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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
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“TK”

Interviewed by Annie Tang

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Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

Interviewee: "TK"

Interviewer: Annie Tang (AT)

Date: February 19, 2018

AT: Hello, this is Annie Tang, interviewing "TK," on February 19, 2018, at Eisenhower Library, for the First-Generation College Students Oral History Project. Hi, TK.

TK: Hi. [Laughter]

AT: Where were you born? And tell me about your family.

TK: I was born in Bellingham, near Seattle, in Washington State, except, that was what I was told, because I have no memories at all of there. My mom used to say that there was a moose outside when I was born, and that it was eating an apple from a tree. But that's really weird, because it's winter, so I don't know how you would just have a random apple outside. But that's what she told me when I was younger. I was born there, in Washington, but within a few years, my family took us back to Taiwan, so I grew up in Taiwan. I think this is the reverse of how most people are, where they usually grow up abroad and then come back to the States, but for me, I was born in the States, and then we went abroad to live. My family, my immediate family is just the four of us: me, my older sister, my mom, and my dad. I'm the only who's born in the States, but my older sister is three years older than me.

My mom and dad, they're 50-something; my dad's basically 60, now, I think – they're four years apart. And so, they're getting old, we're also getting old –

AT: You're getting old?

TK: I'm getting old [laughs] – at least, that's how I feel. But I mostly just live with my immediate family, not with my grandparents, although, like the Asian tradition, I visit them every year around New Year's. So, actually, right now, I should be home with my family, but because my near family lived on the other side of the

island as everyone else, so we were kind of like a secluded little unit.

AT: Where are your grandparents, right now?

TK: So, I only have one surviving grandparent, now, on my paternal side, my grandma, and she's in Taipei, so it's the northside of Taiwan.

AT: You said you usually visit your family for Lunar New Year? What do you do, during the holiday?

TK: I believe the tradition is that the evening, so, the eve before New Year's, everyone is supposed to kind of gather up and have hotpot food, and really just spend time together as a family. For me, I always enjoy getting money, because they have the tradition of handing out the red envelopes, if you ask for money. And so, for me, that was my only source of income, so, for me, I always [laughs] look forward to New Year's for that.

AT: Do you call it li xi?

TK: We call it hong bao.

AT: Hong bao? Ah, me, too – Cantonese. Great.

TK: We do that and – although, because I only go once a year, so I recognize faces, but I don't really know any names. Although, I know I'm the youngest in my generation, so all my cousins are older than me. And, actually, since I was a little kid, I was already an aunt with all these little kids in the family; it's like every year one more pops out of nowhere. [Laughs] So, it's quite interesting.

AT: Big family, now.

TK: Yes, I only see pictures now, or when my mom tries to Facetime or Skype me in, but it's big and it's more faces I don't recognize.

AT: Do you miss them, right now?

TK: Maybe it's because I only see them once a year, and whenever I go, I usually interact with the little kids, so, I don't know, I never – I don't miss them. But I don't know if this should be – this is probably a bad thing, I don't know, but –

AT: No, no, they're your extended family that you don't see a lot. I guess I also meant your immediate family, too – what about your immediate family?

TK: I definitely miss them a lot, even though my dad – so, my dad, since I was a kid, he would always be outside working, so he only came home on the weekends. I was already used to that. Sometimes we would message each other, that kind of stuff. But I definitely miss my mom a lot, yeah.

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My mom was a stay-at-home mom, she really just spent her whole time taking care of me and my sister. So, I think it was kind of mutual, she was a big part of my life growing up, I was also a big part of her life, pretty much her middle age career. So, it feels weird, sometimes, I really miss talking to her, but that's why technology is really helpful. There is a time difference, but once you get over that, then I think that's really good.

AT: Speaking of your parents, what was the highest education of both of them?

TK: From what I know, my mom finished high school; my dad, I think he took a class in university, but he never got a degree from it, and I think the class was specific for his profession. But my parents have been very vague about their histories, and since I was a kid – even now, when I ask them, they're kind of like, "Oh, kids should just worry about kids' lives," and that I shouldn't be trying to look back into the past and trying to know them. Like, my own life is enough for me to deal with that I don't need to, like, deal with their lives, so.

AT: What is it that your parents do?

TK: My mom since I was born, my mom was already a stay-at-home mom. Although, I know she used to work as a kindergarten teacher, she used to work in the bank, too, I think as a teller. My dad, so, he's kind of like a general manager for construction projects, so not really an architect nor like a construction company, but he's the person who's supposed to bring together the client, the plumbing company, the carpenters, the designers, and he's the person who manages the organization and his income is basically a certain percent of the profit.

AT: He's a manager and he's like a facilitator that kind of brings it all together.

TK: Yeah, yeah.

AT: Oh, that's great that you know all the details – not all the details, but you know the basic details of what your father does.

TK: Yeah, I was always confused growing up, so I would always try to ask them, but it seems like it's very complicated—real estate, construction. It's something I don't really interface with that much, in my daily life. I have friends whose parents are architects, so that's really easy to understand, but I think my dad's job is more to interface between expert knowledge, but also very much like a sales kind of person. It took me a while to really understand what his job was.

AT: Speaking of your childhood, can you talk more about what it was like to grow up in two different places, when you were younger?

TK: I've always been going to international school in Taiwan. Since kindergarten, I started learning English, and so, I would say I'm pretty truly bilingual in that sense, although the joke is kind of that, if you're bilingual, you're not really 100 percent full in any language. [Laughs] So, it's always Chinglish for me. In terms of identity it's really interesting, because the earliest memories I have were always in Taiwan; I don't remember anything, really, from the States. But maybe because I went to international school, even in Taiwan, I didn't feel like people treated me as a local. I remember, I think it was in high school, I went shopping, and then the vendor would say, like, "Oh, are you a returnee from America? I can sense it in the way you talk."

But at that point, I had not been to the States since I was born, so for me it was really weird, that not having stepped in the States, to be called an American. It's not really false, because it's true, I was born in the States, but I didn't grow up here, I didn't have that culture. The only kind of American cultural education I had was in school, because of a more international curriculum. I think this is something a lot of international students share, just being caught up between growing up locally and having that local tradition, but at the same time academically prepared for a different culture or a different setting. It's been interesting.

[0:10:00]

AT: Yeah, having a sort of bicultural international life that you lead.

