

Shounak Simlai '05, Thayer '07
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
SpeakOut
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

[DESPINA B.]

KARALIS: Hello. This is an interview for SpeakOut, Dartmouth [College's] project on recording queer oral history at Dartmouth. It is May 16th, 2018, and I am Depy Karalis, the interviewer, and I'm currently in Dartmouth's Rauner Special Collections Library in Hanover, New Hampshire, and it is 2:08 p.m.

I will let my interviewee introduce himself, so Shounak:

SIMLAI: Hi, there. My name is Shounak Simlai. I am a Dartmouth 2005, Thayer [School of Engineering] 2007. It is May 16th. It's 11:08 in the morning where I am in San Francisco [California]. I am in the South of Market neighborhood, at my office.

KARALIS: Wonderful, yeah. To begin off, I would just like to ask if I could hear a bit about your childhood and what that was like, where you're from, et cetera.

SIMLAI: Sure. I grew up in India, and I grew up in a town called Jamshedpur, which is in the eastern part of the country. By Indian standards, Jamshedpur counts as a town. It had a population of only 1.3 million people, which is a very different idea from the town of Hanover, New Hampshire. I lived in Jamshedpur—all my life, until I was eighteen, and which is when I moved to the U.S. to go to Dartmouth.

Growing up was relatively straightforward and uncomplicated. I was very involved with a lot of activities in and out of school. I was also a bit of a dreamer, and I—I was the third of three kids. I'm the youngest in the family. And I think by the time I was born, my parents had stopped stressing out about how to raise kids and just said, "Oh you know, he seems to be this slightly dreamy, introverted kid. We'll just let him be, as long as he is, you know, not doing anything horribly wrong."

So growing up, I spent most of my time at home, reading a lot. My oldest sister is six years older than me, and she was an advanced reader for her age, and I would read the books that she would bring home from the library, so I was reading quite a few years ahead of me. I read *Gone with the Wind* when I was in fourth grade, for example. I went back and reread it as an adult and was, like, *Wow, there's just so much about this book I missed when I read it when I was nine years old!* So I used to read a lot.

I used to also watch a lot of cinema. My parents' cardinal rule was that if there was a film festival in town, it was okay to miss school for a couple of days to go and watch, you know, film festival type cinema. They—they didn't approve quite as much of, like, popular movies, but film festivals were completely fine.

And the third thing I used to do was I had a ton of animals growing up. When I was a kid, I really wanted to be a zoo keeper. One of my role models was Gerald [M.] Durrell. He is a naturalist and set up the Jersey Zoo and really worked really hard with a bunch of endangered species and conservation, and so that time he was the person I wanted to be when I grew up. And at any given point, I think we had at least ten different types of animals at home, and the neighbors knew this, so they'd always drop off things that they found on the street with us and say, "Oh, you know, we found this bird under a tree, and we thought you would look after it."

So that was what home was like.

In school I was—I—I fell into a lot of the kind of activities most people, you know, find themselves doing at school. I played a couple of instruments in the band. I actually played the bagpipes, which everyone is a little surprised. Like, "You're from India and you play the bagpipes. That's very weird." Actually, it's not. India used to be a colony of—you know, a country with the British there, so most bands in India have bagpipes. I used to play a couple of instruments.

I did a bunch of more—you know, writing heavy stuff, like being the editor of the school newspaper, being the editor of

the yearbook and so on. Did a couple of things in the theater space. But those were—those were the main things.

When I was sixteen, I was sitting in the library looking through the *U.S. News [& World] Report*, which back then was, you know, still a physical, paper book. And I said, *Oh, well, it seems like it would be nice to go to school in the U.S.* and ended up basically doing it in a very analytical way and what I later discovered was a completely *un-American* way. I basically made a list of schools by ranking based on, you know, the top universities and top U.S. liberal arts colleges. I then checked which ones of those offered financial aid to international students, and of the ones that were left basically ended up applying.

And came to Dartmouth completely sight unseen, mainly—the biggest factor really was the biggest scholarship was from Dartmouth. And then it was very disorienting to show up on campus, and I would keep meeting people who would say, “Oh, I visited for Dimensions [of Dartmouth], and I visited four more times, and my uncle went here, my father went here, my brother went here.” I was, like, *This is a completely foreign concept to me.* And it made me sort of wonder, you know, *Did I make the right decision by showing up at a place just based off of ranking and aid package?*

But it worked out, and I’m glad it did. So, yeah, and that led to a good few years at Dartmouth and after Dartmouth.

KARALIS:

Were there many other students in the international community that had kind of done, like, a similar thing in choosing Dartmouth?

SIMLAI:

I think not as much. At the time, Dartmouth was—Dartmouth has recently gone back to committing to being need blind again for all students, but at the time, need was considered in the overall application package. So most students who were international students came—they were in classes with who were at Dartmouth because their parents had been to Dartmouth. One of my friends was from Ghana, and her father was a Dartmouth alum, who had come from Ghana, too. Studied at Dartmouth and gone back to Ghana.

And there were quite a few international students who came from families that could afford the cost of the education more. I think, anecdotally, I had one other friend who was from Nepal, who was also in—in my class, who was also at Dartmouth on a full ride, basically. But most people were—you know, had families that were—

KARALIS: Legacy.

SIMLAI: —able to, I think—yeah, either a legacy or able to afford the cost of the education more equitably.

KARALIS: So how did—so how do you identify yourself? What is your identity, and how did that fit in with Dartmouth and the students?

SIMLAI: Um, so I think I didn't think about identity too much when I showed up on campus, and—and at the time, I think—I wouldn't say I was figuring it out, and there were—there are lots of people, you know, who realize they're gay when they're in college. I—I was pretty sure I was gay [chuckles] when I was a lot younger than that, so that wasn't something that had to be figured out over time. But at the same time, it was not something I leaned into as an identity, either.

And I think, if I think back to it now, is when I—when I first came to campus, one of the things I didn't really care to do or want to do or see as much excitement about doing was I think being a part of different LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] student groups on campus. I think I now realize why. That is because in many ways there are lots of cultural markers around the LGBT experience, and so if you're coming from another country, the markers you're coming with are very different from what you then see.

An example of this is something like references to “RuPaul's Drag Race” or references to [the] Stonewall [riots] or references to, you know, some of these coming-of-age LGBT movies that someone growing up here would be—would have seen or heard of or at least interacted with. Those references are things that I now understand, but at the age of eighteen, like, there are just too many other, you know, cultural things to grow into. I mean, you're—you're

moving from one country to another. You're already—you have to learn a lot about a new country very quickly.

And it's a lot more than what you just see in—in Hollywood movies, right? And—and even beyond that, what you see in Hollywood movies is not representative of America. It is especially not representative of life in the Upper [Connecticut River] Valley, where you either see a lot of wealth, in Hanover, or as soon as you leave Hanover, you see a very rural and a very poor community, also a very largely white community, so there's just lots of other cultural markers to navigate first, that I think to me were—ended up being the ones I was navigating more consciously than thinking about, *Oh, how can I, you know, hang out with all the other gay kids in my class?* And that's how it played out.

That's changed, obviously, over time, where now I—I—I have, you know, a very stable core group of gay friends, who are basically friends for life at this point, and we get each other. But in college most of my gay friends were people I had these one-off friendships with. It wasn't hanging out with all the gays together. And if I could go back and redo something, this would be one part of my Dartmouth experience I would redo because even now, there are all these classmates of mine—or, you know, a year before or after—all of whom have a shared gay experience from Dartmouth. Many of them overlap with other groups, like an a cappella group or a specific fraternity and so on. But they all do things together. They all go on vacations together. They all go to each other's weddings. They all hang out together. And if I could go back and redo something, I think that is one thing I would redo so I would have that kind of—a community not just at Dartmouth but even after Dartmouth, to be plugged into.

I think the other parts of identity that end up happening and—and, you know, I began realizing is that it was not easy to find people who were like me, and so I basically had to be okay with, you know, finding people who were largely like me, which was fine. So, for example, there was, you know, good luck finding someone else who was international, also had to be fiscally a little, you know, thrifty and think about just the money and working on campus and all of that, and also be gay. For the most part, I was, like, *Okay, like, you*

know, if there is a two out of three match, that works out just fine. And that was how a lot of these friendships happened and stayed as these one-off friendships over time.

I also began to realize that I really liked two types of things. One, I really liked building things, and I became—I studied mechanical engineering at Dartmouth. And so one of my core shared experiences was with everyone else who was also studying engineering because all of us were at Thayer all the time. All of us were working on problems that were designed to be—often be tackled in groups, so there was a lot of group work, teamwork. All of us were working on other projects that involved working in groups or in—in pairs in the machine shop. And so a lot of my time that I was not sleeping—you know, at night—was basically spent at Thayer or working one of my, you know, on-campus jobs. And so that ended up being a very central part of my identity.

The other thing that ended up happening very organically also was I began joining some student groups when I first started as a freshman and then got more and more involved in them, and I was just, like, *Oh, I can just do so much more here that no one else is doing.* For example, I joined Milan [pronounced MILL-in; now Dartmouth South Asian Student Association], which was a South Asian student group. I believe it's now called SASA [pronounced SAH-suh; Dartmouth South Asian Student Association], because I was, like, *Well, I'm from South Asia. I should join Milan.*

And—and it turned out that actually the majority of Milan members are actually South Asian-Americans, so they are all South Asian origin but grew up in the U.S. I was one of the few, you know, who were South Asians from South Asia.

