

Nell Pierce '13
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
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AL-JABAR: Today is Thursday, January 31st, 2013. I'm here at Rauner Library with Nell Pierce, who is a '13. And just to get us started, could you please tell me about your life prior to coming to Dartmouth?

PIERCE: Sure. So I was born in Santa Monica, California, and I grew up there for the first ten years of my life. When I was in California, I lived in a condominium with my two parents and my two younger siblings, my brother Luke and my sister Ricki. And I also had my aunt and uncle living in the building, and my grandparents lived nearby, so it was definitely a—family was a big part of my upbringing, and more than just—beyond my parents. We also had a strong base of family friends in the area, and so I feel like I had several different sets of parents or people watching over me.

I went to—for kindergarten through elementary school, I went to an all-Spanish-speaking school that was a bilingual school, but we had about 45 minutes of English a day. Most of my classmates were of Mexican or Salvadoran descent. . And I didn't have any prior experience or contact with—actually, I take that back. I had had some contact with Spanish growing up when—my mom is an artist, a painter, and my dad is a writer, and when they would work during the days, we went to the house of a—I guess the parents were first-generation Mexicans, and it was sort of a day care, and they also had a big part in my upbringing, and so I learned Spanish just through being in their household from before preschool, I want to say, or during preschool, up until—pretty much up until I was 8 or 9 years old.

And then I moved to Maine when I was 10, or right before I turned 10. That was because I think my parents—well, first of all, for schooling because we couldn't afford to send the kids to anywhere other than the public schools, which in California were kind of falling apart at the time, and also my parents wanted—it was really a change of pace, of lifestyle, and wanted their kids to be able to run out on the streets and

be free of worry. And my dad's whole family was on the East Coast, so my aunt and uncle were both educators in Portland, Maine, and they recommended us to the schools in Yarmouth, Maine, which is where we moved. So that was a big transition. I really resented my parents' [chuckles] decision at the time because I honestly had never even heard of Maine. I thought it was Spain.

AL-JABER: [Laughs.]

PIERCE: I told people I was moving to Spain, and they were like, "What are you talking about?" So I, it was very—I think I figured it out eventually [chuckles], but I—so we moved to Maine in '99, and—let's see. So I started in middle school there and was very interested in—I played sports growing up since I was 5 years old. My dad was my soccer coach, basketball coach and softball coach. Same for my siblings as well. And so that was a big part of my life up until high school. I also was very interested in theater and dance. At the end of middle school, sports seemed to kind of take over my life with travel teams and different things, and I realized there was such a dearth of creativity and I needed to revive that, and so a lot of my high school was about that.

When I was—I would say this is kind a big turning point in my life. When I was 14, I had my first boyfriend, in eighth grade. And his name—well, I guess I'll leave his name out for now. But he was diagnosed with cancer a month and a half into our being together, and then a year later passed away. He had lymphoma. And that was my first—I would say I hit my lowest point when he was diagnosed, and there were barriers to our communication, and I really withdrew socially and from my family. I developed an eating disorder. I became pretty depressed, and when he passed away, I think I'd come to a place where I felt—I realized that I could—I felt like I could communicate with him, whether or not it was in person or whether or not he literally received my letters. It didn't even matter at that point. That was kind of the beginning of sort of a sense of spiritual connection to something greater. So I knew that he was going to die, and I still felt like I could write letters, and I knew that he was hearing it in some way, if that makes sense.

AL-JABER: Mmm.

PIERCE: And also I think my real first conception of empathy, because when I was in the eating disorder and really inside my head, my aunt—my parents and friends had been making comments that I was very defensive in response to—and my aunt had struggled with her own issues of eating and depression, and she approached me and came to me less from a place of accusation and “You look too thin,” et cetera, and more from a place of “Really, how are you, and what’s going on?” and “I’m here for you.” And I was in the middle [chuckles] of this store, I remember, and I just burst into tears and fell into her arms. That reaching out meant so much to me, and it made me realize, *Wow, I really want to reach out and see how other people are doing in this situation.*

And I—when he passed away, I wrote him a letter committing to living out life for him and through him. Obviously, that’s not just me doing that, but carrying his spirit forward, and he was a—I think he would have been a professional snowboarder. That was his passion. And he was a definite risk taker. It just kind of gave me a new sense of purpose in life, and I wanted to know what other people’s sense of purpose was. And so I think it made me much more—I’d always been outgoing and very sensitive person, but it made me much more just sort of available to the people around me.

