I REACHED FOR BOOKS

Guest: Hem Rizal
Interviewer: Joshua Dolezal

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HR: I'm here for another day before I head toward Yellowstone, so and then I'll come back and say my final, final goodbyes to this wonderful place really.

JD; Yeah. Well has that come to feel like home there?

HR: Uh, I mean, you know, home is a weird thing though because for me, I'd like to call it a second home. Although I don't really have a first home. Because then, right, like the history of where I was born and where I grew up, none of them really wanted me, right, and like people-- And then here, coming to the US, it's been weird in a way that I've always moved right like, from one place to another. I was in Seattle and then moved from there to Iowa briefly, and then here, and now I'm moving temporarily back to, after being four years here on the res temporarily moving back to Iowa, at least for the fall semester, and then I might be on the east coast, so like it's been a weird thing. This place has definitely felt like a home because, well I mean, you know, if it didn't feel like home then I wouldn't be here for this long.

JD: Yeah.

HR: So yeah, it's, yeah, that's what it's been like.

JD: Well just to remind me, where are you? Are you on the Pine Ridge reservation now?

HR: Right, I'm on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation, yeah.

JD: And you've been there since how long?

HR: Since 2016. I started after I worked in Des Moines for about 9 months. Summer of 2016 is when I moved here permanently.

JD: Okay. Great! Well I want to dive into all of this shortly, and thanks so much for taking time to talk with me and share your life story and this is always strange, we have never met in person, and not even face to face since we are talking now again without video, but I appreciate you sharing your personal writings, and I feel like we're friends because Sheri is our mutual friend, and I hope our paths can cross in person someday.

HR: Yeah, I hope so too! Thanks for having me here. I really appreciate it.

JD: Well let's talk a little bit of technical stuff before we jump in. So it looks like this online recording is fine. I just wanted to see if you had a voice memo going as we're talking as well.

HR: I can get that going. That last few times I tried this it was recording, but it wasn't recording my voice.

JD: Oh. So if you have an iphone voice memos is usually under utilities.

HR: Yeah. Let me try that on mine. On my ipad actually, that might be a better idea because that way I don't know if I have enough space here to record another two hours.

JD: Oh right.

HR: So I'm going to do that on my ipad. Is that good?

JD: That's good.

HR: Okay. How close do you need to keep this ipad?

JD: The ipad doesn't have to be close, the ipad could be, you know, 3 feet, 4 feet away. Just on a table nearby is fine.

HR: Alright I am starting it.

JD: Awesome. Yeah that just gives us a backup and then if something doesn't work as well with this online recording, we've got something to fall back on so.

HR: Absolutely.

JD: Great. Also before we jump in, could you just say your name for me?

HR: I'm Hem Rizal.

JD: Rizal is how you say your last name?

HR: My last name, yeah.

JD: Okay great. Well, as I'm looking at sound levels, I'm just curious, this is a question I ask everyone, kind of as I tweak things, how do you define the Midwest?

HR: Yeah. It's strange to me to think about the Midwest as, because then, with that geography, because I actually wasn't aware of the Midwest being, you know, Iowa and then also all the way up to South Dakota and then all the other neighboring states and I don't know. I think it's more a cultural thing than geographical to me because that's how it's portrayed in media and elsewhere when you read about the Midwest. So yeah, I don't really, I felt a bit like when I first moved, I felt of the Midwest as more of like a, you know, predominantly white people. And that's true, right, but lost in that definition is the fact that there is so many other things right including native americans of who I've been living with for the last four years, immigrants and other populations that are ignored or not brought to the conversation when we talk about the Midwest. So I do think of it more as an identity more definitely than a geography.

JD: Right. So when you sort of thought of Midwest, was it kind of interchangeable with Americana or just Americaness is how you thought of it or, kind of the conventional definition of the heartland, cradle of American values kind of thing or is that what you mean when you think of it as a cultural identity?

HR: I think so. I mean, before I have moved here I was in Seattle so I didn't have to think about the Midwest. And even now, it's weird because I don't really think about the Midwest as a region because like I said, it was always something that I thought of as a white land right or a land where a lot of white people lived. Very rural, cornfields, lots of that. But then it's my experience of the Midwest has been completely different right. When I'm in Iowa it's immigrants right, and Des Moines has a huge immigrant population, black population, and then here in South Dakota, it's always Native Americans for me right, like the Pine Ridge Reservation. So it's weird to think about the Midwest as what I thought about as this white flat land where a lot of white people lived and were farmers. That was my conception and it's not true, but even then after I moved there it's never been true for me because it's not that right? I almost never found the Midwest to be dominated by white people in my own personal experience or farmers or cornfields or flatlands, right because it's never been that for me for the past five years so it's weird.

JD: Yeah. Well it's kind of like, you know, with literature students I talk about reality or realism, you know, so it's always used in a singular way when there are many realities or many realisms so American realism is never a singular thing and I wonder if the Midwest is, you can't speak of it as one thing because there are so many different Midwest's plural that all of us experience differently depending on our communities or our points of connection.

HR: Absolutely. Yeah absolutely I think that is a great assessment of the Midwest. It's not uniform identity right, it's a collection of identities.

JD: Well and as we like to say on this Podcast, it's a changing Midwest, and you are part of that change, your family has been part of that change, and that is what we are talking about in season two with our focus on immigration so I might shift to your immigration story and I'm curious when you think about your immigration story, where does it begin in time? Does it start in a refugee camp? Do you think of your own immigration as beginning with your parents or further back with other ancestors?

HR: I mean there are two parts to it right? Part one being it has to start where my great great grandparents started right which was in the Northern Bhutan from where they moved to Northern Nepal where my great great grandparents originated from and then moved to Bhutan. But then the second part to that is my own experience right? Where my first recollections of myself, my life was in that refugee camp where I grew up. And then moving to the United States it was the biggest immigration stories for me right. So that’s yeah, the two parts to it is how I would say that.

JD: Well could we start with the older part then with your great great grandparents moving from Nepal to Bhutan and that was, as I understand it, by the invitation of the king of Bhutan?

HR: Yeah that's what they say, that Bhutan was not, it was very sparsely populated, they needeFd people to pay taxes, they needed people farm their lands, and they needed people that they can rule right kind of to establish that kingdom, you know. Establish sort of like a, establish something that they can hold on to as a political identity you know, right. And yeah, so my origins started, I think it goes back to the first ones, I think they say that started a lot longer before but 1620s I think is when there were formal delegations right commissioned from Bhutan. We came into Nepal and then brought some people to go and live and then that kind of opened the doors for many more to go in that’s the way that, a lot before that, but that’s the way that really increased people migrating from Nepal to Bhutan and kinda calling that their home. That’s where it started.

JD: So when your father is born in Bhutan, that had been home to your family for at least 3 generations?

HR: Yeah.

JD: Maybe you could tell me a little about your parents. What were their lives like in Bhutan before the crisis that your family survived.

HR: Yeah. So I mean my parents were born in 1961 right and then if you kind of juxtaposed that with what was happening in the US or the world right. I mean in the world right that was the end of the second world war and then in the US there were, you know, the Civil Rights Movement happening and then if you think about Bhutan at that time right, basically it was nothing. My parents were born and they were born when their parents came back from the farm after a days work and they were born at home in rural villages. No hospitals, no roads, no cars, none of that right? So very rural. And that’s all that they knew for a long time. From 1961 when both of my parents were born and then, you know, the next 20 30 years is when things started changing and leading up to the, and then it's important to know that my parents might have been there but some of my people might not have had documentation of citizenships and, you know, records of paying taxes, things like that because, you know, it was not really important at that time because that's the land that they had known for so long that it wasn’t really that important to hold these documents. And my parents certainly had documents proving citizenships and things like that, their belonging to that land but it wa such a, it was kind of like, you know, we have always grown up here, this is what we know, this is all we know why do we really need forms of identities or tokens that will prove that we are from here. And then in the 1980s I believe is when the population, and then my parents and my people the Nepali speakings, the Sumpas is what they call, they were predominantly in the Southern parts of Bhutan, but especially in the 1980s is when Bhutan kind of wanted a what they called it a one people, one nation, one nation, one people, something like that in the line where or one religion one nation right. Where they wanted Buddhism to be the dominant philosophy right. The dominant religion that would rule Bhutan. And my parents were Hindus, my people were Hindus, and that;s when Bhutan started asking my people to kind of prove citizenships. So it was kind of like DACA, when we think of, you know, documented versus undocumented people here and that were born here, raised her, that's all that they know. Thousands of them right, but then if you all of a sudden start asking them for citizenships and their belonging here then, you know, they are not able to show anything except for the fact that they were born here. And all that they know is this place, right like all that they know is the schools that they went to, the people that they met, where they were born, but that was kind of the thingfor our people as well that when Bhutan government started asking for these proofs, starting with the citizenship back to 1985 I believe. And that's when they started cracking on folks that weren't able to show these, and then even folks that were able to show that they had documents right they--

JD: Well my--

HR: basically didn't want-- yeah go ahead.

