"SP"

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

March 17, 2023
This is Kristen Diehl here with SP on March 17th, 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 our interview with a couple of questions related to the pandemic in order to recognize the particularly challenging experiences and changes these students faced. So, our first question is how do you feel the coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience? What are some challenges or changes it caused for your personally?

SP: Okay, so the pandemic and the lockdown for school for here at Hopkins happened in my freshman spring semester, so it was still my freshman year, and I was still adjusting to being a Hopkins student. It was pretty much – I was thinking about it, and it was a month after a friend of mine died here on campus. That was something that I was also dealing with at the same time, and then also some health scares. It was like, “What’s happening?” and then the pandemic happened. Then I grew up in Jamaica and came here to the U.S. pretty much after high school and so, I have family here, but it wasn’t like the same bond that I had back home in Jamaica. I was scrambling to figure out where am I going to go, what am I going to do. At first, it was – the school said we could
stay here on campus. It was like, “That’s great.” Three days later, they were like, “Oh, no, you’ve got to go.”

That was a struggle to figure out where I’m going to go. I did stay with an uncle for a couple months, and then I moved down to Florida to stay with my aunt. Luckily, I had a safe place to be. Then the summer that followed after was crazy – summer of 2020. But yeah, the pandemic, I think on a social sphere, it kind of like halted my means to integrate with the community at Hopkins as much as I’d want to. I’ve always been very shy, a bit introverted. So, it was kind of hard for me to make friends my freshman year. I did have a couple of close friends. But yeah, I think even coming back from the pandemic, it was kind of hard to readjust to being a Hopkins student. How do I engage with the Hopkins community, especially being a shy person? So, I don’t know. I feel like there was lots of growing and learning that happened in those months. I don’t know. How did it impact me? I’m trying to think of anything else. I don’t know. Yeah, I think socially definitely was challenging. Familywise, trying to figure out where to go was challenging as well, but I’m happy that I did have a safe place to stay and I was with family in the end. I was safe overall. Then when I did get back to Hopkins and got back to campus, I was able to see friends I hadn’t seen in months, so that was nice. And then get back into the groove of being a student here at Hopkins.

*KD:* How did you find remote teaching and taking courses during the quarantine period?

*SP:* That was a challenge. Because I’ve never – obviously, many of us had never done something like that before. It was pretty much me being – trying to stick to routines and trying to establish routine for myself so that I wouldn’t get too lazy. In that semester, freshman – fall – no sorry, spring 2020, I think I started out pretty good. I was able to get a groove and go to my classes and not skip them, do my homework and everything. Then by the time fall came around, fall of 2020 – yes, fall of 2020 [laughter], it was harder. I took orgo 1\(^1\) online and that was just like the professor wasn’t working with me, like, the way the class was being taught, the lectures. I was rolling out of bed five minutes before class and skipping some classes. So that was an adjustment. Not having the right tools and devices and having other people in the house at the same time and trying to navigate through that. It’s like, “Oh my gosh. This is so hard.” You think probably it might be a bit easier. You’re just going to turn your computer screen on and get the work done. It really isn’t. I

\(^{1}\) “Orgo” is short for organic chemistry.
wasn’t prepared for that. Luckily, Hopkins did have – because if you’re on financial aid, you had access to computer grants.

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So, I got an iPad and some noise-cancelling headphones during that time which was really great. So, I’m happy at least Hopkins stepped in at that point to assist with that especially for students who were probably low income. That much I appreciated.

**KD:** Yeah, I didn’t know that. Those sound really necessary and helpful. If we move backwards in time, you mentioned that you’re from Jamaica, could you tell us where you were born and a little bit about your family?

**SP:** Yeah, so I grew up in Jamaica, went to high school there all the way up to – well, we have 13 grades – all the way up to the 13th grade. My family is from there. Both my parents are from Jamaica. I lived in a house with two more aunts, and two more younger cousins and we were just all women in the same house, like six of us in a small three-bedroom house. To be honest, I never felt like I was in need of anything. I felt very comfortable growing up. My dad didn’t live with me because my parents were never married, but I would still see him very often. We have a good relationship. So, I don’t know.

My mom – my parents were really invested in my education. “Education is the key.” That was their whole thing. From very young, I was getting Smart Alec books and the games that you play online that are more educational than I don’t know, like Minecraft or something else. It was more educational-based games, and so that was a very big investment from my childhood. I excelled really well in school. I went to a preparatory school, a prep school, which is the equivalent to an elementary school. Then I went to high school in Jamaica, one of the best in the country, if I do say so myself. I did very well there in high school. I won a couple awards like nationally and regionally for the Caribbean. And I think I really had a good foundation family-wise and education-wise. It set me up to really succeed at Hopkins. At least in that first year, it was – that first semester was really good at Hopkins, to be honest.

**KD:** Nice. Could you tell me a little bit more about your parents’ educations and also just their occupations or their professions?
Yeah, so none of my parents went to a four-year college or got their bachelor’s degree, so they’re both like I think high school diploma. I know my mom took a bunch of classes afterwards. I don’t know what they were called – ABE classes that were in finance or something. I don’t know if they were like Associates degrees or I don’t think it was a Master’s program. No, definitely not, but she did that way later in life, back when I was still in high school. I remember her doing those exams. She works as someone with data entry/accountant type of role at a law firm. She did that up until 2019. She was doing that for over two decades, but then in 2019, the company – even before the pandemic actually, yeah, the company got dissolved and moved and everything. So, she lost her job.

It’s been hard for her since then. She hasn’t gotten a job of equal value since then. Seeing her go through that has been hard, especially when you’re about to go to college, and it’s a couple months before you go to college, and your mom loses her job. And when she’s the main person who was supporting you, that was hard to see. My dad, similarly, he did high school and I think he was also taking classes. I think right now – he’s here in the U.S. with me. I think he’s doing some Master’s program right now. I’m honestly – I don’t ask him that much. I know he didn’t go to a four-year college or get a Bachelor’s degree. He was also in accounting and when he came to the U.S., it was really hard for him to get a job because he didn’t have a Bachelor’s degree. I remember him working – it was hard for him to find jobs that were similar to what he did back in Jamaica. I think that was very challenging for him, and eventually he started a retail job, and then he had another job with [redacted], which was some type of accountant thing.

