Maya Durvasula:
One of the things that I tell students when they're trying to think about whether this is the right fit for them is that you need to decide whether you're happy working on the same problem for that long, but if you are, it's a nice way of building in this tolerance for uncertainty and learning and growing into a process of research.

Do you think that there's a lot of optimism in economics right now, which is a funny thing to say because everyone calls it the dismal science?

Willie Thompson:
Dismal science.

Maya Durvasula:
Yeah. Everyone loves to complain about economists, but there's just more data now than I think we ever could have imagined there would be. And especially at Stanford what I really loved and the reason that I came here is that there's so much support and excitement for interdisciplinary work.

My name is Maya Durvasula. I'm a fourth-year PhD student in economics, a first-year law student and a member of the 2029 Knight-Hennessy cohort. I imagine a world where access to medicine is universal.

Taylor Goss:
Welcome to the Imagine A World podcast from Knight-Hennessy Scholars. We are here to give you a glimpse into the Knight-Hennessy Scholar community of graduate students spanning all seven Stanford schools, including business, education, engineering, humanities, law, medicine, and sustainability. In each episode, we talk with scholars about the world they imagine and what they are doing to bring it to life.

Willie Thompson:
Today we are speaking with Maya Durvasula, a joint PhD and JD student. During our conversation, you'll hear about Maya's experience taking a gap year to explore state politics and policy, navigating the PhD in JD communities, exploring the choices society can make in equitably distributing medicine and so much more.

Hey, what's up Maya? Welcome to this, our second episode of Imagine A World. We're so excited to have you. How you doing?

Maya Durvasula:
I'm doing well. Thank you for having me. This is very exciting, very professional-looking.

Willie Thompson:
For folks who are listening, we have the full setup with headphones and mic right now in Denning House, or at least Maya and I are and Taylor's finishing up an internship in LA. So actually you have a really great Imagine a World statement, but one thing that I find really interesting is how long has it been since you've been at Denning, Maya?

Maya Durvasula:
That's an embarrassing question for you to answer. I think I was probably back here last in April. April of 2023. Yeah. And my reasons for it are the embarrassing part. My desk was just kind of far away last year, and I get lazy on campus and I don't have a bike as of now. And so every day it was like I should go to Denning House for lunch, and then I had to debate whether the 15-minute walk was worth it to me. And I'm just laziness.

Taylor Goss:
Well, you don't want to interrupt your creative flow on your desk.

Maya Durvasula:
That's a really nice and terrible way of thinking about it. But I walked in this morning and I was like, "I should be here more often." It's just embarrassing that I haven't done more of that.

Willie Thompson:
I feel as if not having a bike on campus is a cardinal sin, pun intended, given that we are at Stanford.

Taylor Goss:
Oh boy.

Willie Thompson:
But are you closer to getting a bike now than you were before? Or are you still about the walk life?

Maya Durvasula:
No, I need one. It's really bad. I had a bike. It was stolen. I was really cranky about it, and that crankiness has just carried over for a year and a half at this point. It's on me. But no, I have these law school textbooks. They're really heavy and I'm just carrying them around at this point. So I need a bike. I'm in the market for a bike. At some point it'll become more urgent. It'll start raining and I'll get a bike and it'll feel really like a necessity.

Willie Thompson:
You guys heard it here first. Anybody who has a bike and is willing to loan, sell or barter for it. We were just talking about the farmer’s market before we got on. If you have tomatoes after tomato season and you're willing to barter with Maya, she'll happily take your bike for tomatoes.

Getting back to just your life and your story, Maya would love to ... So you mentioned this Imagine A World statement of access to medicine being universal. Now we know that this is the world that you like to imagine. But before we get into that, let's talk about the world you’re born into and the world that you've experienced thus far. So can you give us a sense of where you're from and what your journey was to here at Stanford?

Maya Durvasula:
Yeah. I was born in Connecticut, but for all intents and purposes, I kind of think that I grew up in New Mexico, so my parents moved to Albuquerque when I was nine, and it's my favorite place in the entire world. My parents were thinking about moving when I was 16. And moving and starting a senior year of high school in a new place didn't seem like it was a great idea, and I was really lucky in that I had a set of
teachers who kind of agreed like what if I just didn't do that and applied to college a year early. And that ended up working really well.

