

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
MS.0404

First-Generation College Student Oral History Project

Interviewee, "BD"

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

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Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

Summary: “B.D.” is a member of the Johns Hopkins University graduating class of 2021. In this interview, she explains how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted her college experience and she talks about her life so far, education, and future endeavors.

KD: Kristen Diehl

BD: Interviewee

[0:00:00]

KD: Okay. This is this Kristen Diehl here with BD on March 1, 2021 over Zoom 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 are written before the 2020 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 you personally?

BD: So I would say the biggest change was probably like last winter when most students went off campus. I had to return home. And when I was back home, it was just really difficult to adjust because at home we had seven people living in one house, and recently my grandpa was like an accident so he couldn't walk, so he was also bedridden at home with us. And you know, when I was home, because we were so crowded and I had like – I have three siblings so there's all four of us. I didn't have a bedroom so I was sleeping on the couch, and I think that really impacted my mental health. Just not having you know, a place to sleep. My own personal space. A place to study. Access to consistent internet. And like having to also help my brothers like care for my grandpa because we were his sole caretakers. Because both of my parents like started working again, so it was a really difficult adjustment.

I would say like I hadn't realized I guess how nice I had it back in Baltimore. Like having a place to you know, call my own and have a quiet study area. So it was really difficult for me to adjust back

home. But I would face some changes after like coming back to Hopkins because I'm currently on campus. Some of the changes I would say is just having everything be online. I actually think it had improved like my mental health for me because prior to this I used to be like running around for you know, all my classes and orgs, and I wouldn't have time to eat. I was constantly stressed about like you know, making meetings on time. Just running around doing errands.

So actually I think being able to work from home and study from home has been really nice for me, and it actually helped me to focus on my mental health. But I think that's coming from like a pretty privileged stance because I'm a student so I have the benefit of like staying home and like taking my time, and also like as a part-time worker and working remotely, I'm also pretty privileged in that like I don't have to commute.

So yeah, I would say that it was really nice for me to be able to transition from like being home where I didn't have any you know, personal space, and there's so many people to like being in my own apartment. It's like a little quieter.

KD: Thank you. And could you tell us where you were born or where home is for you? Where you've been spending time during the pandemic.

BD: Yeah.

KD: Before coming back to school.

BD: Yeah. So I'm from Chicago. And I mentioned earlier that like I have – we have usually six people so it's my two parents and the four siblings. And then it's to seven just recently because my grandpa has to stay with us.

KD: Okay. And were you born in Chicago? And could you tell me a little bit about your family?

BD: Yeah. So I was born in Chicago but my two parents are immigrants so my mom immigrated to America from Vietnam when she was six years old, and my dad immigrated when he was in college, so I think around nineteen years old. And they're both from Vietnam. I would say you know, my mom's a little more immersed in American culture just because she immigrated when she was so young, so she did go through like American schooling in high school and like some college as well. But for my dad it's been a

little more of a culture shift just because he came here to college age. And my parents met in college.

I also have three brothers, so they're all younger than me. One of them is actually —

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At Hopkins with me. He's currently a sophomore. And then I have two younger brothers. They're both like in their teen years right now, and they're still going to school in Chicago. And then there's my grandpa. He immigrated with my dad and lately he's been like bedbound just because of the accident, and he's been wheelchair bound. He can't like use his legs so it's been real difficult for him to adjust just because like you know, usually he's used to being autonomous, but lately my brothers and I, we've had to carry him. You know, pick him up from bed. Help him use the toilet. And I think it's a huge shock for him just because like he was the one helping us when we were younger, and now that he's older he's unable to do like the things he used to be able to do. Yeah.

KD: You mentioned your parents meeting in college. Could you tell me a little bit more about their educations, and your mom going through the public school system?

BD: Yeah. So both my parents met in community college. They didn't finish with their Associate's degree so they went to a community college in Chicago and when they met there, they had me pretty young. I think they had me at like twenty-two years old. So because like they were pregnant with me I feel like that's a large reason why they weren't able to finish their schooling. And my mom got her education, like she went to elementary school in Chicago and she went to high school as well. And she went to a public high school so the high school she's at now is actually where my two younger brothers are studying at.

I know it's nice because she I guess knew a little bit about like schooling in America, but I would say the transition to college was a little more different because I guess she didn't have as much experience like applying to colleges outside of like community college.

KD: And could you tell me what your parents, what are their occupations or professions?

BD: Yeah, so right now they're both currently nail technicians. They work at different nail salons in Chicago. My mom, she works more on the north side so not really a suburb area, but just a more overall

like affluent area. And my dad, he works more in like the city. Before they were nail technicians my mom was kind of like a secretary at a bank, and my dad worked at a factory. I think he worked at like a paper-producing factory. More recently they both switched to being nail technicians.

And during the coronavirus or pandemic it was really difficult because they both weren't able to work because they weren't considered essential workers, and I guess like when you do your nails it's pretty much like face-to-face contact so it's really difficult. They were out of work for like several months, but fortunately they're able to work now.

KD: Great. Could you speak a little more about growing up in Chicago, and what it's like in your hometown?