TK: Yeah.

AT: Speaking of your education, what was the name of your high school, and what was high school like for you?

TK: I went to Kaohsiung American School – [laughs] I can spell that for you, if it's difficult, later. In elementary school, I went to a Dominican International School Kaohsiung, and it was a Catholic school, but they had an international curriculum. It was a small and enriching community. By the time I left for sixth grade, my class was only, like, five people left; it was a really close, tightknit community. Since then, I've been using English to converse, and our curriculum was very much, as far as I know, very much similar to American curriculum, so, social studies, science, and kind of all the subjects were similar. In sixth grade, I went to Kaohsiung American School, and it was definitely less strict compared to a Catholic school where you had to go to mass, you had to wear uniforms. I think, for me, it was a kind of liberation going to that school, seeing different cultures.

That was when I learned about people like Rihanna, or all these Billboard musicians. I would say it was like my debut to popular culture. It was also then I really started playing in sports tournaments – it's quite interesting, because it's all the international schools that form a league. So, instead of knowing the other high schools in the area, I would know the other international high school in a different city. Because we would always play games with each other, and so, it's almost like a little world, a little social circle of international school students that we somehow know each other across different cities.

AT: First, it was your own individual schools – that was initially how small your world was – and then, it got slightly bigger as you got older, because of sports, basically.

TK: Yes.

AT: But it was still within that group of international schools there.

TK: For me, in high school, I joined a few organizations. There's one called the Global Issues Network, and it's a yearly student group that's a lot of activism, especially environmental activism. It's under the East Asian Regional Council of Schools – I think that's the official kind of umbrella organization. And so, because of that,

and also a competition called World Scholars Cup, and I'd say mainly because of these two and sports, sometimes we'd also join teams and travel outside of Taiwan. So, I've been to Manila, Philippines, I've been to Jakarta, Indonesia – just because of all these competitions and conferences, that are also mostly international schools. It's funny, because you'll see other international school students outside of their country, too. It's really just international school students. At one point, it crossed the national barrier into a more global or at least East Asian regional kind of social circle, for me.

AT: During all this time in your high school education, you were talking about how it was bilingual. How seamlessly did you go back and forth between the languages, with your teachers and with your fellow students?

TK: With my parents, I spoke Mandarin, because my parents, they knew minimal English. I think they could get by when they were in the States, when I was born, but they pretty much forgot it, eventually. I think in recent years they tried to relearn it, but I guess age caught up with them, and so their memory's not as good. This is a bit of a confession, but I used to do my mom's homework for her [laughs], from English class. Because she would always message me at night and be, like, "Hey, I need help on this – can you translate this for me?" or, "I need ideas – I have to do an oral presentation in English," and then I'd have to go fix her grammar. But, yeah, I guess age is something that is a bit troubling.

So, with my parents, I spoke Mandarin. English, though, I spoke with my sister, sometimes, because she also grew up in the international school education.

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So, English became our secret language that we used to talk to each other and not let our parents know.

AT: That was the same with me, with my siblings, we all spoke English perfectly, and then our parents would also get mad at us, too, because we were not speaking Cantonese. I understand what you're talking about. [Laughs]

TK: My parents, at first, they had, like, a defense against us, because there's also Taiwanese in Taiwan, which is called Min Nan Yu. It originated from Hokkien. So, my parents used to say that to each other, so that we wouldn't understand, but eventually we picked up

enough to understand. We can't speak it, so that's why I have a really hard time communicating with my grandparents and my extended family, but we know enough to understand what they're saying. Language is a kind of funny little source of interaction that I have with my family. In school, since elementary school, they always had a rule saying that, "Oh, you're not supposed to speak other languages besides English in school," because the real purpose is for you to learn English in that environment, so they used to be really strict about that.

But among my classmates, we were all very similar. We are all people who might have been born in a different country, or traveled around, but we kind of grew up in the area, at least most of us. Some people might be, I think, ambassador kids or missionary kids were often seen in these schools, too, but I think the majority of us were like me. One funny thing is that we would always say Chinglish, so we would mix grammar. We would start a sentence in Mandarin and end it in English, because that was what we were used to. I think that was pretty much how I interacted with my friends.

AT: Going back to your parents, what were their thoughts on education, during grade school and education for the future?

TK: I am really thankful for my parents, because they let me explore a lot of interests, and I think that makes me a very well-rounded person, right now. In elementary school, she got me to go to – I guess it's called cram school, here.

AT: Your mom?

TK: Yes. She got to me to go to cram schools for math, and for a little bit, English, like writing. That's more like academics, but she also let me take piano, eventually violin. Occasionally I might have things that I wanted to learn, and if I found a place – like, I think in elementary school I wanted to learn some dance, so for a year and a half, I learned some dance. [Laughs] In high school, I was – have you heard of the IB program, by any chance?

AT: International Baccalaureate? Mm-hmm.

TK: As part of IB, there's a 150-hour requirement, 50 of which are volunteering; other 50 could be learning new things, or doing sports, or other kind of activities. It's meant to supplement your academic activity – it's like a requirement. For that, I also tried learning different instruments, and also learning different art

forms. I feel like I had the chance to explore so many things, and it was never pushed onto me. I think I always found this difference between me and some of my friends, like, my mom really let me do these things with the mindset of having fun and release.

Even though I learned some of these things for really long, and eventually I quit because I felt like I needed to give it up to focus on school, but I still have a lot of fun, and I still play piano. When I stress now, I still feel like I want to go back and play these things for interest. I think that helped me see a lot differently, just because I've been able to, for example, being bilingual and growing up in a diversity of cultures, and also having an artistic but also an academic background. And having teachers who could help me to learn to see in different ways.

[Audio break]

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I think I was talking about diversity, and I feel like what a huge benefit I had from that, my education, as well as having backgrounds in not just, say, school. I was super proud, before, that I had good grades in school, but also, I had good grades in physical ed. I don't know, just, like, "Oh, I feel like I can do all these sort of things." But more than just that sense of achievement, I think, being able to think of myself as an artist, at the same time think of myself as a scientist, all these different pathways to thinking and understanding really helped me broaden my perspective. I'm really, really thankful for my parents, how they brought me up.

