First Generation College Student Oral History Project

NH
Interviewed by Kristen Diehl
March 16, 2022
Summary: During this interview, Kristen Diehl discusses with NH about her experiences attending Johns Hopkins. Throughout the interview, they discuss the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on her classes, internships/clubs, and her relationships with her family and classmates. They also discuss NH’s hometown and family life, her experience and research while pursuing her anthropology and neuroscience majors, and her participation in different campus and Baltimore City based organizations. To finish the interview, NH describes her advice for future first-generation students and what Johns Hopkins could do to improve the experience of other first-generation students.

KD: Kristen Diehl
NH: Interviewee

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KD: This is Kristen Diehl here with NH on March 16th, 2022, at the Eisenhower Library for the First-Generation College Student Oral Histories. We would like to start this interview by acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on the Hopkins community. The questions in this interview were written before the coronavirus pandemic, and therefore do not directly ask how the consequences of this public health crisis change the experiences of our students. However, we thought it was necessary to begin our interview with a couple of questions related to the pandemic in order to recognize the particularly challenging experiences and changes these students faced. So our first question is, how do you feel the coronavirus pandemic has impacted your undergraduate experience? What are some challenges or changes it caused for you personally?

NH: So, yeah. For me, I think it's kind of similar to a lot of Hopkins' students like missing that year and a half of my college experience. So I definitely missed being on campus with my friends. I just decided to stay at home my entire junior year because I had an apartment, but then I canceled the lease because it didn't really make much financial sense to come back here even though I would be like paying an apartment but go doing online classes, so I just stayed at home. And so yeah, I canceled my lease and I missed that time with my friends and forming those connections on campus with my professors and a lot of clubs that I do like tutorial project and seeing the kids in person and stuff.

And then, I guess like for my family, both my parents, they were considered essential workers, so they worked outside the home. And so yeah, when people were going to working from home and I was also doing classes online, my parents didn't have that option. And so there was
always that possibility that we might get COVID because my parents worked outside. They worked with the same coworker, so it's not like a grocery store where people are coming in from any place. But yeah, I think a lot of my extended family also had to keep working. Also one of my uncles, he owns a driving school, so he kept teaching students.

My other uncle owns a grocery store, and so throughout our entire extended family, there was always that possibility. But then also being at home and living really close to my extended family, when we did all eventually get COVID unfortunately, everyone was okay, recovered okay. But when we all got COVID, we were able to like give each other food and be really close to each other, so that helped.

**KD:** Yeah. And how was taking classes online? Had you done a lot of online classes before this or that was something totally new maybe?

**NH:** Yeah. I didn't take online classes before, and so – I was familiar with Zoom because sometimes I would use it for work or for meetings with my professors. And so I guess getting used to Zoom etiquette was a little bit easier for me, but doing the actual classes that first semester that was pass-fail, I was definitely just not even trying in my classes anymore. I was like, I'm done. I was pretty much just like enjoying the break, I guess, that I thought it was. And then when junior year started, it was hard to stay focused or motivated. And I know a lot of people like online classes because they get to go back and listen to the lectures again. But for some of the classes, especially the ones that were like big lectures, it was hard for me to focus.

**KD:** Do you feel like the university did a good job keeping you informed or like making students feel connected to the school even with all that was going on?

**NH:** I think they did the best that they could. I think it's kind of hard to have people try to join things on there. Like I don't think there was much more that they could do because I know this year or the first semester when a lot of my clubs were online and we have big club members, we were trying to like have virtual events, and it's hard to get people engaged. So I don't think the university could have done more, but I also think for us, it was exhausting to just like do things online, like Zoom fatigued.

**KD:** Right. For sure. So moving backward in time a little bit just to sort of provide context for how you got here and how the pandemic impacted you, could you tell us where you were born and a little bit about your family?
NH: Yeah. So I was born in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, and that's where I still live. And so that's in the suburbs of Philadelphia. And so my parents came here a year before I was born. And so I was born in 2000, so they came in 1999. And yeah, so I have a very big extended family. And so my mom's the oldest of all her siblings. So all her siblings and my grandparents, they came earlier in the early '90s. But my mom had to come later because she was already married and had my brother and she was over 21.

And so when my parents came, we lived next door to the rest of the family. But then I think – I forget what it was. Something like eminent domain or something like that.

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And so those apartments or those houses, there's a bank there now. But then my parents got the money or whatever it's called, yeah, land something to buy a house. And so that's why I live in Hatfield now. I think, I forget what that first town was called. I was very close. So yeah, that's where I live now and we still live in that house.

My parents always say that because of that, they were able to buy a house then or else they would've taken them longer to save up. And so yeah, I have an older brother who was born in Bangladesh and he's seven years older than me. And so we went to the same public school as, I went to the same public school as my brother and all my cousins. And yeah, that's pretty much my family.

KD: Yeah. Could you tell me a little bit more about your parents' educations and what your parents' occupations are, what their professions are?

