

Transcript – Becky Scheusner, class of 2018
and Office of Military Affiliated Students Program Coordinator

Narrator: Becky Scheusner

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

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Amanda Knox: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. Today is Thursday, April 17, 2025. It is 10:18 am, and I am sitting in person with today's interviewee, who I invite to introduce yourself.

Becky Scheusner: Hello! I am Becky Scheusner. Should I show my face?

AK: No, you don't have to.

BS: Okay. I'm a class of 2018 undergrad and I studied urban studies.

AK: Oh, fantastic! Very cool! So, if you could start, maybe in like the early days, if you're comfortable sharing a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up. Maybe even the kind of education that you had, because I know that's different for a lot of people who land here at Brown. Just kind of some of that like foundational background info that you'd like to share.

BS: Oh, wow! What a fun way to start! Okay. So, I [1:00] grew up in Kansas, in the eighties and nineties. I graduated in 2001 from high school. And the early years I, I went to three different elementary schools on Fort Leavenworth. So, one, one base had three different elementary schools, and I went to all of them. And that was pretty interesting because they're they're Department of Defense schools. So, all of the kids who went there were all military kids. And that base in particular is really interesting, because it's kind of like in Newport, where the Naval War College is. The Army War College is at Fort Leavenworth, so there was a very high turnover. Like, every year there were a whole bunch of new kids that would come in. So, I had

new friends every year. And my, my mom also ran a daycare at home. So, my mom was a small business owner at a time when you know, like people didn't really think of women, [2:00] small business owners as like, "I run a daycare." My dad was in the Air Force, which is why we lived on, lived on base and when he retired, I was in, I finished third grade, so I moved, we moved to a town right next door to, to finish out elementary, and then middle and high school at Lansing, in Lansing, Kansas. And yeah, I finished high school in 2001, in May, and that was right when I went to boot camp.

AK: Oh, okay, so – and I think I remember you telling me this. You, you left pre- 9/11. Can you talk a little bit about what your, like had you always been thinking about – you were in the Navy? Were you always thinking about Navy? Were you always thinking about enlisting in the [3:00] military? Like, what was kind of the drive for that?

BS: So, I think for, for me, I don't want to speak about like every teenager, but that time period is kind of blurry. Right? Like, a lot of things are happening in your head, and I can't say for sure that I always knew that I'd go into the military. It did seem like, like an easy option, as weird as that sounds, just because I saw my dad do it, my two brothers before me both went to the Navy, and my high school band director. Actually, I had two band directors. They both were in the Army Reserve band in Kansas, and so they, they had a pretty big influence on my decision to join the well, I guess specifically the Navy. They both told me not to join the a Army, but I didn't think I could get into the Navy, [4:00] in the band. So, because at the time, they don't do this anymore, I was a flute player, and to play flute you also had to learn to play saxophone, and I could not. I was so bad I, I felt really bad. And, so I practiced a whole lot my senior year, and in preparation for this audition that I had to take. And so yeah, I, I was in a, it wasn't really a class, but you know, when you're a senior, and you kind of have like extra time. So, after band class, I had this extra hour where it was just practice time. So that's all I did was practicing stupid scales, like all the, the very basic things. And then I went to, you know, I, I, when I was 17, I had my parents sign a piece of paper saying that, like I can, you know, sign up to, to start processing into the Navy. I was [5:00] 18 when I ultimately left, but I actually did not join initially in the band, because I hadn't done my audition. So I was, the band was my fallback.

The band was like, really hope I get in. But I don't think I'm going to, so I guess I'll sign up to be a corpsman, and –

AK: That's two very different things!

BS: Right? Right? I'm like, oh, "I love helping people. Why don't I go to be a corpsman? It'd be fantastic." Not thinking about the blood and all of the like reality of what that looks like. So, I was like, yeah, it'll be, that's really what I'm going to do. The band would be really cool. So, I practiced really hard. I did actually get in. But I auditioned the day before I went to boot camp. There's like all of this, like I'm so scared about boot camp period.

AK: Yeah, right.

BS: But then, the day before, I'm like, yeah, why don't I just go do my audition.

AK: Yeah.

BS: My mom's going to be there with me, so she could take my instruments back with her. Oh, it was too much!

AK: Oh, my gosh, and so, [6:00] but I guess this is going to sound, so my brother is in the Air Force, and his process for actually shipping out was just, very long, very what you would imagine the government is doing, right? So, what's blowing my mind is you're telling me you auditioned for the band the day before you left for boot camp and then got in the same day?

BS: Yeah, that's an unusual process.

AK: Yeah.

BS: They made some sort of exception for me.

AK: Because they knew you were leaving or?

BS: Yeah.

AK: Okay.

BS: Yeah. So, they didn't, all services, I think, are like this, where you don't have a contract signed saying "this is going to be my job" when you go to boot camp. It's open season on you. I mean, you can do whatever. And in the Navy, a lot of times that means you go, it's called undesignated, right. You go to a ship undesignated, and you are scraping paint, you are cleaning toilets, you are learning lines, like moving ropes, and like, [7:00] things like that. And, I mean, that's not, that those are jobs that have to be done right, but those are tough jobs. And I think they wanted to avoid that, because once somebody goes undesignated, it's hard to get them into a program. So it was, I mean administrative stuff, right?

AK: Yeah. So tell me about, so do you have, I think this is a dumb question. You have the same boot camp as anybody else? Like, if you're going to be a corpsman or you're going to be in the band, you're going to the same boot camp.

BS: Yes.

AK: Okay

BS: In the years before I joined there used to be a separation between men and women, so there was, there was a boot camp in Orlando, and I think there was one in California, I want to say San Diego. And then the men would go to Great Lakes. So, if you meet some older sailors, they'll ask, [8:00] "Oh, so you went to school, or to boot camp in Orlando?" "No, no, I went to Great Lakes." So, it was like right around the time that I joined that that switch was made.

AK: Do you know why they made that switch?

BS: I don't. I really don't. I mean, it's probably to do with like there's a term, BRAC, base realignment and closure. It's this process that happens congressionally where, I think it's like every 10 years, they, there's this big meeting and they're like, okay, so these are the bases that we can, like fiscally, like they're just not doing a ton, right? So, like we should cut them. So, I think that might have been why Orlando closed. I don't know.