BD: Yeah. So I grew up in like the west area of Chicago, so it was really nice. I think starting from elementary school I was really fortunate to have like a very diverse school. I guess it was just like from my community and it was like a public I guess elementary school. It was like K through eight. So it was really nice. Having friends from similar backgrounds to me and just having like a really diverse set of friends, I feel like it was a really nice experience. And then when I went to high school it was also really diverse. I went to like a 4,000-student high school so it was really nice to have a lot of people, and a lot of people from different parts of Chicago. And so I made a lot of friends there and it was really nice to see a lot of like Vietnamese American students who were also first generation and like low income. Like I felt like I made a lot of friends who could relate to me, and I didn't feel like very alone in that aspect. Overall I think growing up in Chicago is really like nice. I think I was very fortunate to have grown up in such a diverse community.

And something else. Like in Chicago there's like a really large Vietnamese population I would say, and we have like – it's called like Argyle but it's like Chinatown but like for Vietnamese Americans and like Vietnamese immigrants and it was really nice being able to experience Vietnamese culture and go with my parents to Vietnamese restaurants and see you know, small business owners and shop owners who were like Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans. It was —

[00:10:00] Really nice to have like that support system back in Chicago.

KD: Thank you. In high school, you know, were there any particular subjects or classes that you really enjoyed, or any extracurricular student organizations you were a part of, or activities you took part in?

BD: Yes. I did a lot in high school. I did a lot of orgs. I think some of the ones that were really big for me now I guess were – you know, I took my science courses and that was really nice because I always really enjoyed science. But I think because my high school was a bit I guess technical college prep school, there were a lot of electives, and because the student body was so large we were able to have a lot of I guess a variety of electives. So something that I really enjoyed was aquaponics and I feel like if I hadn't attended high school like at the school I had, I wouldn't have had that chance to like work with plants and work with fish. And because it was like a really small course, I think I had a lot of control in being able to plan my own projects. And I think it helped me like think a lot more about sustainability, which is something that I'm really interested in now. And you know, growing my own plants and that kind of stuff, I really enjoy that.

Another thing I took was, I learned Mandarin in high school, and I feel like just learning the language wouldn't have been as I guess shaping as it was if it wasn't for like my teachers then. I had one teacher who was like really supportive. I remember at one point there was like – I don't know. Like an application to study abroad in China, and I like filled it out on the last day, and then she drove the application to the place for me and dropped it off. And I think just having like adult figures who were really supportive was I guess really life-changing for me.

And then I would say the final shaping thing in terms of like courses was I took art history and in general like I was really interested in art, but I don't think it was the art that left like a lasting effect on me, but it was my professor. I felt like she was so passionate about what she was teaching, and it made me really consider like what I wanted to do with my future. You know, I wanted to have the same passion in what I was doing as she had. I wanted to really enjoy what I was doing to really love you know, like the path I was on. So that was really shaping.

And then in terms of organizations. The most important one actually that I was in that was like not academic was Cambodian Thai Club. So at our school we have a lot of cultural groups and culture clubs, and they're really performance based. So we have this thing called International Days where for several days, like for

a week I think, at the end of the school year we like perform. And for that org it was all girls, so it was like I think twelve girls. And I think for me that was like a really nice to have that sisterhood bond. I think that really impacted like why I decided to join a sorority in college just because like growing up with all brothers, it was really different to have just like a set of friends who were just like girls. And we called each other sisters, and it was super supportive. And I think they really helped me get through high school.

KD: Definitely. Could you talk about your parents or family's thoughts on education? What their thoughts were about you know, the college application process and you going off to college.

BD: Yeah. So in general I feel like my parents are pretty lax about education. Like of course, they would be like oh, it's good if you get A's, but they never really pushed it. They never really pushed us like do our homework and study. They're pretty hands-off. I think a large part of it is because they were both always working so there were rarely times when they were home to like watch over us while we did our homework. So I think in that case like my brothers and I, we kind of grew up like having to self-discipline ourselves in terms of academics.

And I feel like – I don't know, I feel like the way my brothers and I took that was very different. I feel like I was pretty harsh on myself even without my parents, just having to hold myself to a higher standard. And I'm not sure if that comes from like being their own daughter. Like being the oldest child or like, I don't know. Going to college when they haven't.

And then I would say in terms of the college application they didn't really know much, and I feel like I was pretty lost when I applied to college just because you know, I had no one to turn to. And —

[00:15:00] This is something I really regret, but I applied to very few colleges. I would say like I only applied to Hopkins as my like reaching for a top school, and my community college. I believe those are like the only two I applied to. And I feel like because you know, I wasn't used to – well, I didn't know how to apply to colleges and I didn't know like what I needed to do, and that it was better to apply to more than one school. And that's something I still really regret. Like not being able to explore my options a little more.

KD: What was it about Hopkins that made you want to apply to it, or made you interested in applying? And then what ultimately led to you deciding to choose to come to Hopkins?

