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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. We also try to highlight the human stories behind the data. Our guests in this episode are Dhruti and Maria. Dhruti is a management program analyst at NASA. Maria is a principal at Kivvit. Both graduated from Stanford in 2017.

[00:00:49:141]

We'll let them take it away.

All right, perfect. So, I think we were just gonna generally chat about know our relationship, so I'd like to get your perspective on how we met.

So, yeah, we met back in 2013, we lived on the same second floor, just a couple of rooms away from each other.

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I don't remember maybe, the specific moment, cuz I feel like it was such a rush, but I don't know, I feel like you came by my room and just kind of introduced yourself in your very Texan way. So that's kind of, for some reason, the image that I have in my head.

[00:01:25:736]

But since that moment, you've just been a very consistent presence in my life. I mean, I think we lived in the same dorm every year we were at Stanford. Three out of four, we lived in basically the same dorm, and we were very close to each other. So, yeah, I mean, you play a huge part of my life.

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I mean, I feel really lucky to still have such close relationships with you and others from our time back in college. I don't think that a lot of people can really say that just cuz life happens and people grow apart, but I feel like as we've gotten older, we've only gotten closer in different ways.

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Obviously, we don't live in the same city, but, yeah, how would you describe kind of, our origin story?

It's funny that you mentioned that you couldn't pinpoint an exact moment, because I felt the same way. And so I had, I think, probably come by to say hi to Sophie, who I'd met pretty early on, and that's probably how we met.

[00:02:21:051]

But yeah, I have to say I kind of agree, I think that you've been sort of, at the beginning of my college experience, at the end of my college experience, and we did a stint together in DC.. And so, I think, definitely, consistent is how I describe it too.

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And I think evolving as well, right? And I think that we've grown as people, both in age and personality and interests. And I think we've managed to make our friendship work as we've changed, which I always appreciate.

I'm thinking back to those fondest memories together when we were in school.

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I remember there was a time that we went out into the city on our bikes, taking the girl train, doing all this stuff was always a good time and just, we had a really great freshman dorm. But I remember when we were freshmen, we were both really into basketball, but it was a very tenuous time because I think our teams were kind of on competing ends.

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And it was great that we kind of made it through that, even though we're both very firmly representing our cities and things like that. So, I mean, it's a handful of years already since that time, but I do think of it really, really, really fondly.

Yeah, it'll be 10 years this September, that I met you.

[00:03:26:633]

Yeah.

Which is absolutely wild in like, I was 17, and you were probably a similar age. You're married now, we have adult jobs. It's so bizarre to me.

So, obviously we've already kind of mentioned you being from Texas, being from Miami, but can you just tell me a little bit more about where you grew up?

[00:03:47:689]

Yeah, definitely. And I think this is something we talked about when we first met, too, cuz we thought there were some interesting parallels in terms of how we moved to the States and things like that. So I was born in India in Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh, and it's where both my parents are from.

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But I grew up in the town that my grandparents lived in for the most part. And I moved to the States when I was six. We did brief stints in other places, like a hot second in Rhode Island. We were in Seattle for two years. But I spent most of my childhood, I think, in Texas.

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Grew up in Houston, which was, I only remember it fondly. I don't really remember pre Texas me. So, that's interesting. So I think for me, going back to India was also a big deal. I spent almost most of my summers there as a child. And I think, after I turned 11, I was just there by myself.

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My parents weren't there either. So I still have a really strong connection to Rajahmundry, and most of my family still lives there. So that's been kind of a big part of it too. And so, it's funny, like, when we say, where did you grow up? I think the short answer is Texas for the most part.

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But the long answer is, both of these places really, because I had kind of, my formative experience with my friends and my school and my education in Houston. But at the same time, I had this sort of, long term relationship. It helped me build my familial relationships, but also I have a real fondness for the people and the culture and the food back home in Rajahmundry too.

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So I still go back every year, obviously no one's giving me three months off in the summer anymore. It's more like two weeks of PTO that I've cribbed together. But yeah, I think it's pretty similar. I go back to Houston and Rajahmundry pretty often. How about you?

So, I grew up in Havana, Cuba.