AK: Yeah.

BS: But the, the, what, what happens is, everybody goes to the same boot camp. But then, when you graduate, that's when you split off into your different like schools, you know. So, I went to Norfolk for music school for, it was supposed to be 6 [9:00] months, and I went for 7.

AK: Oh.

BS: I told you I was bad at saxophone. It's true.

AK: Tell me a little bit, if you're comfortable, well, so let's set the timeline here. What month are you heading out for boot camp?

BS: That's in May, two weeks after high school graduation.

AK: Wow. Very quick. Okay, and how long is boot camp?

BS: Oh, gosh, what was it? 8 weeks, I think.

AK: Okay.

BS: Mayy, June, July, yeah. 8 weeks. Because I, I got to A school in like August. So, I started boot camp, it was like, May 31.

AK: Okay, yeah. Do you have, are you comfortable sharing about your boot camp experience?

BS: Sure. They found out that I was going to be in the band. So, so they made me the laundry petty officer. So, while I don't, this job, I don't think, is the same as what it used to be, but there used to be kind of near the shower area there was this huge room [10:00] with just laundry machines. And there was one recruit whose job it was to collect all of the, it was, we, we would send our uniforms out to be cleaned, but like underwear, that we did in house. So, I washed everyone's underwear in boot camp.

AK: Okay.

BS: And it was like the most horrifying –

AK: You're like, please make me go outside and run laps.

BS: Yeah! It was awful.

AK: Can I do pushups, please?

BS: Oh, man, it was so bad! And then I, I do, I remember in some ways it was kind of a bonus like in this weird way, because I had to be in the, the shower room early to like, set up the, the bags to make sure everybody like had a place to put their, their stuff. So, I got to take long showers –

AK: Oh nice.

BS: In this weird way. But I did have to wash people's underwear. So, gross.

AK: Yeah. Right, right. Tradeoffs. [11:00] So, but, but you know in this moment you're going to be going off to music school. This is Norfolk, Virginia?

BS: Yeah.

AK: Okay. Tell me what music school, like music school in the Navy, tell me what that's like. Do you think like, again, this may be a dumb question, is this like, if you were going to graduate high school and go to music school, do you, is it similar?

BS: No.

AK: Not even remotely. Okay.

BS: And I, I would not have known that at the time.

AK: Okay.

BS: I was just – So there's this word that I, I've started to, to use. Like, now that I've been out of the military over a decade, I've noticed that people who are coming out, they don't understand just how institutionalized they are, right. And I was at the beginning of that process, and I was also 18, very impressionable, right. And also like, scared of my own shadow, you know. And –

AK: But yet brave enough to enlist in the military.

BS: In this weird way, [12:00] right. Like it seemed like, okay, well, I can do that. I don't know, and I don't, I really can't tell you why I thought I can do that. I think if I were in my twenties considering boot camp, I might not have done it. But having done it, I'm like, it's not bad, I don't know. So, so your question was, what?

AK: You don't have to answer it, like you, you answered it. Is it similar to if you go to music school? But the answer is no, so can you tell me a little bit about like music school. You were there for eight months, which is –

BS: Seven.

AK: I'm sorry. Seven months –

BS: Could have been eight.

AK: You're like, do not make it longer! It's interesting to me that that boot camp is like infinitely shorter than, than music school. But tell me a little bit about that. What does that look like in the Navy?

BS: Oh, right. Okay, so this is what I was, I think what I was trying to get at is, [13:00] so, the institutionalization from the beginning. So, music school in the Navy, especially back then, it included Marines and Army.

AK: Oh, interesting.

BS: People who were also just coming from boot camp, and a lot of them were right out of high school, just like me. And all very impressionable, and you know whatever, and so not super opinionated. And just like, okay, tell me what I need to do. And I guess it was, yeah, I, I think I didn't question like, why are we doing ear training this way? This is weird. Like, why are we talking about numbers? Why aren't we using Solfège? Which, do, re, mi, fa, sol, la ti, do. People know that. That's Solfège. That's how people learn ear training in universities. But the military was, was teaching us 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, [14:00] and we would sing in numbers.

AK: Okay.

BS: Why are you doing it that way? And you know I, I can, having had conversations with my husband who has his doctorate in music he's like, and also active in the Navy, he's like, "I don't know why they did it that way." It's like, it's like you have to take, the military does this with lots of things. They, they take a concept that is well established, and they have to militarize it. And when you do that you remove some of the things that, that have standardized it in the civilian world. And so, it's kind of like you're shoehorning this idea of military music into the, this bigger concept of music education. And in many ways it just like doesn't work. They're

like, we're going to make it work. Okay. So, I didn't understand why music theory didn't make sense to me. So, this is, this is a funny tie in actually to my education at Brown. So, my last year [15:00] at Brown, last semester at Brown, I took, because I was a senior and I didn't have any other, lots of leeway in what I could take, I took a music 101 course! Why not? And the Professor was teaching Solfège and chords, like this is how we talk about chords. And it all made so much sense. All of the things that that were so confusing to me through A school, and, and the, the tests that we had to take to make rank. I just, I never got it. And then magically, this, like, door opened up. Oh, this makes so much sense! And I felt, I don't know, I guess validated. Yeah. So, that was useful.

AK: So do you, you might have mentioned this, and correct me if I'm putting words in your mouth or misrepresenting, but the, the point of [16:00] having bands in the military, or, or like an aspect of it, is, for, like it's an uplifting part of the military that, like you can show each other and the civilian world? Are you getting any sense of like a lot of this – Now, again, it's the military, so it's going to be like this, no matter what, but like this nationalism, this patriotism of like kind of shaping your image of the United States and the government and the military while you're in music school, or am I kind of making weird assumptions about that?

BS: I have never really thought about it that way. I mean the, the band, military bands in whatever country you're in, they're propaganda machines. They're, they're part of it.

AK: Right.

