

Damaris Altomerianos '13  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World  
April 6, 2013

WOMICK: I'm Cally Womick, and I'm here interviewing Damaris Altomerianos. We are in Baker Library, and today is the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 2013. So, Damaris, tell me about how you came to Dartmouth. What was it like? How did you find out about it?

ALTOMERIANOS: Sure. I'm from Toms River, New Jersey, my hometown. It wasn't the type of competitive place where everyone was aiming to go to an Ivy League institution and that was on people's radar. In fact, I didn't know what that was. I didn't know what Dartmouth was until it came time to start applying to things, and people were sort of saying, "Well, why aren't you applying to these sorts of schools?" "Why aren't these schools, like, on your list?" They sort of like—all the questions from people were sort of what brought me to think of, *What is this?* Like, I didn't know what that was. [Chuckles.] I know about these, like, eight schools. I just didn't know.

I played violin for a very long time. I started when I was eight. And for a while when I was growing up my sort of dream was to just keep playing violin. And I think as a result, these sorts of schools weren't as on my radar because I was more interested in what a school had to offer in terms of music opportunities, and I wasn't really as focused on the academic rigors that a place would offer. But I think once things sort of, quote, "worked out"—and I'll use that to mean that, you know, as people would say, "SAT scores were, like, going reasonably well and GPA is going reasonably well," and then I thought, *Well, maybe I can do other things. Maybe I can see how far I can go in this other, another world.* And I realized I didn't want to stop learning in a formal way. And so I thought, *Okay, well, lemme figure out this college thing.*

And then, again, I didn't know about Dartmouth. And so I applied to a bunch of schools, and [chuckles] very, very honestly realized that because Dartmouth's application was not too complicated [chuckles], why not add that into the mix? So [laughs] that is absolutely what happened. And I didn't really do my research on it or really think about it. It

seemed like a lovely place, and it had its quirks. And I figured, *Well, I'll learn more about these schools after the fact anyway, so it is whatever it is, and the applications are out now, and it's fine.*

I was really excited, of course, when I got in, and then I came up for Dimensions [Weekend] and started thinking about it, and I didn't really know—I didn't really know—I didn't really know Dartmouth in the way that I know it now, and I don't think that anyone can know Dartmouth in its fullest until they're here. And you can read lots of things, but that really won't explain it. I mean, people told me that, you know, the Greek system is really large here, right? But then they sort of a qualify it with statements like, "Oh, but it's so different from other places that you can't really understand it." "It's so welcoming and everyone can find their place in it." And they make these statements that make you feel like it's not a big deal, and so it doesn't really permeate any sort of campus life or culture, is sort of what I was concluding.

And so, as someone who didn't want to drink until 21 and sort of maintain that, I was kind of like, *Oh, well, then I shouldn't be worried about coming here. Like, this drinking culture that I was assuming just because of the Greek system doesn't actually exist because the Greek system doesn't seem to matter to people, and so what's the difference? It doesn't really matter at all. None of this matters. Everyone can do their own thing, and everyone's appreciated and loved. Because, look, people are singing and dancing to have us come here, so therefore everyone must be fully loved and embraced in a beautiful sense of community.*

And so I thought, *Well, I'm looking forward to a really welcoming, embracing community. I'm looking for a beautiful campus.* And we definitely have that. I was looking for amazing professors who were not only really skilled in their field and experts in their topics but also wonderful instructors and teachers who care about students individually, and we for sure have that.

I wanted to make sure I had the opportunity to play in a symphony orchestra and one that was really—held itself to

high standards and with a music director who's really spectacular, and we have that.

So to me, everything sort of worked, and it sort of just clicked. I wanted to be around people who are bright and curious and interested in lots of different things. I was looking at another school-- that I was sort of between these two schools. And I felt like that school—as a government/economics major, I felt like that school would be sort of more specialized for those sorts of things. And while that's great, I didn't to just be around government/econ types of people, if you want to type people by their majors which is iffy to do, too.

But anyway, so I thought, *Okay, well—okay, Dartmouth sounds great.* For all these reasons. Like I said. Sort of what seems to be, like, a wonderful, embracing community, beautiful, beautiful campus, outstanding professors who are also really connected to students, a really promising symphonic orchestra experience and great music director. So these were some things that mattered a lot.

WOMICK: So how did all that play out during your freshman year?

ALTOMERIANOS: Well, freshman year, in a lot of ways I don't see as a part of my time at Dartmouth. In a lot of ways, I see it as its own separate time, and I think I look at sophomore fall as my first term at Dartmouth—at Dartmouth, that is, as I know it. And I look at my first year here—and, very honestly, it just looks like lots of rainbows and butterflies, sunshine everywhere and everything—to me, at least, in my own experience; I'm not gonna speak for everyone because I know everyone has different experiences, especially for the first year.

My first year here was really wonderful. It's really beautiful, and I feel like I was very, very lucky in so many ways here. I definitely noticed that some of my realities weren't quite accurate, but I actually didn't really, fully realize that until sophomore year anyway. So I was sort of still living in that happy little cloud of what I perceived to be the school.