JD: Yeah. When you describe that period, you know, one nation, one culture, there are echoes for me anyway of this America first, make American great again, kind of philosophical and the xenophobia that seems to have come along with that. I don't know if you've made those connections yourself or if you think of it as like you're saying the DACA story is somewhat similar to your family's experience, do you see those parallels between.

HR: That's-- Absolutely, absolutely right because I mean my parents were born there, their parents were born there right like and it was a land, culture, people, that they knew and the only place that they knew ever in their lives. So to re-ask of them to prove their religions right to be ask prove that they belong, what was shocking to them right. BUt also, kind of paralleled with that was the fact that the government wanted Buddhism to be sort kind of like saying we want white people here only, like the Trump administration saying its okay for immigrants from Norway and Denmark and the UK to come here as long as they are not coming from, you know, the Middle East or Asian countries right because this is white land kind of thing. That's what they did right?

JD: Yeah.

HR: And that ended up with thousands of people leaving the country in the early 1990s just when I was less than a year old actually. And they my great ancestors crossing there to Nepal where they resettled

JD: Well I'm curious, were you born in a refugee camp then?

HR: No, I was born during the height of that crisis in Bhutan so when I was born, my parents were in that state where, you know, we're not sure exactly what's going to happen here. We might be leaving the country, you know, this might die down. But no, I was born in Bhutan and I was a year old, not a year but less than a year old when we moved, and when we migrated or when we fled the country.

JD: So do you have memories of anything before the camp or is that really where your memory begins.

HR: No I have, you know, I think about that a lot because the first of my memories were when I was already five or six, I would say six. I don't-- A lot of people tend to think or say that they have memories of when they were two years old and three years old, and I think that's super power right. For me, I was already five or six when I first remember where I was right, like my first memories, because I don't remember, obviously I remember nothing as an infant of that migration.

JD: Yeah.

HR: All I know my parents telling me what happened and my oldest brother must have been 10 or something, my oldest sister was 8 and they were the ones. And then it was my, so there are five siblings including myself, and the oldest two were the ones big enough to hold our hands and carry us. We're talking about eight and ten year old children right, but they were still able to hold my other brother two years older than me and myself. Carry us on their backs when they were migrating. So they remember more than I, obviously I don't remember any of that.

JD: Right.

HR: But my first memories are definitely of the camp. Nothing from that transitioning at all.

JD: Well sometimes memory is a strange thing because we have family stories that are told to us so often that they feel like our own memories and I'm imagining that some of those stories for you given how intense that time was feel that way. Like you weren't aware of what was going on but you've heard the stories so many times that they feel like your own. Is that true?

HR: Absolutely right. Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean yeah. Right I mean when my parents tell me about, you know, when they left the country all the way until they resettled and then until or all the way until they came to the camp, and until I have my memories, then all of that is, you know, a series of true events that I feel like I lived even though, you know, I don't know. I wasn't, you know, I don't remember, right I don't have memories of that. But definitely those events, almost as if they were my own memories definitely.

JD:Yeah.Well to a lot of Americans that period in time is known as the Bhutanese refugee crisis, and I'm curious if that's the name that you use for it yourself or if there are ways that you and your family understand or tell that history that are really different from the versions that we get in mainstream media or textbooks.

HR: Absolutely because when we think about Bhutan we think about this, you know, this perfect land right, a Utopia, that perfect life right. But I mean that's only because that's what national and international media have been told right or fed, and until today right you can't go in and independently cover Bhutan on international media you can't go and think one of the biggest, you know, barriers to our story being portrayed as, you know, or our story not being a huge component of Bhutan's history was that international media wasn't present there, right like during that time. There was very little coverage of any and we were all so geographically a lot farther away from that crisis after we left because we have to remember the geography of that we were in Eastern Nepal and there was India right and then there was Bhutan. So we're not close enough to Bhutan's border to kind of hide that 16 years of being in that refugee camp. So when people do talk about national growth national happiness things like that, they often forget that, you know, Bhutan does have this dark history and it's never acknowledged and there is very little accountability, right, very little from international organizations to ask of them to, you know, take responsibility of that.

JD: So its like a chapter in history like the Holocaust or like slavery, although slavery and the Holocaust for longer, in duration, but it's a period like that Bhutan has never reconed with or apologized for or moved on from, it sounds like?

HR: Yeah it's never acknowledged no. It's basically something that happened and know its a lot even a lot harder because kind of like a you know, we moved out of the camps and we are in foreign lands now and so there's no kind of proof right, there are people still in the camps but it's easier Bhutan to kind of ignore it even now because there is no ongoing crisis right. There are people there but they'll, like it's, you know, international communities have moved on.

JD: Well so you grew up in, I don't know if I'll pronounce it correctly, you grew up in the Gold Hap refugee camp?

HR: Correct.

JD: Is that right?

HR: Yeah.

JD: What was that-- what was day to day life like in that camp?

HR: You know, it was it was there are two parts to it again right? Like one was the hardships that my parents faced, where food rationed, right we had, you know, there were they had six kids to feed and at one point my up until 2005 I think is when my grandma died, we had an elderly in the family as well who had chronic diseases, diabetes and others so from their angle, it was really really difficult. But for me as a naive kid growing up in the refugee camp, I didn't think about all that right. I didn't have to, I didn't know, I wasn't aware of what was, you know, the challenges. So, you know, I was a happy kid, you know, in the refugee camps there were no identities, school was. I'm thankful for the school because if it wasn't for that school I wouldn't, you know, I wouldn't be talking to you right now and I think about that a lot, you know, when I teach or when I was teaching, but I was, you know, a normal kid growing up in a refugee camp, you know, very innocent and naive about what led to that, what led to us being refugees and so, you know, because Trevor Noah said something in his book Born a Crime that I think about a lot when he said something in the line of you can't dream what you've never seen. Something like that right, and that's kind of what it was for me because I'd never, you know, I didn't have a pair of shoes until I was 16 so I never thought that not having a pair of shoes was, you know, strange or unfair, there was not such a thing there. We were rationed, we were given rationed food and I always that was just the way it was, that economic sovereignty or independence or health care or things like that or a quality education right because I didn't have anything and my people didn't have anything. And we were never, it was not something that we had or that we lost. For me, I never had it, so there was no comparison right, I didn't feel injustice.

JD: Right.

HR: Does that make sense? It didn't

JD: Yeah well I know that you played soccer though and you must of had some awareness of the world outside at least of to learn that game or had access, did you watch soccer? Or did you just grow up playing it because other people in the camp knew how to play it and you learned it from them?

HR: Yeah so it was, you know, you are in a refugee camp there is not a whole lot of things to do, you weren't really allowed to leave the camp, at least not for a kid like me, right. So yeah, soccer was a big part right. We played every single chance you get to. In school, outside of school, we had a forest nearby and we would go in there after school to play. On weekends and evenings basically whenever you get a chance to. I do remember watching World Cups predominantly because those were big events on TV. I remember the 2000, was it the 2000 one or the 2002 I forgot which one it was, but I remember watching those games. Those 2006 game I remember that too, it must have been 2002 I remember Brazil winning the World Cup I remember watching that. I remember 2006, I was big enough to memorize all of that. I remember watching the final between Italy and France. But tv wasn't available dominantly thought because there were only a few folks that had tvs in the camp, that tvs in our camp in our neighborhood. So it wasn't readily available, we would take in through doors and walls and watch it like that. But definitely very fun memories right, because now it's available everywhere I haven't watched Netflix in over a month even though I have it available here anytime.

JD: Well, tell me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like you had a fairly happy childhood and based on what writings you have shared with me it sounds like the event that really kind of changed that for you was this fire that burned the camp down, is that fair to say?