AT: It looked like the diversity of that education in your extracurriculars helped get you into Hopkins. So, actually –

TK: I hope. [Laughs]

AT: Let's talk about that. How did you decide to attend Hopkins?

TK: I always feel like I was scammed into coming to Hopkins. I definitely don't regret that, but when I think back to how I learned about Hopkins.

AT: Scammed? Can you talk more about that?

TK: One summer – and this was another prep class that I was taking for fun, with some of my classmates – even for cram schools and stuff,

there's a little international student circle, so a lot of international students will find the same cram schools and go there.

AT: Cram schools are the study schools, where it wasn't your normal curriculum, it was basically like study hall, but more intense, right?

TK: It's just like having a class, but not in school. [Laughs] So it's more school, which, I don't know, I think I like school, that's why I'm here and doing school.

AT: You were introduced to Hopkins at a cram school, at a cram session?

TK: One of the guys who taught there just graduated from Hopkins at that time, and he studied biomedical engineering. I was taking a class from him in chemistry, and when I was taking that class, I was just so fascinated because he seemed so smart. He was very eloquent when he was teaching, and I felt like I really was able to grasp a difficult subject. Now, I think I had a better grasp then than I do now in chemistry [laughs], but at that point, I was just so mesmerized by how eloquent and knowledgeable this person was, even though he was young. I asked him about college and stuff, because that's what you do to older people at that age, and he told me that he studied biomedical engineering at Hopkins. At that point, I think it was from him, it was the first time I ever heard the word "Hopkins."

Because I think in Taiwan it's always the Ivy Leagues that are more known. I think Hopkins is well-known within academic circles, but outside of that, not really. Until recently, because our most recent vice-president actually graduated from the School of Public Health, I think that's why. But before then, at the time when I was still in high school, I really didn't know much about Hopkins, but I thought, "Wow, if this guy studied biomedical engineering and he was this smart, then, if I go, maybe I'll become like this." When I asked him, like, "What's biomedical engineering about?" he started saying a lot of really confusing interesting things, but the thing that caught my attention was, he was talking about submarines, for some reason. He was saying, like, "Oh, I learned about submarines, how they work, how you make them, how they work and stuff."

I was, like, "Whoa, that's pretty cool – learning about submarines, I think that's my type of thing." I'm premed, but I've always, always wanted to learn engineering, because I always want to learn, like, how can I build stuff, why do things work. I knew I was going to

apply into an engineering field, but I think that's how he hooked me into thinking about applying into biomedical engineering, because he said stuff that was really cool. Then in coming here, of course, there were no submarines in their curriculum [laughs], because submarines and biomedical engineering don't really go together. [Laughs]

AT: He scammed you, with a submarine.

TK: He scammed me, yes. [Laughs]

AT: There are submarines off the coast, because of the Annapolis Naval Academy [crosstalk], but I digress.

TK: Yeah. [Laughs]

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AT: You decided to attend because an alumnus of your school came and gave a talk.

TK: Yeah.

AT: That's interesting. Describe the moment, then, that you got your acceptance letter from Hopkins.

TK: I remember Hopkins and Stanford were the last schools to release decisions, and I applied to 16 schools, I believe, if I remember correctly. I think leading up to Hopkins, I was feeling very sad and nervous, because I definitely got a series of rejections before I got to my first acceptance. Also because some schools that I thought were definitely within reach actually rejected me, I was super confused throughout the process. But people really supported me and I waited. To be honest, I've always been confused about why I was accepted at Hopkins. I'm not just saying this to be like I'm moral or whatever, but actually, I would go back and read my application and be, like, "This really sucks. I would not accept this person. Why did Hopkins accept me?"

I used to joke with people, I used to say maybe the reason Hopkins accepted me was because I never interviewed with them. I mean, I really don't know what goes on in the minds of admissions. I want to feel like I can give advice to high school people applying to college, but, really, I just do not know how it works. I don't know, I guess I worked hard and it's showed, but coming here, or, getting that Web page to show up, that was – I think I was just really

happy in that moment. I already had acceptances at other schools, but out of the schools that I really, really wanted to go, I think Hopkins was the only one among those few that accepted me.

AT: What was the ranking? I know it was a few years ago –

TK: Hopkins, definitely lower than now. [Laughter] And I remember because it was my freshman year that – I think Ronnie D. came my freshman year, and –

AT: That's the name of the alumnus who came back?

TK: Oh, no, our president, Ronnie D.

AT: Ronald, Ronnie D., yes.

TK: Ronnie D., yeah, our current president. Ronnie D. came, I believe my freshman year or the year before. And it was my sophomore year, I believe, that he pushed for going into the top ten list. It's always a bit of a joke that we never made it to top ten; we were always tied for ten, and now we dropped. [Laughs] I think we were definitely top 20, but I think were, like, 14, 15. I remember, I had a huge dilemma choosing where to go, even though Hopkins had always been on my mind since so long ago, just because – I don't know, am I bragging if I talk about this? [Laughs]

AT: It's fine – it's your academic career; you can say whatever you want.

TK: Yes, for historical purposes. [Laughs] I was choosing between Rice, UPenn, and here. It was funny because, in my family, each school had an advocate, me for Hopkins, my mom for Rice, and my dad for UPenn. You can really see, this is our family dynamic: we would always, like, I would stand for something, and then I would really try to argue for it; in the end, I would just do whatever I want. I listen to my parents, but – even my mom said this to me, a while ago, she's, like, "You talk to me, but in the end, you just do whatever you want." Which I really love about my parents and me. We were all kind of advocating different things.

My dad wanted me to go to Penn because it was famous in Taiwan, you know, Ivy League, it was big, a lot of wealthy alumni, which makes for good networking, for working, and that's part of the primary motivation there. My mom actually got to visit Rice, because I interviewed there for their combined medical school program, so that was my first time going in the States with family.

I interviewed there. Rice, at that time, was really known for happy students, so apparently the people there really, really like their school. It was beautiful when I visited, it was nice. But I think –

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AT: Your mom wanted you to be happy.

