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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 Ellie and Sunshine. Ellie is head of Legal and Global Operations at the END Fund, and Sunshine is Co-Chief Executive Officer at Cleo. They both graduated from Stanford in 2012. We'll let them take it away.

[00:00:53:308]

Hi, Sunny.

Hi, Ellie.

So what were your first impressions of me when we first met?

My initial impression of you is that you were a shy, quiet person who liked to observe what was happening, be in the mix, but not necessarily directly contribute or sort of drive conversation.

[00:01:18:378]

We joke about this a lot, but my earliest memory of our sort of relationship was at a Black Law Students Association Kickback, and I'm pretty sure it was in Munger, like a Munger lounge. You were sitting down in a single person chair, so not one of the couches that other people could come and join you on.

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And just sat there quietly watching everybody. And I was like, who is this person sitting here quietly? I'm usually drawn to folks just to figure out what they're about. And at that point, I felt that I knew enough of the balsa class. There's only dozens of us per class, right?

[00:01:58:218]

And I was wondering who you were and did you identify as a Black Law Students Association? Why didn't I see you at any of the ADMIT previews? Who are you? What do you remember?

Yeah, I mean, I think at that moment I was just following my only Law School friend around to whatever social activity she was going to, I was also going to.

[00:02:18:628]

And I did enter Law School very shy, I mean, I'm always initially shy and then I sort of warm up to people and I'm sure your impression of me has now changed that I'm not so shy. And yeah, I mean, I remember that interaction, I remember feeling a little bit caught off guard, but also understanding that, like rightfully so, that was supposed to be a ball to space and maybe I shouldn't just follow my friend around to everything that she goes to.

[00:02:46:028]

Yeah, but my I think first impression of you from that, that I think has not changed, that has stayed true, is that just as we joked about previously, you often do say the things that other people want to say but do not have the courage to say. You are direct and you own the space that you're in.

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And I think in a lot of ways our personalities are opposites and somehow complimentary because of that. But, yeah, that's sort of what I remember.

I think it's really interesting too, because as our careers have progressed and our friendship has grown, I've learned a lot about the power of quiet people.

[00:03:30:280]

And I think that oftentimes there's a value that's been placed on speaking up, right?

Yeah.

We're advocates, we went to Law School to become advocates. You were an advocate before you attended SLS. And at the same time, the fact that you sit back and observe, I think is one of your superpowers.

[00:03:46:820]

I have an impulse to speak all of the time and you're very talkative. We drove cross country together, which we'll get into later, and somehow stayed friends and have developed a friendship over ten plus years. But at the same time, it's like oftentimes you can overlook people based on who is and is not saying something.

[00:04:07:060]

And I think that one of the things that I appreciate about you and our relationship is that even if you're not saying something, you're thinking it and you might share it later or that you were noticing the same things that I was. And we don't necessarily have to have a spoken communication.

[00:04:21:680]

And I think that's part of having to navigate the spaces that we've been in. And I think it's part of sort of our family dynamics and our upbringing. And it's really powerful to see it in a leadership perspective because despite people's first impressions, your boss, you're running things, right?

[00:04:40:540]

You're a leader, and you're constantly sort of elevating the profile of Latina Persian ex people.

In any role that you take. So it's been fun, I think people should also know we're obviously friends.

We are friends.

We've been roommates, Ellie.

We have been roommates.

[00:05:03:492]

I was in your wedding and now I'm obsessed with your child.

New Year's.

So we covered it a little bit, but let's just get into it. What years did you attend Stanford, Ellie?

I was there for Law School, so just 2009 to 2012, I was at Stanford's rival for undergrad.

[00:05:26:020]

So it took a little bit of adjustment to get used to the sea of red that you all have in your bookstore. But yeah, it was three years, and honestly, because of the fact that I was a transfer student at Cal, it was sort of my longest attachment to an academic institution.

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And I remember a point at which, because I'm from the Bay Area, so I had an established group of friends already, but I remember a point at which first semester I was spending every weekend in the city or in Oakland visiting friends. And I reflected to myself, if you keep doing this, you're not gonna make friends at all at St. Stanford.

[00:06:06:196]

And I purposefully shifted that and started going to more and more Stanford events, following my friend around, and walked away with lifelong friendships that I think I would otherwise not have had and didn't really even expect from Law School. But for me, at least as somebody who's mixed Persian and Mexican, the affinity groups at Stanford were huge for me, specifically, salsa.