BS: When I was, and I like to think that it was a, a positive propaganda machine, [17:00] you know. Like, there were humanitarian missions, like in the, in the Navy, there were humanitarian missions that would go out on hospital ships, you know, and they're like rock bands playing music for these villages, of, of people who are getting medical treatment. Like, how cool is that? My husband got to do that. That is amazing. And he went to these countries that are, you know, they're, they're struggling with like climate change issues and vaccination problems, all of these things. And like, he got to be a part of that, even, even though he wasn't the one giving vaccinations or like helping, you know, perform surgery on a, on a kid with like a cleft palate.

Right? He's still part of that, and, like that part is really cool. The, there was, I mean, so, 9/11 happened when I was at A school, right?

AK: Yeah, that was my next question.

BS: Right? That was the early part of A school, and if anybody is, was alive at that time, [18:00] and, and like, cognizant of what was happening in the country, there were flags everywhere, right.

AK: And the yellow ribbons.

BS: Yes. Oh, so, so much of it. And, you know, having come from Kansas and my parents raising me the way that they did, I ate it up.

AK: Yeah.

BS: I was like, I am part of this, I am, you know, like, look at all of us doing this amazing stuff! I'm in the band. And like we, we've sacrificed so much being in the military. Whatever aspect you are participating in, there is a level of sacrifice. I, I don't care what your job is, so what you sign up to do is what you sign up to do. But like you are part of that. And so, I think everybody who, who chooses service deserves some level of respect. Right? And it's okay to, to, to like, accept that your role in that wasn't carrying a gun, [19:00] you know. Maybe, maybe the soft power side of it is actually a really good thing, you know.

But, so 9/11 happened, and there's like flag waving everywhere. And I felt like it just kind of, it sort of like made sense with this political idea I had of myself and my place in the world. And what's interesting is, I think it took me a while, this happens, I think, to a lot of young people, right, like you, you leave home and you have, you, you like, hold on to these ideas that like, I didn't go to college right out of high school, so like those ideas that I grew up with just carried over until I had friends who, they were questioning, because I, I had these great conversations with some of my colleagues who, they hadn't been to college either, but they were, they were just, they had different backgrounds, right? And they, I, I had a couple of

friends who, [20:00] they grew up poor. Super poor. And they were very skeptical about like the war, and I just didn't understand why at first, and then when I stopped and I really listened to them – okay, you're making some interesting points. Maybe I don't like totally agree with you, but that's really interesting. And I think that sort of like coming of age for me. It was slower than some other people just because I didn't go, I didn't go into the civilian world like as a, as a student or like, nobody was telling me, “Hey. Think for yourself.” Everyone was telling me, “You have to think like we do.”

AK: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, right.

BS: So it was, it was, it took me a very long time to get to that point, and, to be honest, I don't, I, I think that I held on to those things, even through getting to Brown [21:00] where I, I needed someone to say to me, “You can actually have a different opinion. And that's okay.” It's really hard for me to, to sit with that and appreciate it. And, and sort of bathe in it in a way, you know, because I couldn't, couldn't do that. I didn't feel like I could do that. Certainly didn't get that kind of socialization from growing up where it was very strict gender roles, also a weird thing that I joined the Navy given the way that I grew up.

AK: Yeah.

BS: Very strict gender roles. I mean, my mom owned a daycare.

AK: Yeah.

BS: I knew very well how to take care of babies, but I was like, yeah, I'm going to join the Navy. Why am I doing that? I don't know. Very long answer to your question.

AK: No, I love that, that's great. I want to talk a little bit more about that in a minute. Can you share with me your memories of [22:00] September 11, 2001? Because I would imagine the way many of us experienced that day is very different than someone who is experiencing that while they're in the military.

BS: Yeah, I don't think it really. So, the, everybody kind of remembers where they were, right. And I was in, I don't know exactly where I was when it happened, but because we weren't, we were in a school setting.

AK: Right.

BS: So –

AK: And did you, I'm trying to remember, I'm sorry to interrupt. I think, for my brother, I can't remember if we had the ability to like, call him, or, or talk to him like at our own leisure when he was in tech school. So, did you have, I mean, granted, so 2001, you probably don't have a cell phone.

BS: No cellphone, but I had a landline. [23:00] In my room.

AK: You had wired electricity and indoor plumbing.

BS: Oh yes, I did. It was fantastic.

AK: But like somebody very well could have called you to say like, did you see the news or something? It's not like you were totally shut off from that, or were you kind of shut off from that?

BS: I was kind of shut off in a physical sense. So, my phone was in my room.

AK: Right.

BS: And the school was not, I mean close yes, like walking distance. But I wasn't in my room, and I, I mean, like we had to report. I don't even remember what time we had to report. It was dark. So, early. I, I do know that I was in the schoolhouse and what they, what they did, they came over – nobody ever made announcements on the, they call it the One MC. It's just the

intercom. But they made an announcement that everyone had to go to their, to like whatever respective room it was. So, like, all the Marines went into this one room, all the [24:00] Army went in this one room, and all the Navy. And I guess in their minds, like this is how we're going to organize it. So, everybody goes to these rooms, and if I recall – this is pretty blurry at this point. I just, I remember mostly how I felt. But, they told us what had happened, and it just, it, you know, like everybody says like it, doesn't, it didn't feel real, you know. I'd like, like things like that don't happen here, you know, and we weren't that far, you know. The ships in Norfolk left. They went out to sea, right and that part of it was really unnerving because I had two brothers that were in, and one of them had already lived through a terrorist attack on a ship, and almost died the year before. So, of course, [25:00] my poor – I can't even imagine what my mother was feeling. But I think mostly, like the initial shock of it was just, what?! And then, as things sort of settled in I remember we, we all gathered – so in the barracks there was this one main room. I don't know why they call it D-MOD, but they did. But there was a, there was a person who would stand watch, and they were somebody who was there, for, like a higher level school. They were there. And then there was giant flat screen TV, and we, we turned it on, and as many of us as could fit in there we would, we just had the news on, and we were just watching, and we like, that's all we could do. You know, there, there's nothing, there was nothing to do except for just witness this awful thing in history. [26:00] And as time passed, the weeks went on, I, you know, there were, I don't remember how long it was, but like we weren't allowed to travel even on base in groups. We had to be, I think in no more like, there couldn't be any more than like 3 of us at a time together. They were worried that there was going to be like a bomb dropped on us, right, or another aerial attack of some sort. So it was that. Then, as people, it started becoming clearer that there was going to be some sort of like military response, the Army and the Marines in particular, they trained with guns right? The Navy didn't really do that back then. In boot camp I shot a laser.