And I met amazing friends, and I'm really close with them, and we've stayed really, really close throughout our time here, and that's been very meaningful.

I ended up in the Dartmouth Symphony Orchestra, which has been probably one of the biggest parts of my time at Dartmouth. You know, I took great classes and connected with professors immediately, and I have great memories of just sitting on the Green in the beginning of spring and enjoying the sunshine, of walking down to the river and sitting there with friends, meeting them for the first time in orientation in fall, of jumping around in the snow [chuckles] when we first had snowfall.

I think all those memories are just—they're really special but to me they're very—they fit within this first year context that I have in my mind, at least.

WOMICK: So during your first year, how did you find friends? Your freshman floor? Did you go on a DOC trip? Symphony orchestra? Classes?

ALTOMERIANOS: Mm-hm. So I felt like I definitely met lots of friends slash acquaintances in all those areas. I really love meeting people, and so I wanted to meet lots and lots of them, and I think I did—I really love doing that. And I met some of my closest friends in a combination of what you mentioned. So I think my first-year floor and through the DSO.

So I was really lucky, actually. My current roommate, and one of my closest friends ever and also she happens to also be a co-manager with me of the DSO—lived right next door, and so that was really convenient and wonderful. And then a couple of other close friends also lived on this floor.

But then I also knew—I met someone from Dimensions who lived two floors above us—or one floor above us. And then I met someone in orientation week who lived two floors above us, and we all sort of became friends very, very quickly. And we've remained friends till now. Like, I just saw them all last night. And so that was really, really lucky.

It's a funny group because we're all really quite different. I think on the surface value people are really surprised that we're friends, but I think for us it makes perfect sense, but we really enjoy each other's company. And through the DSO I met some really good friends, too. Yeah, it's a mix.

WOMICK: So a shift from freshman year to the rest of Dartmouth. Tell me about that.

ALTOMERIANOS: Yeah. So, like I said before, I feel like sophomore fall is my first time at Dartmouth as I really knew it. So it was a combination of things, I suppose. It was that, you know, our first-year floor was all broken up, so I felt like that sense of community was sort of shattered. And then, you know, sophomore year housing isn't really quite the same, so didn't really bond with the floor because people—I think what happens is people get told by upper-class students that sophomore-year housing is different, and so they make it different. But if upper-class students could stop telling first-year students that “next year's going to be different,” then maybe it wouldn't be different. That is what it is. I truly think that's one of the biggest factors of why that exists in the way that it does.

And I was living close by some of my friends because we actually, year to year, made sure that we would live close to each other, so we would sort of like—regardless of everyone's housing number—like, the only one that mattered was the lowest one, right? Or the lowest one that needed to count as—actually count, because you can pull people in, of course. And so we would negotiate how we would live based on how we could live together, which is also, I think, really special. And so I lived nearby them, which is so important because I don't think I would have—I don't know if I would have been able to do sophomore year otherwise.

So there was, like, the housing thing. That was different. And then the very obvious one was sort of rush, right? Like, that was something that I didn't think would have that big of an effect on everyone. Even it has an effect on people who don't even rush. And I was so upset about how it looked like it was changing our class, and, you know, I had so much faith in our class in our first year and felt like we were just such a, you know, really great group of people, and it seemed like there were just wonderful people all over the place who really wanted to get to know everyone and were so open-minded about people and just had the right attitude.

And then I saw this sort of shift in people, I mean, maybe it was a shift or maybe I perceived it incorrectly. But it seemed like people just cared so much more about these things that aren't real. Like, these artificial constructs of status and these new definitions of their communities. So, it was weird to me that people would feel like they needed to automatically love this group of people just because they shared the same, like, letters on their sweatshirts. Like, what if you don't like that group of people?

And then also it was sort of like why are you sort of pulling us all away from these other people whom you love dearly and spent most of your time with this year? It's, like, what is this? What is happening? Why are we redefining our lines and creating lines, even, to begin with. Not just redefining them, but creating them. That was frustrating.

And I was really frustrated about how it changed people's self-image. These people that I just saw as amazing people were now questioning their sense of self-worth, and their self-image was really affected by this. To me, that was maybe one of the most tragic things of all. Why is it that people are questioning *who they are* based on this sort of like activity, I would say, is what I would call this, right?—of assigning themselves to organizations? Like, people put a big emphasis on, like, oh, like, the rush process. Okay, but it's really just like figuring out, like, which organization, another organization you're going to be part of, right? It's another organization. Yeah.

And it was so weird. You know, just really upsetting. It was weird to me that it was sort of like, that was the way that you would define yourself. It was, like, "first name, comma, year, comma, house, period." What??

So anyway, all of that whole thing was really upsetting to me, in addition to being more in tune with sort of the other issues that are, okay, not caused by this thing but I think not fixed as quickly as possible because of this thing. And so those issues I would consider—like hazing, drinking and sexual assault—I don't think that—I mean, I obviously know that the Greek system does not cause those things, right? Being in a Greek organization does not cause those things. But I do think that, by design, just by design of, like, how this "Greek

system” (quotes) exists on this campus makes it so that we can’t remedy some of those other things as quickly as we would like to.