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Very similar story. I moved to South Florida when I was basically six and a half. So it was really interesting. I remember when we first met and we were talking about that, we were like, wow, that's weird that, we have that very similar kind of origin story. Yeah, I grew up in South Florida.

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When my family and I moved here, we lived in West Palm Beach. So it was about two hours from Miami. But we eventually ended up making it back down to where I currently live, which is Miami-Dade County. Being Cuban and living in Miami is a really interesting experience because we kind of make up the majority of the city in terms of folks that weren't born in the in Florida, but that have immigrated.

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When I left Miami, I remember feeling even more Cuban than I was when I was in Miami. And I think a big part of that was because in California, especially at Stanford, there weren't that many Cubans. So it really made me just kind of think about how I experience Miami as a Cuban born resident, right?

[00:06:39:797]

I remember back in 2002 when my family moved here, everything felt just so new, but at the same time so familiar. Because we were really fortunate to have family that was already living in the States and we had a really great kind of, extended network. So for me, moving to Miami as a child, it was a really nice experience.

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But at the same time I was fortunate to not experience that same nostalgia or longing that my parents, who were in their 40s, and my sister, who was basically a teenager, already had to go through, right? Now that I'm reflecting on it, I can imagine that when you're moving to a new country, it was really hard.

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But I was, again, super fortunate that I was so young and I was kind of excited by the prospect of living in a new place. Actually, my parents never let me forget that. One of the first things that I did when I was in Miami, we went to a store or something like that, and I was thrilled to just buy a Coke and a toothbrush.

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It was just, things that as a kid, you're like, what, that makes no sense. But I think, over time, I've been, obviously I lived in California. That's where, Dhruti, that's where we met. But I've lived in Chicago, I lived in DC, I had the chance to study abroad.

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And I think in every place that I've been to, I feel more Cuban. And I've actually really appreciated that because Because once I'm here, I'm so enmeshed in the day-to-day, in the politics of it all that I don't really reflect on how important it is for me to stay connected.

[00:08:11:284]

I still have a lot of family that lives in Cuba and I feel really strongly about everything that happens in the country. Again, I'm fortunate to be able to travel, but I recognize obviously that's not something that everybody can do. So I think the time that I've spent in Miami since graduating has allowed me to feel even more Cuban as time goes on.

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And obviously listening to the music, eating the food, keeping up with all the different cultural kind of items that come up. But it really wasn't until I left Florida for California that I really identified with my Cuban identity. There just weren't that many Cubans at Stanford. So, whenever we would find each other it was kinda like, boom, you just made that instant connection.

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And I remember there were a handful of us that brought back different items from Miami and some people would bring back their little coffee pot, then I had a little flag. So, it was nice to kinda be able to retain some of those cultural touch points, being away from home, and now being back, just kinda putting everything together.

[00:09:20:846]

Yeah, definitely. It's so interesting that you sort of mentioned that big Cuban community in Miami cuz Houston has a really big community too. We just didn't live anywhere near it. So, I think that the way you sort of described that going to California and leaving Miami was the first time you sort of really reflected on what it meant to be Cuban.

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I think moving to California for school was the first time I thought about what it meant to be Indian-American, so to speak. I think that we did a lot of cultural, religious things at home, we're really big on a lot of the festivals. And my mom is fairly religious, so we go to the temple and things like that.

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But it was very much in the lens of what my parents considered was normal or interesting to them. And obviously I enjoyed it as well. But it wasn't really me actively saying this is what it means to be Indian to me, was more like, my family's always done this and I also enjoy that, right?

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I think it was a product of my environment and my family and it was very much onto them just because we didn't have a huge Indian community. We knew folks, but it wasn't particularly massive, and it wasn't maybe a huge part of our lives, right? So when I think got to California, I was like, it's time for me to define what it means to be Indian now, because I don't have that crutch anymore, right?

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So if I wanted to do things that I considered important to me culturally, like religious, let's reveal, it really was on me to figure out how to pursue that. So, I think something similar to what you described, but maybe in a slightly different lens. And I think it was good for me, I think it really helped me reflect on how Indian culture is relevant to my life in a way that I got to define.

