

Richard Asala
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
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WOMICK: I'm Cally Womick and I'm here in Rauner Library with Richard Asala, Class of 2013.

ASALA: Yes.

WOMICK: Today is Thursday, April 18th 2013. So, to get started, why don't you tell me about growing up, your life before Dartmouth?

ASALA: Okay. I grew up in Ghana. I was born in one city in Ghana called Kumasi and my parents and I moved to the capital when I was six 'cause my dad switched jobs. So Kumasi is where I spent most of my childhood. I have two brothers; one is older than me, the other is younger than me, and so we grew up together—the difference in age between my older brother and me is one year and then between me and my younger brother is two years and so we're really close in age, and we shared a lot of experiences together.

I'd say we had a pretty insular childhood 'cause we grew up in a very Christian home. So: school, house, church, a few friends. But we really didn't play around the neighborhood much. You'd call us, like, nerds 'cause we were usually indoors, not playing video games though.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: Most of what we did was games that we could play at home by ourselves. We read a lot. Watched T.V. quite a bit too, and so that was really my life. School. Academics was an important part of my life growing up. My brothers and I all did really well in school and so that became a priority of ours and we kept that up and because we went to the same school all the time and there was always this legacy that followed us wherever we went. My brother would go to a class and the teacher would love him and the next year I'd be there and had to fill those shoes.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: I would say that that was a lot of pressure, but I grew to enjoy that pressure to do well. It built up as we are growing up, because, I mean, it's just what it is. The nature of growing up and having more challenges ahead the more you advance in academics. I'd say we enjoyed it a lot. We are really close and we're very ambitious kids. I was taking on a lot of leadership roles in school too, my brothers and I, and so those things really defined us. At home too, our reading and watching of T.V. exposed us to the outside world, so in a sense we were a little bit different from many of the other kids we knew who, you know, basically lived their life in Ghana. We—though we had never travelled outside the country—pretty much through our reading and all that knew things that were outside Ghana and sometimes some kids thought of us as being different, culturally different in a rather weird way.

WOMICK: Did you feel that way about yourself?

ASALA: I kind of did 'cause I knew that there were lots of—the kind of vocabulary that I had was somehow different from many of the people around me because of the books I read, like I said, and for some reason—I speak three Ghanaian languages but all my friends—we speak English in school—all my friends just assume that I can't speak any Ghanaian language and I was wondering why that was but then I just realized that I spoke those at home and never around my friends at school, so we're seen as the very academic type who probably weren't as cultured and—rooted in our culture. Meanwhile, if they knew us outside of school they'd have known that we're just like any normal kids in that sense. So, I mean, I got that vibe from people at school at times. But then, I didn't think of myself that way because I knew a bit of my culture.

WOMICK: Mmmm. So what did you do for high school?

ASALA: Oh yes, so for high school I went to Presbyterian Boys' Secondary School. That's a leading—I'd say *the* leading science school in the country and it's an all-boys school. My entire family actually went there, all the guys in my family: my dad, my uncles, my cousins, all the guys. It's kind of a tradition to go there. It's a really difficult school to get into to

begin with, so that just shows you the family pressures also that are around academics and all that. So, thankfully we all got into the school. My brother went there ahead of me and I went there, too.

There was that atmosphere of excellence—even from the first day I went to the school, people were identifying me as Sampson’s brother. Sampson’s my older brother. Sampson had gotten quite a name for himself there just the one year he had been there. He was known as one of the smart kids and so the expectation was high for me—coming in. But it was good for me because I think it pushed me a lot.

There’s this national competition that we do in that school and only the best students are allowed to compete for the school. And the nature of the competition is that it is highly competitive. And the school’s already a competitive school because you have to get in by being the best in the primary schools, so the pressure was high and I think that really pushed me even beyond what I’d been doing up to that point, to study really hard. And so that defined my academic experience as I became one of the best students in my school.

Actually, that leads to the story of why and how I left Ghana. Because there’s a scholarship award. That scholarship required you to go through a process of applying where every school—well, certain schools are invited to bring two of their best students to apply. And because I was top of my class there I got an opportunity to be called on to apply for this scholarship, and I won this scholarship. So I completed high school in Ghana after three years, ‘cause high school in Ghana only takes three years.

WOMICK: Okay.

ASALA: So after completing high school in Ghana, three years, I got this—I won this award, actually during my senior year.

And then, so, right after that I came to the United States on that scholarship to study on the IB program—International Baccalaureate program—in the United World College in New Mexico. I was selected as one of four students in the whole country to win that award.

WOMICK: Wow!

ASALA: So, yeah, it was a pretty crazy project. And I think—so right off the bat, me coming to the US—me having this big transition in my life happened because of academics, so those had been really important in my life up until that point. And, yeah, I'd say that's how I grew up. I mean, if I want to extend it all the way 'til Dartmouth—I went to the United World College for two years. There I studied the IB and I applied to colleges and I chose to come to Dartmouth College. And I'm here, four years later.

WOMICK: How did you settle on Dartmouth?

ASALA: I really was looking at Ivy League schools and specifically engineering Ivy League schools. So Princeton, Yale, and Dartmouth were the places I wanted to look at. I was at first looking at biomedical engineering, and so—let's just say Dartmouth had a good biomedical engineering program, Yale had a good biomedical engineering program, so did Duke. I think I looked at Duke, also, yes. That's what I was looking at, really. After admissions decisions came out, I guess my best option was Dartmouth College. I guess that's really what it was. I didn't know much about what Dartmouth itself was, culturally what it stood for and everything, but I just knew that my aim going to college was to have as much opportunities as I wanted.

'Cause I realized when I came to the US that opportunity's all that's important, having options is what's important. Because when I was in Ghana, I was on a track to becoming a doctor—being a doctor in Ghana is a very competitive thing to get into and so only the students with the best grades can get it; all the students who do best in the schools end up getting into medical because they're the only ones who can. So I'm pretty sure that I would have been in medical school right now if I hadn't gotten that scholarship, just like all my friends who were doing well like me in school are doing now.