AK: That's cool!

BS: Never once shot an actual weapon in the Navy, but the, the Army and Marines did, and [27:00] some of them were not making it through music school, and when they didn't they would go to infantry units. It was an immediate thing, and that was, that was a moment of

reality that struck me as a kid, I mean, 18, you know. And, and they were so, in some, you know again this was like flag waving yellow ribbons everywhere. Not, I guess not yellow ribbons yet, but they were, some of them were kind of like really excited to do this in a weird like – the, the fact that they had just failed out of music school was like, oh, no, big deal. I'm going to go do this thing. And they were getting tattoos. This part's kind of funny. They were getting these hilarious tattoos. I don't know if they still have these tattoos. I would have had it lasered off, but they're like, it's like an eagle flying, and then it's like ripping your skin –

AK: Ripping your skin, yes.

BS: And then behind it is the American flag. Okay! [28:00] Even at that point I thought that was cheesy.

AK: I know exactly what you're talking about.

BS: Yeah, that one. And then like the barbed wire.

AK: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BS: There were a lot of these.

AK: And meanwhile you're like, I have to get really good at the saxophone right now.

BS: Yes. And then, for, like Navy people, if you failed out, you went undesignated.

AK: Yeah.

BS: Not cool, but still better than, you know.

AK: Yeah. Right, right. You're like, thank God, I picked Navy.

BS: Oh, God, yes, yes.

AK: So, share with me some highlights, and if you have any low lights of your time in the Navy. How long was your time in the Navy?

BS: 11 years.

AK: 11 years. Wow! Okay, so share with me some of your memories like Polaroid memories of being in the Navy.

BS: My first duty station was so much fun. There was this large chunk of us, who were all first term Navy and young. We were, like, most of us were [29:00] under, we were like 21 and under. And we would go just the, the operational tempo of the band. We were in Pensacola. So, my first, my band was in New Orleans, and we would travel to Pensacola, Florida. It's like 4 hours-ish away, probably like 2 to 3 times a week.

AK: Oh wow.

BS: I mean, it was a lot, but we were so young and we were like, "Yeah, let's do it!" And we didn't, we didn't like party, or I think some people did. I didn't. Those band rides were so much fun. We just oh, my God! Just all of the silly things we would talk about and, and like I don't know make fun of each other about, but it was, it was like one gigantic road trip all of the time. So, I got to know some folks really, really, really well. And I don't, I really don't keep up with them very much anymore. [30:00] And I, I don't really know why. I think veterans sometimes want to pull away from that experience for a while. I really did enjoy being around some of those folks. That same band, I got, so I got there and I was just 19. And my, my LPS, Leading Petty Officer, this is like the person who's in charge of, it's like the, like the middle manager guy, right? So, he's like between all the upper folks, and then, like the lower folks. So, he sat down with me for my, my first like review kind of thing. And he goes, he goes, "Yeah. You could stand to lose a few pounds." Like, oh!

AK: Thank you for the feedback. [31:00]

BS: Right! But remember, this is like before any sort of empowerment or any of that. So, I just kind of sat there frozen.

AK: What was your response?

BS: What do I say? “Okay, yes, thank you?” Yeah. I don't know what I said. I probably didn't say anything. It was just a thought, and then it, it went by. So, that, that was not a great memory. That was a huge, like in a very quick explanation of my time in New Orleans, it was just like a big old road trip, you know. I got married.

AK: Okay, highlight?

BS: Yeah. So, I told you I got there when I was 19. I got married when I was 20.

AK: Wow! Oh, my gosh.

BS: Bought my – I didn't buy a house there. We lived in base housing that was brand new. Then I think it was the year after we moved into base housing was when Katrina hit.

AK: And you were in New Orleans for Katrina?

BS: Yeah.

AK: Tell me about that.

BS: Yeah. You'd think [32:00] there would be a bigger story here.

AK: Yeah.

BS: Kind of not.

AK: Yeah.

BS: Because we were, we were protected, you know, like my house was not, when I say New Orleans, it's like, like New Orleans region, you know? We didn't, we were on the west bank of the city, so the east bank is the area, like the 9th ward, that's on the other side of the river. I do, I did work with somebody whose apartment was flooded, but a lot of their stuff was okay. Most of us, I think, except for him, we all came out just fine. It was more, like I was talking about, a big road trip, right. We, we evacuated to, at first we all just dispersed, like, just get out of town. So, we did that. My husband and I, at the time, we went to Texas. That's where his family was. So, we were just in Texas for a couple of weeks, and then they called us all back to Memphis, because there's, at the time, there was a band in [33:00] Memphis. So, there's two bands in one building that is not big enough even for one band. So that was fun. But then they, they housed us like the, the base. They're like, what are we going to do with all these people? So, it wasn't just the band that went to Memphis. It was like however, many people. I don't know how they decided who went there. But we lived in a condemned building for a little while, in the barracks room, watched a lot of movies. I fell in love with the movie Shaun of the Dead.

AK: Okay.

BS: Great movie. And then they eventually moved us out. They paired us with another couple from the band, and we lived in what was, it's like they had just closed a whole bunch of housing. They were like, going to demolish it or something. But they were like, okay, well, we need places for people to live. So then we, we moved in there. And that was fun, because we were all young and just had [34:00] nothing but time on our hands. So, we played a lot of poker. Yeah, I, I learned, I think one of the most important lessons I learned in my time in New Orleans is that I don't like drinking and getting sick. Did it one time, one time only, done. Good to go. Yeah.