And I do think that some of those things—I think some of those organizations can be useful in aiding that, but I think they lose that ability when they forget about that purpose. So—that sounds like so vague. More specifically, it’s like I really have—I think that—I have a lot of faith in sororities and their ability to build a community of women, and as a result, hypothetically, if they built a community of women, then maybe they could make it so that this whole construct could be better for everyone. And I would say that that would be sort of like not existing as a whole, right?

So it’s sort of like—I’m so ramble-y. I’m really sorry. It’s sort of like how in a nonprofit—sort of in some ways, every nonprofit’s mission should be to shut itself down, right? Like, if you have a great soup kitchen in New York and it’s doing really, really well, that’s great. But if someone comes up with you an offer, sort of like, “I have a way for you to end hunger in New York,” okay, you’re going to pick that, right? And so your end goal should be to shut yourself down. If you end hunger, then you don’t need a soup kitchen. This was a really great thought that a close friend, a Dartmouth ’11, shared with me once. I think it’s so true.

And I think, like, in some ways my faith in sororities or even in co-ed houses that happen to have a lot of socially-minded people—would be that their purpose should be to want to end this whole thing, right? Especially when you see concentrations of power in all-male spaces.

But, then, I guess I was frustrated that I didn’t necessarily see that happening. It was, like, you know, you would ask people, like, “Why are you joining this house?” And it was upsetting to me when their reasons would be, like, “Oh, like, I don’t know. I just like these social events.” And while that’s important, we need social events, it’s, like, we don’t/you don’t need this—we don’t need to be designing our social system in this way to get the social events. Like, the benefits that we currently see from the Greek system, which, I would argue, are, like, mentorship to some degree, community in some degree, social events and social outlets, some sort of

networking sort of component that has to do with career orientation, whatever—those things, you can get in a different construct. You don't need this to get those things, and if we all, as a whole, like, could realize that and decide that we can do better than that, that we should do better than that, I think that's a Dartmouth I would be really, really proud of.

And I guess not seeing that was inconsistent with my view of people from my first year here. And so in sophomore fall, I just felt like—I think that's why I felt like it was my first year at Dartmouth as I knew it, because I felt like I had a bigger understanding of what was going on in our campus and what all of this meant. And, combined with that, I felt like I—hmm. How to explain this?

I was almost really glad that I felt like I was outside of this Dartmouth mainstream way of thinking. Like, some people say, like, it's nice to feel a sense of belonging and to feel like you're, like, inside of a thing, right? But in some ways, I didn't feel that way in sophomore fall, and I'm really glad that was the case, right? 'Cause I would rather—I think we should all rather-- hope that we can identify under a Dartmouth umbrella before any of these divisions that don't make a ton of sense.

So I think, like, exclusive groups make sense to be exclusive if they have a purpose for being exclusive. Like, the DSO needs to be exclusive because we have auditions because you need to be able to play an instrument, because we need to, like, produce concerts, right? Like, there was a purpose here. So that, I think, is fine. So I think kind of being in the DSO makes a lot of sense because, like, there's something under that, right? Like, there's a statement—there's a statement under being part of this orchestra, which is that, like, you know, maybe it's that you spend lots of years playing your instrument because you really care about classical music. Maybe it's you practice a lot—whatever it is. But there's something there.

But to put as your identity something else, like these labels of a house but, like, what does that even mean? Especially for women, when the process is supposed to be somewhat—almost random or advertised to be as, “every



place will be a great place and great experience and there are great people everywhere.” If that’s really true, then why are we defining ourselves and creating, like, a great sense of pride or whatever, identity, based on these places? If it’s somewhat random, then it should be somewhat random. Either-- let’s decide, “Do you want to be random or not?”

Anyway, so all of that happened. [Chuckles.] Yeah. And I think that’s what it was.

WOMICK: And so you didn’t rush.

ALTOMERIANOS: I did, and I dropped out.

WOMICK: You did. You dropped out.

ALTOMERIANOS: Yeah.

WOMICK: What made you decide to do that?

ALTOMERIANOS: Well, I rushed because—[Chuckles.] A couple of things. Couple things. First of all, unfortunately, I was told in my first year here that there are some places that you really should aim to join, some Greek houses you should aim to join...one Greek house you should aim to join [chuckles] if you want to really develop your leadership skills. And looking back, that statement just doesn’t make a ton of sense to me. But I was told that from an upper-classman, and I thought, *Wow! Like, I see you as leaders, and you’re all in this place, and I want to be a leader. Like, I want to develop leadership skills. I think that’s really helpful. And so I should want to be in that place.* And so then part of rushing was for that.

The other part of rushing was that I was told that it’s, like, you just get to meet lots of people—like, lots of Dartmouth women all, like, in one chunk of a couple hours’ chunks. *Of course I want to do that! Who doesn’t want to walk around and meet lots of upper-classmen and get to know them? Like, I would love to do that!* And, yeah, I think I did care about these things, and I think I did care about doing a thing that was sort of advertised as, like, *the* thing to be doing—like, *the* Dartmouth thing to be doing. So I thought, *Yeah, I’ll do this. I’ll rush.*

And then I was just so upset by, like, the whole thing, and I just didn't—I wasn't pleased by it at all. Didn't think I should continue.

