

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
MS.0404

“AZ”

Interviewed by Kristen Diehl

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Johns Hopkins University  
Oral History Collection

Interviewee: "AZ"

Interviewer: Kristen Diehl (KD)

Date: March 19, 2019

KD: This is Kristen Diehl here with "AZ" on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019, at the Eisenhower Library, for the first-generation college student oral histories. So, my first question is: where were you born? And if you could tell me a little bit about your family.

AZ: Okay. So I was born on Long Island. I was also raised on Long Island. I lived with my mother, my father, and my brother. And we all are still together. You want more information about –

KD: About your family and where you grew up. But we could also move on to the next question. If you could maybe tell me a little bit more about your parents or your guardians' education.

AZ: Oh, okay. My mother graduated from high school in Honduras. And then afterwards my grandfather passed away. So then she was the oldest at the time so she had to start working full-time to take care of the family. And then during that time she took a few college courses. But because of circumstances, it was kinda hard to continue. So she took about seven, I think, total. So it was like a semester's worth of classes. And then my dad – he went to school until I think the fifth grade. Or he finished the fifth grade.

KD: And what do your parents do? What are their occupations?

AZ: My father drives public buses, like public transport, and then my mom – she works in the first half of the day in a middle school cafeteria during the school year, and then in the afternoon she works kind of taking care of kids in the elementary school. And during the summer she helps clean up classrooms and prepare them for the next school year.

KD: Cool. You've mentioned you're from Long Island. Is there anything else you'd like to say about living on Long Island or the specific town you grew up in?

AZ: Okay. Yeah. So my town was – it's pretty small. It's a quiet town not far from New York City. And the schools were pretty – I went to the public school there and it was a pretty nice school. The kids were pretty friendly there. It wasn't too big either. I think my graduating class was like 250. Yeah.

KD: Speaking of high school, what was high school like? Did you do a lot of extracurriculars or anything like that?

AZ: I was part of the high school orchestra. And there was this little – it wasn't really like a science research club. It was kind of like an in-between between a club and a class program type thing. Like, I said, it wasn't big. Two fifty was my class size. A thousand I guess total, because it was four years. I had pretty good teachers. They were pretty supportive. Yeah. They definitely wanted their students to learn not just the material that was needed for passing the state exams but they were definitely interested in us being prepared for college and beyond.

KD: Cool. And what were your parents' or family's thoughts on education?

AZ: They definitely wanted me to go to college. Before I was ten years old they weren't sure if that was a possibility. So it wasn't until I think my fifth-grade teacher, during one of the parent-teacher conferences, mentioned that it was – because I was doing well in everything, and if I continued doing well and whatnot that it was possible for me to get a scholarship. And then that's when I guess a lightbulb kind of shone. And from that point on it was kind of like trying to work towards it, making it a reality.

KD: And how did you eventually decide to attend Hopkins, and sort of what was your college prep, college search process like?

AZ: So, my school kind of tried to get everybody looking at what was out there I think in sophomore year. So that's when I started kind of just looking through lists of schools and stuff. I think I started before that too, just Googling schools in middle school I think. And I actually came across Hopkins during that time. And I found out that I think it was ranked pretty highly for financial aid.

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Later on I forgot about it I think. When I was actually in high school I didn't I didn't really look into it until somebody from my school got in and they were really excited about it, naturally. And

that's when I started looking into it a bit more. And then later on I forgot about it again until somebody I knew, a friend of a friend, said that she was applying. And I didn't think I would get in. So I was just like, "Okay." I tried applying safe because I thought financially it might be better to apply to safe schools and to state schools too. But I decided to give it a shot with Hopkins, not really expecting, again, to get in.

KD: So what was your and your family's reaction when you did get into Hopkins?

AZ: Hopkins and NYU were the last two that I was waiting for to hear back from. The rest of the schools were relatively safe, as I said. So at that point I pretty much got accepted to all of them. And they didn't know anything about Hopkins or – they didn't really know too much about big-name schools in general. So when I told them, "Oh, I got into Hopkins," they were just like, "Oh, okay, it's another school. Good job." It wasn't until later on when people started asking, "Oh, where's AZ thinking of going?" and then they told them, "Oh, she's thinking of Hopkins or Hunter," which is another school that I was interested in, that's when they started seeing people's reaction, and that's when they were like, "Oh, okay. I guess it's a good school."

KD: Great. Could you describe the first few weeks of your undergraduate experience and sort of the transition from home to campus and from Long Island to Baltimore?

AZ: It was a little bit rough the first few nights because my parents are pretty conservative and whatnot so I was actually not allowed to sleep over my friends' house or anything like that. So from being home all the time to being away from home and just not being with my family was pretty strange at first. I was homesick for the first two days. And then I realized this was a decision that I had made and that I was going to try my best to make the most of it. So after – I sat down, I was pretty close to tears in my dorm by myself, and then I just was like, "Okay, we'll do this." And then orientation started and I was too busy to even think about [laughs] that.

