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Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
October 2, 2013

DONIN: Today is Wednesday, October 2nd. My name is Mary Donin. We're here in Rauner Library with Shaun Akhtar [pronouncing it AHK-tahr]. Is that the right pronunciation?

AKHTAR: Yep.

DONIN: And you're Class of '12, right?

AKHTAR: That's right.

DONIN: Great. And currently a college employee in the library.

AKHTAR: Mm-hm.

DONIN: Part of the Dartmouth Library family. You're working in Cataloging and Metadata?

AKHTAR: That's right, yes.

DONIN: Great. And last year you were the Lathem Intern up in—

AKHTAR: Yes, the Digital Library Intern, continuing to work in the Digital Library related context here in the libraries.

DONIN: Great, great. Nice to have young blood coming into the library at all times, I say.

Okay, so just to sort of put you and your life into context, why don't you tell us a little bit about how you ended up coming to Dartmouth. You know, was it a college counselor or was it a family member? How did you end up coming here for your undergraduate work?

AKHTAR: Mhm. So I grew up in New York City, and I went to a fairly large public magnet high school. And I didn't really have a specific, direct interest in Dartmouth at that time, but I guess around my junior year or so of high school, when I started looking at a lot of colleges to apply to, my parents and I realized that there wasn't exactly a very specific type of

school I was looking for. I didn't have a big preference on whether it was public or private or if it was large or small, or had a particular liberal arts focus, though that's not a bad thing, definitely.

But I ended up applying to a lot of schools. I think it must have been, like, 21 or so in the end.

DONIN: Oh my goodness!

AKHTAR: The only preference I really seemed to have at that time was that the school wasn't in New York City. I enjoyed living in the city. I grew up in Queens, so not the most urban part of New York City, but, you know, connected to things. And my high school was in the Bronx, so—

DONIN: Oh, that's a commute, isn't it?

AKHTAR: It was. I was lucky that there was a bus service that I took most of the time, but occasionally it would be—if I had to get home via public transportation, that would be a long ride—you know, a bus to a train to a train to a bus. You definitely feel, in New York City, when you're not close to the subway lines. So—

DONIN: It's tough going.

AKHTAR: Yeah. So I didn't have a big preference on what sort of school I was applying to. I do remember that in high school I was heavily involved with my school newspaper. I had an interest in journalism, which persists, though it's taken different manifestations through the years. But one of the big qualifications for many of the schools I applied to—not most, but many—was that it have either a good journalism program or a good English program.

The first school that I remember specifically wanting to apply to—and this was definitely, at least a few years before I was of the right age to start applying—was University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill because they had a good sports journalism program, and I was very interested in sports journalism. And I did end up applying to UNC, but as we went through the college search process, I was signed up on a couple of those websites that help you gather information

about schools, and probably also sell your addresses, though I don't really remember the details of it—but we got a lot of mail, and my mom was really incredibly helpful in helping gather and collect and help me read through this.

And we sort of had this big box where we were holding onto all the stuff that came in, and at some point, we were really impressed with the materials that we got from Dartmouth. I guess I'd heard of it, knew it was in the Ivy League, didn't know much more than that, but it seemed like a really int'resting place. And I don't think at that particular time it necessarily stood out from any of the other really good options I was looking at, but it definitely ended up being on the list.

And I think—so yeah, I applied to 21 schools in the end, many of which were not quite as selective as Dartmouth might be, but prob'ly would have still been quite good places to go to. And one of the big things that ended up pushing me toward the Dartmouth camp happened to be its financial aid offer, which was very good compared to many of these other schools, especially because a lot of the other schools—some of the other schools I was applying to were state schools that, whether they were in my state or not, weren't able to offer quite as much.

The one school in New York City that I did apply to was the Honors College at Queens College, and I could have gone there for—I think it would have been a free ride on tuition.

DONIN: Wow.

AKHTAR: But the Dartmouth offer was quite good. It wasn't everything, but it helped quite a lot.

DONIN: And it filled that need of yours to get out of Manhattan, or get out of, you know, the island, off the island.

AKHTAR: Yeah, yeah. It seemed like it would be a nice place to go. Most of the schools I applied to were in the Northeast, so I wasn't going to be super far away from home, but it seemed like a nice time to get out of the city, at least for a bit.

And so based on the good offer that came in—I think the three schools I was choosing between in the end were Cornell and Haverford in Pennsylvania and Dartmouth. The latter two were definitely both strong liberal arts schools.

I ended up having an astronomy professor here, who went to Haverford for his undergrad—and I didn't learn that 'til later, but I thought that was an interesting fact. I think I would have done perfectly well if I had gone there, but coming to Dartmouth seemed like a nice choice, so.

DONIN: Did you come visit it before you made up your mind?

AKHTAR: No, I didn't, actually. I remember getting some information I think about Dimensions Weekend, but I don't remember specifically what was going on at that time in high school, but it being senior spring, things were busy enough.

And the other school that I visited during my college search, actually, discounting Queens College, which I had seen, growing up in Queens but didn't specifically visit, was the University of British Columbia. I guess during my—I think between my sophomore and junior years of high school, I visited my uncle, who lived out in Vancouver, and we went on a tour of the campus there very briefly. I think one of his partner's cousins—nephews, I believe—went there, and so they showed me around, and that was nice. A beautiful campus right out on the Pacific. You just walk out to the edge, and you see the whole ocean. That's great. But it being an international school, it was definitely not going to be on the more affordable side.

So it was funny, but, no, I didn't visit Dartmouth. The first time I saw it was when I arrived for freshman trips.

DONIN: Wow.

AKHTAR: It was nice that, since I was coming from New York City, there was a large bus of people going there together. I was in one of the early sections. I think it was probably Section B or something like that. And so on the bus there were people I met, not people I got particularly close to, but it was nice that we were all traveling there in a group.

DONIN: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

AKHTAR: But I didn't see the campus for the first time until the bus pulled in. I think that time it went over the Ledyard Bridge, and we went around. At first, I had this momentary not exactly panic but surprise 'cause the bus went around the Green to drop us off in front of Robinson Hall. And at first, I just saw the buildings immediately surrounding the Green, and I was, like, *Is this it? Is this all that the campus is?*

DONIN: [Laughs.]

