

Elizabeth Agosto '01  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World  
November 19, 2012

DONIN: Today is November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012. My name is Mary Donin. We are here in Rauner Library with Elizabeth Agosto, Dartmouth Class of 2001.

Okay, Liz, we like to get started with a little bit of background material about what brought you to Dartmouth. For instance, where you grew up, did you have a connection to Dartmouth before you came or did you just select it in some other way? Give us an idea of all of that.

AGOSTO: Sure. So I was born in the Bronx, New York. My parents were right out of high school when they got married and had me, and my dad joined the military, so I'm an Army brat. We traveled a lot when I was younger, so I changed schools every year, every year and a half or so.

DONIN: Wow!

AGOSTO: [Chuckles.] Yes, so it was a lot of moving and a lot of change.

DONIN: And a lot of skills you learned fitting in.

AGOSTO: A lot of skills in fitting in and kind of figuring out a new culture relatively quickly or figuring out how to make yourself kind of part of the group, which has served me well.

DONIN: Valuable, very valuable.

AGOSTO: Yes, they've served me well over the course of my life. And so my—like I said, he was in the Army, so we moved around a lot. I lived in Colorado, Texas, Germany for a little while, and New York, North Carolina, and then traveled other places with my father, both internationally and nationally while he was doing trainings and things like that but didn't necessarily live there.

My parents got divorced when I was seven, and my mother moved to Connecticut, and that's where I spent the rest of

my kind of time, although in various different places and different sets and times and schools and all kinds of things.

Ended up in East Hartford, Connecticut, which is kind of right smack dab in the middle. It's this town that was very affluent for a while because Pratt & Whitney, which was a—

DONIN: Aircraft.

AGOSTO: —an aircraft—yes, they did the aircraft industry, so during the Gulf War they were making parts. They particularly focused on the Boeings and a lot of the aircraft that were used in the military, and so they were booming for a long time. At the same time, across the river, Hartford was the insurance capital of the United States, so there is this industry that was quite a lot. And then they both kind of crashed around the same time, and people got laid off. And so the town ended being this kind of very split town, where there were families that still had lots of money and then a whole lot of working class, lower class people who didn't have a lot of money, and that's kind of where I grew up. I didn't have a lot, but none of my friends did either, at that time, so it wasn't a big deal. We all—you know, we all were on, you know, reduced school lunch, and we had our lunch tickets, and [chuckles] we all were kind of that group.

Did really well in school. I excelled in middle school, excelled in high school. I was very lucky. My high school had a lot of advanced placement classes. It was just a really good school. I had teachers who had gone to top-notch schools: Harvard, Boston University, et cetera. And I was in the gifted and honors track in school. So I was lucky, very, very lucky, considering that my parents had not gone to college, and I really didn't have any idea of what all of that entailed, but I knew that I was going to college. I knew that I was smart, and my teachers and my mother all insisted that that was the path I was going to take.

DONIN: The group that you hung out with—were they all on the college track, too?

AGOSTO: Yes, we were all kind of, for the most part, on that track. We were going to go to college. And so that was just—it just was a way, the way it was. I thought I was going to Harvard, and mostly because that's what I—I didn't know there were other schools, really, outside of Harvard. There was UConn and

then there was Harvard, and so I was going to go to Harvard. I visited Harvard and actually—you know, the Dartmouth historians and people are really going to love this: I hated it. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Why?

AGOSTO: Well, it didn't feel right. I went on campus. It felt stuffy. It didn't feel comfortable. It felt too, you know, pretentious for me at that moment. Like, I just didn't feel like I belonged there. I didn't feel like I had a place or could even develop a place there, and I feel that way actually about Boston and Cambridge in general now that I am older and recognize that. So it just wasn't the right space for me.

But I had never heard of Dartmouth. I didn't know it existed.

DONIN: Who told you about it?

AGOSTO: So here's the funny thing: so I actually, in my junior year of high school, won an award called the Dartmouth Book Club Award, and I got this—I still have it. I got this great book that's full of pictures, and on the cover it's got, like, the bonfire, and it's beautiful. But I didn't make the connection between this book that I got—it was, like, "Oh, I got an award. Yay!" In college [high school], my teacher—she was my senior philosophy teacher. She taught civilizations and government and all of those kinds of courses. She was the one that was, like, "You know, this is a college. You should really look at it." And I was, like, "Oh, no, I'm going to Harvard, I'm going to Harvard, I'm going to Harvard." Even though I didn't really like it, I was, "I'm going to Harvard." [Chuckles.]

And then my junior summer, I spent the summer at Bates and fell in love with Bates. I thought it was a great place. I had a wonderful experience there. It was a little far. At that time, it was almost too far for my family. I had, like, a radius of where I was, like, "This is too close, and this is too far." [Chuckles.]

And then I got a message, a letter in the mail inviting me to come to Dartmouth. They were doing, like, the October visit, prospective visits, and I had done well enough on my PSATs that—well, you know, they were, like, "Oh, let's see."

So I came. And it was one of those ridiculous fall days that is just perfect. I mean, it was just a perfect day. It was, like, 65 and sunny, and, like, people were on the Green in, like, little sweaters. And it was just that kind of day. And I remember stepping off of the bus and feeling like, “This is what college looks like. This is it. This is what college is supposed to be.”

And over the course of that weekend, not having anything that told me anything different, I was paired with a really great host, and she lived in East Wheelock, and at that point, it was the new dorms, still.

DONIN: Yes.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.] And so I got to stay in the new dorms, and they were beautiful, and we had a great time. I interviewed with admissions and had a great experience with the interview. I just had a great time on campus and loved it and got to spend some alone time sitting on the bench on the Green and reading, and it was very—like, it just appealed to everything that was me.

And so I went home, and I applied early decision, and I got in. And I had already actually applied to UConn and received a full scholarship to UConn, which I turned down to come to Dartmouth. [Laughs.] Yes, that look is exactly— So I turned down the full scholarship and came to Dartmouth.

Now, I didn’t understand what all of that really meant for me in terms of finances, but that was it. And then I got in. I remember getting the letter December 15<sup>th</sup> or thereabouts, and just screaming at the top of my lungs—I mean, so excited—and running to school the next day and telling everyone. It was just—it was just great. And I remember being so happy about it. And, yes, that’s how I got to Dartmouth.

DONIN: Fantastic, fantastic.

Now, were you part of the effort that they—I mean, does the subject come up during these admissions meetings that they’re looking to diversify the campus?

AGOSTO: Oh, yeah! [Laughs.]

DONIN: They want more Hispanics on campus?

- AGOSTO: Absolutely. I mean, at that point, the whole—there was an entire busload of us. It was all, like, students of color, so it was African-Americans, Hispanics, Latinos. I don't know what they called the trip, but it was certainly a kind of a minority recruitment weekend.
- DONIN: Interesting.
- AGOSTO: Yes, and it was from kind of New York—I remember the bus started in New York and drove up, so it picked me up in Hartford, and then I was one of the last groups to kind of get on the bus and then drove straight up here, up 91. [Laughs.]
- DONIN: Now, when you got to campus, did you see enough people that looked like you?
- AGOSTO: You know, it didn't—East Hartford is kind of a white town, and so my friends are—I lived in honors classes and my friends were mostly white. Like, I didn't really—it wasn't really an issue for me. I didn't understand—I didn't really have—that wasn't the salient identity for me, and I didn't know how much it would eventually be part of my life here, but when I was in high school it wasn't—it was just part of the fabric of who I was. When I came to Dartmouth, it actually became much more of a kind of visible identity than it ever was when I was in high school.
- DONIN: Oh, really?
- AGOSTO: Yes. And I didn't understand the impact class would have on my life here, because, like I said, when I was in high school, everyone was kind of in a similar situation or, you know, not so much higher or lower than me that it was an issue. And so I didn't understand how much of an impact it would have on my four years here.
- DONIN: How much did you learn about Dartmouth—I mean, I'm thinking about the sort of co-ed thing and—
- AGOSTO: I didn't know. I didn't know anything. Honestly, I applied on a gut. I applied on a gut check. I loved it. It was, like, it was this gut feeling, and I didn't know to do my homework. I was first gen. Like, I didn't know, and I didn't necessarily ask the right questions when I was here, and I didn't do the research when I got home. What I understood was Dartmouth was Ivy

League, it was a big deal that I got invited, it was a big deal if I got accepted, and, like, I had—you know, for my high school, it was a big deal for them. There was one student here, actually two years ahead of me—she was a '98—who—

DONIN: From your high school?