But by virtue of being in Milan, at some point I was, like, *Oh, well, there's an opportunity to be on the Pan Asian Council,* which spans all of the different Asian groups on campus and figures out how to sort of have dialogue and interaction and opportunities across them. So I ended up being on the Pan Asian Council.

After that, at some point, there was—there was a need to talk about Asian-American studies on campus and—and where that was going, and so I said, *Well, okay, I guess I will*

work on this as well. I actually ended up being an intern for OPAL, the Office of Pluralism and Leadership, working on Asian-American studies.

And then, by virtue of being in OPAL, as I began to get more and more involved in conversations of diversity, I was—I became part of the kickoff—the first sort of Diversity Peer Program session that was founded back then.

And so it became one of these things where, again, all of these things exist in this broader group of or space of what is identity specifically within that? What is Asian identity? And I never actively thought I would be part of this, but somehow I ended up having leadership of this across four different things.

So that's how it played out. A little, you know, not intentional but just happened, so—but I would say if I think of myself of community, engineering was a large part of it, with other people in my class, and also with a lot of grad students who I'm still very close to. Some of them were basically like having pseudo siblings or pseudo parents, parents who would sort of say, "Oh, just come over and we'll cook dinner for you tonight." And there were some nights basically—there was—there was this grad student, a couple, Carl and Daneek [Archivist Note: spelling uncertain]. I'm still very close with them, but often I would basically just be at their place because they'd be cooking dinner, and I'd be there, and then, you know, we'd watch TV together, and I'd sometimes crash on their couch at night. So that was one, you know, big thing in terms of community.

The other two things, interestingly enough, was I used to work at Feldberg [Business and Engineering] Library, and we had a fixed group of students who sort of worked there, and so we hung out together often, because if you weren't working in the library you were just studying in the library. So there was a little bit of a group-study thing going on.

And then another thing I used to do was the Roth Center for Jewish Life on campus had a job opening for a building manager, and I showed up and—it never occurred to me that, you know, maybe you might have to be Jewish to be the building manager for the Jewish Center. I was, like, *Oh,*

it's just a building manager position. I'll do it. And it turned out you didn't have to be Jewish, but they were sort of, like,—they were, like, “Oh, we've never had anyone apply for this position who isn't actually actively, culturally Jewish. Are you sure you want to do this?” And I was, like, “Yeah, sure. That's fine.”

But I actually remember I had to get kosher certified, and, you know, actually make sure the kitchen followed all of the required law and observations, and then even on weekends in terms of electricity use in the building. And so that was—that was in some ways amusing because I remember always having—a lot of Upper Valley residents would come through the building, and I became friendly with quite a few of them. They were almost all usually surprised I wasn't Jewish, but then ended up having lots of really fun conversations, in a couple of cases actually, you know, making friends who are still—I'm still in touch with now, who are, you know, surgeons at DHMC [Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center] and so on.

So that's what identity in college was like. Does that answer the question you were asking?

KARALIS: Yeah. Yeah. You were part of so many organizations! It's crazy!

SIMLAI: Yeah. Somehow, I end up finding that I get a—it makes me feel very happy to work on things that just need someone to get things done, and I think that's been true even after graduating from Dartmouth, in terms of my working with a bunch of different alumni groups, as an alum. You know, it—like I said, you know, when I went to Dartmouth, I met all these kids whose fathers and uncles and brothers and sisters had all gone to Dartmouth as well, and I was very surprised by that. And back then, if you had told me that “one day you will be the alum who will be a part of eight different alumni groups and show up on campus six times a year for meetings,” I would have laughed and said, “You've got to be kidding me.”

Somehow, I've turned into the alum who shows up on campus six times a year for various meetings and dialed in to various conference calls and is very, very involved with

fund raising and—and strategy and just thinking about, like, Triangle House and all of that. So in some ways, it's—it's—it's amusing to think about that. But, yeah, it's—it's—it's—definitely unexpected, how that has turned out.

KARALIS: Do you—do you—do you miss Dartmouth undergrad at all? And, like, being involved in all these organizations?

SIMLAI: Yes and no. I think one of the things I miss about Dartmouth is I really like the sense of tradition and, you know, customs that are kept alive at Dartmouth, just little things like, oh, the Baker[-Berry Library] bells always play the “Alma Mater” every evening and so on. And I—I like having that sort of, you know, continuity in terms of traditions. And I miss that a lot.

I miss, I think, being, you know, younger and not having to worry about life or career and all of that as well, but I think that would be true at other places than Dartmouth as well.

At the same time, I think I am cognizant of the fact that tradition often works better for people who are in positions of power and privilege than it does for other people. And many Dartmouth traditions that I still like, and I wish were continued—like, you know, I really like the “Alma Mater.” I know all the words of the “Alma Mater,” including the third verse that is normally sung in times of war.

KARALIS: [Chuckles.]

SIMLAI: And sometimes I'm a little surprised that most people don't know all the words or care about that, whereas, you know, whenever I'm at a Dartmouth event, at the end we always sing the “Alma Mater.” I go up front and sing with anyone else who wants to come to the front of the room and sing.

But at the same time, you know, a lot of traditions—and this is something we need to recognize about Dartmouth and colleges and institutions like Dartmouth—is a lot of these traditions were set in place and served a dominant group that was basically white men in positions of power. Straight white men, if that. And so it's a little conflicting for me to, I think, think of those two.

The part of Dartmouth that I think back to and don't miss at all is what I now realize is feeling alienated, because it can be challenging to be an immigrant, to be on financial aid, to be queer, to not be white—you know, so many things that you—that are default groups to be part of and that are set up to serve these default groups that you can't be part of, that you have to just work harder at making and nurturing friendships, relationships, feeling like a part of the community.

And it's—it's weird that I now feel more connected to Dartmouth as an alum than I did when I was at Dartmouth as a student. And it's one of these things that I'm often surprised by when I think of it, because I—I'm not sure how it—how it happened. There are, you know, lots of people in my class who definitely have far more happy, fond memories of Dartmouth. I'm not saying I have, like, negative memories. I just don't have that many like, happy, fond memories of, like, you know, "Oh, remember back in the day when I hung out with my sixty other frat brothers and all of these amazing things together?" Or, "Hey, like, remember when I hung out with, like, you know, my lacrosse team and we all did all these lacrosse things together?" I just don't have those kind of shared group experiences that when you go back for re—when I go back for my reunion, it's the sort of thing you keep hearing about and the sort of interactions you keep seeing.

When I go back for my reunion, I'm like, *Oh, like, here are the fifteen people I had these one-on-one friendships with. Let me catch up with each of them.* There isn't that broader, shared thing that a lot of people, you know, get out of a college experience, especially out of a place like Dartmouth. So that's—that's one of the things that I think I—I—I look back at and I'm like, *Hmm, I definitely don't miss that feeling of feeling a little out of place all the time at this college.*

KARALIS: Do you think there is any way the traditions can change to embrace, like, the marginalized populations like the queer students on campus, the first-gen and low-income students, et cetera?

SIMLAI: Mmm, I don't think I've seen a model there, because tradition requires continuity. For continuity to happen, you

need to have some kind of a—a setting that allows for that continuity to exist, right? So basically if you think of why—why do frats have such strong alumni membership, it's because you have a physical space, where everyone comes to do things, you know, together. They've all voluntarily chosen to buy into that space and be part of it. And even though each student is there for only four years, the space exists, and there's sort of this handing off of traditions.

I think with other groups, a lot of this is you are not choosing to be voluntarily queer, right? You're just queer. It's not something you have any choice in terms of how actively do I want to be queer? But I think within that, you see it play out, in cases where it can—and often, again, this comes from a position of privilege, so, for example, there were—there were and there are queer students at Dartmouth who are basically preppie white dudes, all of whom know each other, date each other in college, often are in the same frats, or even in the broader frat circle. They have a smaller friends circle, which is, you know, each other.

And so when they look back on their shared experience, they're, like, “Oh, like, do I have, you know, gay friends I still hang out with and this is a shared experience and some kind of a bond?” Yes, but that came because it came from a position of privilege. So I think there is that element of it.

I think if you look at models outside the university setting where this works well, if you think of just, like, “Hey, let's look at, you know, LGBT centers in some cities and why they work or how they work,” you see them succeed because, again, there are people voluntarily buying into it and choosing to sort of keep these traditions alive.

So in San Francisco, where I live, and in other cities as well, we have The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, who are basically drag queens who dress like nuns and do a lot of charity work in the community. But, again, these are actively people who are choosing to do this and voluntarily to be part of it and not having this identity thrust upon them.

So I think it—it exists where you have the option of choice, but I think it's—it's basically impossible to say that, oh, because everyone—everyone queer who comes to

Dartmouth should be part of the community. That just won't happen. You know, there's too much variability in that group.

KARALIS: Do you think that—for your time at Dartmouth, do you think that [the] queer community was not that accepting or welcoming to anybody that didn't fit that group you described, the homogeneous group?

SIMLAI: A little bit. I think that has been true. I think in general, at a place like Dartmouth, in my time you basically saw—there was a group of preppie white guys who were dating the other preppie white guys. And I'm speaking only from the gay perspective. Right, I cannot speak—you know, as strongly as, well, from position of, like, the queer women at Dartmouth, so this is about the queer men at Dartmouth.