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

AZ: I did meet one. I haven't actually come across that many, or at least that they would talk about it too much. So there was only one that I really knew well that was undergrad here. He graduated a while

back. Yeah. I did meet a grad student who recently graduated who's a first-generation college student.

KD: So what is your program of study and how did you choose it and how have you liked it?

AZ: I am a Mol. Cell major. And how did I choose it? I've always liked bio.

KD: Is that an acronym?

AZ: Oh, yeah. Molecular and cellular biology. Sorry.

KD: Thanks.

AZ: Yeah. I've always liked biology pretty much since I was a fetus. It was just something that I've always loved. So, coming into Hopkins, I knew that I wanted to do something related to biology and health. I'm premed. I'm glad I chose it. I've enjoyed all of my classes. And everything that I learned pretty much from it. So it was pretty interesting.

KD: Do you have any memorable professors or classes specifically?

AZ: Yeah. I did like my cell bio class and my biochemistry class quite a bit. My professors – there's multiple professors and they were all pretty good. The way those classes for structured and just the content made it easy to learn it and to – despite it being a lot of material and pretty difficult material to learn, they made it manageable.

KD: Great. Could you talk about your sort of overall dorm and apartment life at Hopkins?

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AZ: Okay. I think – so, for freshman year I did random. I'm not sure how they decide to match people up. But I think they did a pretty good job of matching me up with the roommate that I had. We were pretty compatible in many ways. Although we were also very different. We didn't stay together for the rest of the way. It was a clean, comfortable dorm. The lofted beds made it convenient I guess to stash all of my stuff underneath. I did like apartment life more, having my own room, for one. I was told it would be cheaper. It's actually not cheaper I think. But having the choice in

what kind of space you have – and there's a lot of options around here anyway. So it worked out.

KD: So, did you join any clubs or activities while you were at Hopkins and could you talk about the sort of different extracurriculars that you might've participated in?

AZ: Okay. I tried a bunch. Every year there's a student involvement fair. So I think there's over 300 student organizations. So when you go to the fairs, there's people kind of advertising and trying to recruit a bunch of students, especially the freshmen. And I would get e-mails and e-mails from thousands of – it was a mess. But it was also really exciting. And I ended up sticking with a couple of volunteering clubs. And the Hopkins Christian Fellowship too. So that was where I found a lot of people that I could get close to and meet upperclassmen, which is something I found to be super helpful and important during my time here: just learning about their experiences and what classes I should and shouldn't take and decisions I should make in terms of how to manage my time.

KD: What kinds of volunteering did you get into?

AZ: It changed over time depending on my class schedule and everything like that and how my interests changed. So, I started off with Habitat for Humanity for some time and then Hop Help, which is a tutoring club. I also did Believe in Art, which is an organization that gets students off campus and we go to the med campus mostly and play with or entertain some of the kids there. What else? Oh, and the Red Cross. That's the one that I think I've spent the most time with these past few years. I joined exec. I'm currently secretary. And this past semester I've been interim co-president. A co-president is away studying abroad.

KD: So the Red Cross has a club at Hopkins.

AZ: Yeah. We have a club at Hopkins. And we've kind of been able to make what we want of it since the mission is promote disaster relief. So we've been doing that through fundraising and by just volunteering in whatever way we can in the Baltimore community and trying to support people.

KD: Cool. That's great. Have you had any internships or jobs while you've been at Hopkins?

AZ: I've had one internship at Bayview, the Bayview Medical Center. And that was a clinical research position. So that allowed me to

kind of get out of my comfort zone and interact with patients and get all their information and do data entry and stuff of that nature. I've also done research. I guess this doesn't count as an extracurricular since I've been doing it during the school year and not as a paid thing too.

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Yeah. That was a basic biological wet-lab-type experience.

KD: Cool. How did you spend your summers and breaks while you've been at Hopkins? Do you usually go home or stay here or a mix of both?

AZ: I did a mix. So I think it was freshman year where I was home. I decided to shadow and volunteer at the same time at one of these private practices. And they kind of let me act as a stand-in lab tech because their lab tech was gone for some time. So that was fun. I didn't think they would actually let me do that. But it was a valuable experience I think. I got to learn how things work behind the scenes. And then that clinical research experience was between sophomore and junior year. And then this past summer I was in a basic research lab. So, yeah.

KD: So, what was your sort of support system while you were here at college? What sorts of mentors or friends, relationships like that did you sort of rely on?