BD: Yeah. So I would say the reasons I applied to Hopkins, I'm going to be honest, I hadn't heard of Hopkins. Like I didn't know about Hopkins, like the university or medicine at all when I was growing up and like throughout high school. I think it was only in my senior year as I started to apply that I like thought about it. And the reason I did was because my brother, who's at Hopkins now, he mentioned that he wanted to go here. And like that was the only university that I'd ever heard of because I guess like outside of my state university, because like I didn't know much about like out-of-state universities and so I was like oh, you know what? I'll just apply there. And so I only applied there because it was like the only university I guess knew a little bit about and I didn't really do my research either. I never visited campus so it was only after I was accepted E.D.¹ that I – like my family and I, we went to visit the campus because we were like going on a trip to D.C. anyways so we stopped by. And I was pretty disappointed with what I saw because it was like in the middle of winter and so it was like super gloomy. So yeah, I think there was a period where I regretted my decision. And I was like oh, like maybe I should have explored my options a little better. But yeah, I think that's a regret for me just not exploring other options and just going through like word of mouth.

Yeah. So I did want to go into medicine, so that was a plus for why I decided Hopkins. And the reason I chose Hopkins over like the state university I applied to was the money. At Hopkins they give you like a full ride scholarship. And I know the other ones also gave me a like a full ride scholarship, but it was like I think you had to pay like \$4,000 versus like zero dollars at Hopkins. So I think that was like a large part of it.

I think another thing was I wanted to experience life out of state. I feel like that would have allowed me to grow more as a person and not like rely so much on my family. Because I had spent like all my life in Chicago.

KD: Sure. Thank you. So what was your family's reaction when you were accepted into Hopkins? And maybe you could describe that transition from Chicago to Baltimore, and the transition, just the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience.

¹ "E.D." is short for "early decision."

BD:

Yeah. So my parents thought it was great. I think they were happy that I got the full ride scholarship and that I didn't have to pay a lot, but I don't know. I guess they didn't really know much about Hopkins either like I had, so it wasn't like a huge thing for my family. I would say it was bigger with my professors when we had like college review day. I guess that's when I realized that like I guess Hopkins was like a pretty prestigious university. When like one professors was telling me like oh, it was really great that I got in, and that kind of stuff. So I guess I hadn't realized beforehand just because it wasn't that big of a deal with my family, I feel like they were just happy that I did get into like a school and that they were paying me money.

My transition from Chicago to Baltimore I feel like something that I really missed that Chicago had was – you know, it's nice that there's like the circulator and like the Jimmy², but I feel like I really miss public transportation, and just how easy it was to get everywhere and just the feeling of like being able to live in like a big city and just having a lot of different small or diverse communities. I really miss that.

And you know, like I didn't have a car in Chicago, just like I don't have a car in Baltimore, but it was a lot easier for me to get around and back home because of you know, transportation. Like the buses, the trains and everything.

My first few years like adapting to undergrad, I didn't really have trouble like adapting to being away from home, or like living on my own. I think by then I was pretty self-sufficient. I think a large part of it, like I said before, was that my brothers and I kind of grew up just as like —

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latchkey kids. I think that's the phrase where like we just took care of ourselves without our parents being there.

Because for a large part of our lives like they were just working and so while like – my grandparents lived with us, but then like my grandma died when I was like eight and then my grandpa moved out because like he got in a conflict with my mom. So it was just like me and my brothers at home for most of the day, so I feel like we were pretty self-sufficient already and taking care of ourselves. So like adapting to being alone and having to take care of myself

² “Jimmy” is a nickname for the Homewood-Peabody-JHMI Shuttle.

wasn't about – wasn't – you know, as nerve wrecking as I thought it would be.

I think though the largest and most difficult part of the transition I think I did a lot of like growing just mentally like with my mental health because like prior to like attending Hopkins I was diagnosed with depression in like my junior year of high school, so I was taking medication, but I was really lax about taking medication because I was like oh, you know what? I don't think it's helping, and that kind of stuff. So I wasn't taking it as routinely as I should have.

So I think just being in that new environment and having to deal with stresses was really difficult for me. It really exacerbated like my depression. I had like several breakdowns in college. And I think the academic part was really difficult for me as well, like going from high school to college. And I would say like not being used to studying, that was really difficult for me. And just having to learn and teach myself how to study.

I think the first three years of undergrad, like my GPA was really low and I think that stressed me out even more. Like comparing it to my peers and being like you know, I feel like I messed up because my GPA was so low, and I was really struggling with handling my course load. And for some reason I also took on like a lot of work. Like I would do like nineteen credits consistently, and some years I would like actually go over the credit limit. I don't know like why I was so ambitious, but yeah, I think that made it even worse.

And I was like also super over-dedicated to my orgs. Like I remember for one club, this sounds awful, but like in between classes I would rent a zip car and drive to the Kung Fu Tea in Towson. So I'd pick up the Kung Fu Tea order for our fundraising, drop it off, and then run to my next class. I was constantly running around for my classes, my orgs. I was dedicating so much of my energy into my organizations that I was involved in that I wasn't dedicating it to academics or myself. And I think that was really detrimental both to my mental health and my GPAs. So I definitely say like in my later years of my undergraduate I had to focus really hard and study really hard just to raise my GPA back up.