AKHTAR: I mean, it looked nice, but at first, my sense of scale was thrown off. But that didn't last very long, that sort of concern.

DONIN: Mm-hm, mm-hm. So did you know—I mean, were you, like, the first from your high school to come to Dartmouth, or did you know any other students that had come here ahead of you?

AKHTAR: I had heard that there was—I think in the class preceding me, there was one student who went to Dartmouth, but I didn't necessarily investigate too heavily how many people there were—

DONIN: So you were really coming cold.

AKHTAR: For the most part, yeah. I guess there was an alumni interview that I went through—I think it was probably in Manhattan, with a Dartmouth alum, but I don't think she was related—she was connected to my high school. And there was one other classmate from my high school who ended up going to Dartmouth, and we knew each other in high school and we remained friendly in college, but we weren't close. So there wasn't too much of an overlap in terms of conversation or planning or anything like that.

So, yeah, it was a fairly unpadded step, I suppose. But I was expecting to go off to—you know, jump into college and see how things went, and so at least in that regard it wouldn't have been—the Dartmouth choice wasn't any less comfortable than most of the others would have been.

DONIN: So how was the—what did you choose for your trip?

- AKHTAR: I did Easy Hiking. I think it was B13 or B31 or one of those numbers. It was Easy Hiking. I think we called it Extreme Picnicking.
- DONIN: [Chuckles.]
- AKHTAR: We were up by the Skiway, and it was nice. It was not too strenuous, but it was a fun trip. I think there was a group of seven first-years on that trip and then the two leaders. And everybody was friendly. I didn't end up becoming particularly close friends with anybody in that group, but it was nice to run into them as time at Dartmouth continued. A couple of them, I definitely saw a lot of over the course of my freshman year at least.
- It was a nice experience, that trip. Even if I didn't specifically make individual connections that were super important, I do remember being at Moosilauke Lodge at the end of the trip and that being a really nice experience.
- And I definitely was grateful for the work that went into planning the trip. I didn't realize how much it was, but I knew it had to have been a lot.
- I remember at some point after the trip, I wrote an e-mail to I guess some of the—it might have been direct to the DOC account or something, and—trying to thank them for the work that they had done. And I didn't end up getting involved with trips later on, but I did spend my first year working as administrative assistant for the club in Robinson Hall.
- DONIN: Oh, great.
- AKHTAR: I don't know if this is a program that they do anymore, but at the time when I was a freshman, they did have some emphasis on recruiting first-years and I guess second-years to provide some help for the OPO office [Outdoor Programs Office] there and deal with some e-mail inquiries and that sort of thing. And since we were working in Robinson Hall, they called us Robo Cops.
- DONIN: [Chuckles.]

AKHTAR: And it was a fun activity. Being there gave me the chance to attend DOC Directorate meetings every week, and that was really nice. Unusually, I think, for most people who get involved with the Outing Club here, I wasn't specifically connected to any of the sub-clubs. I didn't regularly go to Cabin and Trail meetings or to any of the other individual groups. But being on the directorate was nice, getting to see what was going on across it.

DONIN: Do you consider yourself sort of an outdoorsy type of person?

AKHTAR: Not in a very strong sense, but occasionally. I do like to go on hikes when I get the opportunity, though it's definitely wasn't something I prioritized. I wish I had done that a little bit more, maybe, but it was nice to do it when I did get the chance.

I remember—I think it was my sophomore year that the Appalachian Trail was celebrating its 75th—or maybe it was—I think it was the Appalachian Trail that was celebrating its 75th, and so there were a bunch of events organized to get Dartmouth people out on the trail that day. And so a friend of mine and I—we went, I think—I think we hiked across the Ledyard Bridge over to Norwich. Didn't get very far onto the trail, but it was nice to just be outside.

DONIN: Yeah.

AKHTAR: But, yeah, I definitely enjoyed being able to attend directorate, you know, for a period of months there and got to organize a couple of pond hockey tournaments on Occom during Winter Weekends, so that was nice.

DONIN: What did you make of the crazy kind of orange hair and the tutus and the dancing and singing that gets everybody started off when you first arrive here?

AKHTAR: It was definitely a big-impact thing to see. I mean, I'm not the sort of person who would be inclined naturally to dress up like that or to be overly outgoing, but it was nice to be welcomed in that manner. They definitely seemed to care about us having fun over that period of time.

I'm glad that it didn't involve too much of us necessarily having to dress up or that sort of thing. With first-year trips in particular but a number of other Dartmouth traditions, the people who are facilitating them may get heavily involved in some of these more outlandish activities, and it is sometimes less clear for the younger students who are just getting involved the extent to which they are expected to participate in the same way. And I'm glad that in most cases I didn't necessarily feel like I was expected to participate in the same way, because that would have been a bit of a turn-off. It was great to be with people and to be doing things, and music is always nice, but I wasn't going to run around the way that they did.

DONIN: No. Right.

AKHTAR: And mostly I wasn't asked to, so I appreciate that.

DONIN: Now, did you have to go back home and then come back again? Were you one of those early groups that—

AKHTAR: I think so, because, yeah, I'm pretty sure I was in the second group of trip attendees, and so, yeah, after my trip, I think I was home for another week or so, and I saw whomever of my high school friends were still around, but since Dartmouth started much later than most other places did at that time, there weren't too many folks around. But I guess that let me enjoy things at home for a little bit longer and get used to it.

DONIN: So what dormitory were you in to start with?

AKHTAR: I was in Russell Sage, on Tuck Mall. It was a nice place to be. It was a big building, four floors. I think all first-years. So that was kind of busy.

DONIN: And were you in a single or a double?

AKHTAR: I was in a two-room triple.

DONIN: Oh, yeah.

AKHTAR: So I had two roommates, and they were both really nice. We all had fairly different interests, and so we didn't necessarily spend a lot of time hanging out outside of the typical, you

know, be in your room and do work and get used to meeting everybody on the floor, 'cause it was a large floor. I think there were probably around 30 people or so.

DONIN: Oh, golly. Yeah.

AKHTAR: So, I mean, everybody was nice, and it went fine, I think. I certainly learned ways in which I could have been a better roommate, but I think we got through the year without there being much in the way of difficulty.