HR: Yeah. No I think it's fair to say in a sense that the writing that I shared with you, a lot of these are, you know, reflection right, looking back kind of thing. It wasn't something that I realized then that there were significant, but looking back, you know, those huge components including that fire. Because I remember vividly right, I was in the forest. So we would go to the forest to study because there was this the SLC or the School Learning Certificate. I heard that they are discontinuing that but I am not sure exactly what’s happening with that now. It’s been historically the biggest exam right, series of exams that you would have to take and once you earned that, once you passed that, you get to go to college basically. And growing up in a refugee camp, where education was the only bright spot basically right, looking back at least. When I was there I didn’t really realize that, but looking back, education was the only bright spot so when I think about that fire, I remember distinctly me reaching for my books right, my notebooks, whatever I had from school supplies that I had because I knew that if I saved those, I would have enough time to, you know, review and read and do all the math that I needed to kind of get ready for the exams. So I remember saving only those items and running with them as my family and neighbors, you know, hustled to get out of the fire. And looking back, that seemed significant because that’s what education meant to me right. Like if there is a fire, and you wanna save one thing or two things that you can and in the moment of that right, when you don’t have a lot of time you have to make instant decisions. I reached for books right because that was the only future that I had.

JD: That says a lot. Well let's back up a little bit then because it sounds like when that fire happened you were already studying for this test, the student leaving certificate, and by that time if you were preparing for that test you must have been gaining more of an awareness of the camp as place to leave and of opportunities that you hadn’t been given, you were starting to become more capable of dreaming that you hadn’t seen but you had heard about and so describe that shift in your perspective from a child to a young adult thinking about his future.

HR: Yeah so the way it was in the camp was that, you know, folks that finished the SLT passed they go to college right. And then some of them enroll in sort of like virtual when I think about it now or they would only enroll but do all the studyings themselves and never go to the college that they were enrolled in. Instead they would go out to the villages throughout Nepal and India and teach because the biggest strength that we had with the refugee education that we had was that the curriculum was in English even though we were taught English by folks that grew up there, who had limited English, we were taught even if the curriculum was in English, we almost never spoke English. But that biggest advantage of that was that we could read even if we couldn’t pronounce, we could understand even if we couldn't, you know, convey that understanding in coherent English. So that was an advantage because now my brothers and sisters older than me could go outside the camp and then kinda sell that art right sell that skill and teach in rural villages although the important component to that was that almost all of them would lie about their identities because once they, you know, revealed themselves as refugees Butenase refugees, then they would either not be paid or not be considered well enough right. So a lot of them have that skill, math and science and English and they would go and sell these, trade these skills, but a lot of them would hide their identities right. So growing up that was something that I was destined to do which was well let me pass this SLC and then, you know, enroll in a college and then teach somewhere right that was always the expected thing to do. That was basically the only thing that you could do, but the thing with that was that you would be capable of earning hard cash right, that my parents weren't always able to because they would go to the villages and farm and things like that but they wouldn't always make money. They wouldn't always be paid on time, sometimes they would come back with, you know, not monetary cash, but it would also be labor right labor work. It's incredibly difficult to plant and harvest right, and whatever else that they did but if you went to school in the refugee camp where I was, there was seven other camps so pretty much everyone in these camps right all these refugees had this same destination right, had this same kind like a predetermined path right. Like finished SLC, enroll in a college, go to college full time if you want but at the same time still you can start tutoring or teaching in rural parts of Nepal.

JD: Yeah.

HR: And that was always always, you know, growing up that was the only thing that I was destined to do, I didn't really know anything different.

JD: Yeah. Well so you had to walk, you took this test this student leaving certificate, for a week it sounds like and then had to walk to a town to get the results and seems to me like so much writing on that you didn't even really know what the other side of it was but you just had this feeling that there was a future there that the test results would sort of tell you and I wonder if you can just take me through that day when you walked to town to see the results what you were thinking, what you were feeling and how that turned out for you.

HR: Yeah so I had done the test from, so we got this place from the camp and we went a nearby jungle and we set up tents and then we were there and then we would, I would bike with another 500 students during that time from that camp that would go to the nearby school, local school and take the test. And then that was March of 2008 is when I took that exam. March 1st 2008 is when the fire happened. And then the 17th of March I believe is when SLT started if I have my recollections my memories correct. And then, you know, a series of eight exams that we took and then three months later is I think approximately two or three months later is when the results came in and it's such a huge thing right. Now like I said earlier, I heard that it's no longer a thing that they discontinued this but it's the biggest exam that you'll do, all Nepali students do. It's a national one, eight exams, it's a huge deal, if you don't make it through, they call it the iron gate right, if you don't make it through, you're basically, you're perceived as someone that's not able to, you know, make a living in their lives, they are not able to do anything, which is wrong, but, you know, that's what it was, how it was perceived and it's especially important for refugees because, you know, that's the only advantage for you right. That's the only thing that you have. That you can prove. That you can show to the world that you are capable. And I remember hesitating to go and actually check how well I'd done. I know my brother checked the day it came and checked for me too we had this national number all we had to do was it would be published in these newspapers and you just have to look for your numbers and I know I gave my number to my brother who took the SLT the same time as I did he was two years old but basically we were in the same grade throughout our lives and then I'd done well is what he told me right. But I didn't really care about the specifics of how well I'd done, because I knew that I'd done well, there were different divisions, first division, second, third, first division basically is something that if you get and these really incredibly difficult exams so if you get 60 percent or higher, you know, you are regarded very that's decent, really really good actually. 60 percent is really good. So I knew that I did above 60 percent but I didn;t care really actually at that point because I'd already passed, but I remember going and checking a couple of months later after that going, walking to check that how specifically well I'd done right, the numbers in each of these exams and I was like, you know, I don't really care about this because even if I didn't do well in some of these exams, you know, failure is something that I've lived with it's, you know, it's not something that defines me and I think part of that was also that the wave of resettlement was already there the wave of resettlement in a sense that some of my people were already starting to get resettled in the US and other countries in the world. So I, at that point I didn't really care even if it was such a huge thing because, you know, well maybe I'm just going to the US anyways, so it doesn't really matter as much, so I think that was always such a big component of my life, you know, in moments of months, you know, was becoming such a small aspect, but also I remember even before I went to see that, I remember feeling okay, well what if I fail right? And I then I remember thinking like, you know, I really don't care because it's, you know, I've always failed in sense that now I'm already this old and we don't have much of an identity and we don't really know where we are going so failing is not, you know, not a problem I get I guess right? Not something--

JD: You're like too far to fall if you.

HR: Yeah. Like you've already, like your entire life is a failure in a sense that it's out of your control so failing this is, you know, just another part.

JD: Yeah well and in an essay about that time you wrote and I'm quoting: "There is wisdom in survival that transcends survival itself" and I wonder if you could explain what you mean by that.

HR: Yeah so what I mean by that is there is wisdom in survival that transcends survival itself survival is awesome right, you make it through these series events that you are not supposed to live through for example me being born in that village when, you know, after my mom came back from a days worth of labor in the farm and then gave birth to me. I could have died there, the nearest hospital, you know, would have hours away on foot, right like there were no cars at that time, so I could have died there, but I survived right. But when I was a year old, less than a year old, you know, marching through Bhutan through India days and nights and coming into the refugee camp I could've died there, you know, it wasn't something that I was even supposed to survive and people that know me and my brother from back in those days are still surprised, right the eldery are like wow you guys still made it, wow its incredible right. They say that-- one thing that they say is that when we drank water they could kind of see the water going through throats . That's how pale we were. There was no medicine, there was no food, air pollution, and all these other things that affected our chance right chance of survival. So all of those I survived and the fire and then that happened those survivals are awesome right, like you survived that's great but it's the wisdom that you gather in that those moments of survival right, these things that you've survived is what I think are much more important than survival itself right. Now I think about that as going through college or, you know, getting in difficult situations in life I think about them as all, you know, it's not like I've never been in these situations or maybe not the specific situations but I've definitely been in harsher ones before.

JD: Right.

HR: So you gather, you know, a book of wisdom along that road that you've traveled that helps you, you know, kind of cope with all these other uncertainties in life that are always destined to encounter.

JD: Yeah. So well you were 16 and your family ended up leaving Nepal for the US can you tell me about that journey?

HR: Yeah. I mean it's a journey of excitement but also its a journey of uncertainties because, you know, you're leaving for a place that you have no idea about. Right, like the only thing that I remember distinctly remembering only thing that I had heard of the US or America was that this thing that it would be day when it was night where I was right. And vice versa that when it was day where I was, it would be night in the US. And that was crazy for me to think about right wow this is incredible right. But I mean and then you take that leap of faith right like when, you know when you are leaving every that you have known behind, all of the people that you've known, the language that you've known, the traditions, culture, friends and families and everything. I mean I came with my family but you're leaving a land that you have known for so long my entire life.