And so I kind of had this year between high school and college where I could have started college early or I could have done something else, and I basically spent the year wandering around New Mexico doing various things related to state politics and state policy, and it's probably the most formative period I've ever had in my life, in part just because it meant that I could go to these tiny towns that don't really appear on Google Maps in rural parts of New Mexico and spend a lot of time talking to people and understanding how life functioned without any sense of pressure, any sense of deadline and not really needing to be somewhere the next day.

And so I worked on political campaigns and I worked for the state legislature and I wrapped up the year working at this incredible little, they call themselves a results-oriented think tank and they operate out of a four-room house in Santa Fe. But it was kind of a year where my job was figuring out how to love this place that I had grown up in. I'm the biggest New Mexico evangelist. I think both of you should go, and when you decide to go, I'll plan your trips for you.

But the process of growing up there and also the year of trying to figure out what made the place tick, and I followed a lot of politicians around on the campaign trail and everyone's favorite stump speech line that year was that New Mexico was at the top of all of the bad lists and the bottom of all of the good ones. And I think that's a little bit dramatic, but there's something to it.

Like when I was growing up, every year New Mexico would be ranked the worst place to be a child, and it is a hard place to exist in without getting the sense that the communities are incredible, the people are really vibrant, there's this sense of communal support, but governments and policies aren't doing what they are supposed to be doing. You get this sense that there's this set of things that people need that they aren't getting.

And so the process of just trying to figure out this place really shaped the way that I basically have approached everything that I've done since, which is figuring out how do we build systems that better support people? How do we develop evidence that allows us to figure out what the right answer is and move beyond anecdotes and intuition and feelings about what the right policy might be?

Taylor Goss:

I'm curious, so over that time you're working in politics and wanting something, it sounds like more practical application, more actually impact in people's lives, and you move to economics and you end up now JD and economics PhD. Could you talk about your path and the distinction you saw between the political field that you were in and the economics path that you took?

Maya Durvasula:

Yeah. It was a really sharp realization for me actually. One of the most amazing mentors I've had is this man, Tim Keller, who at that time was a state senator for Albuquerque's International District. He was running for state auditor at the time and he's now mayor of Albuquerque and I was one of his legislative staffers. They made up some title for me and I don't remember what it was. It was way too lofty given that I was 17, but I was working with him in the state legislative session that year and he was the majority whip for the Democrats. And that meant that when big votes were coming up on the floor, his job was to make sure that everybody who needed to be voting was in the room. And that year the big issue was minimum wage.

And because I was working for the whip's office, my job was literally to chase grown men around this building and try to make sure that they were in the room when the vote on minimum wage came up.
And at one point I spent three hours sitting outside of an office waiting for people who were hiding inside of the office to avoid the vote to come out, and I was so disillusioned by this, by the end. The minimum wage increase in the state ended up not passing because a lot of the people who should have been there weren't, and it just I think became very clear to me and he and I spent a lot of time kind of debriefing this, that working in politics and trying to persuade people in this process of let's corral them, let's offer them things in exchange for things that we may already have wasn't the version of making a social impact that was going to be the right fit for me.

And he spelled it out. Tim laid this out really clearly. Basically your options are you can be the person in a room who has a vote, you can be the politician who's sitting there, and the change that you can make is in the form of you can vote yes when you're supposed to be voting yes, and you can do it for your constituents, or you can try to make it harder for people to vote no or harder for them to avoid showing up on the floor. You can build the evidence base. That means it is so unequivocally clear that for your constituents the right thing to do is X.

Of course, there's lots and lots of other ways of making an impact than having those two jobs, but the way that I kind of thought of it was I discovered in the process of doing this that I am quite wonky in the way that I think about problems, and the better fit for me was going to be saying, "What's the problem? How can we construct the best possible body of evidence so that we know that we're making the right choices?" and use evidence to persuade in part just because I think I have a thin skin and I would be a terrible politician. But basically in the process of working for the state when I was 17, I decided that I wanted to be an economist.

And I say that not to say that I was like, "I've decided to get a PhD and I'm going to work on these things." I had a really meandering path from there to here, and at every juncture I've kind of been like, "Is this the right toolkit for me?" I ended up deciding sort of and adding a law degree because I thought there were aspects of that that were really useful to being able to communicate and work in government.

But identifying economics as the right toolkit happened relatively early and I think earlier than it happens for a lot of my classmates who kind of realized that math was a way of bringing rigor to social problems. Someone told me I think that I would be a good economist and I listened.

