Thay Graciano:

Hopefully, we can show government that bringing real people, common citizens into policymaking can guide their decisions. So the idea is, okay, so people have now come together and they really agree with this issue, or this one thing should be legal or whatever. Then the policymakers have to accept it, or there is a legitimacy for passing a law if you base it on the people. And so some people suggest that this sort of exercise should be a chamber in government. Or these meetings should be something that informs policymaking.

I believe in that, and so I'm very lucky that my program tries to do something that really has real-life consequences. I'm Thay Graciano, I'm a member of the 2023 cohort, and a second-year master's student in the International Policy Program, and a first-year PhD student in political communication. I imagine a world where people feel like they are enough, both because they have their basic needs met but also because they’re able to do things which makes them feel happy and accomplished.

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're doing to bring it to life.

Willie Thompson:

Today, you’ll be hearing from Thay Graciano, an MIP and PhD student in political communication. During our conversation, you'll hear Thay's experience as a non-traditional Stanford student, her passion and tenacity for accessibility and inclusion within education, a special musical performance about bees, and so much more.

Hey, what’s up, y'all? Welcome to another episode of the Imagine a World podcast. I am one of your co-hosts, Willie Thompson. Joining from the business school, will be at the ed school next year. I am always, as you know, joined by my amazing co-host, Taylor Goss.

Taylor Goss:

You always are, as we all know, joined by the other co-host. Joined by myself. My name's Taylor Goss. I'm doing a Master's in Music Science & Technology and a Master's of Arts in Public Policy. I'm graduating in June. It's crazy.

Willie Thompson:

Wow.

Thay Graciano:

Oh my God.

Willie Thompson:

It's crazy. We're in May and June is-

Thay Graciano:
How does that feel?

Taylor Goss:
It feels wild and we can talk about that more, but the voice that you just heard-

Willie Thompson:
Yes.

Taylor Goss:
... Is our special guest for the day.

Thay Graciano:
Hello.

Willie Thompson:
Thay Graciano.

Thay Graciano:
Yay. Hi. How's it going?

Taylor Goss:
Doing so well.

Thay Graciano:
I promised I wouldn't do the Queen Elizabeth accent.

Taylor Goss:
You did promise that. But I feel like you're going to very quickly renege on that promise.

Thay Graciano:
It's very tempting. It's so tempting.

Taylor Goss:
We've had a podcast pre-discussion about poshness. I don't think that there's a Louisiana posh accent. I think that that exists in the UK, but I don't know if it exists in the American South, unless it's the Charleston. Hey, in Charleston, Southern debutante ball kind of accent.

Willie Thompson:
You mean like Monsieur Candy from Django?

Taylor Goss:
I guess so, yeah. A hyper-stylized southern accent.
Willie Thompson:
Yeah. Yeah, maybe. But no, I haven't heard of that much because it just got phased out over time.

Taylor Goss:
Well,-

Thay Graciano:
I feel like I put on posh accents at Stanford when I really want to not be interrupted during political discussions. Because people seem to think you're clever if you use a accent.

Willie Thompson:
That is right.

Thay Graciano:
Which is really funny.

Willie Thompson:
That's very true. In a class I'm in right now we talked about forms of... Was it forms of privilege? Or aspects of your identity that aren't easily noticeable physically.

Taylor Goss:
Okay, okay.

Willie Thompson:
And someone who's actually a Knight-Hennessy scholar was sharing that they sound British when they talk, and because of that, people tend to give them more space or airtime in a conversation.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah, and it's important.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
She's a woman and she was talking about how she used that as a tool. If she feels like in a conversation, men aren't giving her enough space. She'll just even thicken it up a little bit to share more. I was like...

Taylor Goss:
That's crazy.
It does seem very important.

Thay Graciano:
It's indeed undoubtedly important.
Taylor Goss:
It gives an air of aristocracy really.

Willie Thompson:
Aristocracy. You dare say.

Thay Graciano:
I think any British person would be listening to this and be like, what is this Brazilian girl trying to do? That's not really that British.

Taylor Goss:
And actually, besides being tempted to do Queen Elizabeth, what's on your mind Thay? How's your day going?

Thay Graciano:
I had a statistics click quiz in the morning. So that was on my mind for a while when I got here. Definitely got one question wrong, which is very annoying.

Taylor Goss:
Out of how many questions?

Thay Graciano:
Maybe 15.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Thay Graciano:
But I don't know about the rest because my memory, I can't remember it anymore.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Thay Graciano:
It's all a blur.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Thay Graciano:
Trauma does that.

Taylor Goss:
This happens. It does not end in grad school. Writing a paper feels the same as it did in high school and in undergrad.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah. But it's interesting because I think we always strive for perfection here a lot of the time. And so when you know for a fact you got one thing wrong, you're like, oh, why? But it's very silly. We have such a high bar for ourselves and I think remembering that that's not all about my day and I'm here now and it's fun to be with friends and it's beautiful out there.
It's very important, but it's so easy to fall into these thoughts of you're stupid, you're not good enough. Which anyone can do, can have.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, yeah. Yeah, regardless of their station in life. For sure. And I saw you on the deck earlier before we recorded the pod. Were you journaling out there?

