"ER"

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

March 13, 2023
KD: This is Kristen Diehl here with ER on March 13, 2023, at the Eisenhower Library for the First-Generation College Student Oral Histories. We would like to start this interview by acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on the Hopkins community. The questions in this interview were written before the coronavirus pandemic and therefore do not directly ask how the consequences of this public health crisis changed the experiences of our students. However, we thought it was necessary to begin the interview with a couple of questions related to the pandemic, in order to recognize the particularly challenging experiences and changes these students faced. So our first question is, how do you feel the coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience? What are some challenges or changes it caused for you personally?

ER: I think for me, it was definitely a new environment, because I was in—I was a freshman. So I was here for all of fall semester, and then mid-March, just around this time, like we got sent home. So I wasn’t here for very long. So it was kind of a huge transition to COVID. And then it’s like ok wait, go back. So then I had to go home for almost two years, so I went home from March 2020 to August 2021. So, a year and a half.

So it was definitely a big change in the sense that from then on, you had to do online learning. Regardless of where you were. So if you decided to stay in Baltimore and be with your friends and live in an apartment, or if you decided to go home or what have you, it
was definitely a different environment in terms of you’re already getting adjusted to college learning, which is vastly different from high school or anything that you’ve done before.

And then now you have to get used to this college learning that’s even more adapted to this giant pandemic that has, you know, completely changed everything. So it was like online learning was way different. And then I feel like after that, even coming back was really, really different. Because everything is adapted, you know, in some sense for convenience. A lot of things are adapted to be online, or to be way more accessible to people in different situations, which I think is a really great thing.

Because I think COVID was kind of a big deal, in that it opened our eyes to a lot of different things. Just because people were at home a lot more, and thinking and interacting with different people than they normally do. It opened our eyes to a lot of things. Like, a lot of disabilities. A lot of things that COVID has changed. And therefore a lot of things have been made more accessible. Been made more, not convenient per se.

But have been made more like, I don’t know. I guess convenient is a good word to say. In the sense that it recognizes that there are some people who just can’t make it to a building at a certain time. Or there’s just no way for you to make it from point A to point B in a certain period of time, regardless of whether or not you have a disability. So, it helps a lot. And it makes things more easy. It makes things like, it makes networking a lot easier because you just get to meet with people online.

It makes people, you know, it’s really helpful, especially for people who let’s say have to interview for a graduate program or something, in the sense that you don’t actually have to go over there. Which is a great experience to be able to go. But sometimes, it’s really financially tough to be able to go. Or like school-wise it’s tough, because you’re skipping classes and you’re flying to this place that you don’t know, and you have to spend the night in a hotel and you have to buy the flights, and buy food when you get there because you don’t have access to your normal things.

So it’s a big thing. And I think it really helps a lot in some sense. In another sense, it was really weird, because you do have to be at home for a really long time. Or you have to be somewhere that’s not school. And you’re not socializing. You’re not hanging out with people that you were used to for six months, you know, when we got here freshman year.
So you’re making all these friendships, and friendships don’t take six months to make. Friendships take a lot longer. So, my dad always says you have a friend after you’ve been friends for seven years. But it’s different, because all of that was just interrupted. And not that you stop being friends, or not that you stop knowing these people.

But you start to know them in a different way. You start to know them over FaceTime, over text message, over e-mail. And then on top of that, you don’t get to make personal connections with your professors or your classmates because you’re online. So it’s different. And with that comes a lot of added stress because a lot of environments were changed.

Assignments were made longer, just to focus participation. Certain programs were made mandatory instead of optional, just because they wanted to make sure people were engaged, which is a good thing in some sense. But it can also be a really, really big stressor. Tests were made longer, just to make sure people were applying stuff and not just you know, like copy-pasting from a PowerPoint.

It was definitely a big difference. And I feel like coming back, I’ve learned a lot from it. But it is a huge, you know, you have to adapt to a really, really big change going in and coming out of, like, the quarantine period of the pandemic, if that makes sense.

KD: Yeah. Adjusting both to going to college, but then this other kind of weird adjustment after that. Have you found since coming back—you’ve mentioned how online classes have led to sort of greater flexibility and greater accessibility—since coming back, have you found that’s continued with your courses? Or have faculty kind of moved right back to –

ER: I’ve seen both sides, I think. I’ve seen a lot of professors where, for example, just recently I had to miss a class because I was really sick, and I e-mailed my professor; he’s like “Oh, I’ll record the class for you. No worries.” Which I don’t think would ever have happened before COVID, because that’s just not something we had to face. And now we have these big TVs that you see behind you, that have these capabilities to record a whole classroom, and to record lessons and project things from Zoom online, so that everybody can be there regardless of whether or not you’re
physically in class.

But then I’ve also seen people, professors who are just not accommodating because sometimes people take advantage of that excuse. Like, people take advantage of the fact that like, “I don’t have to go to class. My professor will just record it for me.” And at some point I do get it. Being that I’m a TA, and I get the attendance issues.

I get it, because it like, affects the motivation of the professors and the teaching staff to teach. Because if they’re teaching to an empty classroom, it’s not the same. So I’ve seen both sides of this. I think it has made it a world more accessible. Like, it’s a huge change. But everything good comes with its consequences.

KD: For sure. Moving backwards in time, could you tell us where you were born, and a little bit about your family?

ER: Yeah. So I was born in Miami in 2001. So, I’m going to be 22 now. I was born in Kendall, not the Miami, city of Miami. I was born in Kendall, so suburbs more. My parents are from Cuba. They came in 1993 on a raft, so. A little like dinghy situation. They had to escape from Cuba in the time, the, you know. They escaped, they’re political refugees, if you will. So they had to escape.

My parents, my grandma, like my mom’s mom and my mom’s stepdad and her half-brother all came together. You know, it’s kind of like, if they tell you, “you gotta go,” you gotta go. Like, you don’t get a chance—you don’t get months to think about this. If you’re presented with the opportunity, you have to take it or you’ll lose it. Or, if people find out, it’s kind of risky. Because if people find out that so and so’s leaving to the United States.

Like, so and so’s going to escape. They will report you. They will, and it’s not like “oh my god, like you’re not allowed to leave, no, no, no.” It’s like, you’re not allowed to leave, and you’re going to jail and you’re a prisoner from this point on until the rest of your life. So, they came in kind of like, planned. But it could have been a way more planned had the pollical situation allowed for it, manner.

So they were rescued by the Coast Guard outside of Key West. So they did the 90 miles from Key West to Cuba. Or from Cuba to Key West, excuse me. And then they moved here. They lived for a little while in New Mexico, because that’s where my mom’s aunt was, at the time. She’s the only one that was here. I think now, it’s
funny because she’s the only one that speaks perfect English. She has a United States accent. I think it’s kind of cool.

But then they moved over to Miami, so they started working, you know, odd jobs here and there. So my dad was an exterminator for a really long time. But yeah. Then the rest of my family, so when you’re from Cuba and at the time you could sponsor someone for reclamation. So, you can start bringing your family over. And so that was kind of the process that they did. So I think the rest of my family for the most part got here in 2001. So everybody was here, to be with me.

KD: I was going to ask, you know, about your relationship with the rest of your family, so yeah.

ER: Yeah, yeah, we’re really tight. It’s fun. It’s great.

KD: We talked a little bit about this over e-mail, but could you tell me a little bit more about your parents’ educations?

ER: So my parents, my dad was a little older than my mom, so he got to go through his entire undergrad in Cuba, at the University of Havana. So, it’s a little bit different, you know, education-wise over there, because you don’t have an undergrad the way that you have an undergrad here. You go through high school, you pick a career, and you get in and you go. So for example, like I would have been, at this age I would have been a doctor, had I wanted to be a doctor in Cuba.

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So my dad got to finish his undergrad in Cuba. My mom did two or three years, and then after, you know, she came over here. Had to wait a while. And then finished it at FIU, at Florida International [University]. So she finished her bachelor’s. And now my dad, three, four years ago, decided to get his MBA. His executive MBA, so he could move up from his job. So they’ve made some progress, and it’s really exciting to see. But yeah, I think the rest of my family, obviously my grandparents didn’t go to college. My, I think my uncle is the only one that’s gone to college. He went to a technical school. And then yeah, my uncle did his residency here. So as far as education, that’s as far as it goes.

KD: You mentioned your dad getting his MBA. What do your parents do? What are their occupations?
**ER:** My mom’s gone through a few different ones. Now she’s a teacher, and I think she really loves it. And I think it’s something that she is very, very passionate about. It’s definitely a big stressor, because she works in the Little Havana area in Miami, which is a lot of refugees and immigrants that have come escaping the situation that is going on in their country.