So you have the preppie white guys who date the preppie white guys. Then you have the other guys, who are not preppie white guys, who still want to date the preppie white guys, because that's what is aspirational for them and those are all the models of—you know, we've seen in—in the media. And it's, like, well, this is what we have been conditioned to look at as desirable.

And then after that, the third group, was basically all the reactionary, activist-y LGBT students, which is, you know,—which works out best—well as well, because they're all, you know, in—in positions where they're looking to, like, you know, be change makers.

But I would say the first two groups at the time were still, you know, some of the dominant group—folks you saw, a little bit like, you know, being, like, the—the cool kids or, you know, the kids that you wanted to hang out with or be like and so on. But I think that in some ways is still true in a place like Dartmouth, so in my case, like I said, I had gay friends at Dartmouth, but these were—and I mean I dated at Dartmouth was well, but these were formed based off of—based off of very one-off friendships. There were just, you know, other ways in which we became friends, rather than part of a broader structural thing at play. Does that make sense?

KARALIS: Yeah.

SIMLAI: I feel like I'm not being very eloquent right now.

KARALIS: No, no, I think that makes complete sense. But on that, like, what were those friendships like? How did you meet, and how did you engage with each other?

SIMLAI: Sure. So one of my close friends, who actually lives in San Francisco now, is John [M.] Brett, he's a zero [Class of 2000]. John and I met because we both worked in the Collis Center [for Student Involvement], and there was—and after work, the lower level of Collis had late night—it was called Late Night Collis. There's a bar on the lower level. I'm completely blanking on the name right now.

KARALIS: Yeah, there's one in Wheelock.

SIMLAI: It was—it was—it was called the Lone Pine Tavern back then. And John and I met there because I would often hang out there because that was where you went if you were hungry late at night, and I'm a late-night person. And John used to work there. And so we struck up a friendship, hung out a lot. He was a member of Amarna [a Dartmouth undergraduate society], so I would hang out at Amarna a few times with him. And right now John lives in San Francisco and is actually a preacher here, and he works with homeless people in San Francisco. So he and I have kept this friendship alive for—for a very long time.

There was Victor, whom I dated, and Victor is Mexican-American, and I think in many ways, being—dating him was easy, because he, I think, he came to Dartmouth also from a position of just realizing that there was just this otherness and how you think of that and react to it in—in this broader campus.

So those—those are the kinds of friendships that were I think formed. There were a couple of queer engineers, who [unintelligible] it was perfect, “Oh, great, you're a nerdy engineer as well. We can”—you know—“we—we don't have—you know I'm gay. I know you're gay. There's nothing to talk about that is gay, but there are so many fun things to talk about about how to build a race car, so let's go do that

together.” [Both chuckle.] So there was a little bit of that as well.

So that’s—that’s how I think these friendships panned out. Like I said, I would spend so much time in the engineering building that most of the—you know, you think of college as this one chance where, you know, people just—you just get this community of friends handed to you, and the expectation that you’ll be friends with them. To me, that was in many ways what Thayer was like, where it’s just, like, *I’ve just got this bunch of people handed to me with whom I just end up hanging out for six, seven hours every day, doing homework or be in class. I guess you are gonna be my friends.* And so that’s what—that was my social circle and—and the community I ended up identifying more closely with, like I said.

KARALIS: What was the dating, dating like here? Like, were there places you could go where the students [were], I don’t know, like, accepting? Because I know that gay rights was becoming more and more accepted around the—like, the early 2000s.

SIMLAI: Yeah. I dated someone who was a townie, and we met because he was hanging out on campus with someone who was also in the band, and we hit it off. We dated briefly. And then I dated a couple of students when I was an undergrad. Honestly, it wasn’t different in any way; it was still a very, like, “Oh, let’s hang out together. Let’s watch some movies together. Let’s go out and get something to eat together.” I’ve never been much of a, you know, gay bar or gay club person, even now. I mean I live in San Francisco. I live in the Castro [district], and I don’t really go out to, like, the bars and clubs all that much.

So that didn’t really impact me in that sense. Maybe—maybe—and I don’t know, right? Like, maybe if I had gone to college in a big city, if I—I was also considering Columbia [University] or Yale [University] if not Dartmouth—maybe going to Columbia would have been different because I would have gone out in New York and—and dated in a completely different manner. Who knows?

But I don't think my dating experience was that weird or unusual in that sense, you know, compared to what dating at the age of eighteen, nineteen typically would be like for people, so I think that was—that was just how it was.

I think—a couple of people have asked me—you know, like, “When you were at Dartmouth, like, the fights”, to your point oh this is when all of these states were talking about, like, marriage and gay marriage, and—“and was that what was very top of mind politically all the time in terms of what you thought about or what people talked about when you were in college?”

And really what was top of mind politically, at least that I remember now in terms of me or the people I talked with, was 9/11 [the 9/11, 2001, attacks] followed by the war, because this was happening for all four years when I was at Dartmouth. I actually came to the U.S. on the morning of 9/11. I was at [Boston] Logan [International] Airport, and I remember us buying coffee at Dunkin' Donuts, and I looked up at the screen and there was a building with smoke coming out of it. And everyone was just standing there, looking at this TV screen as well.

And while we were watching this, we saw the second plane fly into the second tower. And I was then at Logan for two days after that because they basically shut the airport down and said anyone who's in the airport needs to just stay in and, you know, be—be questioned, because they had no idea if there were more attackers and if—you know, if they—if they were in the airport or whatever.

So I was actually at Logan for almost two days before this was—you know, I was vetted, and—and cleared to leave the airport. In the meantime, my parents were going crazy, calling the college. And this was in the pre-cellphone era. Right, so basically, no way of communicating with them. I tried calling from a pay phone, and the first time—the pay phones at the airport are not designed to make international calls, so those didn't go through. So actually end up calling the international students office at Dartmouth and letting them know where I was, and they called my parents. And it was—it was all a mess.

But 9/11 shaped the undergrad experience for people in my class in such a massive way. I remember meeting people in my dorm when I got to campus. I used to live in Gile [Hall; pronounced with a hard G], in the Gold Coast [Cluster]. And there were people who were out on the, you know, DOC Trips [Dartmouth Outing Club First-Year Trips], who were basically stopped midway through their hike because someone had to come and tell them that this has happened and—you know, these are all, you know, parents checking with their kids. And so just imagine the logistics of having to go out and find, like, thirty different hiking trips across the Upper Valley in the White Mountains, to tell them that this has happened. Just want you to be able to talk with your parents, your family. In some cases, there are people whose families were actually directly impacted, and they had to be pulled out of trips. I—I had one classmate whose father passed away in—in—in one of the towers.

And so I think this ended up shaping freshman year, the next three years in so many ways. I am often very grateful that I think going to a college like Dartmouth, which was so secluded that the community sort of came together and—and was very, very protective in the—in the days after. Things that, you know, I wouldn't even have known about or thought about, but basically, they were concerned about the fact that, oh, like, in my case, you know, me and—and the students like me, who were brown, and they were—you know, they were—they were deans who were concerned about, like, any kind of just, you know, incidents on campus as just reactions and so on.

I have a classmate who was also from India, from Calcutta [now Kolkata], and his plane was diverted to Seattle [Washington] because all the airports were shuttered in the country, and they basically—the college managed to drive him across the country because they were so concerned about the—the—the—the risks of having him be on a plane and be singled out or profiled or, you know, just be a target of some kind of hate speech. So he was driven across the country, from Seattle to Hanover.

But I think that, to me, is the political news that dominated, you know, freshman year. And then the war happened, and so that was I think what was so front of mind for people. By

the time I was graduating, that had had an impact on the broader economy and in terms of jobs and careers.

So while I think we were still seeing a lot of movement on the gay marriage front across the states and, you know, I was definitely aware of it, that was not what comes to mind now as I think of what were the two or three biggest political things I think of from my college years. The political things I think of is [President] George [W.] Bush and 9/11 and Iraq and Afghanistan, more so than any of these other I think broader societal changes.

KARALIS: Mm-hm. That makes a lot of sense. It was a different part of your identity that was being targeted and one, like, you felt more connected to while at Dartmouth.

SIMLAI: Yeah, yeah, and—yeah, basically. [Both chuckle.]

KARALIS: So if I can change the line of conversation and ask something you were talking about earlier—you were talking about figuring out what—like, figuring out being gay and how, for—it's a common experience for people to figure out in college, but you figured it out a lot earlier. When was that, and, like, how did you know? (As silly as a question as that is.)

SIMLAI: Sure. Yeah, I think figuring it out has lots of components to it, and even the coming out thing has lots of, I think, nuances to it. In my case, I—you know, in my case it's a little weird because if I think back to what is the earliest memory I had, where I remember sort of—"like" is a very—is not the right word because you don't have a sense of romantically liking, you know—but—I remember, you know, being as young as, like, three or four years old, and liking, like, you know, a friend who was a boy, versus liking any friends who were girls. And when I tell people this, they're like, "Oh, can you actually start realizing this that early?" I don't know. In my case, apparently yes.

And it was really weird because, like, all of my friends growing up were girls, but all the people I liked were always boys. And it was—you know, even now, like, in many ways that is true. Like, I—I have more female friends than male friends. But back then, literally every close friend was a girl.

I think I have, you know, from my—from my childhood, I have two close male friends and probably six or seven close female friends and, of course, all these boys whom I liked as a child, all of whom have, you know, disappeared or, you know, they're Facebook friends, but that's about it.