And when I went to high school with that mentality, I had made the decision that, *Okay, I’m just going to be myself and attract the right people because if people are attracted to me for some façade, then that’s not really genuine.* And I met unbelievable friends, coming up with that attitude. I got involved in theater, started up with dance again. I did play soccer in the fall, but other than that, I really devoted myself to the arts and to an environmental group.

I’ve always been an ocean lover, and I got really into surfing, and I would go before school in the morning with friends. I had a very loving boyfriend, who was also a snowboarder, actually, and he was a very important influence and still is an important figure in my life. We’re not together anymore.

But I feel like high school was a very expansive period of my life, where I felt very affirmed for being exactly who I was in all its imperfections. And so when I was looking at colleges, I first felt that I really wanted to return to California. I started saving up for travel when I was 5 years old [chuckles], and my cousins, Greta and Nikko, whose mother was German, had moved to Germany, and Greta and I decided that we were going to hold lemonade stands or give backrubs to [chuckles] family members or whatever we could do to kind of rake up any coins or dollars that we could to send me to Germany [chuckles] to see her. And so at age 5 we began that, and by the time I was 14 [chuckles], I was able to go.

AL-JABER: Oh, my gosh.

PIERCE: But that started this habit of—I always had a little box in my room that was dedicated to travel money, so even after I went to visit her, I always had money set aside for my own travel, and so I started funding myself to go to California by myself, even when my family wouldn't go, to see old friends, to see my family out there. And my first boyfriend had also moved out there, and so I'd go to see him, and that was a huge part of my life.

And then, during my senior year, I didn't get into my first-choice school, which was Stanford, and I realized that all the other schools I'd applied to were really because I just wanted to be in California and had very little to do with the school, itself, and how it was a fit for me. And in the back of my mind—I had previously thought about taking a year off to establish residency in California, one or two years, so that I could get lower tuition, but then I realized, *You know what? Maybe I should just take a year off anyway, and I don't know if I even want to go to California.*

And I came to visit Dartmouth. Actually, I had applied to Dartmouth—my parents went to Dartmouth, which was a big incentive for me not to go. [Both laugh.] But more than anything, I think I just didn't want to be on the East Coast. I refused to look at schools here.

AL-JABER: Was it because of their experience at Dartmouth?

PIERCE: No, they had a very positive experience. I honestly think it was way more me not wanting to be on the East Coast and the cold and wanting to be in California than anything else. Yeah, I don't think it was very much that they had gone here. I think I just didn't even really consider it. But I think part of it, though, was a self-determination thing. I wanted to decide, *No, California is where I want to be*, and if they said, "Well, you should check out Dartmouth," I was, like, "No, no, no, that's your voice" or something.

Anyway, so I did apply to Dartmouth last minute, and I got waitlisted, but I decided to go check it out anyway, and I remember walking around, thinking, *Wow! See, it was, of course, it was a beautiful, sunny day. People were playing Frisbee on the Green, and I just had this feeling of: a lot of these people look like they could be good friends to me. Or just, they're very approachable. People weren't wearing a lot of makeup. People were playing outside. It just seemed—it seemed like it had a down-to-earth vibe.*

And so I decided to take a year off, and I applied to Dartmouth early decision during that year and got in. During my year off, I moved down to Guatemala because a woman from my town, named Hanley Denning, had gone down in '99 and seen the situation in the Guatemala city garbage dump, which is essentially—during the civil war—they had a 35-year civil war that ended in '65, and tons of—like, hundreds of thousands of people were moved from the rural areas into the city, were displaced and didn't really—and ended up having to squat in small communities. There were a lot of people, so not small population-wise, but really tight *barrios*.

And their livelihood was sorting trash in the Guatemala City garbage dump to sell to private recycling companies because there's no public recycling system. I mean, it was a very legitimate job. You had to have a license to go in. When Hanley first went down, people were living inside the dump with kids. There was no age limit. But then there was a big fire in 2005 because of all the methane gas buildup, and the municipality came in and made regulations, so people weren't allowed to live there. They were on the outskirts, and there were age limits to avoid child labor, although that still happens.