AGOSTO: —went to my high school.

DONIN: Oh, wow!

AGOSTO: And so I had actually known her and was able to connect with her. But there's a funny thing about Dartmouth students and how they sell Dartmouth to prospective students in a way that doesn't necessarily always reflect the reality of their own lived experience, because there's a dichotomy of wanting more students of color, wanting more faces here, in order to feel more at home but not really sharing the pieces that could make it feel less like home.

DONIN: So they're sweet-talking you.

AGOSTO: Oh, yeah! And I remember doing it, too. You know, you want them to come because you're, like, Oh, if there's more of us, then it'll be fine. But that's not—it's not really understanding the systemic, underlying issues that are a part of Dartmouth, that don't have anything to do with numbers but have to do with historical structures and things like that.

But, yes, I had no idea. It was beautiful. I had a great experience. I met people that I thought were really cool, and I didn't know to ask anything else.

DONIN: Well, I think you're like the majority of students.

AGOSTO: Yes. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Let's face it: They're clueless.

AGOSTO: Yes. [Laughs.] Exactly.

DONIN: Most of them.

AGOSTO: Yes, so I just—yes. And here I came.

DONIN: So tell us what you found when you arrived. Where did you live?

AGOSTO: So I lived in East Wheelock. I lived in Andres, on the first floor of Andres, and I had a great floor. I had an awful undergraduate adviser, UGA. She was kind of not really present. But the floor had both first-years and upper class. There were sophomores on the floor, and so ended up having some upper-class mentors present. I also lived right next to the graduate assistant, the GA. Her name was Jennifer Tickle. [Laughs.] I loved her.

DONIN: That's a great name.

AGOSTO: She ended up being very, very vital to my first year of college. So I moved in, and, you know, East Wheelock does have a different kind of community feeling, so our floor got along really, really well. I met some really great people. It was a really diverse mix of students. There were several international students, all kinds of just different people.

My roommate was a woman from Fargo, North Dakota, Jill. And she was Mormon and probably as different from me—her dad was, like, an eye surgeon or something. Probably as different from me as you could humanly get. And so we got along fine, for the most part, but we had very different kind of political and social views and religious identities, and so there were certainly moments of tension.

But, for the most part, that first kind of entry into Dartmouth was really good. I went on a DOC trip. I did hiking of some sort and climbed a mountain.

DONIN: Was that a first time for you?

AGOSTO: I mean, it was the first time I really did, like, serious hiking with the backpack thing. I mean, I had to borrow a backpack from someone.

DONIN: Did you have to, like, sleep on the ground?

AGOSTO: Oh, yeah! And camping was not new, because, you know, we didn't have a lot of money, so lots of our vacations were camping, and we would go out and—and so that was fine. But the backpack thing was a lot. But [laughs] because I'm from New England—the trip was a lot of people from New

York and New England, and so there was a certain temperament that we all kind of made sense. And we ended up, like, singing show tunes for half the trip. We were all obsessed with *Rent*, the musical *Rent*. And so, yes, it was a great trip.

And then I went home for—

DONIN: Oh, that's right, because you were close.

AGOSTO: Yes, so I went home for five days and then came back for orientation.

DONIN: That's pretty schizophrenic, isn't it?

AGOSTO: It is a little bit. [Laughs.] It is a little bit challenging. Not only are you, like, the last people to leave their house—like, I mean, my friends had been gone for a month, like almost a month by the time I got to Dartmouth. But then you go back, and it's just weird. So, yes, I did the trip. I did all the normal Dartmouth things and was having a great time, actually. And my first term here was really good. I took some really great classes.

DONIN: Who was your sort of group that first semester?

AGOSTO: Mostly my people on my floor, either the people on my floor or people from my trip. And, yes, those were the people I hung out with. Me and the group from my trip actually had connected really well, and many of them I stayed friends over the course of the four years, both them and people from my floor, actually. Several people from my floor, I still am in touch with, been to their weddings and all those things.

DONIN: Did you jump into extracurriculars right away?

AGOSTO: Oh, yes, I jumped into everything feet first. That's what I did, including my classes. I took Chem 5, Math 3 and this history class, which is probably one of my favorite classes of all time at Dartmouth. But it was a senior seminar, and I didn't under—I didn't know what I was doing, but it was a great class. I can't remember what it's called now, but it was about kind of nuclear war and how—kind of looking at the history of nuclear, like, plants. And we read all this really great stuff. It



was just a great class. I still have all those books, and I love them. But it was a lot. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Yes. Well, academically were you well prepared? Did you feel well prepared?

AGOSTO: You know, I did. Like I said, I was lucky. I had a school that had lots of AP classes, and in my senior year I had taken—seven of my eight classes were AP courses. I did feel academically prepared intellectually and, like, my writing ability and all of those pieces. I was not prepared for the pace. I was not prepared for the pace. I was not prepared for—yes, mostly the pace was the thing that—particularly once I kind of got involved as well. There's a huge difference between, you know, every day going to school and having such a regimented schedule to here. [Laughs.]

But actually in my fall term I did fine. And I worked, you know, a normal amount of hours. I was working, like, fifteen or twenty hours, which is a little bit more than kind of what they recommend, but it wasn't so awful that I couldn't keep up with everything.

And then my winter and spring were really the terms that went downhill. Some of—my parents' economic situation changed, and I tried to kind of figure out how to redo my financial aid. And it's nearly impossible, once you've started a term, to really kind of change courses with financial aid. And they still expected my parental contribution and all those pieces, and my mom just didn't have it. And so I had to take on more work.

DONIN: Ooh.

AGOSTO: So I ended up—that term I had three jobs, my winter term.

DONIN: Oh!

AGOSTO: Which made a huge—it was a huge issue for keeping up with classes, mostly because—like, I worked at DDS, at Food Court, and it ended up, like, I would work the late shift, so I'd be at work until, you know, one o'clock in the morning, two o'clock in the morning, and then go home and try to study. And it became really challenging. I worked DDS, the library, in the stacks and the information desk, and then I worked at DHMC, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. I

worked in the pediatric cardiac offices, and I did, you know, filing and general business stuff, business-y stuff for them.

But it became really hard to juggle the schedule, and it was this chicken-and-egg situation, right? I needed to work in order to be here, but I needed to do well in order to be here, and so that was the first term my grades plummeted, and I got my first D. I was on academic risk after that. And then spring, I had to work the same amount of hours, but I was—well, it was one of those things—and this pattern existed for most of my time at Dartmouth, where I would, like, if my grades plummeted, yes, I would be, like, No, I'm not—I'm determined to be here, and so I would do whatever it took, including driving myself into sick, getting sick and not sleep in order to not get below a D in order to get back on good standing. And that was the pattern for most of my time.

And the more I worked, the less—so the more I worked, the more they expected me to pay because I was making more money, so when I filled out my income tax and filled out my FAFSA, all that got reported, and so it was this awful cycle of Catch-22, where I couldn't get out of it either way.

And so, yes, that happened for most of my time, and, you know, financial aid is actually much better now than it ever was when I was a student. They're much more flexible in terms of—you know, there's still lots of issues, but they're much more flexible in terms of payment plans and figuring out different ways to kind of accommodate students in that way. And when I was a student, like, it was kind of like you pay or—

DONIN: Cut and dried.

AGOSTO: Yes. And so they would administratively withdraw me at the beginning of every term [chuckles], because I had an outstanding bill, and so if you hadn't paid that bill within the first, like, week and a half or so, they administratively withdraw you, which basically means they cut off your dining plan, they cut off your access to the library, you're supposed to not go to classes anymore. Essentially, they kind of can kick you out. [Laughs.]

