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Hello and welcome to Origin stories, a podcast by the Immigration Policy Lab that explores migration through research and storytelling. I'm Adam Lichtenheld, IPL's executive director. Across the world, migration has become one of the most contentious political and policy challenges of our time. With branches at Stanford University and ETH Zurich in Switzerland, the Immigration Policy Lab generates rigorous evidence and innovative solutions to help policymakers make more informed decisions on immigration.

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We also try to highlight the human stories behind the data. Our guests in this episode are Alessia and Xiaorong. Alessia is a sustainable finance expert, author, and adjunct faculty member at the University of Chicago. Xiaorong is Associate Director of Statistics at AbbVie Inc. Alessia graduated from Stanford in 2003, Xiaorong in 2004.

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We'll let them take it away.

Hi Xiaorong, Remember how we met on campus at Stanford 20 years ago?

Yes, of course, it was a fun story. I remember it was a beautiful September morning in California and I had just moved there to start my graduate program at Stanford.

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I remember we were the only two in a big empty classroom waiting for the class to start and 10 minutes later we were still there, the only two person and we both realized that there must be something wrong. so we checked with each other and find out that the classroom was changed.

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It was the legendary professor Dr Dyke in his class Math of Finance, derivative class. I was majoring in statistics, but statistics is like a tool that can be applied in many fields, but at that time I wasn't quite sure which field I wanted to go into. So I decided to register for a few non statistics courses and finance was one of it and we ended up taking the same class and that was the beginning of our friendship.

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Do you remember that?

Yes, I remember it really vividly. I had also just moved only a few weeks earlier to campus and actually I was not living in Stanford, I was living nearby in Palo Alto. And that morning I just remember I was filled with lots of excitement, anxiety.

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It was my very first class of my master program as well, so I didn't really know what to expect. I had lots of thoughts in my head for sure and I thought it would have been certainly a smaller classroom since my program was still very early on. They had admitted only five students at the time.

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So you're right if you imagine picture me parking my bicycle getting into the statistics department and ended up in a huge auditorium style classrooms with very dim lights. It seemed to be really there were no people around. So for me that was the nightmare scenario of missing my very first class.

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No so for me you were like a ray of hope. Somebody actually was there in the middle of that gigantic room and waiting patiently, and that was you, Hieron. So I remember I did not want to seem like I got lost. So funny enough, I think I sat right behind you and waited and then we struck our conversation, but that was just the beginning, right?

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I think also our respective hometowns played a role in our friendship.

Absolutely, I grew up in a small city called Kunming, located in the southwest corner of China. And people call it Spring City because the weather there is pretty much perfect all year round, never too cold or too hot.

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But what makes my hometown really special is its diversity. Kunming is far from the center of China and very close to Vietnam and Tibet. The cultures and traditions of my hometown are quite different from the mainstream in China. We have a large proportion of minorities living there, which means that the city has a diverse mix of cultures, languages and customs.

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When I growing up in a minority majority city, it gives me a unique perspective on the world. I learned to appreciate the beauty of different cultures and understand the importance of respecting and embracing diversity. I think that's the reason I come here. I feel so fortunate to have grown up in such a unique and special place and it's big part of who I am today.

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And what about you, Alessia?

Well, I was born and raised also in a small town. It was not a border town, but I was in the exact geographic center of Italy, and it's a town called Rieti. It's a small town that is a gem for nature and outdoors.

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You have ski destinations in winter just nearby. It's a summer destination for cycling, fishing and paragliding when the weather gets really nice and picture like a valley with lakes and surrounded all by gentle mountains. And so coming to campus for me was embracing again that type of landscape and it was really wonderful to find it there.

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Yeah, it's really amazing how even though we are we lived so far apart in our home countries, we actually have a lot in common and we are both the only children in the families and we both enjoy cooking, we both work hard and we share a strong belief in importance of family.

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I still remember that I was very surprised that the role of religion in our countries is so similar. I saw you pray to the grandma of Jesus and you told me that grandma usually talks the most in the family and it may work better than praying to Jesus directly.

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That was a surprise, and this idea is not so different from what we have In China, we pray to the gods, to goddesses and their relatives. And you remember you told me that you believe we all have the same gods, named differently in different culture. I can't agree with you more.

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I believe the world will be much more peaceful if people all think this way.