I think I wasn't able to put words to it and talk to friends about this bent or being gay until I was I think in college, but when I started to actually be able to put, you know, language to it, words to it, meaning to it and, like, tell some of my high school friends, they're all, like, "Yeah, of course we've known. Like, you don't need to inform us about this formally because we are all very well aware that, yes, you like dudes."

So telling my parents, on the other hand, was very amusing because my mother was, like, "Oh, but you had all these girlfriends when you were a kid." I was, like, "Yes, because—was that not a thing, though?" It's just like, "No, no, we just thought he just liked girls a lot, and all of your friends were girls." Anyway, so my parents were apparently completely clueless about this.

But I remember—I—I think as a—because off this broader realization, I didn't have any kind of a big coming out movement or any of those sort of big moments that I think a lot of other people often had. I told people incrementally over time, as [unintelligible] happened, I think once Facebook happened. In the beginning, I was a little more cautious about what I would post or what kind of pictures I would get tagged in, and over time, I just became more and more lazy about it, so, you know, it—it just—news just organically spread about this.

I—I remember a couple of years ago speaking with a friend from Dartmouth, Allie [Archivist Note: spelling uncertain]. She's an '04. And we were friends because we were both in the band. And apparently it was—I do not remember this at all, but Allie remembers this like—a crystal-clear memory for her, apparently. It was National Coming Out Day, and we were all hanging out on the front porch of Collis, which is where National Coming Out Day was being celebrated. And one by one, people apparently would get up and, you know,

in a mic sort of say who they are and say they were gay or queer or lesbian or bi or whatever, and everyone would clap at each of these sort of proclamations.

And apparently Allie and half of the band kept waiting for me to get up and go and talk into the mic and say something. And I didn't. I was just sitting there, sort of clapping and cheering and just being supportive of people doing this. And Allie was just, like, "Yeah, we kept waiting for you to get up and, you know, formally come out." And I was, like, "Oh, I never felt the need to or the desire to or I—I just never thought that I wasn't already out in some way." [Chuckles.] So it—it was clearly, like, a mismatched set of expectations in terms of what I was thinking and what they were thinking. It is just an amusing memory in that sense.

I think in college I was probably going to—if you asked me, you know, what my identify was, I would have said, "Gay." I think now, again, you know, like I said, I've become looser about who sees what in terms of things I post on Facebook or Instagram. It's the same thing now. If you ask me, you know, "Are you going to identify as gay or queer?" I'm, like, "Eh, just choose whichever word you're more comfortable using."

And sometimes if I have a conversation and say "queer" I just keep using "queer," and sometimes a conversation where I start with the word "gay" I just keep using "gay." "Homosexual" is just too long a word to use, so I don't really go with that one.

So, yeah, it's—it's—it's become I think one where—it's become an identity that I think I was fairly comfortable with, that I think I'm still comfortable with now. As an introvert, though, I don't really do a lot of things that in many ways are part of, you know, the stereotypical gay experience and the one you sort of hear about, where there's a lot of going out to these clubs and bars together, and I'm just, like, *But why?* I don't want to. It's loud and noisy and crowded. I would much rather, you know, go out with three other people for dinner, where you can hear the other person talk.

So I think that is a whole set of just, like, cultural markers that's missing from my life. It's the same thing with, you

know, like, going to P-town [Provincetown, Massachusetts] or to Fire Island [on Long Island, New York], because I lived in New York and Boston until fairly recently. And in the summer, I—I always knew people who went to P-town on the weekends, like, religiously. They would, like, catch the ferry on Friday after work, and they'd come back on the Sunday ferry. Sometimes they'd just, like, take a week off. And I was, like, *That just seems like such a huge waste of money*, because you can go to so many other, more fun places for that money than to just go back to P-town over and over again, to eat not very good food and drink overpriced drinks next to the beach.

Like, I remember speaking with someone who was, like, “Oh, yeah, this is how much I am spending on P-town for, like, two weeks.” I was, like, “You could go to four countries in Europe for that. Why wouldn't you go to Europe instead of P-town? Somewhere else that you haven't been twenty times in your life already.” And I get that—again, in the U.S., in the American space, places like P-town or Fire Island or Palm Springs [California] have very clear geographic, cultural meaning in terms of gay identity or LGBT identity.

It seems to be a very American thing because, you know, it's rare to find people in Europe being, like, “Yes, all of us go summer in this beautiful gay beach together.” If anything now, with globalization being what it is, I actually find people from Europe who are in P-town. And I'm, like, “How did you grow up in Spain and you hear about P-town and decide to come to P-town for three weeks? Like, why? And—and what do you even understand about some of these things?” To me, it's a very fun sort of—it's almost like studying anthropology, where you try to understand, like, if you grew up in Spain and you speak some English, what do you understand and identify with when you're watching [“RuPaul's” Drag Race]? [Chuckles.]

So—and now, actually, I know people in India who are gay, who watch “Drag Race”, and I'm, like, India has its own cultural tradition of transgenderism. Culturally, you know, it's—it's—it's not a drag queen as much as a trans identity, referred to as Hijra's. And it's a part of me, just like you have a country with a history of a trans identity that you're completely ignoring and tune in to watch “Drag Race”, (a).

And (b), so many of these things are so specifically American. Like, someone is dressing up as [Edith] “Little Edie” [Bouvier Beale] from *Grey Gardens* [a 1975 documentary film]. “You grow up in India. You don’t even know what *Grey Gardens* is. What do you understand about this representation?” So it’s—it’s things that, like, depending on my mood, I’m either just amused by or just, like, least confused by. I’m, like, “Oh, okay, I guess this is globalization as well.”

So that’s, I think, my—my identity on the gay front has become, in some ways, a stronger identity and one I’m more comfortable with, but I think it’s also just become a loose sloppy identity. Like, yeah sure, it’s a label. Just slap on whatever you’re most comfortable using if you want to talk to me and hang out with me. I don’t really have a preference either way.

KARALIS: Did you carry your identity, like, the queer identity differently in, like, India versus of Dartmouth versus now in San Francisco?

SIMLAI: I don’t know if I carried a queer identity in India at all. I think culturally a country like India values the community and the societal more than the individual, so you don’t really see individuals breaking out their individual sense of self, with flare, in the same way that you would see it here. And I think that’s a cultural difference across, you know, Asian cultures versus American culture, in some ways.

At Dartmouth and at now, I mean,—I don’t carry it differently visibly in any way. Most people in college who, you know, looked at me would probably see me wearing clothes that didn’t take a lot of effort to think about. Most people who see me now probably still see the same. I don’t really think about outfits and what I’m wearing. I’m, like, *Oh, here are—you know, here’s a pair of jeans, here’s a T-shirt, here are some shoes. I’m good.* So I’m not exactly friendly in that sense in terms of, you know, how I dress. I think in terms of visual identity, I definitely don’t pick up on some of those things or even care about some of those things.

I definitely used to be engaged and involved with, you know, if there’s someone speaking about something about LGBT

activism among—among immigrants, I would be interested in that talk back in Dartmouth. Probably the same holds true now as well.

So that hasn't changed, but that's because my—my broader interests are in the space of immigration and globalization and, you know, how these come to play and how they're represented and depicted in—in mediums like cinema or literature. So that is the same. It's just a matter of access. At Dartmouth, when—when these things would happen, I would go to them. Living in San Francisco, something like this, some kind of a talk or, you know, an event or an art gallery or a movie, there's always, like, something happening every day. I just go to these things more often.

KARALIS: Were there a lot of these kind of events offered during your tenure at Dartmouth?

SIMLAI: Not a lot, but I think living in—you know, being in a—being in a college town, you definitely always have this constant troop of different speakers and events come through. And now, I mean, like, even if you just go to Collis right now and just, like, look at the number of fliers up on the board, you'd be able to find at least, like, you know, three or four fascinating topics that you can go to. And it was a thing back then. Like, I think if you watched out for who to hear and what to hear, I definitely found enough things to go to that I thought were, you know, interesting in my—in the bent that I thought of as being things that I cared about more.

KARALIS: And you said that being in college helped you find the words and, like, to—to form your—your queer identity. Like, what was—like, how? What was that like? What did you mean by that?

SIMLAI: I think it was just realizing that—[Sighs.] Maybe some of this was just—I think some part of this was just growing up, and when you grow up, you understand basically how some of these things play out in terms of who you are, how you relate with other people, what this means in terms of relationships, in terms of what you value, what you care about. So I think some of this is just the growing-up process.

But some of this is around being aware of the language and then the second level after that, right? So here is an example: So a lot of Asian Malaysian countries don't—a lot of people in these countries don't understand the concept of being gay, because the way we refer to the word to be gay in the western sense is you think of another person of the same gender in a romantic sense. In a country like India, you have people who are typically more upper-middle class, upper-class, more westernized, who understand what that word is.

But for lots of other people, they don't conceive of the word—they don't understand the concept of gay because they just think of marriage as something that, you know, if you're a guy, you marry a woman because that is your plan in life. They have—there is—there is no concept—there isn't even the sort of starting point or sort of a marker about the notion of having a married life with, you know—with—with another man, right?

So in a country like India, you have basically—I have a friend who—who actually works in this space, sexuality. And so you have the gay experience, which is more impacted by western influences, and then you have MSM, which is men who have sex with men. They still marry women and have children but for sexual gratification, they go seek out other men, who are also married to other women. [Chuckles.] So it's a very different sort of setup.