NH: Yeah. So in Bangladesh, the system is like, they go to a regular school or public school up until 10th grade, or I think most of their education system is public. And so they go to school up until 10th grade, and then 11th and 12th grade, they call college. And so that's kind of when you graduate the 12th grade, you kind of get like an associate's degree. I think that's like the equivalent here. And so my mom did up to 12th grade and she got an associate's degree. And my dad, after 12th grade, so he finished college and he also went to university in Bangladesh and he also did an MBA in Bangladesh, but then it was also during the – oh, no, I don't think –

No, it wasn't during the 1971 war because my dad was a lot younger then, but it was during some political conflict, and so it took my dad a few years to finish it. And so that's the degree that my dad has. But then when they came to America, none of that education was transferable and they just didn't have opportunities to like – they would've had to take some more classes to get that certification transferred over, especially for my dad and
his MBA. And so my parents decided to just go into the workforce. And so now they work technical jobs. And so they both work at the same company, a company that manufactures airplane parts. And so my mom works in one department that's more in charge of like assembly and my dad works in the machine operator department.

KD: Wow. Very cool. Can you speak a little bit more about the town you grew up in and what it was like in Pennsylvania?

NH: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So I grew up in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, but there's like two other towns that are very close, and so we all kind of merge into one big town that goes to the same school district. And so when I talk about my town, I can usually talk about the entire school district like North Penn, which is the high school that I went to. So it was really diverse. There were a lot of immigrant community like me. And so I grew up with – obviously, the majority was white students, but then I also grew up with Indian classmates, a lot of Bengali classmates. I'm also from the Muslim community, and so my Muslim community was entirely Bengalis. And so that's the kind of Muslim community that I grew up with. There was also a lot of East Asians, and then there were black students as well in my school. What else was the time like? I think because it was so close to Philadelphia, that was – maybe when I was younger, it wasn't that like urban, I guess. So it's becoming more like there's a lot more like stores being built and malls and like a lot more roads and like apartments, things like that. And so as I've grown up, I've seen that transition sort of more into the urban area.

KD: Sure. How far from Philadelphia is it?

NH: It's 45 minutes.

KD: Oh, okay. Sure. And what was high school like? You mentioned you had a pretty broad school district just talking about sort of classes and any extracurriculars or other groups you participated in.

NH: So my high school was really big. We had 1000 students, but that was only three grades. So it was 10th, 11th, and 12th because I guess the school building was too small to include the ninth grade kids so that if we included ninth grade, it would be like 1400, something like that. And so because our school was really big, I definitely didn't know everybody. Oh no, I'm sorry. 1000 was how many kids were in my grade. So the whole school was 3000.

KD: Oh my gosh. Wow.
NH: Yeah. So if it would've been including that, it would've been 4,000. Yeah. So my grade was 1000, and so I definitely didn't know everybody. And I think, I guess, just by the way that like our school was structured, I was mostly in AP classes. And so I pretty much only knew the kids that were in AP classes.

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But again because there were so many, it was like every class had a very diverse group of people and it was never like I was with the same group, but – so yeah, those were the classes that I was in. And even though it was really big, I think all the teachers definitely had enough time to have a one-on-one relationship with everyone. And so it wasn't like it was understaffed or anything like that.

And so the extracurriculars that I did, I did a lot of student council kind of stuff. I was like a National Honor Society and I did a lot of volunteering clubs. And I was also in Best Buddies, which is working with peers who have intellectual disabilities. And I did that since I was in third grade, and so that's always something that I've stayed in touch with.

And I guess I didn't really do any – I played orchestra for like two years but I wasn't really too involved in any sports or theater or anything like that. I spent most of my time after school at a religious institution doing Arabic classes and intensive grands classes, and so a lot of my Muslim friends actually ended up doing that for their full-time career instead of going to college.

But I went to college instead because that's what my parents, but mostly my dad, he really dreamed of that when he came to America. So they were like, "Oh yeah, why would you go to this religious institution where we have those same institutions in Bangladesh." They were like, "Oh yeah, you should go to college." And so that's why I decided to go to college instead.

KD: Yeah. And that kind of gets right into our next question of what your parents' thoughts were on education and maybe kind of more about that decision point and choosing to go to college versus the other institution and what the other institution is sort of like.

NH: Yeah. So I would say that I think my parents’ views on education is very similar to a lot of immigrant parents’ views on education. They definitely aspire to the American dream and that's why my grandpa came over and why my parents came over because – Yeah, I was kind of funny because my parents said that when they were in Bangladesh, they pretty much didn't have intensive jobs and they kind of got to relax a lot, party with their friends, stuff like that.
And they decided to give that up so that me and my brother could go to college here. And so their jobs here are a lot harder than that obviously and so yeah, they think that education for me and my brother is more important than I guess their comfort.

And so they wanted me and my brother to get the highest education possible in America and that's what all of my extended family wants for all of me and my cousins. And I guess there's this stereotype in immigrant families they are like, “Oh, you can only be a doctor, lawyer, engineer to be the successful careers.”

And so my parents really put a lot of – not emphasis, but they wanted us to aspire to higher degrees and definitely being the best in our class or in our school whatever. And they didn't really think about it as like, Oh, you know, we came here with less opportunities or anything like that.

They were like, “Oh, okay, there's such a thing called as valedictorian then you should aim for that.” So yeah, that's what they always thought of education. When they were in Bangladesh, my mom she actually didn't really like school that much but my dad really liked school and so my dad always was very well read and everything like that. And my mom's siblings, her youngest two siblings, they went to higher education in America and so they're a lot younger than her. And so my parents always were like, "Oh yeah, look at your aunt and uncle and try to emulate what they do in college and go up to their level."