And so when I came to the US, that changed because there were so many other options that were viable. Medicine is so competitive because it's the only real stable thing you can do in Ghana and be assured that you'll be having a salary and

you'll have job security. So it makes a lot of sense for people who can get it to go into it. But here, there are so many other options and I think that it was great when I found that out when I came to the US. So going into college, I wanted to keep that and I knew that engineering is something that gives me so many options, 'cause I'm used to doing a lot of things. I knew that I have the technical aptitude to do engineering and engineering would open up doors, so that's pretty much what I was thinking when I was going into college—to make sure that I keep my options open and then I can decide when my interests are more formed later.

WOMICK: Did you get to see Dartmouth before you decided on it?

ASALA: I saw the website. [Laughs]

WOMICK: You saw the website. [Laughs]

ASALA: But yeah, no, I didn't. Around the time we had Dimensions, I had my IB exams coming up—I think it was our mock exams before we actually wrote the final exams—and so I just couldn't leave at the time. The timing was bad. I just, I mean—I just decided that I'm going to come to Dartmouth so it didn't matter if I saw it or not, I'd still come anyway.

WOMICK: Wow. So the first time you saw it was during...?

ASALA: Was on the bus.

WOMICK: On the bus?

ASALA: When I came on the Dartmouth Coach the first time the day before I went for Trips.

WOMICK: Ok.

ASALA: First time I saw Dartmouth.

WOMICK: Wow.

ASALA: Yeah.

WOMICK: What was that like?

ASALA: For me it was, I guess—maybe for me it was a different experience than maybe for other people ‘cause I’d done this before, and it wasn’t just going across the country. It was going across continents. I literally hadn’t been to the US before and I jumped on a plane, went through Europe—which I’d never seen before—and went through Denver—which I’d never seen before but had seen in a cartoon on TV when I was a kid—and jumped on a plane to New Mexico, which most Americans haven’t even seen before. And so that experience of going to a totally new place and knowing that I’m going to be there for a while, I had it before. So, I guess that also helped with me being fine with coming to New Hampshire without ever seeing it before. The experience wasn’t that strange to me. I felt a little more comfortable coming here, also, ‘cause I knew people who were here already. I knew a couple of ‘12s that were here and I’d interacted with somebody who was a ‘09 who was here and who was about to leave, so...

WOMICK: How did you know them?

ASALA: Through the same United World College. So the ‘12s that I know, it was because they were in my high school a year ahead of me. So they came to Dartmouth one year before I did. And the ‘09, it was through Ghana and somebody I knew there. Also I knew another ‘12 who went to my high school with me in Ghana, PRESEC, and so he and I were in the same class—were actually also top tier in our class—and he stayed in Ghana after we finished school, took a gap year and applied to US schools. So he was a ‘12 here, one year ahead of me, ‘cause I took two years off. So I knew him well.

WOMICK: Wow.

ASALA: Actually we are going to be living together when I leave Dartmouth, so that’s great.

WOMICK: Oh, how cool!

ASALA: Yeah.

WOMICK: So freshman trips. What was that like for you?

ASALA: Freshman trips was very interesting for me. In my high school in New Mexico, we are actually based in the woods on a mountain—we are five miles from a town which has about fifteen thousand people and two hours to any other town or settlement. No, like an hour to Santa Fe, which is pretty big. But then—it's remote, that's what I'm trying to say. The school has a theme of wilderness exploration. A graduation requirement was to attend three expeditions in the woods.

WOMICK: Wow.

ASALA: Yeah. So for that, actually, we got to do some overnight camping in the New Mexico area. I actually went to the Grand Canyon, camped there for like five days. It was great. Hiked, it was awesome. And did some other trips there. So, being in the woods—while it was foreign to me in high school—it was something I had gotten used to before coming here. So the part of going into the woods was not the new experience for me, the new experience was meeting people at the college level who come from so many different places, doing things like that.

My DOC trip—the two leaders I had were—one was almost a professional hiker, I mean he's hiked the Appalachian, I think. He hiked that range of mountains on the west coast, I've forgotten what it's called, but he got funded for doing that and so he's done hiking for a while. The other team leader had hiked since she was like six. Girl Scout, hiked with her family and all that, so that's intense. And I was the only non-athlete on my team.

WOMICK: Wow...

ASALA: So my team was pretty intense. And because I had done hiking before—I did the Grand Canyon, like, the Grand Canyon. What else can be worse than that, right? I chose to go on harder hiking. So, yeah... That was the team I met. And they were really intense. In fact we were going with the extreme team and we beat them to the top. All of them. So that was really intense. That was a really intense hiking experience for me. I don't know why New Hampshire doesn't like switchbacks, but they should try that...it makes hiking so much easier. We had to just go straight up for a while.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: So it was quite an experience. But I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. There was one night, actually, I got really, really cold and my sleeping bag was not big enough for me, so in the middle of the night I woke up and I was, like, frozen at the top.

WOMICK: Aw!

ASALA: It was a horrible experience. So I actually called my team and it was just really nice 'cause they all came and cuddled around me and built—like mummified me in a bigger sleeping bag—it was the cutest experience.

WOMICK: Aww!

ASALA: It was great. And I had an awesome team. And then when we got to the Lodge, that was great, too. I just—the Lodge was rather a magical experience in terms of—I just saw all these acts that they were doing and I was like, “Wow, they put so much time into it. These people must really, really, really like Dartmouth. They must really, really, really like freshmen coming in,” and all that. So that gave me a sense of belonging at Dartmouth and I was looking forward to coming to Dartmouth and being that kind of person. That some new person coming to Dartmouth would see and be like, “Wow, that person must really love Dartmouth,” and make the person feel at home because they know that at some point they can call this place home. And so that was really good for me. I enjoyed trips.

WOMICK: How did that carry over into freshman year?

ASALA: Umm... did it carry over into freshman year? I'm not really sure. I can say, looking back now, that the feeling I had for making people feel at home really manifested in me being really involved in the International Students Association. Doing that—playing that kind of mentor role for people. I ended up being the president for the group and it was a good experience doing that for people and I enjoyed people seeing how comfortable I was here, helping them to where they could also adjust in.

But in my freshman year I wouldn't say I was able to really do much. 'Cause I jumped straight into classes. I knew I was going to be an engineer, so I started my engineering right off the bat. I got four engineering requirements done my freshman fall—which is quite insane—'cause I got two credits—took exams and got two credits, took two classes that counted for my AB/BE.

