

Transcript – Bernadette Aulestia, class of 1994

Narrator: Bernadette Aulestia

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

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Part 1

Amanda Knox: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I'm the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. It is Tuesday, March 23, 2021, it is 10am, and I am here with another Brown University alum who would like to share her story with us. Welcome.

Bernadette Aulestia: Thank you so much. My name is Bernadette Aulestia. I am class of '94 and obviously happy to share whatever insights I have about my experience, both at Brown and outside.

AK: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to be with me today. We were just talking about, before we started recording, how busy life can be even in a pandemic, as we've made it to the, just after the one year mark now. But if you don't mind, I would kind of like to start from the beginning. And if you could share a little bit about your personal background, your family [1:00] background, where you grew up, how you grew up, kind of some foundational information like that.

BA: Sure, sure. So, I'm, I'm from Quito, Ecuador. I grew up though, a little bit all over the world. My father was in the Foreign Service and so I spent time obviously in, in Latin America, but his area of expertise was Asia. So, I'm a little bit of a, of a, you know, child of the world, I suppose, and spent time in Tokyo and in Kuala Lumpur, and, and, in frankly, my formative years, and then went back to Latin America for my last years of high school. You know, it was at that point that I was, you know, trying to decide where to head out from an education perspective. [2:00] That said, I'm going to just back up and say, I also am an only child. And so I

do like to say, I'm really the only son that a very traditional Latin American father had. And in some ways, I think that was an extraordinary benefit for someone of my gender because, as opposed to some of my peers at the time, you know, where expectations were perhaps a little bit more traditional about staying closer to home and studying closer to home, and perhaps even beginning to think about starting a family. You know, my father always valued education. My dad actually was a high school dropout, and, you know, moved, moved to this country, interestingly enough, found a career in public service, but really put himself through school at night, and ultimately, you know, got a PhD and, you know, so he, back to just the value of education. And I think for my father, [3:00] it was really important that I always grew up with a sense that I was meant to get an education, and I was meant to do things beyond perhaps what was the norm. So, whereas I would say, my mother was like, a little like, "Oh, my goodness. Are we really just going to let her just go off anywhere in the world?" At the time, my parents were in Ecuador. And yeah, for my dad, it was like, "Yeah, the world is her oyster. So, whatever she wants to accomplish." And, you know, it's really interesting at the time, as I look back with a lot of gratitude. My father never really limited, even economically, what my choices were, my father was just like, "We're going to, you know, we will make this happen for you, you just need to figure out what it is that you want to do."

And so, you know, people often ask me how I ended up at Brown. You know, I'd never visited the campus. I really, I don't have any physical, you know, kind of relationship with it. [4:00] But I do tell the story that what I was, and this is the power of kind of mentorship and, frankly, the power of women as mentors at any age in your life. When I lived in Tokyo in high school, I was a middle schooler and I went to this camp with our high schoolers and, and just, there was this one young woman who just was amazing. And she was just a mentor to many of us. And she was just incredible. And she was thoughtful, and she was creative. And she had an expansive view of the world. And as a middle schooler, I was like, wow, she's amazing. And I remember being in the seventh grade when she decided that she was going to go to Brown and it just stuck with me in seventh grade that this must be a special place because this special person I knew who I respected so much. And then I kind of put it away and never thought about it really until my junior, my junior year in high school when, you know, I tell people it's a very different scenario [5:00] and I will talk about my daughters. I have three daughters, I have one at Brown, currently. The college application process is very different today than it was back then. You

know, I was in high school in Ecuador. I remember a college counselor, college counselor, I don't even think she was, she was a teacher walking in and saying, "Does anybody plan to apply to colleges in the US, please raise your hand." And there was like, three of us. And she handed us the SAT pamphlet and was like, "The test is in two weeks." So it was like, so very different experience. But anyway, at the time, I knew, then that Brown was somewhere I wanted to consider and obviously did my research. At the time, there was no online research so you were getting pamphlets in the mail. And, and obviously, you know, academically I kind of knew I was well, at the time, I wanted to be an engineer. But yeah, applied to Brown.

And, and then I have a weird admission story, [6:00] because I actually almost ended up going somewhere else, thanks to the very, very slow physical mail process of getting mail to Latin America. So, I actually committed, well, put my deposit in somewhere else, because I didn't hear back from Brown. And I still remember my grandfather walking in one day and saying, "The mailman gave me this thing." And it was a tattered envelope and had tape on it apparently had been. And, and that was my admission. So that's my, that's my circuitous way to get to Brown. And, and yeah, the excitement obviously. And, and trepidation, also, right. And just moving to another country. And, you know, I saw, I often think that as, as, as young adults, it's always it's also sometimes good that you don't really know what you're getting into. I think things that oftentimes could become barriers, [7:00] or fear, I think, because you don't know, you know, you kind of do it. And so, so yeah, so that was my experience.

You know, my, you know, I'd never done a New England winter, totally arrived unprepared. And, you know, got dropped off by my parents. And I remember the first week, you know, crying and being really homesick because my parents then obviously moved, actually, at the time had moved back to Asia, so it was even farther away. But, but yeah, you know, it was like, once I was in it, I was like, this is my, this is my home, this is my new place.

AK: Do you have some more specific memories, or like your first memory of your time on campus, or those first few weeks, some kind of like Polaroid snapshot memories?

BA: Yeah, you know, my, my mom was the one who moved me in. You know, we were traveling from abroad. So it just, you know, made sense for just one parent, you know, to come. And, and I remember, [8:00] you know, first arriving on campus, and just, you know, it being

everything and more than I had seen in the brochures, and, you know, this kind of feeling of awe. And I remember the Van Winkle gates the very first time we went there with mom, and, you know, I, and I, and it's interesting that I didn't end up traveling with my dad, who obviously had pursued an education. My mom, you know, went to, I guess, the equivalent of community college and, and, you know, really had had some early career, you know, secretarial experience, but really was out homemaker. And so, so I do think it was interesting that my drop off experience was with the parent who wasn't kind of as exposed to higher education. And so, I think both of us walked around the first week and, you know, kind of in awe of everything. [9:00] You know, everything was so regal and majestic. I just remember it feeling like such a regal place.

And, and, you know, certainly, you know, move in is another snapshot, you know, I, this also goes back to culture, but, you know, for my mom, the idea of coed dorms was like, "What did we sign up for?" Or, "What does this girl sign up for?" But, you know, she's a social butterfly. So, you know, she made sure in the first few hours, I just felt like she was out there trying to meet everybody in the hallway and make introductions. It was very, very sweet. But yeah, I think that those are like, just my, my initial impressions.

I do, I had these very vivid moments of like, the grass being so green, if that makes any sense, like and the sun was shining and it just, yeah. I just remember feeling a real moment of pride like I'd, I'd arrived and, and this was going to be an experience that, [10:00] you know, certainly would make my parents proud.

AK: Do you have any super high point memories or super low point memories of your duration at Brown?

BA: Oh, well, probably I mean, probably everybody has both right? Yeah, you know, it's interesting. It's interesting at this stage to reflect back. You know, I'll tell you what my high points, high point to me is also more of like a feeling, as opposed to a physical moment. And I'll tell you this actually happened two years ago, when I was considering leaving really a career at a company that I had been at and have helped build, and was just thinking about whether it was time for just my next step in evolution. And I, I worked with somebody who was an extraordinary executive coach, and at the time, [11:00] we just talked about things that I'd like to

explore and feel again, as kind of you think about a next journey. I remember him saying to me, “Do me a favor, close your eyes, and can you physically remember a time where you felt the most free?” And, and I remember getting very emotional. I closed my eyes and at first kind of thinking, this is an interesting exercise, closing my eyes, and as he walked, kind of walked through me, like, just physically feel it, feel it, what does it feel like? What does it look like? What is it? I, I, I literally got teary it was, it was this moment at Brown, it was, I said, I remember being this, you know, just I could, felt I could take on the world. I remember physically sitting on the college green with my books and I was studying, and I could feel the breeze and my hair was curly, and it was out and the sun was on my face. [12:00] And I just, I felt like I could take on the world. And I just remember talking about really how pivotal Brown was for me as a young Latina woman, in terms of finding my own identity. You know, we talked about my drop off. You know, I was dropped off, I felt like I was dropped off as this kind of sheltered, you know, little Latina girl, and, and then once I was there it was about finding my own voice and finding my own path. And, you know, by the way, as a, as a, as a Latina daughter, it comes with a lot of expectations about not just, you know, expectations academically, but also even socially. And here, I was on a campus where everything was different than certainly where I’d come from. I came from a pretty cookie cutter high school where kind of everybody looked the same [13:00] and I, you know, did the same. And, you know, here I was in this plethora of like, diverse plot and action, and I’d never met a vegan before. You know, I’ll tell you an interesting story, you know, someone who grew up abroad, you know, I’d certainly had Black friends, but they were primarily international students and so oftentimes African students. I, I’d really not had African American friends. So, the Black American experience, even in itself was something that was completely unique and new. And here, I was, like on this hallway of friends and people, it was just a melting pot. I felt like I was drinking from the firehose, certainly the first few months and just absorbing and learning and being open. And yeah, I just, like I said, okay, I said, the first week I walked around with my mouth open. [14:00] I think, probably the first month I walked around, like, just, just understanding. But I think I was so you know, kind of thirsty for knowledge and more. And so my, my high points, I really feel like I just immersed myself in this new space. And, and I and I definitely challenged myself.

