

Jacob Hickson '13
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
May 16, 2013

WOMICK: My name is Cally Womick, and I'm here in Rauner Library with Jacob Hickson. Today is Thursday, May 16th, 2013.

So to get us started, why don't you talk about where you grew up?

HICKSON: I was born in Southfield, Michigan, which is just outside of Detroit, and spent most of my childhood in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I moved to outside of Nashville, Tennessee, when I was about 11 and then shifted to a different city just outside of Nashville when I was 13 or 14, so that's where I did high school, and that's about where I grew up.

WOMICK: Okay. What kinds of schools did you attend, growing up?

HICKSON: Uh, public schools, fairly decently-funded public schools.

WOMICK: Makes a difference. [Both chuckle.]

So how did you end up at Dartmouth?

HICKSON: Partly by accident and... coincidence. Uh, during the college application process, I knew I wanted to go to a "good" school, and I didn't know what that meant. My dad and mom were both dropouts from a state school in Michigan, and I didn't really have any exposure to what it meant to go to college, just that I was supposed to go. So one of the brochures that wound up in our mail at some point was Dartmouth, and my dad said, "Yeah, I think I've heard of that one before. You should probably apply there."

And I did. It was a pretty simple application. And I, only after getting accepted, learned that it was an Ivy League institution. [Both chuckle.] So, that's—I didn't even know what a liberal arts college was. But that's how I wound up at Dartmouth, mostly just by chance.

WOMICK: Uh-huh. Did Dartmouth's location play any role in whether or not you applied here?

HICKSON: It did, but mostly as a function of its distance from Tennessee.

WOMICK: Uh-huh. Okay.

HICKSON: And it is north and snows, and I thought that I was nostalgic for snow. [Chuckles.]

WOMICK: Did you have an opportunity to visit before you actually came here?

HICKSON: Nope. [Laughs.]

WOMICK: So the first time you saw it was for trips?

HICKSON: Yep.

WOMICK: What was that like?

HICKSON: It was I think surreal, as many people's trip experiences, going out into the wilderness and seeing these beautiful mountains and hiking around, meeting cool new people. So it was ah, on that I think very positive for the initial experience, I thought the campus was gorgeous. I thought the surroundings were also gorgeous, although my time since trips has not been nearly as outdoors as I might have thought.

WOMICK: So what was freshman fall like for you?

HICKSON: Freshman fall was an exciting experience. In high school I wasn't really involved in anything except marching band, so that was sort of the extent of what I did outside of home and work. Coming here, I knew I wanted to work part time, so I could have some money to afford to pay tuition and everything, but I also wanted to try and expand my horizons, so I was mostly trying everything, which—I wound up settling on doing parliamentary debate as my concentrated activity, which I have since stopped. But getting a chance to do things, like Habitat for Humanity, go to all the public lectures,

uh, spend time exploring the campus, going to Norwich, was a lot of fun.

In terms of academics, I think I adjusted pretty well. Had a really easy term, in hindsight, but it made me feel confident, so reflecting back, I had a really positive freshman fall.

WOMICK: What about the rest of freshman year?

HICKSON: The rest of freshman year was pretty similar. I was pretty bent on going to China and going to DC for the first time for the First-Year Fellows Program, so I picked my courses in accordance with that, and they're pretty easy courses as prereqs for those two programs. And I was kind of anxious about getting into them, mostly the DC one, but I wound up doing it, so I had this heightened sense of accomplishment and achievement. So I was overly confident for the rest of freshman year, but wound up meeting some different people, having some different experiences than I had anticipated. I wound up being more involved in volunteering in after-school programs in the Upper Valley, which I think changed my outlook a lot. I started doing that while I was taking my public policy course.

I originally came to Dartmouth with the goal of going into international trade, and after taking that public policy course and volunteering with kids, somehow primary and secondary education policy seemed way more important. So after learning a little bit about poverty in the Upper Valley and poverty more broadly, in cities, and then learning about the consequences of education and poverty, that totally changed my perspective a lot.

So I did my internship freshman year at the U.S. Department of Education. I was not in primary or secondary; I was in post-secondary (the office), but I was still in the department, so I got, like, e-mails and access to events and stuff. So I got to participate in think tank meetings, which was really cool. It's what I liked about Dartmouth, was that I could just go to DC for a summer and then just go places and learn things. I found that really informative, and sort of my life goals were- which were very different from the vague "make a lot of money when you go to Dartmouth" goals that I had coming in.

Um, so, yeah, that was most of freshman year.

WOMICK: Yeah. So who do you think you spent the most time with during freshman year?

HICKSON: Probably the Parliamentary Debate team and the people I was in Chinese with. Those would be the two groups I think I was most involved with.

WOMICK: Did that carry over into sophomore year?

HICKSON: No. [Chuckles.] Uh, there was some small overlap in that there was a person I lived with in Little, who was my Chinese partner. We practiced doing the oral dialogues together. And, uh, sometime in late freshman spring, for, like, Easter or something, which is early freshman spring, I guess, she wound up inviting me to a church, and so I got more involved in going to church and meeting some of her friends in the Christian community.