WOMICK: Wow.

ASALA: So, yeah. I just jumped straight into classes. That's what I spent most of my time doing. I did debate, too, but basically for freshman fall at least, class is what I did. And then I got really involved in the international students group at the end of my freshman year. But most of freshman year was just really getting a hold of academics and settling down.

WOMICK: Yep. You mentioned some students that you already knew when you came here, but, in addition to them, who were your friends freshman year?

ASALA: In addition to them, I'd say the Ghanaian group I met when I came here. I hung out with a lot of the Ghanaians here. There are two other Ghanaians in my class who I hang out with most of the time. In fact we are now roommates in senior year. Everybody keeps asking did we know each other before coming to Dartmouth. No, we did not. We did not know each other. I met them here and it's—I don't know, it was just a great experience because we shared all the same kinds of experiences in Ghana and they were a year younger than me in my class, but because I took two years we ended up here at the same time.

But their experience was so similar and I guess I missed that when I spent two years in New Mexico, so it was a refreshing feeling to come back to that and just see what people were into. We hang out a lot. And also they're also engineers, so that academic experience—that shared academic experience meant that we took classes together, we did assignments together, and we just hang out a lot. So they became a strong friend base for me. But honestly I would say that they became a stronger friend base for me during the end of freshman year, not so much the beginning.

The beginning of freshman year was all about my involvement in the Parliamentary Debate team. I was—I love debate. I didn't get to do much of it when I was in New Mexico but when I came here I really liked it and— I like being on stage, for one, and I like arguing, too. I like thinking through arguments and I like—I really enjoy listening to a good, sound argument and even better a good rebuttal to an argument. I mean, it was just a perfect thing for me. I enjoyed it a lot. We travelled to other schools around the northeast to compete and so I had a really good group of people who I spent time with. And trips were on weekends, and so we just travelled and explored. It was a good time.

And from there we all figured out our social lives at Dartmouth together. We also partied and did all those kind of hanging out moments that freshmen do. We were our own little 'schmob. It was just how I got to branch out a lot and meet so many different people my freshman year.

WOMICK: Mhm. Where did you live your freshman year?

ASALA: McLaughlin.

WOMICK: McLaughlin.

ASALA: So, it was rather interesting 'cause my floor was great, I knew my floor and I went to floor meetings all the time, but I was bonding more with people who were on my debate team and their friends. Also, I came to Dartmouth with two other people from my high school, one of which is Sahil [Joshi '13]. I don't know if you know Sahil?

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: Yeah, so Sahil and I—and Sahil as you know is a very social person—so he and I were hanging out with the debate team and hanging out on his floor. I got to meet his whole floor. So I hung out mostly in the River and in East Wheelock, even though I was in McLaughlin myself. East Wheelock's where I met a lot of people 'cause it's a really close-knit community, so you meet one person, you hang out with them one day and you find out that they know all these other people, and so you get to know people through other people.

WOMICK: Oh yeah.

ASALA: And that's really how I expanded my friend base in the beginning. Actually I knew your roommate—but I had only heard of you, I had never actually seen you.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: [Laughs] That was a fact.

WOMICK: What did you do over your freshman summer?

ASALA: Prior to my freshman summer I had been in the US for two years without going home and so I decided to go home. I mean, I think it had been quite a lot, doing the transition to college on my own, without my parents knowing much about the process. In fact I did all the applications to college, and the decisions, moving, everything on my own. Without my parents even knowing much of anything. I just gave them updates on where I was when I was there. And so that was a big grown-up move for me.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: And just transitioning to Dartmouth. Dealing with the whole financial aid—doing almost every document related to coming to college on my own was quite interesting. And so I wanted to get a break from all that. I needed to relax. I had been involved in this group, the World Partners in Education—the founder was a Dartmouth '06 who worked in the Admissions Office and so he wanted a Ghanaian to help out with—because they were based in Ghana and sending volunteers to teach in Ghana, so he wanted us to help out with an expansion they were trying to do. So I was brought onto the team, and I helped them to recruit. I used my contacts in Ghana and all that to help them recruit a new school to send volunteers 'cause more people were interested and they wanted more volunteers to go.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: So we found one—it was actually in my hometown in Ghana. And we recruited them and so they became a new partner

school. So it really made sense that I would chaperone the people who went there for the summer.

WOMICK:

Yeah.

ASALA:

And so while I was there I relaxed and all that, I got a chance to just show some Dartmouth people around and so that's what I did for my summer, actually.

WOMICK:

Wow, how cool.

ASALA:

It was great. I got to show Dartmouth people where I'm from.

WOMICK:

Yeah. And so then you came back for sophomore fall?

ASALA:

I came back for sophomore fall and then stayed on campus for the longest time. [Laughs]

WOMICK:

Yeah?

ASALA:

Yeah. I stayed on campus from sophomore fall all through 'til my junior win—my junior spring.

WOMICK:

[Sharp exhale]

ASALA:

Yeah. That was a long time, because during my sophomore summer I was not taking classes but I was still here doing research and doing the Tuck [Business] Bridge Program. I only left for like a week to visit some family in the US and that was it.

WOMICK:

That's a long time on campus.

ASALA:

It's a long time to be on campus. Yeah.

WOMICK:

[Laughs]

ASALA:

So, yeah. I really lived here, pretty much. Yeah.

WOMICK:

Yeah. How would you say that sophomore year was different from freshman year?

ASALA:

Sophomore year...sophomore year was when I started taking actual engineering classes and it was pretty intense. I

remember my spring I took four classes and it was interesting 'cause I had planned out my D-Plan really well and so I didn't need to take four classes, but I was *really* interested in taking a class with this professor and for that reason I was like, "I'm gonna just give it a shot and see what it's like." And so I took that in the spring, and that was really intense.

But besides the intense academics, my sophomore year was also a time when I transitioned to leadership on campus, 'cause I was on COSO [Council on Student Organizations] now, starting my sophomore year. And I also was more involved in the International Student Association. I think I was vice-president at the time. And, it's interesting, 'cause I only started being involved like my freshman spring but then quickly got into a vice-president position. And I was working more within that group. And I stopped doing Parliamentary Debate, 'cause of time constraints and all that.