And she works really, really close to the women’s shelter. So you get a lot of people that are really, really struggling, not just financially but with drug addictions and with different housing crises and stuff like that. So she gets to work with them, and you know, she brings them a lot of stuff, and I think it’s really cute. Like, she’ll bring them pencils. And they buy her little gifts every so often. Which, we treasure a lot in my house, just because those kids really don’t have anything.

And then before that, she was kind of a journalist at Univision in Miami. So she did a lot of subtitles if you will. Like, she did a lot of TV program work. So she’s worked on a few different programs as they go changing. But I think now teaching is what really, really suits her and I really like that for her. Because it brings her a lot of peace, and it’s something she really likes. She teaches like little second graders, so it’s really cute.

And then my dad is an engineer. He’ll tell you till the day he dies he's an engineer. He’s not an engineer. He was an engineer. But he’s now the Chief Information Security Officer at eToro, which is an Israeli company. Before he worked at TradeStation, which is a Plantation-based, Plantation the city of Florida, not like the thing. Like, he worked out of Plantation. It’s kind of like a stocks trading company. So he worked on the IT side. He was a Vice President of IT there. So he’s definitely come a long way. I’m really proud of him.

**KD:** Can you speak a little bit more about the town or neighborhood—places that you grew up?

**ER:** I think over time we’ve gone changing just because my family has been working really hard. So I was born and we lived in a tiny apartment, which was, you know, at the time what my family needed. We didn’t need more space than that which we had. So I lived in an apartment when I was little. And then we moved into a house, like a smaller house. It was, I want to say a two bedroom house, if I remember correctly. Two or three bedroom. I don’t remember anymore, it was a long time ago.
But we’ve always lived more or less in the Kendall area of Miami. There’s a lot of Cubans there. There’s a lot of diversity in Kendall. It’s mostly Cubans I would say. But there’s definitely a lot of cultures being mixed. And everybody gets along, which I think is one of the greatest parts. Because you can walk over to your neighbor’s house and ask them for whatever you need. Ask them to babysit your dog, and they absolutely will. It’s wonderful. It’s very homey.

And then now we live in a bigger house, because my sister was born. We needed more space. But yeah, we’ve always lived in Kendall. I think it’s really fun. It’s kind of like one of those neighborhoods where you get to play on the street and you get to run up and down. If you kick a soccer ball over the fence, no problem. Go get it. Your neighbors are nice. I think, I don’t know. It’s, what I find different from places like here that I’ve lived is you can be walking down the street with your dog or something, and everybody waves.

Everybody says hi. It’s not even a hi/bye. It’s like “hi, how are you? Your dog is so beautiful. He’s gotten so old.” Like, somebody stopped me on the street once, me and my mom, and he was like, “that dog looks really happy.” I was like, that’s so nice of you. That was so cute. But it’s very homey. I think especially with the Cuban culture that’s been added there. A lot of people realize that we’ve all been through the same struggles, and why be mean? Why not interact with these people? These people are just like you. So it’s really great living in Kendall.

**KD:**
That sounds lovely. Anyone who talks about dogs or talks to a dog, I’m like, yes. It’s the perfect environment. What was high school like? Did you have any favorite classes, different extracurriculars that you participated in?

**ER:**
Yes. So I went to a smaller high school. It was a Catholic high school. It was definitely a really great environment for me in the sense that it was really small, and everybody was really close. And so I was there in the IB [International Baccalaureate] program if you will, the advanced program. So it was even a smaller cohort of students that you got to be really, really close to, because almost all your classes were with them. So it was really fun, because we would all pursue these similar activities, because everybody’s on the same wavelength.
Like, it’s kind of like, I’m going to, I plan to go to college. I’m going to go to college. I’m going to go to a grad school of some sort. Everybody kind of knew what they wanted to do, which is really great. It’s really helpful being able to work with people that are on the same wavelength. Because you help each other out. And then, in high school, so I played guitar my whole life. Like flamenco classical guitar. So that was a big thing for me.

I think senior year was when that ended for me, just because it was too much. Like, it’s a really big deal. I was doing performances and stuff like that. And so I had to, it was that and I had to get a college counselor, because being the first one here to go through the traditional process if you will. It was kind of a big deal, because my parents and I were completely clueless. So that had to be put on the back burner for a little while. I still think about it every day. I’m like oh, I need to go back.

But I played softball, which I really, really enjoyed. It was like, a huge leadership opportunity for me, and I loved it. I played school softball, and then at the end of my career senior year, I decided to play travel softball. So I played a summer of travel ball. And that was really fun, because it was like you’re working with these people. The best part is half the team is Cuban. And the other half is like, Peruvian, Mexican, like it’s a bunch of people that are just so much fun. So I played, I kept doing that even though I was not that good. It was a really fun environment for me, and I really liked being with those people.

So I think that was probably one of my biggest things in high school. I was also part of this really cool Catholic community. It’s called Communion and Liberation, and that was a big thing for me. We worked a lot with international students that came to my high school. Worked a lot with different people in the community. We did a lot of volunteering. We just would come together and talk about our faith, but in a real life perspective if that makes sense.

So you’re not explicitly reading Catholic texts all the time, but you’re kind of applying like oh my god, we’ll read this text. And then that happened to me yesterday. You’ll bring in the fact that you got stuck in the Starbucks parking lot yesterday or stuff like that. It was a really fun, positive environment for me, and I still try to stick to that as much as I can. I think those were the biggest things.

**KD:** This is jumping ahead a little bit, but have you found a faith practice here at Hopkins?
ER:

Yeah. I think over time it’s become a lot stronger for me. Like freshman year and stuff, I would go to the holy days of obligation that we had here. Because you know, we have a Catholic church right around the corner. I would go, but it’s kind of like, whatever. It wasn’t a priority for me, if that makes sense at all. And it sounds terrible to say, but. I think over time, I’ve been able to become, like a personal path in my faith if that makes sense. And being able to personally, like me, myself and I, get closer to my faith. Get closer to Christ.

And like, that’s been a huge deal for me. And I found that especially coming into senior year, where things are starting to pile up and you’re starting to do a bunch of things, it really, really helps. Because it’s just a time where for example, if I go to mass, I’m like okay, I’m here for at least an hour. And there’s nothing I can be doing during this time except being here. And that’s brought me a lot of peace.

And then we have just recently, I’ve started going to things with the Catholic community. So we have a Catholic community at Hopkins here. And that’s been really, really great for me. They’re really nice people. I don’t go that often, just because I just started. But they’re really, really great people. They’re super supportive. I read sometimes at the Spanish masses. And they’re super helpful. Like, if you get nervous, they’ll talk to you. They’ll talk you down for a minute. Like, it’s okay.

Like, they’re really, really great people. So definitely that’s been a huge part of, especially now my senior year, that I feel like I’ve got really, really into my faith, in a really positive manner.

KD:

Yeah, it’s great having something where you can just take the time and be present and that it helps kind of center yourself. Moving backwards again. I’ve jumped ahead, now backwards. You mentioned you and your parents going through the college process when you applied to college. Can you talk about their general thoughts on education?

ER:

Yeah. So, I think coming from the community that we came from, it’s not like you’re expected to go to college but everybody goes. And I never doubted the fact that I wanted to go to college and I wanted to pursue higher education. I never doubted that in any way, shape or form, just because I feel like okay, when your parents are Cuban, you’re given two options. You can become a doctor, or you can become a lawyer.
There’s no in between. Which is like super, it’s funny. It’s like a joke. It’s not a real thing. But immediately, I knew that I wanted to pursue medicine. After a while, just because of all the things that I was experiencing, we had a career day and stuff at my school. I was like okay, I think this is the path that I want to take. And so my parents and I were like, whatever it takes. Whatever it takes to go from point A to point B is what we’re going to do.

So in terms of college, it was never a question of whether or not I was going. It was just, where am I going. Which is a really, really, it’s a huge privilege to have, in my opinion. Not everyone gets that opportunity, and I was so incredibly grateful to have it. And on top of that, to be able to go to a private university. Because I could have gone to a school in Florida and not paid for tuition, because we have a huge scholarship.

So we have the Bright Futures scholarship, that pays 100% of your tuition if you have above a certain GPA and above a certain SAT score. And I think that the fact that my parents were able to prioritize my education, if that makes sense and give me that booster. They’re like well, if Hopkins is the best place for you to do what you’re going to do, so be it. That’s where you’re going. Don’t even think about it. And I think that was a really big, I think about it and that, that was a huge, huge thing for my parents. And that’s, I don’t know. Like, I can’t thank them enough for that opportunity. But yeah. There’s just no question.

KD: So how did you decide to attend Hopkins? I know you’re interested in the medical profession and Hopkins is obviously, has a lot to do with that.

ER: I think for me, I kind of started looking at schools. And for a really long time I wanted to go to UF. UF was everything for me. UF is University of Florida. That was everything to me, because that school was the college experience. The Ivy of the South. It’s a really, really phenomenal school. They have the sports culture, which I think to me is a really, really big thing. But I think they have a lot of different opportunities. They have a lot of different labs and programs and stuff that I want to take part in.