One of my roommates, I ended up rooming with again the second year, and that was definitely nice. And we're still in communication. He actually was one of the interns at the library last year as well.

DONIN: Oh, great.

AKHTAR: His name is Matt Castellana; he was working in Jones Media Center.

DONIN: Oh, yes. Oh, great.

AKHTAR: So it was nice to see him again on I guess our fifth year at Dartmouth, a very distinct one from our first four. So it was nice that we stayed in touch, even though our activities, for the most part, brought us into different regions of campus.

DONIN: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. So when you got here, were you still focused on pursuing your English/journalism interests?

AKHTAR: In most ways, yes. I had been interested in sports journalism, and I had also been interested in science journalism for a while. I was fortunate that the high school I went to had a planetarium on its roof, and—

DONIN: Oh, my goodness! Was this Bronx High School?

AKHTAR: It was, yes, Bronx High School of Science.

DONIN: Oh, fantastic.

AKHTAR: So I remember in my senior year I got to take an astronomy class, and I was president of our astronomy club, and that

was a lot of fun. And when I got here, I sort of had the expectation for myself that I would try to do a double major in English and astronomy, and see how that went. I enjoyed learning the science when I was in high school, and I wasn't sure if I would naturally have an interest in doing science, but I definitely wanted to learn more about the scientific field.

And so I did end up pursuing that double major, English and astronomy. There were points during the process where I wasn't sure if I'd continue through with it all the way, but it was a good set of experiences. Yeah. So I did English as one of my majors and jumped into that pretty quickly. And I was also able to do work for a number of publications here, which was—

DONIN: You wrote for *The D*. I was checking up on you.

AKHTAR: Yes, I joined *The D* my freshman fall as a reporter, which is sort—I mean, there's a decent distance between the business side and the editorial side of *The D*, but most people who go into editorial early on start off as reporters. And I think, if I remember correctly, I wrote maybe four articles. It wasn't a lot of them. But one of them, I was covering a talk given by an astrophysicist who worked at one of the NASA labs, and so that was nice to meet her and to get that experience of trying to do actual science writing.

The D—I give the people there a lot of credit because it's very difficult to run a daily newspaper, much less one at a college institution. But I know that there were things that it focuses on that it doesn't necessarily focus on, and I seem to recall when I was writing this article about the science talk, it seemed like a bit of an unusual thing to do at that time. That was my perception. I'm not sure if it was accurate.

I do remember that one of the big highlights of working for *The D* that freshman fall was the coverage around the presidential election that year.

DONIN: Aha.

AKHTAR: —'cause this was the fall of 2008.

DONIN: Of course.

AKHTAR: And there was—Hanover High School was one of the main polling centers or poll centers and location in the area, and so I remember after—or towards the end of that evening, I got to do exit polling with the editor in chief of *The D*, who was,—I guess she must have been the Class of 2009. And we were standing there at the high school and interviewing people. Now, that was a fun experience.

Then coming back to the newsroom in Robinson Hall, where we were watching the results come in of the election. It was definitely a big night for many students on campus to see what was going on nationally. And that was a fun vantage point to be watching from. On the whiteboard they had a big map, and they were filling in all the colors as the states were called. I remember the reactions when the election was called. It was definitely a big deal—

DONIN: Exciting.

AKHTAR: —to be part of.

And so I continued to write for *The D* occasionally, into my winter term freshman year. But schedule wise, it became challenging for me because I was fortunate that I was able to jump into a lot of different organizations on campus, and I had a lot of fun with that. But it didn't leave as much time for writing as I would have liked.

But I found that there was opportunity to jump into copy editing work at *The D*. There were some senior copy editors who were around, but there wasn't as big of a presence as might have seemed appropriate for a newspaper that was publishing every day, and I found that it was easier for me to take on copy editing shifts, where I could come in in the evening, after the stories were written, and do work then, as opposed to having the, I guess, more spread out commitment of writing a story once or twice a week.

DONIN: Right.

AKHTAR: And so I became copy editor there and continued to do that for the next I guess four years, pretty much.

DONIN: Oh, wow.

AKHTAR: In my senior year, I ended up being senior copy editor, and we were trying to sort of pull together a larger team. It was always a work in progress because schedule wise, for the editing staff, I think it was difficult to prioritize getting that into the workflow as integrated as it ought to have been. But we made progress on it, and the editor in chief and one of the executive editors who were serving in 2012, the year that I was graduating, two '13s, whom I'm having lunch with later today, actually, as it turns out, because they're working as Presidential Fellows at the college now—but they were able to do a lot of work to ensure that the copy editing team was in good shape, and so I was very happy to see that happen by the time that I left.

DONIN: So did you feel well prepared academically after, you know, you went through a term here? Did you feel like you were well prepared?

AKHTAR: That's a good way to ask the question about academics because I think I was reasonably well prepared. I think that I definitely made some conscious choices at Dartmouth that inhibited my success academically. I mean, I was fortunate that I didn't run into anything I would consider disastrous. I was able to pass my classes and to enjoy most of what I was learning and to continue the tracks that I set out on, but I definitely wasn't near the top of my class or doing outstanding work. I definitely made some decisions that deemphasized the academic I guess schedule that I was setting out on.

The high school that I went to, I was able to take a bunch of AP classes that were reasonably rigorous, even if not deemed to be as such by the trustees or whoever's deciding that we're not gonna award credits for that anymore. But I don't think that I was incredibly unprepared or—I don't think that there was as much of a shock as there might have been. I know that some students who arrive don't feel that their classes that they took previously at all gave them a good sense of what they would encounter here.

DONIN: That's a trend that we've seen in these interviews.

AKHTAR: Mm-hm. I don't think that I necessarily had that issue. I am willing to shoulder most of the blame for things that didn't go as smoothly as they ought to have. I think that the classes I took in high school were pretty good, even if they weren't college-level classes, which they shouldn't have been [chuckles] because I was in high school. But I think that I was decently prepared in that sense.

DONIN: And you were a double major.

AKHTAR: I was, yes.

DONIN: So that's a heavier load.

AKHTAR: I suppose in some ways. I mean, I wasn't taking any larger number of classes. It was simply that I guess there were two disciplines where I was taking some higher-level work. But I'm not sure that that's necessarily more challenging than an individual who does one major and then does a whole lot of other different disciplines.