JD: Yeah.

HR: And getting in a plane and just like boom, you're gone and it takes an incredible amount of faith and resilience and courage to do that I guess but a little of that was, you know, that maybe the fear was overcome by excitement, right the new horizons right, the new opportunities even though we didn't know exactly what those opportunities would be like, even though we didn't know what, you know, what new life awaited us. I guess when you've grown up not expecting much, you know, any moment of those opportunities are too exciting, too important.

JD: Sure. So did you fly from Nepal directly to Seattle or do you have any memories of stops along the way that were part of this strangeness that you were going into, people you saw on the flights or observations of the airports as you as you came to Seattle.

HR: Yeah I had never been to an airport or, you know, been in a plane so that was definitely a first for me and my family. I don't remember, well obviously I remember all of that I was 16 I better remember but I don't remember strange as much as like it was I mean everything was strange, right so there no like "oh that's strange" right like this is strange and that is strange everything is strange because I've never been in a plane I've never left the country, I remember when I was flying from Kathmandu to Abu Dhabi international airport and I had to use the restroom in the plane and then I remember flushing it and I remember that sound that it made I felt like well this is the moment the plane's going to burst in fire, you know, we're all going to die right because it was so loud that I'd never heard that and it was so scary right like I don't remember going to using, you know, an airplane restroom ever since for that journey. I mean I use it now until I came to the US. I don't remember doing that because that's how strange and scary it felt right. So I mean everything was strange to a point where nothing was strange because, you know, everything was.

JD: Right, right. How did your family choose Seattle or was that just the place that was chosen for you?

HR: Yeah so they did give us when we were, during that process of, you know, wanting getting to get resettled they had this series of interviews including health checks and things like that and they did ask if we wanted to resettle anywhere specifically and we said Seattle because my brother who I don't understand the intricacies of the relationships how ended up being my brother because we called them brothers, in our culture there is no cousins or, you know, we were all just brothers your mom's sister's kids were your brothers things like that.

JD: Yeah.

HR: But now I understand it as cousin, it was a cousin of mine that was a lot older than me, his kids were all my age and he had resettled because he was a scholar right he was a scholar when he was in the camp in Bhutan so he had gotten this opportunity to come to the US a couple of years before, 4 years before I think actually, before the wave of resettlement even came in right. So we didn't know when he left for the US then, that we would be following him 4 or 5 years later but he had come to the US and he had, he came to California as I understand it now, I didn't know it back then, and then he was living in the Olympias in Washington when we came and we were told the people that did from the Department of Homeland Security that we would love to be resettled in Washington and they actually according to them they did try to do their best to kind of match that or try and honor that which was especially when you're early in the process because they wanted people to get resettled because it was crisis in Nepal that they wanted to kind of solve and the Bhutan government wasn't willing to accept its people so resettlement was the best option at that point.

JD: Yeah.

HR: And they did honor that and that's how we ended up resettling in Seattle.

JD: So you had a lot of expectations and I'm curious sort of what you thought the US would be like and maybe how that compared to what it was actually like once you got here.

HR: Yeah no my, I know I finished SLT back in the country and I know that I remember thinking that I wanted to go to college right, that was, education was always, you know, my biggest dream I guess. So I remember wanting to go to college but I remember that my expectations That I would like, you know, go to this university or something and be a doctor or engineer, whatever it was right. But all of those expectations kind of fell flat because once I came here I was, you know, I was registered for high school, enrolled in the high school and I remember that I was given ELL classes in math and English and the English was fair because my English wasn't anywhere where it is now. But with math I remember, you know, taking ELL math which was like multiplication and division and I'd already completed advanced algebra, trigonometry and things like that back in the camp so it was kind of strange to have that and so my expectations obviously of wanting to, you know, I thought of it as, you know, you walk in and do great but then the realities that there are so many hurdles that you need to jump through.

JD: Oh wow. So you felt like you had sort of been set back actually by the education--

HR: A little bit. Absolutely, absolutely a little bit. But then quickly right, you learn to, with refugees and with immigrants, you know, they tend to quickly try and figure out what's the best route right. Because then they have to survive, survival is their, you know, hoping you can, right? And so for me I quickly figured out, okay well I'm going to do whatever they tell me to do but I'm going to try and keep pushing right and so I remember getting bored in those math classes because they were teaching us, you know, simple math that I'd already learned and then, thankfully my ELL coordinator teacher was very open to these ideas of testing out and ideas of, you know, moving up the ladders of those classes and my brother and I were offered from that ELL math they're like "oh well, since, you know, all this already, won't you try this other class." You know, we tried geometry and the geometry was like "well it looks like you already know everything that I'm about to teach so why don't you try algebra 2" and we didn't know back in the country right, where I grew up there was no such thing as geometry and algebra 2 and precalculus, to all math. There were two math we called it compassory math which I think of it now as arithmetics right like basic multiplication and things like that and there is the optional math component that where it is geometry and trigonometry and calculus.

JD: Yeah.

HR: So we quickly moved up to Algebra 2 and then after that the teacher was like "well you already know quadratic functions you already know how to solve complex linear equations things like that so why don't you try something different" and then we were offered calculus and that time we were only 4 or 5 students in that school that were, it was such as, now I didn't know it back then, actually, all of these things I reflect on now, as it turns out it was such an underperforming school that it was one of the worst in our school district so there were not many that were ready for calculus and then my brother and I kinda created that wave and then there were a few others that enrolled in that class. So I remember a little bit of-- Yeah.

JD: Yeah do you think that is kind of a twist of fate because I know you went on to major in math in college and you've been teaching math in South Dakota now and, was, I'm just imagining that might not have been what you expected to do with your life or what you expected to teach but it just happened the thing that really set you apart made you better than other students by comparison. Did you sort of embrace it as a result that it gave you an edge?

HR: Yeah.

JD: Or did you do it--

HR: Yeah minored for correction, I minored in math but. Yeah I think that's a fair assessment because I remember being in that school where oh, you know, you're the smartest math kid that we've had, you know, we've never had, you know, refugees that come in with such high level of math ability right. So in that sense I did stand out with my brother as well. But I do remember even if that's the case for immigrants and refugees and it's always a hurdle thought because there's very few people that actually trust your ability and that actually want to help you move ahead right because I remember that quickly figuring out okay well I was already a 17 year old by then and if I wanted to go to college that I would have to quickly get all these credits that I needed to graduate from high school first because I was still in high school and wanted to go to college but I didn't have enough credits, but particularly math was fine because I tested out of ELL math,got into geometry, I earned algebra 2 and calculus so math was fine, I had enough credits, the problem was with English. So to answer your question, was that an advantage, it was an advantage, but it was still a hurdle because I remember talking to my counselor then and I remember going to her because I figured, and i did all of this myself, that if I truly wanted to go to college I would have to first have four years of English and the only way that I could do that is not through high school because well I literally didn't have enough years remaining right until I had to graduate. So my only option was to go to community college but I truly didn't want to do that, I wanted to go to a four year university but I learned about this program, here in South Dakota we call it Dual-Enrollment, but there in Washington they call it Running Start, I don't know if they still call it Running Start, but which is basically a where if you're in high school, you can take college classes and the school district will pay for them, you have to be exceptional right, you have to take a series of tests, getting into the classes that you want and have a desired GPA, and prove that you can handle those classes and all that, the counselor's recommendation, whatever it was, the whole process, but I remember talking to my counselor about it vividly and I was like "look I want to go to a four year college but I'm, you know, there's no way I can have enough English credit to do that so I want to enroll in this Running Start, tell me more about this." And then the counselor was confused because she's specifically said that she has never seen anyone of my background, an immigrant refugee coming through wanting to take college classes within a year of them being in the high school but I was very insistent because I knew that that was the only way that I could go to college. But then after, you know, the first meeting with her failed and then the second one failed, and then I remember telling her "look at least tell me that you'd sign these papers and if I fail it's on me right. At least give me that permission to explore this."

JD: Yeah.