And Hanley started a community center/educational reinforcement center right near the dump, along with some community leaders, and it was called Safe Passage. And it was basically meant to fund the children from the families whose parents worked at the dump to go to school, which is only a half-day in Guatemala. And in public schools you have to pay for books and uniforms, so Safe Passage would fund that and have them come to Safe Passage when they weren't in school, to receive homework help, to have a meal, to kind of—anything that would bring them into a safe, nurturing environment that they couldn't get at home when the parents were working. And many of the parents also had not gone to school, so there wasn't the same kind of reinforcement – such as homework help - at home.

So anyway, I had known about Safe Passage in high school because Hanley's brother was in my class, and Hanley was killed in 2007 in a car accident in Guatemala, but the program was still taking off. And so I went down to—I'd never been there before, but I spoke Spanish from my childhood, and I was interested in social work, teaching.

While I was down there, I got immediately thrust into a teaching position, which I was not equipped to do, but one of the teachers had to—the teacher I was supposed to assist had to leave for family reasons very last minute, and so I was left with these big classrooms of kids and trying to figure out what to do. I did have support from the organization, but I had to get creative. And because arts had been a big part of my life, I started doing a lot of teaching through theater, through writing exercises, drawing exercises, and this made me realize what an inclination and what a deep desire these kids had to be creative. And a lot of talent. But there wasn't an official, sustainable art program within the organization. Certain teachers and volunteers had put a lot of work into running art projects and classes with the kids – but those seemed to come and go because there wasn't a fully recognized and funded program.

And there are about five to six hundred kids in Safe Passage, and there's also a women's and men's literacy program for the parents. So after about five months, I decided to start the Safe Passage Art Program, and I was

able to get \$6,000 of funding through people I was working with in Guatemala City, trying to kind of go around and advocate for this with different local artists, different companies and then also a lot of support from back home. My high school class gave us \$1,000, which was amazing.

And I created a curriculum, started up classes, brought in a lot of local artists to do workshops and then basically said, "I'm not leaving Guatemala until I know that this program lives on without me." The ultimate goal was to take myself out of the equation and have it run, and so we found a replacement. We got it to be a full-paid position, and it has since taken off, and there is an entire team of artists that are running it. There's theater, there is music, there's all kinds of things. I was mostly focusing on visual art when I was there.

But that was a huge, transformative time in my life, where I realized that—I mean, there were just so many moments where I was sitting in the art classroom just by myself or reflecting when all the kids were there, thinking, *This is exactly what I want to be doing*. My heart was so in line with every step I was taking, and to go to college—I was living with people that were—towards the end, I was living with people that were all out of college. Before, I'd been living with other gap year students, who were wonderful.

But I really wasn't thinking about college at all, and if anything, I was, like, *I just want to get through it, after being with all these people who are beyond college, I just want to keep doing what I'm doing*. But then I realized, *Okay, I'm gonna go to Dartmouth to be able to learn how to better do exactly what I'm doing*. [Chuckles.]

AL-JABER: So you're majoring in art?

PIERCE: No, I'm majoring in Women's and Gender Studies, which I didn't even know existed until I got here. But that was the mentality I came in with, and when I came home—I'm sorry, this is a long answer to your first question—when I came home two weeks before going to Dartmouth, my dad told me that he had been diagnosed with the same cancer that my previous boyfriend had died of. And that was big news to me because my dad is probably the person I'm closest to in the

entire world, and so that—I don't know, those are kind of my circumstances coming into Dartmouth.

AL-JABER: And you experienced so much prior to coming to Dartmouth, and you really established a sense of community prior to getting here. Did you try to extend that? Did you sort of stay within the same realm that you were in: theater, art, sports? Or did you try to broaden your sense of community?

PIERCE: I think for me, I really was averse to labels or defining my community when I got to Dartmouth. I mean, I did try being in a couple of different student groups, but I found it really turned me off the way people would identify other people, other students here by saying, "Oh, he's in this a cappella group" or "this fraternity," this whatever. You know, just like—rather than actually taking the time to really meet that person and get to know them, there was such, like, a boxing in, which is a culture and it's not necessarily any individual's fault, although it's perpetuated.