KD: Did your parents sort of value on college in America? Did that come off as supportive but also did you feel a sense of pressure from that? Going to go to college and study a certain thing or anything like that?

NH: I think for me personally I was interested in science and I'm also interested in medicine and I have a passion for medicine, I'm pre-med by the way, and so for me I don't think I felt that. I think sometimes my brother doesn't want to do doctor or engineer, he wants to do more health startup-oriented stuff.

So I think maybe sometimes my brother, some of my other cousins might feel that pressure, but for me I'm also really interested in the humanities. And so when I told my parents that I also wanted to major in anthropology, they were like, "Oh, okay, that's great."

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They also see the value in more humanities focused social sciences and yeah. So yeah, that's pretty much it.
Sure. And so how did you decide specifically to attend Hopkins? What was sort of your college search like? What other schools were you considering and how did you decide to come here?

I think I actually didn't know that I was pre-med for a while, I thought about like engineering or something. But then when I decided to think about pre-med, I was looking at schools that are good for pre-med and stuff.

And I came across Johns Hopkins being in Baltimore and then I was looking at Baltimore a little bit more. And I remembered that when I was younger, I used to go to the National Aquarium a bunch with my family, and I was like, "Oh yeah, I remember Baltimore."

So then I started looking at Hopkins a little bit more and when I was in 10th grade, I did a summer camp here. I stayed here for two weeks and that was the first time that I ever stayed away from home that wasn't a sleepover or something like that because I've never been to summer camp or anything, and so I really enjoyed that experience.

And so when I was applying to college I talked to one of my friends from my high school that went here. And she was a year above me and I asked her, I was like, "Oh what do you think about Hopkins? How can I get into Hopkins because you got into Hopkins?"

And she was saying that applying Early Decision would make it easier for me to get in. Yeah, I applied Early Decision I think maybe because of that summer camp experience, I don't know maybe for my summer camp experience was another college then I would've applied their Early Decision.

But because I really liked the campus and I was comfortable living here and just all the fun that I had with my camp friends I was like, "Yeah, I would definitely want to go here." And so I applied here Early Decision and so for me when I got any decision back from colleges, I guess Hopkins was one of the first that I got back.

I heard back from another school in Philly but then Hopkins was always like, "Okay, if I get in I'm going to go there because it was an Early Decision."

Was the summer camp the Center for Talented Youth one of those programs or a different summer camp?

So actually I was in CTY because the funny thing is for CTY you have to take the SATs to get in. But I joined CTY so I could take the SATs, so it
was kind of the opposite way for me. Because I had a tutor in seventh grade who her daughters were in my Bengali community and her daughters were super smart and they went to, I think they went to UPenn and Columbia.

And so my mom definitely wanted me to emulate them again because they really prioritized higher education. And so my tutor, she told me like, "Oh, if you take the SATs now in seventh grade and eighth grade, when it doesn't count you won't feel anxious later and you'll now have that practice."

And so I was in seventh grade trying to look up how I could take the SATs, and so that's why I joined CTY. But the summer camp actually was not CTY, it was Discover Hopkins.

KD: Oh, okay. And what was your family's reaction when you were accepted into Hopkins? How did they feel about you moving to Baltimore coming here?

NH: I think when I told them they were like, "Duh, of course you're going to get in." [laughter] I think definitely my mom thought Hopkins was definitely my best chance to get into a top 10 score Ivy league or whatever.

And so my mom was like, "Okay, obviously you're going to get into Hopkins." My dad at first he was kind of like, "Oh, why didn't you apply Early Decision to UPenn? Because UPenn was also Ivy league and very close to my house.

KD: Very close. Yes.

NH: Yeah. Then I think I actually don't know that much about UPenn but I know that Hopkins is a research institution and it's pretty much number one for pre-med. And so in that way then I think my dad was kind of like, "Okay, yeah that makes more sense for Hopkins." And my mom knew that already, so yeah.

KD: Yeah. Can you describe the first few weeks of your undergrad experience? The transition from home to campus adjusting to – You'd already been here before, so you were a little bit comfortable with Hopkins, but just about that transition moving in for the first time.

NH: Yeah. I lived in the same building that I lived during my summer camp.

KD: Oh wow. [Laughs]
NH: And so I actually chose that building because I was like, I know it's nice there.

KD: Sure.

NH: I lived in Wolman and so I was like, “Yeah, I definitely want to stay there” because I remember how nice the suite was. And so when I first moved here, I think I was just taking in all the people that I was meeting.

And I know the first few weeks when you're here, it's like, “Okay, what's your major? What's your hometown?” And everyone just exchanges that information and then forgets. And so I think I was trying to figure out who I might be spending more time with or just trying to spend time with as many people as I could.

And then I think when it came to classes, I was a little bit nervous at first because I wasn't sure how hard college classes were going to be because I knew I took AP classes. But I'd also heard that AP classes don't compare to college classes and I remember my first class was calculus.

And the first class went fine, I understood everything.

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But I was really looking forward to my anthropology classes and learning what anthropology even was. And so yeah, I think if I can kind of remember back to when I was moving in in my first few weeks I really enjoyed the atmosphere of getting to know everything again.