[00:06:29:860]

And I think, in a contrast to Cal, where it is such a large school, the benefit of that is that you get to have large affinity groups. But I think the downside of that is that there's often not space for mixed identities. I mean, just in my graduating class in political science, I think we had three times the number of the entire Law School at Stanford, right?

[00:06:53:344]

And so that's huge, you sort of get lost in that. And what I loved about Stanford was you really don't have the choice to get lost because here it's so small, you are kinda forced to build community. And that's what I walked away with.

What years did you attend, Sunshine?

[00:07:10:818]

Such a fun question to answer.

I loved Stanford so much, I went there twice. So I attended undergrad at Stanford, graduated with a Bachelor's in Art History, and then came back three years later for Law School. And I'm not sure what your experience was of the Law School admissions process, but for me, I had no intention of returning to California.

[00:07:36:510]

I think that's probably why I confronted you that first day. I'd spent so much time being direct in the east coast that I wanted more of that in my life. And my thoughts were that part of professional school is to broaden your network and to have different experiences.

[00:07:51:158]

And I actively tried in every way to obstruct admission. It was the last application I sent in. I talked to people. People at the east coast schools a lot to convince myself that something I wanted to do. And I came to admin weekend for SLS and was like, I'm clearly not thinking straight.

[00:08:11:727]

Like this is one of the most beautiful places on earth. I had such positive memories and friendships that I took from undergrad. And the thing that I liked most about SLS as compared to a lot of schools, which can be debatable depending on your perspective, is that. For an institution it was pretty iconoclastic when it came to how you saw your career as someone who was pursuing a JD and anything from getting rid of grades.

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Like we were one of the first classes that didn't have ranking and GPAs, which created its own stress for us in trying to pursue postgraduate careers in the middle of then economic downturn. The fact that you could cross list in the university, like my goal was to never practice law.

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And the only way to do that is if I can develop other skill sets other than obsessing about the tax code or whatever it may be. And so I'm very happy with that decision. I do not regret it. Beyond the friendships, I think it was the right choice for me and I'm still in California, so maybe we should stay where we are.

[00:09:23:855]

We're not in the same place, although we used to be. I now live in Los Angeles. Where are you today, Ellie?

I am in Castro Valley, California, which is the same community that my parents came to after we fled the Iran Iraq war. But I was in LA, you just happened to swap places with me.

[00:09:44:799]

So you touched on this a little bit. But maybe we can talk about where your parents are from and what your experiences of the two countries growing up and in your visits.

Yeah, so my mom was born in Mexico. She immigrated to the United States when she was seven years old.

[00:10:11:331]

As the eldest daughter of a farm worker, her father was able to get a position working a cotton farm in West Texas. And so she and her, I think four siblings at the time, along with her parents, moved to West Texas, rural West Texas cotton farm area. I think the town had 2,000 people in the 70s and has less than that now.

[00:10:36:854]

She grew up with limited financial resources and that sort of juxtaposed with my father's immigration story, which is that he is Iranian. He grew up the son of a wealthy businessman in Iran. And the expectation was that as the eldest son he would move abroad and obtain his education and then come back and run the family business.

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So he did move abroad. He moved to Texas, where he joined a cousin and ended up falling in love with a Mexican woman who was my mother, Lupe. And they have a windy story after that that ended up with my mom moving with my father to Iran during the Iran Iraq war.

[00:11:24:289]

And so my sister and I were actually born there in the 80s. I remember in high school finding for an art project where we had to do a collage. There was a National Geographic poster. The date was July 1985, which is the month and year of my birth.

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And then it was a picture of Iran under the Ayatollah. And so it went through pictures of what was happening in terms of the war and what was happening under the new regime. And that was very much a part of my story in that I was born during that war, and that was that meant wartime stories being passed down to me from my mom in terms of her fears, right?

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She would often tell me stories about how she kept a second crib, right, in the basement with blacked out curtains so that when the siren would go off that Saddam Hussein's bombs were dropping. She could run downstair my sister and myself to the basement and sort of be safe there.

[00:12:28:209]

My father was actually off fighting mandatory military service, so which was the impetus for my mom joining him in the first place. So she was often alone there, but she was also somehow also such a person who carved out a home in a place that was very clearly not her home.

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And even in a place where she very clearly did not feel safe. So she became a seamstress, got her beautician's license, taught English, did all of these things in a wartime foreign country that I think forever served as a model for me in terms of. You can carve out a space for yourself, even if the institutions or the places or the circumstances that you find yourself in don't necessarily feel like home to you.

