, I wouldn't have been able to do that if it wasn't for Hopkins.

[1:25:00]

And, I don't – I feel like slightly conflicted because I know this school has, like, inflicted a lot of harm upon a lot of people and, like, I'm very privileged to be able to say that Hopkins has benefited me, right? Like – but yeah, I just see it – it's, like, opened up so much for me, yeah, and it's going continue opening doors for me, too.
AS: Yeah, I think it's – you said it very eloquently. I think it's hard to have that dichotomy of harm that it has caused for others, but then, you know, the opportunities that you've been awarded just because of getting into the programs that you have. But it's also about your hard work, right? So is there anything else that you want to, like, reflect on about your time at Hopkins, any sort of like closing thoughts to summarize your time here, just like reflections that you have?

LA: I'm really glad I got to explore, and I'm still doing that. I'm, like, acting in, like, a play in two weeks, like, just very, like – I've just been able to, like, grow and push myself. And I hope to be able to continue to do that. That's my goal, to be able to continue to push myself and challenge myself and give myself new experiences all the time throughout my life. But Hopkins has been just, like, so fundamental in allowing me to grow and, like, become the person that I am today.

AS: Awesome. Well, I think that's a great point for us to end, and I just want to thank you again for doing this interview and kind of reflecting on your time here. I really appreciate it and feel like I've learned a lot from you, so thank you.

LA: Thank you, Allison.

AS: Yep.

[End of Audio]