And the low points would certainly be that, you know, I do remember being very homesick at the beginning. Excited to be there, but also, you know, homesick. And, and then I

would say, you know, also scared and challenged and oftentimes making decisions that you know, in some ways wouldn't please my parents, and that was a really scary thing. Like I changed my major and I still remember the conversation I had with my father was just so, I was just so worried about disappointing him. I was going to be an engineer. That was what I was supposed to be doing. [15:00] And here I was telling him that I'd found these classes in economics and in sociology, and now I wanted to focus on the betterment of women in the third world. And I was just so, I was worried my father really wouldn't understand that experience. And so I would say, yeah, those were, you know, highs and lows. You know, I met my husband, that's a high. We met our first week in school. We broke up our junior year, that's a low.

AK: What a roller coaster. I can hardly handle this story, let alone living it.

BA: So yeah, there's a lot of, you know, a lot of lows and highs just I think, as any, any experience that one has. I got to tell you, there was mostly highs, I, my, my, my lows came out of these moments of trying to figure out who I was as a person, if that [16:00] makes sense. You know, I was really fortunate. I had a wonderful, wonderful unit. I, to this day, I'm still close to so many. I had a phenomenal roommate and we lived, we went on to live together for the next four years. I mean we, we, we pledged a sorority together, we lived. So, you know, I felt like I found another family. And, and so I would say that socially, it was just, yeah, it was, it was, I had an incredible time. I felt, I felt surrounded by people who, you know, accepted me and, and, and welcomed me even though this was kind of my home, like my home away from home, you know. I wasn't in a position to go home on the weekends, or, frankly, there was a few Christmases and Thanksgivings, that, you know, I, I, depending on where my parents were in the world, it wasn't, wasn't feasible. So, you know, so for me, I, I, I went to other people's homes, and it was all [17:00] part of my, my, my, my Brown experience.

And so, you know, nothing but really fond memories of that time. But also, just some real kind of more personal existential questions. You know, I mentioned, meaning my husband, but even culturally speaking, you know, my husband is a, is a Harlemit. He's a Black American. And, you know, you know, here I was this, like, girl who'd lived all over the world and thought of myself as very worldly and, and experienced in issues of culture. And yet, you know, there was kind of a very unique minority experience in the United States that I really was not exposed

to. And so, a lot of learning, a lot of learning. A lot of learning about myself, and a lot of learning of how the world saw, how people in this new world saw me. And, you know, some of those lessons positive and some of those lessons, you know, [18:00] not so positive. And, but I think it's all it's all part of our learning process.

AK: So to back up a little bit, how did your dad respond to that conversation about changing your concentration?

BA: My father is, he's, he's funny. He's, he's actually quite serious. And so not a lot, not a lot of well, it's funny. Let me just say, he, this is a totally different discussion going off topic. The father that I had is not the grandfather that my children have experienced. I don't even know this man. But when I grew up, my dad was fairly strict and very, you know, and I get it, it's all about, you know, wanting me to achieve the things that I think he wanted me to achieve. But so, when I told him, and this is not knock to the economists in the world, you know, I also didn't tell him, I led with that I was going to switch my major to economics, even though obviously, my second major was development studies, [19:00] which really was what I wanted to do, but I figured economics sounded better in this conversation, to lead. And I just remember, his complaint was, "Everyone's an economist!" So it was, as oftentimes conversations with parents sometimes go, it was not as bad as I actually thought it was going to be. I think the dread I had built up was worse. And, you know, I think I realized at that point, how much trust he had placed in me as, you know, this was my journey. And, you know, and it's, it's just a very interesting experience to be an international student and to be an immigrant. You know, there's a lot of things about the collegiate experience that like my parents just really didn't understand. You know, just because it was, it wasn't their experience. So, things that perhaps, you know, I really couldn't go to them to talk to or get advice on. [20:00] Not because out of a lack of care, of course, but it was just not an experience they'd had. And so, so I think that those were, those were interesting moments. But yeah, no, they were, my father was so thrilled.

Fast forward to beaming moments. I just, I still, another key moment, I remember was graduation and my father and mother on campus and my dad just walking around, just like, chest out, just you know. By the way, my father is very, he's, he's a total fanboy, and you know, paraphernalia, Brown sweatshirt, Brown cap, you know –

AK: The pennant.

BA: The Brown mug. It's really so sweet. And even after all these years, my dad actually kept the very first Brown sweatshirt that he bought back then. And when Naomi, my oldest, went to Brown [21:00] two years ago, he gave her that sweatshirt, and it was, you know, really, really very sweet and very full circle.

AK: That's wonderful. Another follow up question, which sorority did you pledge? And do you have any memories that you would like to share about being in that sorority?

BA: Yeah, for sure. I mean, I was a Theta, a Kappa Alpha Theta. And, yeah, all great. We, I mean, you know, we also, you know, pledged as a little group of friends and so it was a continuation of our, of our friendship. But the rest of the, you know, young women who became part of my family at the time, also, again, hailed from just all different parts of the country. You know, I learned so much about – I never thought I'd want to live in a women, a female only environment [22:00] for a lot of reasons, including the bathrooms. But, you know, again, I just, I, and it wasn't planned, I think it's interesting how sometimes you just walk through the doors that open in front of you. And that felt like the right next thing, and I'm so grateful that I did it. Once again, I didn't grow up with US college experience, or even a good understanding of what the Greek system, or what these houses were. So, you know, some people kind of knew, go to college thinking "I'm going to pledge." I, for me, it was just much more of a social and, and finding a place with others that I felt, like, thought like me, could be like me, where I could really be myself. And, and, yeah, I really always appreciated that, you know, Theta in particular, to me always felt just very open. You know, I'm extraordinarily proud of those young ladies, especially last year, and kind of taking a stand [23:00] with, you know, disaffiliation with the National chapter based on, you know, wanting to be a more inclusive place, and not just standing in support, but really being anti-racist. And, you know, I'd like to believe that, that that legacy, that rebel was always in there all this time. You know, for me, there was a very distinct reason why that was the house I chose. And I think a lot of it had to do with, you know, I felt that, I felt, I felt it was an inclusive place for someone like me.

AK: So, to set a little bit of historical context, you are also at college in a time where, on campus, there's the takeover of University Hall for need-blind admissions. There's the Cohen v. Brown, Title IX case. There's the push for divestment. Nationally, there's the [24:00] LA riots. There's the case with Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas. Were any of these kind of local and national moments impacting your experience on campus?

BA: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And again, back to where I mentioned, kind of my educate, my, my own education about the minority experience in this country. I would say that, really, it was that, that pivotal moment that, you know, for me, it was a real understanding for kind of the inequality and the discrepancies, not just of brown, other brown students, and I mean brown color, and, you know, ethnicity, but, but also women. And, you know, I think it was an interesting time. I think back to the things that we thought were acceptable, or, you know, certainly generationally, we had been taught, [25:00] you know, you don't complain, you just kind of grin and bear it, the best way to kind of get ahead is to just go along, you know. So, I feel like there was this, this, just this, this inherent tension in the expectations of how we were meant to behave in order to find success and to find acceptance versus this innate desire to want things to be different and, and to have a voice and to, and to, and to actually speak out.

Now, fast forward to where we are today. And in particular, when we talked about last summer, especially raising three young women who are Afro Latinas, right, so both identities. And, and, and, and, and it's interesting, I think that some of the things that we thought we were taking stands on back then, [26:00] to my kids today now seem like, like child's play. Like, really, guys? That's it? Like, though, you went and you did this, and you know, that, you know, it's interesting, I feel like they are so much, they, they have so much ownership, more ownership of their voice, and, and feel much more secure in their place and their right to stand up and, and say, "This isn't right." I think that, you know, for us at the time, I mean, it was a, it was just a crazy, it was just a wild time of trying to understand our own place in this, in this. And, you know, you know, I think back again, issues of like, you know, gender discrimination. You know, it was so early and but so bold, right to kind of be demanding spaces and to [27:00] be demanding to be heard and, and demanding equality, right. So, so I would say all of those are

incredibly formative in my current worldview, of, you know, kind of the spaces that we're in, and the spaces that I feel like people of color and, and women should demand at this point.