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And that's obviously continued now that I'm an adult. I don't live anywhere close to my parents, I go back pretty often. But it's nice to say that the things I do now, I actively have said, hey, this is really important to me because I enjoy X, Y, and Z rather than, we've always done this in October, right?

[00:11:15:937]

Yeah, no, and I'm just thinking back to, for me even being classmates with you, being essentially roommates cuz we live so close to each other. I think leaving Florida, going to California, it was also an opportunity for me to meet people from different backgrounds and different ethnicities and things like that.

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Just cuz I grew up in such a saturated Latino community. Basically everybody that I went to school with was either from South America or Central America. So to me, even going to school and being surrounded by folks literally from different states, but also from different backgrounds, I think that was really great for me.

[00:11:52:556]

I mean, I had never had Indian food before going to school with you. And I remember, what was the name of that dining hall?

Yeah.

Every Sunday.

I remember, yeah. It's so funny to think about that, but for me, it was truly the first time that I was even trying different foods and things like that.

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So, in many ways, it was great because obviously, love the food, love the culture, love you, my great friend. And at the same time, I was like, wow, I can't believe that I've essentially lived in such a sheltered place just because, again, that's just the nature of where I was born and then where grew up.

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So I remember you had some feedback for FLOMO and that the Indian food was good, but it could always be better. But it was also just great again being exposed to so many different things while we were at school together. And I think that's also a really great segue into asking you what were your first impressions of California/Stanford and all that?

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I don't know if you had been there before, but I know you definitely had some takeaways from the first couple of months that we were there.

Yeah, so it's funny that you mentioned that. My dad had broken his leg in a couple of places falling off a ladder putting up the volley slash Christmas lights.

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And so our initial plans to maybe do the college tour did not happen. So I did roll in for admin weekend, which was nice, it was like a little preview. But really I don't think I got a full sense of what Stanford would be like until really I moved in.

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I have a very crisp memory in my head of me and my dad going to a Walmart. We were trying to get a bike just that I could use on campus. And we were in line and it was clear that there was a huge crowd of folks that were all probably university affiliated somehow trying to get things.

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And people were just so blunt and to the point and there weren't a lot of hey, how's it going, how are you doing, sort of conversation. And my dad turned to me and was like, you wanna live here for four years? They don't even say hi to people.

[00:13:56:506]

I do remember that cuz that was my first off campus experience, which even being in California. And I was like, okay, this is a different place. And I still crack jokes about how maybe California is not my cup of tea. There was a reason why I moved after we graduated.

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I think that the people are wonderful, but maybe I need that sort of social padding, right? I like making small talk and meeting people and having relationships with folks. They don't have to be my best friend, but I wanna know-

Yeah, the Southern hospitality of.

Right, but to your end, talking about how Stanford was maybe the first time that you met a lot of people from different places, that was key for me too.

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Because once I got on campus I realized that wasn't really the same feeling that I had with the students, right? And I think you've got people from all over and for me that was really new too. I grew up in a very homogenous part of Houston, and there weren't a lot of people that look like me, and there really weren't a lot of people that, everybody sort of belonged to the same community.

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And it was great. And I love my high school, and I had a great experience, but I think getting to Stanford really, like you said, gave me the chance to experience cultures and learn from people that were very different from me and sort of from cultures or backgrounds that were different.

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I'm gonna be honest, at least for the entire year we were at JRO, that first year, I did not know how to say FA, and I was too afraid to say it wrong.

I was like, what is this? I don't know what this is. I'm like, tastes great.

[00:15:19:862]

I had the same problem.

And it's so funny cuz, I think of that cuz it was one of the first things we saw on campus cuz it was the closest dining hall to us. But there were so many moments like that, I think, on campus where I was learning about different food or activities or things that are important to folks that I'd never heard of.

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And the really funny thing is there's a really huge Vietnamese community in Houston that I just wasn't exposed to because of where I grew up. So, now that I've gone back, I feel like I've learned more about Houston going back now, knowing that these communities and these sort of different experiences exist that I just wasn't exposed to.

[00:15:58:084]

So when we talk about what are my- Impressions of California and Stanford, I think different ends. But I'm very grateful for sort of that global community at Stanford cuz it gave me the chance to learn more about people. But also, it was humbling in a way, because I think that when you're a teenager, you think you know stuff and you get there and you're, wow, I know nothing.