WOMICK: Did your friend group change after rush?

ALTOMERIANOS: No. Luckily we all—I mean, yeah, luckily most of us all stayed really, really close, yeah. So that's really great.

WOMICK: That *is* lucky.

ALTOMERIANOS: Yeah. I know. It's really, really lucky, actually, so we're really grateful for that.

WOMICK: So not being a part of the Greek community, how do you think that's affected your experience at Dartmouth?

ALTOMERIANOS: I've really enjoyed it. I think that it's allowed me to be able to look at things, being apart from them, without having to try to defend—like, to try to defend my decision to be part of it, right? I think that when you're in it—I think that people who are in it should be very critical and very, very objective about the whole thing and try to think about it as if it has nothing to do with them. But I think because people choose one way or the other, we're, like, inherently, like—there's, like, obviously, conflict in that. I mean, I'm obviously biased towards saying that it shouldn't exist, and people who are in it...—like, that's so natural.

But I really like that—I think that I've been able to look at it, like, while taking a step back. I also really like that—I think that it's allowed me to be able to better define myself by other things, and I'm really grateful for that. I'm really happy that—I would like to think that if people were to introduce me to somebody else or like to mention my name to someone else, a word in passing, they'd be like, "Oh, I met this person—." And you, like, tell a little bit about your meeting with this person, whatever. I would like to think that because it's not Damaris comma '13 comma house period, I would like to think that it's, like, Damaris, comma, '13, comma—like, DSO, comma, Link-Up, comma, DAO [Dartmouth Asian Organization], comma, whatever.

And I would rather those things because I chose deliberately to do those things, so those things have some statement about me because I entirely chose that as opposed to, like, having it be a decision that's, like, somewhat computerized and somewhat arbitrary.

WOMICK: Gotcha.

So you mentioned a little bit ago that not being part of the rush process or joining a house made you feel kind of separate and that you liked that?

ALTOMERIANOS: Mm-hm.

WOMICK: Have there been any times at Dartmouth where you felt kind of separate from the mainstream culture and it wasn't a positive experience?

ALTOMERIANOS: Hmm. Yeah, recently I was at an event, and, like, someone pushed me on my criticism of the Greek system. Which is, like, fine. People sort of do that all the time. And I just sort of gave my answers that I almost always give. I feel like it's like a canned speech by now. It's, like, because people ask so often! Anyway,—[Laughs.]

I almost, like, wanna make a greatest hits album of, like, all the main points that I want you to know.

WOMICK: [Laughs.]

ALTOMERIANOS: Anyway,—[Laughs.]. Someone pushed me on that, and then in response to what I said, this person said, "So you just shouldn't be at this school." And I was, like, "Huh! Interesting." And he was just, like, "Yeah, you should have done your research before you came here to realize that you wouldn't have liked it, and so, like, anyone could have figured out that this is a big part of our," *our*, "Dartmouth, and so if you don't like it, then you should have not come here or you should have left," is kind of what he was saying.

That sort of like "love it or leave" attitude I think is so harmful, because it will inhibit any change in any institution ever. Like, think about that for any government. Literally *anything!* To be a "love it or leave it." Like, that's not the best attitude.

So, that aside, I think there's something to be said about that. People often say, like, "Oh, if you've been so upset about the sort of institutions and culture and things here, then, like, why do you still really like it, or do you even like it and why?" And I think I've often said, "Well, I feel like it takes—two extremes: either a lot of optimism or hope or, like, faith or something that I think that, you know, a lot of people here have, which is that it *will* get better. Things *will* get better, and it will be amazing. We have great potential to have this great institution if we just make some solid changes here, real changes, not like low-hanging fruit changes.

And so I think I am part of that camp, so I, like, dream of this better Dartmouth, which is why I've put time and energy towards things that try to make that change happen. Like, if I really, really didn't like it and was so dissatisfied that I didn't want to see improvement / didn't think that improvement could exist, then I would join the second bucket of people, which I would say, like—hypothetically, right?—would be the ones who would not put time and energy during their time here to make it better and would almost sort of want to see it, like, destroy itself, right? [Chuckles.]

This is so silly. But you know in *Batman*, how, like,—oh, I forget the—like, the bad guy's name in *Batman*, whatever. What his name? Whatever. That person was saying, like, you know, "We just need to destroy everything and start all fresh because there are things wrong here that, like, can't be fixed." And so I think, like, that sort of attitude I think is the other extreme. It's, like, either we can make it really, really spectacular and really push for great change, or we can let it destroy itself and rebuild itself.

And I've often thought about that. It's, like, why do I put time into trying to make things better here? Why isn't it the case that we tell—when we advertise Dartmouth to prospective students, why don't we just let the students who would love to perpetuate, like, the sort of not-so-great things here come here, and so it sort of, like, spirals downward and we get, like, maybe a backlash effect? Right? So, like, I think about it like a spring sometimes. Dartmouth is like a spring, right? I think that—you know, as you push down on the spring; it

makes it so that the jump back up when you release it is— will get that much much higher.