You know, I don't, it's what, I think what's so interesting is that you go to a place like Brown, I knew I was going to be challenged in all of, in many, many ways. I never anticipated the amount of activism and how much that would permeate my experience there. And, you know, even, even, and it's so, you know, it's interesting, again, also to even see, like, of my activities and things that I spent time on. You know, kind of social [28:00] impact was always a big part of, you know, kind of, at least my Brown experience, and at least, you know, my experience of, of what our responsibility to our, our community and the world at large was at Brown. And a lot of it informed by that. You know, also, you know, interesting, full circle back, you know, my time at Brown was also the beginnings of, you know, what is now Harambee house, right? And it was, and full circle is my daughter lives there, you know, and it's just so interesting, right? It was like a, was a germ of an idea that, you know, Black students felt like there should physically be a space that celebrated who they were. And I still remember it being controversial when it came up, you know, it was kind of like. And so yeah, and I love the evolution and now seeing it full circle and you know, then, then now, [29:00] especially in a year that we've just experienced last year, having their highest application, you know, year yet, right, and that's beautiful. That's an amazing thing, you know, that Brown has, you know, evolved to a place where, you know, people can be part and participants of a larger community, but also, you know, celebrate what makes them unique.

AK: I, I love and kind of get the tingles that, for you, this moment is kind of full circle, but for your daughter, it might even just be the start of her circle. And who knows, you know, when I call her for her interview, what her full circle is going to look like.

BA: Yeah, I actually completely agree with you. I, you know, I've talked to other, other parents who, you know, other alums too. And it's interesting, you know, you want your kids to experience their own journey and, but what's so unique to me about [30:00] Brown is that these themes, these themes that permeated my experience, even though she's going at it in her own way, and very differently, these themes permeate her experience as well. And, and it's, it's, it's, it's super cool. I mean, it's amazing. I mean, sorry, we've didn't, we've didn't talk too much

about my husband, but you know, my, my husband's a Brown alum. And, you know, interesting, he has a very different experience, you know, for him being African American at that time, you know, his journey was, was, was very distinct. And, and certainly distinct from mine. And so, so you're absolutely right, it's like, now we get to see the experience through the lens of our daughter, but it's, it is, it's, I keep on having these full circle moments, right? It's, you know, she's super involved now with Swearer and, [31:00] and she tutors and it's the stuff that I was doing. But, but she's kind of found it on her own, you know, and it's, and it's, and it's a, it's a wonderful thing to see the, like I said, kind of the foundational tenets of what I think the Brown experience is, which, of course, is academic inquiry and cross pollination. And you know, she has a major very much like mine, which was just kind of this interdisciplinary melding of things, which is the core of, you know, who we are as a campus. But then this ability to socially be involved, and, you know, so I, like I said, very unique experience of her own, but very much grounded in I think the key, the key pillars of what I think make Brown so unique.

AK: So, as we kind of look ahead from your time at Brown. Graduation day comes, 1994, correct? [32:00] Do you have your first job lined up already? Did you know what, what direction you wanted to take at that point? Kind of what, what were you seeing as you graduated and started to move on?

BA: So no. Meaning, well, I'm sorry, no and yes. I dove into this academic experience to learn. I don't think I had a plan for I'm doing this because I want this kind of career. I just, I don't know, again, back to maybe ignorance is bliss, but I was like, I'm here to soak up things. I don't know, eventually I'll figure out how this all fits into some sort of job. So, I feel grateful that I kind of didn't limit myself based on limitations of thinking already professionally, what was I going to do with it? At the time, you know, I, I thought I wanted to do something in the public sector. [33:00] You know, like I said, my degree is in economics and, and then, you know, development studies. And I had interned in the summer at NGOs, and I really, you know, having my international background, I also felt like, maybe that's the path. And, and so I signed up to take the United Nations entry exam. I was going to do that and kind of see if there was a home for me, or, or, you know, I'd looked at a couple of other NGOs. And, but I also had this relationship brewing and, you know, I think I mentioned he's from New York City. And so, you know, part

of me was like, well, maybe I should, you know, I've told this story before in other broad forums that my career and my life in New York has absolutely everything to do with a boy, which is, of course, the advice that I give my daughter's not to do. Don't follow the boy. [34:00] But, at the time, I have to say, as much as I was thinking career, I was also thinking relationship. And look, at the time my parents were still in Asia so the only other option for me was like, moving to Asia and trying to find something professionally there. You know, I needed practically a job that would sponsor my visa. So, at the time, you know, investment banking and consulting was what came to campus early. And so, I figured I'm an econ major, I can, I can be an investment banker. Literally, that was the thought. And so yeah, so I ended up interviewing and, and taking a job at Kidder Peabody. You know, partially and this is where I, you know, sometimes I think, I think women in particular make a lot of career choices very, very pragmatically. You know, it wasn't a question of like, [35:00] what's my dream job? And what do I want to be? And what fulfills me? It was very much like, okay, how do I get a visa? How do I move to New York? How do I make enough money that I can, I can afford to be in the United States without asking and burdening my parents, right? So, so in doing the math, I was like, okay, this job seems to check off these things and yeah, I'll get there and figure it out.

So, so I graduated with a job, which was amazing. And, but I graduated with a job in an industry that I kind of knew nothing about. So that was kind of the, the flip side to it. But yeah, but that was, that was my, my, my career, my career path journey. And again, my father worked in civil service his entire career. He was no help to me whatsoever in terms of navigating. He was just like, "I don't know. That sounds, that sounds great." So, so yeah, that was a little bit of kind of [36:00] how the, how the, how I ended up as my, with my first job in New York City as an investment banking analyst.

AK: So then you made the tradition, the transition, kind of, I mean, I don't know, I was going to say, at a point in your life when some people might be thinking, like, alright, this is my career and I'm going to build on it. But you decided this point to make a transition from finance to marketing. Is that – okay. So how did you know that it was the right time? And how, and why did you make that decision?

BA: So, well, I know we keep on saying these full circle moments and I'll tell you how this applies. This is another weird full circle moment. My first job was my first layoff. And I, you know, the bank got acquired. And so whereas we were, it was at that point, people were [37:00] like, we were at, we were kind of going into our second year as analysts. And so, some people who knew this was their career were like applying to business schools. And I still hadn't quite figured out what I was doing next. And so all of a sudden, there was this, you know, I thought it was taking a job that was like, stable. Now, all of a sudden, it was like, you know, I remember, like, 30 of us being brought into a conference room. And it was like, you know, here's your paperwork. And, you know, thank you for your time. And so it was a little bit out of necessity. I did not know that I wanted to go into marketing. I honestly, I was just like, okay, how do I take my financial skills and what can I do with this? I did get really lucky, I'd worked on a transaction with, by the way, not my area. I did emerging markets. I just was borrowed on this transaction, so serendipitous, in the media sector. I didn't know anything [38:00] about media. I'm not a person who grew up like wanting to be in entertainment. I didn't even know careers existed in media. So, but I worked on this deal. It was back when Turner and CBS were potentially looking at a transaction. So, I'd met the Turner team. And so, when all this happened, one of our clients on the Turner side said, "What are you, are you are you going to business school? Like, what do you think you're doing?" And I said, "No, I need a job." And he said, "Well, would you consider coming to work on the client side in finance?" And I was like, "Oh, yeah, that sounds cool." And I remember he said to me, you know, "You get to leave at 5:30."

AK: Sold!

BA: And I was like, "Oh, sold!" Yes, after like, you know, a year and a half of not seeing like the outside of my apartment. It was a 50% pay cut. [39:00] So, you know, I was like, okay, we're going to be eating lots of mac and cheese.

AK: Yeah.

BA: But I remember being so excited. Right. Just, you know, I didn't know anything about the industry. But you know, I'm a, you know, fairly good analyst. And so, so, yeah, so I went into it

like thinking, okay, I'm going to be in finance in the industry. Once I was there and started to learn, I supported the advertising sales group, but once I was there, I really was like, wow, this is a really interesting business like this model. This entertainment business generally. And at the time kind of cable, the cable industry was just growing, you know, it was really a broadcast networks that were the biggest, you know. And, and I definitely think even then, I was always like, very interested in business models. So even though I supported ad sales, I was like, wait a minute, these guys make a whole bunch of money from this other thing called distribution. Let me, let me go find out, over the cubicle, let me find out what my friends does over here, right? [40:00] And so, for me, it was a little bit of an education about the media sector and understanding like how money is made. And out of that came like, huh, I, I'd like to get closer to, at the time, what was kind of business development. Like, can I, can I pivot my financial skills to really help support growth for these businesses? And so, I left Turner for an opportunity at Univision. You know, one because they were an amazing new entity growing. Two, because they were focused on the US Hispanic business, and I was like, this is incredible. And, and they were like a startup. They were like, completely what today's startup was. It was like, you know, this, this amazingly talented and highly educated team of like, young people trying to make this thing happen. And they were like, come, come, come. And, you know, you kind of don't have a title, but get in here. And, [41:00] and I remember it just being really dynamic. Once I was there, it was like, great, you know, you know, financially, I'd done a lot of analysis. So it was like, great, I got to work on deals, I got to work on distribution. You know, at the time, I don't know, people didn't really know how to use PowerPoint. It was like a weird skill to have. And I came out of investment banking. So, they were like, "Fantastic. You know how to make pretty pictures. You're the marketing department." I was like, "Okay."

