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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.

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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 Petros and Anurag. Petros is Vice President of Customer Success at Cutover. Anurag is Senior Product Manager at Amazon. They both graduated from Stanford in 2013, we'll let them take it away.

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Anurag, where did you grow up?

Hi Petros, I grew up, I was born in India and when I was five, my parents moved to the UAE and I moved with them. So I spent most of my childhood and schooling years in the UAE. I grew up in a small city called Alain, which is about an hour outside Dubai.

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So I frequently go to Dubai, but usually when I meet people in the States, I tell them that I'm from Dubai.

And when you go, you go back to India, right? A few times a year or every few years. Where do you go? Do you have family there?

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And what is that experience like? I guess, compared to the your life in New York and also Dubai, right? Three different places?

Three different places, exactly. So I do go to India pretty frequently because that's where most of my extended family is, my grandparents, cousins, etc. They live in a city called Nagpur, which is in the same state as Mumbai, and I also have family in Delhi.

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And whenever I go back it's obviously a very different experience than going back to Dubai or even staying in the States. I think a lot of my visits are related to my experiences that I've had in childhood. It's a lot about meeting people, going to the same places that I've eaten at, and experiencing the same things that I did during childhood.

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So that's what going back usually feels like. And it's always about connecting with the people that I grew up with, that I've talked to and I've stayed in touch with over the course of my life. How about yourself, Petros? Where did you grow up and where are your parents originally from?

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So, I guess, as the name suggests, Petros, I'm from Greece originally. I actually, grew up in Greece for most of my life. Even a couple of early years of university I did in Greece and then I transferred to the US I did my undergrad at Brown University on the east coast.

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And then I spent some really good quality time at Stanford for my grad school. My parents are both from Greece, but interestingly, they were both born in Egypt. So from Greek families actually that were kind of travelers and had businesses there before the Seven Day War. So we do carry some kind of, I guess, Arabic rituals, etc, in the family, but, I guess, the majority is good old Greek almost the same as the movies, right?

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The big Greek Fat Wedding.

Yeah, now that's very cool, that is something that I did not know about you. And how does it feel when you visit Greece after having been in the States for so many years?

Yeah, so it's a nostalgic experience, right, I spend my time between New York and London for work.

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So I try to combine some trips to see my family, the majority of whom are based in Greece. I would say every time I go back it's more relaxing. Some things feel simpler, some things feel smaller just by speaking, I guess, the mother tongue something still more familiar.

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Maybe my old neighborhood, when I go to the square of the town that I grew up in and I go grab coffee in the morning. I don't know, it feels that as if I know some of these people, right? Whereas you don't necessarily get that feeling in a bigger city like New York.

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It's a good experience when I go back, but the reality is that I usually go back for holiday, right? So there's definitely some good memories, good experience when I'm there. But I also do miss coming back to New York where, I guess, home is and has been for the past few years.

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Yeah, I can completely relate to that. Especially when you leave the hustle bustle of New York, London, go to a smaller town, interact with the people who are enjoying a slower pace of life. It does feel very refreshing and slower paced in general, I can completely relate.

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So Petros, you attended Stanford for your Master's in Management Science and Engineering from 2011 to 2013. It was during the same time that I was doing my Master's in Electrical Engineering. Do you remember how we met?

That's a good question, Anurag. So it's been a while and it's interesting that obviously I've got a lot of friends from the MSEP, the management science and engineering program.

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And less friends besides yourself from the electrical engineering program. So I don't actually, recall all the details cuz, I think, what happened is we had some common friends. So we probably met socially first in either social gathering or someone's birthday, right? I knew some students from India as well that, I think, you knew some of the Singaporean group, right?

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I guess, and we're kind of like all hanging out with each other, so we probably met social first. But I do remember that at some point, and maybe that was the second year we both took this course called Global Entrepreneurial Marketing with Professor Tom Koznick. And I remember us discussing about this class and sharing ideas.

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I don't think we're in the same team when it came to the group project actually, but we're definitely comparing notes for our projects, right? So I do remember kind of that part.