I think if you then think of my Dartmouth experience, what ended up happening is I think some of this awareness and realization—oh, there's actually, like, enough literature and data and, you know, work around this that lays out these are what these words are: These are what they mean. This is how we see it evolving. That's a first level.

The second level will be something like: Okay, now let's think about all of the experiences and the terms and the politics around LGBT issues and spaces in this country. Let's think about race in America and how that—that also comes with its own set of, you know, issues and problems. And now think of what happens when you lay one on top of the other, right? So if you just think of gay racism and what it is like to

be—in my case, to be gay and be a person of color and how that is just fundamentally a different experience.

I think those are the things I began to realize and was able to understand, read about, talk about, watch movies about here—you know, talks by—by academics about or by activists or people who—who—who unpacked some of this already and be able to absorb all of this and then use that to I think shape my own sense of identity, belonging and realization about some of these things.

KARALIS: Did you experience any—like, what you said, any gay racism from the students on—on—on Dartmouth’s campus?

SIMLAI: I think there’s explicit racism, and then there’s just, like, I think, racial biases and more implicit forms that are societally conditioned, right? So you don’t realize that they exist. There was no explicit racism in—in—in—in the—in the gay experience, but I think, you know, you see this play out more broadly where basically—at, you know—at Dartmouth and even out of Dartmouth, right? You see people say, “Oh, like, I’m not into black guys,” and it’s just a preference. It’s, like, that’s not a preference; that’s racism disguised as a preference.” And it’s one that is conditioned by decades of broader societal narratives about what it—you know, about race and what race means.

And you—you see that happen—and it’s not just a Dartmouth thing, right? Like, no fats, no fems [feminine], no Asians. Some version of that existed in college. Some version of that exists out of college as well. Some version of that even exists in a place like San Francisco, which is super liberal, but, you know, I—I—I joke that in San Francisco you still see racism, they’re just better at hiding it than they are on the East Coast.

So I think that was true at Dartmouth as well. Like I said, it was, you know,—if you’re nineteen, twenty years old and the only model of gay life you see in media are preppie white dudes and good-looking white dudes, then that’s what you think of as—as a model, and you never think of *why is there not a model that looks like me and looks like where I come from?* So you have all the preppie white guys dating all the preppie white guys, and then all the other people who are

not preppie white guys, who still want to date the preppie white guys. [Chuckles.] So I think that's how it plays out in—in a more insidious form of race intersecting with sexuality.

KARALIS: So you think it's a bit better outside of Dartmouth, but it's—it's still—it's better—the world is better at hiding it?

SIMLAI: I—well, so I think there are some things that are a little more complex and problematic at Dartmouth. I don't think they're necessarily gay things, right? So, for example, at Dartmouth, like as at other, similar peer universities or establishments, you do hold up certain models as models of success, right?—in terms of, oh, like, this is the—you know, these are the frats where—that are desirable, or these are the kinds of career options that are desirable, these are the kinds of majors that are desirable, these are the kinds of ways you dress, with which you signal privilege and belonging, right? Those are—those are—and at a campus like Dartmouth, that it's in some ways a little more pronounced because you definitely see far more people, you know, wearing, like, plaid or—or wearing these, like, super preppie colors. They're wearing Vineyard Vines than you would see maybe in a college in a more urban setting.

But I—I don't even know if these are necessarily problems that are unique to Dartmouth as much as just broader societal things, right? We hold up what we think of as models of success, and then they work their way into the gay space as well, as they would in any other spaces.

I think some of these problems get a little more complex at Dartmouth because there's an isolating factor, right?—where you basically have people who are a little removed from a broader urban space, and so it's a little more clustered, and then you also have this issue of student memory being only four years old, right? So basically some of these things are—there's—some of this institutional memory gets lost, and sort of you have the same conversations year over year, every few years, because there's no sort of thread about it going—spanning all of the classes.

Overall, are we getting better? Yes. Overall, is, you know, being gay more acceptable at Dartmouth? Yes. But that's true in broader American society as well. But does the

coming out struggle and some of the—some of the issues around gay privilege—are these repeating over and over all the time for people at Dartmouth? Probably yeah.

KARALIS: So what was the issue you were working on while at Dartmouth?

SIMLAI: What do you mean by “issue”?

KARALIS: Your personal, like, position. Like, your personal activism.

SIMLAI: Oh. I don't know if I would call myself an activist. I—at Dartmouth I probably, I think, on the activist-y front, probably worked most closely with, like I said, OPAL and around just representation of minority groups. In this case, I ended up being you know let's think of Asian-American studies, I think of the Diversity Peer Program. I think of how these things get surfaced. I don't think I did anything that activist-y in the LGBT sense.

Even now as an alum, I don't think I do anything that's activist-y in that sense. I'm very involved with Dartmouth with a bunch of different alumni groups, and I'm involved with a bunch of things outside of just Dartmouth alumni stuff, but I wouldn't call any of it activism as much as just I like being involved. I like doing things that, you know, are operational in nature.

For example, when we were setting up Triangle House, is that—is that a big step forward for the college? Yes, and an important one, but I don't—and I was on the—on the gift committee from a fundraising perspective, and making sure you know, we got all the funds we needed to actually have this place be built. And going out to alumni and basically making sure that we had gay alumni who were committing to funding this, based on what their experience had been like at Dartmouth, and looking to make the experience better for future generations of students.

But I don't see my work with Triangle House and fundraising for Triangle House as an activist-y thing as much as just I like fundraising. I'm good at shamelessly asking people for money [both chuckle], so that—that's basically what I end up doing.

So I think that's how I would think of it, not necessarily an activism thing as much as just an operational satisfaction thing.

KARALIS: What was it like, trying to get Triangle House happening?

SIMLAI: It was very challenging.

KARALIS: We should explain what Triangle House is, for the people listening.

SIMLAI: Sure, yes, yeah. So Triangle House is the—well, you might be explaining this better than me, but I see Triangle House as this residential LGBT center, that it's for activities and events in the LGBT space. It—it has meeting spaces, collapsed spaces, classroom spaces, dorm rooms, and it's sort of a living learning center. What would you add to the definition?

KARALIS: That was a perfect definition.

SIMLAI: Okay. You know, when I was at Dartmouth, there was—there still is, but apparently not for much longer—there was a room on the second floor of Robinson Hall. It was kind of tucked away. That was the Rainbow Room. And I remember finding it—I used to be there not all the time, but there were some people who definitely were—you know, used the Rainbow Room very heavily. Sometimes we were there because that was, like, “Oh, let's go find a place to watch a movie.” And the Rainbow Room would be available. It was on the second floor, towards the back of the building, so kind of tucked away

And Robinson has the front stairs, which are the main stairs, and then there's a back set of stairs, which are more private. And so I think having the Rainbow Room located by that back-stair entrance allowed for people who are not as out and a little concerned about being seen walking to the space. It allowed them to come and go a little easily.

And then while I was an undergrad, Rainbow Room was moved from the second-floor space to the first floor, to the main hallway, and it stayed there for a while, and now

apparently, it's being relocated to the Triangle House. And I—I remember when—when we began thinking about Triangle House—and it was a long time coming. I've been on the DGALA [Dartmouth Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Alumni/ae Association] board for two terms now. We have talked about Triangle House for such a long time, about just if it's feasible? Where will it be? What kind of visibility? What will be the purpose? How big will it be? Will it have—what kind of needs will it serve? Will it be towards the middle of campus or will it be more—you know, a little more secluded? Where will the money come from it? Who will run it? Who will report up to from a reporting and organizational perspective? Just so many questions that have taken years to unpack.

And—and tons and tons of meetings with students, with administrators, with professors, with other alums. And one of my classmates, [S.] Caroline Kerr—she's an '05. She's actually a Dartmouth trustee as well now. She was truly the driving force behind just getting Triangle House up and running and—and, you know, kudos to her for taking this on with so much passion. She's clearly, you know, like, hyper-competent. She's also the youngest Dartmouth alum to ever become a trustee. She's—she's an '05, and she became trustee a couple of years, in her early thirties, which insanely accomplished.

But I—I remember sitting down—so when we had the dedication ceremony for Triangle House, that coincided with a DAGLA [Dartmouth Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Alumni/ae Association] major reunion, or the 30th reunion, and we had both of them together, and we had so many alums come back for the reunion but also because of, you know, it was such a big deal to actually have Triangle House open now.

And I remember sitting and talking with an alum from the eighties, and I was telling her like, you know, “When I was at Dartmouth, there was the Rainbow Room, and if someone had told me that, ‘Oh, in, like, fifteen years it's going to be this stand-alone building with dorms,’ I would have laughed at them that this is not the Dartmouth I know. This cannot be at Dartmouth.” And yet this was happening.

And I was talking about just how many hours and hours of phone calls and meetings and trips to Hanover it took to push this through and—and fundraisers and—it—it was—it was heavy lifting for—for a few years. And this alum, whom I was talking to about this, you know, about all the effort that had been—she was, like, “Yeah, we did the same thing to get the Rainbow Room” because there was nothing until basically, you know,—this alum and her peers petitioned for years and years, and basically the same story—you know, just to get a room available.

And it was in some ways super touching to just hear that, you know, this is the same story over again, except now we’re moving from a room to an entire building. But it—it—it definitely was, you know, this moment of “look how far we’ve come,” that literally to have gone from nothing to having a room back when—back—you know, back in the eighties, and people sort of laughed at that. There was harassment. People were, you know,—we—we met a lot who were beaten up and locked into a closet by—in their—in their dorm room and basically left there for two days, you know. Parents showed up and basically had to take the kid out of college and have emergency surgery because this guy who had been beaten up and locked up in a closet for two days.

