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**Liana** [00:00:01] OK, perfect. So good morning, my name is Liana Wallace. Today's date is to 02/14/2022. I'm interviewing Stephen Baldi and I'm interviewing him via Zoom as part of the We Are Georgetown Celebrating Our Black History Oral History Project, sponsored by Georgetown University's African-American Advisory Board. So like I said, my name is Liana. I'm a junior here at Georgetown. Thank you again for your willingness to participate in the project and to be interviewed. Again, this is a part of the We Are Georgetown Project, sponsored by Georgetown University African-American Advisory Board, as a part of an initiative launched in 2021 to memorialize through storytelling, the depth of the black experience past and present at Georgetown. So in this interview, I was planning on discussing your experience at Georgetown and what it was like when you went to school and how it informed what you're doing now and its overall impact on your life as a Black person, so please feel free to jump in or stop me if you want to pivot the conversation or provide any perspective you haven't touched on. But other than that, are you cool to dive in?

**Stephen** [00:01:07] Yeah, cool to dive in.

**Liana** [00:01:09] Okay, awesome. So I'd love to learn a little bit more about you starting with your name, your Georgetown class and undergraduate program.

**Stephen** [00:01:17] So, Stephen Baldi, Georgetown McDonough School of Business Class of 1999. I actually came in as part of the Class of 1998, but I also ran track and field in Georgetown, and so I stayed an extra year one because I had athletic eligibility left, but two who wants to run out into the real world when you could take another year and be on such a beautiful campus. So I took advantage of that and graduated in 1999.

**Liana** [00:01:47] Awesome. I must be too; so cool to hear that. So where are you originally from?

**Stephen** [00:01:54] So I'm originally from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I came to Georgetown in 1994, but I knew back in the late 80s that Georgetown was a place that I wanted to go to college, mostly because I would often watch the Georgetown basketball team and head coach John Thompson on television. And they were wildly popular in Philadelphia at that time, as they were in most cities around United States. And so I remember my first time coming on campus, and I was shocked because back then there was no internet, there was no social media. So most of what you would see from a visual perspective was when Georgetown was on television playing basketball. So I thought Georgetown was a predominantly Black college. So when I got to campus and saw that that was not the case, it did not diminish my desire to want to come to the university. But it was definitely a big shift in my perspective of what the university was and would be for me.

**Liana** [00:02:58] That is so funny you say that. My dad actually, when I was going to Georgetown, would say when I was growing up, Lianna, like we thought it was an HBCU. That's really funny that you mentioned that.

**Stephen** [00:03:11] Where did you grow up?

**Liana** [00:03:12] In a suburb of Chicago called Evanston. Yeah, but my dad kind of moved around a bit, but it's spot on what he said. And you kind of answered my second question. You know why you chose to go to Georgetown for undergrad or if you want to add?

**Stephen** [00:03:27] Yeah, no, I'll just say I really didn't have much of a plan growing up in Philadelphia, except that I knew I wanted to go to college and I knew I wanted to get out of Philadelphia. And John Thompson was such a iconic figure at the time that really, you know, for a young Black male, he was someone that I look to. Similarly, John Chaney, who was the basketball coach at on a temple at the time, was also a huge figure. And I grew up playing basketball. I grew up mostly going to public schools in Philadelphia, up through the seventh grade. But then in the eighth grade, my mom made the decision to move me out to the suburbs. From my school perspective, I still lived in West Philadelphia, but she moved me out to a private school out on a main line of Philadelphia, Friends Central, which is a Quaker high school, predominantly white. But I grew up playing basketball. And so I went to Friends Central as a recruited athlete, and I wanted to come to Georgetown and play basketball. But you can't see right now when I'm about five foot 10 and I've been five foot 10 since the eighth grade. And so in eighth grade I, you know, it looked like I was going to be a giant. But as I stopped growing my aspiration for playing basketball at the Division One level kind of diminished. But my passion and desire to want to go to Georgetown never changed, and so I pivoted athletically from basketball to track and field. And I had the blessing of having a classmate who was two years above me. Her name is Frances Lord. She was a number one cross-country distance runner in the country in 1992 and she went to Georgetown. And she told the coaches about me and they came to visit me and my mom in my home. I remember when they came for my recruiting trip. Georgetown was playing Arkansas in the NCAA tournament, and we didn't really talk much about me or how I grew up. You know, we watched the game. My mom made a lasagna and it was Ray Humphrey who was my jump coach and Frank Gagliano, who was the head coach at the time. And we just sat there and talked about how much we appreciated the university. And a couple of months later, I had the pleasure of getting an acceptance letter to the Hilltop. And I guess the rest is history.