Willie Thompson:

Those are some really resonant reflections as someone who majored in econ undergrad, not with the same level of fervor as you did, but I've heard you speak about how economics is the geekiest form of idealism in a way. And I think that that comes true when it comes to what economics can be in terms of making sense of a fundamentally random world. Again, at this point, I'm just quoting Maya's speech that she gave to her graduating class at Duke.

Maya Durvasula:

I forgot that was online.

Willie Thompson:

We'll put the audio. I don't want to create any secondhand embarrassment, but it's actually, I found the speech deeply resonant and I'd love to take the moment to maybe discuss more of your Imagine A World statement around technology because you even mentioned that the path here has been a bit meandering. However, if you look at just your trajectory and pathway, it doesn't seem that way, like looking backwards. So would love to hear you talk about getting to Duke and then the economics
journey there. And when you talk about the life of a PhD in economics and a JD, that's a decision, that's a commitment.

Maya Durvasula:
A lot of school. Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
It's a lot of school. Tell us a little bit about how those two things compare in terms of being a part of the PhD community. You're starting your 1L year at SLS. Just would love to hear you talk a little bit more about how you arrived at the focus on access to medicine and what economics has looked like through that, as well as what is life like as a JD PhD at a place like Stanford?

Maya Durvasula:
One of the things that I've thought a lot about as I've tried to figure out what I wanted to work on in terms of academic research is that there's a set of questions that I kind of think of as the answers aren't obvious, but the answers also aren't really based in evidence or in economics or causal effects of something on some other thing. Should children be in school? Should children have access to high quality education? Should drinking water be clean? Should people have access to healthcare?

Unequivocally yes. It's really important to have evidence on the things that allow us to get from these should statements about rights and what it means to have a flourishing existence. But I kind of knew that there were a set of questions that I didn't really want to work on from the perspective of empirical research because the framing didn't make a lot of sense to me.

I wasn't sure what I was doing if I was waiting into a space where I was like, should we expand the access to social services for families who may not otherwise have access to them? There's really, really important research questions within that. But the high-level big picture of it didn't quite seem like a fit for the methodological toolbox that I had at my disposal.

I grew up thinking a lot about healthcare. My parents are both physicians who do work on global health, and I think one of the things that was very clear to me in working in New Mexico and my big policy project at the end of the year was price transparency and access to rural healthcare was that this was a space where people have really, really strong opinions and the decisions are life changing. So if somebody tells you that you need to take this medicine that costs $150,000 a year, you don't really have any choice in the matter and people get riled up and there's a lot of anecdotes and there's incredibly well-funded lobbies that are arguably increasing the prices that people are paying for healthcare.

And it was a space where it seemed like there was a lot of evidence that could be generated to give some substance to what are the really vital pieces that we need to understand for policymakers to make it easier for people to get access to the medicines that they need.

So I was thinking of what I wanted to do as a PhD student during what was arguably the biggest medical innovation event hopefully in our lifetimes. So watching the process of the COVID vaccine being developed and patients being recruited for clinical trials really shaped the way that I thought of what big problems of access to high quality technology looked like.

And so a lot of my work now is kind of focused on understanding where medicines come from. So between a scientist in a lab identifying a molecule that can become the basis for the next cancer drug and a patient receiving a prescription are just thousands and thousands of people who make decisions about who the target population is and are we going to invest in diagnostics that are going to help us to
identify them? How are we going to study the effects of the drug? Who gets to be in our clinical trials? How good is the evidence base going to be for this?

And every one of these is a choice and they’re choices that I think we don’t understand very well, but also that have the potential to kind of move the needle on the way that we think about whether we’re paying too much or too little for healthcare, what it’s going to look like to invest in systems that help us get drugs to people, help people faster and more efficiently.

In terms of why two degrees, economics and especially applied microeconomics, which is what I work on, provides this really incredible methodological toolkit for being able to say, what is the causal effect of X on Y? And some of the researchers at Stanford, including last year’s Nobel laureate, have kind of pioneered this, they call it the credibility revolution in economics. So it’s not enough to have a sense that something affects something else. We can be really precise and rigorous and exacting in the standards that we apply to making sure that we understand what data is telling us and we hold our evidence to these very high standards. And economics is really good at providing that toolkit.