I was lucky that—I did still have room to take a bunch of interesting classes in other departments. I took a couple of philosophy classes. When I was in high school, I took four years of Latin, and that was a lot of fun, and my freshman spring I had the chance to take a Latin literature course, which I appreciated.

My freshman spring wasn't a great term for me academically. It was difficult in a number of ways, but I was able to take some things that I enjoyed, still. So looking back on it, at least I appreciate that.

DONIN: And who did you look to for sort of advice or mentoring about your academic path? I mean, was there somebody here that you could go to, your adviser or a professor that you particularly enjoyed?

AKHTAR: There were advisers that I spoke with, and professors whom I had the chance to ask questions of, given that I sort of had a plan that I was intending to follow, and they were helpful in that regard. There wasn't necessarily a lot of seeking out of advising that I did. There were a lot of questions that I tried to answer on my own more than I ought to've, probably. I

think in some ways I remained shy about seeking out certain resources, and that probably wasn't the best way to go about it, but it worked out decently. I definitely feel that when I did ask faculty questions that they were pretty supportive and helpful in that regard.

I know that when we started out, all first-years sort of got assigned a first-year adviser, and I think it's nominally based on what they think their interests might be. My adviser was a professor in the English department, whom I later ended up taking a class with, I think during my junior year, and so it was nice to be able to speak with her about that. I didn't maintain much of a connection with her during the interim between that first year and then taking her class again, but I think it is true that the faculty that I took classes with were supportive when I brought questions to them.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

AKHTAR: Sometimes it was more a matter of trying to find the right question to bring.

DONIN: Right.

So you mentioned jumping into some extracurricular activities—

AKHTAR: Mm-hm.

DONIN: —your first year. Can you describe what some of those were?

AKHTAR: Sure. So I did some work, as I mentioned, with the DOC in their offices there, and I was involved with *The D* throughout my first year, though the aspects of that changed.

I also got involved in Model United Nations. Dartmouth has a pretty strong program there, where every year they run a conference for high schoolers in the spring, and so the fall and winter are usually planning toward that. I think when I arrived, they were preparing for maybe the third or fourth conference. It wasn't too many that'd—I seem to recall that by the time I graduated, more had taken place than had taken place before I had gotten there.

I got involved in Model U.N. in my senior year of high school mostly because of a friend of mine, who had already been involved and encouraged me to participate because my high school had a strong program there. And I enjoyed it a lot. I didn't necessarily have much in the way of curricular interests in international relations, but I found it to be a fun way to be involved and to learn more about it.

I was very lucky that growing up in New York City, one of the conferences that we went to our senior year was actually in the United Nations headquarters, and that's tough to beat.

DONIN: Fantastic. Yeah. Amazing.

AKHTAR: So that was really nice. And when I got to Dartmouth, I decided that I would try to continue work—the program here both sends college students to conferences elsewhere but also plans for its high school conference, and I decided to get involved with the latter primarily, helping plan. So that was really nice. I ended up doing that in various capacities across my four years. And in some ways, it's a bit of a stop-start activity, unlike many others, because there's some planning in the fall, and then it really builds up in the winter, and then you've got the conference at the start of the spring, and then it's sort of over or resetting for the next year. But I enjoyed that a lot, and I usually got to stay involved in that way.

One thing I really appreciated was that there were a number of clubs that allowed the opportunity to just enjoy sort of recreational activities, COSO, the Council on Student Organizations is really good in supporting that. And so there were a couple of clubs that I joined.

One, there was an Origami Club that a classmate of mine founded, and I became the treasurer of that, and we had a lot of fun. It was laid back, and it was not intensive or competitive, but we enjoyed doing origami. There were a couple of occasions in which we got to partner with some community service organizations here to bring that work to other communities, which was nice.

DONIN: Around here, locally?

- AKHTAR: Yes.
- DONIN: Oh, nice.
- AKHTAR: At one point, we went to one of the living communities on Park Street. I don't remember what the name of the building is.
- DONIN: For elder people?
- AKHTAR: Yes.
- DONIN: Outreach House?
- AKHTAR: Outreach House. I think that's right, yeah. So we did a couple of sessions there, which was really nice.
- DONIN: Nice, yeah.
- AKHTAR: And I never got as good at origami as I would have liked,—
- DONIN: [Chuckles.]
- AKHTAR: —but I enjoyed doing that activity. It was fun to be working with classmates on an extracurricular activity like that.
- And there was also a club, the Dartmouth Union of Bogglers—
- DONIN: Oh, I haven't heard of that.
- AKHTAR: —that met every Tuesday night for a long time. I don't recall exactly when it was founded. I think probably about 10 years ago or so. But I remember when I got here, it was led by a few '11s, and I think at least five or six of my classmates and I, who became friends in various ways, ended up going there regularly over the course of our years.
- DONIN: What is boggling?
- AKHTAR: Boggle is one of those board-type games. It's a word-forming game.

DONIN: Oh, I see.

AKHTAR: I hadn't heard of it, okay.

AKHTAR: You've got tiles, letter tiles sort of like Scrabble—

DONIN: Like Scrabble.

AKHTAR: —but it's on a 4 by 4 grid, or 5 by 5 grid, depending on the game. And you play short rounds, where you shake up the tiles, and then you have to create words out of letters that are contiguous on the board. And so it's fast paced, and it's really just sort of a fun thing. It's not high investment or anything like that. But it was a fun way to get together, and we would do this on Tuesday nights, and we would try to save most of our budget for food so that we could enjoy that—sort of a kick-back,—

DONIN: Great.

AKHTAR: —a Tuesday night party. So that was fun.

DONIN: A good pastime for an English major. [Laughs.]

AKHTAR: Absolutely, yeah. So that was really nice.

DONIN: So you really became engaged in all sort of different corners of activities, it sounds like. It wasn't just all focused on English or one particular activity or athletics or—you know, it sounds like you were able to sample quite a few different activities that give you a nice, diverse look at the community that is Dartmouth.

AKHTAR: I think so, yeah. And that was a good word choice, "sample," because there were a lot of organizations that I went to, and I tried to get more involved and I either just didn't have the time or it just didn't fit. But, yeah, I do feel like I had the opportunity to try out a lot of different organizations here, which was really nice.