And so I think if you're already at this point, you can either, like, sort of push it to go upwards or you can push it to go downwards and then let go, right? And so both ways are means of change. They're just different. And, like, some would argue that pushing downwards is, like, why would you do that? What if you never let go of the spring to let it go back up?

But I think those are maybe two ways of looking at it. The original question I think is something I got far from, but— [Laughs.]

WOMICK: No, that was great.

ALTOMERIANOS: But, yeah, I think that's something to answer that question.

WOMICK: So what would you say has been your most meaningful involvement on campus, to you or to campus?

ALTOMERIANOS: [Pause.] Can I give two separate ones?

WOMICK: Yeah, sure.

ALTOMERIANOS: Okay. So I think perhaps—I don't even know. Perhaps the most meaningful—ah, this is debatable—perhaps the most meaningful thing that I think I've done for the campus was a program—was, like, the introduction of a program that talked about what it means to be a diverse community that wants to, like, embrace multiple identities. And that was basically something that happened over my sophomore spring, summer and junior fall. And so there was this wonderful '11 who, in her senior spring, got people together and basically said, "We would love—I would love to see you all work towards creating this program, which is, because currently orientation week doesn't really have, something along those lines. We don't really know what that should look like or how it should be designed." And so we spent some time thinking about that. And then I was the only '13, like, on for sophomore summer who was able to really spend time doing this, and so I threw everything towards this project.

I was simultaneously directing Orientation Team that fall, and so it was really easy for me to do both at the same time because the meetings would be, like,—it was, like—you know, you had to meet with the same sorts of people to get these things done, and so it started to make sense. So I was really involved with that orientation process, for Orientation Team, which is, like, social things. And then also because I was speaking on the, like, alcohol panel that year, too, so I felt I was really involved with orientation. It was really nice. For the '15s.

And so this middle piece about that program. We sort of named it the Dartmouth Patchwork Initiative just because we needed a name for it, and we found this great group called Ordinary People from Cornell, and they write skits that try to get at these really complicated topics, and they try to do so in a way that is effective for presentation to a large audience.

And then I think what was really rewarding was seeing them commenting and performing. And then designing the facilitation with the help of wonderful people in OPAL, and then from that, seeing how the conversation would spin. And I think what was really, really great about that moment was seeing Spaulding filled with people who just had lots of great things to say and people being very open to share their stories, and their peers affirming those stories. And I think in that moment I so much hoped for this better, you know, more improved Dartmouth, and I think *those* sorts of things are the ones that make me hopeful for, like, that first version. It's, like, we don't need to push and the cloud will go downwards and then go upwards. Like, we can actually just go upwards. Because I felt like it was a really good sense of community in that room. So I think maybe that was one of the more meaningful things I've done for quote "campus."

And I think perhaps the most meaningful thing that I've done for myself was to be part of the Dartmouth Symphony Orchestra. And I joined that my first year, fall term, and I joined as a violinist. I play violin. But then in sophomore year, start of sophomore fall I started to manage the orchestra with my really close friend. And it's been really quite rewarding. I think it's been rewarding not only musically but on the management side. It's really pushed me to think about what it means to manage, what it means to lead, what it means to

be strategic about plans and what it means to build a sense of community within an organization. And I think those are all really important things.

WOMICK: Great.

So you're almost done with Dartmouth. You're almost out of here. And with all of your experience and perspective, what would you tell to people who are considering coming here or maybe who have already decided to come here? What advice would you give them?

ALTOMERIANOS: Hmm. For the people who've already decided to come here—so they're already signing the papers and are coming here— I would say that I would love for them to realize that they should, without invalidating people's experiences, that they should question the institutions and traditions that they have inherited and that they should continue to work to make Dartmouth a better place, healthier place, more equal place but that they should never feel like they need to entirely self-sacrifice to do so and that they should do everything they can to balance those two goals: so to take care of themselves and to take care of not only, like, their health and their well-being and their grades, their happiness-- but then also giving back to Dartmouth. I think finding that balance is important.

And then for people who are thinking about coming to Dartmouth, I would say to them a couple of things. One is you should know yourself and really think about you, you, you. Like, who are *you*? How self-aware are you? What type of person are you? Before coming to a place like this. If you're the type person who doesn't really have a strong sense—a strong grounding sense, and if you're the type of person—so someone who—hmm—like, be easily swayed by others or cares a lot about sort of constructs of status, then maybe you shouldn't come here. I don't think this is a good place for you, and I don't think you're good for this place. I think you should reconsider those things.

I think that's coming from observations of people who in a lot of ways are really, really special and wonderful, and not that they're not special and wonderful now, but it's, like, you can *see* the effects the place had on them, and you wonder if

they could have really flourished elsewhere. Anyway, so I would say, like, if you think that you're in that category, then maybe reconsider.