HR: And I remember her saying right “look, you have to do these tests.” The COMPASS test is what there called I think moving away from COMPASS tests now and to the ACCUPLACER but until then I didn’t know that I had to take that test series of tests too for reading, writing and math. And I was like “wow okay no I can’t do this because tests are not my strength.” If I have to do these tests, I might as well not go to a four year college. But I remember collecting those papers that she had given me and I went to the local library, the Des Moines Public Library, the King County system back in Seattle and then I gathered as many books and as many resources as I could from the library for the COMPASS test because I was like, you know, what the heck I might as well try this, there’s nothing to lose, and everything to gain if I pass these tests then I can take college classes, my counselor said so, so why not? But then I remember how difficult these test were right, taking them I passed the math on pretty easily I got placed in Calculus on my first attempt, but I remember doing the reading one for some reasonI passed the writing one too, but the reading I remember the first one I did I had get a 80 on it, but I remember getting a 78 the first one right, and I was like, frustrated time was running out I had to register for college classes in the fall, this was the spring so this, so in the summer there is no school so the counselor wouldn’t be able to do anything so I had to figure this out weekly and I was like I remember wanting to give up because, you know, I failed by two points its not worth it, but I was like, you know, there is still, and this is true for a lot of immigrants right, they keep trying, they keep working harder and harder and harder and I was like, you know, I will try this test again, I only had to do the reading one because I had passed the writing and math, this was in a community college and then I went back I was like, you know, I’ll do it again, took a 15 day or so break and studied and studied and studied and I went back again and I took the test and when the results came in I was mad right because I got a 78 again and I failed by two points.

JD: Oh no!

HR: And that was like, yeah, that was like I’m done right, I can’t do this because I’m just not made for a four year college right, I’m not able because its not for me and I guess it's okay to go to a community college because I was of the impression at that time was that, you know, four year, little did I know right, it’s absolutely really a great idea to go to community college or technical school but that was never in my consideration. I don’t really know why, or how that ended being my mindset but I remember truly wanting to go to the University of Washington for my four year college and then I gave up for about a month of so, I didn’t want to think about it, none of that and I was like “you know, I can’t do this” and then I was like “you know, I’ll do it again!” I don’t know why, I don’t know how I got this energy again, determination again. And I remember reading more and going to the library and having the libraries print out all those test resources that they could find and thankfully printing was free back then in the, I think it’s still fine free at the King County systems in Seattle and I remember going through all of that right and then even paying for those tests the school paid for the first one so even paying I don’t 25 dollars was difficult at that time, you know, I was a refugee my parents depended on SLAB benefits and all that there was no money at all. Went back for a third time and I passed it and remember that to be the moment that changed my life right. I passed it with an 84 and if I didn't go back for that third time, I wouldn't be talking to you right now because I would probably be working at a McDonald's somewhere probably because I wouldn't go to college I wouldn't so many things that I did right. So when you asked if it kinda set me apart, with opportunities when I went to such a school I do think about how much resilience I still needed, how much faith I still needed in myself.

JD: Yeah.

HR: How much hard work obviously I needed to do to get where I am, so my life has always been like a series of moments like that

JD: Right.

HR: Looking back, have been, you know, tremendously consequently right in terms of where I end up.

JD: Well and I wonder if you had grown up ironically if you had grown up with more slightly more privilege or slightly more money but still under-privileged in the US in that particular county, would you have gained the resilience from life experience that you'd--

HR: Sorry, I think you cut off, can you repeat that again?

JD: Can you hear me?

HR: Hey Josh, can you hear me?

JD: Yeah can you hear me? Can you hear me?

HR: I can hear you now. Yeah I can hear you. Can you repeat that again?

JD: Yeah.

HR: You were saying that if grew a privileged life or slightly more privileged

JD: Well I'm just wondering if you grew up in in Seattle, you know, where you were living at the time without having survived all the things that you did if maybe you would not have gained the resilience you needed for that third attempt right.

HR: I think that's, no I totally agree I think I think, like I said there is wisdom in survival right? So I don't think if I, if I even a slightly more privileged life right, I wouldn't have made it this far in terms of I'm not saying i've had a series of success I'm just saying that, you know, I probably wouldn’t have worked as hard because then, you know, when you are forced into a coroner you have to take actions that are not normal or actions that are not precedented, right, unprecedented actions. So no I think that’s a fair assessment that I probably won’t, or like worked as hard as I did.

JD: Yeah. Well and no one knows of course you can’t speculate or know for sure but--

HR: Right, right

JD: What I’m hearing you say is that the resilience that you had learned from growing up in Nepal with the circumstances you were given that did turn out to be asset for you at least in that particular example. So that’s a good kind of halfway point for us here and I don’t know if you need to take a break, sometimes at the hour mark you want to take a break or?

HR: We can keep going.

JD: Keep going? Okay, alright. Well so you so you did go to the University of Washington.

HR: Yep.

JD: And tell me how that happened. You were living in Seattle you had taken these classes you had the university in mind probably because it was close did you apply anywhere else or did you always know that’s where you were going to go if you could.

HR: You know, yeah I didn’t know that I would get accepted into the University of Washington so I did apply to some others, Eastern Washington and North Central, Western, a bunch of community colleges, but going to that community college, so I passed the test and I started classes at the community college and I enjoyed it so I did apply for some community colleges as well. Yeah. Sorry I didn’t answer your question, I forgot.

JD: Yeah well tell me sort of how you started at the University of Washington and what kind of transition that was like I assume that you were on your own for the first time when you did.

HR: Yeah so that was a difficult transitioning because I went to community college, it was close to home and, you know, I would come home after classes, go to work, it was a, it was a lot easier than transitioning to to a four year college even though it wasn’t far, it was like 30 minutes away from where I lived, I lived in South Seattle and, well with my parents but then I moved to North Seattle where the university. The transitioning was difficult because its a, it was obviously Seattle is such a diverse place, but I still didn’t know, I didn't have to be honest with you, I didn't have, I don’t know I just didn’t have I guess, I didn’t have a clear sense of what I wanted to do so I struggled in that respect, right like I didn’t know exactly how to build a community of people around you that would support because I that was never something that I was taught or given opportunities to learn about, you know, socialization was a problem because I’d never been to a college campus before until I actually enrolled, I was still new to the country so that was that was a difficult transition to navigate but also that fear of failure in a sense that when you're a refugee and everything that you do matters in terms of survival and making it through life, failure is not an option right, you just can't fail.

JD: Yeah.

HR: So I think that burden or that fear of failure and then I do like to think about that burden also kind of like burden of expectations that my family had.

JD: Yeah.

HR: Kind of like unspelled ones right, unsaid burdens or expectations that you will do something great and look out for your family and all these, the fear and burden really didn't help because, you know, the transitioning itself was difficult but then you have to manage all these other aspects that you don't have coping skills to manage.

JD: Yeah.

HR: It becomes a challenge. So I remember college as being not as a place for you to go and have fun and build relationships and get to know people but more of like a place where you go and get that education, and get out of there right and do something with your life.

JD: Yeah.

HR: It was more of like, you know, one aspect of your life but an aspect of your life that is fun or always interesting or, you know, what I mean, it was just something that I needed to do.

JD: Yeah that makes sense.

HR: More than something that I wanted to do.

JD: Would-- can you think of maybe just one moment in that first year when you really felt that burden of expectation or you felt that difficulty in building relationships is there a day or particular interaction with somebody that sticks out as kind of illustrating that for you?

HR: I mean, I don't have much of that but other than the fact that I was living with my roommates, three of them and I remember not wanting to live there after that first semester like I just didn't find, I just didn't feel like I belonged there, I just didn't feel like that was a place for me, both in terms of that apartment complex but also the college that I was by myself a lot right like and after that first semester I moved out, I moved back in with my parents in my community, that 30 minute trip, but all of that first semester was really difficult not academically but more socially.

JD: So you had two roommates and you were in an apartment with two roommates and had you met them before or did you just move in with them without having introduced or built relationships

HR: No, see that was a challenge too I guess because I didn't really know my roomates when I moved and they were already friends right like they went to neighboring schools or same schools and yeah I didn't know them there was just something that I was placed in sort of like okay well I want an apartment okay well why don't you, they assigned it to me, so I didn't get to choose roommates, and I didn't know them when I moved. So yeah I remember that transitioning being a difficult one rooming with people that you didn't know but also not really having that social and, you know, social skills you can use to get to know them so that transitioning would be a little bit easier.

JD: Yeah. Well and to make things, make things worse for you, your parents and your family left Seattle while you were still at the university and so I'm assuming that would have really been disruptive if you you weren't feeling like you were belonging there and you hadn't sort of a friend network first, you know, how did they decide to move to Iowa and then how did that affect your, your view of finishing at the university?