So, at one point, he had two jobs and now he’s working somewhere else, and he’s given up the retail job. He’s getting his things on track. It’s kind of weird because usually, that’s what you expect of the person who is just coming out of college, or even just out of high school if they don’t want to go to college. If you’re in your 20s and you’re trying to figure things out and you’re doing multiple things at once and seeing him do that when he’s almost 50 is – it’s a weird experience. I sympathize with him heavily for it because I know it’s probably very hard for him to move from somewhere where he was pretty comfortable and was able to get by to somewhere where he’s constantly challenging – challenged. But yeah. I think I answered your questions.
KD: Definitely. Thank you. Could you speak a little bit more about the town or the area you grew up in?

SP: I lived in a residential area. It’s in a – it’s hard to translate because it’s not in the U.S. Jamaica’s divided into parishes, and I lived in a parish called St. Catherine and in a town called Spanish Town. So, I lived in a community, very residential area in Spanish Town. That’s where I grew up my entire life up until 18 before I moved off to college. Very – I was going to say a quiet neighborhood, but that’s not true. Boys on the street would be playing all the time. It was lively in its own way. I had lots of neighbors who were around the same age as I. So also, friends growing up at that time. I didn’t go to school in the community though. I went to school in another parish and had to traverse one to two hours in the morning to get to school. When I tell my friends here, they’re like, “What?” I’m like, “Yeah, that’s just normal.” Yeah, it was a nice neighborhood. I felt very safe there. Yeah, we were in the family home, so I also had my cousins who I was growing up with. Yeah, I liked growing up there.

KD: In terms of high school, what was high school like? You mentioned winning some awards. Could you talk about extracurriculars you were involved in or different areas of study that were interesting to you?

SP: I think from elementary school level, I was always a high achiever. In Jamaica, it works like you go to the sixth grade, and you do a national exam that everyone does and then they place you into a school based on your results. So, I got very high results, and got to a school, my first-choice school. I got to that high school, and I was with other people who were also the top of their schools, which is also an adjustment, because I was no longer at the top of my class. But they had a big emphasis on academic rigor and I think it challenged me in some good ways. I developed a really strong like for the biological sciences. So, biology specifically, I was really interested in. That was really my main thing throughout, and at the time I was thinking, “Oh, I’m going to be a doctor.” That was a childhood dream. So that was the track I was on. Doing the sciences like bio-chem.

I dropped physics after the 10th grade. I hated it so much [laughter]. But that was really my focus, and then I had a couple positions like leadership roles. We had things called prefects and subprefects, which were really hall monitors in a sense if you want
to make an equivalent to the U.S. You go around and tell people, “Oh, don’t do that.” Write them up if they’re doing something they’re not supposed to do. I was deputy head girl at one point. So going up the rank in that sense in leadership. Then extracurriculars, I did badminton. I think I did netball for a little bit. I don’t remember to be honest. I liked netball but I never did netball. That’s a sport. I don’t know if Americans know what netball is. [laughter]

KD: No, I don’t.

SP: It’s like basketball but for women. So, it was really that, and I was in the astronomy club at one point, just a bunch of after-school things. We had Interact which was like Rotary, like a volunteer type of thing. I think it was pretty – I didn’t do too many extracurriculars after a certain time because having to make a two-hour journey home and two hours in the morning and also do homework, it was so hard. There were things I did because I needed to have it on my record to say – show the colleges that I am involved on campus. So, I had my leadership roles. I had some extracurriculars, but it was mainly focusing on my academics and making sure those were up to par.

KD: Sure. How did your parents feel, and how did you feel about the college application process, thinking about where you were going to go? Did you always imagine going to school in the United States, and how did you choose Hopkins ultimately?

SP: The college application process was the most confusing thing ever and I would never want to do it again. Trying to figure out the Common App, especially – it’s one thing when your parents have never been to college, but then also a college outside of Jamaica or in a different country altogether. We were all very confused about how the process worked. I remember getting very frustrated with my mom because she couldn’t help me. Of course, she can’t help me. She’s never done this before. But I was definitely frustrated. I didn’t really have many resources to help. My school had a college counselor, and I would get help from her.

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Then lots of my peers were also applying to schools in the U.S. So, I would probably ask them questions every now and then. It was still a very confusing process. I remember the CSS profile was dreadful. How do you – we don’t have the same tax forms or stuff like that to give financial information that your schools require. So
that was really confusing. There were more parts to your question. Can you repeat it please?

**KD:** Yeah, in terms of which schools you were looking at, were you always thinking of going to school in the U.S.? Were you looking at any schools in Jamaica? How you ultimately ended up choosing Hopkins.

**SP:** Okay, thank you. Yeah, that was my big thing when I was in sixth form or 13th grade, trying to figure out where to go because as I said, I had always wanted to be a doctor growing up. But then, when I was 17 – 2017, that’s when I heard I was going to be moving to the U.S., because my uncle and my dad had been doing this process to try and get us migrated to the U.S. for years. I didn’t really know about it until I was 17. “Oh yeah, now you’re migrating to the U.S.” I’m like, “Wait. That throws off all my plans. I was going to stay here in Jamaica and go straight into med school right after high school” because you can do that there.