So to come from that to having a dedicated room in that generation and then, now, to go from having a room to having a building was I think for everyone just emotionally such a—such a huge deal, and just this visible, tangible building that just showed, you know: Look how far this college has come in—in—in a span of thirty, forty years. I think the biggest part of it, that I—if I now think back to, I think as just the most sort of meaningful symbol on campus.

Yeah. Sorry. I think I drifted a little far away from your question, in terms of answering that.

KARALIS: No.

Have you been here to see one of the Lavender Graduations?

SIMLAI: No, I typically don’t come back for the Lavender Graduations because that does not end up working out with meeting

schedules. I typically come into town, into Hanover, for four sets of meetings, two in the fall, two in the spring. Sometimes I come in for something in the winter. I try not to come in the winter, though.

On the DGALA front, you know, we—we pay for part of the Lavender Graduation, and so we always—you know, I think a couple of months ago is when we were in board meetings, we decided, you know, “Okay, well, how much are we paying for this? How it’s being handled and who should be attending. So we have someone from the DGALA board who comes in for Lavender Graduation every year. But I haven’t made it up for one of those yet. Maybe at some point.

KARALIS: How do you decide all these things? Like, who’s going to be there, how much you’re going to give money wise?

SIMLAI: I think the “who’s going to be there?”—this comes down to basically how many board members are available and so on. We—we kind of share some of these responsibilities, right? And then also for people who are nearer, closer on the East Coast, from Brendan [M. Connell Jr., Class of 1987], who is the current president of DGALA. Lives in New York. He’s in New York—in—in Hanover quite often for meetings and so on. Some of us try to make these meetings work at the same time.

From a funding perspective, I think that’s just a standard—you know, we—we—we know how much we have from a cash perspective, and we know how much we have to think about in terms of just, like, funding student events on campus. We separately also fund a number of scholarships for LGBT students every year. And so that’s a separate, just a constant thing that we always account for. And then there’s separate fundraising that goes in for major things, like Triangle House, which is just a stand-alone because just the dollar figure for that is so different, that just has to be handled with a separate stand-alone initiative.

KARALIS: So you mentioned the Rainbow Room and that push to move it to Triangle House. How do you feel about that?

SIMLAI: I personally do not think it should be done, and DGALA is having—in the middle of conversations with some of the

administrators of the college about how this is playing out and why. I think we should have both options exist, and personally I think, you know, like, Triangle House has a very different type of needs that are being met. At the same time, I think having something like the Rainbow Room be where it is, which is either in the middle of campus, easily accessible, be—be there—meets a different set of needs that exist for a different part of the student body. And I think it probably makes sense to have both be available.

KARALIS: That makes sense. They're also planning to move—there is one more room that's by Rainbow Room. I can't remember right now. The Pan Asian [Community Resource] Room. It's also planning to move alongside the Rainbow Room, both of them in different locations.

SIMLAI: Okay. Yeah. I haven't been involved at all with that. I'm guessing the current DAPAAA [pronounced DAH-puh] board is probably working with that set of questions. I wouldn't be surprised if they are in the middle of figuring this out with administration as well, about the need for that space and how it'll be handled from a programming perspective. Yeah.

KARALIS: Yeah. I'm only asking because you're involved with DAPAAA, which is the Dartmouth Asian Pacific American Alumni Association, in the past.

SIMLAI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I was a member of DAPAAA soon after I graduated, and I think I was basically doing two sets of things. One was just a lot of programming with—just a lot of, like, DAPAAA alumni events across many cities and just making sure they sort of happen constantly so, you know, people know there's something going on to come to.

And then the other part of it was just, at the time, working on setting up some dedicated funding for endowed chair positions in—in a couple of different departments so that they could be cross-listed in the Asian American studies minor at the time. So basically, you know, you don't end up dedicating—or asking for a chair, an endowed chair specifically in Asian American studies, but you basically ask for one. And you fund an endowed chair in something like English or history, and the person who assumes that position is also able to teach subjects in the broader Asian American

studies space. So that was my second large, you know, time commitment while I was in DAPAAA, was basically thinking through the endowed chair position then. Basically, well, how do we fundraise and fund this position so it's an endowed position?

KARALIS: How different was it—because you've served in many different boards. How were they different from each other? How, was, like—

SIMLAI: Sure. So I think I've been on the boards of DAPAAA, the Dartmouth Club of Chicago, DGALA (I've been in DGALA for two terms now), the [Dartmouth] Alumni Council for two terms, including chairing [the] Young Alumni Committee. I have been on my reunion committee for my class for the ten-year. I'm on the Thayer School Annual Fund [Executive] Committee, which is basically fundraising for the Thayer School. I think those are the main ones I can think of. Yeah, I think those are the main ones I can think of.

Oh, and now, as of, like, recently—this—this isn't a very large commitment, but a couple of years ago I got the Young Alumni Award [sic; the Dartmouth Young Alumni Distinguished Service Award] and, because of that, I now also sit on the [Dartmouth] Young Alumni Award Committee [sic; Awards Committee], which basically figures out, well, whom should we give the award to in any given year? So I suppose it's one of the things if you won—if you win the award, you kind of—not win the award, receive the award; it's not winning; it's not competitive—once you get the award, you sort of have to sit on the board to figure out, well, who else should get it in future years?

They only differ from each other—and, yes, like I said, you know, if you told me when I was eighteen years old that I would be, like, standing across, like, six different committees, I would have laughed at that, “No, that sounds ridiculous.” But somehow, I'm doing it now.

They're all very different from each other. I think Thayer School is interesting. It's very cohesive. But everyone—all the board members are across a bunch of different years, right? So you have people who are in their twenties to people who are in their sixties and seventies. But I think

Thayer has always been a very small school, and so there is a very strong sense of belonging and community that goes into there, so the fundraising around that is—or the work around that is—you know, you quickly find common ground with people.

DGALA is a great model for I think how an alumni group works well in terms of being very leaned in, being very good with setting up events, being pretty good with working directly with administrators and students on issues that come up that just need heavy alumni engagement and involvement.

And, honestly, I just fairly recently—well, Dartmouth and—and other schools as well never thought about their LGBT alumni, and, you know, how many there were, who they were, where they were. And soon after DGALA was formed, basically the board at the time decided to fundraise and write the school a check for the—for the scholarships, which basically finally made, I think, made Dartmouth sit up and say, “Holy shit, you know, this is—this is an alumni base that should be heard and nurtured and looked after, because they are, you know, from a—from a—from a fundraising perspective and an engagement perspective, this is a valuable pool.”

So I think DGALA does a pretty good job as an alumni group, and I think they can actually end up winning quite a few of these, like, alumni group awards in—in the last few years.

The Dartmouth Club of Chicago is, I think, interesting. Chicago has a ton of alums, across a breadth of industries, work types and so on. I liked it because it had a lot of these traditional things that happened every year. So, for example, there was an annual Christmas dinner, and most alums in the Chicago area know that there is an annual Christmas dinner that they show up to. It’s the one event where you know you will meet, like, the 600 people you have wanted to—or not 600 but, you know, 600 people show up, and you knew you will meet everyone that you knew was in Chicago who also went to Dartmouth.

Over all, I think they all figure out—different groups figure out their own sort of ways of being successful, and there are varying degrees of success. Some are more; some, less so. Right now, the boards I currently work—sit on DGALA—the time-consuming ones, which are DGALA and Thayer School—to me are really successful boards that do a really good job of what they're supposed to be doing, and so for me, that's more gratifying, too. I think certainly those.

KARALIS:

So you said that DGALA wins a lot of these alumni association awards, and—and why do you think it is so successful in that way and in working so well together?

SIMLAI:

I think there's a stronger sense, shared sense of experiences and purpose, so I think for everyone in the DGALA board, we have all gone through, you know, being gay while at Dartmouth, or being LGBT while at Dartmouth, I guess, and—and what that was like, and there's a common thread, a common experience that I think everyone is able to understand that, oh, this is what it is like, being LGBT in a rural, small college in the middle of nowhere. And so I think that is part of it.

But, at the same time, I think, again, you know, typically people who end up committing to be on a board are people who are already passionate about that cause, which is why they actually want the additional responsibilities of being on a board. I think with DGALA, there are just lots of alums who really care about that aspect of their life and also about making sure that for current students at Dartmouth, that ends up being a positive experience for them, and being able to support that in the best way they can.

So we just end, I think, always having—every—every—every year, we basically have a certain number of seats open up for board elections, and we—we usually have some pretty strong candidates running for those seats in a—in a very competitive fashion. So I think that—that's what ends up working out well for DGALA.

We also are pretty good in terms of just overall operationally running things in a good way, in terms of regular conference calls, clearly laid out, like, you know, "This is everything going on." There's a ton of programming. We have—you

know, we make sure there's enough events in all the major cities, that you have all these alumni who are able to actually, like, meet each other and hang out with each other and stay connected. So I think that's another part of it that helps a lot. It's just the number of events we run across New York, Boston, D.C., Chicago, LA [Los Angeles, California], San Francisco all the time. Seattle.

I think that those—those all end up working well in terms of then providing a stronger alumni community, which then, I think just leads to overall just better outcomes for the group.

KARALIS: And you said you're also involved with a board for Thayer.

SIMLAI: Yeah.

KARALIS: And you're a Thayer '07.