A lot of the work that I do is very related to things like intellectual property law, so how does the patent system work? Why are all drug patents not the same? Why is it not enough to just count patents? And I have found in the process of thinking about intellectual property and health law and administrative law and kind of regulations, partially it’s just a little bit easier for me to take a class with a lawyer and have them explain it to me than it is for me to open the patent law casebook by myself sitting in my room and try to figure out what anybody is talking about.

There are also just really nice examples, especially in the past couple of years of JD PhDs in economics who have balanced these academic careers in law schools with careers in governance. So if you look at the Department of Treasury in the past couple of years, there’s just this group of rockstar 30- to 40-year-olds, JD PhDs who are going in and saying, "We can use evidence to make government work better," and they have the jobs that I think I would be the most excited to have.

So some amount of it is just the backward induction process of that seems really cool. What if I just did what they did and try to move toward the same type of job? I think I answered all of the components of your question, but I also went on a meandering path there.

Taylor Goss:

So I’d love to jump back to that connection between economics and medicine that you articulated in your Imagine A World statement. And I'm curious for you, what are the focal points from your perspective of change that need to be made to enact that world that you're imagining?

Maya Durvasula:

I think the way that we think about where medicines come from and what we're willing to pay for is something that needs to change. A lot of my work right now is kind of focused on opening what I think of as the black box of basically why are drugs as expensive as they are, and what exactly is it that we're paying for?

And I think it’s really important to say, and some of my advisors have done this much more eloquently in writing, the pharmaceutical industry, people who do medical research, they create an enormous amount of value in the world, like drugs and vaccines, technological progress in medicine, the biggest changes in economic growth and human wellbeing in the last century have come from these technologies and they’re really important. And I think of that as a reason to say it’s really important that we get it right.
A lot of what I'm really interested in right now is this idea that pay a lot for the development of medicines only some of which work as well as we kind of want them to. And it's really hard to say which ones do.

So I think of all of these things through the lens of you have a lot of firms that have incentives and you have pharmaceutical companies and their job is to develop a profitable drug. And the role of a policymaker is to say, how can you make sure that you incentivize the production of drugs that are actually helpful and how can we make sure that we pay for efficient spending, not drugs that are well advertised or well positioned or that kind of reflect someone else's incentive problems that don't really have very much to do with us. And so I think the short answer to Taylor's question might be the practical changes. What we need is data.

We don't know how expensive it is to develop a drug. The best estimates that we have have really fundamental flaws. And then when you get these estimates, you're like, "Okay, why does it cost $2 billion to bring a drug to market? What would it take to bring those costs down?" But we don't know the numbers to start with.

We don't know how many clinical trials are run every year. We don't know how many people are enrolled in them. There's some kind of basic data. And I really like the detective work of trying to figure out if we were to construct it, how would we do it? Where would you go looking for answers to questions like this?

But there's a lot of people who like to make claims in op-eds in the New York Times, and some of them align with my priors a little bit more than others. But I think the short answer is there's a lot of things that we don't know, and being willing to step back and say what evidence do we have and what are the gaps in evidence would be really helpful in just making sure that policy reflects how these systems actually function as opposed to how one group of lobbyists and another group of lobbyists who disagree with each other have decided to frame what the problem is.

Taylor Goss:

I really love just to sort of hear a through line in the way that you think about your career and about your field in the sense of giving yourself time, whether it was your gap year before college or sort of the way that you think about your meandering pathway, the sort of real-time analysis of where you are and where you want to be. In many situations feeling like you're on a meandering path can feel like uncertain. It can feel like I'm not understanding what's around the corner. I'm wondering how you personally have dealt with that uncertainty in making decisions to take the next step. How do you think people in your field grapple with a lack of optimism? How much optimism is there in your field and how much do you feel?

Maya Durvasula:

I think to the question of personally grappling with uncertainty, the most valuable thing for me has been I feel like I have just the most amazing set of mentors who are very, very happy to remind me when I start to feel like, "I need to get out of grad school. I've been here forever. It would be nice to get a job eventually." That the activity isn't finishing. It's kind of finding environments where you can get feedback and feel like you're working on questions that you're excited to get out of bed in the morning and think about.