So, I was kind of conflicted like, “Okay, I’m going to be a resident. It probably makes sense to move to the U.S., and so I have to think of schools in the U.S.” It wasn’t so weird because many of my peers were also going to school in the U.S. Some of my close friends that all went to the U.S. and did school there. So, I was looking for different schools. As I said, I wanted to be a doctor. So, for me, Johns Hopkins just kind of made sense. I remember reading a book when I was in the 9th grade or something about Ben Carson, and he went to Johns Hopkins. He was a neurosurgeon. So, I was like, “Oh my god. I want to possibly do neurosurgery. I want to go to Johns Hopkins too.” I think I was a bit confused about university versus med school. It doesn’t work the same obviously, but I think I was thinking “If I get into the university, of course, I’m going to get into the med school after.” That’s not how that works. [laughter]

Johns Hopkins was my frontrunner from that point on. So, I applied and luckily, my college counselor told me about the fee waiver option. So, I got lots of – I got my application fees waived for the Common App. So, I applied to a whole bunch of schools. Hopkins was kind of my top choice. I probably applied to UPenn and Stanford. If they accept me, sure. Those are also prestigious schools. We’ll see. They put me on the waiting list, and Hopkins actually did accept me. Among all the other schools I did apply to as well, Hopkins gave me the most aid. I was like, “Okay, I guess I’m going to Hopkins.” That was great for me because it was one of my frontrunners in the first place. It was difficult to make the
decision of, “Do I want to stay in Jamaica and go straight to med school? Because if I want to do medicine, why go somewhere else and do four years first and then do another – then do four years after in med school?” I think I rationalized it as if I go to the U.S., I can broaden my horizons, and decide if I actually do want to do medicine or if there’s something else I want to do. That was my deciding factor, and the fact that legally I’m a resident of the U.S. To navigate, “Oh you have to be in the country for six months at a time” and stuff like that, it just made more sense to move to the U.S.

KD: Can you describe the first few weeks in the U.S.? Did you come straight to Hopkins, or did you live in the U.S. for a period before your transition to Hopkins?

SP: Yeah, so I officially migrated in 2017, but I finished high school up until 2019, so I had been to the U.S. a couple times to visit relatives, visit friends, my aunt who I did live with during my sophomore year during COVID. She lives in Florida, so I visited Florida a lot, but I did have family here in Maryland as well. That was where I was moving to. So, I’d visit my uncle in Maryland a couple times just to also get the legal processes done and have that all sorted away. I’ve been here a couple times, but never an extended period of time to really live in the U.S., just maybe like two weeks for a vacation.

KD: And then can you describe your first few weeks at Hopkins, moving into campus, getting to know your roommates and acclimating?

SP: So, I came a week before the real orientation because they had an international student orientation at the time. And it was weird because I’m not international, but I feel like I identify more with international students because I grew up in a different country. I’m technically a domestic resident, but I did international student orientation and came a week earlier.

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My roommate was actually also international which was cool. I remember just I don’t know. I did come late for that orientation actually because I was trying to push my time as much as possible to stay in Jamaica as long with my family. Those first couple weeks was a whole adjustment period to living on my own for the first time. I told you I lived in a house with five other people to now living in this dorm with just one other person and having to
share that space was weird and trying to get accustomed to American customs and the way people do things and talk and everything like that. As I said, I’m a very shy person. So, it was hard for me to make friends in that first week. I don’t know. I had my FYM\(^2\) group that we had for orientation, but I felt like everyone else knew everyone because they did these pre-O programs, like pre-orientation programs but I did not get to go to because I was in a different country, and it just didn’t make sense for me.

I kind of felt left out. I was like, “Oh my god. These people already have it figured out. I don’t. I know nothing about the process of being here and how to be a college student or how to be American or anything else.” So socially, it was weird to adjust and then adjusting also to food on campus, and saying, “Oh my god. This is really bad. I want to come back home. I want my mom’s cooking.” But classes were okay. Calc 1 was a struggle because I’m just not good at math. I try, but it’s just hard. That was a struggle and having these big lectures with 200 other people. It was like, “Whoa, that’s so many people.” Making friends in classes was a challenge. But otherwise, I took all the classes that were things that I was interested in. I took a class called Intro to Hopkins: Arrive and Thrive. It was on the advice of a peer mentor.

I think they had FLI\(^3\) mentors for your first semester. So, I did get a mentor who was talking to me before I got to the U.S. and told me “Yeah, you should take this class. This is how you register for classes.” Things like that on the back end. She was really helpful in getting me adjusted in that way. Taking that Arrive and Thrive class was helpful for knowing what the resources are on campus. My professor was very intentional about “Go to office hours and take a selfie with your professor to prove that you actually went to office hours.” “Go to these buildings on campus and see where those resources are.” I think that was a very good introduction to Hopkins in general and what’s available to me as a student. Then I took some other classes that were just fun, bio-focused because that was what I wanted to do. Those were smaller classes, and they were engaging. My first week – my first couple weeks were good academically, still adjusting socially, but overall, it was fine.

\(^2\) “FYM” stands for First-Year Mentors, Johns Hopkins students who provide peer-to-peer support to ensure the successful transition of all new students into the Homewood community.

\(^3\) “FLI” stands for the First-Generation, Limited-Income Network, an organization on the Homewood campus which supports the success and inclusion of first-generation and limited-income students on campus.
KD: Can you talk about your academic journey throughout your time at Hopkins? What major or minor you ended up choosing? How you’ve found it so far, and what you’ve found valuable about it? I know you’re interested in medicine, or you were, so if you could talk about that.

SP: So, I actually came for SOHOP\textsuperscript{4} when I got accepted, and I was interested a lot in the public health major, but then I applied as MolCell as a – because you apply, and you tell them what major you’d probably be interested in. So, I said MolCell. I came in and I was along that track, trying to take classes for the Molecular and Cellular Biology major, and that’s the major I stuck with. I’m still a MolCell major. Then in my sophomore year, I figured out the anthropology major, but I decided to minor in it instead. It was a pretty fun minor. I didn’t do much of social sciences or humanities in high school. I was very, very STEM heavy, but I’ve always been interested in history and the cultures of people. Anthropology was a fun way to explore that in college and I’m happy I found that minor. It’s a really fun minor and with some great people. It’s a small major. It’s a small major, so I see lots of the same people all the time and the same professors. It was nice to get into that community. So up until my junior year, I decided I wanted to be a doctor. I had my first panic attack during a biochemistry class online. It was just so hard, and I was not getting any of the content. I just felt so frustrated, and I eventually saw a counselor here on campus. She gave me such great perspective that I don’t have to force myself to do that. I can evaluate it like “Do I really want to be a doctor? Is this something I really want? Or was it something I decided when I was seven years old and just stuck to because it made sense?”