DONIN: That's really harsh.

- AGOSTO: Yes, you know, it got pretty bad. And it was pretty—yes, it was pretty bad.
- DONIN: It's such a mixed message, because they want you here so badly, and yet, based on some numbers, they're trying to kick you out.
- AGOSTO: Exactly. And it's really hard to navigate that system. For me, I didn't really understand—like, I was learning the system as I was going because I didn't understand that if I got scholarship, it reduced my, like, aid from the school. I didn't understand that the more I worked—so all of these pieces and—in my head, all I kept thinking was, I just want to go to school, and I don't know what else to do. Like, I don't know where my father is, so I can't get his contribution, because I don't know where he is. Or my mother can't afford this. I'm paying for it. And just figuring out all of those different pieces was really challenging.
- DONIN: And you were basically doing this yourself.
- AGOSTO: Yes, because my mother—like, I filled out my FAFSAs. I did all of that myself. And, yes, I was advocating for myself. I would be going in and talking to—and, you know, there were varying financial aid officers. Some were tremendously compassionate and tried to help and work with me, and others were very much, like, "This is the books, and this is how it goes."
- I was really lucky my sophomore year in that I ended up, started working at Collis. Now that I'm older and wiser, I recognize the position they put themselves in, in order to help me, but I started to work at Collis, which means—and they allowed me to work, you know, forty to fifty hours a week doing all sorts of things, which, on the one hand is bad, but on the other hand, it also gave me a kind of secure and steady space.
- But, I mean, Holly Sateia and Brenda Goupee, who have both retired now, but they—I mean, they became kind of my surrogate family.
- DONIN: Sounds like your substitute parents.
- AGOSTO: Yes. You know, both Holly and Brenda had loaned me money in order to start the term. Now that I know better, I

realize how much finagling they had to do with work study, about, like, the number of hours I was working and how much of a fight they must have had to put up. [Laughs.] But they let me work over interim, and so classes would end and I work forty hours a week, and I would do whatever they needed me to do. And they were just—they just were great. And they provided me a space where I felt safe, and I felt connected and—

DONIN: Taken care of.

AGOSTO: Yes. And Collis ended up being that space for me the rest of my time at Dartmouth and actually, in many ways, still is as an employee. But it ended up being a space where I felt ownership over the school. I felt like I belonged here, like I was empowered in a space where I didn't feel that way in lots of other places on campus. And so I'm tremendously grateful for both of them, that experience.

DONIN: You must have done some growing up pretty fast.

AGOSTO: Yes. And I always—it's funny because money had always been part of the situation growing up, but it was just one of the factors, and then it became so much a factor here at Dartmouth. And, yes, I mean, I just—I just had to figure it out. And I had to figure out how to, you know, make the case and how to eat humble pie if I needed to eat humble pie and how to just make it work. And so I did a lot of that.

Meanwhile, at the same time, getting really angry as time continued. Every time I had to go through this, just kind of building up the kind of anger, but trying, at the same time, to figure out productive ways to deal with it. Like, I tried to work the system. For most of my time at Dartmouth, I tried really hard to kind of go by the books and do what they asked me to do and jump through ever hoop and dot every "i" and cross every "t" until my junior year, when I kind of just had had enough [chuckles] and decided to kind of circumvent the normal kind of rules and go around and figure out another way to make people realize that something was going on.

And so, yes, my junior year was an interesting year for that. And we can talk about it more, if you want, but—yes, so that was Dartmouth, for the most part.

DONIN: How would you describe who your community was here when you were going through this really difficult—

AGOSTO: You know, it was— I ended up building a community of students that were working. You know, they were either employed with me at Collis or DDS or in some capacity were working. I still had friends that were part of, you know, my first-year floor and my trip group, and so they were still part of it, but their presence ended up being very different in my life as it started to kind of take place. And I ended up really being focused on students that were working or with students of color that were part of this community, and it ended up being a whole lot of Latino and African-American students who were trying to make ends meet while at Dartmouth. It became a much more salient part of my life in that respect than it had ever been.

And many of them, many of the students had been activists, so they were coming from, you know, Texas and California and New York, and they had been, like, active in their communities in ways that I had never been. Particularly, there was a group of Mexican-American students who were very involved in the Chicano movement, and so they were very, like, radical and militant. [Laughs.]

So it became a really interesting thing to kind of have this consciousness also that I had never really had before start to get awakened about—I was never blind to race, and I knew how much it had been part of my life, and it was there, and certainly there had been lots of moments where I had felt the impact of discrimination. But it still, like I said, was not the primary identity. And for so many of these students that I was hanging out with, it was: them being Latino and then coming here to this campus with mostly white students, it became a point of kind of hyper drive presence in their reality.

DONIN: Isn't it a form of self-preservation, really?

AGOSTO: In some respects, I think it is. You're looking for someone— people who will understand at least something in your life or some part of who you are and not be—sometimes I think at Dartmouth everything can get very philosophical and intellectualized, and I think in some ways you need a community where you don't have to explain everything.

DONIN: Yes.

AGOSTO: And so I think that was the easiest—that's the easiest marker for many of us. And so I became very involved in the Latino community, became very involved in Latino organizations. I got involved in the fight for, like, the LALACS [Latin American, Latino and Caribbean Studies] House. I got invested in all of those things.

It's funny: A student of mine recently came, and he was the president of La Alianza, and he said "Liz, I found all these documents that have your name on them!" And I was, like, "Mmm yeah, well, that makes sense, I guess." He was, like, going through the files, and I was, like, "Oh, yeah."

So, yes, I got very invested in all of those things. I lived kind of a dual identity when I was here, in many ways. I felt like I was super-involved in, like, the out-of-class experience and super-trying to make this connection with the college and make things different, both in the Latino community as well as outside of that. I was on the SLI [Student Life Initiative] Committee. You know, my senior year, I ended up being on a committee to look at and redo financial aid. I was invested in trying to figure out a way to kind of enhance this community, [and] at the same time have this other space where I was working so many hours and was so angry and was filled with kind of this hatred for this place at the same time.

And so it's this weird split identity that I spent most of my four years feeling. And neither one of those places was one where I was focused on the academics. I just didn't have the time to do—and so the investment—and I think a lot of our students do make this choice about where to invest their energy, and not smartly. I should have made the investment in going to class. Like, I went to class to do my work and really pushed that piece, but I became invested in kind of being a social activist on campus and doing advocacy for the community and being a change agent, which is great, but not why I was here.

And now that I look at it, you know, in hindsight, I'm, like, Oh. I wish it had been a different—but I learned a lot. [Laughs.] I learned a lot.

DONIN: And the thing is—I mean, you were pulled into these other situations—

AGOSTO: Mm-hm.

DONIN: —because of whom you were surrounded by.

AGOSTO: Right.

DONIN: And, you know, the financial aid situation—there was nothing you were going to be able to do about that.

AGOSTO: Mm-hm.

DONIN: So you must have felt a real sort of dichotomy.

AGOSTO: Oh, yeah. It just felt like I was kind of pulled in—like, I was just living—I was living a split life. I was living in two different worlds, in two different spaces. And at some point—so I think what happened—all these things have happened. So my junior spring, all of these pieces kind of smashed together in this one moment where I was—all of the anger and kind of frustration that had been building and all of this work trying to do something different kind of hit in this moment.

My junior spring, I got administratively withdrawn again, and it kind of felt like the final straw. Like, I'm like, Seriously? I'm doing everything you asked me to do. There's gotta be something. And I ended up writing this letter to every kind of senior administrator on campus, detailing from—at that time it was—President Wright had just, like, started—from President Wright all the way to, like, everyone I could figure out: undergraduate deans—[laughs]—detailing the three years that I had been here so far, and every single step I had taken to try to, like, stay here and, like, go to school and pay for school and the things I'd been told, you know, from, like, people saying, "Isn't there someone you can borrow it from?" [laughs] I'm, like, "If there was someone I could borrow it from, don't you think I would do that already?"