That is so true actually, you sent me back years with that. I still play actually to St Anne and my mom is actually named after her. I was also thinking food played an incredible role even in our not just family traditions and how comparable they are, but also in our own friendship.

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When I think about our family traditions, sitting at the table together to share a meal, for example, was an interesting one that we had in common. And also that a meal was not just a nourishment for our bodies, but also times of celebration as a true family event.

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And so while at Stembur, I remember we shared a few meals and cooked together traditional recipes. My home countries remember, and first time that actually you came to visit me was we celebrated Easter Sunday and Chinese New Year's also together at some point. And even after graduation, you would send me to pick up mooncakes from a bakery in San Francisco, remember that?

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I remember I had to ask you specifically which kind of moon cakes you like. So I think that what we found out was that by sharing stories of our childhood or how certain foods or beverages like tea, for example, were used by parents in both China and in Italy when children were not feeling well.

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And you immediately brought me plain rice when I got very sick right after graduation. And that made me feel instantly safe at home. And that there was certainty that I will recover soon. It's great that our relationship has continued to grow strong for 20 years after graduation.

Yes, you're absolutely one of the closest friends in my life.

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You're always there for me no matter what. You never forgot my birthday and important festivals and always send me those very thoughtful gifts and cards to me and my family. Whenever I'm in trouble or feel down, you are there to listen and offer support. And when good things happen, you are the first one to celebrate with me.

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When we were at Stanford, you helped me with my finance courses. And 20 years later today, you're still the first person I go to when I have questions related to finance. You're always my finance hero.

That's so funny, same for me. Without a friend like you, always truly inspiring me to continue studying hard, but also taking breaks and enjoying some time of reflection outside of the classroom.

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I don't think I would have made so many great memories of my time on campus. Honestly, I still can't believe that 20 years have gone by and yet we did graduate from two different programs. But the time we spend in the same classrooms and holding to each other for inspiration and guidance was really great.

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I seriously don't remember a moment when I was going through either happiness or sadness that you did not know. And even I continue to come to you today for your patient advice and I keep following it, so that must be really, really good advice. One thing though I have never asked you about is that just came to me was what were your first impressions of California and the Bay Area?

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I fell in love with California right away. I don't know if you noticed those big eucalyptus trees in California. I saw those trees as soon as I arrived. It's just like the ones in my hometown. And the weather too, the weather was so similar. Clear blue skies and temperatures that were never too cold or too hot, but what really made an impression on me was the people.

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California is full of smart people from all over the world and they gather here to work, to study and create amazing things. And despite of being so talented and accomplished, everyone I met was so nice and warm hearted, just like the Weather in California. When I first arrived, I didn't know anyone in California, not a single person.

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I remember the day before my flight to San Jose, I sent an email to the student union asking for a pickup from the airport. I didn't even have a cell phone at that time and I was not expecting anything and prepared to find my way to school by myself.

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But to my surprise, when I walked out of the airport, I saw a tall girl holding an A4 paper with my name on it. It turned out that the chair of the student union saw my email just before my arrival and he couldn't find anyone to pick me up at that time, so he sent his girlfriend to pick me up.

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That was a very warm and welcoming introduction to California. And since then I have continued to meet many, many amazing and kind people here. What about you, Alessia? What is your first impression of California?

I have a distinct memory of not at the airport, but certainly at the Caltrain station in Palo Alto with my luggage arriving there for the very first time.

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Looking around at the gates of campus on the other side, with the long line of palm trees just pointing straight to the oval and feeling at home. I had spent the prior few years in the Windy City, Chicago, and I was so happy to trade all my heavy winter boots, thick jackets for the Mediterranean weather of Northern California.

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I felt as if I was back home. So weather and the warmth I found there was very similar to what you found. But also, I think, like you, I chosen to stay off campus and I was really eager to go meet my neighbors. At the time, I was living right behind the post office in Palo Alto in a small house with students from the medical school.

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And really speaking of cultural differences, as soon as I walked off the train station, I remember into town, I was greeted with welcoming smiles and a few good morning or how are you from total strangers. Now here I am coming from another part of the exact same country where that was not definitely the typical greeting.

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I was used to people not being so open and it was like a switch went off in my mind. So I think within a week or a few days, I was also greeting people in the street. I was smiling with a warm heart from early morning, it was just perfect.