And so for a long time I was fixated on that. I was like okay, there’s no question, I’m going to UF. I don’t know, I started doubting because I was like okay, what if I don’t get into UF. I had
a good chance of getting into UF, but it’s never promised. So then we started looking at other schools. Obviously my school, my high school, makes you apply to certain schools. So we applied to FIU, and they come to school and accept you on the spot, which is a really great thing.

So I had that option. I had scholarships from FIU, UF, Florida State. Things like that, which were really great. But I think ultimately we decided to go to Hopkins as a spur of the moment thing. We were like, okay, well, should we apply ED? At the time there was no ED two or anything, it was just one, early decision. And I was like okay, might as well.

KD: When you say “we,” do you mean you and your…

ER: Like, my parents.

KD: You and your parents, okay.

ER: Yeah, we decided, because we met with a college counselor for a long time. She really guided us through this process, which we really 100% needed. Because in the sense of, it’s not that I don’t think I could have done it without her. It would have taken us three times as long to figure out all these tiny things and to figure out how to phrase certain things, like in applications and essays and stuff like that.

But I think that ultimately we started talking about schools. We started considering Hopkins. There was another girl from my same high school who came here. She’s a year older than me. And I thought she really liked the opportunity. And I was like hey, I might as well just try it. What’s the worst that might happen? They don’t accept me. So we decided to go and apply ED as literally a spur of the moment thing. It was like well, the application’s due tomorrow. Should we send it? Might as well.

So we were all like okay, the worst thing that can happen is they don’t accept you. Regardless, you can apply to a bunch of the Florida schools and stuff like that, early decision. So I was like okay, I might as well. So I applied to a few different schools, and then I applied to Hopkins ED. And at the end of the day we just concluded, after I got in. So I got in way before. I got into a bunch of other schools. I think I had only gotten into like, maybe UNC before.

It was kind of like okay, well, I got accepted. I have to go. And it
was just, we came to that conclusion because I was like okay, this is the best place for me to accomplish, to get me from point A to point B. So this is like point A to point A and a half. So the next step would be medical school. And this I felt was a really good setup for me to keep moving on after this. We just kind of came to the conclusion, like this is the best place for me to go if I want to make it from point A to point B.

KD: Could you describe the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience moving from home to campus, experiencing a different state and a different city?

ER: Yeah, it was definitely a smack in the face, for lack of a better word. It’s really different. Especially being from a really close-knit community, a really close-knit family.

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Being the first one to leave the bubble was a huge deal, to me. I felt that in my soul. Like, it was like, so strange, having to spend a night away from my family and knowing that this isn’t just temporary. Like, this is going to be for a really long time. This is, at the time you know. This is the next four years of my life. This is what it’s going to be like. And this is the next step. It’s going to suck, but it has to happen.

I think that the first couple of weeks were really weird, in terms of like A, not being with my family all the time and not having that support that I kind of took for granted. It really helped me. It opened my eyes to what, all the things that my family does for me every single day. Like, my mom cooks for me every single day. She cooks for our whole family. My dad cooks for our whole family. My sister comes. We hang out after school. So it was really weird not to have that all the time.

And on top of that, you live with a roommate, which is a whole different thing because you start to realize that nobody’s like you. So you have to reconcile your differences. At first it’s really fun, and then you start showering and you want to shower at the same time. And you, you know, somebody leaves dishes in the sink. And so it’s different because I wasn’t used to having dishes in the sink, because I have a dishwasher. But here I don’t.

And then on top of that, school was a huge change for me. The classes here are obviously vastly, vastly different from high school. The opportunities were different. I have never spoken to anybody
who’d gone through the pre-med procedure before. Procedure. The pre-med curriculum before. So I was kind of weirded out by all these people pursuing research and pursuing all these volunteering opportunities from the first, from the get-go. And I was like, isn’t this a little, like it never occurred to me that you had to do different things to be able to go through this process to even be able to apply to medical school.

So I kind of felt a little behind on that, because I just legitimately had no idea that this was a thing. My thing was like, it’s a logical process. You finish your undergrad, you did what you did, and you move on. Like, in my head there was no reason why you wouldn’t get accepted for that. Which is kind of clueless for me to say now. But I had to start learning, so I started attending different seminars and stuff like that to figure out okay, what exactly do I have to do? And then we got sent home for COVID.

KD: Right.

ER: So, yeah, it was a really, really big change for me. And it was kind of weird not to have that support system. Like, if you did, inevitably you're going to do bad on an exam. It’s going to happen at one point or another. And I did do bad on an exam freshman year. Like, the very first exam that I did bad on, I cried for like three days. Because I think in high school you’re not used to doing bad, because you’re already at the top of your class. You’re already surrounded by people who are doing the same as you. There’s no reason why you would do bad.

But here, it’s like you’re, it’s way different. You’re not taking a test every week or every two weeks. You’re taking a test every month and a half or so. And this test is worth 20% of your grade. So it was a really, really big change for me, because I didn’t have anybody to kind of fall on. Which might be also me, because I kind of am terrible at making friends. But it was just a weird thing, not to have a support system all the time. So it was definitely, it was a smack in the face. That’s the best way I would characterize it.

KD: This question comes sort of later on, but since you’ve brought it up. The idea of a support system at school, especially coming and getting acclimated. And then of course, you had to go home. But I just think in general, have you felt supported by Hopkins as a student? Like, with academic support or financial support, sort of other emotional support? Or did you find support networks through your friends and your peers?
ER: Yeah. I think academic support was, we’ll start there. So being that I am on the board of PILOT [peer-led-team learning], I tried to pursue academic support and give academic support as much as I can through the PILOT program, just because I feel like that’s a huge thing. That is so helpful. Freshman year I started doing PILOT, and I was, okay, maybe this is something I want to do. So I kept going with it, and then I moved on. So I became PILOT leader and I became part of the advisory board of PILOT. So I felt like in that sense, I felt really, really supported, because everybody’s always, in that community everybody’s always there to help you, and we’re always here to help other people. So I felt like, in the academic support sense, like absolutely.

I’ve never felt a lack of academic support, because on top of that, you have PILOT. You have the Learning Den. You have private tutors. You have a bunch of different opportunities. You have the math help room. You have a bunch of different things that you can go to for help. Overall, I’ve found that the teaching staff in every curriculum, in every department and every class that I’ve taken, has been more than helpful. There’s, if you e-mail somebody they will help you. So I found that academically, I’ve been supported –

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But I’ve been to the financial aid office a few times, just in terms of dealing with the FAFSA and stuff like that. And they’ve suggested a bunch of different loans and stuff, and different scholarships that I can apply for. So they’re really helpful, in everything that they can. It is a pain to go to the financial aid office, just because there’s always 20,000 people in there.

And then I think emotionally, I think now I’ve reached a point where I can say I have a solid group of friends. Just because there’s been a lot of changes since freshman year. And I don’t have the same friends that I did at the time. And I do have some of the same friends. I still have the same roommate from freshman year. One of the friends that we were, it was kind of a group of four of us, one of them sadly passed away during COVID.

KD: I’m sorry.
ER: It’s okay. We bring her up. We celebrate her birthday every year. She’s still here. She has a chair at graduation. But it’s definitely been a huge change in the sense of that happening and having to come back and realize that maybe she’s not going to be here when I come back, it’s kind of a huge deal. But I feel like now I’ve come the point where I can say that I have a solid group of friends.

I wish that I had more time with this group of friends than I do. I have like two months left. Two, three months left of being with them all the time. Because we’ll always be friends, I think, but we won’t always live on the same block, if that makes sense. So I feel like now I’ve come to the point where I have a solid group of friends, I’d like to say. Because before I had close friends but not a group, if that makes sense.

So I think this is fun. I also am part of a sorority, which has provided me a lot of help in a lot of different senses. So they’ve provided academic resources that we can talk to. Like, they’ll suggest a professor if you want to take a class. Like, “oh, take it with X, Y and Z” and they’ll help you out. If we’re in a class together, they’ll help you out. They’ve been great.

KD: Which sorority?

ER: Phi Mu.

KD: Okay.

ER: So they’ve been really great. I think other than that, like family-wise, I think they’ve been beyond helpful. So, I have, I get very stressed about school as does anybody here. And they’ve been more than helpful, in helping, you know, they ground me if that makes sense at all. And my friends, I think it’s really weird. Because since we’re all on a similar path, so we’re all pre-med, pre-dent, pre-health type of thing. We’re all going through the exact same process. We’re all on the exact same path.