**Liana** [00:05:43] Very cool. That is like it's just so excited to kind of hear about, and just, I think everyone's experiences in terms of getting into Georgetown. How you got here is just always really inspiring and cool to hear about. So moving into the kind of like academic life, how would you describe the culture of the undergraduate MSB program when you went to school? And how did its culture differ from that of your previous, like academic environments, if at all?

**Stephen** [00:06:09] Yeah. So I'll be honest, I was not prepared academically for Georgetown. Like I said, when I was in Philadelphia, a lot of my time and attention was spent kind of mastering my craft at either basketball or track and field when I transitioned to the sport. And so I applied to the business school only because the nursing school, which was at the time one of the five schools, the School of Foreign Service, the School of Language and Linguistics, and the College of Arts and Sciences all sounded kind of boring, and so the business sounded like something that I could make money doing. And so I applied to the business school. I remember the very first class I went to was the 8:50 a.m. Accounting 101 class, and it was on Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays. And I showed up the class right at 8:50. And Professor Yon was the professor at the time, and she made me and two other people stand up in class who also got there right at 8:50. And she said, If you arrive at my class at eight 8:50, you're 15 minutes late. And that was like a wake up call to me that you better get your act together or it's going to be a difficult semester. And it was a difficult semester. My first semester at Georgetown. I got a 1.55 and, you know, I just wasn't prepared for the classes. I wasn't prepared for the academic vigor or balancing track and field and balancing social life. And so I struggled. And so what I admire most, looking back on Georgetown, is that I got through because very easily I

could have packed up my bags. My mom could have brought me home. My teachers and my coaches could have given up on me, but they saw something that at that moment I didn't have the capacity to see. And so I pushed through and graduated. I majored in marketing initially, but then when I took on a fifth year, I added a small business development double major and I almost minored in psychology. One of my one of my favorite classes was with Dr. Sibert, and I took intro to psychology, but then I took physiological psychology. Why? I do not know he was such a he was such a good professor that I just wanted to be in his class and in his presence, and it really left a mark on me. And so as far as the environment going from high school to college, my high school environment was very vigorous, but I was not prepared for Georgetown. But over the next five years that I spent on campus, there were a lot of people in the administration and the athletic department. At the time, it was called the Center for Minority Student Affairs. I'm not sure what it's called now, but they really leaned into me to make sure that I navigated and got through to graduation. And I'm so thankful because, you know, Georgetown shows up in so many ways in my life right now that I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to spend that time there at 37th and O Streets.

**Liana** [00:09:10] That's awesome. And like you, again, kind of already hitting on questions that I have, but like you said, like that class that you took, was that one of your favorite classes, that psych class? Was there any professors that really stood out and like had a really big impact on you? I kind of feel that you toched on it.

**Stephen** [00:09:25] Yeah, but accounting accounting was hard. Yeah, it let me know immediately that I, in a lot of ways was behind some of my classmates, you know, debits and credits and liabilities and assets were all things that I wasn't familiar interacting with, but it was clear that some of my classmates had been. And so for me, it was very intimidating. I would say probably my most remembered class where the psychology classes. But as far as the business school, Macroeconomics was great, and then I started getting into the management classes, which, you know, inspired me to take the double major but also non-business classes, Social Responsibility of Business, which was actually in the business school, our Entrepreneurship class. But back then, and it may still be the case now. Our freshman year, we were required to take a class called The Problem of God. I'm not sure if that still require class.