KD: Yeah. And how did you find sort of the orientation programming? Did you find that to be useful or did you participate in a lot of sort of orientation events?

NH: Yeah. I think orientation was good, I think it's hard when you're doing the entire class all at once.

KD: Sure.

NH: And my FYM was really great, she was good at keeping our group engaged. I think maybe it was a little exhausting at times having to do everything in a day or in a week. But I appreciated them trying to incorporate Baltimore day going out into Baltimore and experiencing a neighborhood.

I had a good experience I went to Hampden which is super nice but I
know some other people didn't have the best experience because they went
to a place that they didn't really like that much stuff like that. But yeah.

KD: And FYM stands for First Year Mentor?

NH: Yeah.

KD: Okay.

NH: Yeah. They're like our orientation group leader.

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

NH: Yeah. I have. I was part of the Mentoring Assistance Peer Program so I
was a first-year student in that and I was also a mentor in my second and
third year and now I'm a family leader so I'm one of the executive people
in that program.

So I think that program was really great for me to meet other first
generation low income students. And yeah, just like a diverse group of
students that also went through the same thing I did and we were all paired
up with a mentor who – it wasn't like “okay, this mentor is going to tell
you everything about being a first-gen student,” but it was more like, “hey,
this mentor is also from a diverse background and you guys can, you
know, just become friends and hang out once a month and go get boba or
go to Hampden,” something like that.

And so yeah, that was really great getting to meet everybody that way.
And so I think when I came here especially coming from the town that I'm
from, I kind of assumed more of a black and white perspective, like okay
people of color are going to be first-generation immigrant or first-
generation color students and white people are not going to be.

And so because from my town a lot of the immigrant parents worked the
same kind of jobs that my parents do and a lot of our parents immigrated
straight from – Like I said, my Muslim community’s mostly Bengali, so
they immigrated straight from Bangladesh and they worked these kind of
same kind of jobs that my parents do or they also had degrees in
Bangladesh that didn't transfer over here.

And so when I first came here I think that's kind of what I assumed
and so my assumptions were definitely wrong. I think a lot of my Muslim
friends here or a lot of my friends who are people of color their parents
also went to college and also have professional jobs.
And so that was kind of something that I had to change my worldview or not worldview, but yeah, I guess my framework for thinking of what first-generation college student looks like.

KD: Sure. You've touched on academics a little bit already but what is your program of study? How did you choose it and what do you feel was valuable about it? So you've talked about being pre-med but then also, you know, being interested in anthropology and pursuing that as well.

NH: So I'm a neuroscience major and I'm also an anthropology major, so those were the two that I came in with and I knew I wanted to be pre-med actually before I got here. So there was the SOHOP Program and so I visited Hopkins then and at that point my major was general biology.

And I just picked it because I was like, “okay, I liked biology in high school and I know I'm pre-med so maybe biology would just fit with that.” And then when I came here my SOHOP mentor who is really great, she was like, "Oh, I don't really know that many gen bio majors but that's great."

And I was like at Hopkins people aren't gen bio majors, what? And then I found out that's because the general biology major only gives you or not only, I didn't mean only, but it gives you a bachelor of arts instead of bachelor of science.

And so I think that's why most people were turned off from it, and so most people did molecular and cellular biology and I really, really don't like cellars kind of stuff. And my SOHOP mentor, she was a neuroscience major and she said that a lot of people at Hopkins are mol-cell [molecular and cellular biology] majors or neuroscience majors.

And so I was like, "Okay, let me look into neuroscience a little bit more." When I looked at the program of study I thought it was really cool, the classes that we take and so that's why I switched to neuroscience.

And then I was also thinking like –

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"Oh, I really like the humanity, I really like history, I really like writing, and so maybe there's another major for me there." And my mom, she knew that I liked creative writing and my dad also always thinks that I read a lot of stories and stuff.

And so they were thinking like, oh, maybe something like writing stems, I didn't know it was called writing stems then, but something like creative
writing. And then I found anthropology, which I didn't really know what it was and I couldn't find a good definition online.

And I thought it was really interesting how it goes into a sociocultural history of all kinds of groups of people. And so I just signed up for some classes and we don't declare our majors in the first year but I just thought of it as my second major because I knew a lot of people did second majors which I think is really great at Hopkins.

And so I came in excited for both my neuroscience classes and my anthropology classes and both of them have been really interesting, really great. So for my neuroscience classes, well I think cognitive neuroscience is really interesting to me and that's I guess what I decided to join research labs for neuroscience because we also have a research requirement which I also think is really great that Hopkins makes you do that.

And then for anthropology, the program is a little bit more loose and my professors in anthropology have been really, really great, I see them as very close mentors of mine. And then I think towards the end of my freshman year, I was looking at the Islamic studies minor and I was like, "Oh, these classes seemed cool."

Because I was just taking one just to see, I just thought it would be fun and I didn't realize there was a minor and so I added that towards the end of my freshman year. So yeah, those are the three programs of studies I've been through.

KD: Sort of all of that exploration was going on during freshman year for the most part.

NH: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

KD: Thanks. Do you have any memorable professors or classes from your academic experience here?