KD:

Sure. Thank you. How did you meet people in those first few weeks? Could you talk a little bit about orientation as a freshman, or whether you participated in the Hop-In program. Just the first couple of weeks. Meeting your roommate. Things like that.

BD: Well, I didn't do Hop-In but I did JUMP³ which I think is pretty similar. I remember I applied to JUMP because I got the email and kind of just did it like on a whim, like last minute. And it was really nice. I don't think I like – it helped me adjust to college life as much because it was like a remote camping experience, because they took us to like a campground in I think Virginia or Pennsylvania. So I felt that it would have been nicer to be more like in Baltimore to kind of like to get to know the city more, and experience college life versus like a campground. But my mentor from JUMP helped me a lot. She was a Master's student and I think just having her as a mentor was really nice, because I think before I hadn't really had that kind of figure to kind of help me through college.

And then for the first two days of orientation week, I'm still really close to my first year mentor just because like we were in the same orgs advanced groups active. And then I met one of my closest friends through orientation. We just happened to live on the same floor together, and then she came up to me and she was like – she introduced herself and then we clicked really well. And I think a lot of my friend groups came from like getting to know her and her roommate and then like me and my roommate were really close with them. And we were also like branching our friend group out to other people, like just through connections. So I would say that's how I met people and just – I guess through my roommate and through my floor mates.

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KD: Just naturally.

BD: Yeah.

KD: Have you met any other first generation college students at Hopkins? You mentioned being part of the JUMP program, so I just wanted to know about that.

BD: Yeah. I have, I met a bunch of them. Currently, I'm in the Vietnamese Student Association and I think through that I've met a lot of other Vietnamese American first generation students which is really nice. Yeah, I feel like before I hadn't really known there are a lot of Vietnamese students at Hopkins. I feel like it's very

³ "JUMP" stands for Johns Hopkins Underrepresented in Medical Professions, a learning community for pre-health students who identify as underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities and/or first-generation and limited-income students.

difficult to be I guess – I guess Vietnamese Americans students at Hopkins or like Southeast Asian in general. Like the East Asian population is like a lot larger, so it was nice. Yeah, definitely through JUMP I met like a lot of first generation students.

But I feel that there's actually a large amount of first generation students at Hopkins, so it was really nice knowing a lot of people in the same situation as me.

KD: Sure. So what is your program of study at Hopkins? How did you choose it, and what do you find valuable about it?

BD: So currently I'm double majoring in neuroscience and archaeology and I'm minoring in art history. So I came in minoring I think in chemistry or something like that just because I didn't know what to put when I was applying. And I actually had no idea what neuroscience was. I've never heard about the phrase until I came to Hopkins and I took an intro course. I think it was like BBC. Like Brain Behavior Cognition. And I think that really interested me I guess by just knowing the way the brain worked and like the mechanisms behind like how we function. I thought it was really interesting so that's why I chose that major. I added archaeology as my double major pretty late. I would say like my second semester of my junior year. And the reason I did that was because I had taken a lot of art history classes because it was my minor, for my four years and I really resonated with one professor who was art history, but also an archaeology professor. And I think it was the same thing from high school where seeing someone so passionate about something really drove me to kind of want to see that as well. And I just really loved archaeology because it gave me not like a break from other science, but I think just being able to have discussions and explore things other than like hard sciences. It was really nice to like explore people. Explore different cultures and talk about like thoughts and theory. I thought that was such a refreshing break from just you know, constantly studying for you know, my science courses and just like regurgitating information. It was nice just to take it slow, and I think just have more discussion-based humanities classes.

KD: Definitely. So you mentioned a specific professor. Do you have any memorable classes or could you speak more about that specific professor, or any others that you really enjoyed having during college?

BD: Yeah. Did you want me to say specific names?

KD: It's up to you, but I think you know, in the past students have you know, mentioned specific professors that were memorable to them.

BD: Okay. Yeah, I think the professor I was talking about, the art history and archaeology professor was Professor DeLeonardis. She's in the archaeology program. She does a lot of like – what is it? Like Central American art. So that was really nice. I think one of the most important thing for me was like during I think my sophomore year I missed neuroscience, like Cellular and Systems, which was like one of the core classes for non-science. I missed an exam because I had stayed out until I think like 7:00 or 8:00 A.M. the night before studying for that exam, and then I slept through the exam. I slept through all my courses, and it was terrible. Like I woke up right as the exam had ended and I like ran to my professor, like Dr. Hendry's office immediately and I was like crying, and then he said "oh, sorry, there's nothing I can do because I released the" ...what is it?... "the answer key already." But luckily like that course doesn't make a big exam at the end, so it worked out fine. But because of that like I missed that assignment and then I missed my assignment for Professor DeLeonardis' classes and she needed, what was it? Like a letter from Hellwell⁴. So I had to go to Hellwell and then at Hellwell like they asked me like "Oh, what's wrong?" And then I just started crying, I totally had a breakdown and then at the end of it the person was like "Oh, I'm sorry. We don't give out notes."