AK: Yeah, let's do it.

BA: That is literally how my career went. It was so not planned. I had, I had no background in marketing, other than being able to do PowerPoint. And yet, you know, at a really young age, you're being given a lot of responsibility, and you're being given budgets, and it was really exciting. And so, once I was there, yeah, I was, I was sold, I was like this, this is a really cool, creative space, amazing people. And then after Univision was when I got a call about going over

to HBO, you know, to really [42:00] kind of help them think about multicultural segments and markets. Again, back to my background, business development, they were launching channels, there was a whole bunch of new stuff. By the way, when I went to HBO, it was just a movie channel, we had not launched our original programming yet. My first year, there was when we launched *The Sopranos*. So, it was also again, this very nascent time for the company. And, you know, I feel like I was really lucky that I got to be at a space where I could explore and raise my hand for things that I wanted to do. So, you know, worked in marketing at the beginning of my career, worked in business development, you know, worked in sales. Like I, I feel like I had I had seven careers within my time at HBO. But, you know, but ultimately, it all comes back to having started in investment banking. I think finance was always, the financial aspect of the, of the industry was always something that's stayed with me [43:00] and, and so I think, when I think about where I ended my career at HBO, running global revenue for the company, it makes perfect sense, right? It's, it's, I acquired all these things along the way, you know, in terms of kind of our, our marketing and our sales and our content acquisition, and, you know, technology, certainly, as we launched our new streaming services, but the root of all of it for me, was, how does this company make money and how do we make more money? And so, you know, so, you know, ending as being the head of revenue really was, you know, the culmination of many, many, many years. But also, back to attribute it to the brown experience, I feel like in my career, I was a little bit of a jack of all trades, at certain points. Happy to delve into this, you know, oh, what, you know, boom, the.com boom. "We need a website. Does anybody know how to make one of those happen?" "Me!" You know, I feel like there was a lot of, a lot of what's infused in us at Brown has, has [44:00] shown up really clearly in my career, so.

AK: Is there one piece of advice you would give to the person who's trying to look over the cubicle and trying to make it to that other department or that other area of the company? What is the one piece of advice you would give that person?

BA: Well, first of all, it's to look over the cubicle. I think, I think I say this a lot in particular to women, and in particular to communities of color. Some of us still have this ethos of, you know, if I just put my head down and work hard enough, like someone's going to recognize that, you know, I'm ready for whatever's next. And, and look, I think it's wonderful when it does happen.

But I think that so much now is about kind of taking the reins of your career and figuring out where you want it to go. That just looking up and realizing that you should [45:00] be looking over the cubicle and you should be networking with your peers and with, and better understanding, you know, where the company is moving and where things, you know what potential possibilities there are for you outside of what you're currently doing. That's kind of the first piece.

The second piece is, you know, I, it's a risk. Look, I get it. Right. But, and I think some, sometimes we get the, the risk looms so large in our minds, right, that it's like, well, I just rather stay with what I know. I think that the work world is so dynamic now that all of us need to get into, need to get comfortable with change, and, and the pace at which change comes and so raising your hand when you see an opportunity, even if it doesn't mean a promotion, even if it means let me sidecar on a project, you know, I think is the best way to find inroads into the things [46:00] that you ultimately want to do. And look for me, I told you, some of it was that it needed to happen. I was losing my job and so I needed a job. But just taking a job that was 50% less than what I made, it was scary, but I felt like this is an opportunity. I'm going to learn. This is like a whole new, and I kept on thinking, look at the end of the day, this isn't, you know, give it a year, and then we'll see. Right? And so, I think our, our ability, I think we often underestimate our own resilience and our ability to handle change and adapt to change.

And so my advice, one, is make sure you're looking up and over the cubicle. And especially as women, I think we have to advocate for ourselves, we have to, we have to tell people that we want to do different things, and not just wait for someone to ask us, "Hey, are you thinking you want to do [47:00] something different?" You know, one big pivot in my career came from raising my hand and going to my boss and saying, "Listen, I feel like I've just been doing this for a while I know, I'm doing it really well. But I don't want to be," by the way, at the time, I was running our multicultural marketing department. And the conversation was, and here's why I'm really lucky, I had an incredible boss and mentor, and she was a Black woman, and I said to her, "You know, Olivia, I, I know people in this company value me and think I'm great. But I don't want to be seen as the person who's just great at doing the multicultural stuff. I'm great in all things. I can do this, but for other things." And, and I said to her, "I feel like at this point in my career, if I don't pivot out of this, for the time being, I don't think that people will see me out, you know, see me as someone who's capable of more." And so whether that's

your story, as a, as a person of color, or as a woman, or as [48:00] you know, someone who you know, has a degree in finance, and now I, people only see you as someone who just does finance, like, I think that story resonates, which is you know, there are moments where there's an opportunity to kind of step a little bit left from the career path that you're on, in order to see, people see, for people to see you more broadly. And, and so for me, those were, were moments and they weren't easy moments. Like, you know, my kids now know me as mom and who I am and, and look, I have years of experience being this person. So I come across as someone who's highly confident, and you know, believe me imposter syndrome the entire way. But especially early in my career. I was, I was young, I was, I was definitely saddled with, you know, a Latin American background that was about hierarchy and respect. And so, I didn't naturally know how to ask for these things. [49:00] But I'll tell you what, it took a few peers getting promoted a few times over me to realize, wait a minute, this isn't working for me, like I need to, I need to figure out how to get a voice. In my own words, in my own, I don't want to change who I am. But I need to figure out a way to, to, to advocate for myself. And so, so, I would say that's my advice is at the end of the day, you know, you look in the mirror, your best advocate is you. Nobody's going to do it better than you.

AK: Well, we are running up on time here. I have eight zillion follow up questions for you. So, we can maybe talk about a part two later.

BA: Sure.

AK: But I'd like to thank you so much for joining me today and sharing your really beautiful, amazing story. And I hope maybe we'll be able to pick up again on it.

BA: I love it. Thank you so much. And I'm just so happy to be part of whatever, hopefully somebody 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now will look [50:00] back at these, at these stories and, at the very least feel validated and inspired in their journey.

Part 2

AK: 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. It is Tuesday, April 13, 2021. It is 10am. And I am here again with Bernadette Aulestia to record part two of her oral history interview. Thank you for joining me again.

BA: Thanks, it's great to chat again.

AK: So, we left off on part one where you were talking about your, you deciding to move throughout HBO, and eventually, I think, ultimately come to the decision that it was time to leave HBO, which was not all that long ago. So, I think just so we can touch on it again, if you wouldn't mind, reminding our listeners, why you decided to leave, perhaps at that point [1:00] in your life and in HBO's history, and what you decided to do next.