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There are so many people here and there are so many things that are important to them that I've never heard of and I didn't have the language to even speak to them about. And so, it was a big learning experience for me too. And I think, by the time I graduated, I feel so much more comfortable asking questions, admitting that I don't know things and being willing to be corrected when I don't understand things.

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And I think that's a big part of the Stanford cultural experience, at least for me.

Yeah, no, I mean, I remember, just thinking back to the first time that I got to visit the university. So, I just remember it being, truly the most beautiful spring quarter day.

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The sun was just kind of sparkling off the main quad. Everybody was out and about. So, I had the chance to. There's a family friend that was, I think she was a senior at that point, and she was able to give my parents and I a tour of the campus.

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And, I think it definitely helped, right? Like, being there with somebody that already knew the place. I was making everything, really comfortable for us. But I just remember being so expansive. I could not wrap my head around how the campus could be so large. I think that was truly my first impression of Stanford.

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And then just, seeing everybody being on bikes and things looking so free. Obviously, once we actually got into it and we were, in the day-to-day trenches, it brings back that memory. What was that, the duck syndrome that people always talked about that, everybody seemed really chill but underneath everyone's just paddling very.

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And then, I remember, I was visiting with my parents and something that, they also said they're, my gosh, but everybody dresses so differently. That's something that, really. And it seems so superficial. But that truly, took me for a ride because, obviously, I grew up in South Florida. There is not a winter or even a spring for that matter, it's just hot year round.

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So, seeing people kind of dressed and outerwear. Patagonia North Face had no business, knowing what these brands were because I didn't own, a big code. And also, just truly being around just like, a more diverse crowd. Obviously, in Miami, there's a lot of diversity, but again, being around people that are from, different states that, one of my really close friends and through a really close friend of ours, Princess, she has, Nigerian, heritage.

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A lot of friends of mine, and I think there's kind of a pattern there. Their families are from Nigeria, and I think we all really, mesh. And I don't know, maybe it's a cultural thing. Like, we all really understood each other, again, coming from immigrant backgrounds. But even then, Sophie, who was my freshman roommate, was from Arizona.

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And just talking to her, understanding, how she grew up and even how, her own background influenced why she decided to go to Stanford. And I think, that to me was really special because I would not have had that opportunity had I stayed in Miami, I'm positive. The comment you made about, not knowing how to pronounce, I had a very similar issue.

[00:19:28:825]

Every time people brought up going to eat ramen, to me in Miami back in 2013, the only ramen I had ever had were, the Cup Noodles. So every time people were, yeah, I'm going to go to this ramen bar. To me, in my head, I was, why are people going to eat ramen?

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This is something that, you just, picked when you were, in a pinch. I obviously, evolved to understand that there were legitimate ramen bars, similarly with, Korean barbecue and things like that. But, the food, I was just exposed to, truly a new world of, culinary opportunities now, in Miami and everywhere I go, I lived in Chicago for some time, and I was, I need to go find, the best ramen bar.

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And it was funny, thinking back to years ago, I had no idea what that was. And now, I'm trying to, introduce my parents, who've never had it, to, try it. So, that's just, a funny thing that now, every time I think about it, I just. It seems so silly.

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I remember, I stayed over for Thanksgiving cuz I was, I don't wanna pay for, a plane ticket to go home when I'd come right back. And our RA Simon took those of us that had stuck around over Thanksgiving to a Mongolian grill. And I was, I have never experienced.

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I was, we had Tex-Mex. There's, one Indian restaurant you could maybe go to, and then there's just a lot of diner food and things like that growing up at home. And I was like, this is. I couldn't even imagine this as an experience. Now that I've been in D.C. for, six years, I think I go out of my way to seek out new experiences.

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And I think a lot of that is, because I was exposed to things I wasn't used to in college, because I wasn't, my parents, my mom's a big food person. But I grew up vegetarian, and we grew up eating, a lot of traditional Indian food at home, which I still love.

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I go home and I stuff my face, and it's a big part of my life. But it definitely wasn't. We didn't go out of our way to try new things one, cuz there was anything super close by. And my dad used to travel a lot for work, so it was me and my mom.