And I've been really lucky every stage for the last 10 years to find people who will basically just listen to me try to figure out what it is that I want to do and ask really good questions and kind of provide space and reassurance that this is what a process like this is supposed to look like and it's okay for things to take a while.
Something I actually really like about being a PhD student, especially in economics, but I don't know other fields well enough to know if this is normal or not, is at least when you're a graduate student and even when you're faculty, the activity in research and in publication isn't volume, it's quality of output. So it's very standard for people to go on our job market with one paper at the end of six years and they've been thinking about a lot of other things, and there's other stuff in motion, but there isn't this sense that the best thing that you could be doing is juggling a hundred different balls and half answering this question and thinking a little bit about this thing, but it didn't really work, so we just wrote it up and put it out. There's a lot of patience and tolerance for making sure that the version of what you're doing is kind of the best version that it could be or is the thing that everybody has thought about and settled on together. It can mean that you're working on the same project for five to eight years.

And one of the things that I tell students when they're trying to think about whether this is the right fit for them is that you need to decide whether you're happy working on the same problem for that long, but if you are, it's a nice way of building in this tolerance for uncertainty and learning and growing into a process of research. Do you think that there's a lot of optimism in economics right now, which is a funny thing to say because everyone calls it the dismal science?

Willie Thompson:
Dismal science.

Maya Durvasula:
Yeah. Everyone loves to complain about economists, but there's just more data now than I think we ever could have imagined there would be, and especially at Stanford, what I really loved and the reason that I came here is that there's so much support and excitement for interdisciplinary work. So I work with computer scientists and I work with lawyers, and I work with people across the university in different places, and there's never been a question of why aren't you talking to more economists and thinking more about theory. It's always like, "Oh, that's really cool that you've figured out a way of taking this thing from over here and applying it to this thing."

I described very positively one of my co-authors as being a really good improv partner because everything that I say, he's like, "Yes, and what if we also did this cool thing on top of that?" And it's just been this kind of really positive community to exist in where there's a lot of enthusiasm to build on people's ideas and work together and draw on things that come from different corners of campus or different corners of academic research. So I at least feel really optimistic.

Willie Thompson:
I love the reframe of economics from a dismal science to a credible and optimistic one. So that's really powerful. I would say it's also just reassuring that you talk about this importance of interdisciplinary work in the field of economics. I think as someone who studied econ undergrad at a liberal arts school where it was encouraged that we went outside of the econ department to learn more about other disciplines, it really gets at both what I think, was it Gary? I think it was Gary Morson and Morton Schapiro. I think they wrote Cents and Sensibility. It was like a book about economics learning from the humanities and also gets at one of my favorite lines from an economist that deeply resonated with me and Thomas Piketty saying that economists can have a childlike obsession with mathematics. I remember reading that in capital and being like, "Yeah, I feel that sometimes." So that resonates a lot too.

Taylor, were you going to say something as a follow-up?
Taylor Goss:
Well, when you said Cents and Sensibility, I thought you were going to start talking about Jane Austin for a second, so I wasn't sure where that was going to go, but no, I just loved hearing Maya. I loved hearing you talk about the sort of mentorship aspect and because that really resonated with me.

Maya Durvasula:
It's just, it's like it makes such a big difference, especially I know research can be really lonely and a little bit isolating and it has just ... I was telling one of my advisors, "I feel like my enthusiasm for my work kind of decays the further away I get from a meeting with somebody." The longer it's been since I kind of talk to somebody who is like, "No, this is interesting. Here's how I would think about it." Just because I know this from the process of working with students, you can start to figure out what they're talking about and what their vision for something is before they found the language to describe it. And it's really, really fun on the other side to watch them kind of start to put the pieces together, but it makes the biggest difference to know that somebody is also watching you do that and kind of has this 10,000-foot view where you are so deep in the weeds and you're like, "I just don't even know if the words that I'm saying make sense anymore."
I definitely wouldn't have decided to be a grad student for as long as I think I probably will be if I hadn't been so confident that there was a set of people to talk to about all of it.

Willie Thompson:
I wonder, just even given the juxtaposition of PhD versus JD and just your own experience now, how have some of your priorities shifted over the years now that I'd probably say you're still even in just the beginnings of your career?