BA: Yeah, so, you know, just to recap, I obviously built much of my career at HBO. I was there for 23 years, which is a really long time. Felt like eight different jobs within one, one long one. But, you know, I would say that in 2017, you know, the media industry has just been completely shifting and completely, you know, impacted, I would say, by kind of the shift in technology. So, you know, if you think about 2017, a lot of media entertainment, you know, consumer consumption had shifted to online use, mobile device use, [2:00] you know, certainly Netflix and kind of the advent of subscription streaming services. So, you know, we, we obviously had, as a company had made bets in the streaming space. But in '17, you know, just given there was so much movement, there was also a lot of m&a activity. And so, at the time, Time Warner, the larger company, that, that is kind of the, the corporate entity around HBO, Time Warner and, and Turner, you know, kind of began to engage in some conversations with other companies that were interested in acquiring, you know, content companies. And as you can imagine, that was very varied, it was everything from tech companies looking to maybe buy content companies all the way to ultimately who ended up being our acquirer AT&T, so a company that is in telecom, and traditionally, obviously, has a very large [3:00] wireless business. And, you know, really felt that owning content as part of a kind of emerged experience was going to be the future. So that

came about in 2017. You know, interestingly enough, the acquisition took much longer than expected. The acquisition really didn't complete until two years later. The Department of Justice sued and so there was, you know, back to, look, I think there's always concerns about consolidation across technology and entertainment and telecom. And but ultimately, so AT&T, obviously acquired the company in, in fully, and really began operating the company in 2019. So, so, you know, as somebody who always, you know, had oversight for the HBO part of the business and our revenue and, you know, 1200 employees worldwide, that was a pretty intense time period of transitioning, not just into possibly, obviously, what a new ownership would look like, [4:00] but even just structurally. So, so, I will say that when the acquisition was completed, you know, we always knew that there were going to be fundamental shifts and changes to how these companies would be run and some, some level of consolidation. And so, two things came to mind for me personally, at the time. One was, you know, philosophically, you know, I've always, even though people think of HBO as you know, obviously, the gold standard and this really great company that is kind of at the top of this game, you know, when I say I was there 23 years, I feel like I started there when we were just like this like scrappy startup, right? And, you know, lived through original content creation and really creating what would become the standard really of how premium content is created. So, it was interesting to now be on the other end of that journey, right. A company [5:00] that was kind of at the top now being acquired by a massive company. And so, two things came to mind. One was, you know, how would I fit within kind of a much larger organization and philosophically was that where I envisioned myself? You know, I've grown up as a, almost like a general manager, most of my career with a lot of autonomy, overseeing many, many segments of the business. And when you walk into, when you kind of come into much larger organizations, and when I say they're massive compared to HBO, they are. You know, the way large organizations tend to be run of that scale, jobs get bigger, but scope of work oftentimes gets narrower, which makes perfect sense, right. But it becomes a much more matrix organization. And, and so for me, there was that one piece, which was, you know, I've always kind of been master of my little domain, [6:00] I wasn't sure whether that's where I wanted to go next with my career. And then I would say that there was just also this, I'd been at this one company for so long, and it just felt like, maybe this was the opportunity, maybe this was the kick in the pants to kind of think differently.

And so, I stayed through the transition. And a part of me is grateful that there were changes that were being made organizationally that kind of became the answer for me. I think, I think, I don't think I was quite ready to make that call myself, if that makes sense. And I do. It's interesting. I know a lot of women, especially, who've been in long standing careers and have been in one place, it's tough to let go. I mean, it's tough to know when, and oftentimes, what you hear is a lot of, a lot of us have benefited from almost external sources helping us make that decision. [7:00] And so for me, you know, I felt like I knew where it was going to head. And as someone who had built this team, and the company as we knew it, I was like, you know, it feels like kind of some new owner bought the car and it's probably good to just hand the keys over, regardless of whether I think they're taking a wrong or a right turn next, right. And, and that's tough, because I think also, once you leave, you know, there's still a part of you, that stays, you know, especially for me, I, you know, I've known many of these people, for so long, I've seen them grow and evolve. So, you stay, you stay connected to wanting them, you know, wanting to know and wanting them to do well. But it's also hard, because now you're no longer part of the organization. And so, there's a little bit of, you know, Monday night quarterbacking that happens. And, and so it was an interesting personal exercise in, in, in, in learning to let go I [8:00] think a little bit, you know, so mentally, I made the decision, I knew this was the right thing for me to kind of move on. I left on phenomenal terms, I'm really, really proud of the incredible team and in particular, my direct reports. I knew, like, these guys are going to do great. And it's what I told my, my, my, my outgoing CEO at the time, I just said to him, "Listen, you're not going to miss me. These guys are phenomenal. They're going to rock it." And, and they have. But, I think the, the journey was the interesting piece. So mentally, I was like, yes, is what I'm doing. I think the heart piece was different. And that took a little bit of time.

So, I left it in 2019, the summer of 2019, you know, was also at a at a life inflection point in that we were sending our first daughter off to college, to Brown. And, and so, so the summer was filled with lots of distractions, right? Shopping and figuring out what [9:00] bedding is going to match and all these things. And so, I really didn't have to think about, you know, this big decision I'd made, I think I feel like for the summer. And then as a family what we decided was older one was heading off to college, we have a middle daughter, but she was heading off on a semester abroad, and, and then we have our younger daughter who at the time was 10. And I wanted some time away and my husband was writing a book and so we said you know what, and

this is what's crazy is that we did this pre pandemic, which of course now this has become the thing to do, but we decided that we'd always, I, you know, I'm from abroad. We've talked about this. I'm from Ecuador, I've, we've always wanted to maybe live abroad for a little bit, a Spanish speaking country, obviously preferable. And so, we packed up and at the end of that year decided to move to Costa Rica. So, so, we put our kid in school and just had this blissful time there. Definitely thinking about what's next. And what I want to [10:00] do when I come back. And then talk about a lesson and best laid out plans, right? I had this vision I was going to go, I was going to spend time, we were going to do the semester, then I was going to come back for the summer, and then I'd probably think about what else to do. And then just like everybody else, the pandemic hit in March and everything just went out the window. So, so that's a little bit of kind of the journey.

And so then we came back. And a lot of what I planned for kind of, you know, was, you know, was just like, who knows now. So, but I have to say, lots of, lots of lessons learned. And I'm very, very grateful, obviously, for the time to be able to spend away, and away from certainly the world I've known professionally, to really think a little bit about more personally, like, what am I invested in? What do I, what do I want to do next? What I want to do with this, these skills and this talent, and how can I contribute in a broader way. And so, I came back, [11:00] both to COVID, then to an incredibly difficult spring and summer of racial reckoning for this country, which I feel like only solidified my personal desire to use these skills and this talent wisely. So, it wasn't what I planned, but it definitely ended up being maybe what I needed, if that makes sense.

AK: I've often been thinking of the Rolling Stones lately, and my response to everything is, you don't always get what you want, but sometimes you get what you need.

BA: Yeah, that's exactly right.

AK: So, you moved to Costa Rica in, at the end of 2019, with the intention to stay there for a period of time, that was probably longer than what you were there for. So, were you in Costa Rica, when you started hearing about the pandemic?

BA: Yes. [12:00] Yes. So, we were in Costa Rica. And, you know, just like everybody else, I feel like, you know, January became this, like, oh, this thing that felt very far away was happening. And then progressed fairly quickly. And, you know, I'll tell you, there were some decisions that we made, originally, we were like, well, you know, maybe we should just kind of stay here and wait. But as things began to evolve on a really daily and weekly basis, it became very apparent. And, also, this was also some interesting lessons in, I like to tell people that, so, we live in New Jersey, and I say that with love. But being in the tri state area, you know, you tend to complain a lot about, you know, a lot of things. I, you know, people's personalities, the fact that people [13:00] are a little bit rash, the fact that sometimes things aren't the way you want them to be. And, and I do have to say, I don't think I appreciated as much. First of all, my right to be able to say these things and complain. But second of all, just how the ease and accessibility of things that we take for granted, right. So you take for granted access to health care, you take advantage; you take for granted, by the way access to incredibly well stocked supermarkets and, and, and pharmacies; you take for granted, you know, even potentially, you know, from a legal standpoint, right, we have access to all these things that are really almost at the tip of our finger. And I didn't expect that to be one lesson, but we were now in Costa Rica. First of all, not citizens of this country, right. [14:00] So that in itself puts you in an incredibly interesting and difficult position, and scary because you're just like, well, I don't know how this is going to work for me, or for us as a family. Not with access to your regular doctors and your, you know, here we were, I mean, we didn't plan for any of this. So, it was an interesting time of very quick decision making. As I mentioned earlier, Naomi was at Brown, and, you know, all of a sudden, it was like, well, I think she's going to have to come home and we weren't physically there. My other daughter, as I mentioned, was on a semester abroad in Latin America. She was in Ecuador, and then she was in Peru, ultimately got stuck in Peru when Peru closed its borders out. And we made a decision, I think on, yeah, I remember, still remember, it was like March 18. And we made this decision on a Monday that this was just not looking good as borders began closing. [15:00] And we booked a flight last minute on Wednesday, ultimately, that ended up being the last flight before kind of all closures, so it was just a really wild time.

We love Costa Rica, we love the people. I mean, talk about a country who, you know, despite certain disadvantages, I mean talk about, and this is I think, is interesting observations about access to countries that have free health care, and where there is a lot of education in the

population around it. I mean, even before masks became a mandate anywhere else in the world, you know, I still remember those very early weeks, like supermarkets already had dispensers at the entrance, people were wiping down things, people were already wearing their masks, they had public health campaigns, on the radio and on television. So, it was such an interesting, an interesting view of, you know, what's possible. [16:00] And I know they're tiny, tiny the size of, but I think, I think, also was interesting, an interesting, interesting lessons, right, in terms of what happens when you have a public health system, and, and how much faster and better you can get organized.