And then —

[00:30:00] She was like "But, I think you need to see the counseling office." So she walked me to the counseling office and I had to do a session, like signup and everything. And then I talked to the counselor there and then I had another breakdown there, and then at the end she was like "Oh, for confidentiality reasons we don't give notes."

So I was like running around. I ran to the Dean's office. Dean of Student Life, I think. And I told them there, and then the office said they didn't do notes. So this ties in another professor but Dr. Gorman, she was – she teaches BBC, the neuroscience class as well as she's my neuroscience mentor, so I told her what's happening, and then she connected me with a Dean and that was the way I was able to get a note that excused me for the assignment and allowed me to remake it. Like make it up.

⁴ "Hellwell" is short for the Johns Hopkins University Student Health and Wellness Center.

But that was definitely one of the more – that was probably the most stressful experience at Hopkins. And I think that really like opened my eyes to how difficult it was at Hopkins just to – I don't know, like make accommodations. But I was really thankful for Dr. Gorman. And I'll talk a little bit more about her, but first I want to talk about Professor DeLeonardis.

Like I think after that actually I made up the assignment she like I guess talked to me more often. She was like "Ooh, like how are you feeling?" Because she realized like it was a mental health thing and it wasn't like a physical health thing. So she checked up on me and it was really nice of her. And I think as I was more interested in archaeology I would talk to her more often, and I remember I was going through like a crisis because I didn't know whether or not I wanted to continue being a doctor or like continue my premed track, or if I wanted to pursue like archaeology as my profession in like museum studies, and I talked to her about it. And like she shared her life story with me and I kind of told her like what I was feeling, and you know, her input was really helpful and just having her like as someone I could talk to and reach out to. Like even though she wasn't like a science or STEM based I feel like just being able to interact with her outside of academics was really nice.

And I would say she's always been like really supportive. Like I wanted to do an honor thesis for archaeology which I ended up not pursuing because of like my workload, but she's always been supportive. And I remember I had a different archaeology supervisor and they didn't really check up on me, so I was pretty lost, and then I remember she emailed me out of the blue and she was like hey, you know, I asked the head of archaeology to switch me as your advisor and they haven't, but they recently just switched me, and I just want you to know that I'm always on your side, and I felt like you weren't receiving enough attention from the archaeology department. And you know, I think that was just really nice. I feel like I hadn't ever had that kind of support before from a professor. And she's always been super supportive of me, and whenever I try to you know, pursue any endeavor, she always tells me like you know I'm always going to support you in anything you do. So that was I guess – that is definitely one of the best professor relationships I've had at Hopkins, and something so defining for me.

Another professor that I've had that was really supportive is Dr. Gorman. Unfortunately, she did retire so I when I had contact with her between like my sophomore and junior year more recently, like

in my senior year. I took a class with her now about like mental health, and she's also someone that's like really great and like if you reach out to her, she's really supportive. And I think I just – I'm really grateful for her for that one time when she like helped me as my advisor. And she's also like always been really supportive like even in my course. And I think now as a senior, like looking back in like that mental health course with her, I think she's helped me grow a lot. Like just being comfortable with thinking about my mental health, and being comfortable with like prioritizing myself. Yeah.

KD: Great. Thank you. I'm going to pause the recording really quick.

BD: Okay.

KD: Okay, so we're back. And I believe you were talking about memorable professors and you mentioned an instance where you went to "Hellwell." Does that stand for Student Health and Wellness?

BD: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Health and wellness.

KD: Just wanted to double check. Thanks so much. Okay. You mentioned a little bit earlier on at Hopkins making friends. Could you talk about your overall dorm and apartment life? Living in the residence halls and moving on.

BD: Yeah. So I lived in Wolman my first year as a freshman, and that was really nice. I was really close to like some of – like another dorm and they were like my floor-mates so that was really nice, and I was really close to one of them and she's still like my – one of my closest friends at Hopkins now —

[00:35:00] Although she's graduated. And so I was roommates with her up until like she graduated so from freshman year onward.

And my second year I lived in Bradford which was also very nice. It was more like an apartment style. And then the next few years I've lived in the Marylander. It's I guess nice living on my own. Like I really enjoy it, but I didn't realize how much I enjoyed it 'til like I would come back – like back home and just kind of experiencing like living with other people again. Not other people, but just living in a space that was super crowded. So like maybe it was just like there's so many people at home and there was no like you know, space for myself. I guess not having a room kind of like exacerbated that, but it was really nice to be able to live on my

own and just you know, be able to like clean up after myself. I think back home I would always have to do the dishes, and because there's so many people there, there's always so many dishes. And my parents were pretty messy. My brothers are really messy, too, so I think growing up I didn't know how to clean very well, so it was only after like to college that I learned how to like take care of myself. And like how to I guess value my belongings. So I think going back home and seeing that and just seeing like how much stuff my parents hoarded, I think it really took a toll on my mental health because I was constantly cleaning and then like they would just make a mess and then you know, they were like why are you cleaning the floor and that kind of stuff?

So I really liked living on my own and just being able to I guess take care of myself, and just be clean if I want to. Yeah.

KD: And do you have a cat?