[00:13:14:841]

But then we landed in Texas, back on the same cotton farm. But my uncle now owns that cotton farm. And that was sort of my first taste of a life free of a war. And I remember to this day just the sound of fighter jets flying overhead. I'll also, I'll get a little bit of a sick pit in my stomach because I think that fear is so ingrained.

[00:13:39:589]

But there were constantly jets roaring overhead just because we were so close to, I think, like some sort of military training ground in Texas. After a year in te, Texas made out way our way to the Bay Area. And it's been Home, basically, ever since, except for a few years in LA and one in dc.

[00:13:57:126]

And it's interesting that you have the experience of fighter jets. I think about it a lot. I live near an airport here in la. I grew up near Andrews Air Force Base, which is now Joint Air Base, and we used to go watch air shows. And so growing up in the D.C. area, you're accustomed to hearing planes and choppers.

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You may see the presidential chopper on its way. And so I have a different relationship, I think, to military presence because of that. And you kind of take for granted that this is what is normal to some in a calming way, can be triggering to others.

Yeah, I think later on even diving deeper into that and realizing that just because of the political dynamics at the time, the US was helping to fund the Iraqi war efforts and I was a US citizen born abroad.

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So even though I have a migration story, it's not an immigration story. But just to think of the fact that I think I feel like I had an early understanding of how arbitrary war is in that there were bombs landing near us funded by a country that I was a citizen of, right.

[00:15:07:584]

Just the messiness of all of that and just the understanding that there's no clear right side or wrong side to war and that it. There's loss and heaviness on all sides. But how about you tell me about your family story, Sunshine?

My family story begins at two different points in time in the US.

[00:15:24:487]

My mother is Liberian and her father is Nigerian. My mom was born in Monrovia, Liberia, in the 50s. And if anything about the history of Liberia, Liberia was formed as a country by free enslaved people from the United States. But we're an oral history family. We believe in family history deeply and so my mom's side of the family in Liberia is actually traced back to native Liberians.

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We're a part of the Basa tribe. Grand Bassa county is where Monrovia, the capital, is. You can go back several generations of. Our last name that they assumed is Stuart, to talk about who my family is on that side. On my maternal grandfather's side, we're a little estranged.

[00:16:09:246]

My grandmother was married four times. The fourth time is said to have been for love.

My mom tells me I remind her a lot of my grandmother in terms of the fact that I was a pretty argumentative and forceful child. Certain traits, I think, have carried through much of my life.

[00:16:30:168]

And based on sort of, the oral history around my grandmother, she passed away before I could meet her. She did not suffer fools. So the minute she felt we're a matriarchal society in Liberia, the minute she felt that this wasn't best for her children, herself, her business, she moved on.

[00:16:46:001]

And she had the foresight to send my mother, of all her children, to the United States in 1969. She bought my mom a one way ticket to New York City. And my mom was 16 and had no idea that she wasn't going back. So when I think of what I've chosen to do in my experiences of moving to California, I think a lot about the fact that my grandmother sent her daughter before there was GPS.

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Cell phones, video conferencing, consistent telephone lines between countries, to a place where she knew no one. There was one family my mom was supposed to be in contact with who were supposed to help her navigate and get into high school, as is sadly the case often when folks are sent abroad.

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The family's intention was that my mother would be an at-home servant and did not plan to ever enroll her in school. And so my mother decided that she was just gonna stake out on her own and figure it out. Her mother, I remember her telling me when I was a child, she said to the wife of the Liberian family, that my mom didn't send me to America for me to be someone's maid.

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Her mother was educated, her father was an engineer, and so she was here to get an education. So my mother left and made her way through high school and college in New York City. She went to Hunter High School and then Hunter College. She worked without documentation the entire time, somehow, miraculously.

[00:18:14:447]

And I'm fortunate for it, I think a lot of my independence comes because my mother had to figure out a way when there was no way. And we laugh a lot in my family, you and I laugh a lot. And one of the stories that I've been thinking about a lot around how the luck of your circumstances completely shifts your life is related to my mom when her tourist visa ran out.

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So my mother came here as a tourist. She didn't come here on any sort of, educational visas. There wasn't a lottery program that she benefited from. Her mother bought her a Pan Am ticket and she came to New York City. So when her visa expired, I think she got some type of official notice from the then INS, and she went down to the offices to say, well, I can't go back.