And then ultimately, like I said, we kind of scrambled and gave away stuff. And then just kind of move back and collected our children. So thankfully, Naomi, my parents were able to pick her up, and my middle child, Zoe, got stuck. But ultimately, the State Department evacuated them. Took about like two and a half weeks. And so, and then when she arrived, she got COVID the very next day, well, we, the diagnosis. So, I mean, it was just like a crazy, crazy time. So, so the ending of our idyllic trip was not quite idyllic. But, but I go back to what I started with, I just remember [17:00] flying back into Newark Airport, which my daughter tells me apparently is ranked the worst airport in the United States. I, can I tell you, I can now understand why people kiss the floor when they arrive in countries. There was something about being home. And, and yes, it's, it's, it's our love, it's our New Jersey, but it just felt safe. And it felt nice to be back to a place where we, were we knew things. And granted, we, we were all scrambling for things that we didn't know. But it's, it's very different when you're kind of back in your home environment.

AK: So, when Zoe made it back home, was there any sort of requirement that she get a COVID test or as a family were you taking these precautions?

BA: No. No. So, this is, like predates a lot of these things. Right? It was really the beginnings of just, you know, they were, you know, borders were closing, but there wasn't a lot of information yet. And by the way, not a lot of information about much that we know today about young people versus older people. [18:00] Like it just, it was just all in flux. We went, we had to, we had to drive to Virginia to pick her up since it was a you know, State Department flight. And we masked up and we took wipes with us. And you know, we figured, look she's been in these public areas, by the way transiting because she wasn't even in like a main city. So, when we

picked her up, we, we, you know, we were, we gave her a mask, and we came back home and our intent was, well, you know, what, she should just kind of hang out in her room and, and, you know, we'll, we'll, we'll kind of make do for at least, you know, a week or so and just see how she does. That said, we, when I said we were going to make her, let her hang out in her room, we clearly were still letting her come down to the kitchen. You know, it's so, so we were fortunate, I feel like, the next morning, she had this cough. [19:00] Other than that, she looked pretty okay. And I remember saying to my husband, "Oh, I think we should take her temperature," right? Because we all at that point knew that maybe that was one of the, and I remember him being like, "Oh, okay," and she was like, "I don't really feel anything." And then you took her temperature and she had this fever and we were like, wait, wait a minute. So, at that point we did. We were like she needs to be in her room. And ever, and she'll tell you, since then it definitely felt like you know, we all would walk in with gloves and our masks and definitely were feeding her like literally like almost under the, under the, under the door. But, but it was too early. No one would test her at that point. You know, she was under 18. So, they were like, just unless she gets really badly, please don't come to an emergency room. So just, so, that was that. We kind of, we kind of, we kind of did what we knew to do here for the two, three, three weeks really before she felt herself. [20:00] So, so yeah, it was just a it was a wild time.

AK: If you feel comfortable sharing, did her symptoms get worse? And how has her recovery process been since?

BA: Sure, yeah, much worse, much worse. I tell people for somebody who is very healthy and very athletic and very energetic, I mean, it completely wiped her out. And I mean, the, the chest and the coughing, it just was, was horrible. And like I've mentioned, it really took her about three weeks before she felt better. But as someone who runs and I remember in that first month and a half, like she would still get incredibly winded, so. So, she kind of had this longer tail of fatigue, really, probably not until about month two [21:00] or three, where she really started feeling like, okay, I can go for a run, and I'm not like, incredibly, you know, out of breath. So, we were just surprised at just the severity in someone who's you know, super, super healthy. You know, as parents and as older people, that was scary, because that definitely you were like, oh, wait, like, if she's handling it this way, we got, all got to make sure that we're okay. So, but

yeah, it was just an interesting time. And she was trying to finish her 11th, junior year semester. So that was also just like, it was just a really trying time, I would say for her frankly, as, let's just say her second semester, junior year did not end up being what she thought what's going to be.

AK: Now that we've been living the pandemic life for over a year, looking back on this past year, is there any way you would have prepared or anything that you would have done differently had you known that we would be here [22:00] today, April 13, 2021, still kind of living that life?

BA: Well, I mean, it's tough. It's tough to kind of, you know, think about it in retrospect. You know, we're, I'll give you a small example. Like, we're family who just, we love travel. And we've always loved and just had that freedom. So like, imagine where should we go this year, right? And, and that, that in itself felt like, like, I feel like it was like, wow, especially having just come back from Costa Rica felt like, there, there, you take for granted that these moments will always be available for you. And I think that a greater appreciation for when you're able to do those things really being there, present, because who knows, when the next time will be, right, that we'll be able to do that stuff.

You know, I think that, [23:00] I think we were all caught off guard, frankly, by just how unprepared we were for how to deal with a public health crisis, you know. And so, I, you know, I'd love, I'd love to believe that if this ever happens, again, which, you know, many people would argue that we might have more of these types of things. You know, I think we definitely learned a lot about what, what, what to do, what to have on hand. My husband definitely became a prepper. We now have, you know, a closet full of stuff. Who knows when we'll use it, but, so, but it does make you realize that, yeah, I mean, I wish, I just feel like even just that whole supply chain. I've never had interest, but now have such a much greater appreciation right, for just supply chain in this country. And I think [24:00] people probably didn't realize how heavily dependent we are on, especially for not just even consumer products, but like, parts that create products, right? I mean, we're so interdependent globally. And I think that that was an interesting, those are interesting lessons, you know, and things that you learn about, and that you understand.

But in, like, you know, being better prepared. I don't even know how anybody could have ever anticipated where we are, you know what I mean? But, you know, some silver linings, which I think I'm hearing a lot of people, you know, we've been able to really, you know, I had a kid who was supposed to be flying off to, you know, flying after her new, and all of a sudden she was back home. And so, I think there's been something really nice about as a family, having this incredible appreciation for this unique time that we have together and a hope obviously that it's going to eventually [25:00] return to some normalcy. But, but that's been really special. It's been really nice and, and I look at my 10-year-old who, you know, was really sad and thought like her big sister was heading off and the joy that she had when she was home during that time was almost like a second chance that like, at like, you know, having just at least more time with her so. So that was really cool.

AK: So I do want to touch upon the other national and in a lot of ways, international, events that have followed during the pandemic as well. But before we get there, you were also, I guess, trying to make your next career decision in the early parts of the pandemic as well. How did you make those decisions on, on what to do next? And, and what ultimately did you decide was the next step?

BA: Yeah, well, I mean, that was a little, it was a little unplanned. So, before I left, [26:00] I'd already been sitting on one public board prior to leaving HBO. And that was really interesting, too. You know, I don't think most people go on to boards thinking that you're going to be encountering a global crisis. And so that in itself became very intense. And that board in particular is in the retail restaurant business. So, as you can imagine, it was, you know, it really turned into like, weekly conversations of making really big decisions. And so that filled up a lot of time. You know, when we first got back, I don't think obviously, as many of us didn't, anticipate how long this was going to be. You know, I think most people, I still remember people saying, "Well, you know," this was spring, it was like, "Well, hopefully, by the end of the summer, things will be," right? And, and so interestingly enough, I had interviewed for a job and [27:00] really was thinking this, I might take this job and, and it was a big responsibility job. Ultimately, you know, for reasons that have nothing to do with pandemic, completely different. It ended up not working out, even though we were at the, the offer stage. And in retrospect, I'm

so grateful I didn't, I didn't just jump right back into something. I think I was still leading with my head a little bit, right, in terms of just like what seems like the obvious next steps. And the obvious next steps where I'm now that I'm back and things are settled in the girls are home, I should probably think about career wise, what my next step was. It was an interesting lesson. Months later, I'm so happy that I didn't end up going down that route.

And when I mentioned back to, you know, the spring and summer being kind of a really interesting and difficult time, I don't know if in the earlier we talked about, you know, [28:00] my husband was also a Brown grad, is African American, so we have, you know, biracial girls, and so a lot of interesting family conversations about what was happening externally. What does it mean for you internally? You know, I think a really, you know, maybe, especially when you're younger, a recognition that perhaps the world is much, much worse than you thought it was, in some ways. And maybe in other ways, you were encouraged by seeing that maybe it's better in other ways, and that there are allies and people who care about kind of, so it was just an interesting time. But I mentioned this, because even for me, it was like, well, what kind of role do I want to go into? Do I want to continue to help other people build their wealth and their companies? Do I want to maybe do something that feels more [29:00] equitable for me, and, and one of the things I've always said is, I feel like in that conversation, there's a lot of, a lot of it has to do with kind of whether you have, feel like you have a voice at the table. And whether you feel like you have an equitable partnership and relationship with, with people. And one of the things I've always loved about board work is that you work, you are working alongside people, right, and, and oftentimes that can feel like a much more equitable relationship than when you work for someone. And so those were little tiny things that kind of were going on in my head as I was thinking, well, what do I want to do? I also invest and, and I'm really quite passionate about women and founders of color. And this was also really interesting and difficult times for many people. There were people who were trying to you know, people now think about like, wow, look at the plethora of funding and [30:00] money and stuff that's happening in the startup world. Well, in early spring, you know, most, most startups were, you know, laying off people, putting people on, on furlough, scaling down operations. So, as someone who had time, it felt like a really great thing to be able to be a resource and be kind of advising. And, and that was great. And it was, and it was wonderful to be able to feel like I could kind of, again, back to how do you use your talents. Well, you know what, maybe this is a way that I can be helpful.