TK: She also thought it was really pretty, when she visited, so, that's what she wanted. For me, though, I don't know, I never really felt like the culture there was really easy for me to assimilate. I don't know if it's a Texas thing, I don't know if it's that school, but – the students were really nice and everything, the place was beautiful, like, Rice is definitely amazing. But I could not see myself really expanding and exploring there. I felt like there was a structure that I followed, but I wanted freedom. I came to Hopkins, without visiting or seeing the campus; I bet on Hopkins being my best teacher and when I got here I used all the resources I could to make it true. It was amazing, and my freshman year, I had the closest group of friends ever. It felt like an extended summer camp, it was just that fun and that involving. During that time, we had covered grades, for the first semester, meaning all your grades were either pass or fail. And they stopped it this year, but –

AT: Do you miss it?

TK: It doesn't affect me anymore, but I think it was good, because I definitely took advantage of it, in terms of exploring and just hanging out and getting to know people. Because, looking back, I feel like in my freshman year I got to explore, even just with friend circles, way more diversity and way more just different kinds of people I used to interact with. Compared to now, where I have a very kind of stable lifestyle, like, I don't really experiment anymore, because I'm tired and old. [Laughs] That was interesting.

AT: To backtrack, how were your first few weeks of undergrad? Tell me about that transition from moving all the way to Baltimore.

TK: So, my parents came in, to help me move in and stuff. I remember during orientation I was really worried about my parents, so my older sister came with us, so that made it easier. But I always felt like I had to organize everything, because my parents weren't very good at English. The hotel reservations, making sure they had transportation between the hotel and campus, also, following the crazy orientation schedule. I still remember a really funny story was, we took an Uber from the hospital to our dorm, during move-

in day, and I guess it's a tradition, but as your car drives up, they cheer for you and stuff. It was an Uber driver driving us, and so, it was part of a long line, and we were coming up, and we were stalled, like, waiting in line for a while, and you could tell the Uber driver wasn't really happy with that.

Then, he rolled down the window as we approached, and this group of students were just, like, "Hey, welcome, like new freshmen," [laughs] and stuff, and so – and then they looked in and they looked really confused, because we were ethnically different. And then my driver was, like, "Oh, I'm, like, a driver service – can we get all our stuff out and stuff?" [Laughs] So I just thought it was really funny. But, yeah, and my parents were in the back; I think they didn't really understand it. But I just thought it was really funny, because all the volunteers, you could see their faces were just super confused. But moving in was good. My roommates, freshman year, we used to be called the Diversity Suite, because I was Asian, and my roommate was black; my other two roommates, white, and I guess she grew up in Dubai, the other roommate, and so we were ethnically diverse.

You don't really know if they did it on purpose or if it was random, but we got along – I don't know, but I felt like I got along with them pretty well. I think freshman year really taught me that I could handle a lot more differences and get along with people, just because I grew up in such a homogenous kind of population. Moreover, I really only interacted with other international school students, so, I think it was definitely another opening up of my world, but – it was interesting. Not just with my suitemates, but all the other people on my floor. We would eat together all the time, like, we would just go to stuff together, we would hang out together. So, we had the common room, and it's almost like we were a huge family.

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Sometimes on our way back from a restaurant or something – I remember one time we just saw, like, a stranded furniture in the middle of the road, and we just carried it back to our dorm. I believe it's still there, because sophomore year I checked, and it's still there. We shared all our games and stuff, so – I think that's pretty amazing, because I don't really know, but from my friends, it seems like their games are their essential part of their lives. And so, when they were willing to put it in the common room where it's totally vulnerable to theft and whatever, just so everyone could enjoy it together –

AT: Are these board games you're talking about?

TK: No, videogames, which are pretty valuable, right – Wii, and I believe there was an Xbox at some point.

AT: That's a very trusting community you have, wow.

TK: It is, and we were all super friendly. It took a while, though. I feel like all of us made an effort to involve everyone on the floor, so, sometimes we would have huge amounts of people just in the common room. Which was pretty small; it was kind of like a living room. We would just spend all our time there – we did homework there, I got introduced to League of Legends, there – we just did everything together, my freshman year. That welcoming community really, really helped me build relationships here.

AT: Let me ask about what you nicknamed the diversity room. Did you guys think the university did that on purpose, or the residents' hall did that on purpose?

TK: Mm-hmm.

AT: Why was that? Because most of the other dorms, were they Caucasian? Was that where that impression came from, because you just ended up having the most ethnically-diverse room, out of the whole floor or building?

TK: I think, even across all the other rooms, it always felt like – there were a few where it might've been more homogenous ethnically, but across, kind of in general, I felt like it was pretty evenly placed. Also, I was introduced to the nickname as the diversity room by my friend – I don't remember who, now, but we used to have a way of naming different suites. And so, there was one room where all the three of the guys, their last names started with D, so we called it the Tri Dell room. So, I don't remember too much anymore, but we would just call it, like, "Oh, that suite, and that suite," and I guess they called us the Diversity Suite.

AT: I was just curious if it was the way you filled out, or if you did have a residence hall survey form. A lot of college students are asked to fill it out before, and if you had checked off, "Oh, I would like to be in a room with multicultural students."

TK: I believe that was not on the survey, because I have no recall of ever considering that.

- AT: It looks like you had a good room of roommates, regardless of however it came about.
- TK: Yeah, college definitely felt like a summer camp for me, beginning with my first year.
- AT: That's great. You were talking about these other roommates of yours – were they also first-generation students, or did you meet any other first-generation students while you were here?
- TK: It's interesting, because even though, when I filled out my applications and stuff and I know my own status as a first-generation student, it doesn't really come up in conversations here. Although the issue of minorities or status is huge, and I think people really take pride in their ethnic statuses. Since freshman year, I've been really involved in cultural groups and stuff, so I definitely joined the Taiwanese American Student Association – all my other friends, they also joined or became more involved with their ethnically-associated groups. That's even clear, now, I feel like, over time, it kind of differentiates. It's no way intentional, but I feel like most of friends now happen to be Asian. I feel like it differentiates. I guess people don't call it an issue or anything, but I don't believe I've ever told anyone, explicitly, that I was first-generation, or that it came up in the conversation.
- [0:40:00]
- I just don't feel like it's something people talk about that much. I've definitely had a lot of conversations about my identity as an American who grew up bilingual, but as first-generation, it doesn't really come up.
- AT: In your experience, it appears that, to Hopkins students, at least the ones you hung around with, racial and ethnic identity, cultural identity, was much more important than societal or educational identity, that background of having parents that went to college and having ancestors that went to college.
- TK: I definitely feel that way, and even people's family situations, with some of, say, my roommates, now, it used to come up, but it's not something we really actively seek to learn about, about each other. I just think it's a phenomenon, but I'm not really sure if it's because the culture feels like we shouldn't be talking about these things, like what it feels like more domestic or private matters. But, also, it just doesn't come up in conversation.