BD: Oh, yes. Yeah. He's usually in the background, but yeah, I have two cats I adopted. My first cat, like about two years ago when I first moved to the Marylander. She's really sweet. I adopted her from a shelter and she was about like seven years old. And then a few months ago I adopted my second cat, and she's also from the same shelter. BARCS⁵, the animal shelter in Baltimore, and she's eight years old. So they're the same age.

And actually like back home when I would bring my cat home, my first cat home, my mom kind of fell in love with the cat and so now at home they have three cats at home, because my mom's like super obsessed with cats now, so yeah.

KD: That's great.

BD: Unrelated, but yeah.

KD: And I'm sure you know, I find having pets especially helps during stressful times. Do you find that they've been comforting to you while you've been in school?

BD: Yeah. So they've been so much help. I feel like my first cat, she's like a total lap cat, so I remember when I first brought her home, she would just immediately like go up to me and sleep with me. And it was really nice. Just like when I was stressed, just like cuddle with her or like – you know, just like taking care of them.

⁵ "BARCS" stands for Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter.

Like making sure they have their food and a clean litter box. That kind of stuff. I think it adds like a routine to my life that is really like welcome. But yeah, they're super fun. I think I just like spending time with them and playing with them. It's been super nice.

KD: Great. You mentioned joining a sorority.

BD: Yeah.

KD: Could you talk about other clubs or various activities you've been a member of at Hopkins?

BD: Yeah. So since my freshman year I've been a part of like the Vietnamese Student Association. I'm currently the president of it now. And then I was also in Eclectics dance group which was like a non-audition open to everyone dance group. And I was like treasurer and productions manager for that. But recently I've taken a step back from Eclectics. I met a lot of my friends through there because we did showcases. I was really close to the people there. But I think I gave a little bit too much of my effort. It was one of the orgs where I would say I was running around and doing things for them. Like getting Kung Fu Tea. That kind of stuff. I think I really over-dedicated myself to them. Not that that's a bad thing. I just think that there's a fine line between like prioritizing yourself and then like giving your life for an org. And kind of like my junior year I realized like what am I doing? Like why am I putting in so much effort into this one org when I could just be like focusing on myself.

So that was like a big game changer for me. And then for my sorority I'm kind of like the president of it now, and it's aKDPHI⁶ so it's an Asian-American interest sorority, and that has been such a huge part of my life at Hopkins. I joined when I was a freshman, my freshman spring. I actually joined with my roommate who was like my really close friend because she wanted to join. And I had never thought of joining a sorority before —

[00:40:00] But it was because it was like a smaller org and it was so close knit. I think like I just instantly fell in love with it, and some of my closest friends are through the sorority. And like we would always have conferences.

⁶ "aKDPHI" stands for the alpha Kappa Delta Phi Sorority.

So one of my I guess my favorite things was like traveling with them. I remember we drove to like Florida one weekend. It was like a fourteen-hour drive because we had to go to a conference. And I think that's just like a huge bonding experience. And I think it was nice having something outside of academics to relate with them. Just like a group of people who are really supportive of me.

I was in a lot of other orgs. Like I was in the newsletter. I'm in share. I'm just like in a bunch of different organizations but I think like those three were the most formative for me. Like the Vietnamese Association really helped me find like my cultural identity as well. And I think – yeah, I think it's knowing that there were Vietnamese Americans were really nice.

I was also a part of Disaggregate Hopkins, and that's kind of like pushing for data disaggregation at Hopkins. Just because like there's only five broad categories now. Like Asian, white, Like Latino. Other. No, I think it's Alaskan or American Indian, and then Black. So there's just like breaking down those broader categories. So that was something that I really enjoyed doing. Just like pushing for against change and the administration.

I'm also a part of the Curriculum Committee, but I don't think that's an org. I think I had to run for that. So yeah, that's also something that helped me open my eyes to like how academics work, and then being able to like talk directly with all the professors when we were making like widespread curriculum choices. I think that was also really eye-opening to see like what professors thought, and like what the administration thought like compared to student voices.

KD: Sure. So that's an elective position, and something that works sort of collaboratively with faculty members?

BD: Yeah.

KD: Okay.

BD: I think I joined it through SGA. I remember I had to apply for that position, and then I think SGA like the student government decides on who they want as their committee members.

KD: Interesting. What about internships or jobs you may have had while an undergrad?

BD: So I did research part-time I guess at like a neuroscience Parkinson's Lab for a good chunk of my undergrad experience. And then actually my post-op that I worked under was another really important mentor for me. She was really nice. And then currently I work part-time, and I think I've been working part-time for two years at a donor, an organ donor, like research, clinical research study. That was really nice. I think that was – it really helped cement the fact that I want to go into medicine because not only was I working my part-time with like patients, but being able to – it's like a call center I guess. Like talking with patients directly and talking to people, and just hearing their stories I think really affected how I viewed medicine and its accessibility to everyone.

KD: All right. Could you talk about how you spent summers or breaks from Hopkins? And maybe a little bit about your relationship with your family while you've been here. You mentioned your brother, too.