HR: Yeah by the time my parents moved in, oh my God was it '13 that I'd already kind of figured out, I'd had a firm grip right on what I basically, I mean not exactly what I wanted to do but, you know, I'd already determined that I would finish college at least right. And I had a good job, I got a good paying job that helped me with my rent and things like that. So when my parents started talking about moving because Seattle was such an expensive place all these other people were moving out towards, within our community that spoke our language, other Bhutanese families were moving out and that wave that my parents wanted to ride and get out of that place and be with people that they, you know, cared about and communities that they wanted to be with. I remember thinking that I have to stay back, right I couldn't just move because I really wanted to finish college so it wasn't really difficult in terms of seeing them leave because I'd already, although the first year was difficult for me, I'd already developed that firm sense that, you know, I have to finish college. So

JD: How did you feel--

HR: I said goodbyes and--

JD: Yeah how did you feel personally about them going, going to Iowa it sounds like a place that you had never been,didn't really know much about.

HR: Yeah so my brother was the one, my oldest brother was the one that was more vocal about it and he wanted to go so yeah I, you know, I well, you know, it's better kind of maybe stay together, so instead of my parents moving there and my oldest brother living in Iowa and then we had two nephews then so it was important that we didn't, you know, have families in different parts of the country. Especially for the kids, it was important that we, they had their grandparents close by so I yeah, I said that's something that we want to do, let's do it together. We all moved to Iowa, I didn't really know much about Iowa, I had taken a tour, a road trip that somewhere before through the Midwest starting in Seattle, all the to Iowa and then to the South Dakota and then back with some friends and my dad. Yeah so I really didn't have any thoughts about Iowa in terms of what it might be like. I didn't really know a lot about it.

JD: Well there's a big Nepali community in Des Moines, and so I imagine that gave you a kind of sense of belonging when you joined your family there?

HR: Yeah yeah. I mean part of the, that's part of the reason why, you know, my family wanted to move there because of that that community, you know, the Nepali community there because immigrants tend to kind of be more community oriented they care about where they live and who their neighbors are and having people that spoke the language, came from the same origins was was important. It definitely played a factor.

JD: Now this is again, I'm just speculating about this and tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm imagining that the kind of Iowa culture that I know which is more of that community centered know your neighbors, be friendly kind of culture I'm assuming that that felt more familiar to you than the culture of a big city like Seattle. Is that right?

HR: I think so. Yeah I think, yeah no I think, but I mean I wasn't, I didn't move with them right? So I moved in 2015 after I graduated from college so I don't really have a firm sense of what Iowa culture is because for me its a, it's, you know, a place where my parents are and then when I moved there and worked for the Des Moines Public Schools for 7-8 months, that is all Iowa experienced of Iowa so it did feel like, you know, unlike a large city, like Seattle, it did feel a little bit more, I mean if not, I mean Seattle is such a diverse place so there is definitely that, but it did feel like you could navigate it a little bit easier in Iowa than in Seattle, but it's still, yeah for me personally though, you know, all I have experienced with Iowa was just those months when I was working at the Des Moines Public Schools and after that I moved out so I don't really have that, you know, what I Iowa is like.

JD: Right.

HR: Not yet at least.

JD: Okay. Well I want to just backtrack a little bit to your graduation from the University of Washington and you've written about that time that it was your father's dream deferred and so is it alright if I read a little from that essay that you wrote about your own graduation?

HR: Yeah, no.

JD: Yeah so you wrote: “In my graduation, my dad achieved what he couldn’t by himself by envisioning me in a cap and gown, he saw himself in one. In my diploma he saw his own aspirations and desires that he’d put off. Up until that point in his life, my dad had had very little to celebrate and he had already turned 50. Never earned a house, his citizenship had been terminated for decades and he was living in a country where he couldn’t understand the primary language or the dominant culture. What makes it even more painful is my dad had a brain that was never nourished and in my graduation he could finally reconcile with a part of his dream that he never could realize.” So that was really powerful to me and it seems that when you finished there was even more of this sense of expectation or obligation because it was like you were living two lives, your life and then also the life that your father never got to live. Is that how you felt?

HR: Absolutely right. And I don’t want to speak for other immigrant populations, other immigrants, but I feel like all immigrants live different, at least two lives right, or more. And for me certainly that was the case, my dad wanting me, wanting to see me graduate from college when I had no desire to walk right. It’s for my dad having, you know, wearing that cap and gown and walking across the stage and getting that diploma that certificate, that’s all that is for, that’s, if you don’t do that, you didn’t graduate right, like that was, that was all that my dad cared about in a way. So and I didn’t realize then right until further reflection of that right that that want it meant to see that right where he saw in me his own dreams that he didn’t ever achieve. So it’s always.

JD: You still feel that.

HR: Absolutely right because my dad pretty much reminded me every single year after I graduated right like that that I needed to go back to college and get a masters because that’s something that he still talks about and then when I was, when I was applying I was kind of telling him here and there okay dad I don’t know why I might be going to back because I’m thinking about this I'm applying for some of these programs and he was like. Yeah you better go right, like you have to go and he just absolutely cannot wait to see me, see me get a masters right, he always like Why don’t you, why don't you just finish, you know, just go back and finish, he’s always of that, just get a masters and get a PhD right, just finish and then you can start working, why do you have to work now? Always that right and I was like oh my God because it's’ something that he never was able to do.

JD: Right.

HR: And seeing, you know, your own fruit, you know, do that is must be a form of redemption almost like, right, a satisfaction that he always wanted.

JD: Right.

HR: And part of the reason why I’m going back has to do with my dad, right, I’m going back to college, you know, my dad. I kind of have to do it.

JD: Yeah.

HR: And it's different and it's kinda like an obligation. Although I’m not saying that, you know, that's the sole reason why I'm going back, I’m doing it for myself, but I do have to keep that in mind right, like as an immigrant I can’t disform my parents desires, you know, I can’t separate myself from them or their aspirations. It's always something that I have to think about.

JD: Yeah that’s powerful. I was laughing only. I hope you didn’t hear that as disrespect. I was just thinking that it’s not always as simple as just finishing it when sometimes you get a PhD and it gets more complicated trying to get work, you know, it's simpler sometimes with your undergraduate degree.

HR: Yeah no. I mean even with that undergrad right, after I graduated I didn’t really know what I was doing so the path that I’m in now to go back to college wasn’t something that I always knew that I would, you know, be able to, or would be something I would explore because when I graduated from college I told myself like I’m not going back to college again so yeah so to be able to tell my dad look dad, I just need to figure what I want to do before I go back to college right because I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do going to back or if I even wanted to go back to college.

JD: Right.

HR: So the past four or five years has been although we don’t talk about my dad and I don’t really talk about that as like, you know, him expressing constantly, like his desire for me to go back to college, although he doesn’t say it out constantly it’s something that is always, you know, it has always been in the back of my mind.

JD: Right.

HR: That unspoken, you know.

JD: Well and fortunate for South Dakota that you didn’t just go straight on because that’s how you’ve been connected to what I think of as the changing Midwest through AmeriCorps and Teach for America that’s what brought you to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota so, can you tell me how you got connected with AmeriCorps and Teach for America?

HR: Yeah AmeriCorps when I started for the Des Moines Public Schools, I applied for that when I was, before I graduated from Seattle I was just looking for something to do right, I wanted something ready and I was looking for jobs in Seattle but I already had a pretty okay job but if I wanted to move with my parents here in Iowa, I knew that I needed a job first before I did that.

So I just basically applied for whatever was available. I did kind of have a sense that I wanted to work for a public sector more than private so I found the AmeriCorps job for Des Moines Public Schools and I applied and got it when I was still in Seattle so I transitioned that summer. And then I worked there for, I didn't complete my AmeriCorps tenure because I, TFA came calling because that Fall when, the fall that I started working at Meredith Middle School and Hoover High School I got to learn a little bit more about TFA and I was like, part of the reason why I applied for it was that I kinda felt like I could do more and the AmeriCorps job that I had I didn't really have many specific roles that I could play it was more of like you figure out your own assignments and I figured that if I were in a classroom I probably would be able to do more and I wanted to do more right contribute more. And that's, the easiest path to doing that, being in the classroom more, was through TFA because I obviously didn't want to go back to college and get an education degree and in TFA you don't have to do, you know, you don't have to go into education to get, to get an education degree to be a teacher. So I applied and then, and I got the, which is something that I didn't expect to get because obviously it's a very competitive one, they like to stay very highly selective and I was surprised that I made it through a bunch of rounds of interviews and writing assignments and I knew that when I got that I debated if I should move to South Dakota, you know, maybe I should just not take it but I'm I did because it really changed my life for the better.

JD: Did they just assign you to South Dakota?