Yeah, I believe the class was Global Entrepreneurial Marketing or something along those lines. How did this class shape your experience afterwards?

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Yeah, so it was one of those classes which was kinda typical for, I guess, Stanford where they were more discussion and kind of more project. And hands on type of work as opposed to memorizing and solving kind of problems and doing tests and exams, right? So I remember we had to read a lot of books about entrepreneurship.

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And I remember it was the first time I was introduced to some classic books, I guess, like Crossing the Chasm or Lynn Startup, etc. I also really enjoyed and remember that we did a lot of case studies. Which, I think, for me especially kind of coming from Greece having experienced a little bit of the European kind of system of teaching and studying that was different, right?

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It was about reading a case, understanding it, preparing for it and actually, making arguments and thinking how you would act in a similar situation, right? It was less about reading a textbook and then kind of learning and then kind of sharing about that, answer questions about that, right?

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So that was definitely exciting.

What I do remember, and I have really good fond memories of and some of it I use later on. I guess, in my professional career, was that we did a group project which was about preparing, A marketing strategy or a go to market strategy for a fictional start-up, right?

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So that was definitely interesting cuz that this is when I got introduced to this, to this concept. And as you might remember, after Stanford I joined investment banking and this is how I started my career. But for the past 10 years I've actually switched and joined kind of the tech, enterprise tech and start-up world, right?

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And I went to smaller and smaller companies, so the past couple of years I've working for an early stage start-ups in the go to market actually function, right? So I could almost say that maybe this class actually shaped my future career in ways. So Anurag, I remember you before Stanford, you did your undergrad at Georgia Tech in Atlanta.

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So that was your first introduction to the US System of education, so what were your impressions of the US System of education, your life in Atlanta and then your life at Stanford?

Yeah, so just to fill in the details, I did my undergrad at Georgia Tech, it was in electrical engineering, and then moved to Stanford to do my master's.

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Moving to the US from the UAE was a big, big step, culturally, financially, emotionally, living away from the family and all of that. But I was lucky that at Georgia Tech I was able to find a very diverse group of friends who also came from very international backgrounds, and I think we all found a home away from home in each other.

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And I think that group of friends is what sort of helped me get through some of the beginning part of the difficult parts of moving to a new country, settling in with new friends, a new culture, etc. What I distinctly remember is how different school experience was, a class experience was at Georgia Tech versus my high school.

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I think one of the things that we always hear about is how practical and how hands on the US education system is. And given that I was in engineering, I did spend quite a lot of time in labs doing research, and as a student, you were encouraged to do that, and I took a lot of those opportunities.

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So yeah. Now moving on to your next question of the differences between Georgia Tech and Stanford. I think besides the obvious differences of one being in a major metropolitan city in the US versus the other being based out of the Silicon Valley and one university being public. So therefore having a lot more students than the private university, which is Stanford, I think I saw two major differences in the student body population.

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So Georgia Tech is primarily an engineering and sciences school, so 95% of my friends were from the same background. So I had a very homogenous group of friends who thought alike and knew the world or looked at the world using a very similar lens, especially when it came to this analytical engineering or sciences background.

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Whereas at Stanford I found friends that were pursuing all different types of majors, so you were one of the analytical friends I had. But then I also came across friends who were studying arts, history, literature, etc. At Stanford I was also interested in honing some of my non-engineering skills.

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So I remember taking this class on Japanese business culture where it was a quarter long course on how business is done in Japan and how you should conduct yourself in the business environment which I found to be very interesting. So that is the first difference. The second difference that I found in the student body population was at Georgia Tech upon graduating a lot of people wanted to join the business world.

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So either go into consulting or join a Big Tech company and then see their careers through there. Stanford on the other hand was very, very entrepreneurial. Students wanted to start their own ventures, they wanted to start their own start-ups, they wanted to go into VC so they could help other start-ups grow.

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And that was a big, big change for me because I was not familiar with the start-up world at all. And going to Stanford helped me become more educated, learn about technology, learn about the start-up culture and those are learnings that I've taken with me through my career. I've only worked at large companies but I also do have an interest in looking at the start-up space, seeing what companies are doing well and where the industry is going.