[0:25:00] I was doing well in biology courses and yeah, sure, naturally I’m going to be a doctor. So, in my junior year, I really thought about it. “Do I want to do this?” I started applying to different internships in different career fields. I applied for something at Morgan Stanley and got through to one of the interview stages. Didn’t eventually get it, but it was still on my radar to “Okay, you don’t have to be a doctor. You could also do public health if that’s of interest to you, or just do something completely different.” So, since my junior year, I was applying to different things. I applied to [redacted] and got a job there. I decided I’m never – I’m not going to be – I’m not going to be pre-med anymore. So, I dropped the pre-med thing pretty much the beginning of my senior year.

\textsuperscript{4} “SOHOP” stands for the Spring Open House and Overnight Program.
But I still love the MolCel major. It’s a love/hate relationship. I don’t want to say I completely love it. But I still enjoy the major and the classes I’m taking. I enjoy biology and my research I do in my research lab and stuff like that. I still enjoy that aspect, but career wise, I’ve shifted gears for practical reasons and just because I want to see what else is out there.

*KD:* I think that’s really smart and probably really common, I’m sure. Do you have any memorable professors or classes that you’ve taken?

*SP:* My freshman year, Ann Elizabeth Brodsky, she was my – what was that class called? It was an introductory writing class, expository writing class. It was a class with 15 students, and she was very intentional about learning our names and talking to us and getting to know us. I felt like she went above and beyond just caring for her students, especially because the pandemic hit during that semester when she taught that class. I don’t know. She was just a very warm person who made me feel like, “Okay, I belong here and I can do well.” She always gave me great feedback on my work. I always like getting compliments for my work. That also helped that she was giving me all these good compliments on my work. So, I don’t know. Something about her just made me feel like safe and comfortable here at Hopkins and I really appreciated that. Then even before that, in my freshman fall, I had a – I think she’s a staff member. I don’t think she’s faculty. But she taught the Arrive and Thrive class – Irene Ferguson. She helped me get my first on campus job.

I was struggling to – the finances part of being a college student was just also hard my freshman year, trying to figure out how to do that. Tuition was covered by Hopkins, but I still had to figure out room and board and I knew my mom had just lost her job. So money-wise things were tight. I needed to get a job on campus, and I didn’t know how to get that done. I reached out to her, and I asked her and she set me up with someone in the Dean of Student Life offices, and I got my first job there. So, I am really grateful to her for that. Then throughout the years, I feel like I’ve had a bunch. My current advisor right now, Katie Tifft, for the MolCel major – honestly, at first, I was like, “Oh my god. I don’t really like her classes. These classes are so hard, and the way it’s structured, I’m not a big fan of it.” But getting to know her as a person, she’s just been a really phenomenal person and I’ve been able to go to her and talk to her about anything. I do really appreciate her and probably some other professors, but I can’t remember them all right now. Needless to say, I’ve had some really good experiences.
with some of my professors and really feel supported by the faculty here at Hopkins.

**KD:** Could you talk a bit more about your overall dorm or apartment housing situations while you’ve been here?

**SP:** Yeah so, my freshman year, I lived in AMR2. So, I had one of those regular 2-person dorms and that was just a weird adjustment to living with someone else who I don’t – I’m not related to and trying to navigate that. I remember she’d always slam the doors. I’m like, “That would never happen in Jamaica. People don’t slam doors in Jamaica. Why are people slamming the doors so hard? I’m trying to sleep.” Navigating that was a bit weird. We were friendly but we were never really close. We weren’t besties in the way that lots of people become besties if they’re roommates. So, we were cordial of course, but it was never like, oh we were really friends. My bedroom was just somewhere I came to sleep and get work done, but it was never like a social place for me in my freshman year.

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Then sophomore year, I did my first semester in Florida at my – with my aunt, and then the second semester I came back to Hopkins and lived in a single apartment style in Homewood Apartments. That was nice. I like living by myself and not having roommates. Then from junior year to senior year right now, I live in one of the row homes back on Guilford Avenue. Yeah, that’s been fine. I have like two other housemates. The house is nice and spacious enough. I don’t bump into them too much. It’s fine. They aren’t Hopkins students. They’re other people from the community, but I found the house through the Hopkins housing platform, so it’s kind of weird because all my other friends live with friends they met freshman year. I don’t have that type of relationship with people here or that type of housing situation, but I think I’m pretty comfortable. It’s a bit of a far walk but other than that, it’s fine.

**KD:** I wonder if it’s maybe, I don’t know, nice or interesting to live with folks who aren’t super ingrained in Hopkins or being a student. Maybe a little bit refreshing perhaps? I don’t know. Possibly. [laughter]

**SP:** Yeah, maybe. [laughter] Sometimes.
KD: You’ve touched on this a little bit, but could you expand further on internships or jobs you’ve had at Hopkins?

SP: Yeah, so as I said I had that first job at the Dean of Student Life. That was great. Met some great people there. I worked there until we had to shut down for COVID. Then after that, I didn’t go back there. Sorry. Then where else did I work? I got a study consulting job, so I’ve been doing that since my junior year. Still a study consultant. I love that job. I love working with students on a one-on-one basis and getting to learn their stories and try to help them along this whole college journey. I had a virtual job through the School of Public Health with the clinical trials department. So, I help out with that. That’s very interesting to see the behind the scenes of how a clinical trial is run. So that’s a really cool job. I also – I tell my postdoc that I have like three jobs. He’s like, “How do you even do that?” Yeah, I have the job with study consulting, the clinical trials job, and I also… I’m a part of International Students at Hopkins. And in the position I have, it is paid. So, I also have a job there through them. Then I also do research and my research is paid, so I guess that’s technically also a job. Yeah, over my years, I’ve been doing a bunch of things. Mostly Hopkins related, nothing that’s outside or internships. As I said, I did apply with an internship with Morgan Stanley but that never worked out. Then I applied for the job with [redacted] and it did work out, but I haven’t actually worked there before.

KD: What sort of research do you do as part of your work?

SP: Yeah, so I do research... for my MolCel major, you have to do six credits of research to get the major. So, it’s basic science research. We work with the zebrafish as our model system, which I like, because I don’t want to be killing mice. [laughter] I like the zebrafish. We study lipid metabolism and things like cholesterol and diabetes and most metabolic diseases that lead to cardiovascular disease. I really like my research and people I work with. I think it’s really impactful research and even though it’s at a very basic science, not too translational right now, it’s given me a different perspective on to what else I could do. If I don’t want to stick with a corporate finance job, maybe I can go back and do some research afterwards. Because I do enjoy the work I do there.