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You sent me this notice. I go to school here. I have no plane ticket to return to Liberia. And a very kind clerk told her, take my advice, don't come back again. And that's the only reason my family exists in this country, right? Is that there was a kind worker who understood that borders are arbitrary and people's ways of coming to this country vary based on the US's perspective of the eligibility of that population.

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And there were employers who were kind to hire an undocumented person. There were landlords who were kind enough to rent to an undocumented person. And my mother succeeded for it. Now, in terms of my dad, my dad, I think it's worth saying, you call me Sunshine, but my name is Tsion, which is Amharic.

[00:19:42:715]

My mother gave me Sunshine. We've had it since I was a baby. If you go to Ethiopia, they use a completely different name. My father's Ethiopian, and his background is a little different from my mother's, in that he grew up the child of farmers in rural Ethiopia. It's about an eight-hour drive from Addis in the mountains.

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It's beautiful. He's one of four children. And his path to America was pretty winding. And he, like your dad, served in the military. So, my father was a member of the Ethiopian Air Force. He served under a political regime that had displaced Haile Selassie. And at the time, there was enough political friction between ethnic groups in Ethiopia that my father was targeted.

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He had been shot by a fellow member of the Air Force and had to leave active service, was converted to work for Ethiopian Airlines. And was in the United States in 1980 for pilot training and decided to seek political asylum. So with my mother, our family history starts in the 60s and 70s in New York City.

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With my father, our family history starts in the 80s. So they have very different views of the United States based on how long they've lived here. And they met in Pennsylvania. So my father was living in Washington DC at the time, having found work at the World Bank in security.

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My mother was working in New York City, had gotten a co-op apartment, had really worked out this United States story for herself. And then she decided that she liked my Dad.

And left behind her bialis and bagels. And all of the things that we grew up having to go and make pilgrimages throughout New York City on what my brothers and I would call these sort of death marches through Manhattan.

[00:21:28:442]

Cuz she didn't believe in taking the trains when you can walk tens of blocks, to living in the DC area, where she still had no family and really no support network.

Yeah, yeah, I mean, so two things, I wanna circle back to the piece that you said about your mom's influence on your independence as a kid.

[00:21:47:777]

And I want you to talk about poem that you wrote when you were a kid. I was thinking also about the same thing, just how the luck of circumstances has played such a role in my life and just, also in just my understanding of that luck. If we're talking about Stanford, I felt lucky to be at Stanford, right?

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Lucky because, not to say that I didn't have the academic background or the test scores or whatever to be there. But also knowing that with a 7% acceptance rate, there are thousands of other people like me who could have been there, right? And then also, just lucky in terms of, with the war, I think my mom tells me a story about how there was a bomb that dropped in a swimming pool a couple blocks away.

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And had it not dropped in that swimming pool, the impact would have been quite different. But also, just how you told the story about your mom's immigration and education story, and without her fight and her hustle and her drive. And just the luck of the people that she encountered along the way, you wouldn't be possible.

[00:22:49:133]

And I think about my mom's story, where she was such a bookworm and a, quote unquote, nerd throughout her elementary and high school years. And then when it came to take the SAT, her high school counselor said, you don't need to take that. And luckily, she was friends with somebody who drove her to take the exam.

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And then, when she hadn't heard back from UT Austin about whether or not she was accepted, she heard some ad that she says was from a legal aid association. That would call on your behalf if you hadn't heard back. And she ended up calling them and the legal aid attorney had some angry conversation with the university, in which they had said that they had reached their quota for Mexicans, apparently.

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And they fought that and my mom was late to orientation and didn't know she was supposed to bring a blanket, didn't know she was supposed to bring anything. And basically, just showed up with a toothbrush and enough cash to buy books, and that was it. But just those little things that, quite literally, without those people helping and without our moms' persistence, we just fundamentally would not be here.

[00:23:58:496]

I think they've always Played a huge role in not just inspiring hard work, cuz that's only one part of it, but also just appreciation for whatever next step there is that we've been able to achieve. That that has some amount of luck and fortune in it, right? That that's not just us, there are other forces that allowed us to be there.

[00:24:19:304]

Yeah, I think about it a lot because having gone back to Ethiopia and having visited Liberia once in my life, like, I look and I'm like, this is insane. My grandfather grew coffee beans and didn't have indoor plumbing, and I've been to so many countries and I've had so much privilege.