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So yeah, so those were my impressions of Stanford versus Georgia Tech. Very fortunate to have gotten a chance to attend both universities and both have helped define who I am as a person today.

This is very, very interesting and I guess there is both experiences based on what you said shaped kind of different parts of who you are now, right?

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If I think of, of Stanford and given it was grad school, I remember we're both worried about getting a job afterwards, right? Staying in the US, right? On a visa at the time. What do you remember as being your fondest memory of your time at Stanford and what is your kind of hardest moment if you like?

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Yeah, so let's start with the hardest one first so that we end the question on a high note or the answer on a high note. I believe some of my hardest moments were I already spoke about the diverse student body and they weren't only diverse in terms of their interests.

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They were also diverse in where they came from and what their backgrounds were and what their beliefs were. And just being able to communicate with all of them and being able to talk to all of them, being able to know how to effectively communicate with people from different backgrounds was something that I struggled with initially.

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And I think that got easier with time as I became more open-minded, as I became more open to learning about the differences that exist amongst the Stanford community and I became open to learning more about them. So I think those were some of the hardest moments, especially at the beginning, because going from an engineering school to a school where people come from many different backgrounds have many different views of how they see the world was super challenging.

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Especially when it came to making friends and just getting to know people in general. And some of my fondest memories at Stanford I think would be how at home I felt towards the end of my course there. I remember as I was finishing, I remember I told myself that I don't think I can find another place where there's so many interesting smart people within a small campus anywhere in the world.

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And that that has, has mostly been true, I've been fortunate to work with a lot of smart people. But just being at Stanford, interacting with people, learning from them and just becoming a better person myself every day was definitely the most fun part of being there. So moving on to you, Petros, as you mentioned, you did your undergrad at Brown University in Rhode Island, what were your impressions of Stanford?

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So for me, it was when I first moved to the US and I transferred actually from a Greek university to Brown, there were some, definitely a lot of new experiences, right? And I think that the main one was how friendly actually everybody was, how well travelled everybody was, and also how many kind of different interests everybody had, right?

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And Brown was a small school in Rhode Island, the small, Smallest state in the US, and was kind of sitting in a small campus, right? On a college hill, etc. So, it was a kind of a nice friendly environment, right? Everybody was happy. When I went to Stanford, it was in some ways night and day, right?

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And I'll talk about those ways first, but there were obviously a lot of similarities, right? The night and day came when I realized how big Stanford was as a university, right? It was huge, it had a really big undergrad population, and I believe an even bigger grad school population, right?

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And we were part of that grad school population. There were certain classes, and I remember one called Advanced Microeconomics, that we would not even see the professor at all after class, right? We would deal mostly with some really, really smart PhD and postdoc students that were acting as teaching assistants, right?

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I remember there were some courses that were really popular, like Global Entrepreneurial Marketing, where you had to apply to get in, right? And sometimes you wouldn't get in, if you only were there for one or two years and you wanted to make the most out of your education, right, it could be disappointing, right, if you didn't get in kind of the first time, right?

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Having said that, what I do remember very fondly is how smart everybody was and how driven everybody was, right? So, I feel I did my best learning when I was at Stanford, by being part of the Stanford community, right? I was impressed by everybody around me, I wanted to do more because everybody around me was doing a lot, right?

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I remember there were some classmates that would take more classes than me, do better than me in those classes, and also have one or two startups on the side that they were trying to kind of get off the ground, right? And I was, I'm this kid from Greece, right, what am I doing here?

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I've made it here, right? So, I must be worth something, right? So, how do I make the most of this experience? But I also, when I said that I learned a lot from the Stanford community, is that it was really a melting pot, right, of ideas, right? There was always really intense conversations, there was always people, I guess, questioning the status quo, right, and wanting to innovate and try something new.

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So, that was definitely eye opening. Another thing that stood out for me is that Stanford is part of that tech ecosystem, right? And that hub that the world talks about, Silicon Valley, right? But by being there and being in that proximity and sometimes taking courses by the pioneers of those subjects, you also had great access and direct access to literally the biggest name in tech and in entrepreneurship, right?