Maya Durvasula:
I hope so. I think the way that I think about what I want a career to look like is a little bit different. Coming out of college, I think I had just been very used to going constantly, if that makes sense. There was constantly a deadline. If you weren't working, you were probably doing something wrong. And now I think a lot of what I'm thinking about is what do I want a career to look like when I'm 35? What do I want it to look like when I'm 45? And it's much more focused on what type of questions do I want to be working on? What type of impact do I want to have? But also what is the balance between being a person who really loves work and loves research and also would like to have a family and have a life and be able to step back and enjoy that as it happens without feeling like I'm constantly wanting to be two people and having two full-time jobs.
I don't know that I have great answers to that. I kind of think of grad school as a time where I can set up a lot of pieces for my future self. I have a lot of uninterrupted time right now to kind of do the thinking on what are my values, what are my priorities, what do I want things to look like? And just building time for that at every stage seems like it's a little bit more reflective than I probably was five or six years ago.

Taylor Goss:
So when you're taking this time and being a bit more reflective, is there anything that you do to put yourself in a more reflective space, habits or hobbies?

Maya Durvasula:
I started doing a lot more writing. I feel like I am always between. I think a lot of my friends who do research say that their lives function kind of similarly. It's a very high variance job where there's weeks where you're like, "Yes, I'm going to solve all of these problems." Everything is going really, really well. And there's weeks where you're just like, "All of this is ridiculous. I'm just kind of screaming into a void." And what's been useful for me is anticipating these cycles and keeping more notes on things and building more in more opportunities to talk to people at a high level about what their goals and their paths and their systems look like. I also do a lot of yoga.

Yoga Source has this wonderful $99-a-month student membership, and I am getting more than the full value out of it. Living close to it was very high on my list of priorities when we were looking for apartments this year. So building in systems for myself, I sleep a lot more now than I ever did before, which is really, really good. And I can kind of feel the difference of saying, "Today I'm going to sleep eight hours, I'm going to do an hour of exercise, and then I'm going to fill in the rest of the day as it comes" as opposed to "Work is the primary thing and if sleep happens, if exercise happens, and so be it." So the shift from a work-life balance perspective has been, I think a really, really big improvement.

Taylor Goss:
Using that subscription frugally.

Maya Durvasula:
There's a set of people who are just head and shoulders above everyone else. The very exciting thing to me on a paper recently is we got the first citation and we were like, "Wow, people are reading our paper who aren't like my mom." Yeah.

I tend to think it's really important in these types of discussions to keep in mind we can kind of treat these problems separately. There can be two questions. How do we develop the best technology and how do we make sure that people get access to it? And sometimes those discussions get a little bit siloed.

Something I've been kind of confused and a little bit perplexed by in discussions around COVID is that there are two totally different sets of people who appear to be having different conversations about what we should be doing with technology. There's a set of people who are really focused on, we need a universal coronavirus vaccine and a set of people who are really focused on billions of ... Actually not even billions. Diffusion of this has been pretty good, but there's a lot of people who haven't gotten access to the COVID vaccines that we have right now. And why would you focus on building something new when you can't diffuse what we have?

And it kind of feels like a false dichotomy to say we can't have both. But having these two sets of people talking to each other feels really important. And right now, something that I'm a little bit disappointed by is that there is less overlap between those two groups, and they tend to find there's less willingness to compromise or kind of work together for those two groups than I might've hoped.

Willie Thompson:
Well, luckily we have folks like you who are sitting at the intersection of those things who are going to do some phenomenal work in the future. I mean, I know we're coming up on time here, so I'll get us into our closing round of questions.

So one aspect of the Knight-Hennessy application experience is the improbable facts discussion. Taylor, did it take you a long time to figure out your improbable facts? Was there something easy that come easily to you or no?
Taylor Goss:
It was maybe the thing that I thought about the most if I think about time spent having conversations about and thinking about and reorganizing. It was the final thing that I decided on. Yeah.

Maya Durvasula:
Yeah. I found it so hard.

Willie Thompson:
I feel like the things that make you think a lot are probably good prompts for you to explore. So I would love if you could just share an improbable fact with us. It could be one from the time of your applied to Knight-Hennessy, it could be a new one that's come up with all these $99 per month yoga subscriptions or ... ?

Maya Durvasula:
I think that's like the most probable thing about me. My entire law school class signed up for that. There's nothing unique about my choice to take out my stress in the same place as everyone else.

Willie Thompson:
The most probable facts.

Maya Durvasula:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
That's funny.

Maya Durvasula:
Let's see. My improbable fact, the one I usually go with is that for 10 years of my life I taught acrobatic martial arts to five-year-olds.

Willie Thompson:
Five-year-olds can be acrobatic?

Maya Durvasula:
No. Five-year-olds have no control of their muscles, which is why it is a hard task. They're very-

Taylor Goss:
That's why they need you.