So, Katrina was mostly, for us, it was, oddly enough, like a monetary benefit. I really hate to think of it that way, but I think it is important for people to know that there are people

who actually came out of it better than they, they did, than they should have. Like, I shouldn't have, but at the same time I understand that the government is like we have to do something, and there's all these people that need help, and we don't know who needs exactly what. So, everybody's getting the same thing. I get that. [35:00] But the public health person in me is like, there's probably a better way. There's definitely people who needed more than I did, you know. I would have gladly given them what I, what I was given, you know. Instead of buying a computer, or whatever I don't even know. Yeah. So that was New Orleans.

AK: So, you leave the Navy in 212. Am I doing the right math?

BS: Yup.

AK: When do you start at Brown?

BS: 2014.

AK: Okay, so what's going on in that interim period? Are you thinking I'm going to go to school, are you –

BS: There's a whole bunch in there.

AK: Okay.

BS: So, New Orleans. Then we moved to Virginia. My husband, like we're still married, and then we, we were there for 4 years. Then we moved to Hawaii.

AK: Oh, nice.

BS: So Hawaii was my last duty station. I moved to Hawaii pregnant.

AK: Oh.

BS: Yeah. I got on the plane [36:00] the last day that the Navy would let me fly.

AK: Oh, my God!

BS: So I was really pregnant.

AK: Yeah.

BS: And so, I had my baby out there. And then, just as I was getting out of the Navy, my son is almost 3 at the time, I'm like, okay, husband, I'm kind of done, right, like this is not working out. So, we were married for 9 years. I'm getting out of the Navy divorcing, and I had already gotten into Rowan University in New Jersey. So, I'm like, I'm doing this. Okay. And I'm, I'm going to do it by myself. And I was gone. I'm like, yes, that's great. So, I chose to go to Rowan because there was a professor there who, she started this, her name's oh, goodness, Lily Levinowitz! She started an institute at [37:00] Princeton to study music and children and I just, I, I had taken, or I was certified to teach Music Together, which is like, you know, the family and me kind of music class, and loved it so much. And I, I just wanted to get my hands in, into as much of that as I could. And I was like, I'm not going to Princeton, but I'll tell you what, I can go to, Rowan. So, I went to Rowan and I, one of my, I spent a year and a half there. One of my last classes was with Dr. Levinowitz and the end of class one day she was like, "Why are you at Rowan?" I was like, "What do you mean? Because I wanted to take a class with you, I mean, come on." She goes, "No, I don't, I mean, like you've shared with me the things you want to do with your life, and I don't understand why you would choose Rowan." Nobody had ever asked me that before. My parents didn't graduate high school. They didn't know [38:00] that different colleges are good for different things. And so in that moment I felt very self-conscious, like, what did I, did I make a big mistake and no one told me? I don't know what I'm doing right now. And she was like, "Just look around." That was the whole point of that conversation. Just look around. So, timing wise my, I got remarried, and my husband, active duty Navy, plays trumpet, got orders from Hawaii, where we met, to Rhode Island, and I was like, kind of nice to live together.

AK: So, while you're at Rowan, you're there in person in New Jersey. And is your current husband still in Hawaii?

BS: Yeah.

AK: And you're building a relationship that way.

BS: Yeah. For two years we did that.

AK: Oh, my gosh. Oh, boy.

BS: Yeah, yeah, it was crazy, because the time difference, depending on the time of year, because Hawaii doesn't do daylight savings, it can [39:00] be between 5 and 6 hours.

AK: Oh, my, gosh, okay.

BS: It was so much. So yeah, he got orders to Rhode Island, and he's like, "Oh, maybe you want to transfer schools?" Okay. So, having had that talk with Dr. Levinowitz, I know my husband. He's like, he has his doctorate, so he knows way more about going to college than I do. He's like, "There's these schools here that, you know, they, they offer programs that sound interesting, based on like what you've said you want to do." So, I applied to Providence College and Brown. Didn't think I'd get into Brown, absolutely did not. So, when I got my acceptance letters I got Providence College first, and I was like, oh, my, gosh, I got into Providence College! It's so amazing! It's a private school. I'm like, wow, I, I can't believe I, I accomplished this! That's amazing. And then I looked at the sticker price like, whoa, okay, so we'll figure this out. [40:00] But it'll be fine. And then a couple of days later, I think, I got yeah, I was living in an apartment, and it had, like the, the bay of mailboxes like out in the parking lot. And my son, I think he might have been with his dad that day. He wasn't with me, so I go to open the mailbox, and you know when you get a letter, maybe people who are listening in this don't, don't know this, but you get a letter in the mail from a collage and it's thick, that's good.

AK: That's good.

BS: Right!

AK: That's real good.

BS: I had no idea what was in that envelope at first, and I just, I felt the thickness of it and I was like – I opened it in the parking lot.

AK: Yeah, yeah.

BS: And as dramatic as it sounds, this is true, I actually sat on the curb and I cried.

AK: Yeah, I want, I'm like ready to cry for you even over PC, I'm like, Oh, my God! Like, I know you're here now, and I'm like she did it! [41:00] Like, I don't know where this story is going.

BS: Yeah, it was like, I, I still, even now I can't understand why someone read my application and thought, yeah. It feels like they took a chance on me, even now. Even now. And, and I felt that same way when I applied for my master's, and I got the acceptance letter. I went to Brown for my undergrad! Even getting an acceptance to a master's program, I still feel like someone just somewhere was like, “Yeah, okay, maybe.” Yeah. So again, I think that, that goes back to the strict gender roles, you know. Girls, you know, they can do stuff, but not really that, right? So that, that self-doubt – pervasive. I hate it so much, and I know that it's there. Wish I [42:00] could just let it go. It's just part of me. Yup.

AK: Yeah. What was the appeal – so, there's a lot of colleges and universities in Rhode Island. What were the appeal of Brown and PC? Why those two?

BS: PC had a program to help you, it was like community, basically doing good in the community. Essentially, that's what it was. And I was like, oh, yeah, yeah, totally want to do

that. And Brown, it was just like a cool shiny thing, you know. I don't, I don't think I knew enough about it.

AK: I was going to – did you know, like it was an Ivy League school like, had you heard of it?

BS: No!

AK: Yeah, okay.

BS: No! My husband suggested it. I thought it was an HBCU [historically black college or university]. Yeah, if you're a kid growing up in Kansas, and your parents didn't go to high school like, how would you know?