BD: Yeah, so the first two summers I would actually go home, and the reason I went home was because I would work at a nail salon in Chicago. Not the same one as my parents. I would work at one on I think the south side, and I worked with my cousin. But yeah, so basically after I finished school I would go home and I would work fulltime in a nail salon. I think it was like ten hours for like five days a week, so like fifty hours. I would just do nails. And I think I was just really driven by just getting money at that point. I think I put a lot of pressure on myself for not wanting to take any of parents money. You know, just like having that full ride scholarship, but I don't want them to pay for anything with college. Like I don't want them to pay for like my rent, or the food I eat, or even my plane ticket home. So I think that's one of the reasons I really pushed myself to just work.

I do wish I like took that time in the summer to explore other things. Like research or just like more community engagement thing instead of just working. I think that was a mindset that I had to grow out of throughout my undergrad experience.

Then my other summers. The other summers I think I spent at the Parkinson's Lab as well as the clinical research. I was working fulltime so it was an eight-hour workday.

KD: And were those – the Parkinson's Lab and the call center, were those —

[00:45:00] Based in Baltimore?

BD: Yeah. So they were both at the Johns Hopkins Hospital

KD: All right. So when you weren't at home and when you were here, what is your support system like on campus? Friends or your brother, having him around. How do you find support while on campus?

BD: Well, I definitely think it's like my friends. I have a huge support system. I think that's the most important part. They're like my partners also, which is a very important. I think just having someone to talk to. I think because a lot of my friends are also in the same track with me. Like premed. In the same year and like applying to medical schools. I think it's easy to – for all of us to relate to the struggles we're all going through at the same time.

But my brother, I think – I would say he's my support system. Actually like I'm more of his just because I think he's having a hard time like adjusting to college and making friends and stuff like that. So he hangs out with me in my apartment a lot, and like whenever – I try to invite him over a lot. I know when we were back home during the pandemic he was talking to me a lot about like his problems and whether or not he should like stay home instead of going on campus. But I think he's doing a lot better, so that's nice. But definitely my support system is like my peer group.

KD: Sure. And have you felt supported by Hopkins specifically as a first generation student? Do you find that they have useful programs or offices that are available to students?

BD: I personally haven't felt like I've been supported by Hopkins in terms of that. I know like a lot of my – like my one sister in my sorority. She's really involved with like FLI like the first generation low income group and I think that really helps her a lot. I think it was more me for not like really searching for more first gen programs outside of JUMP. Like I definitely know that there are programs there, but personally like I've never like – I guess I wasn't really made aware of them. Like I had no idea FLI existed 'til recently. Actually 'til my sister joined, and then she told me about that.

So I think I maybe the lack of research on my part or like I guess Hopkins, I didn't know it very well, but I didn't really know about these programs. But yeah, they're definitely there. I just haven't utilized them.

KD: Yeah. How do you think the university could increase its support for first generation students? Do you think that perhaps an increased awareness from the programs might be useful? Or just what do you think about that?

BD: Yeah, I agree. I definitely think an increased awareness of the programs. I feel like if I hadn't joined JUMP I wouldn't have known like any other programs. I think like for JUMP, like they send newsletters out which I think would be really helpful in general to just make those resources I guess more visible to just students.

I think like it's really difficult to like – I guess when you're focusing on your academics you – kind of everything else is secondary so you don't really search for things like that. Yeah.

I remember I don't actively search for like first gen support. I guess because I didn't realize like what a huge like – not only financial gap, but just educational and experience gap it was until like recently. And I think as an incoming freshman I wasn't really like aware of that. I was like yeah, I'm getting my scholarship money from Hopkins. But I didn't realize like what a gap it was for me. Like oh, I didn't know how to study and that kind of stuff.

KD: What kinds of indicators made you realize or notice that gap recently?

BD: I definitely think talking with my friends and just hearing like them talk about like oh, they have like SAT prep. And then I remember when I took my SAT, I took one practice test the night before and I just took it. I felt I just did not know what I was doing. I was so underprepared looking back at it. But just hearing, like their process, how they like – you know, just the access of materials and relationships. Like they knew people who wanted to be doctors. People who were doctors. They knew the process. I guess they had family members who were doctors. They had test prep. You know, just have access to resources and they kind of knew like what you needed to do. I guess. I didn't know about applying to college and that kind of stuff. So I think it's having that. I guess that's not something you really ask as a freshman, but I guess like I was made more aware of it just throughout my undergrad and talking to people.

KD: Thank you. Say more about your life in Maryland for the past few years as well as just what it has been like living in Baltimore. Another part of this question we like to ask students is —

[00:50:00]

If there's any significant event that happened in the city or in any sort of historical moment that happened generally while you were living here, and how you found that to be. And if not, that's okay. Just we're interested in just what it's been like for you living in Baltimore.

BD:

I think outside of my own like personal life, I think something that I really love about Baltimore is that I feel like I've learned a lot more social activism issues. Actually in Chicago, like back home I wasn't really aware of it. I'm not sure if it was my friend group or just like in general, like the community. I feel like Baltimore and its small businesses and like its activism in general is like a lot more pronounced.