**Liana** [00:10:21] It is, yeah.

**Stephen** [00:10:23] But it had such an impact on me because going to a Jesuit university, I assumed that what they would want students to kind of walk away from is this deep commitment to Catholicism, and that's not at all what the class was about. Another one of my favorite classes was Struggle and Transcendence. It was taught by a gentleman, Father Raymond Kemp, who still, to this day is a very close personal friend of mine. And it was about basically, you know, struggling through life but finding a way to transcend it. And that was kind of my Georgetown story. Like I said, I started off struggling pretty difficultly. But by the end, I felt like in a lot of ways, I transcended and still try to, at this point, kind of push through what life throws at you to get the blessing out of it and see what's on the other side.

**Liana** [00:11:10] Yeah, no. I mean, with the accounting class, I can really relate to that. I went through. I think we all go through it. And when you go in, you're like, wll, what is a debit, a credit, what are all these accounts?

**Stephen** [00:11:21] People in my class were, you know, I could tell that they were familiar with it from conversations with their families or the different schools that they went to. So, yeah, but my children, now I try to have those conversations and I have three kids, the 24-year old daughter, a 23-year old son and a five-year old daughter. And so there's a bit of a gap. But I am very intentional about talking about, you know, what I do in my business. I let them come to the airports and see my stores. They've all worked in my business, except for the five-year old, she's too young. But the 24- and a 23-year old have worked in my businesses. Just so when they showed up to a university, they weren't as far behind as I was. But it was great. You know, my story is my story, and I'm glad to have gone through those struggles, but I definitely when I first started taking those classes. Although Georgetown did a great job of trying to make sure that there was equity and inclusion, I didn't always feel like I belonged. But it took, you know, like I said, a lot of people leaning into me to get me to a point where I knew Georgetown was home for me.

**Liana** [00:12:24] Yeah. And I think like, you know, a lot of a lot of students of color, honestly, because of the generational wealth gap and all these things that all of us come to; so when you come to the table, it's different. That's not conversations that we might have in our household and stuff. So it's definitely different. And and that's OK. And it's all about kind of like, you know, kind of going through it. I know it was really cool for me, at least to have other students of color around me in this space that I could talk to and kind of go through and learn together. So thank you so much for talking a bit about that.

**Stephen** [00:12:56] For sure.

**Liana** [00:12:56] In terms of campus life, you mentioned, you know, track and field being a big part of your experience at Georgetown. Was there anything outside of like track and field like clubs or other on-campus organizations that you participated in? How involved are you? Do you have any special memories kind of associated with them?

**Stephen** [00:13:12] Yeah. So I was deeply involved for the first couple years on campus. I sang in a gospel choir and I remember, you know, touring around the city. We even took a trip up to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and sang there so that I was deeply involved in a gospel choir up until probably my junior year. I also participated in the Black Theater Ensemble. I did poetry. I was in a couple of plays and theater was really important to me. At one point after I graduated, I thought that maybe I would try to pursue a career in theater, but then I realized that a starving artist is really that, starving, and I like food. And so I wasn't built for the hustle to try to make my way through theater. But yeah, the Black Theater Ensemble, the gospel choir. In my junior year, I became a resident assistant. You know, I worked as part of my work study. I worked the security in the dormitories. I don't even know if they have people now.

**Stephen** [00:14:16] Yeah, they do.

**Stephen** [00:14:16] They will find they check your I.D. So I did that for Harbin Hall and for Village C East and West and a gentleman, Mark Seidel came up to me one day and he said, "You know, you've got a great personality. I always see you talking to the students. Have you ever thought about being an RA?" And I had not because, you know, I didn't want to be responsible for myself, let alone other freshmen. But I was blessed enough that Mark pushed me to become a resident assistant. So I was a resident assistant in Copley for two years. And then when I graduated Georgetown, I actually was the resident director of Harbin for two years. And so that was a great experience meeting students, being able to stand by them and support them as they were trying to navigate campus. And so yeah,

outside of track and field, I really didn't lean into some of the other things that were available to me as a student. Not so much the classes, but all the other stuff. I definitely didn't lean into and it was a great experience.

**Liana** [00:15:11] That's awesome. I mean, it's like so hard, like you were involved in so many things, like I, you know, they were like, look up to the athletes, you know, they have a lot going on and to manage all of that on top of it being incredibly rigorous to, and to be in the choir and stuff, that's awesome.