And so it’s been really helpful, because they’re there to back you up. They’re there to help you out. That’s something that I take for granted, but it’s a really big deal. So I think yeah, I’ve come to a point where I’m like, I have a solid support system. I think that’s part of the reason why I decided that this is a good time for me to apply to medical school, because I feel like now I’m in a place where I’m supported by the people that I need to be—because medical school is hard—I’m supported by the people that I need to be supported by. I’m emotionally ready to go, if that makes sense.
KD: That’s great. Have you met any other first-generation American students at Hopkins?

ER: Mm-hmm. My roommate is a first-generation American also. She’s a similar story. Her parents are from Cuba. I’ve met a few different ones. Almost the entire, like I would say 95% of the Cuban community here, so we’re part of the Cuban Undergraduate Student Association. We’re all first-generation students. So, everybody’s parents kind of have the same story, where they came from Cuba, were the first ones to go or like maybe if they have an older brother. We’re either, we’re at the top of the list. The first ones to go.

So I think that we’ve all kind of had the same story where we talk to each other. We’re like, there’s nobody like Cuban people. Because I think the Cuban people uniquely have this strange, strange sense of determination that I don’t think I’m qualified to say that I haven’t seen in other people. But it’s very unique in Cuban people, I would say. So coming together with them, specifically with Cuban first-generation Americans, or first-generation students, is a huge deal. Because we get it.

We get it, our parents are kind of on the same wavelength. And then on top of that, I’ve met countless, I’m also a member of SGA so I meet a lot of people through SGA, and a lot of people who have a lot of different experiences. And I get to do that a lot, which is a huge privilege for me, because these people have incredible stories to tell and I’m super happy that you’re doing this.

Because I think they have a lot to say. And they have a lot of different struggles, and they have a lot of different stories to tell and stuff like that that I’m continually amazed by. And their resilience is beyond words, because it’s not easy being the one to you know, translate your parents’ tax forms –

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– at 11 years old, and you’re kind of crying on the dining room table. Or like, your parents, for example one of the big troubles that I had when I was in elementary school was my parents divide upside down. So you’re doing division, you kind of have, like it’s like a, one line going up and one line going to the right. But my parents have one line going down and one line going to the left. So it’s different, so that was a huge stressor for me.
And that’s so, like minimal. It’s just division, and I was like eight. Not even. I was probably a little younger than that. But I think that says a lot about who we are as first-generation Americans and first-generation students. Having to go through these kinds of, like being able to reconcile these differences between our families and the school that we’re going to or the environment that we’re in is a huge deal. And that brings a lot of strength to us, like emotionally.

We’re very prepared to keep going, and to, we’re very determined people. I don’t think I’ve ever met another first-generation American or first-generation student that is not super, super determined. They’re not, they’re never going to settle, if that makes sense. It will never be enough. It’s a good thing. It’s also a bad thing. But. But it’s really inspiring to me, to be able to talk to these different people. Because I think also in Miami, basically everybody is a first-generation American.

Like 80-70% of people that I grew up around are first-generation, like, Americans. So their parents are from Venezuela, their parents are from Colombia. Cuba. Dominican Republic. Miami is a melting pool in every sense of the word. So that was something that I kind of don’t really pay attention to, or never grew up paying attention to because it was normal for me. Everybody speaks Spanish. Everybody has different, kind of similar traditions for Christmas Eve or different holidays and stuff like that.

So it’s kind of something that I never paid attention to until I got here. And then I realized there’s so many different people that I get to talk to. People from Europe. People from Asia. People from Africa. People from South America, that I’ve never been able to interact with on a regular basis and now I get to do that. And it’s really eye-opening, and it’s very inspiring.

**KD:** On to academics. We talked a little about being pre-med. Could you talk about your program of study, how you chose it, and you know, from freshman year to now, what you found valuable about it?

**ER:** So right now I’m completing a double major in neuroscience and math. So two very different things. I think, I chose neuroscience originally. So I applied to Hopkins with biology, in the sense of in my head that’s what I thought you needed to be a doctor, right? Let me just say right now that I’m terrible at biology. I’ve struggled with it for a very long time. But it’s, there was like a girl from my high school that she wanted to apply to another school, and I was like okay, what are you applying as, and she was like neuroscience.
And I was like, okay. Interesting. So I did some research on it, and I was like wait a second. This sounds a lot better. Like, this sounds like exactly what I want to do. Because neuroscience encompasses so many different things. So there’s a huge biology aspect. Cellular, molecular neuroscience is a huge… I want to say it’s like half the school’s career.

There’s a bunch of different things you can do. You can take more of a psychology path. You can take more of a computational neuroscience path, which is what I took. You can take a cellular molecular biology neuroscience path, which is crazy. Because it’s a really, really vast field. And it’s growing a lot. So, it’s… there’s… we don’t know anything about the brain. And I felt that I wanted to be a part of the community that advances that. Even if it’s like .0001% of an advancement, it’s something. So I think that’s what kind of interested me in the first place. So, I did kind of steal that idea from one of my high school classmates.

\[\text{KD:}\]
Like-minded.

\[\text{ER:}\]
She directed me in the right path. And then, math. Math was an accident, I will say. Math I kind of, so, in my head I needed math to have structure in a semester, if that makes sense. Because math to me has always come very naturally. And it helps a lot, because it provides a time where I’m doing stuff and all I’m doing is computing. And I’m not reading, and I’m not you know, doing other things. I’m not running back and forth between computer programs. I’m just computing.

So, it was kind of, I did a semester without math, and I was like, I can never do this again. So, I just kind of, by the time I realized, like you have to officially declare your major, I had gone through more than half the math major. So I was like okay, well, might as well finish it. So as weird as it sounds, it was an accident. But it was a phenomenal accident. It's opened a bunch of doors for me. I’ve met a bunch of different people through the math program. Yeah.

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\[\text{KD:}\]
Have you had any memorable professors or classes?

\[\text{ER:}\]
Yeah. I’ve had a few different classes. A bunch of them were during COVID so they were online. But for example, like the neuroscience cellular and system class, which is the infamous
Hopkins neuroscience class, equivalent to the Harvard Math 505, or whatever class it is. It was definitely a strange experience. But it was my first real experience with real, real, real neuroscience.

Like down to the bone, every single cell, every single protein. It was really interesting. But from then on, that kind of secured it. Because if you make it past nervous systems, you’re good. You’re good to go. From that point on, from then on you get to pick. But cellular and systems is kind of like the last requirement that you have to take in order to be able to take a bunch of different classes. So that for me secured a lot of what I wanted to do.

*KD:* What year did you take that?

*ER:* Sophomore year. So it’s a sophomore neuroscience class. That kind of secured what I wanted to do. And from then on, it was straightforward. So my advisor, which is Dr. Dani Smith, we’ve been pals, I guess, since freshman year because she’s my advisor. So I had her for a class freshman year, and then nervous systems happened.

And then after that I took another one of her classes my junior year. So I took Diseases and Disorders of the Nervous System (DDNS). And on top of that, and being my advisor, we’ve gotten really, really close to the point where she hired me to then be a TA for that class. So we’ve come a really long way, and she’s been an incredible support system for me. I’ve kind of come to her with basically everything.

Like, my life is a mess, help. And she’s been very, very helpful. In terms of not only as an employer, not only as an advisor, but almost like as a friend I would say. She helps me out with a bunch of different things. She points me in the direction of academically what I should do. So it’s been a huge, huge help for me. And she’s an incredible support system. I think she’s just a wonderful person, and I cannot thank her enough for all the help she’s given me.

And on top of that, I would say the math department is really, really close. So being that I’m also a TA for that department. We’re all very close, and all the professors you work with are really, really helpful. So I TA’d for a few professors that are in the process of rewriting the service course curriculum. So the service courses being like calc one, calc two, in both the engineering and biological sciences one. So I’ve gotten to work with a few of them, and they’ve been really, really helpful.
So I’ve worked really closely with Dr. Emily Braley, who has been a huge help, again. Math-wise and outside of math-wise. We’ve had a few late nights grading here, so we’ve gotten to talk a lot, and it’s been really helpful. She’s a really good person to talk to. She’s helped me a lot, in terms of helping me figure out my time management, because some of these classes are really grading heavy, and it takes a toll.

Because part of being a TA is being able to sacrifice your time for other people. So she kind of helps me out, in terms of being able to give these people the best of what I have. So being able to pay 100% attention to what I’m doing with them. And she’s really helped me out, in terms of guiding me onto the next step. So one of my potential options for my gap year is being a math teacher, because I have a math degree and I might as well use it.

So she’s helped me a lot in terms of here’s what I would do. Here’s what I would do in this situation. So I’ve struggled sometimes with attendance. That happens a lot. And she’s helped me out a lot and given me a lot of constructive tips that you can apply in the classroom, but you can also apply to different social situations. So with them I’ve gotten really, really close.

And on top of that I work now with Dr. Richard Brown, who’s the Director of Undergraduate Studies in the math department. And he’s been a huge help also in terms of like, he’s helped me find help for some of my classes. He’s now my boss. And he’s been a really great support system. He’s very direct, and sometimes that’s exactly what you need.