Ultimately, you know, what's beautiful is that so many of, came kind of right back out and, and have been able to kind of go into additional fundraising, and now, you know, the future looks much brighter. And then there's been an influx of funding for founders of, diverse founders. So, so that also became like, just took up a lot of time, but I loved it. [31:00] And so I don't think I had any plans, ultimately. At that point, you know, I think everybody's plans went out the window. So, I was like, I'm just going to stop planning and I'm just going to start, I have this, I don't even know who said it to me, but I, it stuck with me, with every opportunity that's come up, just kind of saying that you kind of walk through the door that opens in front of you, rather than overthinking. And that's kind of the philosophy, you know.

So, I've done my board work. I stepped onto another board, that again, also kind of came out of nowhere, you know, and it just felt like the right next thing, right. It's, to me right now, it's about like, I mentioned this earlier, because it's the philosophy I have, I feel like my whole career has been very head driven. You know, I plan it, I plot it, you know, I've got my like, like head, doing the numbers. This stage for me feels much more like a heart decision. It's, it's, it's how do I feel right now? How does this conversation make me feel? How do these people [32:00] make me feel? And, you know, is this a space I want to be in? Do I feel energized? And, and it's been nice, that's a complete change of pace for me to kind of lead that way. But it's come, it's, it's yielded some really amazing new, new, new opportunities, and no, no full-time job.

AK: So, you are also serving on the Brown Corporation.

BA: Yes.

AK: You were doing that pre and during pandemic right?

BA: Pre. Yeah.

AK: So can you tell me a little bit about what that work generally looks like and what it looked like, during a pandemic, or looks like.

BA: Yeah, well –

AK: Present tense.

BA: I'm glad, I'm glad you mentioned that, because very similarly to my experience on the public board side, you know, oftentimes, obviously, from a governance standpoint, we have our, our, our meetings that are scheduled, and we have updates in between, [33:00] and some of us sit on committees, and, you know, I'm Vice Chair of a committee and, and so there's a nice cadence to how that operates. And, again, the pandemic just kind of threw that all up in the air, right. I think like, like, you know, it's interesting that you mentioned that, because I didn't mention this, but here I am, as a parent, dealing with, you know, the emotions of having a kid who needs to come home, and what's going to happen. And so, there was all these, like, personal views, I also had about, you know, why aren't we getting more information? Or when are they going to make this decision. Meanwhile, I'm also on these, on these, you know, phone calls about how complex and difficult it is, especially when you're in the charge of, you know, half our population is, you know, you know, under the age of 21, like some of you know, still under the care of other folks. So, so that was an incredibly, [34:00] I mean, it was just really, really like zero to 100. It just solidified for me what an incredible leadership team we have. And it doesn't mean that all the decisions we made were correct. But just such passion and a heart for doing the right thing and doing the right thing by our students and doing the right thing by our community. And, and, frankly, really the responsibility that we bear also to our Providence and Rhode Island community.

And it was just an incredible thing to see Christina Paxson in action, and you know, at the at the time, Governor Raimondo, I mean, it just was beautiful to watch that. And because we're having this conversation, I have to tell you, my, my, I kept on saying my observation is that I think we were lucky to have women in leadership at the time, at the state level, and at the university level. There was just, there's no time for egos, there was no time for grandstanding. This was about fixing, [35:00] coming up with solutions, incredibly collaborative, I mean, right away, it was, let's get the best minds around this right? Not just in, within the university system, but like we have access to all these folks who are vested in our, in our, in our ecosystem in our success. So, I love watching that, like just watching the power of what I think is female

leadership. I think it's very communal, I think it's very empathetic. And I think it was the right thing at the time. And I'm really, really, really proud both as a parent really proud and as a, as a trustee, very proud, and as an alumna, really proud that, you know, I think that we were, really ultimately these were really hard decisions, but I think we ended up being one of the models, ultimately, as a university for how to bring students back safely. You know, we all knew whether it's this year [36:00] or next year, that eventually we would be in some sort of hybrid mode. And that, you know, we weren't going to be able to close University forever. So, we needed to start thinking about and putting mechanisms and systems in place for, for how to how do you go back. And so, I think like in that regard, and I will not name but my, my second daughter is going to be heading somewhere else, and, incredible place, but I think that I can see already like the fall, the preparation for the fall, like Brown's kind of already done this, so our return to fall, it's going to feel much more, it's just going to be less new things to encounter. Whereas other universities, the fall is going to be kind of almost the beginning of testing how this goes for them. So, so I just am very proud of like, I feel like we've just been a wonderful national model for, for how to, how to handle and make some really hard decisions that balance, [37:00] obviously, the freedom and the experience of our students, but, you know, in a way that doesn't jeopardize, you know, our, both our, our, our community as university but also the larger community in Rhode Island.

AK: So then, again, to turn to national events, if we can go back to May 2020. News breaks of the death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man who was killed at the hands of Minnesota police. Of course, certainly not the first time this has happened, but it re-grips national attention. Do you remember where you were when you learned about that news and kind of things that you were thinking or feeling or conversations that you were having in that moment?

BA: I do. I do. I do. I, listen, we were all at home, but, but I remember and, and I think that this is common, [38:00] you know, it's very interesting. Here we are talking about what happened in May of 2020 and now look at what has happened just this past weekend, right? And you know what, I think what I remember was a flurry of phone calls, and texts, and emails among what I would say is like my tribe of people, where, and it's, what I find so interesting about that summer is that you know, here we were showing up on these work calls and showing up the way that you're supposed to show up on a, on a, you know, and it's like, you know, I need this by five

o'clock and I need, and meanwhile everybody you know certainly in, in, in our communities were dealing with kind of this this heartbreak, right? Not, not because we didn't know these things. [39:00] Hello. I think it's almost like what, did everybody else not know that this is how it's been? But, but yeah, just we were I think it's just like the, this tipping point where, where people were just done and, and perhaps for the first time done having these behind the wall conversations amongst ourselves, but it was just kind of spilling out onto this national stage, and spilling out into workplaces, and spilling out into friendships. You know, I'm, I'm still, I still remember those weeks as just being incredibly revealing both on the professional front, on the personal front, and there just being a lot of, a lot of heartbreak and disappointment. And, and then there's like the more personal which is, you know, when you're a parent, [40:00] you know, these are conversations that you're having at the dinner table. And, and, and we don't necessarily have answers, but, you know, you're, you're, you're certainly discussing them and, and trying to figure out especially for kids like, what does this mean for me, right? And how do I fit in this equation? And, you know, we live in the northeast and so, you know, the kids have always, you know, we've always selected, it's self-selected, right, we've selected to live in places that have diverse populations. You know, for us, that's always been important being both of us, you know, minorities in this country and wanting our kids down a sense of self and seeing people like them. So, I can't even imagine what it's like for kids who, who haven't had that. And yet, even within our own community, you know, which is this, you know, super like, [41:00] little, I think of it like idyllic liberal town, 30 minutes from New York City, there was a lot of internal, you know, community level conversations. There were conversations happening at their schools, there were people in agreement, and in, and in disagreement, and it was just, like I said, I felt like it was like, not only heartbreaking in that moment, but I think that there was just several heartbreaks over, over many months for people, you know. Disappointments. Disappointments in how people were either discussing the issues or, or, or points of view. And so it was, it was an interesting thing.

That said, I feel like for me, I'm a person who I like to immediately kind of jump into action. It's the way I process, do you know? And it's, and I go back to, there's no wrong way of processing. Some people really needed, like, break, like, I can't have this conversation. And for me, it was more, and for my [42:00] kids and my husband, it's like, we're more like, okay, what can we do about this, right? What, what are the ways that we can kind of contribute to this, you

know? And so, so that was that just, it was a really interesting time. And, you know, and even within my family, I'll tell you, you know, obviously, we are a multi ethnic family. But I'm Latina, I'm not Black. And so even that conversation with my kids, right, it's like, my, even my own experience is very different than the experience, you know, of my husband or, or the experience of you know, theirs.