And by sophomore year, I had had the six-month gap going to DC, where I was with all the first-year fellows, and then I was in Beijing with not the same Chinese language students but a different group of Chinese language students, and I wound up making good friends with some of the people on that trip. So when I came back, I had started doing the UGA program, so I was a UGA in a freshman dorm in the River, and that became sort of my community, was the staff for UGA and then the residents in the River, with whatever overlap I had from people who were still on from the Beijing FSP. There was one guy who was actually on the Beijing FSP who was on my UGA staff, which was really convenient.

WOMICK: Mm-hm.

HICKSON: Yeah, so most of my time was with those people. And then it was a little bit—any overlap I had between—it was my UGA staff and classes or who was in Beijing FSP and classes or UGA staff. Um, so I was slowly getting, at that point, integrated into the Christian community, and that was when the shift started in who my main social circles were.

WOMICK: Mm-hm. Do you want to talk about how that happened over the course of, I guess, sophomore year?

HICKSON: Yeah. I think it was mostly over the course of sophomore year. I think it started really late freshman year possibly, but I know I wound up going to what was then called Christian Impact for—I don't even remember why I was going to those meetings, just hanging out with some people I knew.

I had some renewed sense of a desire to connect with spirituality, and in going to those meetings, I had committed to being on the music team, so now I had another thing that I was doing. So that was why I kept going. And sometimes I wouldn't go if I wasn't performing.

But through that, I agreed to go on a spring break trip with Christian Impact —excuse me— to Panama City Beach, Florida, which is actually kind of a really funny story because originally we were going to go to Orlando because I could help homeless kids. So, as I mentioned, I developed this interest in poverty and children and education, so helping homeless kids was, like, the perfect feel-good thing for me to do for my spring break. And I didn't get into the other spring break programs because I was applying from Beijing, which doesn't work out very well, apparently.

WOMICK: [Chuckles.]

HICKSON: And so I was excited that I was going to go to that, and then last minute, we had to switch. So in doing that, I actually wound up probably creating closer bonds with the people on that trip, which included the staff of then Christian Impact, which is now known as "Cru," because they were Campus Crusade for Christ. And being involved with that staff and some of the students on that program, or on that trip, really changed my perspective on life more broadly, ah, and impacted the way that relationships had meaning, that meaning has meaning, what sort of I was going for at Dartmouth. Um, so that affected what I wanted to do with my time.

So from that, I started hanging out with Christian Impact more intentionally. Um, I got hyper involved and started going to things like the Navigators meetings. I went to Agapé

meetings. Even though I'm not Asian, I definitely have some friends here and there and felt a strong tie to the Asian community since I've studied Chinese.

So I was just really involved in all the Christian communities at Dartmouth, trying to understand what that identity meant, what it meant to pursue that. So that transition happened mostly as a function of that spring break trip that tied me to that community and showed me what the meaning of the Gospel of grace was, which I have been slowly learning and internalizing for the last two and a half years.

WOMICK: So then moving into junior year.

HICKSON: So by junior year, I was pretty solid that I wanted to have a foundation in the Christian community but as well to interact with first-years through the residential education program. That was a really easy way for me to make connections because I'm not a particularly social person, so being forced to do it through my job gave me the convenient outlet for meeting '16s—or, '15s then, '16s this year. '14s the first year that I was there, and getting a chance to have a staff with support, where I can talk about some more meaningful things. The dialogues that I had in ORL were probably what kept me there on staff meetings.

Living in the substance-free communities as a UGA was also really convenient because you can have really cool conversations with people who are living very intentionally about not wanting to engage in self-destructive behavior, for the most part. And so that was what junior year was about.

So I had some ties that I met during sophomore summer that I kept over, which—I think it was during sophomore summer when I met my present wife, so I started hanging out with her and some of her friends, which included the friend group that I had met freshman year in my dorm, in practicing Chinese. So there was some overlap there.

And, yeah, mostly as a function of that, I got more involved in the leadership of Christian Impact in trying to stay with that community.

During sophomore summer, I lived in the Chinese Language House and met a few girls there who I was really close with and was then friends with in the fall, and, carrying over, I'm still friends with most of them. So that's sort of how my social circles were looking junior year, although I had the winter off, so I had to switch floors and switch staffs, which was kind of stressful and frustrating, probably exacerbated by the fact that when I came back, I had started dating in the spring, so I felt like I had all these new transitions and everything was different. I had no continuity, having had that gap term in Nashville at a charter school.

Um, so yeah – that's the social aspect, at least.

WOMICK: Yeah. And then senior year.