He’s also been working really hard to reconstruct this math curriculum with Dr. Braley. And they’ve been a huge support system for me, I would say. And just overall the math teaching staff has, they’re incredibly helpful. They’ve all been through the same path. They know that math is hard, so they’ve been really helpful, I think.

**KD:** You’ve touched on a few different, TA’ing and other jobs. Could you just describe kind of in general the different internships or jobs, positions you’ve had while at Hopkins?

**ER:** I’ve had a few. So, freshman year, freshman and sophomore year I think I did the Matriculate program, which is where we help, I think it was like high-achieving low-income students apply to college and learn the college process, which was a really, really big thing for me.
After COVID, that kind of changed a little bit for me, in terms of I wanted to take other opportunities. So, I became a PILOT leader sophomore year, which was, it’s still to this day one of my favorite things that I’ve ever done. So I did that freshman year. And then I, junior year I moved up and I became part of the advisory board. I’m still part of the advisory board.

And then let me see what else. I’m the Jay\(^1\) for certain events. I don’t know if I’m allowed to say that, but I’m the Jay. Surprise. So I’ve been the Jay for a few different events for the athletics department. So sometimes I’ll go to basketball games and lacrosse games, and I take pictures with people. They don’t know it’s me. It’s a really good opportunity. I think it says a lot about who I am.

KD: That’s awesome.

ER: It’s really, really fun. I enjoy it so much. I’ve been a TA for the math department since junior spring, so for a year now. Which is definitely my most time consuming job. But it is so rewarding. It is so much fun. Because I actually do get to teach a section. I get to facilitate learning. I do the math help room. I do my own office hours. I meet with the other teaching staff, and it’s really fun.

I think that’s what set the ball rolling for me in terms of maybe considering a math teaching opportunity for my gap year, because I love teaching and I love interacting with people, and that gives me the best opportunities to interact with the greatest amount of people. And then last semester, last semester? Last semester. I TA’d for Dr. Smith. Dr. Smith and Dr. Baraban who run the DDNS course. So I TA’d for them.

That was also a really great opportunity, because that class is unique in the sense that it’s not a traditional classroom style. Like, it’s not lectures, it’s not PowerPoints. It’s a bunch of different people from a bunch of different departments of the med school or at the med campus that come, and they teach their research essentially. So we’ve had people come on myasthenia gravis. We’ve had, that was Dr. Druckmann. We’ve had people come on ALS.

We’ve had people come to talk to us about hearing loss and cochlear implants and a bunch of different things. So I get to

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\(^1\)“Jay” is short for blue jay, the Johns Hopkins University mascot.
interact with a bunch of different people in more of a professional sense. Being that they’re researchers and doctors and scientists, we’ve had people from U. Penn come to talk to us about traumatic brain injury, which is a huge thing because he’s Cuban. And it’s a really, really great opportunity to see people advancing.

Because people coming from Cuba now I think are relatively young, I would say. So people came before me, so like I would say the generation before me, being able to see them succeed is a huge motivator for me. So that was one of the biggest things, teaching-wise. Let me see what else. Oh, I do Blue Key\(^2\). I don’t know if that’s a job. But I do the tours for school. And then I’m part of a few different clubs.

\textit{KD:} I think both, sort of internships, jobs, but then also really any other clubs or activities.

\textit{ER:} Okay. I also do research at the med campus. So I’ve been in two research labs thus far, which I think is a really unique opportunity that Hopkins also allows. The ability that you’re actually able to, there are opportunities. There are sufficient opportunities for you to be able to jump. Like, for you to be able to be like okay, maybe this isn’t something that I like and I want to try this other thing.

So before I was in a computational neuroscience lab, which I loved. But I’m terrible at computers. So, it was a big challenge for me, and I kind of wanted to be more in a wet lab sense. So, I moved on, like through the Hopkins, I guess, research opportunities. So now I work with Dr. Amanda Lauer at the med campus at the Center for Hearing and Balance, which is one of my favorite things. It’s so much fun. I’m learning so much.

So I’m an undergrad researcher there. And I’m also lab assistant there. So I kind of have two different jobs going on in the sense of, I get to deal with my own research that I’m doing with a post doc. And then I get to deal with lab stuff, so I get to deal with the handling of a bunch of different equipment. I get to do, like checking the equipment, making sure everything’s up to code. Making sure all the papers are written.

I get to proofread a bunch of different things. I get to test out different equipment. Be familiarized with a bunch of different things, which is a huge, huge opportunity for me. And then I was the Vice President of chapter development for Phi Mu last year, so

\(^2\)“Blue Key” is short for Blue Key Society, a student organization within Undergraduate Admissions which provides campus tours and orientation programming for prospective and admitted undergraduate students.
for this last term that just ended now in January. Which was also a big thing.

I get to interact with a lot of different people, a lot of different organizations, a lot of different Greek organizations. But also non-Greek organizations. We get to work with the Children’s Miracle Network hospitals, which is a really great thing because we have one here. And it’s been a really fun opportunity. I’m on the exec board of the Cuban American undergraduate student association. I’m a senior senator for student government. I’m a Blue Key member.

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Just a bunch of different things. Oh, I’m, like a volunteer for the Violet Project, which is also a really cool project that Hopkins has going on. So there I volunteer at the baby hospital emergency department. So basically what we do there is we give out pamphlets and information as well as different menstrual products, like sexual health products.

So we give out STI testing kits. We give out pads, tampons for people who menstruate. Or people who just overall need these materials and need this information. Because it’s not readily available. It’s not something you can Google and ask. So what we do is we kind of direct them to our website, which actually has a feature where they can ask like, this is happening to me and I don’t know what to do with it.

And they’ll put it into the computer, and the computer will answer. And it's like a licensed doctor who actually answers one-on-one. And then they have access to being able to purchase these products. Not purchase, but like, get these products for free. So you have period products, you get sexual health products, and stuff like that which has also been a really, really great opportunity.

Because I think we take a lot for granted, being, having access to these kinds of things. Because there’s people who, I’ve seen people who are just so thankful and so grateful for being able, for us giving them this tiny goody bag full of different things that they got to pick out. Because they just don’t have regular access to that. So that’s been a huge, huge thing for me.

I’ve shadowed with a few doctors also at Hopkins, which has also been a really cool opportunity, because it’s definitely a different environment than what I was doing before, like, in Miami, because
it’s more of a really, really big hospital setting. But also, Hopkins has the unique research aspect of it. And it has a lot of different, smaller fields.

So for example, I shadowed with neuroplastic surgery, which is basically like skull reconstruction type of things. Which is a really unique field, because there’s not really a lot of places where you can see that. And it’s really cool that Hopkins has that, and there’s ongoing research on that. And so it’s been a really, really cool thing for me to be able to do.

KD: Thanks. I’m going to pause our recording. [Break in audio] Okay. So, thinking about jobs and internships, can you talk about how you spent your summers or your breaks from school?

ER: Yeah. Since I was 16, I’ve worked at a uniform store. So I did that, I think my freshman summer, on top of like, I did a few different opportunities here and there. But basically if I remember correctly, that’s what I was doing all that summer, because it pays decently. And you know, college is expensive.

So, after that I did, I spent a summer working, jumping back and forth. So I did a little bit of, it kind of bled into the summer a little bit. Mostly through the spring semester. But I did, I worked, so this was when I was in Miami during COVID. So shadowing opportunities and clinical opportunities were a little tough. But I was able to work as a physical therapy tech for a while.

So I was working with people for a little bit. And then I was connected through the same clinic to kind of the clinic that feeds in people. So I was working with a podiatrist for a really long time, which I loved, because it’s like a real clinical experience. Like, real hospital experience. I got to go to surgery centers and watch surgeries. It’s really weird, because it’s a podiatrist but you don’t think your patients might be a huge risk.

Like, one of our patients almost died. And I was like, this is what I never would have thought this would have happened. It was a really great opportunity. And then, also that clinic was kind of unique, in the sense that it has a lot of different people coming in. So we had two different clinics. One that’s kind of like in a nicer area. But there’s a lot of different people, so we had a few people come in without insurance.

We had a specific case where this woman shattered her ankle. She fell out of a tree or something, and she shattered her ankle. We
took an X-ray and there was fully nothing there. Like, it was just like, the outline of a foot. And of course she didn’t have insurance. She was an immigrant from Venezuela. So it was cool, because we had to figure out what do we do with this? Because there’s no way this woman can survive. Like, not survive. She can never walk again, on this foot.

And it was cool, because you’re working with people who are also like I said, Cuban descendants if you will. So there’s a few people that were from Cuba working in the clinic. There’s a few people who are like maybe second generation. And then there was a few people like me. A lot of students. People that were coming from podiatry programs across the United States. So we got to interact with a lot of different people and see how they react to this kind of situation.