[00:24:39:012]

And it's entirely due to the fact that, like, I think forces conspire for your greatest good at the right time in your life.

I don't know, it's kind of emotional to think about, yeah?

It's super emotional to think about, yeah.

Yeah, I mean, I think obviously of the same with having girl cousins who still live in Iran and just thinking how different the circumstances are because I am the child of the oldest son who happened to go abroad and fall in love with a Mexican woman and get married.

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Like, that's such a different life circumstance because of that, that I'm able to, like you, pop in and out of different countries, experience them, love them for their culture and food, and not have to face the political realities on the ground. And you do feel torn, I mean, you feel, I sometimes feel guilt, I sometimes feel like you can sort of lament the American tourists that may visit Mexico, not so much Iran, but maybe the European ones.

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But is there sometimes a feeling of, am I also embodying that American tourist by popping in, popping out, loving on my family? Obviously, I mean, I think that's sort of family is essential, right? And that connection that they provide to culture, to home, to all of that is essential.

[00:26:02:125]

But, yeah, I do feel, I feel torn with visits I feel conflicted.

Do you wanna talk about the last time you were in Iran, Ellie?

Yeah, I mean, the last time I was there was the fall of 2016, just before Trump got elected. My grandfather was about to pass, and I used to be in the habit of visiting Iran every other year.

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As a kid we wouldn't go so often just because the tickets were so expensive, but once I had the means to go myself, I started to go every other year. And, yeah, I was there for the last couple weeks of my grandfather's life and then flew back and Trump was elected, and the Muslim ban was put in shortly after that.

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And then the pandemic happened, and now more recently, just political unrest, and so I haven't been back since then. I guess it's not weird, but it's hard to explain, as somebody who's mixed, who has ties to three places, right? I very much, have pride in the Bay Area and everything that it has done for me, in some ways, have more pride for the Bay Area than America as a whole, right?

[00:27:10:618]

As many people from the Bay do, right? Because it was this place that was able to provide me a home as a mixed kid, as somebody who didn't feel too foreign, even though I was foreign. But that being said, just because of the fact that I was born in Iran, most of my Mexican family is in the US all of my immediate Mexican families in the US.

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So it doesn't have the same pull, there's a cultural pull to Mexico, but not a familial one. But, yeah there's like a hole there, right? When you, you aren't able to go in and out with such ease, I often joke that when I travel to Iran, it's just a really expensive ticket to grandma's house cuz I'm not really there to explore the country.

[00:27:56:638]

I'm really there to just sit on the couch with my family and annoy them when I ask them to take me out to get ice cream. But yeah, I mean, I think part of that is, I think going back to what we've been circling around, which is how do you identify?

[00:28:13:119]

I think because of the direct familial tie to Iran and also probably because of my father's intense relationship, quite intense relationship with his family. I often joke that they're like the Mafia in that they're so protective of each other. I think I very much consider myself more Iranian than Iranian-American, I didn't grow up with a close community of Iranians.

[00:28:38:184]

Neither did I with sort of a close community of Mexican Americans either here. So, yeah, I mean, I think I identify as a mixed kid from the Bay, first and foremost. Able to, I think, identify with other mixed kids in general, right? Like I think that just has its own unique experience of, All right, we can't check that specific box.

[00:29:01:131]

And then as the daughter of a Mexican immigrant and as sort of Iranian, too, but I would love to learn more about how you identify and that I don't know how that's influenced your work or what you do now?

I think it's complicated by the fact that I was born and raised in the DC area, so I'm from Prince George's County, Maryland, which is a majority black county.

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I had the benefit of being just outside DC so Howard University HBCUs were a major feature in my life. And until college, I believed almost all Ethiopians lived in the DC area. It never occurred to me that the first Ethiopian community in the United States was in Los Angeles until I actually was moving to LA, I just was not aware of the people here.

[00:29:56:538]

Why you lived anywhere other than DC area was always a foreign concept to me, despite having gone to college in California. But in terms of my identity, I feel fully Liberian, I feel fully Ethiopian. Nigerian is sort of a part of my heritage, but it's not part of my culture, right?

[00:30:14:933]

My mother and her father didn't have relationship once she came to America, I have thought about trying to look for my grandfather's family, being a student of history. But to me, it's less important to my identity than the idea that there is this universal theme between people based on your experiences and exposure.