HICKSON: Senior year I was continuing with sort of the trends that I had started late freshman year and sophomore year, where I was involved in ORL, so I was still doing the residential education program. I committed to do the pilot, which was the Academic— or, the Advising 360 pilot, which is academic advising. And because of that, I no longer was placed in a sub-free community, which was a new experience for me as a UGA. And my wife contends that because I had a negative outlook about what that community was going to be like, it became really hard for me, whereas from my experience, it was, *This could potentially be really hard*, and then it wound up being a really challenging community.

So the interactions I had with my residents, the first-years, was a lot different than it had been in the past. I was not close with any of them, which in the past I had been pretty close with some of them. So that experience was really different.

But my staff, on the other hand—I had the closest staff relationship that I ever had, so we were really a cohesive group in the ORL community, to be able to talk about what is the importance of community, what does it mean to live intentionally? And by this point I was really involved in leadership with Cru, so I was thinking about how to care for people, have relational connections that are focused on showing grace and showing love and being patient and caring in communicating relational connections that most

people don't get and that could only exist in a context of grace and forgiveness and all the things that are espoused by the Christian tradition.

So that was sort of what I was focused on, was reaching out to the people that I had known and then reaching out to people I didn't know to try and make more connections, which I've always found really hard, is actually making new connections after the fall term, particularly. People usually get pretty entrenched, and they get really busy, so I noticed in my own experience it's a function of time. Freshman year, I felt I had all the time in the world to do all the things.

By sophomore year, when I had a UGA position, I was really bogged down in, like, *I have to get things done*. My classes started to have more value or more weight in terms of "you need this to graduate" or "you need this if you want to commit to a major." So there was more—it seemed like there was more academic pressure as a function of time, and that just meant more isolation away from other people and focused on "studying," quote-unquote.

And so I think I've noticed a lot of people fall into that, where they want to be invested in their academics or invested in their projects, extracurricular activities, which I totally was as well. And I know that I've done this to other people, where it's, like, "Well, no, I can't really hang out. I'm really busy doing this thing." So I found it really hard to engage with people and make new relationships on that level.

But trying to get into the circles that are easy for me to form was basically how I made my social connections, so wherever—like, I had a job, that was where some of my social connections were, or if I was really invested in the mission of the community, that was where my social connections were. And sometimes it's really hard to even make meaningful relationships within that. So there's only, like, two or three people that I really wind up being connected with.

WOMICK:

Mm-hm. Were there any points during your time here that you felt like you didn't fit in?

HICKSON: There's been lots of points in various contexts when I felt like I didn't fit in, sometimes to the community more broadly, so being a Dartmouth student; sometimes in a more specific community. So, for instance, when I came in here, I thought that I could do anything because now I'm at this Ivy League school, which no one else from my high school had ever done, no one else from my family had ever done, so I was, like, *Well, I can do anything.*

So I applied for, like, the jazz band. And, like, you're not actually the best musician anymore, which is something I wasn't used to because I was the best musician in high school. So that was somewhat disheartening. I didn't get onto the newspaper. I was like, aw—I thought I was a really good writer, so now I don't have that connection. But then I found other things that I was able to do, so there were times when I felt like an outsider in terms of my ability to, like, be the best, which is something that I had maybe imputed on other people, that, like, everyone is the best and whatever they do, they'll succeed at. So when I don't succeed, I don't fit in. Like, I'm not like everybody else.

So I think I felt that a little bit freshman year, until I started succeeding at things, and, like, *Oh, right, I do fit in.* I got the First-Year Fellows Program, I learned the Chinese language, I was doing really well in my classes freshman year, so I started to feel more like I did belong in that sense.

And living in a sub-free community, I definitely felt like I belonged in the sense that there was at least some pocket of people who didn't think that socializing meant drinking. I think my motivations for that were really wrong at the time, but that's probably a different question.

But there are a lot of times when I look at sort of: What does it mean to be a Dartmouth student? What does a Dartmouth life look like? Okay, current students—and it seems like a lot of it is more social than “I am”—um, so all of that is, like, spending more time with people than I often get to. So I oftentimes feel kind of left out and that I'm not as connected as I'd like to be. For instance, I set foot in a sorority *once* because my friend had her mom over, and she cooked lunch. That was my Greek experience.

WOMICK: [Chuckles.]

HICKSON: Um, I think one other time someone said, “Say hi to someone,” so I stopped into a house. So, like, I have no real connection to the Greek community, which does in some ways make me seem left out because I look at all statistics, like, 60 or 70 percent of all people are affiliated on campus, or that’s where most of the social scene is. So there is some degree of separation in terms of that. So I do feel somewhat like an outsider, like I am the 30 percent who’s not involved in that. But I feel like that 30 percent is big enough that I don’t feel excluded. So I didn’t necessarily feel isolated like that.

Once I became a Christian at Dartmouth, that definitely changed the dynamic a little bit. As a Christian, it does feel more like an outside perspective because everyone is always talking about, like, this very narrowly-tailored view of pluralistic relativism and they’re defining that as truth and all other truth claims are not relevant. So it’s something—the academic studying, when you hear all of these, like, things that are posited as fact that may or may not align with the things that I believe or can refute as fact that does seem different.