KD: I’m just curious because I work in the library and kind of stay in the library, but is that research, is that in Mudd Hall that it takes place?

SP: No, Carnegie Institution which is on San Martin Drive.
KD: Okay, yes.

SP: So, they’re very close by. It’s pretty much on Hopkins campus, but they aren’t a part of Hopkins. It’s a weird relationship. I never know how to explain it. But there is also research that happens in Mudd Hall. I know lots of my friends do research at Mudd Hall, or at the med campus. This is just one of the locations you can do it.

KD: Yeah, it’s such a large ecosystem. I’m always curious where different research takes place and who’s involved. So, thank you. Are there any other maybe non-jobs but clubs or activities that you’ve been a part of at Hopkins?

SP: I’ve been a big part of the Hopkins Sports Taekwondo Club since my freshman year. I did karate as a kid, and so I’ve always liked martial arts. There was no karate club here on campus, so I just did taekwondo because it seemed pretty similar, similar enough.

So, I did that, and I’ve stuck with them for the entire four years I’ve been here. I really love that club. I’ve also been part of the BSU, the Black Student Union, ISAH, which I mentioned earlier, International Students at Hopkins. Those are the main ones. I’ve been to other events on campus like Female Leaders of Color. I’ve been to some ASA events, African Students Association. But my main clubs are like Hopkins Sports Taekwondo and ISAH. Oh, and I’m also an EMT for HERO, Hopkins Emergency Response Organization or Unit depending on how you want to say it.

KD: So, two follow-up questions. Taekwondo on campus, do you compete against each other or other schools? What’s the culture of that club?

SP: We compete against – we do both. We compete against each other in practices to train and get better. There are actually two taekwondo clubs on campus, so people always ask “Whoa, what do you do?”

KD: Do you compete against each other?

SP: We don’t compete against each other actually. We don’t interact much. We should do that more. We also leave campus and do competitions with other schools on the east coast. The Naval Academy is our sister school in a sense. We have the same
coaches, so we do joint practices with students from the Naval Academy and also from UMBC, and just last – earlier this month, we went to Princeton and had a competition there. Usually in the fall, we go to Cornell. I had an opportunity to compete with people from other schools and that’s really been fun.

KD: Yeah, that does sound really exciting to go and compete at different schools. My other question is about the Hopkins Emergency Response Unit, and how you’ve found that and if you could just talk more about it.

SP: Yeah, in my freshman year, well in orientation they had a whole speech about what the unit is. Obviously as a resource for students if you are in an emergency on campus, you can call Hopkins Security, and someone from HERO will come to your assistance and provide some basic life support. So, hearing about that and at the time being very, “I want to go to med school”-focused, that made sense to me. So, I wanted to get that experience, and so I applied in my freshman year. Didn’t get through. Then I reapplied in my sophomore year and did get through at that time.

It’s been really fun meeting people but also getting the experience of working as an EMT. I’m nationally certified. I’m certified in Maryland. I’m actually an EMT and being able to assist people on campus when an emergency arises. That’s been interesting. So, it started with my initial passion of wanting to go into medicine. Even though I’m no longer going to pursue that as of now, I still stuck with the club because I think they’re great people there. They have such a good – they’re very important to the Hopkins community.

KD: Yeah, that’s a great service you’re providing, but then also just a great set of skills to learn and to have that could serve you through the rest of your life, whether you go into medicine or not. Could you talk about how you spent your summers or breaks from Hopkins? I know COVID, the quarantine was kind of its own interesting break. But otherwise, whether you stayed on campus, or went home, or went to your aunt’s house or relatives.

SP: Yeah, so that freshman summer, I couldn’t go back home. Borders were locked and everything. I went back – I went to Florida, stayed with my aunt there. Then my sophomore summer, I think I stayed in Baltimore. Yeah, I stayed in Baltimore. I think that’s – I was doing a couple jobs there. It’s honestly a blur. It all blurs together at some point. No, I think I went home my sophomore summer, went home to Jamaica. That was my first time back in Jamaica in a
long time. I just had to go back home. So, I went back home. Then my junior year, I stayed in Baltimore. That’s when I got my research position and my job at the School of Public Health where I did clinical research stuff. Then yeah, so I spent – it was a mix. Sometimes I’d go home and sometimes I’d stay. I’d try at least to have a couple weeks back home in Jamaica. So, I’d probably go at the beginning of summer break just to see family. Then I’d come back, and I’d stay for the bulk of the time in Baltimore, especially that junior year.

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

SP: It’s changed. I’m still very close with my mother. We’ve always been very close, so that still persists.

Freshman year, she called me all the time, like every day and I’m like, “Mom, I’m in college. Please do not call me every night.” I wasn’t doing anything. I was still at home, being a homebody, but still, I would like to be a homebody in peace. I had to have that conversation with her during freshman year. She was not pleased. She was like, “Just answer the phone. I want to know you’re doing okay.” I’m like, “I get it.” I am her only child, so I also get it. With my dad, oh my god, it’s been – I think I’ve learned so much more about him since coming to college. He’s also in the U.S. Seeing him struggle so much trying to adjust in a similar way that I’ve been also trying to struggle and adjust. Seeing it from that perspective has been interesting and I think we’ve probably grown a bit closer since then. I understand him more as a person now since I’ve been in college and been to the U.S. I don’t know. I don’t think I thought too much about what my relationship was like with him as a kid, because you know he’s my father. I was a kid.

He’d visit me on the weekends because we didn’t live together. I’d see him every weekend and we’d watch cartoons together and talk, and that’d be fine. That would just be the extent of it for the most part. I’d see him during summer breaks. I’d go visit him and stay with him for the summer. Then so it was – we had a relationship, but it wasn’t too close. Definitely not as close as me and my mom, but there was a relationship there. No resentment or anything like that. Then when we got to the U.S. I think by the time I was a teenager, my parents always argued a lot. And so having my perspective of my father was through my mother’s lens. But when
I came to the U.S., I was closer to him than I was to my mom physically distance-wise. I got to learn more about him through my own perspective, and not getting clouded by my mother’s judgment of him. I think we’ve grown closer.