HR: Yes and no. They did give you, give me in that board, I don't know how they do it now, but we had this option to kind of rank where we wanted to go and I knew that I kind of wanted to stay around in the Midwest because my parents were in Iowa so, TFA they are not in Iowa but I remember putting South Dakota there somewhere, Cleveland Ohio, Cincinnati Ohio, my sisters where in Ohio at that time and Oklahoma, Mississippi, some of these places in the South and also the Midwest, Colorado must have been there somewhere as well, but I was given that chance to rank the top ten of my preferred regions and I remember South Dakota being the number one because I thought I that, I didn't actually do a whole lot of research into that before I selected, ranked, because I thought they would be in the eastern part of South Dakota.

JD: Oh.

HR: Which is a lot easier to get to than the Western part where I am now.

JD: Right.

HR: Yeah. I did know that part of the reason why I wanted to put South Dakota as a region was that this is one of only I think three or four regions that TFA works with native communities and that felt very exciting to kind of work with a community of people that you had never lived with, you know, hung out with. So that was an exciting reason I put South Dakota as a choice there.

JD: Well you've said that it changed you for the better so what are some experiences you've had there that have transformed your outlook or your identity or enriched your life?

HR: Yeah I mean it's the whole process. So it's not something that one thing that happened right that changed me, the entire process of learning about native communities through value systems, a lot which kind of aligned with my own with the Lakota people they are a lot more community oriented, family minded than many other communities are right like if there an elderly that needs help the community takes that as their own obligation to help them. My kids, my students a lot of them right like, I would say a majority of them lived with, you know, their grandma, grandpa both or, you know, aunties and uncles if with parents, which was something that's very unique to native communities but it wasn't new to me right because I, you know, my grandma lived with us when we were back in the camp right. How people still, even here in the US, right we like to stay together, you know, close-knit families is something that's valued how within my value system and my people's value system I live with my parents right now there, even though its temporary I still live with them so these things that I saw here kind of reaffirmed my own values that I've not seen elsewhere in the US right in Seattle or Iowa or elsewhere. And if there was a moment that changed it all it was just that going to just Standing Rock and seeing what they were doing, you know, protesting the construction of the Dakota access line that was, there is one moment that kind of triggered that thought that this is the place that I wanted to be in.

JD: Yeah well tell me about that night you camped at the Sacred stone camp for one night?

HR: Yeah so I had a, so the reason I ended up there was that there was a training with TFA up in Standing Rock that I was ordered to go to and that was a what 3 hour drive or something from here and so went I remember driving there in the morning and I finished that days worth of training and then after that I made it a little bit farther north where there was that group of people protesting, cannibal. But then when i arrived I was like, you know, I'm just going to check it out see how things going and what they're doing, you know, talk to people, but I had no intention right I was like I'm just going to go back home and, you know, I didn't think that I would, yeah it was not in my intentions to stay. But then like just going around it was, it just felt great, you know? It was kind of like a we're back in the camp or we were in a refugee camp, you know, we all had our own small huts and that's how people were set up there and I kind of, I kind of instantly felt gravitated right, I kind of instantly felt like I needed to be there for much longer and it was evening time, right, the sun was going down and I quickly needed to decide if I wanted to stay there or just head home because it was a long drive for me to come back here on Pine Ridge and then just going around I was like okay I would love to stay here but I don't really have anything, I didn't plan on this, you know, and then a there was a tent close by and they were like hey I have an extra tent, why don't you take this, you know, and there was a long line for dinner that, a community dinner that was there going on and they helped me set up the tent and then they sent me there, went there to get my dinner and I was like, you know, I'm camping here. There's no way I'm not camping. The was that I had to come back to teach, that was Sat-- it must have been Saturday so the next day I had to come back, Sunday, because, you know, I have to be in the classroom Monday, otherwise I would have stayed longer but yeah that was the evening that I kind of by chance, kind of by intention that I stayed there. And kind of by pure generosity and kindness of these folks that were there, what was powerful about that really was just that people from all over the country and the world really, there were folks from Germany I remember, Ireland, people from all around the world really right that were there. I don't know if they directly came there from wherever they were, or if they were already traveling in the US and they decided to show up in solidarity. But it was incredibly powerful, there were these flags from all around the, all around Tribal Nations of Seattle that I'd seen, California, Oregon, you name it right, Florida, just incredibly powerful to see, you know, a group of people that were there to, you know, protest capitalism basically and greed.

JD: Yeah. Well and you've written about this in a blog, you've written about this in a blog post where you said that leaving that camp which you stayed at for only one night was almost as emotional for you as leaving the refugee camp in Nepal. Can you explain how you felt that?

HR: Yeah so the next I get up and put down the tent and handed everything that I had gotten from folks to where they belong and, you know, I was leaving my truck and that's when I realized it kind of felt nostalgic right, it kind of felt like I was leaving something that I had already left or something that I'd already seen or experienced although, I'd only been there for one night, I kind of felt sad and that's instantly when I realized that very day, right, September 11, 2008 so the night of September 10, 2008 is when I was in the camp the next morning was September 11, 2008 or sorry, oh my God, 16, 2016 I realized that exactly 8 years before in 2008 the same day I was leaving the camp that I'd called home for so long. And it felt like, you know, leaving the refugee camp was exciting but it was also like okay we're going to this uncharted territory right and leaving behind everything including my culture, my language, and also the sense by abandoning where you come from, you're leaving, you're abandoning your history right, like you are abandoning or you are giving up on your past in a way. And leaving that sacred camp, that's how it felt because it felt like I was kind of giving up on these people that were there for so long protesting the construction of the Dakota access pipeline that leaving that was kind of abandoning them and their values and what they were standing up for so it felt that, you know, the analogy didn't come instantly until I realized, you know, these two different things ideas, you know, in between but also kind of learning that that these folks that were there were protesting, you know, or were standing up for their rights, their sovereignty their rights to self-determination, their lands, their waters, and connecting that how my parents, and my grandparents left Bhutan and how powerless I was you now how I couldn't really contribute to that right, like my parents leaving Bhutan and the only lands that they had known for so long and how, you know, there was nothing I could have done back in the 1990s to prevent that or to be in that fight or to stand int hat solidarity because I was just a year old, knowing that some days, you know, almost two decades later, I was, more than two decades later, I was able to reconnect that right, reconnect those dots and that was able to stand in sort of solidarity with these people that I'd never met before and never heard of until until a couple of months before so it kind of felt like I was, I was doing what I, or just being there I was, I did or I was able to accomplish what my parents wanted to which is to stand up for your own lands and your own waters. You know, so to be in that struggle in solidarity meant, was important for me.

JD: Yeah.

HR: Because I was doing that also for my parents and my grandparents that weren't able to do that for their own lands, for their own waters.

JD: Well I know that from following you on social media that you feel that solidarity with other groups that underrepresented or oppressed and I'm curious if you feel something like that connection with Black Lives Matter and the demonstrations or protests that are happening across the country still?

HR: Yeah absolutely. So leaving the Pine Ridge Reservation here right I you just the understanding that I was leaving my students these people that I've worked with for the past four years was, you know, giving me some guilt right, like I still have that guilt it's that guilt will never go away. But I was also trying to channel that into action and, you know, ELL in Des Moines was another group of marginalized people right that are voicing for their own, you know, for justice and for equity and kind of instantly felt like I needed to join right because then it was kind of like okay well, you know, I may be abandoning this one group of people, here on the reservation, but, you know, I can still sustain that fight through maybe it's for the same group of people but it's still a group of people that are still fighting for a just cause right. So yeah it was an instant connection there for, it made it a little bit easier for me to kind of reconcile my own guilt of leaving my schools here on the reservation.

JD: Yeah are there any--

HR: There is another cause that gave me that hope that could just continue that fight, you know, on a different platform, or place.

JD: Absolutely. Are there, before we move on to your future, who are the people who are going to miss the most from South Dakota, are there friendships that you've forged there that people you'll keep in touch with? Do you feel like you will still be connected to that community?

HR: Oh yeah I mean this is a, when we started they us TFA right that this is a lifelong mission right, you are building relationships for a long time to come and little did I realize that that was, you know, I didn't think about as much as I think about that now, but incredibly true right because I've been here for four and have built relationships with a lot of folks that are from here but aren't from here and a lot people come in, you know, come here and then teach for a couple of years and then leave and then I have relationships with those folks that have already left and are all over the country. I would say I have relationships with parts that I've been in despite for so long that are still teaching at the school I teach that are still serving the communities here on the reservation and those are relationships I assume that I will be continuing for a long long time and it's definitely a place that has a huge space in my heart right like yeah.