WOMICK: Right.

ASALA: Outside my academics and outside the leadership, I think sophomore year was a pretty social time for me. I got to know a lot of people. And my friends joined fraternities and sororities, but at the same time I got to meet a lot of people. I wouldn't say I lost my friends at all, it was actually really good 'cause I got to meet their new friends and all that and just hang out more. Basically, that's what sophomore year was for me. It was an academic time, leadership, and then quite a good social time.

WOMICK: Were you able to keep your friends from Parli [Parliamentary Debate], even though you weren't doing it anymore?

ASALA: Oh yeah, yeah. I did.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: I mean, most of us were not doing it anymore, so we were just friends from there. And we all branched out doing different things 'cause we all found things we were interested in doing. So that was good.

WOMICK: And you decided to rush a house, too?

ASALA: No, I did not.

WOMICK: You didn't rush.

ASALA: Nope.

WOMICK: But a lot of your friends did?

ASALA: Yeah.

WOMICK: Was that weird?

ASALA: No. Actually, one of my good friends rushed a house and didn't get a house, and that was weird for him, but then—I think it was fine 'cause, I don't know—like, nobody really expected me to rush a house 'cause people knew what I thought about the fraternity system and everything from the beginning and I'm not a kind of person that people would influence me to do something, 'cause they knew that if I wanted to do something then I would.

I did have some people encourage me to rush some of the houses, some of the brothers who were trying to get me to rush a house, but then, like, again, it wasn't that they were trying to force me, they just wanted to ask if I was interested. It was not weird for me at all, not rushing a house, 'cause I could still hang out in the house. It was totally fine, I just—I did hang out in houses a lot, too, I just didn't really feel the need to necessarily join one because I had a good friend base already. I had people who also supported me, like the international students and the African students. We are pretty tight—we just had a support group for ourselves and it was fine, I think. I didn't really need to branch out, as it were.

WOMICK: What about sophomore summer, when you kind of transitioned to being, you know, top dog?

ASALA: [Laughs] Sophomore summer was quite interesting. When I was here I went out quite a bit. So, the thing is, sophomore spring I got into a relationship and so my going out was a little bit less.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: Than it used to be. And my social drama went down, 'cause I did have quite a bit of social drama in my sophomore year. [Laughs] And so I don't know, it was ok. I just went out—hang out, you know, with my guys, we played pong. We just, you know, chilled like any other. And that was fine for me. Sophomore summer, I was doing a lot of research that term and then the Tuck Bridge Program was really intensive, so during that period it was very busy—I was engaged all the time. So, part of sophomore summer was me doing research and hanging out with guys in the frats and then the other part I was just actually busy doing a lot of work, and so that was what it was.

WOMICK: And then junior year happened and you didn't have a break.

ASALA: Yes. Junior year happened. Junior year was quite busy as well. I mean, I can describe my Dartmouth career as being very busy.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: Generally. Like, this is one of the terms that I get a free pass *because* I was trying to do the engineering program—the five year program—in four years, and so...that's—it speaks for itself. It's a lot of work.

WOMICK: Right.

ASALA: Yeah. So, junior year—what did I do junior year? Do I remember? So junior year I became president of the ISA and that took quite a bit of time 'cause I took up a lot of work in the ISA that year. And...I'm trying to remember—I don't think—I think I really immersed myself in the ISA that year and I wasn't going out as much 'cause classes took a lot, and also over the summer I had become more invested in my future. Like, in terms of I had more of a direction I wanted to go in. I knew I wanted to be an entrepreneur now. So I was expanding my scope to try and build my skills to become better at that.

The research I did over the summer—my professor liked my work and took me on for the whole year, and so I was doing more work and doing really good research with him. And so I

just think I was developing myself a lot more my junior year. And, as always, my academics took a lot of my time, but besides that I would say I had less of a social life my junior year than I did my sophomore year.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: Yeah, for that reason, yeah. Also because I had a girlfriend, I just basically didn't branch out as much. That's what happens.

WOMICK: Yeah. How would you say it is, having a relationship at Dartmouth?

ASALA: It's extreme—[sigh] it's very...I'd say it's—I can't blanketly say what it would be like for everyone, having a relationship because I did have sort of a relationship before I had this relationship of mine, and it really depends on the person that you're in a relationship with. It was—at points, when I had my previous relationship—at lots of points felt like a burden because I knew that you need to invest time into your relationship and Dartmouth is a busy place and for somebody who's an engineer, the time you have to do social activities is really limited. Weekends, for example. And that time needs to be rationed. And—you know what I'm saying?

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: And at some points, too, it's in your best interest to spend some afternoon time doing studying 'cause it will improve your performance and all that, and so it became kind of a burden. But then, at some point—I think it takes a while to be able to manage that well, and just manage expectations on what's going to be in that relationship. For me, it has been good. I've been able to balance it out pretty well, I think, by this time, 'cause I've been in a relationship for quite a while and we have a mutual understanding of how much time we can spend together and all of that. And we are both busy, so it's a good understanding that we've come to, and it's working for us. But I will say that the nature of our schedules at Dartmouth makes it really difficult. And the D-Plan schedule of people being off at different times also makes relationships strained a lot. And so it's kind of a struggle.

WOMICK: Mhm. Yeah.

ASALA: Yeah.

WOMICK: The D-Plan.

ASALA: The D-Plan. Yep. Yeah. While the D-Plan does strain some relationships, it also helps you to branch out a lot more because I know terms that my girlfriend was off I just had a lot more time—I mean, I made some new friends. So that was good and all.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: It is a reality. This is what it is.

WOMICK: No, it's true. There's a limited amount of time.

ASALA: There's a limited amount of time. Very limited. Yeah.

WOMICK: What else about junior year?

ASALA: What about junior year... Junior year, I think—pff. Why are they all blending together? It's kind of interesting.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: I'm trying to remember—so junior year I did—like I said, I got more invested in my future, so I was trying to figure it out, scrambling left and right, so I went through corporate recruiting, I remember, in the winter. That was a bad experience. But not really. I say bad experience because nothing really came out of it, but then that was difficult because I already have limited opportunities, being an international student, and even if I didn't have that limited opportunities—meaning that some companies would just not hire international students at all—

WOMICK: Right.