SIMLAI: Yes.

KARALIS: So you must have really loved Thayer, or Dartmouth, to come back [chuckles], for continuing here.

SIMLAI: Well, I—I—so when I was an undergrad, I had already finished a large number of courses that I needed for my master's degree, and so at some point, when I graduated from Dartmouth in 2005, I became an investment banker, and I liked it, but it was definitely not the best lifestyle fit for me, in terms of just the number of hours and so on. And so I said, *Oh, you know what? I maybe—maybe I need a break from investment banking and then figure out what I should be doing next.*

And I said, Well, it would be nice to just go and finish this master's while I'm, you know, taking a break. That way, I have some down time to, like, really sort of think about career perspective, which direction you want to go in. So it wasn't really a matter of, I think, being, like, I can't want to be back in Dartmouth for another degree as much as just Let's—let's make sure we use this time the right way.

So I actually came back to Thayer only for two terms, because I realized I only had a few more classes left for a master's, and I could somehow, *I'll figure out how to take*

them together in two terms, so seven months—in six to seven months in all.

Coming back to Dartmouth as a grad student was really bizarre. After having been an undergrad and sort of lived through the undergrad experience, where, you know, you just feel like you are just there as part of the community and—and, you know, you can go wherever you want; the whole campus is yours. This is your home.

Coming back as a grad student is just really alienating and, for me, was definitely a little weird, just because suddenly, you know, you're meeting a lot of other grad students who don't have the same shared Dartmouth experience. And the way they navigate Hanover and the Upper Valley is just so different, and the—you know, geographically, societally, culturally, socially, all of those.

So, you know, when it was time to go to business school, the one thing I was very clear about was definitely not going to go to Tuck [School of Business], because having seen—I had friends who went to Tuck, and I was, like, “Oh, what is it like to go to Tuck?—where, you know, all of you are in your mid to late twenties, early thirties, and there is one bar in town that is a nice bar. What do you do when you get tired of going to the Canoe Club? Like, really, it must be a little boring when there's only one nice bar in town.”

So I think—yeah, I—I—I think the Dartmouth experience was special because it's an undergrad experience. I think Dartmouth would not be quite as special for me if I had been there only for grad school.

KARALIS: Is there not the—there's no community for—for Thayer or the grad schools here?

SIMLAI: It's—it's smaller, right? I mean, Dartmouth—Dartmouth's strength is that it is a college of the Ivy League, and that's how it refers to itself as, and the fact that, while there are grad studies across various departments, they are very small, and the focus really is on the undergrad experience. So if you're a grad student, you really don't have that many other people to have a social life with outside of—outside of, you know, your—your classes, whereas if you were a grad

student in—in a school that had far larger grad programs, then you would probably have just a lot more people you would know and do things with. That's one, in terms of just the number of people you have access to.

The other thing is just the location. I think as an undergrad, you live your life out on campus and you—you know, I—I rarely went off campus. You know, it was just like, “Aw, like, we need to make a quick trip to the Kmart to buy decorations for a party” or something, but pretty much my whole life was lived on campus, right?—like, in terms of meals and where I lived and where I slept and what I did.

As a grad student, when you suddenly realized that, *Well, it's a little*—you can't really go out and socialize with the undergrads. Or you can, but it's a little weird to. And then you're, like, *Well, what else is there to do outside of Dartmouth's campus?* And there isn't [chuckles] a lot to do, and you're, like, *Well, there's, like, five restaurants in Hanover, and I've eaten at all of them already.* And then you look in the broader Upper Valley, and it's—it's—it's definitely a very different kind of life and lifestyle, and you need to sort of have that mental shift.

I had classmates who, you know, stayed at Dartmouth for undergrad and then for grad school, and, you know, they navigated it. Almost all of them who are Dartmouth undergrads sort of say that, you know the undergrad experience was really special for them; the grad school experience was more like, “Eh, it's more like being adults” and, you know, being in more of a real-world experience versus undergrad, which is truly special and truly difference and, you know, just different in that sense.

Yeah, I—I definitely—when I think of Dartmouth, I definitely think of my undergrad experience as being the one that I think about. I don't really think of my six months at Thayer as the additional, like, “Oh, I came back because I loved it so much.” I came back in the middle of winter. It was horrible. There was, like,—it was one of the worst winters we'd had. Like, *What am I doing back here?* So it was definitely a little different.

KARALIS: So from your six months of experience in a grad school here, was the immigrant and the queer—were the immigrant and queer communities any different, any better?

SIMLAI: As a—in the grad population?

KARALIS: Yeah, and then because you also—

SIMLAI: Oh, there is no queer community.

KARALIS: There is *not*.

SIMLAI: No, because, I mean not—again, it's more like being an adult in the real world, so basically—I—I—there is no way to find these people. There's no formal sort of student group. You know, it's—again, you don't exist in this undergrad space, where it's truly a bubble in that sense and you have access to all of these resources and groups and administrators and all of that, so honestly, I mean, I think I knew a couple of other grad students who were LGBTs, but there wasn't much overlap. Like, one was a Ph.D. in—in—in the bio department. Another one was at Tuck. So it's, you know, like when—you have three people. One is in bio, one is in the business program, one was an engineer. Like, what would they have in common to talk about? There isn't really much in terms of shared life experiences that are common, or even in terms of life goals and priorities.

So it's a little bit of a stretch to then go look for a community in that sense, right?

KARALIS: Mm-hm.

SIMLAI: So, I mean, you—you organically find queer friends and strike up friendships with them, but that's just the same way you would do it, you know, if you moved to, like, a new city and began looking for friends and community. I don't think there's any kind of—being grad and queer has nothing to do with that community as much as just “I am here. I'm looking for friends. Let's be friends.”

KARALIS: Yeah.

SIMLAI: So, yeah, I think it's—it's a little less engaged in terms of either being immigrant or people of color or queer in that sense.

KARALIS: And the same thing carries over to the University of Chicago?

SIMLAI: A little differently. So I think at U. Chicago, the—the same thing carries over to the U—to the University of Chicago's business school, right? So basically in many ways my experiences in the business school were very similar to some of these Dartmouth experiences, because, again, you had everyone who was in the business school together. All of us were in this pressure cooker of an MBA [Master of Business Administration] degree together, so in that way we were all people who were at a very similar point in life, had very similar goals, defined success in a very similar fashion, were in the same classes, were recruiting for the same internships. You know, in many ways, like, you were getting a group of people who were already similarly aligned.

So in some ways—it's almost like, you know—I have a friend who described business school as, like, an amazing frat experience because everyone is looking for the same things out of life, and now they're all together for two years. And it's actually very amusing because in b-school you often find that lots of your classmates end up marrying each other, because it's a little like, oh, like, being in—in the real world of survivors, where basically the combined stress of, you know, like, having to find the right job and navigate classes, and all of these things together just make for finding a lot more empathy and—and, you know, building relationships with each other more easily.

So I think in business school, I was very active with the business school LGBT community and with the alumni in that group, so basically when I was looking for jobs, I would reach out to other people who were—who graduated with—you know, it's—it's similar in that, you know, I would reach out to, let's say I was looking for a job at (I'm making this up)—let's say I was looking for a job at Google. It would be natural to reach out to someone at Google and say, "Hey, I noticed you got an MBA from the University of Chicago as well." Similarly, I would reach out if someone would say,

“Hey, I noticed you’re at Google and you’re gay as well and have an MBA. So what was it like to navigate these experiences together?”

So I think in that way it’s still gives you, then, that sense of community. But I didn’t really do anything with the broader U. Chicago LGBT community. I think it—it existed, and, you know, there were events and so on. I remember going to a couple of grad student mixers that were, like, out of b-school gays or the law school gays and the med school gays and the policy school gays together. And we would basically discover that basically everyone hangs out with their friends.

And there was one event that I think that had undergrads as well, and it was, like, *Oh, my God! All these kids look really young!* [Chuckles.] But—and they all, just, like, come in with their backpacks and—so it’s—I—I—like I said, I think the engagement and the activity level was more to do with the other gays in the business school because all of us were doing the same things and we were all at the same point in life than just with the broader, overall U. Chicago gay community.

KARALIS: Was the size of U. Chicago—did that make it easier to, like, socialize and go outside and make friends than Dartmouth’s more isolation-y location?

SIMLAI: Well, the thing with grad school—yeah, the business school is—has about 600 people in a class, so in all, you end up pretty much knowing everyone in your class. It’s a pretty easy number, where you get to pretty much everyone. It’s in a city, so there’s more things to do. Everyone lives—not everyone, but most people live in the same five apartment buildings, so it’s a little like having your own dorm room, where you are able to basically easily decide whom to have study groups with, whom to hang out with, socialize with, all of that.

It’s—so I think those end up contributing. I—I have friends—you know, there are a couple of b-schools in the country that are bigger. Harvard [Business School] and [the] Wharton [School of the University of Pennsylvania] are both bigger. They have about a thousand people in a class. I think at that size, you don’t end up not knowing everyone in your class

quite as well, and I have friends go to smaller schools. For example, Tuck is a lot smaller. [unintelligible] is a lot smaller. Berkeley is a lot smaller. And in those ones, you—you are close friends with everyone in your class because you just have to be.