AT: That's good to hear, that it's not necessarily a class thing; it's more about who are you culturally, on this campus.

TK: Yeah, mm-hmm.

AT: Moving beyond friendships and extracurriculars, what about your program of study? Going back to that alumnus who came by, was the same reason you chose biomedical engineering the same? Or did you choose it, finally, for different reasons other than this great alumnus came by? [Laughs]

TK: I think that was definitely the trigger, and I think part of this is definitely my personality. In the end, I remember when choosing colleges, I had such a hard time deciding, all the way up to the deadline. And eventually, I just kind of gave up and felt like it came down to something simple, because they were all pretty much the same, and so, I was just choosing which name I felt looked prettier and I would want to put on my resume. And so, I felt like the word "Johns Hopkins" visually looked nicer, and so, that's how I really settled on it. I hate that it's such a trivial thing, but I think sometimes life comes down to these trivial decisions that you just have to make, and so you come down with that.

With biomedical engineering, I feel like it's almost an obsession. I feel like when I started to learn about Hopkins it was through biomedical engineering, so it was hard for me to kind of differentiate Hopkins and biomedical engineering. Even though I did, when I applied, I put as my second choice, major in mechanical engineering. But at that point already having a desire to eventually go into medicine, but at the same time, not wanting to kind of give up on my chance to learn about engineering, my chance to focus more on STEM. And that's why – I guess it's a greed, [laughs] a greed to learn and try to grasp onto as many different fields, that I ended up choosing biomedical engineering.

AT: It makes sense, because it's very interdisciplinary – it's in the name itself.

TK: Yeah. I ended up majoring in humanities and in engineering, so, I definitely have a greed for different disciplines.

AT: You are majoring in biomedical engineering and – what was the other one?

TK: It's called medicine, science and the humanities. I believe it was started two years ago. Even though it just started two years ago, I think it's currently the biggest program within the arts and science school.

AT: Speaking of that program and your biomedical engineering program, do you have any memorable professors or courses that you've taken?

TK: Yeah [laughs] – there are a lot, I feel like, just because every professor kind of has their reasons for being memorable. Freshman year, I remember, I took a class called Molecules and Cells. It's part of a required course sequence for biomedical engineering, and for a class, they used Pac-man, the game, to model enzyme kinetics.

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People dressed up, eventually, for one of the demonstrations, to explain I believe it was, like, electron transport chain, or something. There was a lot of interactive activities in class. Each professor also had a very distinct personality, so, I remember, one professor that I really liked, Dr. Beer, I always had a kind of like paternal feel from him, I don't know. Sometimes professors would say things in class that I just really liked, and I always joke that I go to class just to listen to them speak, and not really for the content. It was really good.

AT: Was it because he was a good speaker, or he had great anecdotes? Or was he just good at relaying information to you? What about his class did you like about him?

TK: I liked his personality when he was speaking. I think I really like it in class when professors' personalities show through when they're teaching. Honestly, I feel like because of this I like every class, no matter how badly I do in them. [Laughs] But I think, for me, it's a weird kind of noncorrelation between how much I like a class and how well I do in it. He had a very strong personality, and I think that helped me see that class as being like a distinguishing factor. I feel like that's true for a lot of biomedical engineering classes, just because of the way classes are structured. Within the same class, sometimes seven professors come in and teach different segments, and they've been doing year after year. The special professors kind of stand out, and they're remembered for teaching that class, and it's almost like a rite of passage you go through.

Like, when I talk to students that are taking the classes I've taken before, I'm always, like, "Oh, you know that professor who, like, la la la?" Yeah, for me, I feel like my memories of certain classes are definitely associated with professors.

AT: You like engaging professors.

TK: Not even just engaging, because I feel like – so, my freshman year, I had a professor who, actually, I recently found out, had already left Hopkins. But she taught Calculus 3, and she was not engaging in terms of – and I think that's also because of her background. I think she was trained in a foreign university, and then came for further school, and so maybe that's why her teaching style was very different from a lot of the other professors who might have been trained here. But even though I felt like a lot of students didn't really like her because she wasn't actively interacting with the class or trying to say things in a very, like, daily casual manner, she had her own style, too. She was teaching math, and it was very clear, it was very organized, the way she taught it.

Because of that, even though all my friends didn't really appreciate her class, I ended up taking another class with her, just because I felt like she was so clear with what she was teaching, and her teaching style was something that I really could feel comfortable with. I felt like I definitely follow professors more than I follow the subjects themselves.

AT: You were talking about how you joined a lot of cultural clubs. Can you talk about the activities you've been doing on campus?

TK: I think it's hard to sometimes explain these, just because I feel like every year things shift a little. But my freshman year, I spent a lot of time with the Taiwanese American Student Association. It's kind of funny, because I'm not very involved with them now, but my freshman year, I was super into it. One of the main things I remember is, freshman year, there was a talent show among a lot of the Asian groups, and I took part, and I rapped [laughs] for our group, on stage, in Shriver, so that's a memory I have. I've been in our auditorium hall, I was on there and I was rapping, and that will be forever in my memories of Hopkins.

AT: What song was it? Or was it a made-up song?

TK: It was a song by a Chinese singer group called S.H.E., and they have a song called Zhong Guo Hua – it's, like, the Chinese language.

[0:50:00]

There was a sequence of Chinese tongue twisters that they wrote into a rap part. So, while my friends were – they were singing, and we had two violins – like, they were doing the instrumental parts, I did the rap part. So, that was really fun, just because I got to really hang out with upperclassmen, I definitely felt like they were my family away from home, just because I could feel so much of my own culture here. Even though they might not have been people who grew up in Taiwan, maybe just having that little sense of similarity, I was able to feel like I had people I could depend on, here. And the funny thing is, we didn't win, but my friend won, and he was from my group, so, I guess as a group we ended up winning.

AT: Would you like to reenact the rap for posterity?

TK: [Laughs]

AT: No, just kidding, just kidding. Any other clubs or activities that you want to talk about?