And then in the way that people live their lives or assume their outlook on life. They approach life with a different philosophy. It does seem like I am in the minority and kind of an outsider from that. But, again, there being a pretty solid Christian community, there is an inside to feel not completely isolated from. But it does at times feel like there is some isolation from specific communities, from the broader community.

And I think the most outsider experience I had was as a UGA on a non-substance-free floor, because just the way that—even in floor meetings, when we would talk about alcohol, I would cite things from a policy perspective and get told that I was being really judgmental, which to me was really hurtful, and that was the most excluded I ever felt because I was, for all intents and purposes, doing the right thing. Like, this is my job. Is to tell you—like, your underage drinking is not legal. Um, beyond that, it’s not healthy—

WOMICK: It's just a fact. [Chuckles.]

HICKSON: Yeah. So, that's a fact. And then drinking is not healthy. There's lots of research that shows that that's a fact. It's not the best way to have community. I don't know. There's probably research that shows that, and there's at least anecdotal evidence that shows that. But then being challenged on that, being, like, "No, drinking is part of the college experience. You don't know what you're talking about. You're being really judgmental." I think part of that was having the Christian identity being imputed on me as, "because you're a Christian, you're really judgmental. Therefore your opinions about drinking policy are invalid." So that was probably the most outsider that I felt, being—interacting with the rest of the community that I had been so isolated in.

WOMICK: So would you say that there is such a thing as a cohesive Dartmouth community? And if so, who is a part of that?

HICKSON: I would say probably not. I would say you could artificially construct one based on whether or not you're a student or faculty or alumni of Dartmouth. You could call that a Dartmouth community in the sense that we all have some tie to Dartmouth. The degree of interaction within that community does not seem to me to reflect a true, cohesive community.

I feel like the Dartmouth community consists more of several smaller communities that may or may not gel well together. And I think a microcosm of this is actually in the Christian community at Dartmouth. So you'd think, *Oh, there's a Christian community. That must be a cohesive entity*, which is just not the case. There are different fellowships and groups that have isolated themselves. It's, like, "We're *this* community within the broader community. We might have some degree of interaction, but not really a cohesive, frequent degree of interaction."

So I had this, uh, conversation with a resident one time, who was talking—I was talking to them about their perception of community at Dartmouth, and they said things like, "Yeah, I have lots of friends at Dartmouth. There's people I can hang out with. I think I have a good sense of community," which to

me says, “I have some friends,” which is vastly different from a sense of community because I think—I think the sense that Dartmouth has a diverse population is probably true, people with different perspectives, backgrounds, ethnicities, religions. All kinds of things are different, but they don’t necessarily unite under, like, interacting around those differences.

So I think there’s uh, there’s certainly fragmentation within the broader community, which I think is an artificial construct in the context of Dartmouth. There are certainly smaller communities that are certainly, like, overlaid on—we all live in the same space as students, and we all act in the same academic circle, so between students and faculty, you know, the same alma mater affiliation, so all of the alumni connecting in—so I think that that does exist in a sense, but it’s not necessarily a meaningful community.

WOMICK: So when, during your time at Dartmouth, have you felt like you really did belong here?

HICKSON: Uh, so, like, as a function of when in time, along the timeline did I feel like I belonged, or, like, specific instances? Or like, right now, I feel like I belong.

WOMICK: Both. Either.

HICKSON: Okay. I think probably throughout freshman year I was in and out of feeling like I belonged at Dartmouth. Once I saw that I was performing well in school and I had some social interaction, I felt like I belonged, although I think freshman year I did feel really socially isolated because I was not involved in the Greek scene and I had not yet connected with the Christian community. So I was sort of this weird outsider who didn’t really like to talk to people, didn’t like to participate in the social events that were around me. But I think I still had, you know, two or three friends who I could at least stay connected with, and I was invested more in my own success and my own participation in programs. So I think that tied me to the institution of Dartmouth, and I felt like I belonged there.

I think by—when I was in... DC that freshman summer, I definitely didn’t belong to the community of first-year fellows because that was largely focused—the social life of the first-

year fellows is largely centered around drinking at night, so I just didn't—I opted out and didn't participate, so I felt pretty isolated then.

In Beijing I had sort of a similar thing. I only had, like, two or three friends who I connected with, that we didn't feel like drinking was the most important part of the social life. So the three of us got really pretty close, and everyone else sort of separated, and I started to realize that like, there is this social disconnect between me and the rest of—or the majority of Dartmouth. So I definitely felt that a lot.

But once I got involved in Christian Impact and the Christian community, I think I started to feel a lot more connected, at least in the sense that there was the staff who was really invested in my relationship with Christ and molding me as a leader, and there were some of the peers that I was working with and interacting with that we were really connected.

But even after that, there was sort of this—everyone's pursuing their own goals, and I think that isolates people a lot. And I do feel sort of disconnected from people as individuals oftentimes, and from particular groups.