ASALA: And so you're like—of the limited pool of one or two kinds of internships that come to Dartmouth, not all of them can even consider international students. So, besides all those issues, it was also—I had only just gotten into looking into fields like,

you know, consulting, finance, and those things and I didn't know—I'm not a marketing person and so—it was really limited. There were slim pickings. And even those companies are very competitive for their internships.

WOMICK: Mhm.

ASALA: So again, slim pickings. But I'll just say that it was a good experience for me 'cause of the interviews I got and all—the process of learning how to do cover letters and all those things put me in a certain frame of mind that really helped me. It helped me know how to take charge of some things in my life. You need to plan ahead for some things, like job search. Just—I find that you need to be in a certain frame of mind for a lot of things you need to do.

Like, for example, going through that recruiting experience and learning more about myself—things I do well and things I need to improve, helped me think consciously about them and from then on everything I was doing was targeted towards improving myself. 'Cause I wanted to improve myself. And I—that was a good thing for me.

And for that reason I did a couple of things. Like, I applied to be a DOSC [Dean's Office Student Consultant] for the next year. Last spring I applied to be on the Palaeopitus senior society and to do the Rockefeller Leadership Program. All these things, I'll say—one thing, being a DOSC can help, not necessarily in a personally enriching way, but to give back, and I did that 'cause I had done things like that the whole time at Dartmouth and enjoyed it.

But RLF was mainly to have that personal development and have network that I found one really needed to have, because sometimes it's not just about being able to perform in a role but about being given the opportunity. And you need some people to give you opportunities and push you in the right directions, and so I just found that would be a good thing to do. So that's what my junior year culminated in: me understanding where I want to go after Dartmouth and making—taking steps to increase my chances of getting there and just getting the help I need. 'Cause I found that you need help to do whatever you want, right?

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: And so, I ended up, my junior summer, doing engineering research in Germany and that was great, 'cause—it was a good experience. I hadn't been to Europe ever and that was a good experience for me because I broadened my scope, I learned to work with people in different cultures, not that I wasn't doing that at Dartmouth, but being in that kind of space where it's very foreign. The German culture is German, and being in that space is very different from being in the US, where, like I said, growing up I felt like I already knew the culture well enough, so I was really comfortable—and my extent of culture shock wasn't that high.

I felt comfortable being here, but being in Germany is very different 'cause there are certain nuances that I didn't know. German culture is just not the kind of thing I studied ever. So it was good being immersed into that and just also having to work in a very academic environment under such conditions. And just exploring Europe, too, was great. I got the chance to travel around, so I traveled to the Austria, Denmark, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia—it was really good. And it was good being in a different part of the world, too. For me, it was great.

WOMICK: When you were there, were there other Dartmouth students that you spent time with?

ASALA: Um, yes. There were two other Dartmouth students in my program with me. I spent more time with one of them than the other 'cause the other person spent so much time with his books and his work.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: So, I spent time with another student Kyle Saltzman—another '13—we hung out a lot and we went out, explored Hamburg—that's where we were. It was really, really good. A really good experience. We got really immersed in the culture, I would say. And I learned how to cook! 'Cause I had to cook for myself. We were in Helmut Schmidt University. It's a government military school, and that's where we were doing the research. So I got to know a bunch of soldiers—and I would say that through that, I got a new fun fact about

myself, which is that I got to play paintball with a group of soldiers in a forest area somewhere in eastern Germany.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: Yeah. It was really cool. And they were really, really cool people, too. It was a good experience, like, playing paintball with professionals. I got headshots so many times. They were so good. And so that was a really fun experience for me.

It's like one of those things where I didn't—I would never plan for it, but then when it happens you realize, just, man, it's something so different from anything I ever thought I would be doing when I came to Dartmouth. It was really fun for me.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: Yeah.

WOMICK: And so then senior year.

ASALA: Senior year rolls around. I realize that this is the final stretch in my academics because I was on course to finish my BE on time and I had now gotten all these commitments too—I was in Paleop, I was a DOSC, and I also got into RLF, and so I was busy. And I was a UGA [Undergraduate Advisor].

WOMICK: That's a lot.

ASALA: [Laughs] I was a UGA, I totally forgot about that. That has been part of my experience this whole time. [Laughs]

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: Been a big part of my experience this whole time actually. I don't know how I forgot that. So I lived as a UGA since my sophomore year and my senior year I got to be UGA of the Maxwell-Channing Cox apartments. I was the UGA with the most residents—131 residents. Which is rather insane. And it's huge task—trying to build community in a place where there's not even a common space, and people usually

choose to be there because they only want to hang out with people in their apartment.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: So it's quite a task. Quite an idealistic task, if you ask me, but—

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: That was also there. So also having that burden to always think about—ways of mobilizing these people who don't want to be mobilized, and all that, so—I had a lot on my plate coming to senior year, no doubt. I had, on top of that, my senior fall I had three engineering classes. I had avoided three engineering classes up until that point but I had to do it this time around because there was one class which wasn't offered any other time and I'm a senior, so, had to do it. And—

WOMICK: On top of everything else.

ASALA: On top of everything. Plus corporate recruiting, 'cause I needed a job. And the stress of corporate recruiting was a little...was something that I don't think words can describe because the options I had were—if I didn't get a job then—I had to get a job, and be sure about it, before senior year ends because there are a bunch of preparation documents I need to get as an international student to be able to work after Dartmouth. They cost money, so it would actually be a burden if I don't have a job and all of that. So, like, I needed to figure it out.

I need to figure out where I'm going to live after Dartmouth because, once I graduated, if I didn't have a job, I'd have something like 60 days or so to leave the country. And then coming back to the country to do something else would have to be through grad school. It's highly unlikely that—maybe not highly unlikely, but it would be a little more difficult to go through the recruiting process while in another country.

WOMICK: Right.