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To probably the greatest people that are worldwide, I guess they have worldwide fame, right? So, I actually fondly remember this case study based class, and I don't know if you took it as well. It was called Strategy and Technology Based Companies taught by Professor Kathleen Eisenhower, where for one of the classes we were reading and preparing a case study on LinkedIn, right?

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And how LinkedIn as a company started. And it starts with a scenario and it was, the founder of LinkedIn, this guy, Constantine Garrick, was looking out of his window and he had this big decision to make, etc. I don't remember exactly what decision he had to make, but that's kind of the case study.

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Had it set the context and then we had to answer it and give our opinions, right? So, prepare that, we go into the class, I think my team was presenting. So, we gave kind of our thoughts, right? Professor Eisenhower gave us some pointers, some other teams shared their thoughts, debate a little bit, right?

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Then what happened the last 15 minutes of the class, Professor Eisenhardt says, okay, great, my students, right, great ideas, I heard you. Now, let's hear how Constantine reacted and what he ended up doing, right? And then all of a sudden, she says that, and then she calls Constantine Garrick, the co-founder of LinkedIn, right?

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And he popped in the class casually, right, in an afternoon, and he told us about his own experience, right? And then asked you what he ended up doing. So, we literally went from this theoretical kind of case study that we're reading and kind of debating to an actual scenario with the person that acted on that.

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So, it was fascinating.

Yeah, no, I can totally relate to all that you said there. So, let's talk about how Stanford shaped you, right? So, I think you spoke a little bit about it in your previous answer. So, Sir Petros, as an immigrant, did your understanding or thinking about your own identity change during your time at Stanford?

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Yeah, we didn't know each other before, right, but I think if we did, maybe we wouldn't be friends, right? I was a very, very different person before I came to the US for studies and definitely before I started my master's at Stanford. I would say, and that's not something I've shared, I guess often or with many people.

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Is that I was probably more single minded in many, many topics, right? I think, living in a small country like Greece especially, 10, 20 years ago you had less exposure to the world, right, in many ways, right? Whether some of it was ideas, some of it was diversity, I guess, people of different religions, cultures, races, etc, right?

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So, I think when I came to the US, when I interacted with the student body at Stanford and the professors and the general community, right? There was an explosion of ideas and an explosion of interests and experiences kind of going on in my head. I would say I learned so much, I definitely became more open minded.

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I could even go and say, and I don't know if that's a strong word, but I became more tolerant, right, in many ways. And fun enough, I also became a little bit more critical of some of the ways we do things back home, right? So, you asked me before, how I feel when I go back to Greece, right?

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I think sometimes I feel that, we should change our beliefs in some areas, right? We should be more tolerant when it comes to religion, for example, right? So, there's definitely a lot of stuff that I've learned that I feel I can kind of go back and apply and by sharing with my family or other friends that live back home, I can maybe influence or mentor or help with certain things.

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I would also say that on the contrary, right, there's definitely certain things from back home that my experience at Stanford made me value even more. I think, the sense of that small community that I said, right? Some of the sense of the personal connections, right? Some of the rituals and the cultural elements, right, that by living in a foreign country you kinda miss, right?

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And there are things you probably used to do every day that you didn't appreciate when you did, but then you do. It's definitely a complicated, I guess, answer and a topic, but I would say overall, I've definitely been more open minded, right? And again, a lot of experiences and I definitely became a citizen of the world, right?

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And that did start at Stanford.

Yeah, so, moving on to life after Stanford, where have you been since Stanford and where do you live today?

So, after Stanford, I ended up getting a job in London, so, I moved to Europe and I did a few years there, I did three years there.

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But actually before that, right after Stanford, I went back to Greece for one year and I completed my mandatory military service.

Wow.

Greece is one of those countries that still has the requirement. So, that was an interesting experience. Very different experience to doing grad studies and stuff.

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So did that, learned a lot. And then I worked in, in London for three years. I started my career in investment banking, and then I think Tech won me over and I moved to Tech and you know, I scale up at the time and since then I've been in that world.