And then, the other clinic that we, that was the same doctor. Like, Monday Wednesday Friday it was one clinic. Tuesday Thursday was another one. So the other clinic was in a lower income area where we got to work, we were really close to the HIV clinic in Miami. So we got a lot of patients being shuttled to us from there, because a lot of them have a variety of different problems, like different ailments, if that makes sense. Like, they have on top of the HIV, so that creates problems with being able to receive treatment when it’s from certain things. Like being able to receive skin grafts might be affected.

On top of that, they usually have a bunch of comorbidities. So sometimes they have diabetes, which is a huge thing in the podiatric community. A bunch of different things that were happening on top of that, it’s a lower income area so we had a lot of people come in with different restrictions. So sometimes your insurance won’t cover.

If they have a wound, their insurance won’t cover a skin graft for it, for example. And we have to figure out how to deal with that. And it was really cool and very, very eye opening, because who thinks of that? You think that you can walk into a medical clinic or a hospital and just receive the treatment that you need. You can receive it, but how are you going to pay for it?

So it was really, really interesting, and being able to, have to sit down and think critically about how we were going to attack this
type of situation. How you’re going to take this person who literally cannot walk and has no insurance, how are you going to take them? And how are you going, it needed to be operated on. So eventually what we did, is we kind of pulled them in through the ER of the hospital we worked in. And then we picked them up.

We kind of, you kind of claim them as your patient, if that makes sense. Very informally. But that’s what we did. So we got to help her out, and she was so incredibly grateful. And the doctor being that he was a private clinic, he was able to chop off a little bit of the price of the surgery. Because inevitably surgery is really expensive. And he was able to kind of give her a plan to be able to pay this off. Help her out. Because it’s a private clinic, which is a huge advantage that they have.

And you know, she was super grateful. I got to see her again and again as she came back for follow-ups and every time she was glowing. Like, brand new person after that. In her boot, obviously. But it was a really great opportunity. And then, last semester, last summer, I studied abroad, which was fun. So I got to study abroad in Salamanca in Spain. So I did a neuroscience research program, which is actually how I met my PI. And now I work for her.

So, but that was also a really cool program. It was only five weeks, which, well, being that it was a summer program, that was a little on the shorter side. But it was a really, really jam packed five weeks of straight up learning. So, you get to absorb a lot of the culture, so we only had school Monday through Thursday. We had school like eight a.m. to like two or three p.m.

So it was very cool in the sense that you get to learn in a whole different environment. Like, learning in Spain and we also did a program in Prague. Learning in these countries is nowhere near the same as learning here. It’s a different structure. It’s a different plan. People have different goals. And then, that class is also similar to the one that I mentioned before, that it’s a bunch of different researchers from a bunch of different schools coming in and presenting their work.

But this is more of like an up and coming research type of thing. And it was specifically auditory research. So we got to see a bunch of different people come in and explain. So we have people from Carnegie Mellon. We had Dr. Shinn-Cunningham from Carnegie Mellon, who’s huge, being the fact that she’s also a woman in the field, which is wonderful. We had a few people from U. Conn., so Dr. Oliver’s the one that runs the program.
We had people from Hopkins, so we had obviously my PI. And then we had a few different people. We had people from NYU. U. Mich., a bunch of different people coming in. Also, and people from Salamanca, obviously, coming in and presenting their research. And it’s like up and coming. This is what I’m planning to do. I haven’t done it yet.

And it was super, super cool, because then the assignments were that you have to think of your own research project and propose it, based on the ideas that they give you. So it’s a really cool class. I have never learned so much in five weeks. And then you get to take a Spanish class.

So being that I am a native Spanish speaker, I got to take advanced scientific Spanish, which is really cool. Because essentially what you’re doing is you’re reading scientific texts in Spanish, and trying to figure out how to go from English to Spanish, Spanish to English. Or figuring out the differences in what they’re saying. Or like, how they phrase different things. Because people in different countries have different goals than the U.S. had.

And then on top of that, you got to explore this beautiful, beautiful city. We got to go to different places in Spain. We got to go to Prague. And it’s huge. It’s beautiful. It’s honestly one of the greatest experiences that I’ve had. And being that my family, we’re Spanish descendants. It’s kind of cool, because you’ve got to go back to your roots. And like, at some point, this is where we were. So it was really fun.

And then Prague was also beautiful. We got to go to the university, the Czech university in Prague, and see their research programs. See their research labs and stuff like that. We got to do one-on-one. Like real, hands on labs. So I got to patch my first neuron there. It was so much fun. Kind of everything that we learned in neuro lab here, I got to put in perspective, and I got to see how people are actually using this on a day-to-day basis. Like, this is somebody’s life. So that was really fun. And then, that’s it. This summer I’ll be doing my med school applications.

KD: You’ve mentioned your family as a support system throughout your college experience.

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Could you talk about that a little more, how your relationship has been as you’ve been at home with them during some breaks or during COVID, and then back as you’ve been here, how that’s been?

*ER:*

Of course. So my family and I have always been, we’re very close. My grandparents come for dinner, or like lunch-ish, dinner-ish. A late lunch, if you will. Every Sunday. We spend a lot of time with my cousins, being that we’re all kind of the same age. So I’m the oldest one. And my second oldest cousin is like, the one that follows me is two or three years younger than I am. And then my sister is eight years younger than I am. So, we have a little bit of a difference.

And then my youngest cousin is 21 years younger than I am, which is really fun. So we get to spend a lot of time together. We love hanging out together. We’ve always been really, like my house has always been the hub for people to come hang out. It’s just where it ends up always. Because I’m always the one, being that I’m the oldest one, I always wind up inviting people to my house. And like come, like I’ll help you study for the SAT. I’ll give you my books. Here, I’ve done it already.

Which is a huge privilege to have, being able to guide them in this path that they’re trying to take, with something as minimal as getting through calculus or something, to them, as important as getting through the SAT or getting through a high school entrance exam. For them, it’s a really big deal. And being able to guide them is a huge thing for me.

And then on top of that, my family, my grandma lives less than a mile away from my house. We’re just very close, all the time. Like, there’s never been a point where my family is distant in any way, which is a huge thing. It’s a huge privilege to have. But in terms of being a support system, I think everybody’s really been able to help me out with being in college, being far away. It’s been a huge thing.

I call my grandparents all the time, or they call me and like, how’s it going? Are you okay? My grandparents always think that I’m starving. Because it’s not the same. My grandparents, that’s their love language. Food is their love language, for a lot of Cuban people and a lot of different Latin or Hispanic people. That’s their love language. So they always send me back with food, like jar my food up and put it in a huge container, and like, wrap it in saran wrap and send me over here with food.
But they’ve been a huge help in the sense that they, when I’m nervous about an exam they’ll send me a text like, you’re going to be fine. Everything is, you’ve got this one. There’s no reason why you’ve been fine on the last ones and you won’t be fine on this one. Sometimes it’s like, no, I’m not, it’s not going to go well. They’re like, you’ve got this. We believe in you. You know what you know. And then, they’ve also like, they’re all excited to come to my graduation. A lot of them are coming. This is the first time.

So for example, this is the first time my grandparents have been here. Like, my parents have been here a handful of times, in the sense of like, I need them to help move me in and stuff like that. But they’re very, very excited. Like, they text me every day. They’ve had their flights booked for a few months now. Being ready, like they’re very excited for me to come. It’s, for me to be able to come home and me to be able to have this under my belt.

Being able to have a degree, have two degrees, from Hopkins, is a huge deal for them. And it’s a huge deal for me, in the sense that I get to do this for them. I get to, because of the struggles and the things that they’ve done, to be able to create a better life in their family outside of this political climate of Cuba that was not very constructive in any way, shape or form. Being able to like, help them out as much as I can, by advancing myself, is a huge deal for me to be able to do, for me to be able to like give them the opportunity.

I’ll never give them half the opportunities that they gave me. That’s just impossible. I can never repay them for all they’ve done. But this is a step in the right direction. Being able to accomplish these things and do it also for my family, and for my country. Because not a lot of people get to do this. Not a lot of people get to escape Cuba. Not a lot of people get to see what life is like outside of Cuba, and what life is like outside, like having food on the table all the time. Air conditioning.

Like, it’s ridiculous. Having TV that’s actually in a language that you can understand. TV in Cuba’s mostly Russian. Or when my parents were growing up it was mostly Russian. That’s a huge thing for me. Being able to have these opportunities, I have to make the most out of it. You know, to give them some sort of satisfaction that what they did was worth it. If that makes sense.
KD: That makes a lot of sense. In terms of your time, living at Hopkins, could you talk about your overall dorm or apartment life, different living situations you had?

ER: Yeah, I’ve had two. So my first living situation, I was in Wolman. Very small room.