**Stephen** [00:15:26] For sure.

**Liana** [00:15:27] This question is a bit deeper, but I'd actually want to ask if you're comfortable?

**Stephen** [00:15:31] One hundred percent.

**Liana** [00:15:32] Yeah. Like so at Georgetown, I think for a lot of Black folks on college campuses, there tends to be this stereotype that if Black folks are at a prestigious university like Georgetown, the reason they're here is for their athletic abilities alone and less for their academic ability. So we kind of talked about this, but like, did you ever face those type of stereotypes during your time at Georgetown? What was it like being both Black and athlete and in the business school when you were an undergrad?

**Stephen** [00:15:57] Yeah. So I would say I didn't really experience anything outwardly, but you know, I made it very clear because I was proud to be at Georgetown. I was proud to be a member of the track and field team. And so it was clear to people who knew me that I was a student athlete. And at times did it feel like, of course, people, you know, second guess why I was there and that I deserved to be there? More specifically, when I was coming out of high school, I remember there were three people in my high school that applied to Georgetown, and I was the only one that got in. And I remember a young woman coming up to me and congratulating me, but then quickly asked me if I was running track. And I said yes. And she responded, of course. And so, you know, there were moments like that that I wasn't necessarily, I didn't feel the struggle at the time because from my perspective, you know, people get into universities, places of employment for different reasons, right? And a thing that I had access to that I could lean into was athletics. But what was important to me is now that I was in the room like, what would I do with it? And I didn't take full advantage of it when I was an undergraduate student. But I can tell you later in life, I have leaned on my Georgetown network and my experience very deeply. I've been a business owner now for 14 years. I own food and beverage franchises that operate exclusively in airports, and I've done so since 2008. One of my classmates who sat next to me freshman year and that in accounting class runs a private equity company and they were the first bank to loan us money to start the company. You know, Georgetown has showed up in more ways in my life than just that. And so it wasn't necessarily difficult for me because, you know, my group of friends, if I was on a basketball team, I think it might have been more difficult. But when you look at a track and field team, right in track and field is cross-country. So my diversity of friends was really vast. Like, you know, I had a predominantly Black training group because I was a sprinter and a jumper. But, you know, I was also friends with the guys who would run cross-country and they weren't people of color. And so I was never restricted socially for how I navigated campus. Nobody really came up to me and made me feel like I didn't belong. But there were moments in classes where I knew I didn't have access or I wasn't as familiar with things and other people were. And I didn't seek out academic resources,

partly because I was embarrassed to, because I probably did think, you know, here I am this athlete showing up for academic support and people are going to assume, well, of course, you can't do this work. But if I really had raised my hand, I'm sure they would have been people who would have supported me. I'm close and connected to the university now. And so one of the things that I would like to push the university, make sure that they are committed to is not only diversity, equity inclusion, but creating a campus environment where people feel like they belong. Everybody feels like they belong, no matter if they're coming from the middle of the country or they're coming from an urban area that are on the coast. You know, whether or not they come from a deep religious history that's not Catholicism or if they're someone who doesn't believe in Christ at all. And so, you know, I think it's really important that universities create environments for all of their students to feel like they belong, because that's when everybody truly gets in real opportunity to learn because the learning that you do is not only present in the classroom, it's most importantly what you do outside of the classroom. At least that's where I learn most about life and other people. And I think Georgetown's committed to that, and they've done a lot of good work. I still think, like some of it, is incomplete. But again, I'm really active in connecting to the business school specifically right now through our foundation. And I'm hopeful that, you know, I'll be able to work with the university for a few decades to make sure that the campus is not only a great place to learn and to become a more polished academic, but you come out as a whole person, you know, *cura personalis*, what you know, being a Georgetown University students means care of the full person. And I know that's a strong commitment of the university and I'd like to see that carried out more in practice. But I know they're committed to it. I've had some great conversations over the last couple of months through my foundation, and they've supported us and I'm hopeful that it shows up with the students in the near future.

**Liana** [00:20:22] Awesome. Thank you so much for kind of like diving into that and speaking to that. I think it's just an important conversation to be had and for future generations to hear too. In addition to kind of like campus life, like in D.C., were there any events in the wider world that, like you and your fellow classmates were really aware of at the time you went to school or like what was going on in the city during the time you went to school?