Just every single thing that I had been told—like, detailing it all. And ended with—I think I have a copy of the e-mail somewhere; I should find it—ending with, "And I'm planning on talking to the *Boston Globe* and telling them about

Dartmouth if someone doesn't help me figure out a way to stay here."

And do you know that the next day, I got a call from the vice president of financial aid and admissions, saying, "Hey, we found this scholarship." [laughs] That ended up paying for—it was just enough to pay for how much I owed that term. And my senior year, miraculously, I got another scholarship and put on a committee to help look at financial aid.

You know, I don't know—I think I was just ticked off enough to kind of blow the lid off of Dartmouth a little bit, but only because I had gone through every—like, I had tried every channel. And then it just made me laugh. I was, like, "Really? When I asked in the office [laughs], you couldn't have found the scholarship?" And so my senior year, I ended up only having to work, like, ten hours a week.

DONIN: What is that message?

AGOSTO: [Laughs.] Well, you know, you got a little threatening— [Laughs.] I know. Well, that's where—you know, it's hard now as an employee when students say, "Dartmouth cares only about their PR," to not agree a little bit, because there is this piece of my own history where I know the leverage that public relations and the public persona of Dartmouth—and instead of, like, fixing the structural issue, they threw money at me.

And, you know, I do think they've gotten—the committee I was on my senior year talked a lot about that stuff, and actually for a minute had come out [with] quite a few recommendations that, if I had been a student, would have helped me tremendously. And since then, our financial aid package has been quite good.

DONIN: President Wright—yes.

AGOSTO: Yes, President Wright was invested in the issue and really cared. You know, I feel bad sometimes when people don't remember that about him, because I think he really did care about trying to equalize and [create] equity for students that did struggle and recognizing that not everyone came to the table with the same, you know, background or ability to be here.



And so, yes, it was an interesting—and then—yes, so my senior year, I only had to work, like, ten hours a week, and then—

DONIN: Wow.

AGOSTO: —which was good, because I had to take four classes each term in order to finish a major in—[Laughs.] But I did, and I graduated on time.

DONIN: What was your major?

AGOSTO: I was a sociology major and an education minor.

DONIN: Aha.

AGOSTO: And so, yes, I finished on time, and I finished with a horrible cumulative GPA, but I had a really good GPA in my major, and, yes, it ended up fine. [Laughs.] I guess.

DONIN: So these struggles that you had with you the whole time, virtually, both the sort of identity struggles and the—I shouldn't call them a struggle, but the financial aid struggles and this new, renewed sort of commitment to self identify—did you feel set apart from—you know, looking at all these white kids wandering around who didn't need scholarship help?

AGOSTO: Oh, sure, absolutely. I mean, I think I felt very much not part of mainstream Dartmouth. I was not that student. I didn't go to fraternities and party. I never played Pong. I've never played a game of Pong, which most students now, when I tell them that, they think—they're, like, "Did you go here?" I'm, like, "Yes, I went here." And it's one, gross, but—[Laughs.]

So, yes, like, I just felt very much—I didn't do the big weekend things, mostly because I was working, so every big weekend I took everybody's shifts because they wanted to go out. I worked. And so I watched the bonfire from the Collis information desk, and I sold Winter Carnival T-shirts while everyone was partying, and I just didn't have that experience that most Dartmouth students have and cherish in that respect.

And so, yes, I felt very disconnected. And most of my friends felt disconnected in that same way and just didn't feel like they were part of the institution. I'm happy to say that lots of students feel differently, although there is some repeated conversations that are happening now that worry me a little bit, sound awfully like—well, a lot like when I was a student.

DONIN: So you didn't do things like do a study abroad.

AGOSTO: Oh, no. I didn't do a study abroad. I could never have figured out how to do that. I didn't do a study abroad. I didn't actually take an off term, and most interims I worked, so I was here. I took what students call a Hanover FSP now, and I worked full time while staying here because I could figure that out without having to figure out housing or any of those other things.

DONIN: Did you live in the dorm the whole four years, or did you move into the—

AGOSTO: So I lived in the dorm. So my first year, I was in East Wheelock. My second year, I was a UGA in the River Cluster. And then my sophomore summer I lived in the River Apartments. My junior fall was when I took the Hanover FSP, and I actually lived off campus, in an apartment, like, basically a closet in someone's apartment. Which was fine, you know? It was kind of an adventure. And then I must have lived on campus somewhere. I can't remember where. Where did I live my junior year? Did I live there all junior year? Maybe I lived there all of junior year. Hmm. I don't think I did. I lived somewhere on campus junior year. I can't tell you where. I can't remember. [Laughs.] And then my senior year I lived in Casque & Gauntlet.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

AGOSTO: Because I was the president there.

DONIN: Well, wow! That's pretty impressive.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.] This is what I tell you: that my time at Dartmouth felt very—like, it was a weird—

DONIN: You were president of Casque & Gauntlet?

AGOSTO: Yes! [Laughs.]

DONIN: So wait a minute! This is a whole 'nother—

AGOSTO: [Laughs.] That's what I'm telling you. Like, I have—like, my story—when I think about Dartmouth, there's, like, multiple stories that are all part of my story. So there's this, like, person that was, like, really struggling to stay here, but at the same time really invested in the college. And I did a lot to kind of try and do things. I programmed a lot, and I was very involved, so there's all of those pieces that all have to try and fit and really tell a story that is different. So, yes, I was the president of C&G my senior year. [Laughs.]

DONIN: But also isn't that sort of an affirmation of your—you know, it's a different way of measuring success at Dartmouth.

AGOSTO: Mm-hm.

DONIN: But that's a very valid and legitimate—

AGOSTO: Absolutely.

DONIN: —measure of success.

AGOSTO: Absolutely. I mean, I do think that—I think I had an impact. When I think about Dartmouth, I think I had an impact here. I think that I fought the right fights that I needed to fight, and—

DONIN: And you're the ultimate insider.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.]

DONIN: Right?

AGOSTO: Yes. [Laughs.]

DONIN: I mean, is that fair to say?

AGOSTO: Yes, yes.

DONIN: So this person who walks around feeling like they're on the outside—you're the ultimate insider.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.] Which is a weird—

DONIN: How did your friends react to you, the ones who were in your original group, who identified as Latina—Latino or Latina and were financial aid and were struggling to meet their bills? And here you are, the president of C&G? What did that do to your relationships?

AGOSTO: It actually didn't do—I think by the time my senior year ran around, a lot of my relationship with—I went through kind of my own transformation with a lot of that identity stuff, and so the person that in my sophomore year had developed this Latino identity that had never existed before had kind of faded into a person that could see the reality of being a student of color on campus but also the need for us to actually build some coalitions and bridge some gaps. So I had actually burnt some of those bridges already because I had tried to be a different voice, which is why I think I ended up being the president of C&G, because I really had tried to be a different type of voice by that point. I had tried to say, "Look, if we're going to do this, we have to do something a little differently. We can't always be so angry, and we have to bridge some of these gaps and approach things a little differently." And so that had already raised the hackles of many of my [chuckles] people that I thought were friends, because that wasn't—

DONIN: Compromise was not in their—

AGOSTO: Right. It wasn't what they wanted. It also was not the vehicle or the way that they had ever learned to make change. And so, I think falling back on some of the skills that I had learned moving around a lot and living in a town that had kind of lost everything and needed to rebuild, I kind of fell back on into that—who I was, really, at my core, and was able to make changes in different ways, and had actually stopped being part of some of the Latino kind of organizations and activities in a real kind of hardcore way by that time. Had shifted to doing some other things: some smaller committees, some work with student government and some other places like that, that could allow for some bridging.

I still worked really hard with the group that was working on getting the LALACS House built and identified, because I thought that was important. But I spent a lot more time doing activism in very different ways. I, like, put together a whole bunch of rallies over the course of my junior and senior year and, you know, did a lot—during that time, there was the

ghetto party, and there were all these other situations that happened that—like, I worked with the, like, African-American community and Native community to start to try and do some protests and some activities that would be a little different than what we had been doing and raise some conversation.