And so I haven't really joined student groups since I've been here. I mean, I'm a part of a couple different communities just sort of by—I don't know, I'm in Casque and Gauntlet senior society, and I am pretty involved in the Women and Gender Studies department, and I've done a lot of work with Telling My Story, which is an NGO that partners with Dartmouth. And that was through a class, originally. But other than that, I haven't really—I'm not in any student groups.

So my community—it's been wonderful because my community has—or I've been able to dip into so many different communities. And I think when I first came here, I realized that the fraternity scene was not conducive to my happiness and well-being, and I just remember—I had an amazing group of friends in high school, particularly with my first boyfriend that I mentioned. It was just his group of friends and my group of friends were—we just—it was very creative. You know, people never sat around saying, "I'm bored." It was always, like, "Oh, okay, let's do something. Let's make something cool, let's—" and they're all off doing very cool things [chuckles] in the world right now.

But I remember talking to him, because we were still—our relationship was kind of lingering into my freshman year, and realizing, *I don't really feel proud to share with you where I'm spending my time on the weekends or what I'm doing*, when I would just go to the fraternities out of convenience. And I was, like, *You know what, rather than just complain about what's going on, I'm gonna start my own little communities and just make happen what I want to happen.*

So some friends and I started having little wine and cheese circles in given rooms on Friday nights or something and really getting to know each other in a more intimate way. And often one of us would bring a friend that we'd gotten to know elsewhere, so I started meeting people that way. And I don't really know how it happened, but I would just meet different people who would introduce me to different people and say, "Oh, you need to get lunch with this person," and it just kind of—it was an organic networking that way.

I had some incredible upperclassmen mentors, but—yeah, I don't know, I really can't—I can't define what my community is at Dartmouth. I would say that it kind of reaches out into various different groups.

AL-JABER: And is it changing over time?

PIERCE: Yeah. Yeah. I think—I don't know, I'm probably more of a one-on-one person than a big group person, and I always resisted being a part of cliques because, for me, my alone time is really important to me, and having personal space and not feeling attached to—*Oh, I have to be spending all my time with these people in particular.* So I've made it a point to—

Also, I love bringing individuals from different parts of my life into the same space, so I've lived off campus since freshman summer until now, and I've always loved having dinner parties or just gatherings where I invite people for whom I might be the common denominator, and friendships start branching out. That's what brings me joy.

AL-JABER: So it is the sense that the frat culture was—what was it about it that dissatisfied you?

PIERCE: To me, it felt a little antisocial. Like, I didn't feel like people were actually really interacting with each other in a genuine way. It was a lot of—I don't know. I felt like people would go down there and then watch other people play Pong.

AL-JABER: [Laughs.]

PIERCE: And to me, I really wanted to be talking with people. And it's not—I definitely—I'm not a huge drinker, though I'll definitely enjoy a few drinks, and I like being social and letting loose, but I guess I'm not someone in extremes, meaning that when I'm doing my homework, I might have a beer. [Laughs.] Or, like, I want to be around people in a coffee shop. I won't be in the stacks. I want to be in kind of a more relaxed atmosphere. And if I go to a party, I want to be able to engage in cool intellectual conversations or hear what people are up to. So I don't fully dive into my work, like, total crunch time, and I don't fully let go when I socialize. And that's what it felt like. I felt like it was this total extreme.

And so I have missed—I love dancing, and that was something in Guatemala that was so wonderful for me, to find—I was really connected with a community of break dancers and hip-hop artists, and I went back to Guatemala for a few months my sophomore fall and delved more into that. And it was just so liberating [chuckles] to be able to let loose at a dance club and not fear people touching me in inappropriate ways or—there was sort of the spirit of: No, dancing is our release, whereas, I remember the first dance party I came to here, I tried to dance with a guy, and he accused me of trying to dance with him “all good.” [Chuckles.]

AL-JABER: What does that even mean?