**Stephen** [00:20:44] Yes. So I'm sure that you remember this because it was such a big moment in United States. But the O.J. Simpson trial happened my sophomore year, and I remember being on campus when they were reading the verdict. At the time, I was living in Henley and everybody was outside. Like, everybody was like waiting for the verdict. People of color are not people of color. And when the verdict was announced, the students of color celebrated because for us, it was really a moment for all of us. It wasn't. It didn't feel like it was just about O.J.; it felt like finally a system that historically felt as though it did not work for us had finally sided on our side. And so I remember people were running around campus and yelling and screaming and clapping. But what I did not remember, nor was I paying attention to, was how the other side responded, How were they feeling? And as I've gotten older, I realized that what's important to me is important to me. But if I really want to be an active participating member of my community in my society, I should also try to be aware of the things that aren't important to me, because that's what I'm asking of society to do for me, right? So as a person of color, I often ask people to understand what they haven't had access to experientially. And so if I'm asking others to do that, I feel a responsibility of myself to try to understand perspectives and experiences that I haven't gone through. But in that moment during the O.J. trial, I was just happy that he got off. I felt like all of Black people had gotten off. A few before that, Rodney King had happened, and it was a very different circumstance where it didn't land in his favor. And so, yeah, that that

was a big moment on campus. The Million Man March, I think, happened not while I was a student. I think it happened while I was the resident director in Harbin, and so a big group of us left the university, walked over to the National Mall and participated in that day together. So yeah, the O.J. trial, the Million Man March were all pretty significant things that happened when I was a student there, and I remember those moments very fondly.

**Liana** [00:22:58] Awesome, thank you so much for providing that history there. Now moving into kind of like post-Georgetown, what have you done since leaving the university?

**Stephen** [00:23:08] So for the first two years that I left the university, I really didn't do much at all. I was still pursuing my athletic career. I spent a year training for the 2000 Olympic Trials, which were held in the United States, but then the Games were eventually held in Sydney. And so for that first year after college, I was the resident director in Harbin Hall, but I also had the blessing of being sponsored by Reebok. And I train still at the university, although I had graduated. And so for that first year, I participated as a member of the Reebok enclave. But then I didn't make the team. And so in the middle of 2000, I was really left with no clear professional plan or personal plan for my life. And so I kind of unraveled. I started working in nightclubs in Washington, D.C.. I started deejaying and for two years, I call it kind of my walk in the wilderness where I was making a lot of questionable social decisions. I started experimenting with drugs. When I was in college, I didn't drink party much at all because I was an athlete. But when the end of the 2000 training season resulted in me not making the Olympic team, I knew all that was behind me. And so I wanted to catch up for all the experiences that I did not have. So I spent a lot of time just, you know, socializing, partying, having fun. And it wasn't until 2002 where I actually found out that I had a three-year old son. And that changed my life. That's my child that's 23-years old now. His name is Langston. And really, finding out that I was a father had a dramatic impact on my life. And it basically said, Stephen, you need to get your life together because this is no longer just about you. So I stopped deejaying and working in nightclubs. I got a job working in Springfield, Virginia, leasing apartments for \$11 an hour. And I remember in that first year because the W-2 is still sitting on my desk to remind me of how far I've come. I mean, \$19,000. Sorry? Not yet. \$19,110.45. And that wasn't a lot of money in 2002. But it was a start. And so I grinded and I hustled, and eventually I was hired by a company called Westfield, which coincidentally was based in Australia, which was the Olympic team I did not make. But Westfield is a shopping mall developer, and at the time they were managing the concession program at National Airport and they hired me as their general manager. And so for three years, I was learning the business of how to lease stores and develop stores and construct stores. And after three years of working for Westfield, I decided that I was going to leave and start my own company. And so that's what I did. In 2008, I started Baldi Management Group, which is a food and beverage company that operates national franchises exclusively in airports. And we've been doing that since 2008. And so currently we own Dunkin Donuts, Jamba Juice, Smashburger, and Potbelly. If you're familiar with Founding Farmers, we're going to be opening the first Founding Farmers in an airport next year. And so I've been blessed to have started off at Georgetown pretty rocky, spending two years after graduation kind of just partying and not really being focused, to having a life transformational moment happen, which was becoming a father, and five years later, starting a company. And this year we're marked the 14th year that we've had the business, and I'm so blessed to have had this journey and I wouldn't take back anything that's happened along the way.