And some of the organizations that ended up becoming most important to me were things I didn't get involved in until later on. Even so, it was nice that some things continued and

others, you know, came in and out as opportunities emerged, so.

DONIN: Was this also the way you developed your group of, you know, friends, close friends? Was it through these organizations?

AKHTAR: In many cases, yes.

DONIN: As opposed to class or dormitory, it was more the activities that you were into.

AKHTAR: I think so, yeah. There were definitely some friends that I made in my dorms, who remained important people for me. But I think, yeah, mostly I met people through organizations and then through friends of theirs, where we overlapped in those interests that brought us out after class.

DONIN: Mhm. Did you ever entertain the idea of—I mean, were you interested in Greek life at all?

AKHTAR: Not initially when I arrived at Dartmouth. I remember that my freshman fall, there were some events that I went to with friends of mine, often from my dorm. We would go take a look at things together, and it was nice that I was able to join up with them to go to places. I enjoyed going to dance parties and that sort of thing, but I didn't drink alcohol. It wasn't something that I did 'til I turned 21. And so the appeal—I guess in some cases, the incentives to go to some of these events for me were definitely distinct from what they would have been for many of the people I would have hung out with.

And I did have—I recall seeing some all-campus advertisements for different types of events, and it's what got me a couple of times over to Phi Tau, which ended up being an important location for me later on. And I remember they had their Milque and Cookies party in freshman fall. They do this every term, but especially in the fall it's a big deal because they tend to give out t-shirts to the first few hundred attendees, which is a nice way to—well, it's good advertising [chuckles], if nothing else.

DONIN: Right, right.

AKHTAR: One thing I definitely learned at Dartmouth is—well, I sort of learned earlier that there is in fact too many, but at the time when I arrived, I didn't think there was such a thing as too many t-shirts.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

AKHTAR: And there are so many activities that either give out t-shirts or that sell them reasonably cheaply, and now that I—in my day job, I tend to wear button-down shirts, and I've got dozens and dozens of t-shirts at home that are in a box that I'd love to use but I don't have the opportunity for. And most of them came from Dartmouth, I think. It's not like I didn't have enough beforehand. But too many. But I digress.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

AKHTAR: I didn't necessarily think that Greek life would be of interest to me. I didn't have—when I got to Dartmouth, I didn't think about the fact that there might be co-ed Greek organizations. It wasn't on my radar. I remember that I went to Milque and Cookies my freshman fall, and I brought back a t-shirt, and I happened to wear it when I was home over Thanksgiving break, and my mom asks me, "Have you joined a fraternity?" And she wasn't panicked, per se, but she was surprised because she knew me and she knew that it didn't seem like something I would do. And I said, "Well, no, I didn't. I just have this t-shirt because they were giving them out. And even if I wanted to, I couldn't because first-years can't join fraternities at Dartmouth."

And so it didn't occur to me, really, that that would be a thing to do. But I did go back to Phi Tau and to some other organizations a couple of times over the course of the year, not super frequently but occasionally.

I think honestly the organization, the Greek organization I spent the most time at my freshman year was probably the Tabard, not because of any particular connection to the community there but in part because they gave us a friendly environment where we could, for example, play Pong without having to use alcohol. I enjoyed the game, even though I wasn't drinking, which I guess seems strange to many

people who play it to drink, but I appreciate that they were friendly enough to let us do that.

But it wasn't really until my sophomore fall, when, again, they started to advertise all-campus that I started to think about it. I remember that Phi Tau sent out an all-campus e-mail saying, "We're having rush tonight. Everybody is welcome. Come on by." And I thought to myself, *Well*,—I'd been there a couple of times before. The place interested me. I liked the idea of a co-ed organization, and they didn't seem to focus on things that I found objectionable.

So I decided to go to the rush event. And I got to meet a lot of people there because there weren't very many upperclassmen who knew me. There were some. But mostly I wasn't really part of their community. And I was impressed. And I signed their rush book, which is the way you ask for an invitation there, and they decided that they wanted to give me a bid, and so I had that.

And it was really a nice—I guess in that short period of time, my thinking changed rapidly to the idea of, *Well, maybe this is something that I want to do*. Unlike how it works with many other organizations, at Phi Tau when you get a bid if you're an undergraduate, it's valid until you stop being an undergraduate or you invalidate it by joining another house.

So mine was good for as long as I wanted it for, and I said to them, "Well, I am interested in your community and I would like to be a part of it, but I need some time to a) take care of other things" that were on my plate that term, as my sophomore year began, and just to get to know the environment there better. So I said, "Well, I think I'll probably join next term, and I'll try and come by every now and then to get used to things." And to their credit, they respected that—

DONIN: Ah-hah.

AKHTAR: —that statement to the point where they didn't really bother me much about stuff, but I got to go back occasionally. And then in my sophomore winter I eventually decided that I was ready in part because it was the same term that a number of people I was close to or friends with, who were also

converging on that house, decided to join that term. And so I jumped in.

DONIN: That's a happy event, it sounds like.

AKHTAR: It was. I got a lot of really great things out of being a member of the organization. I lived there my junior and senior years, and that was really nice. It was a place that was very important to me, and I'm fortunate that I still have good connections with the people there. They have a fairly strong and supportive alumni community in most ways, and I'm proud to be part of that.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

AKHTAR: It is nice that working on the campus, I get to visit every now and then and maintain friendships with people there. Especially last year, as I was transitioning from being a student to not just being an alum but being an employee who is around, but by default not expected to be part of most of the same circles, it helped that I still knew a lot of undergrads there. And elsewhere too, but definitely knew a lot of people there and found it to be a base.

DONIN: So among your friend group, what was the breakdown between those who decided to affiliate and those who decided not to?

AKHTAR: Most of the people that I was closest with did decide to affiliate. It's funny: I know the freshman term "schmob" gets thrown around a lot at Dartmouth, and by the end of my freshman year, thanks to people whom I knew, partly through where I lived but I think more so through organizations or sort of random connections that we met up with people, I was at least peripherally part of a schmob that was fairly large, maybe 15 to 20 people.