So I think the most inclusive points in my time at Dartmouth have been academically to the institution and then, with the spiritual affinity, to the Christian community. I think the other one that's more successful is in the residential education staff. I think I felt really included and connected in those staff contexts because there were people who were really intentional about having more lofty conversations or more broad conversations about things that are meaningful, so I think anytime I was able to talk about meaning and purpose, that was when I felt most connected.

I think I felt that a little during parliamentary debate because you get to argue about, like, "What is meaningful, what's valid, what's useful?" And those are the parts that I thought were interesting. But then I realized that I hated the politics of the debate circuit and didn't really want to invest my time in it, which is why I disconnected from that community.

But, yeah, anytime when I've been able to meaningfully engage with people about goals, meaning, purpose, I've definitely been the most connected or inclusive feeling.

WOMICK: Do you think there are any people who have an easier time fitting in at Dartmouth?

HICKSON: That's probably a really difficult question to assess. I think it would depend on how you measure ease of connection or ease of fitting in. So I bet the people who isolate into a specific community and don't really care about interacting with the broader community probably fit in pretty well. I think the people who are really social and don't mind slipping between communities and can find some connection where they can spend their time probably fit in fairly well, as long as there is the sense of, like, connecting with other people.

So... the degree to which it's true that they feel more connected than me, I don't necessarily know, based on their own personal perceptions, but it would seem to me that there's probably some people who are more isolated in a certain community that feel connected within that small circle, and then there are some people who just have a greater proclivity for extroversion or for social interaction, who probably might feel more connected just by nature of their personality.

WOMICK: Okay.

Do you want to talk about how you met your wife and what that's been like here?

HICKSON: Sure. I technically first met my wife freshman year. We both lived in Little, and I didn't know her very well then, but I was really good friends with one of her friends. We were the Chinese dialogue partners. And through getting connected with her and then getting connected to a local church and the Christian community here at Dartmouth, that was when I started being in the same social circles as my wife.

We actually then met again sophomore winter, in a class about education politics and policy, and we started having a little bit more interaction because I recognized her. Then she was off in the spring, and when we came back for

sophomore summer, we were both involved in the Summer Christian Fellowship, and it was through that that I got to meet her. We were both involved in kind of the planning and administrative leadership components of that. We went to Boston as a group, and she was there, so I got to hang out with her then, so I got to meet her and hang out with her.

There's the Edgerton Episcopal House on School Street that—she lived in 19 School, which is just across the street, so she was there all the time, and I had a friend who was—well, I had a friend whose girlfriend lived at the Edge, so I spent a lot of time with him, and so there was a lot of interaction there. So that's how we—that's how we got to know each other.

Then in the fall I started going to the Navigators, which is another Christian fellowship that she had been involved in a little bit as well. And we connected there, and the two introverts that we are connected mostly over Facebook, where we didn't have to actually, like, be face to face. Uh, we were able to type-chat with each other, which is far easier because writing is a much easier means of communication for me.

And through that, we got to know each other a little bit. By the winter, we had decided that we liked each other and were willing to try a dating relationship in the spring. And approaching it from our perspective, uh, from the perspective that we had, only a year and a half where we'd be in the same space guaranteed, we thought if we're going to date, it's got to be with some kind of purpose, and it can't be just for fun or frivolous, because that sort of violates how we view relationships in general, based on our Christian perspective. So our intention was we're going to try dating to see whether or not we think we would actually want to get married.

So that was how we approached it. And we had the spring to start that process. We were really involved with Cru staff, who helped us to think through what it would mean to date intentionally, what it means to care for another person, um, to view someone as more important than yourself, to be humble, to, um, really imitate that Christ gave his life for the people that he loved, in the same way to give your life to someone that you love, and to view dating as a way of

practicing that, to get to know someone and know how to love them and then be able to apply that to other people.

So that was the view that we had, and the way that we were going to tell if we were going to get married or not was if we could commit to doing that for our lives together. So there's some degree of, like, do our personalities fit well, do we think we could live with each other forever, do we enjoy each other's company, so that was a part of it that we just kind of assumed and kind of figured out that we did connect on those levels.

So then it became more of this logistical question of, like, can we, like, actually *be* together forever, because I'm going to try and do things like Teach for America, I might want to go to China for something at some point because I have some connection there, and she just kind of wants to do—whatever. She's not really that invested in that specific career. So she mostly just wants to be with someone who she can trust and who she can have a family with, that was her goal.

So we had to check and see if our life goals were compatible, if we thought that we could legitimately follow Christ together and grow together, knowing that we're going to spend our lives doing that.

So by—probably by the end of spring, I was just, like, *I'm gonna commit to this because that's the person that I am*. I took a strong—not strong—the Strengths Quest finder, did my personality thing. One of them is responsibility, which they describe as feeling guilty really easily and committing to things as a result of it.