NH: Yeah. Definitely. I guess the professors that I'm closest to are my humanities and social science professors. So one of my professors in the Islamic studies department, Dr. Homayra Ziad, she's super, super great.

I took her class first in freshman spring and I just thought that the way that she teaches is very cool, I think it's because she has a background in community organizing and interfaith community work. And so she brought that to her academic career and still while she's being a professor she's also incorporating that community work into our classes.

So I've been taking, I think one of her classes every year. And so last
semester I took a class with her about 9/11 and it was also very community focused. So we actually got to do oral histories of people in the DMV area that are Muslim organizers.

And so I think that's why I always thought that her style of teaching is really cool because she incorporates all those organizing aspects into our class so that we get that real life experience and we're not just in this academic bubble.

And so she was my advisor for this project that I came up with to look at the experiences of Muslim women who went to those religious institution I was mentioning earlier. And so she was my advisor for the first two years of that project and so I really appreciated her insight into everything.

And then after that she was my Islamic studies advisor but I also wanted to keep that project for my senior thesis in anthropology. And so I switched over to Dr. Naveeda Khan, she's the Dean of undergraduate studies, for anthropology.

And so she's been my advisor for my thesis and she's really helped me to hone in on my writing and make it good and helped me with presenting my thesis at different panels and stuff. And so yeah, those two professors are definitely the first ones that I think of when I think of memorable professors and the mentorship that they've given me personally.

And then in my neuroscience career, I obviously have my research PI Dr. Landau. And I actually hadn't taken a class with her until this semester but her and the postdoc that I work under, I've been with their labs in sophomore year.

And so they've been really great with also helping me get my research credits and getting me on as a co-author on a public or not publication, a poster for a conference. Oh yeah. And my neuroscience advisor for my major Dr. McCloskey, he's also been really great, I took his classes when I was online and so I think he had a really good way of doing online classes.

Because instead of lecturing for a Zoom class he would break up his lectures into tiny videos and put them online. And so that was a lot easier to focus with 10-minute videos, just that I could just watch by myself instead of having to tune into an hour lecture that was live on Zoom.

And I'm actually a TA for one of those classes now and so he's been really helpful with me keeping my neuroscience major on track, so I could graduate. And he was actually the one who helped me find a lab to research in.
KD: Sure. And yeah. You touched on sort of I kind of easily forget that a lot of this is happening remotely or over a Zoom. [both laugh] So how you mentioned sort of one method that a faculty member or approach that they took to teaching.

How did you find the faculty adjusted to teaching over Zoom or what kinds of different approaches did they take? And it seems like you were able to build strong relationships with faculty members sort of maybe in spite of the circumstance [both laugh], so could you talk about that a little bit?

NH: Yeah. I think it definitely helped that I had these strong relationships in place before Zoom, I think it was hard for anybody that was trying to start a relationship over Zoom just because virtual office hours are not as easy to approach as in-person office hours.

And then yeah, I guess it was easy for me to schedule meetings with my professors if I wanted to. And I guess when it comes to teaching classes I did have new professors during the pandemic that were really great at facilitating on small group discussions and a small class on Zoom.

I think it gets hard when it's a big lecture class and getting to know your professors that way or engaging in classroom activity. I think one of my professors tried to have us do breakout rooms and discuss problems but I think that just doesn't always go well when it's such a big group and most people want to keep their cameras off.

KD: Sure. I would also just love to hear more about your thesis project, sort of the topic and how you found conducting research for it, and kind of where you are if it's already been submitted or how that has been.

NH: Yeah. So it's for my anthropology senior thesis. Like I said, when I was in high school, I went to this religious institution that was after school, they're called madrasas. And so I went with my friends and eventually when I was in 10th grade or 11th grade.

Yeah, I was in 11th grade they switched to being completely full-time and so I decided to keep going with college and my friends decided to stay there. And they do that for their full-time career and their secondary education and so when you graduate there you become an Islamic scholar.

And you go really in depth into Arabic translation of the Quran and the Hadith. And so I found that very cool but I decided to go with medicine instead. Whenever I went home to visit from college I found their lives really interesting and especially with everything that was going on with
like Trump being elected and like us being Muslims, you know, having to deal with that kind of Islamophobia.

And so I wanted to know more about how they were moving in and out of that madrasa space in America. And so I approached Dr. Ziad with this question and she thought it was really interesting, and Dr. Khan also found it really interesting.

And so my freshman year and my sophomore year, I was applying for grants to get funding for the research. And so I won a grant for the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Department and a grant from the Anthropology Department.

And so that really helped with, I guess my rent and making sure that I had the space to do that project. And so I actually started it in my junior year during the pandemic.

NH: So I had to do a lot of those interviews and focus groups over Zoom. And I guess it was easier for me because I was at home and they were also doing online classes and so I got to join their classes over Google Meet or over the phone.

And so I got to sit in another class and do participant observation, do their interviews, and then so now I have all the field work done. And so this year especially this semester I'm working on writing it and so far I've done one chapter and I'm working on the second chapter right now.

And then hopefully by the end of this year I'll have that whole thesis done and then submit it to get an honors in my major.

KD: Awesome. Thank you. Switching gears a little bit. Could you talk about your overall dorm or apartment life? Your housing situations here at Hopkins and then I guess also partially at home for part of it. [both laugh]

Yeah, unexpectedly. Yeah.