[00:30:35:754]

And that between my Ethiopian family, who has a great pride in the history of that country, and my Liberian family, who have great pride in the history of their country. We're all winning, right? I equally love Ethiopian food and Liberian food, I used to laugh with my mother that I dance like a Liberian, but I eat like an Ethiopian.

[00:30:58:993]

I have to move my waistline when I dance, I'm not too good at Esquita but at the same time, like, you've had my cooking, so, you know, I can also, I'm obsessed with Ethiopian food. And I think what I loved about my mom as a child is that, she was estranged from her Liberian family, no one lived in America.

[00:31:18:713]

She didn't have a big Liberian community and she took it upon herself to make sure that her children were cross, culturally competent in whatever environment we were in, right? And so which DC allows you to do so? We had neighbors from Nigeria, we had neighbors from Ghana, we had neighbors from the Philippines, we obviously had a lot of Ethiopians who lived in the DC area.

[00:31:41:236]

My mother learned how to make Ethiopian food, I think some of her dishes are better than some of the born Ethiopian food I have consumed in my life. My parents aren't married anymore, they're divorced, and my dad does compliment my mother's cooking every day.

My stepmom isn't around, so quick, Clearly, she can assimilate to wherever she needs to be.

[00:32:04:100]

And I think that is for me identify as black, before all else. We spent a lot of time thinking about, and learning about political movements in Africa. We had to fill in the map of Africa as children, about different political campaigns to destabilize Africa. Like I said, we're prideful on both sides.

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And having never been colonized, you have to know the history of how the nation states that exist on that continent were formed. And so I had kind of a Kumbaya feel when I started at Stanford, where I was like, hey, we're all black. I had to live in a majority black county, and work my way with someone who had a name that was not familiar to people at the time.

[00:32:44:141]

And learn about the history and legacy of Maryland, right. Harriet Tubman was born in Maryland. We forget that Maryland was part of the Confederacy a lot, but it's still the legacy of the US History, is still visible everywhere you go, particularly in Prince George's County. And so I think if you were to survey my siblings, they might all give different answers.

[00:33:06:747]

It's really funny talking to this next generation of nieces and nephews, where they think they're American first. I always sort of thought of myself as American second. This dream of having multiple passports, and being able to travel through different countries, and speak different languages. I think you and I shared that in common as youthful people.

[00:33:24:390]

And so depending on the context, I'm either Ethiopian, or I'm Liberian, or if it's helpful for negotiation, I'll be Nigerian.

Love to barter.

But yeah, like you, I think we were both abroad in the fall of 2016, cuz in 2016 when you were in Iran, I was in Ethiopia visiting my family.

[00:33:47:556]

Yeah.

I wasn't able to go most of my childhood. My first trip to either Liberia, or Ethiopia happened as a gift when I graduated from Stanford undergrad for my mother. And my mother hadn't been back to Liberia since she left in 1969.

Wow.

So I grew up with this vision of Liberia, that was very much steeped in sort of the economic opportunity that it was afforded it.

[00:34:12:098]

Cuz they used to trade on the US Dollar. One of the dictators, Samuel Doe, was very close with Ronald Reagan in the 80s. It was a very developed country. And so you can only hear so much about what's happened during 16 year civil war. But you're not sure, we weren't fully aware of what we were landing to visit and see when we went to Liberia.

[00:34:35:697]

But the things that stick with me, and I have not been back since my cousin who I was on a trip with in 06. And I talk a lot about sort of the trauma of being there just after peace was announced. And just after Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected the first time, like, the country was still stabilizing itself.

[00:34:54:918]

Yeah.

And so you had to go through UN checkpoints to go places. You weren't sure if they were going to search your car. You didn't quite understand what was happening. Power was limited, and safety was also a concern. And so I very vividly remember it's the summertime.

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So you'd want AC to be running or a fan, but you had to close the windows, you had to close the doors. And my older cousin would lock the women in a room at night while sleeping, and he would sit centrally in front of the compound we were staying in.

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And I was like, this is not living. I cannot,

Wow.

I cannot live like this. This is not what the end of war should bring to people.

Right.

Like, psychologically. And for my mother, I think her experience, or at least my observations of her experience going back to Liberia for the first time, is like, this is just unrecognizable.

[00:35:45:878]

Yeah. The house she grew up in had been sort of taken apart. She had one sister who was still living at the time. And I think both of us have been avoiding a visit since. Like, I've been to Ethiopia several times. I was there in 2016 during one of our many, I don't know how to call it.