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And we didn't go out of our way to go do completely new things unless they were, in our immediate neighborhood. And, I think that, Texas is a lot less overall vegetarian friendly, it's different now. It's massively different now, even in Houston. But back then, in, 2009, it wasn't as vegetarian friendly as California was.

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So, I really opened up my mind. I was, wow, I could actually eat something at all of these different places. And so, that was pretty eye opening to me, even, going back to, India, where I spent time like these, there was no, translation there either, cuz it's such a different environment.

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Yeah, and I think obviously, once you're in a place for a long time, you just kind of adapt. And I think, by the time that senior year rolled around, everyone had, fully assimilated into, that, California lifestyle. It was just such an interesting thing that. But, yeah, but I do remember the weather being something that, was also a little bit shocking because I was just used to, hot weather, humidity, and, that was it.

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The reason I even bring up the campus, too, is that, I think growing up, I grew up in, Houston suburbs, right? It's just, a lot of concrete. Everybody has one tree that the HOA already planted in their yard. And so, just the greenery and, how pretty it was in the plants were just a whole new experience for me.

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It really, reminded me of going back to Rajahmundry because my mom's younger sister used to take me around all over the place. And one of the things that was really something that we used to do every time I was there, we'd go to this place called Cutting, which is a pretty famous plant nurseries in the area we're from.

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And I have lots of fond memories of walking around there and it was so novel to me when I'd go visit over the summer cuz that's not what my day-to-day experience was. And I just thought that was normal, right? This sort of stuff is fun, but you can't really experience it day-to-day.

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And then, when I got on campus I was, wait, I can live in a place like this, I think. And living there full time, it was the first time I really, I think had an appreciation for what it meant to have these outdoor opportunities. And the fact that it was walkable and bikable was also super new.

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And that was something I experienced in India. So it was really great. But day-to-day in Houston, it was like I imagine telling my mother I'm gonna bike to school. She'd be, three trucks are gonna hit you. And I live less than a mile from my high school.

Yeah, no, now that you mentioned that, the walkability and the bike ability of the campus is something that is actually a fondest memory for me from.

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From being at Stanford to this day, I feel that it has been one of the best places to bike. Again, similar to like in Miami. I think we're like pretty much last on the list of cities that are safe for bikers and pedestrians. And, obviously growing up I knew how to ride a bike, but when I got to school, it was the first time that I actually had a bike.

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It was so freeing, honestly. And like just being able to go on a bike ride and just use it as like my form of transportation, that's honestly the part that I kinda miss the most. Because, we live in cities now where, I mean, I guess we could bike and we have biked, but I think on a day to day, I haven't been able to kinda relive that and.

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And again, you just felt so free and everything was so beautiful that I get really nostalgic really for riding my bike on a regular basis just because you can't really do that unless you live, I would say, like in Europe, honestly.

Yeah, no, I hear that. Well, kinda to this point, we talked a lot about what stuck out to us at Stanford.

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But Maria, I'm curious to see, did sort of your personal background and your time at Stanford impact kinda what you chose to do after school?

Yeah, so senior year, I'll never forget Bradley, who was in our freshman dorm. He sent me just a message on Facebook and he was, hey, have you heard of the Congressional Hunger Center?

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They have this amazing fellowship. I think you should apply. And, I had studied human biology and my concentration was around sustainable food systems. The fellowship rather was focused around food policy and hunger policy and things like that. So I was like, okay, why not? I'll apply. And I was fortunate to get accepted into the fellowship, which meant that I was gonna go live in D.C and in Chicago.

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The program was kinda split into two parts. So, it was an incredible experience. It's where I met my right now husband, which is like crazy to even utter those words. But, it was truly because of this friend of mine from my freshman year dorm that pointed out this amazing program that I was able to really get on a path that to this day, the Congressional Hunger Center has been a really pivotal moment in defining my professional career.

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I'm really interested in public policy and it's what I do now in my job. And with that Program, I've had the chance to live in Chicago. I was working for a small nonprofit there right after I graduated, went through that Chicago winter, which was truly life defining in many different ways.