And some of these people became very close friends of mine and still are, but all of them are people that I was friendly with. A majority of these people did affiliate with Greek houses, but out of that majority, almost all of them went either to Phi Tau or Alpha Theta, the co-ed next door.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

AKHTAR: And that, I know, is very atypical for most schmobs. It was funny because one of the members of Tau whom I met, who was a Class of '09—she told us about—she was in a similar environment where she was in a schmob, and many of them affiliated but split between the co-eds. And I think we appreciated that, in most cases during those years, the co-ed connection allowed us to—I shouldn't say "allowed us" because there's nothing stopping people from being friends with people in other houses, but unfortunately it seems to happen more frequently than it ought to. But what I should say is that having friends in another co-ed house made it even easier to stay close because of the connections that the co-ed houses have with each other.

DONIN: Do the houses become your sort of center of activities and friendships?

AKHTAR: For some members, yes. For me, yes, it did. I definitely tried to continue to stay active with many of the extracurriculars that I was involved in because those were also important bases for me. But it's true that over time some of these things converge, but, yeah, I did find that—I think especially if you live in the house of the organization you're in, it facilitates that, which can be great if you are happy being heavily involved there, but it can also make it more difficult to retain and build further connections outside of that building.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

AKHTAR: And it was something that I felt I needed to explicitly try to work on. And I think it was—in some ways, staying part of other organizations helped that, but there's always more you can do to go out and meet people. There's never enough time for anything at Dartmouth, but that's not a Dartmouth thing; that's a college life thing that—it doesn't change after college, either; it just manifests in different ways.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

AKHTAR: But it was nice to be able to continue to work on events with people whom I was already friends with and that our communities continued to grow and in some ways consolidate because a lot of the people who were in that

group joined one of those houses later on. A bunch of us joined sophomore year, but then there were a bunch who joined over junior year and even some who I think ended up joining their senior year.

DONIN: Mmm.

AKHTAR: And so it was great that as friends we were part of the same community, but it also concentrated us even further in the particular locations that some of us were already likely to stay in, which is interesting. But it was nice that I was able to be part of some organizations that have had strong alumni support and communities.

My junior and senior year, I became involved in the Marching Band.

DONIN: Ah! So you're a musician, too.

AKHTAR: Not much of one, but some of one. Growing up, in elementary school, I took piano lessons, and then I stopped taking piano lessons, and I probably should have kept taking piano lessons, but I still have an electronic keyboard in my house that I tell myself I'm going to use someday. I must have gotten that when I was five or six.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

AKHTAR: I hope it still works. I haven't plugged it in in a while, but we'll see.

In middle school, there was a required band class, and so I played clarinet, which I wasn't great at, but I did appreciate being able to play music. I didn't continue to do so in high school, though.

What happened, actually, in college was that I was a sports fan, and so I attended sporting events naturally. I'm a big hockey fan. I'm not as big a football fan, but I would go to games occasionally. And a lot of the people I was friends with through other organizations happened to be in the Marching Band. And so because I was friends with them, I would sit near where they were, and they seemed to be

having an awful lot of fun. And I liked music, and I liked some of the irreverent fun that they were having.

I'm not a photographer, but I had a point and shoot camera that I used a lot through my first three years of college, and so I would often take photos. And since the band at games was always busy playing, they didn't necessarily have the opportunity to get as much multimedia as they needed.

DONIN: Right.

AKHTAR: So during my junior year, I in some ways became their unofficial photographer and helped out in that method. And then senior year, they received a gift that allowed them to upgrade their percussion equipment and also gave them a whole bunch of new stands for their drums to sit on and such, so they had more equipment to deal with.

And some of my friends who were in the band asked if—we were talking, and somehow the topic came up of, “Well, we could use additional equipment—assistant equipment managers to deal with this stuff that we've got.” And I said, “Well, I can do that.” And I ended up joining the band officially to serve as an equipment manager in the fall, which was great because I got to help them out and set up with all their games, and we went on a couple of—the band usually goes to one or two away games every football season.

DONIN: Oh, fun, yeah.

AKHTAR: And so we went to—I think we went to two that term, one to Yale and one to Harvard, and that was a lot of fun. The Harvard game was a mess because there was a blizzard.

DONIN: Uh!

AKHTAR: And so outside of the two teams on the field, the majority of the people in the stands were the two marching bands.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

AKHTAR: But it was a great experience. It was an adventure, but it was a great experience.

And then in the winter term, when the band becomes a pep band instead of a marching band, they played indoor basketball and hockey games. I played bass drum with them, so that was nice.

DONIN: Those bands add a lot to the games. I love going to the games when the bands are there. It adds a lot of sort of entertainment value.

AKHTAR: I'm always glad to hear that. I always felt that way, too. I was so glad that they were around when I attended before I was a member, and I was really glad to join them, too. So I appreciate being part of their alumni body as well. And you meet people who are in all sorts of different circles you may run into.

The woman who's currently the head of the Friends of the Dartmouth Band alumni group is a '91 who happens to be secretary of her alumni class, and I run into her at a few different alumni events through the year because I'm also on my class's executive committee. I'm one of our newsletter editors, and that's an activity I enjoy a lot. As a young alumni class, we're still figuring out how to be effective in our roles as all of us get used to being Dartmouth alumni and figuring out the levels of connection that we want with the college and with each other. But I appreciate being able to be in these circles, where I learn from alumni whom I know from all sorts of different things.

DONIN: Sure.

AKHTAR: And so that's really nice.

DONIN: So it sounds to me like you really settled in here well and established not only comfort with your academics but comfort with who you were on campus and who your friends were. Did you ever experience sort of uncertainty about whether you belonged here or feel marginalized at all?

AKHTAR: I guess there was some uncertainty. Most of it wasn't necessarily from overt actions that people were taking, but there are definitely some assumptions about what students at Dartmouth are interested in or are like or have access to in terms of resources. I was fortunate that, growing up, I had

what I needed, but my family certainly wasn't wealthy. And some of the things that occur at Dartmouth may give off the impression that they expect people to sort of be from things that they're just not always.

DONIN: As somebody said in an interview, there are so many different ways to feel that you *don't* belong here, even though you feel that you are a sort of mainstream kind of student, that there are times when you just don't feel that way, for exactly those sorts of reasons, 'cause assumptions are made about who you are.