**KD:** Does he live close to Baltimore?

**SP:** Yeah, he lives – he’s close. I don’t know. It depends what you define as close. I can take the MARC train and a Metro train and get to his house within an hour and a half.

**KD:** Not too bad. This question is kind of related to that question, but what has your support system been like while you’ve been in college? Whether that’s your friends, or your family members, maybe campus programs, or anything like that.

**SP:** I feel like I’ve always had some sort of distance between myself and the people here at Hopkins and just my life here in America has a certain distance and I just cannot explain. I don’t know. I’ve had really close friends in high school, and we remain really close friends, so it’s been over a decade long friendship with my friends back home, and we have this group chat, and we’re always talking in the group chat. So, I talk to them more often than I talk to anyone else. I definitely talk to my mom very often, like every couple days. We have video calls. If I have a recipe to cook and it’s a Jamaican recipe, I’m calling her and we’re going to get through it together. I’m still very close with her, very close with my friends back home. My boyfriend also lives in Jamaica, and so we’ve been doing the long-distance thing for almost five years – almost four years, but we’ve been together for almost five years.

So, lots of my support system, my genuine real people I can tell anything to and get advice from… I kind of ask my friends from home and ask my family back home in Jamaica. Then here in the U.S., I do have friends here that I’ve some level of closeness, but it’s just not the same. It’s just not the same. I don’t think it’ll ever be the same, at least at this point. I’m a senior right now. It’s like it can’t get much closer if it’s not that close right now. But I do have friends here. My taekwondo club, I have friends from that club because I’ve been in there for a long time, so we’ll do fun things together and hang out together from time to time. With ISAH, I’m very close with the co-lead. She’s always been a great person. She’s very extroverted. She’s the type of person to just adopt you into the friend group. So, I’ve met all her friends. I’ve become friends with them. So, if I want to go out and have fun and be social, I can lean on my friends here on campus. But when it’s
something serious, I’m going to lean on my friends and family back home.

KD: Have you felt supported by Hopkins as a first-generation student, and I guess also as an international student?

SP: Yeah, I think in very tangible ways definitely. I think because they did have a big endowment from Bloomberg, that’s the reason I can come to this school and get my tuition covered because – and I mean, you say international, and I also try to – I say I’m international, but really, I’m not, because I can still apply for Pell grants and stuff because I’m low-income and I’m a domestic resident of the U.S. So from that perspective, I can get federal funding and my tuition is covered and all that, those nice things. From that perspective, yeah, and as I said, the computer grant that they had in that year of COVID was very helpful for getting me settled in and having the technology I need for my classes.

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So, in that way, I’ve been feeling supported. I know we have lots of programs on campus. Honestly, I don’t go to the programs that often enough to be – really lean in to the support systems they have in that perspective. But my support on campus and being able to adjust has really come from me reaching out to people in my circle and asking for the support I need. Like in that freshman year when I needed a job, I asked someone who I knew already and she wasn’t really related to the FLI program or anything else like that, but she was able to help me out in that way.

Then just different offices on campus have been helpful with finding housing and other things I need like a counseling center or anything else. I feel like the resources are there, and it’s just a matter of you using them. So, I’m happy that Hopkins provides those resources at least, so I know I can reach out to them to get that support. Yeah, so in that aspect, yeah. I don’t know if there’s – I don’t know if that FLI program itself or Hop-In or anything else that they do for FLI students specifically I would say have been really impactful in the way that just the organic relationships I’ve made with people have been.

KD: How do you think the university can increase its support for first-gen students and students in general? Any programs that you think are lacking or non-existent, or ways that you think awareness of different programs can be improved?
SP: Honestly, I think Hopkins provides a lot. I think resources are out there if you need them, and if you know how to find them. That’s probably the problem. People don’t know how to access them. I’ll mention something to someone, and they’ll be like, “I did not know that existed.” I feel like I know it existed because I took that freshman year class that forced me to go around campus and find the different buildings on campus that have these resources. So, I knew about resources like Student Outreach and Support. I knew about the counseling center. I knew about different programs on campus to get support when I needed it. So, I think it’s more the availability is there and when I was a part of the pre-med program and they had JUMP which is for Johns Hopkins Undergraduates in Medical – underrepresented in medical professions.

KD: Professions, yes.

SP: Yes, that it is. JUMP was really helpful for if you’re going to be pre-med and you want to go into a field but you’re a minority. So, I was happy they had that as a resource. I had MAPP in my freshman year, Mentoring Assistance Peer Program. So, I think Hopkins does a lot with providing different things on campus for people to do. It’s just a matter of students don’t really know much about it, and that’s kind of sad.

KD: Thanks. What would you say in general about your life in Baltimore and Maryland, going to different neighborhoods, trying out different restaurants or anything outside of school in Baltimore?

SP: Yeah, I’m a victim of being in the Hopkins bubble and staying in the Hopkins bubble. I’ve been trying to get better at that since my senior year. I think because we did have COVID, it was hard to jump out of the Hopkins bubble. In my freshman year, COVID hit, and so that first semester I was adjusting to life at Hopkins. I wasn’t too concerned about what else is happening in Baltimore. Then part of sophomore year was also just like, COVID. I wasn’t really focused on going out of campus. But then junior and senior year, I tried to make a bit more attempts to do that. I like where I live because it’s far enough from the central Charles Village area where students are like the Nine East or places that are closer to campus, and so I can go to the Waverly Farmer’s Market on a Saturday morning. That’s really fun. I go to the Giant at Waverly because it’s closer to me. I feel like that way it’s a way for me to engage with community members. When I’m going to Waverly, lots of the people I see are Black people who look just like me.
I feel like, “Yeah” and I see a hair shop where I can get – where I can buy hair extensions and wigs and things for my natural hair and that’s really nice to just have that access so close to me.Coming from a country where it was predominantly Black and to see people who are Black, that’s a nice taste of home for me.Different neighborhoods, I haven’t explored too much.