And, you know, I think it worked to varying degrees. But I think my time had changed by that point, so some of my relationships were very, very different. And C&G really was one of the highlights of my time here. I got to really meet some different people that I hadn't had access to before, in different ways, and also have some other real, like, meaty conversation about what it meant to be a Dartmouth student and what it meant to be in community, and hear some different perspectives and share my story in a way that I hadn't been able to do.

Some of my best friends are still people from C&G my senior year, that I had not met. I also got really crazy experiences with alums during my time with C&G. I was one of the first women presidents. I was one of the first women of color presidents, certainly. And they weren't all quite ready for that. [Laughs.] And so we had some really interesting experiences.

My vice president was this white male, like, what Dartmouth looks like.

DONIN: A greenblood, yes.

AGOSTO: Although when you really got to know him, he wasn't, but he looked the part. And I remember sitting in, like, these C&G trustee meetings with—me and him would go, and I would, like, ask a question, and they would respond to him.

DONIN: Ooh.

AGOSTO: And he would get so uncomfortable, and he'd be, like, "Liz? What do *you* think?" [Chuckles.] And I would—and it was just this very interesting situation that happened there. [Laughs.]

DONIN: But you were educating them.

AGOSTO: We were working on it. And, you know, there are very—it's funny: Some of the men are still trustees of C&G, and I'm on

the board of trustees now, which is completely weird. And they're very different, and they see C&G differently, and they understand it a little differently, and they understand that leadership and activism on campus looks different for them. You know, they were, like, "Why isn't the captain of the football team on here?" "Why isn't the president of IFC here?" Like, that's what they were thinking.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

AGOSTO: And so a lot of the time we were, like, "Well, leadership looks different, and we're, like, really going to hold to the values that we say we hold. Then when we're talking about who is leaders in these communities, it's very different—these are very different communities. This is a very different Dartmouth than it was in 1950." And so it's an interesting place to be. It's weird working here again because of those things. Like, I'm, like, Oh, weird. All right.

DONIN: Yes.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.]

DONIN: Some things probably haven't changed that much.

AGOSTO: No, there are some things that haven't changed, and then there are some things that have changed, you know, lots and lots.

DONIN: Right.

AGOSTO: Yes, it's a—but, yes, it's an interesting space. But C&G was—I mean, when I look back on my four years, C&G was one of the best things that happened to me in terms of expanding my kind of understanding of Dartmouth a little bit, and I think really set the stage for me—understanding and being able to come back and be in the position that I am in now, because I really was able to see multiple perspectives and understand that, you know, Dartmouth is hard for everyone. It's not always—you know, everyone has a hard time. Even those people who come into it ready and have everything, every advantage, still there are pieces of this place that make it very hard for students to be who they are. And those are systemic issues. They're not—you know, they're about our social life; they're about our isolation; they're about history; they're about all kinds of other things

that are not about an individual's sensibility or willingness to be here.

It was good to have that understanding my senior year and have those arguments. And we would—we would sit—there's a stairwell—I don't know if you've ever been in the building, but there's a stairwell, like, right when you walk in, and we would, like, congregate at the bottom of that stairwell and just, like, have these all-out, like, arguments about whatever was going on.

I mean, my senior year, going from my junior year into my senior year, there was all kinds of stuff going on. I mean—

DONIN: So we're talking 2000.

AGOSTO: So 2000–2001. We had had a rash of, like, racial issues in fraternities and around campus. We had had a rash of homophobic issues. The *Dartmouth Review* had been kind of running rampant with all kinds of just really horrendous stuff—

DONIN: Terrible.

AGOSTO: —including publishing names of students that were, you know, outed. And that all had been happening over—and so when we got to my senior year, we all had all these things. And, you know, we just were ready to have this conversation and have these arguments. Like, we would duke it out, and then we'd be laughing, and then we'd duke it out and laugh. And we'd be up until, like, the wee hours of the night.

And I had never been able to have that experience at Dartmouth because I was working or—and I don't know if you can have it in a space other than a space that's kind of designed for it. C&G is kind of designed for that kind of mat. You put all these people with very different beliefs into one space, and it's designed to make you kind of have those conversations.

DONIN: Well, it's intimate. It's small.

AGOSTO: Oh, yes. And I think it's just great. You know, there's thirty of us in the organization, and half of you live in the house; the other half just kind of come by every day. [Laughs.] Yes, and

so it was one of the best experiences I had at Dartmouth. And one of the best living spaces you could ever ask for.

DONIN: Oh!

AGOSTO: [Laughs.] It was prime real estate there. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Next to the Dirt Cowboy. What more could you want?

AGOSTO: Exactly. Yes. So being president was interesting.

DONIN: But it dramatically changed your—I mean, if you had just had the first three years here, your outcomes would have been completely different.

AGOSTO: Yes.

DONIN: Completely different.

AGOSTO: Yes, it had a very strong impact on my life and my understanding of Dartmouth, which was good because I left here really thinking that I would never, ever step foot on campus again. Like, I was kind of done with Dartmouth. And I think that, you know, one, time heals lots of wounds, but also being able to have had that positive experience made it easier to kind of come back.

So C&G coupled with Collis are really the spaces that allowed me to have a footway back into Dartmouth and back into, you know, understanding why I fell in love with it that very first weekend in 1996, October of 1996, and understanding its appeal and power and also understanding, you know, its kind of dark underbelly at the same time.

DONIN: I was going to say you saw the dark underbelly—

AGOSTO: Yes.

DONIN: —pretty soon after you had fallen in love with it.

AGOSTO: Yes.

DONIN: Remarkable. Just remarkable.

So you want to take a breath first?



AGOSTO: Sure. [Laughs.]

DONIN: I'll turn this off, and you can have a little break here.

**[End Part One. Begin Part Two.]**

DONIN: Okay, we're back on for Part Two with Liz Agosto. Okay, Liz, so just to finish up your undergrad experience, how do you think it prepared you—without knowing what your future held when you graduated, how do you think this dramatic experience you had here in terms of migrating your way through these troubled times as well as the triumph of becoming, like—I don't know, maybe I'm showing my ignorance, but being president of C&G is, like,—that's pretty—you know, it doesn't get better.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.]

DONIN: How did that prepare—what kind of skills did you come out of here with, being able to survive all that, and thrive?

AGOSTO: You know, endless numbers of skills. So I think that one of the things that Dartmouth prepared me for really strongly was being able to be quick [chuckles], in lots of ways: like, be quick in terms of understanding the conversations or text or whatever in terms of, like, your academic piece—like, understanding pieces of things that are going on and to make connections really fast.

DONIN: Is that because of the shortened term?

AGOSTO: Yes, I think the short term does that. Like, it moves so fast that you have to kind of be quick. And so you learn how to turn things around, how to make deadlines, how to just do that, which really helped me in my job right after college, because you just had to kind of turn things around fast.

I think it helped me be able to talk to a wide range of people. I think the one thing I learned at Dartmouth is that I can—like, I could hold my own in any company, and it didn't matter who you were or what your pedigree was. I went to Dartmouth. I could hold my own. Like, I have talked to you people already and before, and so it really gave me a sense of kind of grounding and self in that respect, in terms of not

being intimidated by people that in many ways, you know, should intimidate me or were very different than me or had very different lifestyles than I did. So I could do that piece.

It taught me—I learned the art of kind of seeing the big picture and the art of compromise. Over my four years here, I learned how to how to kind of navigate really challenging systems. You know, on the flip side of that, I also learned there's a time when you have to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em. Like, at some point you got to figure out another route or decide that, I can't fight this fight anymore, and figuring out where you stand on that.

And the other piece for me that I think was most important and still remains I think the most important for me is really understanding what I believed and what my core was and being able to hold onto my integrity and who I was and my story, even, when it felt like it would be way easier to kind of let that collapse and do something else and, you know, do things that didn't feel right.

I think it's really easy at Dartmouth to—and I don't think everybody learns this at Dartmouth [chuckles], but I did. I think it's really easy at Dartmouth to kind of do things that you don't feel comfortable with. I think there's a difference between compromising around a situation and compromising yourself, and I think it's really easy at Dartmouth to compromise yourself as a student, in order to fit in. And I think I did that somewhat in the beginning in terms of, like, trying to fit in with the Latino community or these other spaces, and realizing that it really wasn't—that wasn't who I was, and not kind of embodying really what I believed in and what I'd been brought up to do and behave and what I believed the right thing was. And I think by my senior year, I was able to do that despite any other things that were coming my way.