So part of my personality is if I commit to something, I'll feel really bad if I don't stay with it, so I was really committed to her, and based on what I had been learning about, uh, Christian values, she didn't have to be the perfect person because there is no perfect person, and it would be—I would feel really bad if I viewed romance as some kind of consumer process, like, *Can I find the best partner for me, uh, based on my preferences?*

And so I was trying to approach it from a *Can I be the best partner to this person based on her needs and my willingness to serve her?* So by the end of the summer and into the fall I had been asking myself that question, and it was definitely a difficult question at some points, but um, maybe as a function of my personality, uh, as a function of my desire to really care for someone, I decided to commit to that, so that's when I proposed to her, in Rollins Chapel, which was really embarrassing because I sang a song I couldn't remember the words to.

WOMICK: [Chuckles.]

HICKSON: And it's caught on tape, but you can't hear the audio, which is fortunate.

WOMICK: [Laughs.]

HICKSON: And then the plan was we were going to try to get married after graduation, like responsible people. And then I got accepted to TFA, and my placement would have me go before commencement. So our options were, we could wait for me to finish some part of TFA; we could meet up later, but that would require her to be with her family doing nothing in particular and we'd be separated. We'd already done a term long distance that we didn't really enjoy. She'd had a relationship in the past that was long distance that she found really difficult. So we didn't really want to do that. And then she didn't know where she was going, so it would be really helpful if we could commit and she would know whether or not that she would come with me, to be with *me*, or if she should find something else, to do something else because there's not necessarily anything specific for her to do in Oklahoma, so she might have gone anywhere else to do some other program. She might have gone to India because she wanted to work with, like, orphans in India. So we needed to know these kinds of things soon.

So we decided that it was not a good idea to wait, since our life goals were kind of—hers were kind of iffy and mine would keep me really busy for a while. So in order for us to feel like we had continuity in knowing each other, we decided that we wanted to do it sooner rather than later.

So getting married in Tulsa didn't make any sense because no one would be there. Getting married at one of our homes wouldn't make any sense because all of our close friends that we met in the Christian community were here at Dartmouth. So we decided that we were going to do it during the winter period because—or during winter reading period so that we could have a term where we'd be in a community of people that we trusted, that we knew, that we would have some safety net when things started falling apart, that we could have some transition from college life to adult life.

So we decided that the best thing for us was going to be to be married here during the winter. Which was really unfortunate for our families because that's not really a convenient time for anyone to be anywhere, and not everyone can make it. But we went through it anyway because we knew it would be the best for our relationship and our marriage.

So now we've had—almost finished with our last term at Dartmouth and our first term as married people, and it's definitely been a completely different experience than anything I've had at Dartmouth. I think I've had this thought that relationships are really important, and I've wanted to make relationships really important, but something about the ethos at Dartmouth makes it really hard to do that because you're so focused on résumé building. You need to be a successful person, and part of that does not necessarily include having successful relationships.

This term, we have—my wife and I have very different perspectives on what it means to be successful, what it means to participate in academics, what the value of our degrees are, and living together and taking the same classes, even, has been really challenging in those values conflicting. But it has been incredible to have a daily forum for engaging in relational connectedness for engaging in being humble, for receiving grace, giving grace and forgiving someone who sometimes genuinely hurts you or sometimes accidentally hurts you, or there's just misperceptions and miscommunications, and being able to start to uh, learn my own flaws and my own imperfections, uh, as they affect another person who I'm with daily. So learning that has been probably—like, this term has probably been the most

socially rewarding or most personally rewarding in terms of learning what relationships mean, learning what, like, the value of life is, um, even learning—

So in the Christian tradition, marriage is actually a symbol for how Jesus loved the church, so loved the people that he died for the people that believed in him. And learning that—so being able to see, like, how is that a symbol, what is the significance of that, living with someone and having to, like, die little deaths daily is what one of my friends told me about it—in that you don't always get things your way; you have to sometimes admit that the other person has hurt you, but you don't want to do that because you want them to be perfect. You want them to be the person that is constant and solid in your life, that you can rely on. And so when they make mistakes, you don't want to admit that. But having to do that and having to tell them to communicate those problems is more challenging than probably anything else I've had to do but definitely more rewarding, so that's been the marriage experience so far.

WOMICK: Looking ahead, how do you see yourself being involved with Dartmouth after graduation?

HICKSON: Immediately, I'll probably be incredibly disconnected with Dartmouth. I'm going to be doing Teach for America, so I've got a five-week intensive training course at the University of Tulsa, where I'll be teaching summer school. I'll have 15-hour days. Then I'll have to try and maintain my marriage at the same time. So immediately, there's not going to be anything.

For the next two years, I'll be teaching at a high-income—or a high-poverty community in Tulsa. I'll be focusing on getting credentialed to be a teacher, on lesson planning for teaching every day, for connecting with the families in the communities that I'll be in, for connecting with the new community and helping my wife and I to adjust as a social unit, to connect with Tulsa, so probably very limited exposure to Dartmouth, limited care for Dartmouth at first.