[0:50:00]

Just the other day, I went to Hampden. I was like “Oh my god. Hampden is such a cute place. Why haven’t I been here more often? Maybe I should go.” But I feel like I preoccupied my time with so many academics, and I told you I have three jobs and doing all of these things to get through school that I haven’t really given myself the time to explore, but I’ve been to D.C. a couple times, which has been fun. I’ve been to a couple of the neighborhoods out to go clubbing with my friends. Things like that but not often enough where I can tell you I have a favorite restaurant here in Baltimore or things like that.

KD: I’m curious generally what you find that you do or students do for fun around campus or with each other in general.

SP: I feel like people hang out with each other a lot at their apartments, lots of house parties. The frats and sororities obviously have their things and so people will go. Well, not the sororities. I don’t think they host, but fraternities host events. People go to frat parties on the weekend. As a HERO member, you will get called like someone drank too much and now they need help. So those are things that people do. I think Plant on a Thursday night, I didn’t know that was a thing until my senior year. That’s the popular thing you get into Plant for free on a Thursday night with your college ID. So, I’ve been doing that a couple times. Then just other bars in the area, people will go to. Then I guess people are very invested in their clubs here on campus. They have lots of different cultural affiliation groups and just interest groups on campus that people are a part of. I don’t know. I don’t know how to compare it to other schools or anything because people do say Hopkins isn’t much of a party school. But if I don’t have a base level to compare that to, I don’t really know.

KD: Were there any events or historic moments that happened nationally, locally, or internationally while you were at Hopkins? COVID is of course one of them but any other historic happenings that stick out, and what your experience was like living through
that, and being a student here? Any university response to different goings-on in the world?

SP: Yeah, two things jump out at me. Summer 2020, the Black Lives Matter protests and I remember the Black students on campus being disheartened by how long it took for Hopkins to make a statement about the killing of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor during that time. So, it was a weird time to be a Black student on campus highlighting the fact that yeah, you are in the minority. I was working on the board of the BSU (Black Student Union) at that time, and so also seeing the conversations behind the scenes of us trying to scramble to make our statement and also ask the university to do more, because they weren’t really saying anything. I remember oh my god. It was such a weird week. Someone made a comment on Reddit about calling the Black students on campus affirmative action students or basketball-Americans or straight up racist things to say about students who you interact with on a daily basis.

Because Reddit is Reddit, you don’t know who was saying anything. It’s all anonymous and I think up to that point, I was under the guise that I was at a pretty good school. People were pretty much liberal from what I could guess. I don’t really know who people are voting for, but everyone seemed like Democrat-leaning type of thing. So, experiencing that through that time where everything is heightened on a national level. It was jarring. It was like, “Whoa. So yeah, this is what the students have been talking about.” I feel like Black students talk about things like this and it never really— if you don’t experience it, it’s hard to say, “Oh yeah, that’s true.” It’s easy to say, “Oh that never happens. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But then during that moment to see in action was just weird.

Also, I mentioned I came for SoHop in 2019. I think it was around the time of the Garland sit-ins. I wasn’t a student then, but students were fighting against the private police and “isn’t that here at Hopkins?” Google is always listening to you, so I think Google picked up that I was going to go to Hopkins and going to be in Baltimore. So, I was getting lots of news from the Baltimore Sun and news about Johns Hopkins. I remember coming to Mason Hall in the Blue Jay Shuttle and on the floor in front of Mason Hall admissions office was “Hopkins is Racist.” I was like, “What am I getting myself into?” [laughter]

KD: That’s a red flag to see [laughter].
“This is my first day on campus. What is this? What am I getting myself into?”

I hadn’t accepted by that point. I was like, “Do I want to go to Hopkins?” But I think a part of me was – and it might sound really weird to say this, but I had already resolved myself to possibly experiencing things like this moving from a country where it is majority Black to the United States where the news you hear on the TV is someone else gets killed because of police brutality. You have this idea that America is a racist place, so seeing that on the floor was jarring to see it in the moment, but at the same time at the back of my head, I was like, “Okay, I guess I have to expect this. It’s a university that’s been around since the 1800s. What am I to expect?” Also hearing later on that Johns Hopkins wasn’t as abolitionist as we thought. He also owned slaves. People were like, “Oh my god. That’s so shocking.”

All the Black students on campus were like, “No, that’s not shocking. He was a white man in the 1800s. [laughter] We’re on a plantation.” It’s not that surprising. So, it was a weird moment of reckoning trying to – getting a new sense of who the people are on this campus and the people I interact on a daily basis, we don’t really know what they’re thinking. These are people you have classes with. I don’t know. It was a weird time. Then also feeling because I’m not a citizen, that I couldn’t really go out in the streets and protest. In the back of my mind, I was like, “I want to go out and protest as much as everyone else, but if I get arrested, I might get deported, so I don’t know what I can do.” Being in a weird situation where you’re like, “I want to do so much. I’m crying every day because the news is very disheartening, but I feel like there’s nothing I can do.” It was a weird time.

Yeah, wow. I’m going to go ahead and pause our recording. Okay, would you mind speaking on your plans for the future or life after Hopkins? What you’re thinking about in the next few months and maybe longer-term in terms of academic, professional, or otherwise.

Okay. So, for the short term, I know I have a job. It’s going to be in corporate finance, well – yeah, corporate strategy consulting, whatever that means, so it’s going to be in the corporate world. I know that for a fact. I have – I think it’s a two-year program that they have the new hires do and for the next two years at least I’ll be doing that. Afterwards, I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about
it. I might go back to grad school and do something in biology or public health because I’ve always had an interest in that, but at the same time, you grew up poor. You’re in this country where you have an opportunity to get to [alarm]. Oops, God.

**KD:** I’m sorry. I didn’t – when I restarted turn off my alarm. I apologize for that.

**SP:** Yeah, so I’m in a position now where I can build some generational wealth, something that it was hard for my parents to do, the people before me to do. Do I want to go back into a field where I might struggle? I talked to my postdoc and the people I work with in my lab. The joke is they’re all struggling financially. They don’t get paid enough for the work they’re doing. If I have a job that’s going to pay me six figures right out of college, do I want to go into a field that’s going to pay me less? So, thinking about if I want to follow my “passion” or just live a comfortable life because I think I deserve to. So, but for now, yeah, I have a finance job in the corporate world and that will be that.