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NH: Yeah. So my freshman year I shared a dorm with my friend – yeah, I think all the freshmen lived in doubles and so I lived in Wolman and so that was really great. I don't think we were that – we were friendly with our suite mates, so we weren't friends with them so we didn't see them that often.
But it was nice having a little kitchenette and our own bathroom instead of a communal bathroom especially being a hijabi I didn't want to have a communal bathroom and so that's why I pushed to get a suite in Wolman.

And then sophomore year, I had a friend from freshman year who I was really close friends with. And so me and her were like, "Hey, let's combine, I'll bring my roommate and you bring your roommate and we'll combine into a suite."

And so we lived in McCoy, we definitely didn't want McCoy [laughs] but I think because of the housing slot that we got, it was the last timing to get a good room in commons. And then since we were the last ones to not get commons and so we got the first pick of McCoy, and so we actually got a really nice room in McCoy.

McCoy doesn't come with living rooms we had enough space to make a little living room and so that was super nice. I had a single that year but because of the pandemic we all had to move home. I guess they told us that we would come back April 12th, so I didn't pack up all my stuff. And so when I went home, we got emails that, "okay, we'll actually we're going to stay home and movers are going to pack up your stuff."

And so towards the end of that year I went back to Baltimore to pick up my stuff from the warehouse. So yeah, that was how that year ended, yeah, I got all my stuff from the warehouse. I think some of it ended up being a lost but I also was at this point it's fine It doesn't really matter.

And then junior year I was at home also the second half of sophomore year. And so I guess because I'm the youngest, oh yeah, I'm the youngest of two. And so my parents worked and so I pretty much had the house to myself and I used my brother's room because he had a desk and my room doesn't have a desk.

And my brother doesn't live at home anymore he lives in the city and so I got to focus on my classes during Zoom and stuff and my parents always knew that if that door was closed then I was in a meeting. I think the only problem was sometimes my cousins used to live next door and I had a little cousin who would sometimes come over and so sometimes that was hard for me to focus if he was there.

But yeah, other than that, the living at home was fine. It was also very convenient having my mom cook me food and being able to like, I wouldn't have to commute or get dressed for the day because you only see above the shoulders [laughter], and so that was very, very convenient.

Oh yeah, I told you about the whole thing that happened with my lease, I
had to cancel that lease and I guess we lost money that way. But we did also get a refund from Hopkins from the sophomore housing because we left in March.

And then senior year I signed a lease for that same apartment because two of my roommates that were here before they stayed junior year and so I signed my lease for that apartment. And I live in Nine East which is super-duper nice and it's very close to campus and it has a lot of great security which is the number one reason that my parents wanted me to live there.

It's a little bit pricier than the other apartments but because it was close and had that security that's why my parents wanted me to live there. And so, yeah, I guess this year it's been really nice being in that apartment and getting to have that space.

I have a full kitchen and a full living room and I like cooking and so, yeah, it's been nice actually having a place to host things instead of being on Zoom [laughs] and trying to do social things there.

KD: Did you join any clubs? You've mentioned some already but could you speak about clubs or activities you've participated in at Hopkins?

NH: Yeah. I mentioned Tutorial Project that's with the tutoring kids from the Baltimore community, that's super fun. I did Best Buddies for the first two years but I think because the pandemic it kind of went defunct.

I'm going to leave this semester but I think it would be great for people to bring that up again because I really love doing Best Buddies. And I was in MAPP and I am still in MAPP as a family leader now which I think is a great program.

[0:40:00]

Oh, yeah, I was in United Mission for Relief which is fundraising and raising awareness for conflicts happening in other countries – especially Muslim countries. And so that's been really great raising money and awareness for our refugees coming in America.

And yeah, I think intermittently I participated in some other clubs but I wasn't super invested because I think it was just so many things that you could possibly interested in but then actually dedicating that time is hard.

So yeah, those are all the clubs I was in. I have a part-time job that's on campus for the Center for Educational Outreach so that's not really a club I guess but it is somewhere I spent about six hours of my week there. Yeah.

That's basically a center where Hopkins provides free programs for
Baltimore city school students and so I'm a program assistant there so I help with planning all those programs.

KD: Sure. Yeah. And our next question is sort of what about internships or jobs, [laughter] so that's one job and have you had any other sort of internship or job experiences here?

NH: So I think mainly since my freshman year I've been working at that office. Well, when I was first looking for jobs, I just realized that I was going out a lot during intercession and I was like, "Whoa, I should have some spending money instead of always asking my parents for money."

And so I was just looking at the employment site and I ended up finding this Center for Educational Outreach which seemed really cool. And so when I joined they hired me to plan this program called the youth or Young Environmental Scientist Program.

And so we recruited third and fourth grade students who had an interest in the environment and wanted to have those outdoor learning opportunities. And so I planned the transportation, the meal planning, all the logistics, finding field trips for them to do and finding that summer camp.

And so during the actual summer I stayed here and that was my first big job and I was like, "Oh, this is cool." It's not really an internship but it's a job that I can – I really like working with kids and so it was cool that I got to contribute to the Baltimore community that way.