TK: I'm still involved with cultural groups, but not TASA. Right now, I'm actually vice-president of the Japanese American Students Association, even though I'm not ethnically Japanese. But I took Japanese in high school, and so, I learned a bit of the language, and I didn't want to give it up just because of nonuse. I joined the group, and even though freshman year I didn't really involve myself much with the community, gradually, I started to go to events more, hang out with people there, and now somehow I've become vice-president. Things change a lot, but I feel like cultural groups are still a big part of me and what I think is important for college experiences, just because I felt like I had such a fun time going to events, eating things I was familiar with back home, or just seeing things that I was familiar with. At the same time, learning more about other groups, yeah.

AT: Tell me about some internships or jobs that you've done here at Hopkins.

TK: [Laughs] I feel like diversity is a big thing in this kind of talk. I've had many different types of work experiences, probably also because I'm also on work study. Freshman year, I worked at the athletic center, so they have athletic trainers there who do, like, preparations for athletes who before and after practice or before

and after games they need treatment, sometimes. I was like an assistant, there. My job was really, for games, I had to prepare the water, I had to be on the lookout for any injuries. I also became a pro at making icepacks – that was very much my job. I worked there for a while, and I thought it was a great way to interact with people. Also, it was a nice boundary between medicine but also the student community. I worked there for a while, and I really liked it there, but then I started trying out other types of jobs, too.

The summer between my sophomore and junior year, I interned at the commercialization academy here, and it's under the technology transfer office, where, for university innovation, they kind of look through it, and the inventions and the disclosures, and if they think it's something that the school can invest in or patent or market, they they'll also kind of develop it. My job as an intern was a lot of reading literature, doing patent research, market research, and then writing up reports, mostly looking at competition in the market or past similar technologies. Often, I would be sent a paper or a report about a new technique or some innovative research, and have to learn a lot about it and make a comment about it in terms of what I thought was kind of new or patentable, I guess, about the invention.

I felt like it was a nice distance away from, say, research labs, but at the same time being able to have access to innovation and research.

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Which [is] huge at Hopkins, I feel like. So, that was a very interesting experience during that summer. It was also my first time being more involved in what I would consider a more business field. Then, I graded for a class, last semester, and it was interesting, because a lot of the classmates that I graded for were actually in my senior year. I got to experience what it was like kind of being on the other end of the educational experience, and I started to understand why certain formalities were in place, and just being more empathetic towards professors who – I don't like to say this, but – have to deal with students. [Laughs] I feel I had a huge range of opportunities.

AT:

Since it came up in the Google researching of your life, would you like to talk more about the Miller Laboratory work you did as an undergrad researcher?

TK: I definitely was not as great as it seemed; I was there to learn – I think that was what I set for myself. I'm very glad that my first research lab was there. I worked immediately with a postdoc researcher – her name is Haiyun Liu – and I felt like not only was she a mentor in lab, she was also very much an advocate on a personal level. . She also lived in the area, so it was just nice feeling like I had an older sister I could rely on. Even summer storage, between freshman and sophomore year, I had to rely on her and I stored my stuff over there. It was definitely a relationship that was not just within the lab or at a specific time in a specific place. But I, for the first time, worked with mice, and it's funny, because I never grew up with pets, or fish, turtles, that was the extent of it.

It was a very new experience working with mice and learning how to handle them, being very scared at first, especially the euthanasia parts were definitely tough. But it was in an area that I was interested in – Dr. Miller is under dermatology and he studies a lot of the inflammatory response that's involved with dermatology. Myself, I have pretty severe eczema and stuff, so, it was an opportunity where I felt like I had a potential to learn more about myself. Even though that's very vague, with multiple barriers of scientific jargon and specificity, but that was an opportunity for me to learn more about how science worked, and especially this type of science. During my time there, I helped out with a lot of the technicalities of the work.

I stopped working there for a while, but they had a paper recently published, so my name is somewhere out there – yes [laughs] – even though I feel like I haven't contributed much. But it was definitely a good experience, working with mice, learning more about how complex the human body is in the ways in which science can be really complicated. Even though the theories are very simple, they're meant to be simple as models, there's a lot of repetition, there's a lot of trial and error, a lot of space for error in the process, and I think that's only something you can learn once you've seen it yourself.

AT: Talk about your summers and breaks, whether you did any study abroad, or classes, or just simply going home.

TK: I think when I first started college, I had a strong sense of having to do something during breaks. Because I think that was just the expectation of students, you have to be busy all the time, otherwise, you're not a student. I remember, so we have intersession, here, which is an optional January semester, like,

tuition is covered. But if you do that, then your winter break is only two weeks. So, my freshman year, I was, like, "Yeah, okay, I'll go home for two weeks then I'll come back for school." I had some interesting classes I ended up taking, but flying home and then coming back in two weeks, that was a lot.

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Gradually, I learned taking a break means you should take a period of break. Then when you're focusing on learning things, then you want to really focus on that. But freshman year summer, I took organic chemistry here over the summer. I took Orgo 1 and lab – Orgo is the slang term for organic chemistry, here – so we took that and the lab. My sophomore year summer, I was doing both the commercialization academy internship, but at the same time, I was also shadowing. I managed to do this every-other-day thing, which was complete luck.

AT: What was the shadowing?

TK: I shadowed a pediatric surgeon at the University of Maryland Medical Center, Roger Voigt. I shadowed him, because I had always considered pediatric surgery as what I wanted to do, and so, I needed a chance to kind of just see for myself. Since then, I think my own understanding of the medical field has become more complicated, and it's less and less easy for me to say, like, "Oh, this is what I want to do." But as an opportunity to see how people interacted, what kind of patients there were, and just the culture of the profession, I felt like I had a good opportunity, there. I got to spend a pretty long time in the operating room, when I was there; also, in the clinic. I'm very thankful for Dr. Voigt. If I had the chance, I would want to go more. It was just tough transportation-wise, at first.

But he was so open to people who wanted to learn. Probably, also, I don't know, but he was not born and raised in America. I believe he's from New Zealand or Australia. I don't know if it's part of that, feeling, like, "Oh, it's someone else who was raised in a different culture, coming into the States, learning medicine," but there was that. Last summer, I volunteered, for the first time, abroad. I spent two months in Nicaragua, with an organization called Engineering World Health. For the first month we learned, and then eventually in the second month we were dispatched into sites where we conducted interviews, and primarily fixed medical equipment, broken medical equipment, or equipment that just needed to be adapted for their conditions. It was opening up pieces, soldering, and putting stuff together.