So, it was it was just an interesting conversation about, yeah, how do we move forward as a country? Can we move forward as a country? And I'll be honest, early in the spring, it was like, should we move back to Costa Rica? I've just, it just felt like such disappointment and heartbreak. And [43:00] maybe we'll, there'll never be a place for us here. You know? Also, remember, the backdrop is this highly politicized time. So that wasn't helping either, right. Normally, in those times you look to your leadership right, to, to make you feel like no, no, this is, this is wrong. This is anomaly. We're going to fix this. And that is not as a country what we were hearing. So, so the summer was tough. The summer was tough. And lots of, lots of conver, back to my advisory. So originally, at the beginning of the spring it was about people's businesses. Midsummer it felt like an unburdening. I just, I just knew so many female friends, both female and male friends of color in, in the, in the workplace that were just like, "Help. I need to talk to someone who's not in my space." And so, it just was a very, [44:00] yeah, it was just an intense summer of, of be, trying to be supportive. And trying to find a path forward. And, and, you know, if you fast forward, I feel like for many people, November, and the election became a real beacon of hope. That maybe, maybe, again, at the leadership level, you know, there, that this country was maybe ready to take a stand, you know. But it was scary. It was scary because for a long time, it seemed like no, I don't think that's what this country is going to do. And that is crazy. So anyway, that, it was just a really emotional roller coaster of a summer and fall.

AK: So, before, I have a couple of more questions about the election, but before that, did you or anybody in your family participate in Black Lives Matter protests or marches in your area?

BA: Yeah, we did, [45:00] we did. And what I loved about it was my girls like, it's, it's so, this is where you're like the children will save us. That's, that, it just felt like they rallied in a way that, you know, it was beautiful to see kids rally, kids learn to organize. I mean, I think that that

was the other component, right? It's not just, oh, we're going to go out there and be, it's okay, well, I mean, we're going to go out there, but then what are the ways that we organize in order to make this more impactful? So, so that, that was just really uplifting, you know, as the adults is to see how much of this was youth led. And yeah, so for us, you know, I mean, we stayed local, you know, I think that's, that's no, you know, we weren't, we weren't necessarily trying to be out-out. But, but the way that we, you know, we could locally [46:00] and again, back to I am in a pretty active community. And so, our, our, our community, you know, did a lot of activism. There was wonderful ways for kind of people to show support and to be engaged. And like I said, one of the beautiful things that they did was, you know, these are like, OG activists, so people who've been in this fight for many, many years. Authors, academics, you know, people in academics, people, I mean, wonderful, amazing people. What I loved was the effort to, they did a series over the summer to actually teach young people how to organize right. So, take that anger, take that, take that, but, you know, channel it, learn how to actually be, you know, activists and so, so it was cool. It was like, yeah, that was just a really uplifting thing to see.

AK: So, I'm going to keep going back and forth in our timeline, our chronology – [47:00]

BA: Of course.

AK: Here, because there's so many running threads that are still existing today. We are, I think, three weeks into the trial of Derek Chauvin, who is the police officer, who, allegedly, I guess, would be the word, murdered George Floyd. Have you watched any of the trial or read anything about it? Do you have any thoughts as we are kind of in the middle of this trial? Things that you're thinking or feeling, or, or maybe even projecting what you think, might happen?

BA: So, I've read, and I've heard this often, by friends, I can't watch. I have a, I've had a, I've just I, yeah. I couldn't, I can't watch. And that's, let me just say, that's kind of where I'm at. And, you know, I think in tone and where it's heading, [48:00] I think it's, well, maybe I'll be surprised. But to me, it feels like it's fairly obvious where this will head as it should. You know, I think what's incredible to me, though, back to your earlier point about how this is so commonplace and here, we are focused on this one trial. And what makes me you know, what's

interesting is that all the pieces have to have been, have to fall, fallen into place in order for us to believe the victim. And so, a part of me is like, Oh, thank God, right, that all these experts and all these people are, you know, solidifying really the point of view, but a part of me is also like, I, it just, it's, it just shouldn't be this way, you know. [49:00] You know, it's interesting to watch, obviously, the recent, you know, the recent shooting, I mean, and it's interesting how to watch kind of the re-victimization and the attempt to always portray, in this case, kind of Black men as the perpetrator, or as, you know, I always say it's either they're super human, or they're super weak, and it's just, just such a, I mean, it's like these, these, these continuing tropes that just keep coming back and, and then you see it again, it's like, oh, well, you know, someone had an arrest warrant out, and it's like, all of these things are justifications for what? Like, someone has to lose their life over that? So, I watch it and I think ultimately, we will get to the right place on it, on this particular issue. [50:00] But I just often just think of how many more people there are who have been killed, abused, you know, just the system hasn't worked for them. And, you know, obviously, the hope is that this is the beginning of conversations around certainly police reform, and you know, what it, what it's like to enact ordering communities in a way that, you know, is humane and that takes the communities themselves into consideration.

AK: And just to give some context for the listener who is hopefully here 50 years from now, what just happened this past weekend was a yet again, in Minnesota, the death of a Black man in a traffic stop of some sort, where the woman police officer [51:00] was supposed to have grabbed her taser, but grabbed her gun instead, and he died.

So then to go back a little bit, again, we're kind of running up on time here, and so many things politically have been happening in the last four or five years, let alone the last year, do you have any brief kind of like Polaroid snapshot memories of election season? Things, again, that you were feeling or thinking or hearing, as we were waiting to see how the country would determine the next president and who that person would be.

BA: I think my Polaroid, because I feel like living up, kind of up to the, up to the actual election day, it was just such an up and down and so much noise. My Polaroid though is the inauguration. I, I, I, I just, you know, I still get emotional when I think about just that [52:00] image of the Biden's and Kamala Harris and seeing, especially with the brown girls around me this, you

know, this is what's possible. And, and to me, it was such a beacon of hope and like, and then fast forward, I look at the cabinet and to me, this is what America is. This, this is the visual representation of this country, right. The most diverse cabinet, right. Our first Native American cabinet member, our – and I just think of like, just what's transpired and, and what I love about them is they are visual images. To me, they are visual statements about what our country looks like, who are the people that represent us. And I know there's a lot of noise and there will continue to be. But after a pretty crazy year of, you know, both the pandemic, as well as [53:00] kind of just, you know, socially as a country where we're at, and I think it was just a real, yeah, it's a real moment of hope, you know, and so it's funny that you said Polaroid. Immediately, I think of them on those steps. By the way, I also love the fashion choices, just the amount of color and Amanda Gorman and I mean, just the whole experience, and I feel like she embodied what we were all thinking and feeling in her poetry. And, and, yeah, to sit there and watch that, you know, as my youngest was, who's now 12, is also very politically active. And I just see her little face and she's just like, yes, that's, that's possible for me, you know, a brown girl like me can do these things. And so, that's my Polaroid shot. And, [54:00] and, and, and, and for me, like I said, I know it's not going to be easy. You know, we've still along got a long way to go with this pandemic. We've got a long way to go with the economy. And just a lot of people lost a lot. But I feel hopeful. I feel really very, very hopeful. And back to the conversation about advocacy and youth. I feel especially hopeful that I think it's the next generations, right, whether it's climate change, whether it's race and racism, anti-racism, you know, whether it's just, just, you know, hope and a more equitable future. You know, I look at them and I get, I get really excited about just the rock stars, they're going to be.

AK: So, [55:00] finally, I guess just to wrap everything up, I would like to leave some open space. If there's anything else you would like to share about your time at Brown, your work, what you see ahead for yourself, for the country, for humans at large. Anything else that you'd like to get into the record that I maybe didn't ask you about?

BA: No, I mean, I guess I just love to end with just what a special place Brown is. I, you know, this whole conversation has been wonderful. And it just reminds me so much of just how much Brown has been in my life, starting from, I think, molding me into this girl who thought I could

do anything. It's funny that we talked about my daughter. I think of my Brown years as being just this place that nurtured me. And I felt like wow, yes, I can go out and conquer the world. And then, and then you grow up. And you know, the world kind of beat you up [56:00] a little bit here and there. But, you know, I feel like I've never lost that hope and I've never lost that sense of, of being. And then I've remained involved, and then to have one of our daughters kind of now on her own journey at Brown. And like you said, just living through, I think the amount of empathy and thoughtfulness of a world, of a global event that nobody could have anticipated. I'm just incredibly, I'm incredibly grateful for the places and spaces that I feel, you know, are supportive, are empathetic, are safe. And I count Brown as one of those spaces.

AK: Well, that's wonderful. Thank you so much for the work that you're doing at and for Brown, and for the work that you are doing at large for women of color and people trying to start their businesses. [57:00] And thank you for spending more time with me today.

BA: Great. Well, thank you so much. It was awesome to have this conversation.