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I moved back to the US and in particular New York seven years ago and I've been in New York since and I worked for a small startup, joined when it was Series A and I'm on the go to market side side and it's a great experience.

And in terms of staying connected to your culture and to Greece, what are things that you've been doing in New York or since you've graduated from Stanford that have helped you with that?

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Yeah, I do try to stay connected to Greece. As I said earlier, I do go a couple times a year. I try to combine my work trips to London with some quick trips to Athens where my family is at. But I think, apart from that I have a fairly diverse, I would say, group of friends in New York and this is what the city is great for as well and can offer that.

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But I do have a group of Greek friends, right? So whenever I miss home, for example, this weekend actually it's a Greek Orthodox sister, on a Sunday we wanna go to a restaurant in Astoria and we're gonna have some lamb, right? Some roasted lamb, etc. So, I do try to stay in touch with this group and obviously keep some of the traditions alive.

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I also keep in touch with classmates from Brown and also from Stanford. I participate in alumni events. This is where sometimes we see each other actually, which is great. And I participate in the class, alumni leadership as well. I do interviews, etc. So you know, I try to give back to the university.

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Now, when it comes to Greece in particular, I am a member of an organization called Greek tech.org. It's kind of a nonprofit networking platform where a bunch of people of what is called Greek descent or Hellenic descent come together and we talk about learnings and challenging challenges as well of our professions in tech, we talk about fundraising, etc.

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So this has been an interesting experience, maybe the most interesting actually. And what I'm really passionate about is I am a mentor of Greek entrepreneurs and, and startups starting in Greece, but looking to expand in Europe and in the US I do that through a global nonprofit organization called Endeavor.

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Endeavor is a nonprofit advisory organization for startups, but they also have an incubator arm. So an incubator and a venture arm. I guess they do, they do give some funding to some of those startups, but it's all nonprofit, right? So they can't invest back to their business. So through that, in some of my visits I would meet founders, I would help them to grow their business and bring in the US and in some ways I feel I'm giving back to the country, right?

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And a lot of the stuff we talk about is stuff obviously I've experienced myself through my own career, but also a lot of things that I learned at Stanford. But enough about me, Anurag, where have you been since your time at Stanford and where do you live today?

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Yeah, so literally the day after graduation is when I flew to New York and I've been here ever since, I started my career in finance and four years later pivoted to tech and I've been in tech for the last six to seven years.

Now that you're in New York and you've been here, it's been what, like 10 years.

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What are the things that you do to stay connected to your Stanford community as well as your culture and your home country. Although I don't know if you define your home country, India or the UAE and Dubai. I'll let you answer that.

So I'm often confused about what my home country is also.

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But culturally I would say I am Indian. So in terms of staying in touch with my country and culture, I do visit pretty often. So I try to go back to the UAE as often as I can. It's an easier flight than going to India. Next, I like you have a pretty big social circle here of Indian people from all walks of life, be it undergrad friends, grad school friends, work friends, etc, so periodic catch ups with them, celebrating major festivals with them such as Diwali, Holi, etc.

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Also the South Asian diaspora in New York, especially the young South Asian diaspora, has been growing pretty rapidly in the last few years. And some of the organizations that you spoke about, I'm aware of a lot of similar organizations. So there are networking events, there are Bollywood themed parties, Bollywood music themed dance classes, etc.

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Which I've gone to a few times to meet more people and to network with more people. So that's how I stay in touch with my culture and my country in New York.

I remember you're playing cricket as well at some point in.

No, that's a great reminder.

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Yeah, cricket is a big part of my life so watching cricket is something that I enjoy doing. Playing cricket is another thing that I used to do but haven't gotten a chance to do in the last couple of years. So that is something else that I really enjoy doing and I hope to find more time to do that in the near future.

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Moving on to my friends from Stanford, attending the various alumni events, meeting people through the alumni events, following up with them and just learning more through the various events that the alumni board puts together. Besides that, I really dread long flights, so I've not really flown back to campus to see friends that are close to there.