And I would say if you're really looking for a place—if you're not in that category and you're really looking for a place that will really challenge you and be, like, just create, you know, an environment that makes you just—by design, makes you think about really important things, really important issues, if you want a place with, again, all these amazing professors, the most beautiful campus, some of the most engaging peers with really insightful perspectives, then I think you should come here. I think Dartmouth has a lot to offer, a whole lot, so much to offer.

I mean, I've changed a lot in my time here. These years here can be totally formative and can do so much to shape people. But they shape certain types of people, right? And I think the people that they do best in shaping are the ones who, I think, really have their feet planted and have a strong sense of their principles and values and understanding what that means and making sure that seeking some construct of a status is not as important as figuring out what really matters to them based on principles and, like, larger principles, not just Dartmouth constructs of what is important but, like, what the world perceives as important and valuable.

So I think—yeah, it's a different place for different people, and I think that's kind of what I would say.

WOMICK: So looking ahead, what do you see your involvement being after graduation?

ALTOMERIANOS: With Dartmouth?

WOMICK: With Dartmouth.

ALTOMERIANOS: Hmm. Well, I think at this point I feel a little bit exhausted. I think talking about campus things can be really, really tiring, and I think by senior year, like, a handful of people who have been talking about this for the past four years end up having to talk about it more because people like seek them out and want to talk about these things, which is, like, lovely but really tiring. And so I think, you know, I think right after



graduation, I don't see myself, like, charging into, like, running some alumni thing, right? I think I need some time just to step away and just to self-care a little bit and do other things.

But I would love to get involved down the road, because I think that alumni are a really big part of this community, and I really do believe that there are misunderstandings, miscommunication between alumni and students, administrators, and I think if we can work to correct those, we'd be in a great place.

I think that alumni assume things about the students and what students want and make decisions based on that, and students see those decisions and conclude that alumni will make those decisions no matter what and that they have no power to sway them. But they were actually part of that decision making in the first place. And so I think students—and so it's a two-way thing. It's, like, alumni are not quite understanding where students are and what students want fully, completely, and students also are miscommunicating to alumni and misunderstanding their intentions. So I think, like, correcting for that loop will be great because I think the administration in a lot of ways responds to that loop.

WOMICK: So in terms of your own personal growth while here, talk about that, whatever that's meant for you.

ALTOMERIANOS: I think I changed a lot in my time here. Like, a lot! [Chuckles.] I look back back to some things I thought and said and did my first year here and don't really understand how that was. So I'm really grateful for Dartmouth. Like, was my first year really, really fun? Yeah. But I would rather be where I am now than where I was then.

I think that we haven't all seen the full effects of how Dartmouth has changed us, and I think we won't see them until we leave. I think I really found, like—I think I've been better able to pinpoint exactly things that I really care about and why and to at least somewhat articulate why. And I think it's challenged me. "*It*." Not "*it*." What does that even mean? *The people* at Dartmouth that I have spent time with have challenged me to be more thoughtful, more mindful, to be more critical.

I think maybe that's one of the biggest values of Dartmouth is that, if you allow it to, it can let you be much more critical. And I think there's a healthy amount of skepticism that exists. So I think people can either turn out of here—in two directions: either that direction or else the other direction of, like, blindly obeying something that exists because—for the sake of tradition, whatever that means. I think we should be encouraging people to go the way of questioning things. I think that's healthy.

WOMICK: How does Dartmouth compare to where you came from before, the sort of place that you grew up in?

ALTOMERIANOS: So different! I grew up in Toms River, New Jersey, which is along the Jersey shore. So different! I mean, well, the obvious things. Like, geographically it's obviously very different in that we don't have a beach. [Laughter.] That is really sad sometimes. [Laughs.] I really like the beach.

Sort of demographically it's obviously very different. [Chuckles.] I remember just being amazed at the amount of wealth that some people have here and really just so shocked by how that can be someone's normal. [Long pause]

WOMICK: Yeah.

ALTOMERIANOS: [Laughs.] At the same time, I've also been really inspired. I talk to people who come from backgrounds and homes that have been very, very difficult and seeing their strength and ability to continue to achieve and to continue to be hopeful and to be really good people despite really, really tough circumstances deserves a lot of admiration. And I think that I've definitely seen that here in ways that I may not have really seen—I mean, definitely at home I see some of that, right? But I think Dartmouth—also it takes people who are much more extreme cases of that sort of strength. So, yeah, I think it's, like, two extremes of that.

I think one that made me sort of sad that I realized as difference between here and home is that I think there is so much more individualism in my hometown. That's somewhat upsetting. Like, yes, I understand that some things are more

practical than others, and so there's some conformity because of practicality. Like, if there's just a nice pair of boots, it just, like, really, really works, I understand that people will buy those boots and that is what it is, right? [Chuckles.] It's, like, okay, it's fine. That's just how that is.

But, yeah, I think it is upsetting that there's much less individualism. Like, I have lots of things in my closet that I've been much less inclined to wear, and I've realized it makes me sad. And it's my own fault. Like, I should just have the boldness to do that. But I do think it would be really—somewhat difficult for me to do that. I mean, I wish I could have this inner sense of strength and self-confidence to feel like, *No! I'm gonna wear these crazy things that I really like.* [Chuckles.] But, yeah, I think that's something I've noticed, too.