In the future, it's possible that I might have closer ties, but it is really hard to say. Geographically, I'll be really far removed. In terms of solid ties that I have here, I think I value

the institution and what it's provided me, but mostly in the sense that I've gained experiences that I may or may not have gotten from Dartmouth. So in the future, I think I care about Dartmouth and I want Dartmouth to be a better place than it seems like it has been or seems like it's becoming, so I kind of want to invest in that. But with the direction that my life is taking me, I might not be able to invest in a significant way, so it seems like my ties with Dartmouth might be a little loose.

WOMICK: So how do you think Dartmouth has changed during your time here?

HICKSON: During my time, I feel like I've become more aware of some of the social malaise that goes on at Dartmouth. At first, I thought that people were just making stuff up because that was their pet issue. Uh, it's, like, these things can't be that serious. I didn't hear about or care about things like sexual assault freshman year. And it wasn't until I got involved in Res Ed as a UGA, where I started hearing these things, — and I knew that alcohol was a problem, but that was mostly because I was really against alcohol for some moralistic reasons that are not directly relevant to why alcohol is a problem, and then learning that there's, like, serious health problems that go along with that and then social problems as well.

I think the intensity of the problems with the Greek community seem to have—uh, it's gotten much stronger. Like, there's a much more intense tension about what Greek life is at Dartmouth, how involved social life and Greek life are, what does drinking have to do with it, what are the implications for sexual assault and racism and homophobia in the Greek community, without—uh, outside of the Greek community?

So I think I have become more aware, probably. Like, my idea of Dartmouth is this perfect institution that I thought it was as a freshman because I wanted to be at the perfect insti—it's kinda like the way I was talking about my wife. You want where you're at to be the perfect place. Then to find out that it has all these flaws, not necessarily as an institution but certainly as the people who are in it.

So I think having to wrestle through a lot of those problems certainly put Dartmouth in an odd position. Losing our president midway through, who was only here for two years, uh, has certainly not helped, so there's a lot of administrative inconsistency. There's a lot of administrative problems in terms of—like, there are some reporting issues that I think people have. It's not clear what the administration can do to affect social life, uh, to actually make improvements on things like sexual assaults or incidences of racism. I'm sure there's something that can be done for some approach to institutional problems with sexism, racism, homophobia.

So I don't know what degree the administration is making positive steps towards that, but now I've seen these issues in light and know that there is some degree of change that needs to happen.

And then looking at the admissions statistics and knowing that we had a much lower yield than normal, our tuition has gotten higher, there's been a lot of negative press about Dartmouth lately. Dartmouth, when I came in, was the number one undergraduate institution in the country, possibly the world. You come here to get the undergraduate experience. You come here to enjoy the D-Plan, the liberty, the short terms, beautiful falls, skiing in the winter (which I never did), but all these wonderful things about Dartmouth that now seem less important.

Um, and it's more like, *What is the Dartmouth community that I've been trying to invest in in the last four years? Have I made a positive impact? How has it impacted me?* I think those are the questions I'm thinking about now.

So how has Dartmouth changed? It looks like, from my perspective, Dartmouth has gotten worse. And it may not have actually changed, I just might have seen it in a different light. But it does seem like the press is getting worse about Dartmouth. The administrative response somehow is more positive. I think Dean Charlotte Johnson is a really great administrator. I don't necessarily know about all of her policies, but I think certainly as a PR person she certainly has an interesting job.

Having heard the dean of the faculty recently, during the day off that we had in light of the protests, I thought his perspective on things was really informative. The fact that we're losing people like Carol Folt, the fact that we're losing early administrators, another dean that we had in the first few years, whose last name I can't remember— Sylvia something.

WOMICK: Spears.

HICKSON: Spears. So knowing that Dartmouth has been having a lot of turnover and transition, it seems like it's not clear what the future of Dartmouth is like, so I think there's a lot less confidence in Dartmouth. So that's my perception as an outgoing, jaded senior, if nothing else.

WOMICK: Mm-hm.

You've already touched on this, I think a lot, but I'm going to ask you really straightforward: How do you think *you've* changed during your time here?

HICKSON: I have changed incredibly in ways that I didn't even know were possible to change which is good because in order to learn something, you must first not know it. Coming here, I had all these ideals about what the purpose of college was, and the purpose of college was to get a job that makes a lot of money. That was the only statistic that was relevant in my mind about why you go to college.

I actually have now changed in my perspective on the liberal arts education, which—when I first came here, I decided that was going to be the most important thing. Now I'm questioning a lot and wondering what the true value of that is, having been—taken a lot of classes on labor economics and education and some sociology classes and learning kind of *what does it mean to be educated?* What is the value of having this stark difference in life prospect, on whether or not you get a college degree? So, yeah, what I value has changed significantly.

And I think it was only senior year of high school when I started to develop the social conscience, started to get really upset about things like genocide or child, uh, soldiers in

Africa. And coming here, making a claim like, I'm really upset about the child soldiers in Africa, would actually be really offensive to some people because, like, Africa is really diverse in places like Sierra Leone or the South Sudan, where that stuff is happening.