And I think over the course of my last—you know, it was two thousand—eleven years since graduation, there's been lots of times where that's been tested, as an employee, as an employee elsewhere, and being able to kind of sit in what I believed to be right, even though if other people—even if it gets me into trouble or puts me in a place where I'm kind of fighting the current.

DONIN:

That's a lot of learning.

AGOSTO: Yes, it was a lot of learning. It was a lot of learning. I learned a lot at Dartmouth, as a student. I didn't really have words for it until a few years after I had graduated, and I was working at a [chuckles] consultant firm, no less, but I had a weird kind of route there, because I was actually the receptionist and then they realized that I had brains, because they assumed that I just was just [inaudible] and all these things happened, and I ended up being an analyst.

And we were working for these cases that I was, like, Oh, I am diametrically opposed to what is happening here, and so figuring out how do you work in that situation and still hold onto who you are and be—and it ended up being that I had to leave because I just couldn't anymore. And I was, like, there's nothing that I'm doing here that is making me feel good about who I am. And so I worked there for about a year and a half, and then left and was, like, okay, I can't do that. I've got to do something else.

So, yes, I think it served me well in many fronts.

DONIN: So how would you describe—when your time here was done, who were the people that meant the most to you that you had to say goodbye to, whether it was your coworkers or your classmates or people who mentored you? I mean, who was your community that you were sad to leave?

AGOSTO: Sure. It wasn't a huge community. I was sad—I had friends in—a core group of people that ended up being—lots of C&Gers, actually, that were core to my experience, and I was sad to say goodbye to; two of my best friends that were floor mates of mine my first year, that had been my friends the entire time. And then mostly everyone else was staff members, so—

And it wasn't so much sad as in terms of [being] eternally grateful for what they had done, kind of let me graduate. I saw them as part of kind of my victory. And so Lisa Thum, who's an undergraduate dean—she was my dean, and she— her and Holly Potter, who was her administrative assistant, were critical [chuckles] to my four years.

You know, Holly Sateia and Brenda Goupee and Amy Macneill and Mark Hoffman were all the Collis staff members

that were kind of my—my people. [Chuckles.] And they really had been the ones that kind of got me through.

And there were some underclassmen who I'd kind of taken on as, like—because I saw very similar patterns in their time, and so I had kind of taken them on in their first couple of years to try and give them some hope. And they both ended up—they all ended up doing pretty well. And so I was sad to see them go.

But it was a small group. I was not—most people—and I actually said goodbye before commencement day, and so when commencement day got here, I walked across the stage, commencement finished and, like, was in the car, gone within, like, forty-five minutes. [Laughs.]

But, yes. And most of the people on that list I kept in touch with afterwards, even though I didn't think I would ever kind of come back to Dartmouth. They were people that I wanted in my life and wanted to continue to be part of my network of support and care. Yes, those. Small but mighty. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Small but dense.

AGOSTO: Exactly.

DONIN: Which is important. That was good. Okay.

All right, now we jump ahead to—how many years before you found your way back here? Two thousand four, was it?

AGOSTO: Six. No, 2007.

DONIN: Two thousand six? Oh, seven. And you came back to work in Collis, right?

AGOSTO: I did! I did. So it was kind of a weird situation. So I usually say that it's because of pie that I ended up working back at Dartmouth. So I left, was gone, gone, gone. And in 2007 I was teaching at Fordham University. I was getting my Ph.D. I was working on my Ph.D., and I was teaching at Fordham but was living in Connecticut because I was helping my mom with some stuff.

I got my license. I was late to get my license because I never needed it, and then I lived in New York, and then I moved to

Connecticut. I was, like, Ooh, I need my license now. I'm twenty-seven years old. I need a license. So I got my license, and so it was very exciting, and I was tooling around, and one day I got the bright idea of wanting Lou's [Restaurant] pie. And I don't know why. It's one of those things that maybe the stars aligned or something. And so I drove up here—

DONIN: From Connecticut.

AGOSTO: From Connecticut, so two and a half hours. I drove up here, and I parked behind the Fayers, and I was, like, okay. Well, if I'm here I should go to Collis and I should say hi to the people. And so I went to Collis, and I saw Brenda and Holly and Linda Kennedy and just a bunch of different people, and I said hi. Ended up talking to them most of the day. And you know what? I never got pie. And then I drove back to Connecticut.

And so, about two weeks later, I get a phone call from Holly Sateia saying that she had a proposition for me, and so, what I didn't know when I came to visit was, at the same time—so Holly was getting moved over to be the vice president of IDE, and Joe Cassidy was going to move down and be the dean of student life, and there was all this movement happening. And then Amy Newcomb was going on maternity leave and all this stuff was happening.

So they needed—they had gotten permission to have a nine-month term position, so that was all. And I showed up. And they were, like: Oh, Liz! She knows Collis. She knows—and I was in a place where I could kind of take some time, and I was not sure what was going on with my Ph.D., and I was, like, *Eh*.

And so, she was like, "Do you want the position?" and I was, like, "Mmm, let me think about it." [Laughs.] And, you know, it was one of those things where I was, like, Okay, Collis gave me so much when I was student. I can do anything for nine months. You know, six years, five years later, I'm still here.

So I drove up—I still remember this. I drove up on August 15<sup>th</sup> to meet the staff of the Collis—the student activities office, and to kind of get a feel—and I had already decided that if I was going to drive up, that I was going to take the

job. That was the decision. So whether or not—however this all worked out—Eric Ramsey, who was going to be the director, had insisted—I later learned that he insisted on meeting me. He was not willing to just hire me without having met me. [Laughs.]

So I came. We talked. I, like, met everyone. Some people, I had already known, like Gabrielle and Linda. And some people, I was meeting for the first time. And I met with Eric, and he gave me—this is what sealed the deal: He gave me a Post-It note with my salary on it and a start date. [Laughs.] And on the back of it, it had Jennifer Jones's number for Dartmouth real estate.

And so I took the job, and one month later, September 17<sup>th</sup>, I started. It was the day before orientation started.

DONIN: Oh!

AGOSTO: And, you know, Collis is, like, in the heart of that beast, and so I was kind of thrown in. And it was—you know, it was a great year. It was challenging and triggering on all kinds of levels, and I had to really kind of manage my Dartmouth, like, angst. [Chuckles.] But I was, like, nine months.

And at the end of that nine months, I really wanted to stay, and I never thought I would feel that way about Dartmouth, but I really wanted to stay. I wanted to stay because I was proud of how far we had come, and I was able to really see change.

DONIN: You really did see change?

AGOSTO: Yes, and it was change—so it's hard to—it wasn't necessarily measurable, tangible change in terms of policies had changed or—but the level of conversation among staff and students about some of the social issues on campus had been elevated. It was less—they weren't—it wasn't hiding away in the closet that we have, like, students of color, and we have people who don't have money. And there was some discourse that had changed. And I could tell that our students felt a little different than they did when I was a student. And they had more resources.

So maybe it was the moment that I came. I came at the height of kind of where we were, and then, you know, two

years later, everything changed. But at that moment, I was—like, I was proud of where we were. I felt like I had made a difference during that nine months. Like, I had connected with students and been able to give them a different story about Dartmouth. And as an alum, students listen to you in a different way, and so I was able to help kind of give them some different perspective and a prospective that they trusted because I had been through it and I had seen it. I knew what they were talking about. I understood the language. Even though I'd never played a game of Pong, I understood why they played Pong, and I understood what it was.

And so I felt like I had an impact, and I loved the work. I loved what I was doing. And so I actually applied to be a community director, because there was a community director position open, and I got that job. But at the same time, unbeknownst to me, really, Eric was kind of fighting to get me a full-time position in Collis. You know, it was another one of those moments where stars aligned. Amy got another position that she really was excited about, her position was open, so all these things moved around, and I ended up being able to stay at Collis as the associate director.