And so, yeah, I stayed here during the summer and for those two weeks I worked like 12-hour days working with the kids and getting their bags together in the morning and then picking them up from the schools on the school bus, and then taking them to the camps and facilitating their learning experience and then bringing them back to their schools and then unpacking those and so those two weeks were very exhausting. [laughter]

When I was doing I was like, "Oh my God, this is so exhausting." But I assumed that I would get that experience every summer because it was a five-year program but then because of the pandemic that was the only time I got to do it.

And so I'm definitely grateful that I got to do that but because of the pandemic it kind of went remote. And so I've been working on other programs now that are for high schoolers and middle schoolers. And so I work more on the recruiting, talking to parents and students, making flyers, making recruitment materials, yeah.

And it's a very creative job and I get to work with my supervisor very
closely and so I think at this point she kind of considers me more of a coworker to bounce ideas off of and we come up with ideas together rather than just a student worker, so I really appreciate that. And I guess just doing research with my lab was the other sort of internship.

So I had applied for some internships and then I think I was deciding between the CIIP internship at the CSC and my job and then I ended up choosing my job because it wasn't just for a year but it was for all four years. And so but I think the CIEP internship is really cool too.

KD: Sure. you've talked a little bit about this as well just now talking about this job but could you talk about how you spent summers and breaks from school?

NH: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So that first summer I worked pretty much – I was here working at the office and most of my days were pretty much like three hour days and I spent the rest of the time just enjoying the weather I guess but then I worked super hard those two weeks.

And then the next summer because of the pandemic we were at home but I took orgo online because I wanted to take it over the summer rather than dealing with orgo in all my other classes I heard it was really hard.


NH: Yeah. Organic chemistry 1 & 2. Yeah. And I also worked and then my third summer I worked and also did research for my lab. But my main focus this past summer was studying for my MCAT. And so I checked my MCAT at the end of August, this past August.

[0:45:00] So yeah, those are my three summers.

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

NH: My relationship has been really great. I think sometimes my mom calls too often so I guess if I was going to describe the relationship it would be sometimes we are too close but, yeah I communicate a lot with them.

I think when it comes to that point of like, “oh, I might be missing them” then they either visit. So they visit once a month if I'm not going home for like a break or I'll go home with my roommate to visit them. And so, yeah, my parents especially my mom have been very involved in decision making just because – I guess when I have need to make decisions about anything related with school or my work or my lab or anything like that.
I'm like, “oh, I don't know what to do” and then I lay out all my options to my parents and they really help me come up with decisions and things like that. And so I guess in that way they're kind of the people that I go to for advice first.

And I definitely tell them all about my day especially now when I'm applying for jobs after graduation. Every day I'm just calling them I'm like, “okay, so this is what happened today and” – yeah, so my relationship with my parents has been great.

I guess when I first got here it wasn't that I didn't miss my parents but I really missed my younger cousins. So I'm the third oldest out of all my cousins and most of them are 10 or younger. When I first got here now they're like 12 and younger, but yeah, I guess I'm just so used to growing up with a bunch of kids and my aunts and uncles.

So, yeah, my aunts and uncles they all miss me a lot too. And yeah, I think it got a little bit better because I tutor some of my cousins on Zoom and so I get to see them every day. And then when I go home I spend a lot of time with my cousins and my extended family doing things that I used to do every weekend when I was at home.

KD: Sure. Yeah. It seems like you're very close with your family. What other support systems have you found here at Hopkins, you know, during this semester?

NH: Yeah. So I think definitely my friends. I spend a lot of time with my friends and I think maybe freshman year I – not that – okay. I'm trying to find a way to word this. I think freshman year I spent a lot of time with a bunch of different people and then I think because of the pandemic I just found it very hard to keep in touch with people and so I pretty much only talk to my roommates.

And so now that I'm back I really like going to parties and hosting parties at my place and those big social events but also when I need support, when I need advice, then I usually just go to my roommates or my best friends, and so they've been a great support for me.

Some of my professors like I mentioned, the ones that I meet with for my thesis they're super great with communicating. And I think all of my mentors in all the different things that I do whether it's my thesis or for my major or work they're definitely very supportive in everything that I do.

If I'm struggling with something related to school it's never like, “Oh my
God, I always have to worry about work” because they're very understanding.

KD: Have you felt supported by Hopkins as a first-generation student here? You've talked about this a little bit but I guess we're also curious, you know, what specific programs you found helpful and what are ways that the university could increase its support for first gen students?

NH: Yeah. I think the MAPP\(^1\) Program was really helpful in creating a diverse atmosphere. Somebody who doesn't work there anymore, her name is Rezwana, she was really great in incorporating all these different cultures into the program itself.

So like every month we would have food from different places, we would have music from different places, we would play games related to different traditions and cultures. And so I think MAPP was a really great way to have this informal connection with everybody.

And yeah, so that's like a club or an office, the Office of Multicultural Affairs they're also really great. And then I think the Financial Aid Office they're very helpful when I call them and ask them any questions.

[0:50:00]

And I guess specifically to first-generation students, I think it would be really helpful if the university had a specific center for first generation students. I think it's really great that all of these different offices they include in their mission statement or I don't know what it is but whatever they call it, they try to, I guess – I'm trying to figure out the word for it.