AK: Exactly.

BS: I mean, you know, Harvard, [43:00] you know Yale.

AK: Yeah, right.

BS: Okay, maybe you know Dartmouth.

AK: How many could there be, right?

BS: Right. Yeah. So, that was, that's pretty funny. But yeah, I think the more, Brown was a shiny thing at first, and then the more I got to know about it the better it felt, right. Like I didn't know what I wanted to concentrate in. And then I had a, I was thinking about urban studies kind of because I, I personally think that of all of the concentrations at Brown besides, like an independent one, I think it's the most Brown of all of them.

AK: Yeah.

BS: Really, because, like you can, I, I chose to study more of the sociology side. Right? And I know some people who studied more of like the environmental side, or the, the built environment. Things like that. I can study all of that. But it's so cool because there's only, there's only 10 requirements, and then beyond that you can do whatever, you know, and the fact that I could take a music class, [44:00] I could whatever. Also, I'm really good at selling Brown. Really, really good at that. But I think it was, it was sort of like, at first it was a shiny thing, and then it just like reinforced itself over time by just being Brown, you know.

AK: And was this after the seed had been planted, that you can kind of start thinking in different ways, and were you – I'm going to just put words in your mouth here, like, was it looking like Brown could facilitate that, or were you not really compare, like, connecting that yet?

BS: I don't think I connected it. I just thought, okay, well, Brown, by the time I figured out Brown was an Ivy League school, and like, I mean, that's like a golden ticket, right, to success? What I thought, right? Of course that's not true. But I really want, and I still, I, and I'm using the present tense on purpose. I want to do so much good in this world, [45:00] and I don't want to do it for myself. I want to, I want to like be a facilitator for what other people need and I think people who want to do that got to know, you have to understand the systems around you, you know. And for my undergrad it meant studying cities. That's where the majority of the world lives, are in cities. And even if you think you live in a rural environment, chances are you don't. You know, the, the definition of what it means to, to live in an urban environment is not what people think, and I think a lot of people would look at like where I grew up and think, oh, well, that's, that's rural. It's not, you know. And so understanding cities in terms of the people who live in them, and the, the systems that we all have to operate in and around and with and oh, any other – not adverb. What's the word? – [46:00] Preposition you could imagine. So that is what led me to public health, through a conversation I had with one of my urban studies professors. Because, boy, I really didn't think public health made sense.

AK: Yeah.

BS: But it, but it, it really, really does. And this is not the, the direction I think the conversation, like you wanted, you meant the conversation to go in this moment.

AK: I wanted to go however you want it to go.

BS: Cool. So, I believe that in, in years past people who wanted to do good, they went into the clergy, or they, they became a nun, some, some sort of like religious life. That's, first of all, that's not for me. And second of all, I don't know what people really do anymore. Like our, we know that, especially in America, like the, the idea of religion being the center of your world, it's just not that [47:00] anymore. So, having language to talk to people about doing good things, it can't be that. And so, what, what can it be? What is it? You know, people are still out there doing good things. You think like, well, politics right? No, maybe not. You know. I think there's, there's a lot of skepticism, rightfully so, about politics and politicians. Okay, cool. But what, so what is there? And then I realized, public health kind of does that, you know. And, and people don't. People take public health for granted. They don't, they don't understand what all it does. Because these are, these are people who just like, they do amazing things all the time, and they don't, they don't talk about those amazing things most of the time because they're just like, "No, I'm doing it because it needs to be done." Absolutely. Yeah, like, we're taking polio vaccines to, [48:00] you know, wherever in the world. Yeah, let's do that! You know? Cool. So, I think, I mean, I'm sure there's an argument to be made against this. But I really think that public health is that new way of talking about helping people in ways that make sense for them, you know, because public health is, is not supposed to be paternalistic, you know, it's supposed to be like working with community members and, and understanding what they need so that you can bring that to them. You know? Yeah.

AK: I have so many more questions, and I know we're running up on time. So, I think maybe I'll kind of jump around in the timeline a little bit, if you can share at all, how is the current, the current political climate in the United States impacting that work, or impacting [49:00] the way you study that work, if you can share. If you want to share.

BS: I can say that everything feels weird right now. You know, from the work that I do with students directly to my schoolwork.

AK: And can you say, so you are also an employee for Brown right now.

BS: Yes.

AK: Can you share what that work is?

BS: Yeah. Yeah. So, I'm in an identity center. It's what we call them. I'm in the Office of Military Affiliated Students. Shocker, right? That, that was the spoiler. So, yeah. So that's the work that I do. And what that office does is we, we work with students who are mostly veterans, but we have ROTC cadets, some folks who are like dependents, so their, their parents are still [50:00] in the military, or they were in the military. You know, that kind of thing. And apparently what I do, so cool, I help students orient themselves to the university and then transition into being an alum. That sounds really easy. But remember, we're talking about people who have been institutionalized.

AK: Right. I'm thinking that sounds really hard. Because one of the maybe, if you want to juxtapose the two, I was going to ask about some of your first experiences at Brown, or even just generally highlights, lowlights of your time as a student on campus. If, I'm sure that, I mean you had been in civilian life for a couple of years by the time you got here, so it may not have been a huge shock, but maybe it was?

BS: Brown is a very different place.

AK: Yeah. It's not the civilian world.

BS: No. And it is very different from how I grew up. It's very different from [51:00] how I socialized as an adult in the Navy, and just kind of in the world. So, I really, I did not know how to be. I felt so uncomfortable and, so actually the first time I was ever on campus, it was before

orientation, and I went to meet with my, I forget what they call it. He was like basically a peer mentor. He was like the guy who I was assigned to, to kind of like help me transition to the university. And he was working at Maddock Alumni Center. So that's where we met. I'd never been on campus before, but park on Brown Street, where there's cobblestones or brick, or whatever is on the street. And I'm like, okay, this is a little intimidating, and I'm in like a, like a little cotton sundress and Chuck Taylors. I feel very not in my element. And then I walk into Maddock and I'm like, what is happening [52:00] here? I feel like there's nothing but old bankers or something. And I thought, oh, God! What did I do? I just – and you know, now that I've been at Brown a long time, like what I was wearing is totally fine, but it didn't feel that way. So, that was weird. Yeah, what was your question? God, I'm sorry.