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But if I ever make a visit there, I think going back to campus and seeing my friends there would be something that I would really like to get involved in.

When is the next time for event we're going to?

We should probably think of something soon.

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So Anurag, you have a really inspiring story and I think what I would like to, to ask you last is, you came to the US you started at Stanford, you're obviously from India, grew up in the UAE. So for a young person with a similar background like yourself, a young person that is just starting a journey and they're maybe dreaming of coming to and starting in a place like Stanford.

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Is there anything you would wanna pass on to them? What do you want them to know based on what you know now?

So in terms of getting in, from what I've been hearing anecdotally, getting admitted to universities for undergrad and grad school is just getting significantly harder and harder.

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So I think whatever advice I had for folks applying to grad school 10 years ago probably wouldn't hold true now. But regardless, I think the most important thing there is to be a well rounded candidate that not only excels in academics but also excels in things outside the classroom.

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So when you're in school, college, make sure you get involved in a lot of different things, take on leadership positions and really try to make an impact in the organizations you're in or in the institutes that you're in. Because those things will help you form connections and help you make lifelong friends that you will carry with you for the rest of your life.

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But let's say everything goes well and you're in your dream university in the US or, or you end up attending the US for school. Something that I recommend a lot of people from my background to do is I tell them that you should try to mix and mingle with as many people as you can and try to interact with as many people People as you can, because A, it helps you build your network.

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In life, what I've started realizing after having graduated grad school for over ten years is life is about who you know and less so about what you know. So, building those networks from school, from university, really helps you, either build that network or build your interpersonal skills that will help you build networks in the future.

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And B, it gives you a really good way to understand perspectives and beliefs that are not your own. It helps you check for biases and it just makes you a more well-rounded person in general. So I would say, don't be shy about saying hi to new people. Take classes in things that you may not have ever thought of because it'll make you more well rounded, it'll make you more interesting.

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And it'll help you build connections that'll help you succeed in life. So if I had to turn that question around to you, Petros, for a young person from a similar background, such as yourself, who's starting their journey, what would you like them to know?

Yeah, so I think for me, starting at Stanford and Brown was probably the best thing that happened to me and definitely changed me and shaped me into the person I'm now.

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And in many ways, it set the scene for the life that I'm living now in New York City, right? If you ask me 20 years ago, I'll be here in New York, right? If you told me I live in Brooklyn, right? I don't think I even knew where Brooklyn was, right?

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Now it's funny to say that, as an adult, right, saying single experience for shaped me, that is the only thing I remember about my life. But look, it's true, right? It's true, it's a very important milestone, right? And we already discussed about how this came to be. So I think, if I look back and based on what I knew then, and based on what someone at this age and growing up in Greece, what they probably know these days as well, or they don't know, right?

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I would say that, even applying to a place like Stanford, it's daunting, right? If you read the statistics, Stanford is very selective and it admits what, like 3, 4% of applicants every year. It would sound not just daunting, it would sound impossible, right? But what I would actually say to the young me, that it is possible and believe in yourself.

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And even going through that process, actually you learn a lot. And then I would say in Greece in particular, there's maybe obsession and overly focus on things like grades, right? So I would say, yes, do your homework and have good grades, right? Pick the subjects that you're more interested in also, right?

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It is viewed like that.

But also I would say it is not just about grades, do other stuff, do sports, get involved with philanthropy. Participate in the equivalent of model Congress, right, in your home country in Greece. Model parliament, I guess maybe we would call it, I don't know, do comedy, right?

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Basically, if you're passionate about something, right, you probably do it well and you excel at it, and it will come natural to you. And those experiences and those activities shape you as a person, give you a more holistic perspective and give you a better perspective about the world.

[00:35:21:494]

So I would definitely encourage and tell someone to do those things and explore those things, and then, just try it, take the leap. And if you believe in it enough, believe in yourself enough, and you're passionate, you're probably gonna get closer to that goal you're aspiring to, right?

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And then it'll be amazing, right? Then you'll be rewarded in ways that you didn't even expect to. So I'll close with that.