PIERCE: I don't know. I don't know. And I said, “Oh, sorry. I'm just dancing.” And he said—excuse my French, but—“Fuck this” and walked away. [Laughs.] So, like—it was just a strange—like, it seemed like it was a dancing as a means to something else as opposed to just dancing to release and enjoy. But I have missed that kind of more loose party atmosphere being here, and I'm excited to find that beyond Dartmouth because I think my socializing has been pretty low key, but very fulfilling in other ways. I mean, living off

campus has been a huge blessing for me, to have my own space I can host in and know other people that have their spaces, so it's—

Which, it's interesting because it's not an exclusive network in that the people have an exclusive mentality, but it is exclusive in that it's all by word of mouth to get an off-campus house. The college doesn't really facilitate that, so people have to have connections to be able to find or really work hard to find that. So only 9 percent of students live off campus.

AL-JABER: And then you—it sounds like art is very therapeutic for you, so could you talk to me more about Telling My Story?

PIERCE: Sure. So my freshman year, I took Writing 5 with Professor Nancy Crumbine, which was Philosophy of Education, and that fall, I was—it was like, in a weird way, having my father being sick was really pushing me into getting close to professors right away because I felt that I needed to—there were weeks I would have to go home to attend to what was going on at home, and—or that I couldn't complete an assignment and I just needed them to know why, and so right off the bat, I scheduled meetings with my professors to let them know what was going on. And I developed pretty close relationships with them. Professor Crumbine and I still are very close, and we see each other every term. And so she knew about what I'd been doing in Guatemala, and told me—she invited me to go to one of the Telling My Story shows with her.

Telling My Story is essentially an NGO that works in prisons and rehabilitation centers, anywhere that is kind of—creates a wall between the people within and the outer society, whether it's a physical wall of the prison gate or if it's social stigmas as a wall, or addiction being a wall. You know, these sometimes very literal, sometimes you just—it's there. And so TMS works with populations living behind these walls—who are, in a way, socially invisible – to cultivate communication skills and self-reflection skills through the arts. So it's far less about the arts and the quality and—you know, it's about using art as a tool and a platform, a safe, creative platform where we can all be vulnerable and create together.

And so the way it's connected to Dartmouth is that there's a class that students can take where they work with—I've only worked in prisons, but they work sometimes in rehabilitation centers—work with the inmates to essentially create a platform to examine the social situation that we're all living in and recognize how we all need to be rehabilitated socially. You know, it's not "them" needing to become more like "us." We all need to find some sort of middle ground of understanding because all of us are holding—people on both sides of the wall are holding serious prejudices or misconceptions of the other—you know, just kind of breaking that down and then, at the end, collectively putting on a public performance of theater, poetry, drumming, dancing, and visual art that addresses themes of injustice, of loyalty, of realities often ignored.

That's a really rough explanation of what Telling My Story does, but it's a 10-week process usually. And so Professor Crumbine took me to a performance in—it was in a rehabilitation center. I'm forgetting the name right now. But we went to see them, and that's where I met Pati Hernandez, who started Telling My Story, who's a Chilean woman who moved—she came to the States in her early 20s and has been doing this type of work for at least the past 15 years or so—and Ivy Schweitzer, who was doing kind of the theory part of the course, so the students would be in the classroom for part of the time, learning about the prison system, reflecting on their experiences in the prison—that's what Ivy would run—and then we'd go to the prison with Pati and do the, like, on-our-feet workshops.

So I met them there, and I was so intrigued, and then I stayed on for my freshman summer and took the class. It was very transformative for me, especially going and having the thought that I'd done—you know, I kind of knew what this work was about, having done similar stuff in Guatemala, but you never—there's always more to learn in this kind of work. You never have it figured out. And if you think you have it figured out, you really haven't had it figured out [chuckles], you know?

And then afterwards, I was going back to Guatemala City, and I asked Pati if I could use some of the Telling My Story

methodology to run a month-long summer camp for the Safe Passage students. That was a leadership position that I had been asked to fulfill. And so I adopted it a lot and hired Guatemalan artists, poets, musicians, street theater actors to come in and run these workshops with the students.