AK: I have been just rapid firing questions. I've asked you a million of them. So really, what every you talk about is fine. I had started with the political climate's impact on your work, and you had said it was also impacting the work with the students. And then I asked you to go back to when, to you being an undergrad. So whatever one of those things you want to talk about is great.

BS: Let's do the political climate. That's a, that is a really fantastic question that, I think if you ask anybody how they're doing right now, and everyone's like real answer, or like the quick one? So, I don't know how everyone is feeling in my classes because we're, it, I am [53:00] actually in an online program. So, I don't get to interact with the students kind of the way that you would if you're in the classroom. But there are physicians, you know. There are people that work at NIH and CCD. And they don't talk much, and I think, I'm assuming a lot here, right? But, think there's a fear, that's what it is. I think, I think that, that's the overarching theme, I think, or the, the cloud, I guess over everything right now. There is a fear. Now, how that ties into my work, I'm sorry if I cry, I might.

AK: Aw, that's okay.

BS: But the – [54:00] I don't, I don't work directly with international students. I work with a couple, right? But for the most part we're talking like U.S. veterans, okay. But Brown does host

students who come from other countries where they are conscripted, right, like they, they'll spend a year at Brown, and they have to go back to their home country, do a year or two of service, and then come back. That's a different kind of experience, too. But even them, I, I'm not necessarily thinking about them, but I am. International students that we have, you're, they're kids, you know. And I can't imagine being in a place that's not your home, trying so hard to make it your home, and then someone saying, "You're not welcome here." Not only like, "You're not welcome," but like, "We're going to be violent toward you." [55:00] That, that's not, it's not the country that I served in. That's, that's not the military I served in. That's not the Brown I know. And Brown isn't doing that, right. But those students, they're just kids. They don't, they don't deserve any of that. They, they are here to, to do the same thing I was doing, right? They want to learn, they want to do great things in the world and then go out and be amazing humans. And I, I just don't, it hurts me that, like on their behalf, that someone wants to take that. And, and the kind of fear that that instills in everyone. That's what's scary, and that that is what, I think that's what nobody really wants to talk about. So, yeah.

AK: Yeah. [56:00] Would you like a tissue?

BS: I'm okay. They're going to stay up here.

AK: Okay. Yeah. That, I think really accurately captures the moment for a lot of us working in a lot of different areas across campus for sure. And I'm hoping that this is just a moment that we're capturing for history that people are going to look back on and be like, wow! That was crazy. Good thing we don't live in that anymore.

BS: Yeah, like, listen to this crazy lady. Can you believe she said something like that?

AK: Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BS: That would be amazing.

AK: That's, that would, that is a hope. So, with the time that we have left, like, I said, I asked you a thousand and one questions. But is there anything I didn't ask you that you wanted to get into the historical record about? Anything about your life, your time in the military, your time at Brown, something you see for the future? Any, any last thoughts you want to share before we close? [57:00]

BS: I think it would be really, honestly kind of dumb of me if I didn't talk about what it was like to have a baby at Brown.

AK: Yeah. That's so, that's funny. I was going to ask you, like having a baby in the military. But please tell me about what it's like to have a baby at Brown.

BS: Yeah. Well, -

AK: You have two babies. They're big babies.

BS: Two. Oh, gosh, yeah, an almost 16 year old, and then a 9 year old. So, they're not babies anymore. Not as much as I like to think. So, yeah, so real quick, so like it, having a baby in the military and being married to someone in the military who's in your same unit. There's some tension there.

AK: Oh, yeah.

BS: And, and having to talk to like the operations person, like the person who assigns you to different gigs, essentially, not understanding that, like as a breastfeeding mom, you can't put me on a parade that lasts five hours because I can't, I physically can't do that, right. So, like having, having to have that conversation, like that's [58:00] uncomfortable, right? That was, that was a big piece of it. I also, I think, that this is actually kind of funny. So, when I was in Hawaii we, I was a an extra in *Battleship*.

AK: Oh, yes!

BS: It was an all-day thing, and I was breastfeeding at the time. He was a little bit older, so I could, you know, go a little bit longer between pumping but I did have to pump on a battleship, a literal battleship. Yes, in a bathroom stall.

AK: Take me with you. Put me there. Describe it.

BS: Oh, God, it's a museum, right?

AK: Right.

BS: So, none of it is new. We're talking like World War II battleship, and also not meant for women. So, they just like, picked a room that was kind of big enough, that had pipes in it, and then they retrofitted it to be a bathroom, and it was like the tiniest little space you could like, like I think [59:00] the door hit my knees, and I'm not tall. I'm 5' 2". So, if the door is hitting my knees, you could imagine someone who's, you know, like, up to average height, very uncomfortable. And it smelled like fuel, like diesel engine, because it was a diesel engine ship. Disgusting. And pipes everywhere, and asbestos, and I mean all of the things you could imagine. And this is where I'm pumping. And it was surreal. I'm an extra in a movie, in my uniform. Also bizarre, there's Rihanna, and this movie is terrible, by the way, but, but fun. You know, I got to be in this and some guy from like True Blood, like, the blonde guy. I never watched the show, but like the blonde guy who everyone said he was like, so handsome. Check out the movie, though.

AK: Yeah, yeah,

BS: And, and like, here I am in a bathroom stall. Bizarre. I think that's my favorite [1:00:00] breast pumping story ever.

AK: Yeah, that one would be hard to top.

BS: Yeah. Well, and no, I, I definitely can't top it. And then, being pregnant at Brown is super weird, as an undergrad. Who is pregnant at Brown as an undergrad?

AK: Yeah.

BS: Someone who's insane, that's who!

AK: Yeah!

BS: Or, oh, it was definitely not planned. Because why would you plan that? Yeah, this be, I love, I love my little Dean. But, boy, talk about the biggest surprise on the planet. Like, okay, we're doing that now! Great! So, yeah, I think, so I only spent like one semester as the pregnant lady in class. But there's like no denying that you're different. Like, the desk won't go down.