Willie Thompson:
Exactly.

Maya Durvasula:
No, I was mostly in the position of corralling them, but I did a lot of acrobatic martial arts for a long time and I wanted to teach because I find that really fun. But I'm a physically small person, and the set of people who I think I command the most respect from in an athletic setting are five-year-olds. So I was in charge of them for many, many years.

Willie Thompson:
So real quickly, can you describe aerobatic karate and second, would you be willing to do a session at Denning House with some scholars? I mean, I'm pretty sure we'd sign up in the portal tomorrow.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Maya Durvasula:
I feel like I'm too old and brittle now, but it's like movie kung fu.

Taylor Goss:
Amazing.

Maya Durvasula:
It's much closer to dance than it is to sparring, which I think kind of works quite well for...

Taylor Goss:
Sounds great.

Maya Durvasula:
Yeah, my interest was never really in fighting people, but it was kind of an interesting use for something that was a little more acrobatic. I don't actually know how I ended up doing it in the first place, but it is, yeah, what you see in the movies.

Willie Thompson:
I mean, Maya, I don't know if you were trying to unconvince me that I want to do aerobatic martial arts, but I'm more convinced now because I never want to be hit. I don't want to spar. I just want to look cool.

Taylor Goss:
Right. I want to do something so impressive that the other person that I'm fighting has to just like, "Okay, props. The fight is over."

Willie Thompson:
Exactly.

Maya Durvasula:
Yeah. They're just like, "How did they move through space like that? It doesn't make sense."
Taylor Goss:
Yeah. You can do a flying kick. This year I'll go no further.

Maya Durvasula:
I think I could do a flying kick 10 years ago. I don't know if I ...

Willie Thompson:
Oh, 10 years ago.

Maya Durvasula:
Yeah, I might need time limits on improbable facts [inaudible 00:37:35] an old fact.

Willie Thompson:
An expiration date. An expiration date on what's a good thing Knight-Hennessy doesn't come up to us and say, "Hey, this improbable fact you listed back in 2019, can you do it now? Is it still the same today?"
That's funny.
Well, cool. Well look, well, we are at time, but before we go, just any advice you would give to folks? There are lots of people listening to this wondering, maybe they're economic students. They're thinking, "I never thought I could do a joint PhD. I never thought I could see myself in a place like Stanford or California." Just you gave some of that a little bit, but anything specifically that Knight-Hennessy you think you would give in terms of advice to folks who are interested and want to apply?

Maya Durvasula:
I find the process of writing these applications, even though they're stressful and the format of the questions is different, to be one of the most useful periods of reflection on how I ended up where I am that I've ever had. So I feel like I've done a lot of random stuff and the thing that's helped me to draw a through line to be able to say, "No, what I'm actually interested in is this set of questions that I keep gravitating back to." That comes in the process of writing and revising essays and talking to people about them.
So the outcome of the process is amazing, and I love this community and it's been a really special interdisciplinary home at Stanford. But even the process of sitting down and thinking really hard about who you are and what you're interested in and what questions you're kind of interested in the world can be a really rewarding process in of itself, and it's worth giving yourself the time and the space and the grace to work through that in kind of a messy way.

Taylor Goss:
You might say that the application helps you connect the dots.

Maya Durvasula:
Wow. You might.

Taylor Goss:
One might.
Willie Thompson:
Maya, this has been great. You're great. Your football team is great. Duke is doing great right now. LSU and Alabama, Taylor and your respective teams at Duke are-

Taylor Goss:
We took-

Willie Thompson:
... under the radar-

Maya Durvasula:
Awesome-

Willie Thompson:
... at the moment. But really glad to have you on Imagine A World. So glad you could join us. Taylor and I are both looking forward to seeing more of you at Denning.

Maya Durvasula:
Yes. Yes. No, the law school is much closer to Denning. I don't even need a bike to get here.

Willie Thompson:
But still, if someone has a bike out there.

Maya Durvasula:
I know. If someone has a bike. Thank you for having me. This was really fun and it's always really nice to talk to you two.

Willie Thompson:
All right. Well, cool. Well, take care.

Taylor Goss:
Thank you for joining us for this episode of Imagine A World where we hear from inspiring members of the KHS community who are making significant contributions in their respective fields, challenging the status quo and pushing the boundaries of what is possible as they imagine the world they want to see.

Willie Thompson:
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