For me, that was when I first saw how my curriculum was actually integrated into engineering, just because I could open up these medical devices, see how they worked, and in the process of fixing them, learn how these are designed. It was a huge kind of learning opportunity for me, too, just because, first I was thrown into a place where I had not learned much Spanish before then, but we don't have translators in the group. So, luckily, in the first month we took some classes, but really, in the second month it's just you and a partner, in a rural site. And our site was the most rural, and we just went in there, just the two of us, from day one, telling them, "Hi, we're here to volunteer. We're here to help," and then getting to work right on. And it's not just, like, fixing these devices without interacting with people.

We were working with the people there; we had to communicate the problems and solutions. Part of the program also required us to do interviews about needs, so, it was very, very much like an immersive environment. At the same time, besides learning about culture, learning a new language, learning the engineering principles, it was also, for me, learning how to become more dependent on the people around me. It's interesting, because you think, oh, you learn to be more independent, but that's actually false. You're learning to be more dependent on the people around you, and learning how to develop a network that way. So, for me, it was a big experience.

AT: How did you feel, after you finished that experience?

TK: I think I went into it expecting very different things, also, because I received a lot of funding from my religious community that I developed my junior year.

[1:05:00]

I went in there with confusion and not really knowing what's going to happen, but I was thinking, like, "Oh, I'm going to see great things that work." Because I had heard about my friends who went on missions for a church, that they saw a lot of things that really moved them, things that transformed them from the inside. I was hoping that I'd say the same thing, that I'd be able to say I'm a changed person, coming back. Unfortunately, I feel like it's hard for me to say that I've changed or transformed, and spiritually, even though I had a lot of opportunities to converse about religion – with my limited Spanish – with my coworkers, but it – I guess

it's the difference between when you're there for missions versus when you're there for volunteering.

AT: I think this is a good time to move on from that topic, though a very fascinating part of your life. But you've mentioned religion a few times – how important is religion to you?

TK: I think that it's something that I struggle with a lot myself. My school, as I told you before, my elementary school was Catholic, so, my first real educational system had a religious kind of aspect to it: we were expected to go to mass, we had to learn our prayers, things you had to recite, and that kind of stuff, all the songs. For that period of my life, all the songs I knew were hymns, or for some reason Eminem, because of my sister. But that was the early part of my life, but there was also that weird clash with the local customs of Taiwan, which, I don't know if it would really be called religion or culture. Because we would go to temples, we would give tribute – it's something the whole community did regardless of whether you're actively religious or not.

You would give tribute, at certain times of the year, to your ancestors, and the lunar month of July is when they always say, like, the gates of hell open and all the spirits come out, so you're not supposed to stay up at night too long. I think the religious and superstitious aspects of Taiwanese beliefs are so deeply ingrained into the practice of daily life, and the rhythm of the lifestyle there, that it's hard to distinguish between was it part of my lifestyle or did I have a separate religion. Then, when I came to Hopkins, that's when I really first saw a religious community. I started going to a student church, here, called Stepping Stone Ministry, and even though through upperclassmen and friends, I had known about it since freshman year, but it was my junior year that I really started to kind of go into it. And so, I started going to sessions – they had Bible study, they had a number of activities for people – and really opened me up to a different world.

I definitely saw – I definitely felt like I was – I mean, I became Christian, at that point. It was a very different experience, but also, I feel like, with religion, it's a lifelong process where you're trying to understand your place in society. When you're developing, not just thinking about yourself, but once you're thinking about all the other things around you, it depends on where you put your emphasis that determines your religion or your beliefs. I think, coming back from summer, there were certain clashes, and so – I stopped going to church, too, I stopped considering myself, or, actively choosing Christianity as my religion. Even now, with a lot

of self-introspection and reading, I do not have the answers figured out for myself regarding religion. Because it is a very complicated issue, and it's hard to kind of dissociate it with how you're brought up, your culture, your environment.

That's why I think it's something that I'm still searching for. But I feel like I've got to see a lot of different religions, myself, you know, at once, like, believing in one or not believing in one.

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I myself am still searching, I think, for a religion. I think it's part of the process of learning to take over your own identity, which I associate with adulthood. If college is the process during which you happen to be growing into an adult – I'm 21, now, [laughs] yay – the process of becoming an adult and choosing how you want to see the world, for me, religion was a part of that.

AT:

Thank you for sharing about that – I know that that can be a difficult subject for many people. Diverging from that, how about your life – you've talked about your life here on campus, and at Hopkins, and even at hospitals, working off-campus. How about life in Baltimore and Maryland? Have you explored outside? Or, tell me a little bit more about your relationship to Baltimore and Maryland, the region we're in, right now.

TK:

I think everyone who comes here for college comes here with the assumption that this is a scary place, and to an extent, it's true. And even though I've never seen *The Wire* that they always talk about, just the vibe you get from the streets, walking around, you can tell it's – at least, if it's not dangerous, then it's very foreign, at least to me. For me, I was used to growing up in a place where I could walk around, like, convenience store is literally downstairs, everything was very pedestrian-friendly, there were parks just like next to my house. Also, in Taiwan, the population density is higher, so everything's in a certain area. Even though I took public transportation to and from school, or for other stuff, I also grew up in the same neighborhood, all 16 years of my life, before coming here.

I was used to that – I knew where things were, I was used to knowing exactly how I could do things and what I could do. But coming here, with Baltimore, I was very shy going out, at first. If other people were going, then I would join them and go. But I am definitely spatially challenged; I cannot tell directions. Like, if I go into a building and I come out, I cannot orient myself. I don't

know, it's part of my family, I guess. Learning to go around myself was a huge step for me, learning – and even now, sometimes. I remember, when I started shadowing at University of Maryland, I had to – because I had to go really early in the morning sometimes, or didn't want to spend all my money on Uber, which really adds up over time, I would take the public transportation.