ASALA: So. The pressure was on. It was a tough time. And so I had all these things that I was juggling at the same time that fall term, it was really intense. One of the most intense terms I've had at Dartmouth. Thankfully, I pulled through that term. Classes were okay—were actually good. For my senior project, which I put a lot of work into—I'm happy, it went really well. I got a job. I got a job at the end of—at the beginning of November, which was really great 'cause then, right when I got that offer, like, all my anxiety went down.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: I just had to concentrate on academics. And it felt good. It felt like I had accomplished something at Dartmouth, 'cause what I'd discovered from my sophomore summer—about where I wanted to go, like what I wanted to pursue, in this relatively short time—I'd achieved it. So that was a great thing, and it counts as a great success in my books. And moving into the winter term I was very optimistic about—you know, just riding through the rest of the term and all the rest of that and just having a good time.

Then, after the craziness of the fall term, I thought my winter term was going to be—couldn't be worse. It was worse. It was more demanding because I had my final senior project in two classes which people avoid taking together—engineers avoid taking together, so it was...very time consuming. And one of them alone is enough to override your other classes, and I had two of those and then on top of that my senior project. So my winter term was great—uh, sorry, was very busy. I think it was a good thing that my girlfriend was off that term 'cause otherwise—[Laughs]

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: We probably wouldn't have spent much time together and that would have been bad. 'Cause it was a very busy term. And the reason I decided to take those three classes—'cause I could have pushed one of them down to this term—was that I just—I wanted to round off Dartmouth on a high note, not being busy the whole time. Having a relaxed spring term to just organize myself, 'cause anytime I'm busy I realize I've got to push some things backwards and I would rather not do that in my last term 'cause I realize that the

things that I do—things I have a plan for after leaving Dartmouth were pretty important to me. So, that's what I did. And my winter term was very busy. And, honestly, my winter term senior year, that's all I can remember of it, 'cause I was working almost every hour. It was a lot of work taking Engineering 62—which is a microprocessors class—CS 50—which is insane—and then my senior project, which was also taking a lot of time. Thankfully it went well, and I'm happy about that.

WOMICK: Wow.

ASALA: Yeah. And the intensity died down 'cause I finished my BE at the end of the winter term and coming to this term I just could take my time, take whatever classes I wanted.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: So now I'm taking Econ 2, Tuck 3, and Russian 13, which is—yeah.

WOMICK: You earned it.

ASALA: I think I did.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: I feel I did.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: Yeah. And I also had to do a PE last term. So I did ice skating at the same time. Fun times. Yep.

WOMICK: Unbelievable.

ASALA: Yeah. So, yeah, that has been my journey here. And—looking back, I think that I am very happy I came to Dartmouth, because my mindset was doing engineering so that I have options. And, truly, I have realized that it does give me those options that I want. Maybe engineering is not necessarily what I'm going to be doing when I'm done with here 'cause I want to be an entrepreneur, but having engineering is the best thing I could have done with my time

here, 'cause Dartmouth has this engineering school that doesn't turn you into a highly technical person who only thinks about technical matters, but somebody who can look around and consider other factors and then know if something is important for them to actually pursue in the grand scheme of things. And that's what I need as an entrepreneur, so it has been a great experience for me, being here, and also has given me all the—I mean, there were ups and downs, all the time—but it has given me all the necessary resources and also exposure to let me know how to get resources whenever I need them. And I think, even leaving Dartmouth—Dartmouth's gonna be an integral part of my life, even when I leave here, 'cause of the connections I have here and all that. It's been great, I'd say.

WOMICK: Why don't you talk more about being a UGA?

ASALA: Being a UGA—so, my sophomore year is when I became a UGA, and I was put in Woodward. I was in charge of the whole building. And, as a sophomore—the building was full of juniors and seniors, and so it was rather interesting 'cause—I don't know why they placed me there. I wanted to be a freshman UGA, but they saw through it and it was good because I probably wouldn't have had time for the freshmen. And so, it was good because upperclassmen are more low-maintenance than freshmen.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: But the good thing about it was that—I don't know how, but they somehow respected me as a UGA—even though they knew I was a '13 and they were, you know, mostly '11s and '12s—they respected me. Like, I could call people out when they did things wrong and all that. And I—the only thing is they weren't really interested in was programs and so that was a little bit of a problem—it's just what it is. And I got to help out some people when they needed help and the good thing is that I think they felt that they could always e-mail me when they needed some help, so that was great for me.

I moved from there to North Mass my junior year, and that was good. There I think I knew my residents a lot more because—I mean, it was two floors, but I could see them in the hallways and we'd chat and all that and I was now a

junior, so I knew a lot more of them. So, my UGA time there was also very—programs. Not all of them came to my programs, but then since I knew some of them and had some relationships with some of them, I was able to—actually they would come just to be nice to me, you know?

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: And that was good. Then—but, I think my UGA role is the kind of thing where I ended up just getting work done that I needed to, I was required to. And the majority of the time I was just responding to things that people needed, 'cause the nature of being an upperclassman UGA is that people usually just think there's a UGA there, they don't really care about the UGA until they need the UGA. And so I was responding to those times when they needed the UGA to do something for them. And I think I was—I'm good at doing that, 'cause I've done that quite a while. I was an RA in my high school before coming here.

WOMICK: Uh-huh!

ASALA: And so it's a thing I was definitely going to do when I came here. And now, as an apartment UGA—more of a struggle because people *really* don't care anymore. They choose to do what they're doing—they choose to live there because of that exclusivity and being insular from everyone else. 'Cause there's no hallway anymore, it's just a staircase. You barely see them. They have their own bathrooms. You never meet somebody in the bathroom, so it's a very different experience now, but I've enjoyed working with the freshmen UGAs on my staff because, as opposed to previous years when everybody else on my staff was an upperclassmen UGA, now I'm the only upperclassmen UGA with freshmen UGAs and they do things like BFABs [Breakfast for a Buck] and have floor meetings and all that, so I listen in on all the things they do.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: And they're more connected to their residents. And because I'm the DOSC in the apartments, in the River cluster, I've also gotten to know a lot of the '16s in the River.

WOMICK: Mhm.

ASALA: I've actually made some really good friends among them, so that has been a good experience for me. My UGA role this year has blended a lot into my DOSC role 'cause of one-on-one meetings to have lunch and then talk about school—engineering, mostly.