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And I think, yeah, I mean, it took me to D.C. and eventually now I ended up back in Miami where I was always eager to come back home just to kinda experience Miami as an adult. I think living in different places from Palo Alto to D.C. to Chicago has just really opened my eyes to again, all the different possibilities.

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And again, it would not have been possible had I not left Miami in the first place. And it was life-changing for me. I know my life would have been completely different had I stayed back home. But, yeah, Dhruti, what about you? Obviously, you're now in D.C. but, how did you get there?

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Yeah, so I also had a college friend kinda help me direct my career choices, so I couldn't. I was really interested in doing Stanford in Washington, and it never worked out timing wise to apply because I declared my major a little late. But AV had met somebody when he was in the program who worked at Booz Allen Hamilton, which is a federal consulting company.

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They do a lot of things, but that's how I know them. And he'd known that I was sort of interested in working in government or government adjacent and sort of still getting to do some of the modeling analytics work I was interested in. And so, I was introduced to somebody who worked at the company and I applied and I got the job and I moved to D.C. in September of 2017.

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And so, I did a couple stints for different agencies and a couple internal projects. But for the most part, I spent a lot of my time working with NASA, even as a Booz Allen employee. And it was a really formulative experience for me because I knew I wanted to do sort of government work.

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And, working at Booze initially kinda gave me the flex of trying it out at different places to get a sense of like, is it similar across the board or is it? Or do you kinda feel like you have the same sort of work patterns regardless of agency? And I've been around for NASA so long that back in 2021, they're like, okay, come work for us directly.

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At this point, you're here more often than not. And so, I work for them directly now. And I think my time with the government sort of really solidified my interest in and doing work that contributes to public good, I think a big part of, I find the work interesting and I like the.

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And I think the limitations of working in places with constrained budgets and stuff makes the work challenging and fun and worthwhile. And I think the time I've spent in the space has really made clear to me that I wanna be doing this sort of work or having this sort of benefit, whatever I do in the future as well.

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And one thing that's really, I think in the lead up to this, I've been sort of reflecting on Stanford and sort of where I came from and where my family's from and how that kinda impacts how I am at work. And I think that to this day, Stanford is still the most diverse place I've ever been.

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I think the four years I was there, I was surrounded by people from all over the place, within the US, outside of it, all that sort of stuff. And I've never been able to recreate that same sort of distribution of folks, right? And even in my adult life.

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But I think that pre-Stanford and post-Stanford, I think you handle that differently. When I was in high school, I was like, already younger than a lot of my classmates and I was like, trying to fit in. And there's a lot of stuff that I maybe didn't talk about in my peer groups.

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They didn't really know about these cultural things that were so important to me growing up, right? My closest friends in high school. I think I barely knew about Diwali and stuff, where even Maria, we used to do stuff with me when we were in college. And, I remember we would do a couple holy things when I was younger.

[00:30:13:188]

And, my mom spent more time fielding phone calls from people's par about, like, whether or not, it was safe and stuff than I was actually doing activities. And so, it wasn't that I minimized it. I just don't think I shared things with folks because they had no wavelength to understand these things that were important to me because they'd sort of.

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It was so novel and different to them. And I think that my time at Stanford, seeing other folks and how open they were with their experiences and having sort of that ability to share in kinda a safe space. And learn from folks has really impacted how I talk about my life at work, even through the DEA kinda affiliations with that at work, where I'm like, a lot more open about things and it's helped me really develop stronger relationships with the people I work with because they have more of a personal understanding of what's important to me.

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I learned the same about them. And we sort of create a separate layer of interaction outside of, hey, I need this turned into me by tomorrow. Or, we have to talk about this policy that we have to put together. We care about people on sort of more of an individual level.

[00:31:16:150]

And, I think we've worked a lot to make sure that people's language and the way you interact with folks and even in terms of are they taking off time for a religious holiday and that sort of thing, my language has become stronger, and I think my openness, I hope, has affected maybe other folks kinda doing the same as well.

[00:31:34:408]

So, I think that if I hadn't gone to Stanford, I wouldn't maybe have the same language for it. And I don't think I'd have the same openness, not because it's like, I'm not ashamed of it. It's so important to me, and I love it, but just. I didn't realize that people would be receptive until I experienced it.