Yes, it was a great position, and I did that for, three years? I'm trying to look how—yes, three years, three full years. And in that position was able to do all kinds of really cool things. So I, you know, got to really work with students on a great, like, intimate level. I was working with student organizations and programming and leadership development. I got to chair committees and do all of those things that really got me access to a broad range of staff and faculty.

But I think the thing I'm most proud of is I got to develop FYSEP, the First Year Student Enrichment Program. And so, yes, so I did that for three years, and I built FYSEP with Sam Ivery, who no longer works here. We built FYSEP, and it's still going, and the kids are doing really well.

And then Dean Johnson, Charlotte, came on board, and, yes, and then I got this position. It was very weird because I wasn't looking for another position, and I didn't expect to have it. But I went to her office to give her a briefing about FYSEP, actually, and to prepare her for—she was doing some opening remarks. And it was the first time I had really had a conversation with her. And so I gave her the briefing,

and that took all of, like, ten minutes. But I had a half-an-hour meeting, and she starts asking me all these questions.

It felt kind of like an interview. It was very weird. And I was, like, okay. And at the end, she was, like, “Did you feel like I was interviewing you?” I’m, like, “Yeah, kind of. What’s goin’ on?” [Laughs.] And she was, like, “Do you have a writing sample?” And I’m, like, “Yeah.” She was, like, “Could you send it to me?” I’m, like, “Okay.” And so I sent her the writing sample, and, like, a month later she offered me the job.

DONIN: Fantastic.

AGOSTO: You know, it was all very—and then I was, like, “Uhhh!” because I have this job that I love—love, love, love. But if I’m really honest, I hadn’t been doing just Collis work for a very long time. Like, I had been involved in a lot of other things. And I think part of that is, I think—when I am completely honest about the situation, I think, yes, I’m smart, and I’m good and all those things. I think I’m also a woman of color and on lots of committees. When they need someone of color, they’re, like, “Oh, here is one.” [Laughs.]

And so I got lots of opportunities that other people wouldn’t have gotten, necessarily. And that’s not to diminish my own kind of—you know, someone will hear this one day and be, like, see? [Laughs.] But, I mean, I think I worked really hard, and I—well, I know I worked really hard.

DONIN: You’ve also got all these outcomes that are [inaudible] —

AGOSTO: Right, so it’s not to diminish—but, like, I think both of these things happened at the same—like, they worked together and that I was, you know, given opportunities for one reason, but after a while it becomes—

DONIN: You produce.

AGOSTO: Yes. And so I hadn’t really been solely doing Collis work for a really long time. And I think Collis deserves an associate director that is focused on Collis work. And so, yes, this was a really cool opportunity, and I liked what Charlotte stood for, and I liked where she was going, and I needed to believe that we could right the ship after the last two years, and I needed to believe that—I felt she needed an adviser. She needed someone that had been kind of not in Parkhurst for



that time and understood where people really felt, where they were and how much of an impact the budget cuts—but not just the budget cuts, that it wasn't about the money, but it was about the way things were done, and it was about people feeling devalued.

DONIN: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

AGOSTO: And I needed her to understand that and I figured that was the only way she was going to be successful, because she needed to know what she was walking into. And I didn't necessarily trust everyone in Parkhurst to tell her the truth about that situation or to give her enough background about—and I was close enough—I was again in one of these weird insider-outsider positions, because I was close enough to the center of what had been going on and had had a relationship with Sylvia and with various other people—Sylvia Spears—that I was able to—that I knew what was going on, but at the same time, I wasn't of that group, and I hadn't—and so I think that I was hopeful, and so I kind of followed that hope. [Laughs.] That's kind of what happened. I followed that hope, and I took the position. It was a year October 17<sup>th</sup>.

DONIN: Fantastic.

AGOSTO: And it's been an interesting year. It's been kind of crazy, you know? Like, we've had a lot of stuff going on, and I think the dean of the college division is stronger now than it has been in a long time. I think Charlotte was able to provide some much needed stability and some much needed kind of vision and values. And, you know, there's plenty of people that, like, don't agree with her, and that's fine. And I think she's got her own style, and she's really direct. Sometimes it feels brutally so. And so people take that as different things. But I think she's good. I think she's good, and I still have hope, and that's good after a year. I was worried that I wouldn't. [Laughs.]

DONIN: And you must be such a valuable resource for her, because you do have the institutional memory.

AGOSTO: Yes, I try to provide a lot of—like, you know. And what's nice right now is, as we start to talk about social life stuff, which is, you know, the core issue, and if we don't really fix it, that's where—that's why we keep repeating the same cycle over

and over again, is that we don't fix the core, the systems. And, you know, having been here when the SLI happened and having been part of those conversations in a different way, being able to say, "Look, it wasn't the actual document that was the problem. In fact, most of those things actually came to be. It was the implementation and the publicity around it that ended up being the problem.

DONIN: That was the big mistake.

AGOSTO: Right. Like, you don't set up—you don't—we set up President Wright to fail, in that respect. Like, you just don't go out the Wednesday before Winter Carnival and say, "It's the end of Greek life as we know it." Like, you just—you don't do it, because no one's listening after that. [Laughs.] And so, recent conversations have echoed some of the ones that were happening then, and all I keep saying is, "Yes." I was, like, "One, if we're going to do it, we have to stick to it and say, like, 'As we were rolling out these hazing reforms'"—I said, "We can't make anything public or official until—if we're not going to do it, if we're not going to hold our students accountable, if we're not going to really follow through, because that's our problem historically, is that we back down. And is this the right thing to do? If it's the right thing to do, then let's do it."

DONIN: Mm-hm.

AGOSTO: And I think the same thing with social life. As we start to have these conversations about what social life on campus looks like for real and what is the right thing to do, then we need to stick to it. And if we're not going to be willing to, then don't make that decision. Don't change Greek life. Don't invest in other options if you're going to pull back the money the minute you need to cut something, because that's what happens, you know? Like, when I was a student, they invested so much money in student life and in Collis and in late-night programming, and there was all this stuff happening. When I came back in 2007, I could see that it had been cut, but there was still enough—it was the first thing to go in the budget cuts. Like, Collis got cut by 23 percent.

Like, of course social life changes when you cut the budget of the student center so that it has to close three hours earlier. It's not going to have the—like, that can't be the first

thing to get cut. I know it's not sexy, and I know it's not what the faculty wants you to invest in, and they know we want to increase intellectual life on campus, but students live here, and they're only in class, you know, at most, a quarter of their time, at most. But they have a whole life. And we need to provide that life for them; otherwise, we end up where—we end up with what we have.

And it's not even—like, honestly, for me, it's not about getting rid of the Greek system. I don't know that we necessarily should. I think we need to reinvest, and we need to rethink, stop calling them a system and treating them like every other—and I fall into it, too—start treating them like every other organization. But I think we need to rethink our understanding of what a residential campus means and invest appropriately in that and not pull back the minute things get hard.

DONIN: Yes. Tough going.

AGOSTO: Sorry, I just got on my high horse for a second. Sorry. [Laughs.] We're going to have to embargo that until I don't work here anymore. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Your passion for what you're doing comes through.

So let's shift the focus a little bit, and let's look at your life as an employee here for the last, whatever, five years.

AGOSTO: Yes.

DONIN: Where's your sense of belonging here now, as opposed to—I mean, it's easy when you're a student. You're supposed to belong to a student group.

AGOSTO: Yes.

DONIN: As an employee, a former—or an alum, let's say—not a former student, an alumna—where is your sense of belonging here?

AGOSTO: Sure. I mean, I have friends that are both employees, so I have kind of a network of employees that are friends of mine, outside of work. But I've also managed, in the course of the time, to kind of make a community here outside of Dartmouth people.

DONIN: What a concept!

AGOSTO: I know! It's so weird! The other day, I walked into a place, and one of the bartenders was, like, "Hey!" And I was, like, "Hey!" I was, like, Oh, I'm a local. [Laughs.] I live here. And sometimes that takes me by surprise. I'm, like, Oh, I live here.