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I guess you could call it a civil war. I think a lot of Ethiopians are in denial about that. The casual, let me travel the country by myself, not speaking the language fluently, and Internet and communication lines get shut off. And I went back again at the beginning of the pandemic, and was there in February 2020 and have not seen my family since.

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So it gets a little bit more familiar every time. But I do feel a sense of loss around the relationship with Liberia, for sure. So we've talked a lot about our experiences of sort of our family, our travel. I think the odds of there being young people out there who have our exact identities,

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Seem unlikely. If they exist, please find us. But what would you wanna pass on to them? What would you want them to know about our lives to this point, and where our families, and our personal migration and immigration stories have brought us, Ellie? I think just the lessons that I spoke of that my mom taught me.

[00:37:12:366]

Which I think I, I try to live both in my professional life now, as well as when I was at Stanford. Which is that, to sort of not be intimidated when the world is telling you that you don't belong, right? For so many different reasons, and to carve out a place of belonging for yourself within that world.

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And it might be a smaller place, or you might take up more space, but that you can carve out that space and look for like minded people within that in order to support you, right? Cuz both of our stories wouldn't be possible without other people helping our families.

[00:37:46:717]

And I think that, sort of to circle back to how we met, right? Is just the affinity groups, right? Salsa and Balsa ended up really collaborating on a lot of things, and cross pollinating and all of that. And supporting each other almost out of necessity, because they were only about 20 of us each per class, right?

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And so you sort of create this larger community out of necessity. And I don't know how I would have gotten through law school without affinity groups. I remember distinctly on orientation day looking across the room, and I thought, I need to find my people here because otherwise, this will not be for me.

[00:38:27:888]

So that's my tip. What about you, Sunshine?

I think professional school is a little bit different from undergrad. In that an undergrad, hopefully, if you're at a large institution, and I consider Stanford a relatively large institution, there are so many different opportunities to interact with people. I took for granted when I started law school that there was just a Black Law Students association, right?

[00:38:50:433]

Whereas, when I was an undergrad, we had the Stanford African Students association. We had the Ethiopian Era Trans Students association, we had the Black Student Union. You had MECHA, which was for sort of the Chicano identifying students, but then you also sort of had your Caribbean communities, right?

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And so you could be very fluid in trying to find common ground, common experiences, even among people who may not have your exact background and identity. I think that's something that I look to in my roles at companies now. It's like, how can I show people that we may appear different, we may have different backgrounds, but we find our common ground, our common interest.

[00:39:31:667]

We might actually have a lot of shared experiences. And I think particularly at professional school, when you're learning about the doctrinal background of considering people less than human. Whether it's based on immigration status, gender, or sexual identity, you need to know where the people are who are gonna say to you, well, that was the wildest thing I've ever heard in my life.

[00:39:52:007]

Why are we talking about this objectively? It is directly impacting human beings, and here's my experience of the impact of immigration policy. Or financial decision making, or whatever it may be, right? How we identify families. And so, given I've had the long relationship with Stanford, I also want young people to know that the school has evolved significantly, in terms of a lot of things since I was there.

[00:40:17:094]

As a first generation law student, as a first generation Californian, or a low income student, which I was as an undergrad. We didn't have free rides for folks that I would have qualified for. I had work study and had to hustle, right? Same thing for the law school.

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And I think that as frustrating as it can be to be at institutions, stepping back and acknowledging the fact that, there are people there that are there to support you, can be really helpful. Particularly if you feel like you're isolated. Because how many people are Persian, Mexican, or

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Ethiopian, Liberian, Nigerian? My childhood friends joke, you have to pick one, I refuse.

They're all wonderful stories. We all win at the World cup, depending on which country I'm following.

Yeah, so I love that.

I think being mixed definitely affords the ability to find commonalities, right?

[00:41:09:690]

And even in our backgrounds, we talked about our parents having different levels of education, and access to resources. And even that allows you to see different angles and across the lines, just that different socioeconomic, educational.

One thing I think is funny in terms of commonality, I think I'd also say that you never know what you have in common with someone that you've known forever, right?

[00:41:30:663]

So the story I laugh about around our relationship, is that like we spent hours together in a cross country drive. We were roommates, we were very close friends. And it wasn't until our law school graduation, that we discovered that your dad worked on the planes that my dad flew, in the Ethiopian wars, right?

[00:41:48:359]

It was their conversation around their immigration story, that brought out so many more layers to what we had observed, or thought we knew for certain.