They're very diverse and they accept first-generation student limited-income students and trying to help them. But I think it would be really helpful to have a whole separate sense. I think they're called centers for all of the different offices but having a center just for that especially the things being translated. English isn't my parents' first language.

And so yeah, I think having all these different communications come out especially during the pandemic. If people were able to translate that and be able to read that even if they didn't speak English I think that would be really helpful.

KD: Yeah. That's a really tangible, specific example that people might not think about. What would you say in general about your life in Baltimore? Just living in different neighborhoods, getting to know different parts of the city, working with, you know, Baltimore city students, how have you found it living here?

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\(^1\)“MAPP” stands for Mentoring Assistance Peer Program.
I really like living here, I like Baltimore. I think Hopkins definitely has a Hopkins bubble around it and so I'm very used to Charles Village. And I think that I have a lot of fun going out with my friends outside of Charles Village like going to Hampden, Federal Hill, Inner Harbor and things like that.

And so I think Baltimore has a lot of cool opportunities for us to just have fun. But yeah, I think working with Baltimore city public school students, I think Hopkins is very well known and has a very big name but I also know that a lot of Baltimore community members might not trust Hopkins because of their name.

And so I think really making sure that Hopkins students and faculty and staff are very cognizant of that when interacting with Baltimore community members. I think when I'm recruiting students from our programs they're very intrigued by the name Hopkins and so making sure that that name continues to mean something good is really important.

Yeah. For sure. Certainly the pandemic was a massive historic moment that happened while you were at Hopkins but are there any other sort of cultural moments or political moments that have happened that have impacted your time in college or things that have kind of shifted your perspective over the past four years?

Yeah. Definitely the pandemic, yeah, the election in 2020, yeah, that impact a lot. I think just because the election went on for so long, it wasn't a one day thing. And I remember I had a biochemistry test that week and I remember our professor being like, "Hey, I know people might be stressed."

And so I think our professors were also aware of what might be going on through our heads that us being stressed about it and so I thought that was really nice. But yeah, I don't think I can think of any other moments.

Sure. Yeah. I like that question because it kind of just situates these interviews in sort of a historic context. Would you mind speaking on your plans for the future or life after Hopkins? You mentioned taking the MCAT and applying for jobs. What do kind of the next few years look like for you?

Yeah. So I am taking a few gap years before med school, I know a lot of people take one gap year. And I think for me beginning from freshman year I was always set on taking two years just because I wanted to really take a breather.

And whatever job I wanted I didn't want to just leave it after a year I
wanted to have that time to build any connections to whatever community I moved to. And so I've been applying to different jobs especially clinical research jobs because I want that clinical experience before I go to med school.

And so I've been applying to mostly places in Philadelphia and I applied to a few in Baltimore. And so I'm still just interviewing and seeing what might be a good fit for me in mostly pediatric clinical research.

KD: And is sort of pediatric clinical research the kind of direction you want to pursue after med school? Is that kind of your area of interest for med school and what you want to do afterwards?

NH: Yeah. Definitely. I think definitely pediatrics and I think maybe I'm biased because I'm a neuroscience major but I think I'm very interested in pediatric neurology. But also maybe because I've spent so much time in Best Buddies and learning about neurological disorders and neurodevelopmental disorders and so that really draw – yeah, attracts to me.

[0:55:00]

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

NH: Yeah. I would definitely recommend. I think Hopkins made it very easy for me to attend here, I think Hopkins gives a lot of aid to students that might not be able to attend otherwise. And I think that they made the transition very easy and I really like that Hopkins allows you to do – there's so many students here that do double majors.

And so being able to pursue whatever you want because you don't have so many general ed requirements, I think is really great.

KD: Is there any sort of advice you would give?

NH: Advice? I think I would definitely advise them to join MAPP as the program or just join any other programs that have cultural or traditional significance to them. I think it's helpful to join a cultural society just so that you have people that have the same background as your upbringing as you.

And yeah, I think I would encourage them to go to different events from different departments and just see what there might be some other major some other program study that might be interesting to them or something like that. Yeah.
KD: Yeah. Great. This is always a tricky question for folks to answer, but sort of after all of the time that you've had here, how would you summarize your time at Hopkins?

NH: How would I summarize it? Like in a word or?

KD: Yeah. It can be a word or just whatever that means to you. Some folks are pretty concise in their response [laughter], others have a lot to say to summarize their time, so whatever it means to you.

NH: I think my time at Hopkins has been really, maybe eye opening to all the different things that I can do especially – I guess I don't really think about it that much because I'm so used to thinking the way that I do or experiencing the things that I experience through classes and stuff.

But I think the moment in high school, I definitely didn't know what neuroscience was or anthropology was or all the different clubs or research or work that I could do. And so now that I'm in I'm like, "Oh wow, I got to do so many things, I got to have so many different experiences."

KD: Well, that's sort of all of our set questions. Thank you so much for talking to me today, I really appreciate your time. I know everyone is really busy right now. Is there anything else you would like to add before the interview is over?

Anything that we didn't get to or didn't touch on that is, you know, significant about your time here that you'd like to talk about?

NH: No. I don't think so.

KD: Okay. Great. Well, thank you so much.

NH: All right. Thank you.

[End of Audio]