DONIN: Yes, it must be hard to shift gears.

AGOSTO: It's weird sometimes. It really is. And particularly, like, my reunion, my ten-year reunion was last summer, was summer 2011—yes, two summers ago, I guess. And that was weird: all these people coming back, and it was just all—[Laughs.]

DONIN: Are you an alum or are you an employee?

AGOSTO: Exactly. Well, I ended up—I think I am an employee. Honestly, I think when it comes down to making one of those two choices, I always fall on the side of the employee, and I see alum behavior through the lens of working here. And I actually was mortified—

DONIN: [Laughs.]

AGOSTO: —was completely mortified by what was going on at my reunion. I was, like, "Well, this is why we have a problem. You all are why we have a problem." [Laughs.]

DONIN: Well, they say they come back to campus and they act like they're undergraduates again.

AGOSTO: I was so upset. Like, I went to this event, this big event, and, you know, you go to the bar, and it's, like, students that I work with every day, and I was, like, I can't even—I'm, like, "No, I'm good, thanks." I can't. I can't do this. So, yes, I'm much more an employee than an alum. I just never was one of those alums.

But I think my community here—I think I very much am part of the kind of staff of Dartmouth.

DONIN: But you're higher up than that. I mean, what are these titles doing to you?

- AGOSTO: I know! It is a little weird. It's gotten a little weird. But not so much, actually, that for me—I mean, this year has required some navigation of that and some kind of moments where I'm like, "I really can't talk about it"—or push back or pull.
- DONIN: Pull rank. I mean, don't you have to pull rank?
- AGOSTO: Yes. Yes. I'm lucky. One of the skills that I—why I'm good at my job is that I am able to pull rank and somehow not have people hate me.
- DONIN: You can get away with it.
- AGOSTO: [Laughs.] And so I've been able to, like—I mean, and mostly because I think, one, I think I have a pretty good reputation on campus of not playing the games that lots of other people have played. Like, I don't really—I'm not—when I have to pull rank, I usually explain why, as long as I can. And so I try really hard to be transparent and be available. I think I work just as hard as anyone else, and I think people see it. And so, yes, there's been some growing pains with that, but, at the same time, I've been able to kind of navigate a lot of that. But it is harder. It is way harder to be kind of generally friends with people on staff because of my title and being special assistant and needing to kind of pull rank or be able to kind of push people when they need a push and be really brutally honest with those about them not meeting expectations, particularly since I don't actually supervise anyone, so it's a very weird authority without kind of the—
- DONIN: Well, you've got the authority of your office now.
- AGOSTO: Right. And so it's an interesting space. But, yes, it is hard in that respect. But I've made friends with people not in the division. What I do get is access to a lot more people not in the dean of the college division. So I've been able to kind of—and some people that are in my same position—so, like, Aurora [Matzkin] and Nariah [Broadus] who are doing similar work but in other spaces.
- DONIN: Yes.
- AGOSTO: I've really gotten to kind of build that community.

DONIN: Are there times when you feel like you're an outsider? I mean, are there groups that make you feel like an outsider here?

AGOSTO: That's an interesting question, because I feel so much less an outsider now that I'm on staff than I ever did as a student. Sometimes—you know? I think sometimes with faculty, like, it gets a little challenging. But even that—I think having built FYSEP up and really worked with faculty on FYSEP, I have a pretty good reputation amongst faculty, and so I've been able to navigate some of those pieces. I think having been a student here—see, it goes back to when you asked the skills question. I don't actually necessarily feel like an outsider amongst any of the groups, even, like—I've got—like, even the custodial staff and FO&M because part of—I mean, I worked—there are people here that still remember me from working in the dish room at DDS. And so I've done—like, there's a certain amount of past that doesn't escape.  
[Laughs.]

DONIN: And you paid your dues.

AGOSTO: Exactly. And allows me to kind of have the conversation but also allows me to code switch between the different groups in a way that I think not everyone can. And so I can speak to—you know, I live in Richardson right now, in an apartment in Richardson. Bill, the custodian—Bill and I have these long conversations about all kinds of stuff, and I can speak to Bill, who other people—I mean, he's told me—he's, like, "People don't even talk to me. They ignore me." Like, who other people may not—he expects me to behave in a very different way than I behave. And so, honestly, most of the time I respect the work he does more than I respect someone who may be well above his pay grade.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

AGOSTO: And so I think you get what you put out, and so I have a decent reputation with people because I really—like, I try really hard to understand where they are coming from. I also have lots of experience. And I think the problem with a lot of people at my level or above is that we start to treat the AAs and the custodial staff like they're invisible. And I think people don't realize that [that] impacts how you're seen by so many other people. And, frankly, the only reason I get things done is because I know enough AAs to kind of get

things done and I care about them. And one of the things I try to do in the division is try to get them more exposed to all kinds of things, because they have got so much knowledge, and they see some of the ugliest things on this campus.

So, yes, so I think it's weird. Like, I actually feel much more connected to the institution and much more embedded in all the layers of the community than I ever did as a student. And even with my current position, there are certainly moments where I am aware of where I am in the institution and what I know and don't know. But, at the same time, I don't feel alienated from people that I'm not able to kind of—if in that moment I can't give them information or I have to tell them, "Hey, clean it up." [Laughs.] Yes, you know?

And, honestly, there are lots of times where I forget that I'm the special assistant. [Laughs.] And so I—and it goes back a little bit—not forget, but goes back to a little bit of what I think—like, the right thing to do isn't always what I necessarily should do as a special assistant if I'm trying to, like, cover my ass or, like—

And, you know, within reason—but sometimes it doesn't make sense to hoard secrets. They're not secrets. This is Dartmouth. Everybody knows everything. Let's not pretend. And sometimes it's just better to go and have the conversation and say, "Hey."

So sometimes I don't really behave the way—or behave, period.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

AGOSTO: But it's problematic, I guess. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Clearly not. It's working.

AGOSTO: Well, you know, I think it's about discretion and knowing—yes, I think if we're going back to what I learned at Dartmouth, I think that's one of the things I learned at Dartmouth: Sometimes you just—sometimes you need to go and do what needs to get done, even if it's not the thing people want you to do, or people are so scared. I think there's a lot of fear at Dartmouth amongst the staff and employees. And I think one of the things that my being an alum or my experience at Dartmouth has done for me is I

don't have that fear about Dartmouth. I think Dartmouth has already done the worst that it could do to me, and so there's a little bit a part of me that's, like, "Eh, bring it on." [Laughs.]

So I'm able to say things that other people can't say, and I'm able to speak up when other people feel like they can't, and I'm willing to do it, and I'm willing to take that on the chin, if need be, because I think sometimes people need to speak up for people that can't say anything. And so I'm happy to do that. And I'm happy to—if I get in trouble for it, if that's the way I go down, then I'm happy to go down swinging. Yes, so that's kind of how I feel.

DONIN: Well, Dartmouth is lucky to have you back.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.] Thanks.

DONIN: They figured that out.

AGOSTO: I hope so, you know?

DONIN: They figured it out.

AGOSTO: I hope so. Yes, I love—you know, I really actually like working here. And I think the last—for me, I have some hope that we're getting back to a place where staff—the recognition that staff really do contribute to the same level as faculty. It's different, wildly different, and one doesn't diminish the other.

DONIN: Right.

AGOSTO: I never really understood why that was the case, and I still don't, and so I'm hopeful. I am hopeful. And that's good. I'm glad to feel hopeful because there was a few years there where I was, like, Rrrrr! It's time to leave Dartmouth.

DONIN: Yes.

AGOSTO: But I stuck it out. It's important to stick it out.

DONIN: Yes. Well, that's another one of the lessons you learned.

AGOSTO: Mm-hm.

DONIN: You stuck it out as an undergrad.



AGOSTO: Sometimes you just have to stick it out. Know when to hold 'em; know when to fold 'em.

DONIN: Right.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.]

DONIN: I like that phrase.

AGOSTO: [Laughs.]

DONIN: Okay. Liz, this was great. I'm going to turn off the mics here.

AGOSTO: Okay.

**[End of interview]**