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But my second surprise was that evening one of my neighbors knocked on my door to share an apple pie, welcoming me to California. What else could I ask for? I had arrived in dreamland almost, but I also know we had some difficult times and probably you remember those as well.

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Yeah, sure. Yeah, life is full of ups and downs and we definitely had some hard time and shared one, the challenge of immigration status. It was something that impacted our lives in every aspect. From the academic programs we choose to and the job perspective we pursued. We had to carefully consider which majors would offer financial aid and lead to job opportunities that would sponsor our visas.

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So that's something special for the foreign student. And even after graduation, navigating the process of changing our immigration status was incredibly stressful and overwhelming. I guess you experienced the same thing as me here.

Yes, that's exactly correct.

I remember being so worried about my OPT, which was taking longer than expected at that time.

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And I was wondering whether my employer would be able to wait for me during the process. It was a really difficult time because it wasn't just about finding a job. It was about the possibility of having to leave the US if my status wasn't changed within 60 days after graduation.

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That was the immigration policy. If you end your F1 visa, then you have to change your status within 60 days otherwise you have to leave the country. But fortunately, my manager at that time, who was also graduated from Stanford, he was very nice and understanding. He gave me extra time I needed to sort things out.

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So I was lucky, but that was hard.

You're right, I think for me, it was the same. This idea of figuring out paperwork, right? So paperwork became the sort of journey of immigration as opposed to the broader picture of what it means embracing a new place for me came actually during summertime with internships.

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And I was very much looking forward to apply everything I learned with the very top level math with real world application and the ability or not to work on campus as well. And the timing of that, as you said, was really a difficulty, especially if you think about that.

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We both graduated during the bubble burst and experienced an incredibly challenging job market. So if I look back at what I thought of immigration at the time, to me it felt like a clock was clicking on my head every day. No matter how smart I was, how good my grades were, how incredibly fortunate I was to be in such a well known university.

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Yet immigration restrictions were there to put a limit on my time of personal and professional growth. And so there was very little time, I felt, for experimentation and put really all my knowledge to work. If you ask me, what has made it manageable. And again, after all, we're both living in the US after 20 years and we both embrace citizenship but with rewarding careers and we have happy family lives.

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But I think for me, what made it manageable was the supportive environment of really being immersed in a web of students from all over the world. Some that had gone through securing their own immigration status. You talked about your manager, right? And so others that were also in the process and they were just embracing the unknown by just, they focused on continuing to do good work every day and be aware of what the outcome could be and it could be different.

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So having the ability to actually share and talk and discuss with a large network on campus gave me hope, a sense of confidence that things will fall in place. And, I hope that was not wishful thinking. It was a strong certainty that all will be well because we have worked so hard for it.

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And after all, it did pay off incredibly well. Yeah, we don't just have the hard time. We also have great memories to cherish believe it or not, my best memory at Stanford is actually learning. It's the most amazing experiences I ever had. The study environment at Stanford is just fantastic.

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It totally changed my perspective. After I joined the homework group, I was so surprised. I never knew that learning could actually be team ever. Back in China, working together on homework was not really encouraged and some teacher even don't allow it at all. Students were expected to do their homework independently and working together was seen as a way for students to copy off each other and kind of cheating.

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But at Stanford, the homework group was a completely different story. I guess you were in one of them too. We all sit together sharing our ideas. I learned so much just by listening to my fellow classmates, especially those from different backgrounds. We just solved the problem very differently and there are a lot of new things to learn.

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And at the time when I was sharing my thoughts, it really forced me to organize the pieces in my mind and put them in a logical way. It was like I was teaching myself, but with audiences. And I find that it deepened my own learning when I try to let others understand my thinking.

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And more importantly, I learned how to be a team player and I saw real leadership. How about you, Alessia? What was your fondest memory?

Certainly studying together was definitely one of them. And you are absolutely right. I remember we ended up only taking a few of the same classes while we were on campus.

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But I remember you were focusing on the biomedical statistics track and I was on a financial mathematics program. And I would say I learned the most when we were helping each other in classes. We were not taken together, right? And it was what you were saying, these translation that went actually beyond even our own comprehension of English, right?

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It was like math and equations were actually helping us get to each other's learning and understanding and translate our own sort of logical patterns to finding a solution. I enjoyed sharing what I knew and really being helpful to you and the other students in my homework group. And you were such an incredible teacher to me on some really foundational work I had not done in my undergraduate studies.