WOMICK: Do you think that the Dartmouth community is good at bringing people from all these different backgrounds together?

ALTOMERIANOS: I think it—hmm. I think it brings people to this place, but I think it doesn't do—I think we could do better. “We,” including students, could do better at making that a bigger part of everyone's life. Like, meeting people from different backgrounds should be part of everyone's life here. It's really shocking to me how we can all go through our time here having just spent our time with such a small cross-section and not really branching out. That, like, defeats the purpose, right? Like, if we're supposed to be able to really learn from each other and each other's experiences and to be inspired by each other and to really push each other and challenge each other as peers here, you can't get that when you're only with people who are just like you. This is why I like the idea of sort of random assortment for a social system. I really would love to see us in a residential college system in a full way, very full way. In a way that requires,—so this sort of big vision is still entirely impractical in some ways.

But imagine if we were to sort of just clear out our residential spaces, right?—and, like, take back all of these Greek houses. And so now there's empty buildings, and now you can remodel them essentially, right? And it would be really nice if we could make them all the same size, to hold the

same number of people, I mean, and, like, of the same, like, quality level, so it's not like some people are living at really, really bad-quality housing versus good. So we'd even that out.

And then wouldn't it be really nice if each cluster, really, could be its own thing, randomly assigned, so that you can imagine, like—imagine the Choates, for example, right? Wouldn't it be great if there could be people of all different years there, but keeping first-year students on the same floor, who—say, like, imagine Brown. Brown One could be first-year students. Brown Two can be sophomores. Brown Three—like—and you can make it like that, and people have the option of, you know, of co-ed floors or, like, single-sex floors, whatever you want—like, whatever. Make all the options available for each place, and people still have some choice in that.

But each place also has a physical plant. So, like, pick any of these houses—Webster Ave, right? And so if any—pick one of those—could be connected to the Choates—like, connected not literally, but connected to the Choates—where, like people who live in the Choates would now have that whole physical plant to, like, cook together, eat dinners together, to have dance parties together, to play pong together, where you at least have a sense of space that you can call your own that is with people that were randomly assorted there. That, I think would be a great thing because you need to get people to meet other people in social settings and in living settings. I think it needs to be random to get there. I really do.

And I really think that wouldn't diminish sense of community. I really think people can find a community in that community. I don't think people—like, people would argue, "But it wouldn't be as close because they wouldn't find as great as friends." No, I think you would. And I think to a large degree, like—because of the counterfactuals [that are], like, fundamentally unobservable, you don't know. Maybe you missed out on some of the best friends you could have had here *because* you didn't branch out to other people, *because* you kept yourself in this small group that then rushed the same house, which then...—whatever.

And so I wish that we could all have that sense of space, 'cause space is important. Physical plants really, really matter. And I think everyone here, regardless of paying this amount of dues or, like, getting into this place, should have a sense of space that they can call part of their own.

WOMICK: Have you been able to find a space like that at Dartmouth that you feel is your own?

ALTOMERIANOS: Hmmmm. Not like a physical plant, I would guess. I mean, obviously, like, the neutral ones. Like, "Collis and the Hop and the library." But I'd say, like, not, like, a social—like a physical plant for the sole purpose of, like, a social body. I think that was upsetting. But I don't even know how many people really feel that way, obviously, because not every place can actually be open and host events, so there's that whole issue, too.

WOMICK: So where have you lived while you've been at Dartmouth?

ALTOMERIANOS: I lived in the Choates, then I lived in Mid-Fay, then I lived in La Casa (that was really fun), then I lived in Gile, then I lived off-campus, then I lived in Gile again.

WOMICK: Wow, so a bunch of different places.

ALTOMERIANOS: Mm-hm.

WOMICK: How were those experiences different?

ALTOMERIANOS: Well, I really loved the Choates because I really liked that—I really liked the random assortment. Like, it was just so cool to be around such a wide range of people. That was really cool. And, yeah, I found my own, like, circle of friends. That's fine. That's just what will happen, fine. But it was really cool to be able to, like, walk down the hall and to, like, be able to, like—so I just loved how on our floor—our floor was pretty close. You know, someone who I would never talk to now because of these sort of, like, social barriers, would just come up to my room and be like, "Hey, Damaris, do you have a Band-aid?" Yeah, yeah, you know.

I went into, like, one of the rooms, and I was, like, "Hey, do you have baggy sweatpants I can borrow I need to wear for

like a dance thing I'm doing." Like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah!" And, like, those are really little things, but those are pretty big, too. Like, or one of them would see that I'm sick and he'd be, like—come over. It would just be, like, "Oh, like, here. I have, like, this—like, Vitamin C thing you should take." Or whatever, right?

I haven't had that type of interaction with people after my first year here. I mean, I see a lot of these floormates around campus, and it's just, like,—now it seems like they're unreachable; like, they're untouchable or like—not untouchable in that sense, but I mean, like,—like, inaccessible is—sorry, that was the better word, *inaccessible*. And that, like, now there are all these, like, sort of invisible walls between people. And, like, for me to reach out to certain people is, like, less normal now than it was in our freshman floor. That's so sad.