**KD:** Is that local or?

**SP:** It’s in Virginia, close to D.C., pretty close to the Baltimore area or the DMV. It’s in the DMV.

**KD:** Sure. Would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students and is there any advice that you would give them?

**SP:** I think I’ve had a good experience as a first-generation student here at Hopkins. I think there’s been a big push to incorporate FLI students in – integrate them into Hopkins life and have them get well adjusted with all the programs that they do have, like Hop-In and just like everything that falls under the FLI umbrella. The big endowment that we get definitely makes a big difference. It’s one thing to say we have all these programs for you, but if you’re actually giving people the money and the means to go to a university that is as prestigious as Hopkins, I would encourage people, other FLI students to come here for that reason. Yeah, I don’t think I would have gone anywhere else, or it would have made sense for me to go anywhere else. So from a practical standpoint, yeah, I would definitely say Hopkins is a place to go if you’re FLI, and if they continue to be able to provide for international – not international students, sorry – for first-generation students in the way they have from a financial standpoint, because yeah, if you’re FLI, the money is the most important thing deciding where you want to go.
Then as for support after you already get in, and you have the money – the tuition already covered, there are programs that are available for you. You just have to find them and pay attention to it and ask for help. That was something I had to learn – asking for help and not trying to do everything on my own. That really did help me out. From that standpoint, yeah, I would say Hopkins is a good place to go for that. Advice, yeah, my main advice is to ask for help. If you need something, there is someone out there willing to assist you. I think I used to see asking for help as a sign of weakness, and it was very hard for me to do so. I realized that when I did ask for help, it was just – it would have saved me so much trouble if I’d asked for it earlier. “Why didn’t I just do this? It was so easy, and it was so quick.” People are here to help you, especially if they are staff members who were working for the university. That’s their job. Ask them for help. So that would be my advice, and just also talk to your peers, and talk to higher – upperclassmen about the things they’re doing and finding out how they navigated different things they had to navigate as a student. If you’re pre-med like so many other pre-med students are here who can help you with that.

**KD:** How would you summarize your time at Hopkins overall?

**SP:** Oh [laughter].

**KD:** It’s a big question.

**SP:** I don’t know. It’s not just about Hopkins. It’s also about moving to a new country and I think it’s hard to separate the two for myself. So, my experience with oh, how is it my time at Hopkins also encapsulates a question of how was my time as living in the U.S. for the first time, and getting used to that. The weather, the climate was a hard adjustment to make moving from the tropics to a more temperate zone where the four seasons are actually a thing. Moving to a place where you are a minority, if you are a minority, that will be difficult. That will be definitely challenging. Then but I think Hopkins provided me with so many opportunities that I wouldn’t have had otherwise if I’d gone to certain other places or stayed in Jamaica, and so for that, I’m very grateful. There really are a plethora of resources out there for you based on your interests. I do appreciate that. I think it’s set me up. From a real practical standpoint, at the end of the day I’m going to have a degree with Johns Hopkins University on that. That brings some
prestige that will open doors for me definitely and so I’ve enjoyed it for that reason.

But also, I think I’ve grown a lot as a person since coming to Hopkins. Naturally, you’re going to grow a lot during your early 20s and moving away from home. So, I’ve been challenged a lot just like academically, personally, socially, I’ve been challenged a lot. But I think it’s been all for the good, and I’ve come out a stronger, more intuitive person. I know myself a bit more and I know what I want, and I think Hopkins has played a role in that. I’ve also found community here, people who I can call friends, people who – faculty and staff who support and care about my success. That’s been great to find here and have that – my growth fostered in a place like Hopkins has been great. So, I did like Hopkins, the good, and the bad, and the ugly. The things you’re going to have to deal with as a student here that you’re all going to complain about the food at the FFC\textsuperscript{5} or Hopkins Café as it’s called, and it’s fine. If you’re a Black student, you’re going to complain about administration, and that’s to be expected, but you’re going to find your niche. You’re going to find your community and I feel like there genuinely are so many spaces out there for you, and I feel like I found my place at Hopkins.

\textit{KD:}\hspace{1cm} I’m curious when you look back over the past couple of years what maybe your best memory is or something that sticks out as memorable?

\textit{SP:}\hspace{1cm} Let me think. It’s really about the friends I’ve made and the experiences I’ve had with my friends just like the different house parties or just like hanging out with the people in my different clubs or different organizations and getting to know them on a deeper level beyond just like, “Oh yeah, what classes are you taking? Oh, you also hate orgo? Yeah, me too.” Beyond that, finding out about people and the lives they live and what their experiences have been like back home versus here.

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For me, it’s been all about the personal connection, my taekwondo club, and going to the parties that we had there, the socials we had there, and having dinner with them and eating with them. Learning about new cultures through the people I interact with on a daily basis has been really the most impactful thing. Nothing stands out to me like oh here on campus doing anything for academic-wise. Nothing like that stands out to me. I love seeing the Black

\textsuperscript{5} “FFC” stands for Fast Food Café, a dining hall on the Homewood campus.
community come together on campus, so when the BSU has events and we have a big turnout like we have our – I don’t know. It’s called a Homecoming or Black weekend, like the first weekend of school, stuff like that, making the Blackumentary. I remember I was a part of that. Oh my gosh. I was a producer for the Blackumentary or I helped to produce that. Hearing people’s perspectives about their time here at Hopkins has been a really impactful thing. Recording those memories and those – that history in itself, especially during a time like COVID and the BLM movement. So, yeah. It’s really just been about the people here and those experiences.

KD: Thank you. That’s the end of my questions. Thank you so much for everything that you’ve shared today and for taking the time to speak to us. Is there anything else that you’d like to add before we end? Anything that didn’t come up in the questions or part of your Hopkins experience that you want to touch on?

SP: No, I can’t think of anything, no.

KD: Well, thank you.

SP: Uh huh.

[1:05:39]

[End of Audio]