After that, I came back and talked to Pati, and I knew that I had the next winter free, and—this is, like—so after Guatemala, I went to New Zealand, and I went hiking with a dear friend. It was great. It was a whole 'nother thing. [Chuckles.] But I came back, and I saw Pati, and I knew she was going to go back to Chile in the winter to live with her family and take care of her father, who was growing old. And I asked her if I could—if I came down with her, if we could run Telling My Story in a Chilean prison. It took, like, five minutes to convince her of the idea.

And we spent that fall—so a year after I was in Guatemala—that fall fundraising and holding panels with—I was the TA for her class at the time, and so we held a panel with ex-inmates and students and professors and alums that had been involved in Telling My Story to spread awareness, and we spoke at different venues to gain financial support and also [chuckles] emotional support, and were able to raise about \$20,000? No, a little less than that. I want to say \$15,000.

And I got a Tucker Fellowship. We also received funding from the Dickey Center. We went down to Chile. I asked the woman who had replaced me as the art director at Safe Passage to come down for a month. She came. And then I asked an '11 that I'd been very close with, who I knew was kind of in transition between jobs and projects and was very interested in gender issues and the arts—and so she came down as well.

So it was really cool to have this team of people from different parts of my life come together in Chile, and we ran the program for ten weeks. Also, we split the curriculum so that Pati—half the time we were working with Telling My Story workshops; half the time I was running a self-portraiture workshop that I devised in Guatemala.

And since I've come back, I've—that was a *huge* learning experience for me, being in Chile, and also doing the whole thing in Spanish. It's interesting because I've really only done these—most of my work in the arts and in teaching or facilitating has been in Spanish, so I'm really curious to know how that would feel or what kind of relationships would develop if I'm just doing it in English.

AL-JABER: So was it strange coming back after going through that experience?

PIERCE: I think, if anything, it just gave me more empathy for Dartmouth students because I realized while I was down there that it's so easy to—you know, so, as humans we have this instinct to want to be right [chuckles] about things and blame somebody else or make someone wrong. And that's a really easy position to stay in, right? You can stay on your throne of righteousness and just point at all the wrongs in the world, and it puts you in a very negative space as well.

And I realized that, you know, while I was being on, quote unquote, like, the side of the inmates, it was really easy to stand with the underdog because I was in this position where I could stand for whatever I wanted to as a student, as an Anglo woman coming in. I wasn't going to—

AL-JABER: Be judged.

PIERCE: Right, right. You know, nothing was really at stake for me in taking that stance, which is a total place of privilege to be in, and so it was easy for me to side with the inmates, and then I would just judge the guards, who—I didn't like the way that the guards treated them, you know, or I—the system and all these things, and not really acknowledging my own sort of complicity in this greater system in the world. You know, where do I actually stand in this? And I'm not saying, like, I should feel guilty or have—that's not really constructive. But having empathy for somebody who has committed murder and then criticizing the guard standing next to her for doing his job or her job, and not really thinking about—

And it's ironic because I think socially the guard—like, in the outside world the guard would be the “right” one in the situation, right? Or the one who is less to blame. But it's all a

matter of perspective. And then it made me realize—you know, if I could empathize with someone who committed murder, why can't I empathize with LAX bros at Dartmouth? Or, like, people like fraternity brothers—you know, people who I was so quick to criticize at Dartmouth for their attitudes or the way that they acted. And why can't I just take the time to listen to *their* side of things and their story? And just kind of—it gave me a better understanding of where we were all coming from. I mean, I don't understand where we're all coming from, but a better awareness of how necessary it is that—being listened to is a human need in the way that being fed is, and there are parts of the world that are more deprived of listeners and food, but that doesn't mean that we don't all need it.

So I think I came back with just a greater sense of, *Wow, I really want to understand where everybody's coming from—* and just as a discipline for myself.

AL-JABER: Just going off that, there's been some unrest on campus recently. How do you feel about that?

PIERCE: It's definitely something I've been thinking about probably 90 percent of the time [chuckles], this year in particular. It's exciting to me that it's coming to a more campus-wide consciousness right now, or that it's just being brought to the surface.

Hmm. Can you be more specific, what do I think of it, like?

AL-JABER: Have you interacted with people who are personally affected, and does it make you rethink your sense of where you fit into the Dartmouth community?