WOMICK: [Laughs]

ASALA: Yeah, it's been a good time. Yeah.

WOMICK: How would you say that the Dartmouth community has changed in your time here?

ASALA: I don't know if I can say that it has changed because I have found that, as I've gone through my years at Dartmouth, I've learned more about some things that happen here, as opposed to, like—I wouldn't say that in my freshman year I knew what the Dartmouth community was. So, I would say that I got to know more parts about the Dartmouth community.

For example, when I was in freshman year I didn't know much about how frats, sororities really work. I just knew that that's a place I went to party. I didn't understand the impact it had, for example, on sophomores when they lose their friends going to different places. Or juniors, when they find that they missed out on some experiences because they were too invested in their frats and sororities. Seniors, that same experience, plus realizing that, there really are some things that they could have done and changes they have gone through that they had never anticipated, being at Dartmouth.

And, another side, those who have found that being in that community was a support system for them and that was great. And those who have found it wasn't a support for them, it was a false support because now they have to go into the real world and they haven't developed themselves enough. Also, in terms of student organizations and just involvement outside campus in general, just thinking about how a Dartmouth student thinks about their extracurricular activities. Whether it is to develop oneself or it is for padding

a resume. Is it about hanging out with people, finding a way to hang out with people—‘cause that’s how they explain their social circles—or is it just ‘cause everyone else is doing it?

I ask ‘cause I have been doing many other things I’m doing just because I’m trying to develop myself or just ‘cause I’m interested in doing things. I can’t really say I know completely what the student body is and how that has changed necessarily. But I have heard friends say things about how, you know, people at Dartmouth are less joined together. Less—I don’t know, have less of a community feel.

I personally think that it’s an idea that they built ‘cause of the difference you see between freshman year—when they came to Trips and felt like Dartmouth is this amazing place—and senior year, when they realize that this is what it is and this is how it has been—little pockets of communities. I can’t conclusively say that the community has changed, but then, the angle you are viewing it from has changed, probably, ‘cause of the way you’ve been evolved on campus.

Like, I haven’t been to a freshmen trip since then, but I’m pretty sure that freshmen get the same vibe from Trip leaders who are very happy, and happy all the time, of what they should expect at Dartmouth—and that spectrum changes a lot. For me, my experience has really been based on who I hang out with, what I’m involved in and just opportunities that I’ve been able to use here.

WOMICK: Would you say there is such a thing as a “Dartmouth community?” And, if so, who’s a part of it?

ASALA: I’ll say there’s a Dartmouth community in as far as we share this common thing about what it is to go to school at Dartmouth. Like, what challenges you face. What realities you come to know—if there’s a Dartmouth experience, I would say that we’re all affected by the frats and sororities. No matter where you are, if you’re a Dartmouth student, you are somehow affected by them. Either because you feel like it’s a dominant social scene here and you are part of it and everything you do is rooted into it, or you are not part of it, or it’s affecting your friends and your friends of your friends, and so that affects them. Or it’s affecting what other people

think about your school, and so that's—I think that's something affects everybody.

I think the D Plan is something that affects everybody—because of movements and relationships. I think academics is something that really affects everyone. Besides that, our relationships really nuance our experiences and what we're involved in here nuance our experiences, and that is not shared. But academics, the D Plan, and the social life here really does affect everyone around us, and I think that if you could boil the Dartmouth experience down to something like that, that will be the essence. The fact that we all have to deal with this really tight schedule that we work on that nobody else shares. We have to deal with that combined with expectations of high academic performance. And then that, also combined with these expectations of moving around and just—having a D Plan that moves you everywhere, being in control of your life, and also what the social scene is and the implications of that. I would say that those three things are shared by us all.

Of course, we deal with it in different ways. But it's something we all have to deal with, as opposed to the other things here.

WOMICK: So you've had kind of a different Dartmouth experience, the way you came here and the way you've done things. Have you ever felt like there were times you didn't belong?

ASALA: Times I didn't belong...I wouldn't say so. Yeah, I wouldn't say there were times I thought I didn't belong. Maybe this is because it happened early in my career here, but when I went to the Parliamentary debate team the first time, like, these people were really, really smart, they've done debate for a long time, and they were doing it well—I don't know if I'm supposed to be here. But I debated a person and I was actually good. And I was like, "Wow, that's weird." Maybe that incident dispelled that thing in my mind that, "You don't belong here."

I never felt that way, honestly, and, to be fair, I must say I was a little pompous when I came to Dartmouth at first 'cause Dartmouth was not my first choice. It was...probably my fourth choice, I think, and so—yeah, I think, I just had

that feeling that, “Okay, whatever, I’ll just go to Dartmouth.” ‘Cause I got into Dartmouth, whatever. If something else didn’t work then that’s fine. For academics, I got into an honors chem class and passed two credits by taking exams, so I don’t know—for academics I felt like I belonged here and it’s totally fine.

And then going to the social scene, too, ‘cause of my friends, I was just able to—I could go to any frat or sorority. I was just—I didn’t feel like I didn’t belong from the beginning, and I would say that usually people feel they don’t belong in their freshman year, and that—as you grow older you gain knowledge, you get to the place where you’re kind of a boss on campus, you feel less of that. And so I actually never got to feel that, because I had these experiences and I had the background—the support there. Community support, that is, friends who were always there with me. We’d always just chill, we’d hang out, and I could always go back to them. And got to know new people—seniors and all that, and so, I just—I don’t think I ever felt like I don’t belong here.

WOMICK: That’s great. Ok, so, big question: How do you think being at Dartmouth has changed you?

ASALA: I think—and sometimes I find it difficult to admit it to myself—but I think being at Dartmouth has taught me to be less idealistic than I am—than I was, let’s put it that way. Because I just, I don’t know—my experiences here have shown me how being practical about some things gets things done. Something like networking, something like getting contacts, having people push you in the business world, for example. That showed me that—I mean, you can sit down and say that everything has to be fair, you have to do this this way and you have to do everything by merit, and all that, but then if no one else works in that same way, you wouldn’t get what you want. And you need to, you know, get what you want ‘cause that’s what’s important—that’s the bottom line in most cases.