So I think that experience ends up being a lot—like I said, you know, the b-school experience in some ways is very similar to a Dartmouth undergrad experience. And when I was in b-school, I think in my class there were eleven other people who were from Dartmouth, and we all basically were pretty good friends with each other. And so for non-Dartmouth people, who were in my class—they were all [unintelligible]. They were, like, “But you guys didn’t even know each other at Dartmouth. Like, you weren’t in the same class. How are you so friendly?” It’s like “because we all went to Dartmouth, and, of course, that’s such a shared experience.” So the non-Dartmouth people at U. Chicago found this very amusing but also very confusing.

And then I think they began to relate, “Oh, it’s kind of like we are like right now in business school, right? We are all best friends with each other. You guys had this back in college.” And it’s—it’s very weird to realize that not all colleges [chuckles] are like that and giving you that kind of sense of, like, “Oh, we’re all gonna be friends with each other! Because in five years we’re all gonna give each other jobs and hire each other and—and—yeah.” Which—which, more broadly, is I think a problem with America, right? Like, it’s this system of—basically like a flawed meritocracy.

So—I—I don’t know if I should speak of it quite so positively, but that’s basically how it pans out. I—I think I mentioned this to you, is when I was looking for jobs, I—every job I’ve gotten in my life has been because of a Dartmouth connection, so [chuckles] clearly that—that comes into play. Like, “Oh, you went to Dartmouth. Can you speak to me about what you do?” And they’re, like, “Oh, yes.” And then after a while, they’re, like, “We have a couple of jobs that we think you might be a very good fit for. Do you want us to refer you for this?”

And—and, you know, because I went to Dartmouth and because this is basically how I got my first job and every job

since—in the beginning, I thought that this is of course what, you know, a college experience is like: You have a network that's very approachable, easy to talk to. I have cold-called Dartmouth alumni and just said, "I would like to talk to you," and they've always said, "Yes. Come for dinner and talk to us."

And to realize that not all colleges, or not people who go to other colleges even have anything like this is definitely a little bizarre to me. But also, I think what makes Dartmouth very special in that sense.

KARALIS: Is part of that why you're so involved with young alum and—

SIMLAI: Yeah, probably. I mean, I never say no when someone who's a student wants to call and talk to me about just what they're doing, where they are—most people now will e-mail, but I've had people who have cold-called me and said, "Oh, we found your number in the alumni directory. We are thinking of doing something in marketing, and we noticed that that is what you do, because that is what your profile on LinkedIn says, and we noticed that you went to Dartmouth. Will you please speak to us?"

And that's basically the kind of conversation I had when I was in college, when I would just say, "I noticed you were an engineer, but now you do this really cool job, and I think it's cool, and I was wondering if you could tell me how you got to that position because I would like to get to that position at some point." So in some ways, it's just now, you know, the reverse of the kind of conversations I had when I was in college.

And most of these are just people looking for additional insights and guidance and just, you know, things that they don't know about. Some of these people are, you know, also looking for things like internships or just things of that sort, in which case I try to make sure that at least, if I—if I feel like they'd be a good fit, then I'd try to make sure that they at least get noticed by our recruiters.

Yeah, I—I think now realizing how much of my professional success has come from Dartmouth and that community, it only feels fair to I think now give back to this community and

to this—you know, as an alum, because I wouldn't have gotten where I am professionally if it hadn't been for this community and, you know, if I had gone to another school except Dartmouth, this would probably not have—I don't know how it would have worked out, but maybe not this way.

KARALIS: And would you mind speaking a little bit about your Young Alumni Distinguished Service Award and how you felt receiving that? [Chuckles.] What did they say about it?

SIMLAI: So I think the way it works is that they look at alumni within ten years of graduation, maybe fifteen, actually, now, but I think—no, ten, actually. And within that, they sort of look at your track record of the things you've—they look at what you did when you were at college, and they look at all the things you've done since graduating, in terms of being, you know, an alum who is clearly spending a lot of time doing alumni things, and then they look more broadly at just, like, other things going on in life. And I think every year they decide I think up to three people to give the award to.

It was a little bit of a surprise, because I definitely wasn't expecting it, and they sent me a letter, and the letter said something like—or apparently said something like, oh, like, you know, “We just had to give you this award before we can formally announce this in the media and in our press release. We would like to confirm with you that you are saying yes, or are you declining?”

And I guess I just threw the letter away when it came in the mail because I don't really—like, I just assumed that, you know, all the important stuff I get from Dartmouth I get in e-mails, right? So the letters are just usually, like, fundraising things that I throw away. So I threw it away, and I didn't even know about this.

And then I think like these poor people in the alumni office were waiting for my response, and then after a month, they e-mailed and said, “We sent you a letter. Did you get the letter?” But they didn't tell me what the letter was. I was, like, “No, I didn't get a letter. Can you please send it again?” They're, like, “We'll send you a scan of the letter and e-mail it to you. Can you please look at this letter and tell us what you think?”

It was all very mysterious, and I was, like, *What is this letter?* I was super confused. And so then the scanned letter was sent to me by e-mail, and I was, like, *Oh! Okay, this is the Alumni Award. Okay.* So basically, I ended up saying yes, and then they had these logistics about, like, when they actually present the award, because there are three or four different major events that happen on campus, and you get to choose which one works with your schedule.

And then they already have all of the information about you, because the alumni office does a very good job of tracking all of our info, but then they actually go out and talk to your friends and your professors and other people who knew you well and collect all this additional information, which they use to, like, make a video, and when they're presenting the award, they write up a speech about it, and it—it's—it's—like, when I was hearing the speech, I was, like, *I—who is this person they're talking about? They're talking about me or—this sounds like a lot of work to have done over all the fifteen years.*

But it's all a very big affair, very emotional, and I had a bunch of my family and friends fly in, so a lot of my Dartmouth friends and Thayer friends actually came to the award dinner, which was in Hanover, and then—that was on a Saturday night, and then—so most people we just spent the weekend there. It was nice to just be back.

So this was a couple of years ago. This was 2016. Yeah. It was actually a surprise, though, and I was—I was not expecting it.

KARALIS: That's awesome do you have—based on that, do you have any, I don't know, advice for young Dartmouth students, immigrant, queer Dartmouth students coming in, and trying to navigate?

SIMLAI: I don't know if I'm in the posit—I don't know if I'm in the position to give anyone advice of any kind. I think—I think—you know, there are all these things in college that at the time seem like these huge questions and issues about, like, *Oh, am I studying the right thing? And will this ever be of value? And where is my life headed?* All questions that all

seemed like very, very deep, meaningful questions that I needed to have, you know, like, answers to and do things about.

And honestly, if I could go back and say something to myself, I—I could give advice to myself, right? Because I don't feel qualified to give advice to other people. I would just honestly just chill a little more and be less concerned about, you know, my future and where things are going and how, because honestly, everything has worked out pretty decently. And I think for most of my friends from college, you know, we're all fine, largely happy with what we are doing in life and where we are. So I think that would be the—the—the biggest part of it.

I definitely think Dartmouth allows for a deeper sense of community and engagement, and I think the good thing about that is it's there, so lean into it. The thing to be watchful about is it is there, and sometimes it's easy to forget there's a bigger world outside of it and not think about things beyond the Dartmouth bubble, which I think would be—would be more in your face if you went to school in a large city, where you're able to, you know, just get off campus more often and just explore things off campus more often.

So I think that—that's the other part, which is there's a bubble. There's good things about the bubble, but there are also things you have to be a little mindful about you are with relation to the bubble, but, yeah, I don't think that counts as very meaningful advice [chuckles; unintelligible], so, yeah, hopefully no one is going to be listening to this and looking for advice.

KARALIS: [Chuckles.] Were there—I don't know, was there any moment in your undergrad that stands out as very important, very foundational in defining your identity, who you are, your experience as—as you are, as a full person, as an immigrant, as a person of color, as a queer student?

SIMLAI: I have to think about that. Also just looking at the clock. I know we're almost out of time.

KARALIS: Yeah.

- SIMLAI: Do we need to set up a second session as a follow-on, based on questions I might have missed, or how do you want to handle this?
- KARALIS: I have a couple more questions, and then we can finish up. If that will be ok.
- SIMLAI: Ok should we setup a separate time? Because I do have a one o'clock meeting that I have to run to because—yeah, so maybe should we—should we figure out a time to wrap this up, maybe later this week or next week?
- KARALIS: I can ask—I can ask you one last question really quickly.
- SIMLAI: Sure.
- KARALIS: And then I can e-mail you about possibly setting up a future—sometime this week, because [Digital Collections and Oral History Archivist J.] Caitlin [Birch] is gone this week, but I can e-mail somebody else. But as a last question, why do SpeakOut? Why are you part of this?
- SIMLAI: I think—sure. I think it's good to track oral histories, because otherwise you quickly forget and have no record of diversity and, you know, different voices that exist, right? Because too often, when you sort of look back at historic records of anything, you only see representation of dominant voices, and I think it's important to realize that, yes, there is a dominant experience, but that in no way means that other experiences were not meaningful or unpleasant or not relevant.
- And I think this a way to be able to have those other voices, those other experiences at least be recorded and be relevant, because that is—is—is important. Otherwise, you know, in—in—in ten, twenty years from now, no one is going to be thinking about what was the Dartmouth experience like in—in—in the early 2000s and—and how has it changed. You can only measure change if you know what came before and you track it, so I think this is at least going to be helpful on that front.
- KARALIS: Well, thank you so much for doing this, and I look forward to possibly hearing more.

SIMLAI: Ooh! Sounds good. We'll be in touch.

KARALIS: Yeah. Have a wonderful rest of your day.

[End of interview.]