JD: Yeah.

HR: If I were to write a book in future the reservation is going to be a huge part of it right because it's definitely something that’s changed my life in that sense.

JD: Well so you’ve been teaching at little Wound school and also at the Ogalala Lakota Community college or just Ogalala Lakota college.

HR: Ogalala Lakota college yeah.

JD: So being immersed in that community you’ve described the kind of family sensibility that the Lakota people share with your Nepali family. What are some surprising things that you’ve learned about Lakota culture or history while you’ve been there.

HR: Well I mean when I first started right like I didn’t know anything about native people because all I knew was, you know, this was a white land right like people, white people have always been here and back in Seattle I remember that there was a requirement to do, and I might be wrong, I need to do research on this that there was a requirement to do Native American history but I was given a packet I remember where I had to take that packet go home and, you know, fill out whatever it was and that would give me credit because there was no Native American history taught in my school back in Seattle. So I had very little knowledge about native people, about the Lakota people here or about in general the indigenous communities in the US and in the Americas. So all of that was a surprise. Nothing specific right like the whole notion that, you know, that this country pre-Columbus was 99 percent native right, 100 percent native and that realization that now that percentage has gone down to less than one percent, or maybe a little bit over one percent right so that realization was shocking right that this land at one point all Native Americans and in less than 400 years its gone down from that 99 percent to one percent and that is truly mind blowing to me.

JD: And why were you never taught that? I mean this is something I wonder because I teach American literature and teach that pre-Colonial period and the oral tradition but I sometimes wonder why Native American history is so overlooked in schools when it's one of the bedrock chapters in what it means to be an American.

HR: I mean it's, I guess it's kind of like the hunter is always the one that writes the story of the hunting right, the lion always gets to tell story and, you know, it's predominantly white people living in the US writing history books, you know, they want to tell their parts of the story and then they do add, you know, snippets of Martin Luther King and other, you know, figures that are important to the construction of the country here especially the Civil Rights Movement but also the foundation of this country it’s, it's the people that write about it that tell the stories and its the

Native Americans and the black people who have never been given that chance to tell their stories. So I think that's part of the reason why that, why I as never, you know, taught about, right, about native parts of this country's history. I think that's the sole reason right because it's, you know, Native Americans were never able to, they were never given that opportunity to tell their stories so it's not out there, it's not prevalent.

JD: Well, so you'll be starting graduate school this fall at the Kennedy School at Harvard and it will be online which will be a little bit strange because you will be studying at Harvard from your family's home in Iowa is that right?

HR: Yeah. I'll be, I'll be taking classes at Harvard from my parent's Habitat for Humanity house so yeah that'll be, that'll be interesting online. All of Fall semester is going to be online.

JD: And what will you be studying?

HR: Public policy, a masters in public policy.

JD: And why did you choose that program over the other opportunities you've had?

HR: I think part of was the realization that being a classroom teacher, you have the ability to change or affect or impact, you know, a group of people, of young minds that come through your classroom doors, but otherwise, you are very powerless right, there's not much more you can do and there are decisions being made for your classroom, for your school for your community for your people that, by people that, you know, decisions being made by people that have no idea about what it means to be in the classroom or what it means to be in rural parts of the country or what it means to be in, on a native reservation right like so part of my desire to wanna go into public policy is to hopefully influence that that conversation of policies because it's the policies right, we can, we can have conversation all we want, we can make small difference all we want within our, you know, control, circle of power or circle of control, focus of control, we can all we want but unless if policies are made that that, you know, would make it easier for these changes to happen, then, you know, our, our control is limited. So I wanted to get into policy because of that, because I feel like if I, if I have, you know, a better understanding about how policies are made, enacted, who gets to to enact policies, then I would be able to make a little bit broaden, impact.
JD: Yeah.

HR: More than just in the classroom.

JD: Well it sounds like you're carrying some of that burden of obligation that you, that you feel from your family, from your father in particular, but you're carrying that also for other people that you don't even know who are affected by policy is it fair to say that your life's work is a way of working through that, that burden of obligation that you've felt your whole life?

HR: I think so I for the past, I think about 3 years ago or so is when I kinda decided because until, up to that point I'd been wrestling with what I truly wanted to do with my life and I think about 3 years ago or so is when I truly kinda determined that all I really wanted to do was involve in making a difference in the public sector right? Making a difference through social good and I think, I think I mean, you know, who knows going to happen in 10 years from now and with my life and what I, what I end up doing with it, but I think it's fair that I've already determined that, you know, I would, I would want to stay in, I would want to continue doing things of social value, social good right? I wouldn't want to do anything that's, that doesn't carry social, social good, and I don't know what exactly that might look like, like I don't know what sector it would be exactly, but regardless of what it is, be it education, be it organizing, be it I don't know right? Perhaps international, internationally or locally or nationally or I don't know. But I do that it's, that like you said that obligation because, Toni Morrison I think is the one that said, you know, if you have, if you made it in life, you have a moral obligation to help those haven't quite made it and I think that's something that I do think about or, you know, I, I'm going to be fine, you know. But what have I done for others? And that's something that I, that I think about and I think that's, you know, I don't ever envision myself in the future, you know, working for a bank or insurance company, although I could bring my mathematical skills or things like that to that but I just, I don't know its just kinda feels like, you know, that would only be helping rich people get richer right like what's--

JD: Yeah.

HR: What's the value in it, I want to go home and be like yeah, you know, I helped someone apply for this public benefit today or, you know, I saw or maybe I wrote something a policy that helped, you know, marginalized communities, I don't know right like, I would never want, yeah I don't think I would ever go into private for-profit in that sense which is not to say that's not, you know, I'm not saying people shouldn't, I'm not, you know, we all have our callings and for me its in the public sector.

JD: Yeah well I'm just thinking of your story, you know, grabbing your books running into the jungle, all the time when, when you could have died and it seems like what you've taken from that is that your life needs to have meaning that's not just for yourself.

HR: Yeah I think that's fair because yeah that's my value system, my people's value system where we're more than our own individualistic thoughts and desires and that's what my parents, you know, that's how my parents think, that's how my people think, that's I've always thought about so when my dad celebrated my graduation, right like it was a, a collective success right for him of of not just his son's success but his success and his people's success, so yeah no definitely its, it's definitely a collective thing for us.

JD: Well maybe a final question so when the pandemic eases and you go to Cambriidge to study at Harvard in person and beyond, how do you think you'll be able to maintain connections with communities and other places like, like Nepal or Bhutan?

HR: Ah see, unfortunately for me I haven't been in, and my own ignorance my own fault, I haven't been in touch with folks back in, in Nepal because I mean part of the reason is that all of my people, the refugees that I grew up with, you know, almost all of them are, are, you know, resettled in Western countries now, and so that's why I don't really have that connection and in Bhutan I don't have any connections because, you know, my people don't live there I can't even go back, I'm not allowed to, so hopefully I can continue maybe I can I can I can be in touch with them by reading about them, writing about them, or I don't know maybe visiting those countries one day if I can go back to Bhutan, I can't right now but, I'm not allowed to I believe.

JD: Yeah. Are you, do you still like, do you still feel like you're searching for a home then?

HR: Yeah. No I think that's very fair to say because I I mean I kinda like in Pine Ridge but I'm leaving and Iowa hasn't quite felt like home yet because I know I'm there temporarily and I know I'm going to be at protests and writing about them, advocating about them, but its, you know, I'm there temporarily because after the fall, in the spring of 2021 I might be moving to the East coast and that's going to be a new community so it's been a series moving form one community to another for me so it definitely like I've found a home yet, but hopefully that happens soon but I think home is, you know, something that is constantly in the making I guess for me at least and even if I haven't figured out perfectly where that is I know wherever I get to do something of value, that's where I, my home, home is, you know, when I'm doing it and long after I finish doing that thing of value, whatever that might be.

JD: Yeah. Well that's really a, a nice thought to end on.

HR: Yeah.

JD: So thanks for your time so much and I guess we'll be in touch about the inform consent form and some of those details and I guess, you know, that we'll be launching the podcast in the fall so we'll be in touch when we need to have some links and things put on our website but thanks so much for sharing your story.

HR: Yeah no thank you, thank you for having me.

JD: And we'll be in touch and have a great time in Yellowstone!

HR: Yeah thanks Josh! Yeah thank you, thanks

JD: Alright, take care.

HR: Bye now.

JD: Bye