AKHTAR: Mm-hm. That was really well said in that interview. Most of the activities that I was involved in helped me feel like I belonged doing whatever I was doing, and people were friendly to me. But it's definitely true that some of the ideas about what would be really exciting for everybody at Dartmouth didn't always hold true for me or just weren't that important.

I'm glad that at Dartmouth there were, and in most ways, continue to be good avenues of support for people to try doing different things and creating different organizations. But it is tough when, in some sort of more subtle ways, people feel, students feel that they don't necessarily fit in with everybody. And it's difficult to be in a situation where the student feels comfortable seeking out for the support or help in that regard.

I was able to stay busy, which I think helped me a lot. But definitely, especially during my freshman and sophomore years, there were times when I just didn't feel like going out doing what everybody else was doing. And it was a challenge. I mean, part of it is getting used to one's own limits and capabilities and such, but—things worked out reasonably well, but there were definitely times when, yeah, I didn't necessarily feel like I was on the same trajectory as everybody else.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

AKHTAR: And it's very difficult, especially as a young college student, to try to ask yourself, or ask others, "Am I on the right trajectory for what I wanna be doing?"

DONIN: That's what you're here to figure out.

AKHTAR: It's true. And I was lucky that there were some things that gave me the chance to do that, but it was tough. I went into college having a plan for what I wanted to do academically with those double majors. And in some ways, that definitely inhibited me because I didn't think too closely about other things I might have majored in. And I don't regret that because I enjoyed the experiences I got out of being in both of those departments. And even though I wasn't an exceptional student in either, I enjoyed a lot and I learned a lot.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

AKHTAR: But it's true that I sort of compartmentalized; that is, *This is what I want to do, and this is what I'm gonna do*, and I did it, and it mostly worked out well. My junior and senior years, I was involved with the [*Dartmouth*] *Undergraduate Journal of Science*.

DONIN: Ah, yeah.

AKHTAR: I wrote some articles for them, and then I became the layout editor. And I had a great time being part of that publication. But all along the way, there *were* times when I felt that I was pushing myself to do something in some regard because it was what I had decided to do and that it was easier than trying to pull back and reevaluate everything. So that was int'resting, I guess.

DONIN: Well, it sounds like—many students go through that same sort of search, and as an institution like Dartmouth makes more and more efforts to diversify who the Dartmouth community is, what it looks like, who the people are that make it up, I think there's more and more instances of people feeling that they aren't sure where they fit into the big picture here because of the, you know, so many varied circumstances that each of these students come from, which isn't a bad thing; it's a good thing, but it does add to the increased possibility that everybody is gonna have moments of saying, *Have I done the right thing here?*

AKHTAR: Mm-hm.

DONIN: *Do I belong? Am I in the right place?* And it's, I think, a search that everybody goes through as an undergrad. It's part of why you're here, because there's no longer sort of the typical Dartmouth student.

AKHTAR: Mm-hm.

DONIN: And that's where I think the college gets into trouble, is allowing anyone to think that there *is* a typical Dartmouth student, 'cause there isn't anymore, not just because of coeducation, which obviously changed the gender dynamics here, but dozens of other ways that they've diversified the campus. Do you see that there is one Dartmouth community, or is it a series of communities that make up one big family? I mean, do you feel that it's lots of small groups that make up this community, or?

AKHTAR: I think so, yeah. I think it is closer to being lots of small groups or sub-communities. They're communities in their own right, but that contribute to the experiences we have as related to Dartmouth. It's nice to talk about an idea of a singular Dartmouth community, but there are so many ways to either get specifically involved with different activities or locations or programs or in some ways to not feel like you properly connect to all of those, for me to feel like there is a singular Dartmouth community. I mean, I think maybe for students or staff or combinations or whomever it is—there may be roles that they held at these times that themselves contribute to the flavors of a singular Dartmouth community.

As an alum going to alumni events, sometimes, especially where they're talking about leadership and governance and such, it makes me more inclined to feel like there is a greater Dartmouth community that can unite about certain things, but I don't feel like that's necessarily very practical or a pragmatic way to look at what the reality is in terms of there being so many individuals who had experiences at Dartmouth that were not what they would have hoped for, what we would have hoped for for them, and that they're not being the same interest in retaining connections or building things out in the same way.

I was fortunate that I had, for the most part, a very good Dartmouth experience. There were things that I could have done better, and there were things that could have been easier, perhaps, but for me things worked out really well, for the most part. And I feel badly that I can't say the same thing for all of my friends who were here or people whom I met after the fact, who were at Dartmouth at the same time.

And I hope that in some ways we can all contribute to a community that is seeking to further develop this institution, make it even better, but I don't think that thinking about it as one Dartmouth community is effective except in the rarest of cases, where you want to be able to reach everyone, but you usually can't reach everyone with the same message.

DONIN: No.

AKHTAR: So I feel like trying to focus on individual communities that might roll up into something larger on occasion as a better way to think about it.

DONIN: And, of course, you've now joined yet another Dartmouth community as an employee.

AKHTAR: Mm-hm.

DONIN: How was that transition for you? Was it weird?

AKHTAR: It *was* weird. My colleagues here were always very helpful and supportive, which was great, and my friends who were in the area were also helpful and supportive. But it *was* strange. I guess my senior summer, so to speak, the summer after I graduated, when I started working at the library—those three months I was still living over at Phi Tau.

DONIN: [Chuckles.] Oh, gee! That *is* weird.

AKHTAR: It is weird.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

AKHTAR: But I think in some ways it helped in the transition because I didn't have to move out right away, and I was living on campus. I was nearby. But it is strange when most of your

housemates go off to school and you go off to work. I was lucky that some of my friends, who were also '12s, who still live in the area, were also starting work at the college at about the same time. And having a group of people like that, who were sharing some of those experiences, is invaluable.

Everybody was pretty supportive, but it does take time to get used to, in some senses, where the lines are drawn for what employees do. I shouldn't say can or should do because that is quite variable, depending on a lot factors, but it just is a different sort of mindset in some ways.

It is great to be an employee, and it's great to be an alum who has connections to the student body, and I'm not sure if those two necessarily overlap or if I should try to—in some ways, I'm satisfied having my employee hat look different from my alum hat, even though both of them enable me to do things that interact with other parts of the community.