**Liana** [00:26:56] That's awesome. Diving in a bit to like the Baldi Management Group. When you were a student at Georgetown, did you ever see yourself like leading like an air

venture, kind of like that. And like what mentors or people in your life allowed you to feel empowered enough to kind of start your own?

**Stephen** [00:27:11] So I will tell you, yes, so I think it was my junior year. It might have been my senior year. I took entrepreneurship class in MSB and that class was really impactful. The class project was, you know, you take an idea from seed to launch and you kind of walk through with that process was like. And so my idea wasn't accepted. So the class started where you got into groups and there was five people in my group and then each of us pitched an idea. And my idea was to create this thing called Buncha, which was at the time I loved Nestle crunch bars. So I said, you know, Nestle Crunch is one of the only thing that you can't get at the movie theater and kind of movie theater size. So my idea was to have Nestlé Buncha, which was basically like crumbles of the Nestlé Crunch bar. But my team was like, "Yeah, that's too wild of an idea; we're not going to do that." And so we ended up doing a project where we formed a used car sale business, but it was almost like pre-CarMax, CarMax. And so that was a great experience to go through. I will tell you three years later, when Nestle came out with Nestlé Niblets, which is exactly the idea I have for class. I took a box back to the business school and I found an entrepreneurship class, and I said I think I was onto something with that, but that experience really put in my mind that entrepreneurship could be something that could benefit my life. And the one thing specifically I remember from the class is the professor said, "If you're going to start a business, you're going to spend just as much time working on the \$500,000 idea as you do for the five million dollar idea. So build the five million dollar idea." And so that's what we've tried to do at Baldi Management Group. You know, pre-COVID in 2019, we built a business that was \$15 million in annual revenue, which I'm really proud of, and we're on the track now to grow it to be even bigger now that we're coming in full recovery out of COVID. And so, yeah, the business school was something that initially I thought I was going to be an accounting major. But after that first accounting class, I was like, I think I better pivot to something else. So yeah, and the MSB was really impactful for my life. And like I said, it showed up in many ways, even now.

**Liana** [00:29:35] That's awesome. And I think you you also served on the board for Graybridge, a nonprofit that Georgetown partners. So can you tell me a bit more about Graybridge and its goal towards the path to racial equity?

**Stephen** [00:29:51] So Graybridge was formed in May of 2020. I have the pleasure of being in a professional organization called YPO, which stands for Young Presidents Organization, and basically it's for presidents of organizations and or C-suite level executives under the age of 50. And I've been a member of the Baltimore Washington chapter since the beginning of 2020. But in May of 2020, as you know, George Floyd was murdered and I can say he was murdered because at this point, the court has decided that that's actually what occurred. But at the moment that the incident took place, it was unclear as to how that moment was going to be resolved. And a member of my YPO chapter, his name is Michael O'Neill, an Irish gentleman who grew up in New York City, called me and he said, Listen, Steven, I'm not a person of color, but my girls play basketball and we've been around families of color for a long time. And I'm just going, be honest with you, like my soul is hurting right now based on seeing the videos on TV, hearing what took place on the news, and we were both in a lot of pain. I was I was really mad and angry, and we sat on the phone for about 30 minutes and we probably only talked for about five. So there was a lot of silence because we didn't know what to do. But as we got through the emotions of that moment, we decided that we had to do something. And so initially what we thought was we have a deep network. Let's try to raise some money and then deposit that money in organization that was already doing the type of work that we felt like in this