AZ: I think I've mentioned the Hopkins Christian Fellowship. The people there were the first people to make me feel welcome. So that's how I connected again with older students who had been there and had experienced the stress and the uncertainty and confusion with figuring out what decisions to make and stuff like that. So they were the people that I ended up leaning on. I also made friends in classes as well. A good friend of mine I made in a lab, one of the lab classes. She was my lab partner. So she's been a mentor for me, especially now that I'm in the med-school application process. She's already been through it. So it's helpful to have somebody like her.

KD: Definitely. And how was your relationship with your family during your time at Hopkins? Do you talk to them a lot or see them during breaks and things like that?

AZ: Yeah.

KD: Do they miss you?

AZ: Yeah. They definitely do. They let me know that. I call them. Especially freshman year it was a lot easier to make time to call everybody and stuff. Got a little bit harder after sophomore year. But I definitely made time do that. Family's important to me and it's important to them. So I definitely made sure to stay in touch with everybody and know how they're doing and let them know how I'm doing.

KD: Cool. What would you say about your life, just not even only at Homewood, but just in Baltimore and in Maryland? How has that been?

AZ: I guess it's kind of been eye-opening since it's such a different community than the one that I grew up in. Just I guess the way people interact with each other is different too. I remember freshman year when I first came here my roommate was from North Jersey and then I'm from Long Island. And I guess we were kind of confused at first. We were just like, "Why is everyone so nice and friendly? We're so used to whatever reputation that New Yorkers and people from North Jersey have." And then I remember going back home for Thanksgiving break and being really confused as to why people seemed so stiff and rude back home on Long Island. And I was like, "Oh, wait. Never mind. I'm home" [laughs]. "This is just how it's always been." Yeah.

KD: Were there any sort of historic moments in general or any major events on campus that really stuck out to you? Or events around the city that you might've gone to?

AZ: In the city...I can't think of any in the city off the top of my head. But I know that I had a job at one point my freshman year – it was very short-term. I think it was only three or four weeks. Wait, no. It was like eight weeks but I was only there for four to eight hours a week. And it was at the pediatric neurosurgery department.

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And I remember way back when, when I was like seven years old, one of the first instances where I was like, "Okay, I wanna be a doctor," was when I saw the Ben Carson documentary, *Gifted Hands* I think it's called. And I remember sitting there and just – my job was to go through everybody's old charts and take out all the junk and determine which things should be kept so that we could scan it and put it on that online medical records and stuff –



electronic medical records. And a lot of the stuff that I went through was actually his stuff. So it hit me that I was like: "Wow." When I first watched that, documentary, that was during the time when I still didn't think college would be a possibility. And now I'm at Hopkins. So –

KD: It's very surreal.

AZ: Yeah. It was surreal.

KD: You've mentioned this a little bit, but maybe you could elaborate on your plans for the future and life after Hopkins, academic, professional, or otherwise.

AZ: Yeah. I mentioned that I am in the process of applying to medical school. I'm going to take a year off between school, potentially two. I'm not 100-percent sure if I'll be ready by the time comes to actually submit something. But I'm still looking for a job. I've been focusing more on just kind of getting the application for med school out of the way. But yeah. I'm open to clinical stuff or basic research stuff. And then as a doctor I guess maybe surgery. I know that I want to help people and that I'm interested in biology. And that was one way to combine the two and make an impact in people's lives.

KD: Overall, would you recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students? And what advice might you have for them?

AZ: Yeah. I would recommend Hopkins to other first-generation students. I think the best part about Hopkins was all the people that I met. So many people here are driven and they really want to make the world a better place. And it's pretty tough academically. And also there're so many opportunities; sometimes it can feel overwhelming to know what to do. But everybody here is supportive and willing to listen in my experience. So even if you come across those moments where you feel overwhelmed – and I think for first-generation students it's easy to feel that way because this is an opportunity that maybe your parents wanted and they never had or you have other family members who started school and they couldn't finish for various reasons. It's kind of: you want to make sure that you don't blow it I guess. But, yeah. The people here have made it worth it, I think, in my opinion. Just the support and everything.

KD: So now that you're nearing sort of graduation, how would you summarize your time at Hopkins?

AZ: Summarize it. I guess definitely challenging. Definitely a place where I've had to push myself out of my own comfort zone and learn how to I guess speak up for myself because there's so many really smart kids here that sometimes it can be intimidating at times and hard to just realize that, yeah, "You're also smart and whatever;" to know that I could have also ideas that are good and that matter I guess. So I guess my advice would be to not be afraid to speak up for yourself and to ask questions or be afraid to look stupid. And also to reach out for help when you need it.

KD: Great. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

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Those are all of my questions so I'd like to ask just if there's anything that we didn't touch on that you'd like to discuss or anything else to add.

AZ: I think I pretty much summed it up in the last part [laughs].

KD: Okay. Well, great. Thank you so much for interviewing with us today.

AZ: Yeah. Thank you.

KD: Sure.

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