I have a friend from Tanzania who grew up in a middle-class family there, who is really upset when people talk about Africa like that. So something like that is not something I ever would have thought about before, something about people who have different perspectives, knowing that different—

My perspectives on culture has changed significantly. I took Chinese because I knew nothing about Eastern culture, and I have now learned that China is incredibly different from places like Japan or Korea or Vietnam, and that's something I didn't know before, either. I thought Japan and China were functionally the same thing, going to a public Tennessee high school.

So having learned that difference, having learned a new language and a new way of thinking, I also value English differently, that it's a really inefficient language. I really wish we spoke Chinese. But learning the value of, like, linguistics and knowing that, can you communicate something? That's really the important point.

So all these, like, things that I've learned have changed my perspective a lot. And I think the ultimate conclusion is now I value people a lot more than I value accomplishment. So I was really achievement oriented coming in here. Like, *I need to get my degree, have all these experiences for my résumé so that I can then get a good job, feel secure, make lots of money and then have an impact on the world. Like, so people will know my name. Something will be different as a result of what I've done.*

And only very slowly have I started to learn that what's really significant is, how do you change people's lives? Are people actually better off as a result of what you do? They're not just broadly, like, people in general. Like, *Oh, I started a business. We created jobs, and people are better off because the economy is bigger.* It's not clear that that's true, but is it more like, *I met this person. They were having a*

really hard time mourning the death of a loved one. I've lost my mother. I can relate to them. I can invest in their life and try to care for them and their family. That's something that's more meaningful to me now than it would have been several years ago.

Having a community is something that I think is really important, too. I don't even think I heard the word "community" prior to coming to Dartmouth. And if I had, it was certainly not in any kind of meaningful context. So knowing what it means to live with people in some kind of space, uh, and interact with them in a way that focuses on them as people and not just my own security or my own comfort or desires or ambitions, and having meaningful interactions with people has definitely been the new focus.

And I think a lot of this comes as a function of having actually heard the essential tenet of Christianity for the first time here at Dartmouth. I had grown up in some household that identified as Christian, as some 80 percent of Americans do, and, like, probably 70 percent of Americans it doesn't mean anything other than the fact that there's some social institution known as a church that you may or may not go to, there is some piece of literature known as the Bible that may or may not be meaningful. You read it to feel good. You believe in the things that Christians believe in because it's the right thing to do and you feel good about it.

And to know that that's *not* why people should be Christians and to know that none of the things that I had grown up with are actually what Christianity teaches has totally transformed me. Now I actually believe that the purpose of life is relationships, which I've seen not only anecdotally, theologically, but also empirically because I've taken a class where my professor had done research that the—it shows that people report happiness much higher when you have relationships with others. So now I know empirically, theologically, personally that relationships are important.

And now I know intellectually and I'm only slowly starting to apply it in my life. But knowing that, like, caring for people not because of what they accomplish, not making people instrumentally valuable—like, "What do you do for me? What do you do for society?" even is a question I would have

asked. I think I was really upset at people who, like, didn't contribute in some meaningful way. But now, having a life is valuable as a life is something that's totally—totally a new perspective, valuing people for who they are, for the fact that they are people that have thoughts, that have feelings, caring about those feelings.

I'm only recently learning that there's, like, an emotional dimension to a person, which prior to being married didn't even exist for me. Uh, and I am now only having to learn how to process things emotionally and deal with someone who processes emotionally before rationally.

So learning to value those things, learning to not have to be perfect is another one. I don't think I understood the value of failure before I came to Dartmouth, and I don't think that Dartmouth would have taught me the value of failure had I not gone out of my way to learn it. So I've learned through various experiences and researching education and having experience in schools, um—knowing that you have to fail at something to learn how to do it right. You have to have failure in order to have meaningful experiences and processing, to be resilient. I think that's changed significantly.

Now I think that people need to fail more, and I think that the Dartmouth ethos actually has this idea, like, you need to succeed as much as possible, and it's really uncomfortable to fail. And I'm not necessarily perfect at it yet, but if I were, then I would violate my essential tenet that people are not perfect. So having learned that, it definitely changed my perspective.

So now, at least intellectually, if not emotionally yet, um, I'm much more committed to investing in other people more than my own projects, investing in a community and groups of people to come together and unite around caring for each other, investing in children to have the opportunity to not feel the pressure to be perfect, to be able to fail but to be able to use failure as a launching pad for success, which is not just financial, not just economic.

So, yeah, learning all of these things has definitely been how I've changed a lot at Dartmouth.

WOMICK: That *is* a lot. Thanks.

I think that covers all of the questions that I have, but is there anything that we haven't talked about yet that you would like to cover?

HICKSON: Hopefully not. [Both chuckle.] I think I've covered everything I can think of.

WOMICK: Okay. Well, thank you.

HICKSON: Yeah.

[End of interview.]