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It was just a joy to we teach to each other some concepts and help the other succeed also you're absolutely right. The fact that we also had very similar learning style because also in Italy at the time I was preparing for my undergraduate studies. But even before, throughout my K12, there was not that much of an encouragement of sharing.

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And there was in a way perceived as a way of copying from one another exactly the same that you had growing up and you had experience. So I like that we both enjoy building our inquiries in a way from scratch from the real ABCs and then working our way into the more complicated blocks in a way like building a forth with Lagos, I would say, right?

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But I must also say, as you were speaking, I think my own sense of identity blossomed during our time at Stanford. Did your identity as well shift somehow or how was it for you?

Yeah, when I first arrived in the US, my first stop was Gainesville. It's a small university town in Florida.

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I lived there for a year and Florida was beautiful. And most people are nice too, but being a foreigner over there was a challenge. When I just arrived, my English was very poor and my accent was very different. And it's always make me very embarrassed. Most people, well, they're nice people and they're friendly, but you can see their puzzled face and they make it really clear to me and they don't understand me and I'm an outlier over there, so it's different.

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It's different, but when I moved to California, it's totally changed. I was so happy to find out that most of people here are from somewhere of the world and they all have an accent. So I don't feel too bad about my English from then on and it's magic.

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We speak different language, we speak English in a very different way, but we could understand each other just fine. It was like seeing strangers every day and strange become normal. Yeah, it felt amazing to finally blend in and not feel like outsider anymore. And Alessia, do you remember when I first met you, my English was still very poor, but you always understood what I was trying to say.

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I could never imagine to. To have a non Chinese friend before that. And then I met you and we have been best friends for over 20 years.

Well actually I don't think your your English was that bad. But in my case I can totally relate with what you're saying.

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In my case, for example, I got very comfortable with being part of a multicultural and international community right away. I did not need to fit into anyone's image or celebrate someone else holidays or smooth out my accent somehow right I could choose. I was absolutely comfortable with being my own self.

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A bright multilingual learner with quite inquisitive mind, I admit it and allowed to ask as many questions as I wanted. Sharing my own traditions and learning about others. And there was no preset standard of success on campus either. So something that definitely helped me stay strong and succeed on my own terms when I left campus and went off to build a career on Wall street where for the longest time the definition of success was only one.

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And what led you there was a specific ladder to climb in a certain way. And yes, my campus experience at Stanford shaped the way I went ahead and defined my own success and stayed open to reassess what success looks like to me today as it actually changes. I notice as I as I also develop my own pattern.

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If you have to pass along something to someone starting at Stanford today with your background here on what would you, what would you recommend them to do or what would you advise them?

Well the very first thing I want to say is they are incredibly lucky to have this opportunity to be able to study at Stanford.

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So enjoy every moment and make the most of it. They will sure receive a world class education and be surrounded by some of the brightest minds in the world. And another thing is to be open minded. At Stanford you will be exposed to different cultures and perspectives which may change your beliefs and values.

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But learn to embrace the differences and learn from them and you can still be yourself. You can be different but at the same time respect the others and be open. And last, I would encourage them to make connections and build relationships with others. In this campus you never know who you will meet and how they will impact your life.

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They could be the co founder of the next big tech company like Google, like HP. They are all funded by a pair of Stanford students and if not that big and you may meet your lifelong best friend just like you and me.

That's true. I would say the same, maybe I would just advise either a younger me or someone with similar background arriving on campus today to find yourself a very good friend, I always say, an old soul type of friend.

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Someone you really can learn from, both academically and as part of a community you would want to grow for life. I always think that with an inner wisdom and a sense of lightness and curiosity, right. Stanford is such a unique place, you said it before, it's almost magical.

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I say that because I studied in other absolutely incredible schools before Stanford and after but the deep connection I have with my time in Northern California to this day is that of a pivotal personal growth. I did pursue an education at Stanford for the academics, but he went way beyond that.

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He opened a world of possibilities to me miles away from campus. And every single step I've taken since graduation has been always driven by the same sense of purpose I nourished there. And definitely that's thanks to a friend like you, Hyerong, and thanks to a strong sense of self that having the tools to build what has never been built before gives to creative and resourceful minds.

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I don't know yet if I found Stanford or Stanford found me when I was looking for the best school to attend, but it was, and it is, 20 years later, one of the strongest bonds I've ever had.