moment was necessary and that was criminal justice. But as we started to talk about our ideas, our children were the ones who inspired us that this wasn't a time to just be passive in our support, but actually we had the ability to be the leaders that we were looking for. And so we decided to found a foundation. The name of the foundation is Graybridge. The reason why it's called Graybridge is two parts - one, if you are in the photography or cinematography gray is kind of the middle point behind all of the colors. It is one of the colors that represents all colors being seen and our most perfect form. And so that is the beginning of the foundation gray and then bridge is often known as something that connects two points that otherwise wouldn't have to be the ability to be connected. And so at Graybridge, you know, our goal is really to create a path towards racial unity, and we do that through trying to take people through discovery, which is kind of just a basic education of what the core issues are. So things like, you know, what is bias, what is privilege? What does it mean to actually be an ally? And so after we walk people through the discovery, we then try to have them connect with other people from different communities that otherwise they would not have the opportunity to connect to because I know my life was really blessed. And in fact, though, my mom made the decision to send me to a predominately white private school in the eighth grade. Before that, I had not had any meaningful interactions with anybody other than people of color, because that's just where I grew up in the city. But during my time at that school and during my time at Georgetown, I was learning, not specifically like seeking out learning, but as I was experiencing people from other cultures, from other communities. I was learning that not necessarily all the things that I grew up assuming were necessarily true about people that I not had a lot of interactions with. And so our hope is that at Graybridge, if we can connect people from diverse communities and doing simple things like going to a place of worship together or doing a recipe swap where I make something that's important to my family and I share it with you and you make something that's important to your family and you share it with me and we talk about why that is. We fully believe if you put people in the same room and just have them interacting and connecting with each other, that that is the most sticky way to get people to learn. And then from there, after you've discovered and you've connected, then we want to inspire people to have impact and impact and show and a lot of different ways. You can shop at a small local business that's owned by a person of color, or you can do things like a community cleanup day with the people that you've met through our platform. So it's about two years old. I feel really blessed that Georgetown University has taken this on as an official research partner through their education and innovation hub called Red Door. But there's also right now an undergraduate class in the MSB called Creativity and Innovation, who was taking Graybridge on as a class pilot. And so they're taking the journey right now. It's a 30 day journey, and they're going to give us feedback about whether or not the content was motivating and inspired them. So we're hopeful that Georgetown's pilot now will grow into something much deeper in the fall. Of the 10 founding families of Graybridge, there are four families that have roots to Georgetown University, and so we feel really honored that Georgetown has agreed to partner with us doing this work; and we'll see, you know, what happens. But we're not tied to any outcomes. I learned a long time ago that sometimes you should just be committed to the work and not necessarily have a specific outcome in mind because as you're doing the work, there are things that might be happening that you're not even aware of, lives that you might be touching, and light bulbs in somebody's head that you might be setting off and they might go off to do something even more extraordinary than what you have planned. So right now, we're just committed to the work. Hopefully, we can create some outcomes where people feel inspired and connected. But we've got a lot more work ahead of us than we do behind us, but we're inspired to keep moving forward.

**Liana** [00:35:43] That's awesome, and it's really cool to hear about that the class is being piloted. I think I heard that Professor Bies is actually taking it, and I took my freshman Heroes and Villains class with him.

**Stephen** [00:35:53] Oh, you did.

**Liana** [00:35:54] Yeah, so that's pretty cool. And so I'm also wondering, like when you were a student at Georgetown, did you wish they had more classes like the one being piloted and like, was race and kind of unity ever a conversation that frequently came up in classes? And do you wish it had been?