DONIN: There's a real value added, too, I think to having those triple experiences. I mean, you were an undergrad, you are staff, you're an alum. I'm sure the college feels that as well 'cause they do hire a lot of students as employees afterwards, because, you know, you're the ultimate Dartmouth person, who can understand all three sides of the story, whether you're helping a patron in the library or you're dealing with an alumnus or an alumna. You've been in all those places, so there's real value added. But I imagine for you it's slightly schizophrenic.

AKHTAR: It is a little bit strange. I agree that it definitely has value, and I appreciate being able to do that. At the moment, the work that I've done in the library so far is mostly not public facing,—

DONIN: Right.

AKHTAR: —at least in terms of personal interactions, and so—

DONIN: I was thinking more of you up in Jones. I don't know what you were doing in Jones, but I assume you were having some public service. Or not. Weren't you in Jones?

- AKHTAR: I didn't work in—I didn't—I wasn't employed in Jones, but I did some projects there sometimes. My former roommate, Matt Castellana, worked in Jones—
- DONIN: Oh, that's right. He was in Jones.
- AKHTAR: He was an intern there.
- DONIN: That's right. Sorry. Yeah.
- AKHTAR: But some of my friends who work there, they definitely have that. But sure, in my role, working with a lot of the items that we're digitizing out of the archives here, that connection to Dartmouth history,—that certainly means a lot to me, in a way that it may not necessarily mean as much to somebody who arrives after, having not been at Dartmouth.
- DONIN: It's just a job. Right.
- AKHTAR: So that is certainly appreciated. It is nice to be able to evaluate all the things that take place on campus and about campus through those different lenses. I hope that they continue to not necessarily pose too many conflicts in terms of my own evaluation of how things are going at the college, but it's definitely nice to be able to see things in those different ways,—
- DONIN: Mm-hm, mm-hm.
- AKHTAR: —which I appreciate.
- It was fun to be a student here, for the most part, and I hope it'll be fun to be an alum here for a long time. And while I'm an employee here as well, it's nice to be involved.
- DONIN: So, for instance,—and then I'm going to let you go because I know you've got to go back to your job—so, for instance, the day of the inauguration, were you an alum or were you a student or were you an employee that day? What did it feel like?
- AKHTAR: Well, I was an employee and then an alum. I took a half day that day—

DONIN: Oh, did you?

AKHTAR: —because in addition to being inauguration, it was Class Officers Weekend.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

AKHTAR: And so after inauguration we had programming that Friday night and then Saturday, with the newsletter editors. So I was at work in the morning, and then—I know that we were encouraged to go to inauguration events on pay time, so I did that for the lunch, but then by the time inauguration rolled around, I knew that I was going to be doing lots of more alum-focused things.

Over lunch, actually I had a chance to have a meeting with one of my co-newsletter editors, who was in town. She wasn't able to stay for the whole weekend, but she was actually going up to Moosilauke to do some work on building bunkhouses there.

DONIN: Oh, wonderful.

AKHTAR: She was joining a bunch of undergrads and other alums. So we did some business there, and then—inauguration was a fun event, and it certainly meant a lot to me as a former student and as an alum who hopes that things will go well. “Optimistic” seemed to be the word of the weekend that we all—a lot of us felt that way about President Hanlon. So we'll see how things go.

But even then, it was funny because I remember I met him and Gail Gentes when they came to visit the library. There was an open house with employees there. But that same evening, there was the Dartmouth Club of the Upper Valley event, where they were, and I saw them there. And Gail said, “Didn't we just see you earlier?” I said, “Yeah, different hat.” But it was nice.

The inauguration for me was more important, I guess, as an alumnus, in some respects. At least it felt that way because of what I was doing. But it was funny because I ran into an alum member of Class of—oh, I think '77, I think President

Hanlon's class—whom I had met through a reunion that DGALA held—

DONIN: Oh, yeah.

AKHTAR: —back in June. And when I first met him in June and I explained to him the work I was doing in the digital library program, he—I think at first there was some consternation because he was concerned that we were trying to digitize all the books so we could get rid of them.

DONIN:[[Chuckles.]

AKHTAR: And I—partly this was probably somewhat of a joke, but I explained to him what we were trying to do and that really we were supporting, you know, this mission of faculty teaching and other scholarship and we were digitizing the very best of—because we can't get rid of all the books even if we wanted to. And we're certainly not getting rid of things in *this* building, for the most part. So that was nice. But it was funny because they had inauguration. I was there as an employee but as an alum, and then I ran into him and we started talking about libraries again, so back to my job.

So it mixes together, and I appreciate that there's the opportunity for that to do so. It can in some ways, perhaps, feel schizophrenic, and I may find more of that if I continue to be at Dartmouth as an employee long term, and especially if responsibilities change that get me more involved with other communities. But for the time being, it's a very nice fit, and I'm enjoying getting to jump around between these things.

DONIN: And I think you must have times feeling like the ultimate insider because, you know, you fit every profile here because you're a staff person, because you're an alumnus. You know, this theme that overlays these interviews is, you know, about belonging or not belonging, and I should think working here as an alumnus makes you feel, you know, *I'm right where I belong, for the time being, anyway.*

AKHTAR: For the most part, I agree with that. I definitely feel like I get to enjoy a lot of updates about what's going on here and processing that in multiple different ways for different

communities. It is nice to be on the front lines of being back here in Hanover and seeing what's going on.

DONIN: Right.

AKHTAR: Being parts of some of these alumni groups, I feel like there's a long way to go before I feel like an insider, in some ways, because the focus is often on alumni who are many years out,—

DONIN: Yes.

AKHTAR: —who have very different concerns and positions in life, so to speak. And some of them I know I will never exactly feel the same way that they do now, many years down the road. Some of those things change in time as generations are distinct. Some of them are just on how things go for you in life. I hope that things will go well for me, and I look forward to many happy, productive years, but I'm not going to have the same bank accounts that they do.

DONIN: Indeed.

AKHTAR: And the same partners that they do. But I hope that we can work together on things, and so far it's been pretty good, so.

DONIN: Great. Okay, Shaun, I'm going to turn off these recorders.

[End of interview.]