AK: Oh, no!

BS: Or, I don't know, like, I, I ran into professors years later, and they're like, "Oh, you were my pregnant undergrad!" [1:01:00] I'm like, "That was me. You'll never forget me." And so, that, the, the physical like inability to hide is one part of it. At the beginning of the semester, you know, when you're doing like all the icebreaker stuff people would always assume, or often assume, that I was the professor, or that I was a graduate student. Like, no guys, I'm here with you.

But what I thought was like, really, really cool, and this happened even before I, I got pregnant. But when the traditionally aged students found out that I had been in military, or that I had kids, or whatever, well, one child before I had, I had the second one, they really leaned in. Oh, they were like, oh, my gosh. That, how did you get here? So cool?

AK: Yeah. and kind of exactly like, why, I have you here today. [1:02:00]

BS: I guess so, yeah. They, they have this like genuine curiosity. And I think that's part of what is so heartbreaking about what we talked about earlier with international students, like this is

such a – we talk about like the bubble of College Hill, but it's also a community at College Hill that, that, like, I don't, I know it's not, it's not fair to say everybody cares about everybody here. That's not clearly true. It's a community, right? There's, it's complicated. But I never once felt like I wasn't cared for. And that's kind of huge, you know, even as weird as it was that I was pregnant on campus and having to find the lactation rooms, you know, as an undergrad, like, you know I didn't even know who to talk to to find the stupid lactation room. What? Because we don't talk to undergrads about that. Why would they?

AK: They don't talk to employees about it either.

BS: Right. You just have to like, [1:03:00] figure it out. So, yeah, but then, like being a breastfeeding, mom was also kind of interesting. I had, I had some really cool professors. One of them in the environmental science house, he, his kids were grown, but he's like super nutty crunchy. And his kids were like, maybe a little bit older than me. And so, his grandkids were like getting kind of to be like around the same ages as like my kids. So, he, he would, he just like, really enjoyed having conversations with me. He was like, "Oh, so, are you doing cloth diapers?" "Yeah, yeah." "Boy, it's like, it's quite a challenge." And he, he would, I don't know. We just, we had this like bond. He told me in office hours one day, he's like, "Look, if you ever need to take a step back from this assignment, or, or you need extra time, or you need to, you know, like need extra time to get to class because you're pumping, or whatever [1:04:00] you need, just like, just let me know no big deal." And I never needed to do any of that. Just that someone said it. Yeah, yeah, that was, that was huge.

Oh, yeah, and my advisor, I actually would run into him because his kids were the same age as mine. We would run into each other at like the Children's Museum. "What's up!" Yeah. Yeah. And I don't think that that's a very common experience.

AK: Yeah. Certainly.

BS: So, that's kind of what it's like to have a kid at Brown. And I would, I, I have said this in, in lots of places where it's not public, but I think it's, it's really important to say where it is public, that Dean Bhattacharyya, she was running the RUE [resumed undergraduate education]

program at the time that I was doing my undergrad. She was amazing. I called her, she's the first staff person I called to tell them that I was pregnant. [1:05:00] And I was very emotional. It was the summer between first and second year, and I was doing a VISTA program, Volunteer In Service to America program, like an eight-week thing in the summer for Southside Community Land Trust. So, I'm like at a housing project in a community garden in, it's like an early morning, because, you know, it's a community garden so we got to go like early to do the cleanup and all that. And there are people leaning out of their windows looking at me like, what is this crazy woman doing on her phone in the garden just crying.

AK: Aw.

BS: I was a sight, but I got, I was on the phone with Dean, Dean B, and I was like, "I don't know what I'm going to do." And she just started very calmly, "What you're going to do is you're going to take a reduced course load, okay? And then [1:06:00] you're going to have your baby and come back. You can have another reduced course load."

AK: I thought she was going to say have another baby. I was like, no!

BS: No! God, no! Love, love babies, but I'm done. And then, and then I, I just, just like that moment, that calming effect. That's what, that's what I needed. Just needed somebody to be like, it's okay, there's a, there's a pathway forward. Just having a baby doesn't mean that everything has to end. Oh, my God! So, that was really important for me here. I wasn't planning on quitting, for sure. But I was really scared, you know. So having her there, I I've said this to her face. She was my rock in that moment, and I don't, I didn't, I did not reach out to her a ton for advice or anything like that, but that she took that moment, and, and helped me see the pathway forward, [1:07:00] I don't know what I would have, how I would have approached the, the next two and a half years of school without that moment of like focus.

AK: Yeah. Yeah.

BS: But yeah, Dean B is awesome!

AK: I'm so glad that you've had that support here. I could talk to you all day, but any other final thoughts that you'd like to share before we wrap?

BS: Being in the Navy was complicated and fun and sad. I think I'm, I'm so glad that I did it. Not because I felt like I, like it gave me a bunch of things. I don't think that's fair. I took a lot of things from it. I earned a lot of things from it. No one [1:08:00] gave me self-respect. I just had to figure that out. And the educational benefits, I earned that. I, it, when, when I have students who come to me and they're like, oh, you know, "I have this educational benefit that I'm so glad the military gave it to me," I'm like, "You stop that right there. They did not give that to you. You had to work for it. Okay, that is yours, and that is the same thing as your VA benefits, your whatever quote unquote disability you have. You should make sure that you receive those benefits," you know. But it took me ten years to get mine, you know, because of the complicated nature of my military service. I don't think that those, [1:09:00] the negative things that imprint on you, they don't go away, you know. Like I, I told you I still, I still struggle with those like very specific gender roles. But I can see it now, and I think that's the difference. You know. I think that's what I really appreciate about that time in my life. It empowered me, not the military, but just that time in my life the reflecting on it, has empowered me to see that like I did some pretty cool stuff. And I don't need a military rank, or someone higher than me to tell me that I can do hard things and cool things. I can do it on my own. And I have. Yeah. [1:10:00] That felt really good to say. Yeah. Oh, my gosh, I can't, thank you so much.

AK: Oh, well, thank you, Becky, so much for taking the time to be here today, and to share all of this beautiful story with me. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

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