PIERCE: Absolutely. I mean, I think a lot of my close friends at Dartmouth have felt very personally affected by it. And what's probably the most disturbing part of this whole thing for me is—I mean, I truly believe once your eyes are open to the systems of privilege in the world and you have a consciousness of racism and classism and sexism and other forms of discrimination, you can't shut your eyes, and you don't want to shut your eyes. I mean, it's maybe a more challenging way to live, but in the best way possible, you know – even though it gets me down, it also makes me love

more deeply. But it's disturbing to me knowing that, as a white woman on this campus who is privileged in multiple ways, I could choose to disengage from this conversation.

AL-JABER: Yeah. In some ways, you could choose to live up to, like, the insider role.

PIERCE: Right.

AL-JABER: Yeah.

PIERCE: And that—I'm saying it's disturbing to me because I know that there are many people in my position who *will* do that. And it's not even necessarily an active choice, it's the default; it's just it's very—there is this—the fact that it is a *choice* for me to pay attention to the pain on this campus is a privilege. I mean, there are these dialogues and gatherings going on around campus, and there are people that go to them because they are curious and want to engage in these conversations, and there are people that go to them because they need these kinds of communities and support systems to survive on this campus, you know?

AL-JABER: Mm-hm.

PIERCE: I'm not saying one is better than the other or right or whatever. It's just that it's true, I think. And of course, there are many subtle ways to actively engage – its not about who shows up at what meetings. I have lots of friends who care deeply about issues of inequality and walk the walk with less talk – I learn a lot from them.

I mean, I think I have felt, —where I feel very directly, personally engaged in this is I am a survivor of sexual assault, and as a Gender Studies major I have thought about the gender dynamics on campus a lot. But also I was not sexually assaulted at Dartmouth. The triggers are not as raw for me at this place. But, I mean, I really feel like having so many friends that do feel personally hurt here – and chronically, just by nature of who they are, not simply in response to particular events – is just as powerful and painful. I don't believe in comparing pains between people, I just know that my heart hurts here. And I can't really—even though I know there is that kind of—there's that choice there

to disengage, but it's really not a choice. I just know that that's—I don't know. I—it's just what I think about a lot. [Chuckles.]

It's so disturbing to me that—I mean, you know, people can choose to express themselves or not express themselves, but anytime someone tells someone else not to express themselves in the way that they need to is—that's silencing, and that's dangerous to me, or in my opinion. And so I've been working with a lot of friends to figure out ways that we can provide safe places for people to speak their truths – from all perspectives.

And—I don't know. I guess for me, with privilege, denial is the greatest danger. And I've done a lot of thinking about, oh, you know, what's my whiteness mean, and what's my being a woman mean, and all these different things, in the greater scheme of things. It's so liberating when I can just accept—I think guilt is just so unproductive. [Chuckles.] And I'm not sure if it's a stage that everybody has to go through as a white person, to have this sort of white guilt thing. But it's just, like, the quicker you can get out of that and propel yourself into action, the better because it can consume and paralyze you in the most kind of self-absorbed [chuckles] ways – I know first-hand!

It's just focusing it back on yourself. You know, it's just, like, *No!* And so being able to speak very frankly about the privileges that I have and not wrong myself or other people for them, just acknowledging that's the way it is given the forces in our society, and then okay, so let's move from that understanding—is very empowering. It's about attitude – no matter what you look like or where you come from; we've inherited circumstances, but it's our responsibility what we do with them. And also being able to acknowledge contradictions within myself is something that I think I'm constantly working on. But being able to say—for example, my boyfriend was a lacrosse player here, and there [chuckles]—like, you know, there're some of these stereotypes, and he's a white male. And I sometimes find myself saying, *Oh, he's a white male lacrosser. But he's, like, a really great guy.* The sort of “this but this,” as opposed to “this *and* this.” Because by me saying “this but” or, like, “I'm a white person, but I really get this,” whatever, it's just

throwing all my other white friends under the bus and being very, like, self-serving. So being able to say, *Oh, I'm this, and I care about this* or *I'm this, and I believe in this*—even if, like, in the social schema that doesn't necessarily—people don't always align those things—invites those around me – regardless of their race or sexuality or whatever they identify strongly with - to embrace all their contradictions as well, you know.