But I was so scared, so I spent hours just, like, following Google Maps, and counting the number of stops before my destination. Trying to remember all the street signs on Google Maps, like, looking at the image of the places, even though by then I had already spent two years in the city. The day of, I went an hour early, just in case I missed any stops and such, so I was micromanaging my transportation. But I've become a lot more comfortable, now, and I think that's really due to – I joined a volunteer organization, recently, called Charm City Care Connection. And it's a resource that's meant to help with health aspects of more low- and middle-income members. Some of these populations within Baltimore, they come to our organization and they look for help, whether it's enrolling in medical insurance or looking for help with employment, that kind of stuff.

It was my first time interacting actively with people here who aren't students or staff, who aren't associated with the university or the university campus area. So, there's different expectations going in, right? I feel like, with university campus, they're supportive; it's a supportive system, you're here as students, it's like its own system, so you can expect different people to treat you a certain way. But when you're working with people whose lives are so different from you, but you happen to be in the same place, then there's less of these expectations you can have about each other.

[1:15:00]

It was a little scary, at first, just because I didn't know, like, "How do I interact with these people?" Just because this is a city with such a deep history of racial inequality, and these are huge issues in America right now, like, being extra sensitive to how I talk and stuff. You know, Baltimore Riots were here, so it's – and for me, it was learning how to interact with people beyond how I've learned to interpret people, just because I'm dealing with a different culture. But it's been about half a year since I volunteered with that organization, and I've had to really talk about people's families, I've had to talk about people's health, and, often times, their difficulties, their lives, financial difficulties and such. Even though I still [laughs] have trouble getting around, but in terms of being

involved with what some Baltimorean lifestyles are, I think I got to see a lot of it.

I call Baltimore, like, “Baldimore,” now – I guess that makes me pretty good [laughs] in terms of kind of involving myself with the city.

AT: Eventually, you'll start saying “Baltimore”, without the D, because there is only a D sound – no, I'm just kidding. [Laughter] That's great that you're getting involved with the community. How about outside of that, how about the future, what are your plans for your future, either immediately or otherwise?

TK: As a senior, I am actively encouraged to think about my future, and I feel like I've had many changing plans. But the one that feels most secure for me, right now, is – I was actually enrolled in the five years master's program here, so the plan is to spend another year here, studying robotics. Luckily for me, it'll be interacting with many of the same faculty; the lab that I'm in is my faculty advisor and my principal investigator, my PI, here. He came recently, last summer, but he's under the robotics department, and a lot of my classmates are also robotics master's students, so it feels like another year of undergrad. But I want to take that opportunity to really learn and feel like I am more skilled at engineering. Then, I hope to apply to medical school this summer, and if the odds are in my favor, then I will get to go to medical school, after my graduation for master's.

AT: Through Hopkins, or another medical school?

TK: I feel like I'm not really in a position to be able to choose easily which school I want to go to, but if possible, I'd like to go to school in California. [Laughs] That's where my sister works in LA, right now, and my parents – so, this is something we've talked a bit, but – my parents are thinking of moving where I end up going to school. They really want me to go to school in California, because my sister's there; it's also on the side of the States that's closest to Taiwan, so distance-wise it's closer. There's a bit more pressure on me to go to California. Apparently, it's one of the more competitive states for medical school, but right now, the goal is to get in.

AT: Good luck on that.

TK: Thank you – [laughs] I think I'll need it.

AT: Would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students?

TK:

Yes. I think for everyone, the college experience is different, especially for me, because I feel like I grew up abroad, so first-generation – there's a lot of other aspects besides it that really influence how you see or how you value your experiences. But here, I've had a lot of support from people; I never felt like I became ultra-aware of the fact that I was first-generation. So, in that sense, I think that was really good. I was lucky to have financial support. I got a scholarship, coming in, so there was definitely less financial pressure there.

[1:20:00]

I don't know too much about the general statistics about Hopkins and financial support, but from what I've heard, they're pretty helpful. In terms of finding campus opportunities, even though at times I might feel like I'm underqualified and so that's why it's hard to find opportunities, I think if you search for the right places – and sometimes it's just timing and when opportunities match. I have been lucky to find job opportunities on-campus, and other ways to enrich my experience. A lot of things that I became interested in, I found ways to, if not find a way to explore them, that I could actually just do it myself. I think Hopkins is a community that really encourages that kind of—you could also do it yourself, if you don't find an existing opportunity.

I don't feel like my status as first-generation has put me at much of a disadvantage, or made me uncomfortable in any circumstance while I was here. I would definitely encourage anyone who's interested in Hopkins to look at Hopkins. If it's for prospective students, then I think, if you have the chance to come here, could you see yourself spending a day here? Could you see yourself spending certain time doing certain things, here? Or if not, do you think you could take the initiative to decide what you want to do here? Honestly, I myself am a very indecisive person, and so it took me a while to choose what school I wanted to go to, and like I said earlier, it came down to a very trivial decision, like, how the name looked visually.

But I think for prospective students who are first-generation, I think you should just consider Hopkins, with the comfort knowing that, if finance is not a problem, then being first-generation should not factor into your criteria for deciding where to go.

AT:

We are at our last question: After all this, how would you summarize your time at Hopkins?

TK: I think my time at Hopkins was a lot of trial and error. And I think that's really how most people come to learn, and I think that's most – I don't know if this is too deep, but, like, that's life, right?
[Laughs] You see things, you try things, and if it doesn't work, then you find new things. There's always new things, everywhere, that you could try. I think that's true for a lot of places, but all these different opportunities, all these different people, are just new possibilities for you. For me, Hopkins was a place where I tried out a lot of different things, and in the process, there were times when I found that it was not compatible with me. There were also times when I found, like, "Oh, yeah, this is something that I really wanted to do."

With different people coming and going, there's also different interactions. For me, Hopkins was a place where I felt mostly safe to have the freedom to try things out, and know that – or at least not have to worry too much about any consequences of trying it out. Also, just because you know that everyone else is also in that process: everyone's also trying things out, everyone's kind of learning. If anything, everyone here is, like, trial and error; everyone's learning. Yeah, it's a nice environment for that.

AT: Nice environment for trial and error.

TK: Yes.

AT: Great – an interesting way to describe Hopkins.

TK: [Laughs]

AT: I think that's a great way to end our session right now.

TK: Thank you for sitting [laughs] through all this.

AT: No, I was going to say that first, thank you so much for this. All right, this is Annie Tang signing out.

TK: Thank you.

[End of Audio]