So, going through that experience has taught me to be more practical about some things I do. And, to be very realistic, I still admit that things are unfair and should be change, but at the same time, it’s like, there are so many constraints related to those things that I have come to acknowledge and

consider that, yeah, that's just what it is. That has changed about me.

Another thing is my—I've become more open-minded, I think. Being at Dartmouth has taught me to be very open-minded I would say. I've come to understand where people come from and—when I was in high school, it was a very idealistic place, being United World College, very idealistic. And that challenged a lot of my beliefs, like my religious beliefs and all that, because some of my best friends—great friends—we shared things in common, we think alike, we're pretty much almost very similar, grew up in totally different corners of the world and have totally different—our religious beliefs are so different. My roommate, was an atheist. One of my really good friends is Muslim. We think alike and everything. It really challenged my thoughts and made me realize that I am who I am because of where I was born and grew up, and I should be very conscious of that.

But at the same time, I was very idealistic in saying that, in like—I only superficially accepted that the differences are legitimate. At Dartmouth I've come to accept more, 'cause, I don't know, maybe because I respect people here more to have thought through everything that they say and to actually, legitimately know what they're talking about, and have genuine feelings as opposed to being like, "I didn't think about it." And that has helped me to be more open-minded about a lot of things that I think about and all of my opinions.

I'm now more open to having my mind changed more easily. I mean, I do think about things, but then I'm open to give everybody the benefit of the doubt and listen to their parts of stories, and that's not something—that's not who I was before I came here. I was a very opinionated person and I would defend my point every single time and now I understand that there's a lot that I don't know. And so, being open-minded has been something that has really changed me.

WOMICK: That's really great.

ASALA: Yeah.

WOMICK: Is there anything that we haven't talked about or that I haven't asked you that you wish we had?

ASALA: About my experience here?

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: What about Dartmouth...I don't know, is there—have I covered everything? I'm not really sure. But nothing comes to mind right now.

WOMICK: Okay.

ASALA: I mean, from previous conversations, is there some part of life here that I've—

WOMICK: No—[Laughs]—you haven't left out anything.

ASALA: Anything...ok.

WOMICK: No, I just wanted to make sure that you got to say everything that you wanted to say.

ASALA: Yeah...Well, I do have something to say about the experience at Dartmouth. I don't think Dartmouth really supports everybody. And that might be a problem, because—I mean, I think it is a problem. I've sometimes tried to work, and—being in Paleop, I've realized the problems that exist here and I think we should fundamentally think about what we stand for. Like, if we stand for a liberal arts education or if we're standing for practical leaders or if we're standing for people who are successful going forward. We should be pretty clear on that and make sure that we allow that to happen as it should.

I say this because I found that this whole conversation about where most Dartmouth people end up—that is, in consulting, finance, and everything—is not really a function of Dartmouth people genuinely are those kind of people, 'cause I never knew what consulting was before I came here and I didn't know what being an investment banker was before coming here. But when you come here and those are the options that you see coming around you, it becomes something you consider, because you don't have time to

think about other things. You may not have enough stimulus around you to help you discover what you really want.

For me, Tuck Bridge was that thing, and I invested a lot of my time and money into Tuck Bridge 'cause I really wanted to be able to make a decision for myself. Not everybody has that opportunity. I was lucky enough to have good financial aid to not worry about having financial burdens on me, so I could actually push myself to invest in something like that, to think about opening up my options. That is not true for many people here, and I think that that's a problem because if we stand for a liberal arts education and want everybody to really explore what it is that they're interested in, and purely so, then we shouldn't favor one thing over the other.

And I think a lot of academic decisions here are made based on what the prospects of a job are, and that's not what liberal education stands for. If we stand for a liberal arts education then we should make sure that that's not the case. To the extent that you bring—you allow, 'cause it's not that Dartmouth brings corporate recruiters from consulting and finance first, but those people are those who regularly recruit and so make that happen—if you're going to allow them to come then you should understand that you either invest your own money in balancing it out by bringing other firms in industries who can't afford to come here or don't traditionally do things like that.

And I know this is a very radical thing to think about and it's challenging everything that happens at other Ivy League schools, but I think that we're unique in the sense that we are in a very insular place and so if only certain people with certain opportunities can come to Dartmouth, we are disadvantaging different choices that people can make at Dartmouth. So we should either really, seriously spend money to bring people who would give people other career opportunities or really limit the overwhelming, narrow opportunities that people are getting, because it's really affecting the choices that people make in academics, and I think that's not a good thing for the institution, just generally.

Because, honestly, the people we produce here are going to go to other schools, probably, for grad school. That's where they're going to contribute to academia and contribute to

being intellectuals, building knowledge. But if they're all doing the same thing, with the end goal of moving out of academia, then as an institution we're kind of failing at building knowledge and rather, are probably just attracting people who have learned to cultivate those things at other schools. And I think that's kind of a problem.

WOMICK: So who do you think really gets left behind or left out?

ASALA: There are a lot. I think the arts get left out a lot. We—COSO recognized that groups for arts and entertainment, but they do have a problem in bringing people here. They have to start organizing trips to New York and all that, and it's not the same, 'cause people traditionally don't think of Ivy League students as people interested in arts, generally. That's kind of a problem. People who want to go into PhDs are—I mean, they aren't as bad because there are programs here and funds that could support some people towards getting research done and going to PhD programs, so that's fine. But other nontraditional things like working in industries that are not consulting and finance—working in, I don't know, operations or something. Broadcasting. Journalism. All those different things that people try and do.

You pretty much have to do everything yourself at Dartmouth, and Career Services is there, but then you have to seek it out—and, when you go there, too, you find out that they just direct you where to go look, as opposed to the easier route in consulting and finance, which is that people come here, sign up—from your room—and upload a document and they call you for an interview. I say that is hard because we all don't have time, and that's a reality, so if you make one path an easier path, things will flow towards there. And that's just what it is. And so I think that that's a problem.

WOMICK: Yeah.

ASALA: Yeah.

WOMICK: Anything else?

ASALA: Nope. I think that's—

WOMICK: Good?

ASALA: That's good.

WOMICK: Okay. Then I'll turn these off.

ASALA: Okay.

[End of interview.]