I think it was probably the smallest room in Wolman. Like, we calculated it. Our room was 100 square feet for two people. It was cozy, I’ll say. It was also, it inevitably became the hub for my friends. So it was really fun. So we lived there in, it was like suite style living. I had a roommate who’s still my roommate to this day. It was fun. I would definitely say, it was the college dorm life, that you think exactly what you think it is.

You get to, it was fun because you get to just go upstairs or downstairs to visit your friends. You don’t really have to go anywhere. And then I moved just next door, to the Charles. So, not very far. We wanted to be close to campus, just because we’re two girls living alone. And it was just convenient. The opportunity presented itself, and we’re like okay, why not take it? The rent is good. We can afford this. It was, it’s a really great accommodation for us.

Like our rooms are nice, and we’re very clean people. We’re Cubans, after all. I think it's been great. I think, I don’t have very much to say about the Hopkins dorm life, just because I didn’t get to experience it for as long as I would have. But I will tell you that I applied to live in Homewood my sophomore year. I never lived in it. But, I tried. And we would always go to the dining halls together, and it was fun because they were all relatively close to where we were. We would always cook in our dorm. It was fun.

We had a really reactive fire alarm, so we would, we set it off with the steam from the shower. We set it off with toasting bread. Like, not even burning it in any way, shape or form. Just a gentle toast. But it was fun. It was memorable. It was part of who we were at the time. And I think it’s been great. I like having a little bit more freedom than in a dorm now. So I live in an apartment. It gives me a different sense of freedom, but also a different sense of responsibility, in the terms of if I don’t pay my rent nobody’s going to pay it.

So like a dorm, it just gets paid. Like, you pay for it like at the
beginning of the year. Or if I don’t cook, I’m not going to eat. So, it’s a different sense of responsibility. But I feel like it’s been a really great opportunity that prepares me for what my life is going to be like from now on.

KD: What would you say in general about living in Baltimore? The different neighborhoods that surround campus, other Baltimore neighborhoods that you’ve been in? And also just Maryland in general?

ER: It’s definitely different from Florida. It’s a lot colder. I would say that living in the Charles Village area is cool, because it’s very student friendly. There’s a lot of different restaurants and stuff like that that make our lives all that much easier. Because sometimes there’s just no time to cook, or sometimes you really don’t feel like it. Or sometimes you just want to reward yourself and go out and grab your food.

And being that everything is close, it’s nice, I like that we have the security going around, which definitely makes me feel safe. But I don’t think I’ve ever felt unsafe, if that makes sense. Like regardless of whether I’m in the Hopkins security area or not, I’ve never felt like threatened. I think a lot of that comes with the fact that I’m from Miami and I’ve gotten used… I’ve always locked my doors at night. I’ve always been like, I’m a very observant person.

So I like to walk people and figure out if I’m in a situation that I want to be in. And if I’m not, I take myself out of it. And then also, the working at the baby hospital, which is a whole different neighborhood, I get to work with a lot of people that I’m like, people from Miami, kind of like refugees, immigrants, that have come, and they just come to our hospital because they don’t have a PCP, or they don’t have insurance.

So it’s definitely a lot of different things. I never imagined that Maryland would have such a strong Latin and Hispanic community. Which is awesome. Because I get to interact with them, and I get to provide them a social tie, because it’s not every day that they get to speak to somebody who speaks Spanish. And it’s a really big thing to me to be able to provide them that comfort, and provide them that opportunity. That I get to explain to them, everything’s going to be fine. Here’s what we’re going to do. Like, A, B and C.

And it’s helpful to them, because it provides them a little bit more
comfort in the sense that somebody knows what’s going on. Somebody knows that they’re, like they get their situation if that makes sense. But I don’t think I’ve ever felt unsafe in Baltimore in any way, shape or form. I don’t carry pepper spray. I don’t carry it, which is kind of, I should. But I don’t carry anything because I’m very observant of the situation that I’m in.

And I won’t put myself in a situation that I don’t want to be in. Potentially, that I don’t want to be in. I won’t go if I think that it might be risky. But I don’t think I’ve ever felt, and I’ve been here a while now. I don’t think I’ve ever felt threatened in any way, shape or form. I like living here. It’s a really cool community. It’s very quiet, I will say. Especially going downtown, it’s a really, really pretty area downtown, like the Fells Point, Inner Harbor area is really pretty. I like going there. I like living here. I don’t mind it at all.

[1:10:00]

**KD:** Do you have any favorite restaurants or museums or anything like that?

**ER:** Museums, I’m not a big museum person. I like them, but I don’t know. I just don’t make it a priority to go. I do like going downtown a little bit, and just kind of like in the Fells Point area. There’s a lot of different tiny restaurants that I like a lot that I just kind of go and I walk into one if it looks good and it smells good. So I would say I’m not very picky. There’s a few different restaurants that I like. I like the little diner that’s right across the street. The, like, oh. The name escapes me. It’s like, the one with all the toys and stuff on it.

**KD:** Oh, Paper Moon?

**ER:** Paper Moon. Paper Moon. I love Paper Moon. It’s so much fun to go there. Paper Moon is fun. I like going to like, R House is really cute, because it’s also walking distance, which helps. And it’s a nice walk. I like walking a lot. Just because it’s, like I said, a time where I’m only walking. So I like going there. I like, along the Inner Harbor I walk into places and if I like them, I’ll just go and I’ll eat there. I especially like when it’s a smaller business, just because it, if I can provide at least one help to the community by eating at a small business. Which doesn’t cost me anything. If I’m going to eat, I might as well just eat there. I think it’s a really cool opportunity to go there.
**KD:** I think maybe one of the biggest ones is obviously the COVID pandemic, but one of our questions is whether there were any historic moments or events globally or nationally that happened while you were at Hopkins, and your experience being on campus for different kind of goings on in the world?

**ER:** Yeah, I think there was one point, I think it was junior year. There was a whole uprising in Cuba where a lot of things were happening. And overall the COVID pandemic has affected Cuba in a really, really different manner, just because they don’t have the same access to medicine that we have. They don’t have access to the Pfizer, the Moderna vaccine. They have their own vaccines, which at the same time can be just as damaging as they could be helpful.

And there was a lot of uprisings and stuff in addition to that at the time in Cuba. And it was kind of difficult because being that Cuba is relatively small. It’s not something a lot of people pay attention to. It was kind of different to explain to people why I was frustrated, and why I was kind of, I wanted to bring this to people’s attention. And it’s not something that regularly gets talked about. So I think that was one of the bigger things. I was, I think it was during COVID a little bit.

But I still talk to people from my classes and stuff like that. So it was kind of different to explain that to them. And explain to them exactly what’s going on, and how I feel about it was a little bit different for me. And on top of that there’s been countless injustices that have been happening to people worldwide. So all this like, all these movements that have been happening, both in the United States, outside the United States. Like Venezuela’s been going through a huge crisis.

A bunch of different countries have been going through a huge crisis. We’ve gone through the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been a huge, huge revolution, that’s been going on in the United States, that needs to be talked about. Needs to be continued. It can’t just be put on the back burner. Like, none of these things are, all of them I would say are of equal importance in the sense that this is something that if we don’t do anything about it, nobody else is going to do anything about it.

We as Americans have a huge, huge privilege to be able to help them out. Be able to bring this to light. We have access to a lot of different things. We have access to different social media. People
in Cuba generally don’t have access to a lot of social media, for example. And then, we have access to unique resources in the fact that we can provide them funds. We can provide them clothes should they need them. We can provide them different opportunities, and overall just provide them support in any way, shape or form, which is a privilege that we uniquely have and that we need to exercise as much as possible.

**KD:** Thank you. You talked about medical school. And I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind speaking on your plans for the future, life after Hopkins. Whether that’s academic, professional, immediate or otherwise.

**ER:** So ultimately I do want to become a doctor. That’s a huge part of my life. That’s what I’ve been working towards this whole time. I think I’ve reached a point now where I’m in a good place to be able to take that step. I’m planning on taking a gap year in order to be able to save money, to get myself an apartment, get myself, pay off my car and stuff like that. To kind of take that stress off my parents’ back. Because if I’m able to do it, I absolutely should. So I’m taking a gap year – just to save up some money, to be able to be emotionally ready to go through this but also financially ready to devote a lot of my time and a lot of my resources to this.

So I’m planning on saving money this whole year, living at home, just to be able to do that. And ultimately I plan on going to medical school. I don’t know where. I have a lot of options in my head. I have a few ones that I prefer, that I would be really, really interested in. Not necessarily prefer, but that I have a special interest, just because they have access to certain programs that I like. So on top of that, yeah.

And then as far as what kind of doctor I want to become, I have a few options. I really like the idea of being a PCP. Being able to build connections over time with people or being like a pediatrician. Somebody who’s with somebody for a really long time. But I also don’t have the experience under my belt to have seen all these fields of medicine and be able to pick one just yet. So. Those are my plans for now.