I'm just—I'm constantly trying to chip away at these boxes that we put ourselves into, and the more outright we can be about the things that we just are and stop worrying about trying to justify them, I think the better.

AL-JABER: You speak a lot about, like, how you feel, as though a white woman in this community automatically gets put, like, placed into this limiting category. Did it take time for you to escape that category, and in what ways do you think it's still put on you, and has it still been put on you?

PIERCE: I mean, people are going to put on me whatever they want to, and I'm not really that concerned about that. I'm more concerned with the way that I think of myself and whether or not that view limits myself from engaging in certain conversations or not, if that makes sense?

AL-JABER: Mm-hm.

PIERCE: So I don't know what other people have categorized me as, and I haven't necessarily felt like they've pressured to put me in a certain box. But I just wanna feel free to fully engage with and listen to and be fully myself in any setting on this campus, and that requires just owning who I am, if that makes sense.

AL-JABER: So have there been times where you felt like you're an outsider on this campus?

PIERCE: I don't really—I mean, I could look at it that way, but, again, I think that's, like, spiraling back into a sort of a self-consuming—'cause, I mean, I—hmm. I—no, not really. I mean, I think in the fraternities, I never felt fully safe, so in that case, yes, my gender played a role. In other settings I

have felt *uncomfortable*, but safe, which can be healthy I think.

But outsider? I wouldn't use that word. I don't know. Maybe—I feel like I'm not being very articulate.

AL-JABER: You've been very—not “very”—but you've been vocal about your position on sexual assault on campus, so how has your community reacted to that? Have they been supportive in that, or do you get flak for that, because..?

PIERCE: I've only received support.

AL-JABER: And going back to this sense of the Dartmouth community, how would you define it, and has it changed over time?

PIERCE: That's a big question. I mean, again, I just don't—I don't know. I really don't feel like I belong to one community at Dartmouth. I have friends who I feel more immediately comfortable around, and some who I laugh more easily with, others who I connect with intellectually, whatever. I don't want my idea of myself to get in the way of me reaching out to people.

But as far as my community at Dartmouth, I mean, I think I'm just getting to know the '13s, '14s, and '15s really this year – and I've been so grateful for that. All my closest friends were '12s and '11s. I had a loose-knit group of women that—I think we all felt part of other communities, too, but together we had so much fun and really loved each other. It was the most fluid and open clique I could've been a part of.

AL-JABER: And do you think that the Dartmouth location affects the sense of community?

PIERCE: Yeah. I mean, I think that if we were to be in a more urban area, that people would engage more with the outside community. I think here, there is such a desire to create these small communities within the campus, and it is kind of weird, because I feel like there's less engagement with the small, outside community that we do have here than there would be if we lived in a city or something.

AL-JABER: I think we've covered everything, but is there, just, an experience that you feel relates to—that has affected your sense of community within Dartmouth that you would like to share?

PIERCE: Hmm. Let's see. I mean, I guess something that's been really important to me has been having—my relationships with professors have very important to me here, and having professors that I know I can go over to their house at any time for a meal or just to talk, and having settings with students and professors off campus or on—you know, just kind of that—being in the Women and Gender Studies department, which is small enough so that students really have a say in the direction the department is going, just having that sense that I don't feel like there are major lines dividing—a sense that, you know, if I—

AL-JABER: There's no hierarchy between professors and students.

PIERCE: Yeah. I mean, maybe some people feel that way, but I haven't had that in my experience, and knowing that I have that support network is really important. But I think, like, you know, it's small enough so that if there was anybody on campus that I really wanted to reach out to and get to know, that I admired or, you know, if I wanted to get people together who wanted to talk about a certain issue, I feel like that could easily be done, which can't happen in a bigger, more urban—or it's more difficult to organize in a bigger, more urban setting. And so I just found myself in a lot of—oh, sorry. I'm not being articulate at all. [Both chuckle.]

AL-JABER: I think you've been articulate enough. [Chuckles.]

PIERCE: Okay. Yeah. Sorry. I can't really think of a story right now that's coming to mind.

AL-JABER: No, you're fine. So I'm just going to turn off the tape. Thank you for your time.

PIERCE: Okay.

[End of interview.]