So I really liked the Choates because of that different type of interaction.

I didn't really like Mid-Fay 'cause I didn't feel like we were—no one was close. Like, what was that? I don't know. That was all sophomore fall.

I really liked La Casa. That was really fun. I really loved that, actually. My Spanish—I don't think my Spanish got much better, but I got to have lots of good food and meet amazing people. It was really great.

Gile's been pretty fine. I mean, it's been pretty comfortable. I lived near by a close friend. It's been great.

Off-campus, I didn't like because it was so far. [Chuckles.] 'Cause I stay up late in the library, and so I didn't like walking home late at night. But—really far away. But it was okay.

Yeah, those are my living situations.

WOMICK: That's a lot of different ones.

ALTOMERIANOS: Yeah.

WOMICK: Most people don't have that many.

ALTOMERIANOS: Really? [Laughs.]

WOMICK: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think I should or that you'd like to talk about? Anything about Dartmouth or you? Anything that's happened since coming to Dartmouth?

ALTOMERIANOS: Hmm.

WOMICK: Totally open.

ALTOMERIANOS: I guess I just wanted to point out this other point that I think, like, doesn't get talked about enough. So I really think in a lot of ways, improving students' engagement with the arts, direct engagement with the arts, is perhaps one of our best ways of improving our campus climate. I think it's the Year of the Arts, but I don't think we went about it in a way that I was hoping we would go about it, and he's been focusing on arts presentation and visiting artists, which is lovely. Like, I love that I can go to the Emerson String Quartet this week. You know, it was fantastic.

But I think really, really thinking about ways to very, like, on a larger scale, improve students' direct engagement with the arts. By that I mean, like, student ensembles, people taking lessons, people who have never taken lessons who want to take lessons. Like, random dance classes. Like, literally just making that a bigger—making the arts, like, a more integral part of people's lives. Not just, like, going to a concert passively but, like, *actively* engaging with that. I think that may be one of the biggest ways for us to improve our sense of community.

For a couple of reasons. One is—like, sort of like the most extreme version is, like, you can convey a lot towards social impact and social justice (whatever that means) through the arts. Like, that's very real. But I think on sort of, like, a more regular, consistent scale is, like,—people feel connected to people when they build something with them, more than even a conversation with them. And I think what you're doing when you're creating something with other people and through the arts is, like, you're building something together, right?

Like, you feel close with people in a quartet or with an orchestra or with a dance ensemble or within a theater group because you're building a thing, a really beautiful thing. And I think that's a way to feel connected, and it's a way that—in a lot of ways, it doesn't—it won't—like, those sorts of things don't really divide us. Like, to be able to do those things is not dependent upon other, less important things. And it erases—in some ways can erase—not erase, but it can decrease in importance the other parts of our identities that get highlighted too often in other parts of our lives.

And in this place, it's just about you as a person and what that means and, like, what you bring to this, this building of a thing, based on who you are as a whole person, not just, like, the main characteristics that people will rattle off when they're trying to describe someone to you, right? And I think—I have so much hope for investing in the arts here as a means to creating a better community. I wish that we could talk more about that on campus.

WOMICK: Do you think there are any instances of that being done successfully yet?

ALTOMERIANOS: The conversation or, like, the actual thing?

WOMICK: The actual bringing art to the community.

ALTOMERIANOS: Yeah. Well, I think—I mean, in my time here I've seen the DSO really grow and evolve. And I've always just loved this community and that group because it's such a wide range of people, really diverse group of people, where there's *such* a sense of respect and friendship, right? And it amazes me because, you know, those people in any other context probably—I don't think we would all know each other. I don't think we'd all be friends with each other. At least some people, yeah, but not all of them.

And in a lot of the ways that's a beautiful escape, right? Like, when you're doing that thing, like, that's all that really matters, and you can—I mean, Dartmouth is overwhelming, because college is overwhelming, because in college, like, you never have a day off, right? Like, there's always something else to do. Like, in the real world—quote, “real world”—when you're done with work you can go home and,



like, sleep and then you get up in the morning and go back to work. But, like, we don't really have that in college, any college. And so I like that it's a nice escape. I don't know, I feel like a lot of ways, the DSO has just been a great example, I think, for what I think—well, I think it needs to improve on its own, but as something that—as sort of a model. We can have more DSO-like structures. So I think that exists.

WOMICK: Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

ALTOMERIANOS: This project is a really scary one, and I think it's really valuable, and it just reminds me now, while I'm telling you all this, this recorder all this, of how much I wish that we could share stories with each other more often. I think some people do share stories here often, but I wish it could be the normal thing to do, to share stories really often with each other, with people we don't even know too well, to be able to get to know them. I think it's a good means of also breaking down some barriers. So, yeah. So thanks for doing this.

WOMICK: Thank you. I'm gonna turn it off now.

ALTOMERIANOS: I'm sorry I talk so much.

**[End of interview.]**