**KD:** I think you’ve mentioned auditory research. Is that the kind of, you know, work that you might be interested in?
ER: Yeah, for sure. I think if provided the opportunity I would like to go back to that at some point. To be able to contribute to that community for a long time. So my grandpa is very, he’s almost deaf. He’s a stubborn Cuban guy. So he has his government, not government, insurance issued hearing aids.

But I think a lot of the motivation behind wanting to do auditory research is being able to create opportunities for people who don’t have regular access to something as big as a cochlear implant. Or you know, that kind of thing. Being able to create opportunities for them to get these things. People like my grandpa, who just aren’t at a place to be able to get that right now. You know, like healthcare-wise. And like, his job, his insurance.

His family is obviously super ready to support him. But in terms of, that was never a priority for him. Just because when you come from another country, and you come to bring your whole family and to raise your family here, that’s not a priority for you. Your family is a priority for you, and I want to be able to give people the opportunity where that can be a priority, if that makes sense. It’s not as minimal, but something that we take for granted, sometimes people have cochlear implants or hearing aids and you don’t even see.

So I want to be able to facilitate that and a bunch of different opportunities, especially like the Latino community in the future. It’s a really big part for me, to be able to give them a helping hand so that they can prioritize themselves. So they can prioritize their health and their, not only physical health but their mental health. Like a bunch of different aspects that contribute to health overall. I want to be able to facilitate opportunities for them to be able to prioritize themselves. And they should prioritize themselves in every way. Yeah.

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

ER: I absolutely would recommend Hopkins. I think that Hopkins has given me a bunch of different opportunities that I don’t think I would have been able to get anywhere else. Academically, research-wise. But also to interact with people that I wouldn’t normally get to interact with.

So for example, had I gone to school in my hometown, I would have interacted with almost the same people that I interact with in high school and stuff like that. So being able to come here and
being in an environment where almost no one is from here. This isn’t like a state school. Being that it’s a private university, it’s people who actually really do want to come specifically here.

So you get people from all around the world. Which is a really, really great opportunity to have in that you don’t get to talk to these people on a normal basis. You get to talk to for example, in Miami I get to talk to people who are at most from a Southern American country. But here I get to talk to people who are from the other side of the world. People who are from Japan. People who are from Africa, from different parts of Europe, that I never would have been able to interact with otherwise. Which is a huge, huge opportunity in the sense that it has expanded my cultural horizons so much.

And I’ve learned to, having to interact with people in a sense that I make them feel at home, or try to make them feel at home as much as possible. And I think Hopkins just has a huge research community that I think is a really big part, has been a big contributor to my future. And kind of what I wanted to do has been a big thing for me, that I think Hopkins uniquely offers. And on top of that, I would say the environment here is constructive, so I think people sometimes get the wrong idea that it will be really competitive and people will be all cutthroat.

But I think quite the opposite. I think if you put yourself in a cutthroat environment, it will be cutthroat. But I think there are more than enough opportunities and more than enough people who are willing to help you, who are willing to be with you. Because everybody’s going through the same thing. Everybody wants to go from point A to point B. And if you find the good community that can help you, that’s ready to support you. There are a multitude of such communities that are willing to help you. And also, there’s just different organizations, and you get to be part of different, very, very niche clubs, that I think are really, really cool.

[1:20:00]

So there’s a few podcasts I think are awesome. There’s a few sports teams that I think are cool. We have a Quidditch team. Who finds somebody who has a Quidditch team? Which I think is unique. I think that there’s a lot of different opportunities we have that I don’t think I’d be able to get anywhere else. What was the other part of the question?
KD: So the next part of this question is also related to the question after that. It’s what advice would you give students coming here?

ER: I would say that it’s definitely academically rigorous. I would say, I’m not going to lie about it. It’s hard. College in general is hard, because it’s a huge change, especially when you’re moving out of state or you’re moving to a different area. It’s a huge, huge change for you to be able to go from living at home or like living in a certain community to living here.

And on top of that, changing your classes. Changing the way that classes are structured. Because now you don’t have eight classes in a day. Now you have three or four at the very most, that require a lot more attention than normal. So it’s definitely, I would say a lot of people suffer with imposter syndrome, and a lot of people suffer with I’m not good enough for this. I wasn’t meant for this. This is an accident. Like, they accepted me by accident.

Absolutely not. I think that everybody who comes here has been through a very, very detailed, very personal, like acceptance or admissions process. Everybody’s here for a reason, and everybody has something to bring to the table here. And I would encourage a freshman to take it easy. Like, take it, work hard. But you are meant to be here. 100%, everybody who is here is meant to be here.

And everything you’ve done so far has led to this moment. This is the best place for you to be. And it’s going to be hard, and it’s going to challenge you. But it’s so worth it. And you learn so much. And there are so many people, professors, TA’s, teaching staff in general. Your friends. Different communities that are willing to help you. You are absolutely not alone on this journey.

And on top of that, I would say for anybody, not specifically freshmen. But, take advantage of every opportunity you have, because chances are this is an opportunity that will be here for four years, and then it’s gone. I would say it, to take advantage as a senior, now I get to look back. Learn as much as you can, absolutely.

You know, take advantage of every class. Talk to your professors. They’re humans. They may have given you a really hard test, and it’s going to happen. But most of the time it’s like, professors really, really just want you to learn. Hard tests are made for critical thinkers. And they’ll help you. They’re absolutely willing to help you, regardless if the class is hard, if the class seems impossible.
There are more than enough people willing to help you, and there’s a support system for everyone here.

Yeah, I would say take advantage of every opportunity. Talk to as many people as you possibly can. Make friends. And I would say above all, my thing is protect your peace. If you find that you’re in an environment that doesn’t bring you peace, go. Get out. Don’t even think about it twice. Because there are a multitude of opportunities for you to go through that are going to bring you peace, so why stay in one that you don’t like?

So, I would say that Hopkins, there’s a delicate balance for students to do well. But also to, this is college. Enjoy yourself. This is an opportunity. You’re never going to be 19 again. You’re never going to be 20 again. Celebrate your birthday with your friends. Absolutely, go out. Take a walk. My roommate always says to like her PILOT students, touch grass. Go outside. I think, you have to prioritize yourself a lot. In order to succeed as much as you can, you have to pick yourself, is my advice.

*KD:* That’s great advice. Do you think that there’s a way that Hopkins could increase its support for its students?

*ER:* Hm. That’s a good question. I would say that there’s a few different ways that we can maybe use the opportunities we have to take a step further. So, I think students have a unique voice that needs to be heard. A lot of the times that maybe a professor will make a class too hard, it’s legitimate, because a professor believes that students can do this. So sometimes if a class is too hard, talk to your professor. Be like, I don’t know what I’m doing.

And the professors, sometimes they might just be like as lost as you are. Especially if there’s a professor that’s new, or a professor that maybe, like coming back from COVID there’s a huge learning curve for both students and professors. And I think being able to accommodate that and being able to hear students’ voices. An emphasis on the student voice from all fronts. From the teaching staff and from other students as well, is I think the best way that Hopkins can help out.

Creating a platform for students to be able to both voice opportunities and be heard. And the students to feel like they’ve been heard. Does that make sense? I think that would be a really great opportunity. I also think we have a lot of opportunities that are not paid attention to. So for example, we have Learning Den. We have PILOT and stuff like that, that are really, really valuable
opportunities. And I just think that they need to be promoted a little bit more, if that makes sense at all.

[1:25:00]

And I think that there are ample opportunities. I just think that there needs to be somewhere that somebody can go and be like, this is my problem. Let me pick which resource I can have. Because we have them. People don’t know about them.

KD: Sure. Awareness, for sure. I think you’ve done this quite a bit in our interview, but one of our final questions is kind of broad strokes. How would you summarize your time at Hopkins?

ER: Hm. I would summarize my time at Hopkins as I think one of the, the best learning experience, the best, most constructive experience that I could ever have asked for in every sense. Like, I’ve gotten the opportunity to make a bunch of different friends that I never would have made otherwise. I’ve done a lot of research that I literally never would have been able to do otherwise.

I’ve been able to work with people, work with people in my clubs. Work with people at the hospital, that I would have never been able to see otherwise. So I think Hopkins has given me so many opportunities that are so unique to this school and so unique to this environment, that I don’t know. I can’t describe them. They are just incredible. They’ve opened so many doors for me. So I would say that my time at Hopkins has been such a big learning experience overall, on all fronts.

KD: Well, that’s the end of my questions. Thank you so much for all that you’ve shared, and for taking the time to speak with me today. I wanted to ask if there’s anything else you would like to add before the interview is over. Any part of your Hopkins experience that didn’t come up in the questions or something that you would like to touch on.

ER: Not that comes to mind. Yeah, I don’t think I have anything.

KD: Great. Well, thank you again.

ER: Thank you for having me.

KD: Sure.
[End of Audio]