**Stephen** [00:36:09] Yeah, it never. It never came up in classes. And I will tell you, I spoke at Professor Bies' Heroes and Villains class last Spring. Oh, and it was so amazing. One, the fact that, you know, I can start off at Georgetown with a 1.55 and then twenty-four years later, be asked to come back and speak to students just in itself was a blessing to be able to do that. But no, I can say that I don't recall really having a lot of conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion when I was in school. You know, some of the conversations I might have would be during my time as a resident assistant because definitely in residence life, it was a priority of that department to make sure that all students, specifically their freshmen and sophomores, that RAs often have the responsibility to kind of guide through their experience. I know for residence life it was important that all members of our floors felt included and felt like we were a safe place to come and talk to. But specific conversations about diversity or what it meant for me as a student of color to be at Georgetown wasn't something that we really discussed. I will say that there was a program and I still think it's around called Community Scholars, which happens in the summertime when I was coming into Georgetown. It was three weeks in July where it was mostly first generation students and students of color that they brought to campus before the Fall. Just so we could get a head start on what it was like to be on a university's campus. And so we spent three weeks at Nevils, we took some introductory classes, some reading classes and some math classes. We learned where places like the Levy Center was, where Wisemiller's was, where I had my first Burger Madness before anybody ever came on campus. So I think at that time, that was Georgetown's attempt to try to make sure that the campus was inclusive. But there were no specific conversations about the fact that Community Scholars was all people of color. We could plainly see that, but it was never discussed as to why that was the case. But I do know now there's a commitment at the university to not only create a campus life where you know DEI is important, but they're also focusing on how do we make sure all of our students have a sense that they belong here? Because that's really what's important is that all the students feel like it's a university for them. And not that I had very many moments where I didn't feel that way, but there were times where I felt like, you know, this is above my competency. There are students here who are much more prepared than I am, but I'm glad to see that the university is committed to doing that work now.

**Liana** [00:38:55] Absolutely. I just have two last questions, but I do not want to take up too much of your time. What advice do you have for Black students at Georgetown?

**Stephen** [00:39:05] Wow. So. If I were to share anything with students of color that are at the university now, I would say lean into the things that are uncomfortable. When I was a student, I often wouldn't raise my hand and ask questions. It was rare that I would go to a table and have lunch or go to an event that my friends and or my teammates were not going to. And I feel like that was a lost opportunity for me because if you're only interacting with people that you're comfortable with, there's probably a significant amount of people

who you're not having any meaningful connection to. And so I would say the magic of Georgetown is not necessarily all the things that you learn in class, but the relationship that you form that will show up in your lives decades later. Like I said, you know, someone who just was in my freshman accounting class who I was not a friend, I was not friends with him during our time at the university. But when he heard that I started my business and I had my first meeting with him, it came up that I was a Georgetown University alum and we made that connection and that more than anything. Listen, I had to have a viable business. I had to have a business plan that made sense. But the fact that I was a Hoya made a difference in their determination to loan my company the funds we needed to start our company versus not. And so I would say to students of color, make sure that you are pushing yourselves through uncomfortable situations because on the other side of being uncomfortable is a breakthrough. It may be a breakthrough academically and may be a breakthrough socially, but whatever it is on the other side of that uncomfortableness is not failure. It's a breakthrough to open up your eyes and your experience, something that you probably don't have the capacity to otherwise realize.

**Liana** [00:40:59] Awesome. Thank you so much. And then last question here is what did it mean for you to be Black at Georgetown?

**Stephen** [00:41:07] What did it mean? It meant I got to go to a lot of dope parties. It also meant that within my circle group, I feel like I was fully supported. Georgetown was not easy for me. I went through a lot of struggles and it would take another four hours to talk through all of them. But there were some really low moments in my journey through the university. And at my lowest point, the people of our culture, the students of color, really formed a net around me and made sure that I got through, made sure that the things that I stumbled over, I had the strength to stand back up to get through. And so even now, you know, I feel really fortunate to have a lot of the friendships in my life. Still, you know, people like Antoinette Campbell, who was a dear friend, Jon Evan Hornsby, Frances Davis. So many people continue to be part of my life. Miguel Lambert, Ayana Wright, I could go on for another 30 minutes, naming the people of color who really stood by me through my struggles at the university. And so to be Black at Georgetown meant that I was someone special. It meant that I'm someone who deserves to be there. And as a graduate, it means that I have forever a commitment to show up for the students of color by doing stuff like this interview, by coming back on campus and speaking to students and offering, you know, all the things I have access to professionally, to people who want to raise their hand and have the courage to say that they need support. And so, you know, my time at Georgetown and like I said, it was a five-year journey, not four, was so special and to have gone through it at the time where so many significant things were happening in my life. I just feel really honored and blessed, and I will be a Hoya for life.

**Liana** [00:43:10] Well, thank you so, so much for dedicating your time this morning to this interview. We really, really appreciate it and excited to add this to the collective archives of even more interviews as part of the We are Black Georgetown Project. So thank you so, so much. I'm going to stop there now. OK.