I remember like through the newsletter I would do a lot of like outside, like in the Baltimore community stories. And I remember I would attend a march. It was like a march advocating for like women workers, and also for like the minimum \$15 wage, and I think just being able to experience those issues in the community. And I definitely think like when I attended like marches for Black Lives Matter, and just meeting other like just people in the Baltimore community, that really changed like my experience.

Yeah, I think in general just like seeing more social issues being passed forward really helped me I think. You know, I think it's really important to address these issues. Definitely going into healthcare. I definitely think that academic rigor is secondary to like just wanting to improve people's lives and like just needing to take care of people, and taking care of like the community.

So I think just the experience of being in Baltimore and just a more open community I feel has been really nice.

KD:

Great. And you mentioned about you know, going into healthcare. Could you speak about your current plans for the future for like after Hopkins? Whether those are you know, academic, professional or otherwise.

BD:

Yeah. So I think I mentioned that I was like pre-med. So I think for me I have a lot of like turmoil I think when it comes to things like premed just because like of my GPA. Like I really was really low _____ freshman year and then I worked really hard to bring it up. It's still pretty low. So I feel like for that I was like really stressed out about applying to pre-med, but I think the pre-

professional office here is really nice in terms of like from the premedical track. Talking to the counselors there helped a lot.

So currently I'm taking my gap year for two years. I'm going to take two years off so I'm applying for the 2023 cycle for medical school application. And in those two years currently I'm like applying. I'm in like the final interview stages for two jobs that I hope I get, but if not, you know, the job hunt goes on.

But like it's a Clinical Assistant program, so I'll be working with children with behavioral problems. And then the second one is working remotely with high school, like freshman to like freshman year of college students in Chicago, and they're like a diverse group of students.

And I think the reason that program really spoke out to me was because I kind of saw myself in that program. And like I really hope I get that position because it's something that you know, I never realized how important it was to me until after I went through college and I was made aware of like all the I guess barriers I had. Like whether it was through the education system or just through like my family's lack of experience with college. Just knowing that there's like students out there who are driven and ambitious, but because of like all these barriers in front of them, like it's difficult for them to even just apply to college.

So I think I want to take these two gap years not to focus on like medicine and school like I have been these past few years, but just focusing on community and you know, just doing things that I feel really passionate about. So that's my two gap year plan. Hopefully I get those positions and then going forward, hopefully I get into med school so that's something that I really want to do, and I want to be a family doctor. Just because I want to work with like you know, a wide age group. Like from children to elderly. And I want to work you know, it's super ambitious, but I do want to work at a home in Chicago. And just working because I know when I was growing up like we didn't have – like we had access to healthcare, but it was really limited because we were on the state's like insurance. Like Illinois insurance. And so there's a lot of places that —

[00:55:00]

Wouldn't accept it, and you know, my mom had to like look for specific doctors who would accept our health insurance so that we could get like our checkups and stuff like that.

So I do want to work in Chicago and I want to make healthcare really accessible just for everyone. So those are my goals, and I think that is what's driving me recently.

KD: That sounds like a really worthy endeavor.

BD: Thank you.

KD: Our next question is would you recommend Hopkins to other first generation students, or is there any advice that you would give students of you know, as they're thinking about coming to Hopkins, or starting their Hopkins career?

BD: I would say I would recommend it. I think just using my other friends who are you know, like first generation incoming, they've really enjoyed their Hopkins experience. I would say like just giving a piece of advice, just that Hopkins isn't like really diverse so I think for me it was a culture shock coming from Chicago with like my – just being in like high school and my elementary school who are all really diverse. Just having like people who like are similar to me, it was kind of a shock coming to Hopkins. I think the money thing was one thing, and then just life experience in general is really different.

So I would say Hopkins does like open up – not open up. I feel like lately like the student population has become like a lot more diverse but just in general like pushing for that.

KD: Okay. Yeah. And in addition to just any advice you would have now that you're coming to the end of your undergrad career – and you've been doing this the whole time, but how would you sort of generally summarize your time at Hopkins overall?

BD: I think my time at Hopkins, I'm not sure if it's like specific to Hopkins or just like in general college. It's been really eye opening and transformative for me I think. You know, in terms of just getting to know myself better and like just coming to terms with like mental health. I think also just community engagement. Just realizing like what I wanted to do with my life, and just experience like – having the time to think about myself and reflect, and realize like what things were important to me and what things weren't.

I think that was kind of like my main point. Not a main point, but like a large part of what – like my Hopkins experience was. But then again, I don't know if it was like Hopkins or just in general like, because I'm in like that college age. Yeah.

KD: Well, great. Thank you so much. Thank you for interviewing with me today. I know it's different for us with Zoom so I hope it was okay for you. Is there anything else you'd like to add before the interview is over? Maybe anything that we didn't touch on that you would like to share?

BD: I guess for me something that I think about a lot at Hopkins is just the way academics are viewed. I know like it is pretty competitive. I do think a lot of people like I think prioritize academics over everything which I feel like is something that I don't really enjoy about Hopkins. I do wish that there was more of a push for life outside of school. Definitely the Hopkins bubble is real.

KD: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. And yeah, thank you so much.

BD: Thank you. Bye.

[End of Audio]