Thay Graciano:
Yes, I was journaling. I journal every day.

Taylor Goss:
I love that.

Willie Thompson:
Going back how far?

Thay Graciano:
Probably a year now. I don't know if you've heard of this book, it's called The Artist's Way.

Taylor Goss:
Oh, yes.

Thay Graciano:
I love that.

Taylor Goss:
Rowan Ings, 21 Cohort, my dear friend, turned me onto this.

Thay Graciano:
Oh really?

Taylor Goss:
And I have her copy currently and I still have not read it.

Thay Graciano:
Oh, you should do it.

Taylor Goss:
I really should.

Willie Thompson:
Read the book, Taylor.

Taylor Goss:
But it's not just read the book, right? It's read the book and it's do the work.

Thay Graciano:
The work, yeah. It's interesting because of course I haven't done it perfectly. You're meant to go on artist dates every week. So you're meant to take yourself out on a day with yourself and just spend time with yourself, do something fun and journal every day. And the idea behind it is that you're basically allowing your inner child to come out and play and you're also allowing the bad thoughts to be processed through the journal. I think it's really important to know what's on your mind. And I look back sometimes and I can't quite believe that I was afraid of something so that I was anxious about something. I think we really inflate fears when we think too much.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Thay Graciano:
It's a nice grounding thing for sure.

Willie Thompson:
It sounds like you feel more stable now. You feel more...

Taylor Goss:
You just said grounded or rooted, you feel more sort of I guess more in touch with yourself.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah, I think the writing definitely helps me just remember the core things that I love doing and who I really am. It's like meditation, but a little bit more active.

Taylor Goss:
Well, speaking of who you really are.

Thay Graciano:
Oh gosh.
Willie Thompson:
Good setup, Taylor. Look at that transition. Wow. It's almost like you do a podcast.

Taylor Goss:
I like to call that a segue. I made that word up. We like to start off the podcast by talking a little bit about your origin story. So before we talk about the world you imagine, let's talk about the world you were born into. Where are you from and what was your journey to here?

Thay Graciano:
It's a bit of an odd journey, I must say. I'm originally from Brazil. I'm from the south of Brazil, the best part.

And I moved to the UK, to London, when I was 14. And we moved to the UK because my parents were looking to give me a better education, and to honestly find better economic outcomes. Or better economic opportunities for themselves.

My mom had been teaching Portuguese and English in Brazil for a while, and I remember she was always on strike because the salary wasn't enough. And so London was the place we went to try to have a better life. When I got there, of course I didn't even speak English, so it was a big adaptation and making new friends. But I really wanted to go to London. I used to have these political discussions with my uncle all the time in Brazil. And so my dream was to go to London and to study at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

And so when I got to London, that was the thing that I really wanted to do. I remember being in school, so I went to this school called Stockwell Park High School, which is now called Plutano's School, I think. They changed the name and it was in a very poor area of London actually. And I made friends and lots of them were immigrants, some of them were from Portugal. I was in an area of London that was very much an immigrant area. And that sort of helped, but also if you want to learn English, you really should be speaking English.

But I fell in love with Shakespeare, so my theatre class was... my theatre teacher was the kindest person and he really believed that I could learn it. And I used Shakespeare as a way to prove to myself that I could learn English, which is odd, but it's what I did. And so I did really well in theater. And eventually I really wanted to go to university. Wasn't able to. And that's a deeper story. I got into Cambridge. I was going to study literature, which is definitely not what I do right now.

But I didn't manage to go. I didn't manage to afford it to get there. So I stayed in London, helped my family for many years. Which meant that I got involved with other things, with politics, with activism. And I started an NGO with my friend Sandy, and she's from Egypt. She's amazing.

Taylor Goss:
This is Skaped correct, right?

Thay Graciano:
Yes. Oh my goodness. Okay. We started Skaped, yeah podcast. They fist bumped.

Taylor Goss:
We'll talk more about Skaped.
Thay Graciano:
Yeah. Okay. And at that time I was also volunteering at Amnesty International, but I was also working as a cleaner sometimes as a bot and doing anything and everything to help my family. And at that point, my brother had been born. At this point I'm 18.

My brother was born. He's a wonderful, lovely boy called Brian. And we had a lot of difficulties in the family and so I stayed there for as long as I could trying to help and eventually figured I really needed to get an education and I'm not going to be able to do that in the UK. I was dating this wonderful person called Alex, and he said, you really should try America. I think they would love your story. And I think they have scholarships, they have things that you can do. They'll help you get there. And so I started studying for the SATs between shifts cleaning and I got a very good score. Got a scholarship. Went back to Brazil for a year, worked with politics a little bit or with education activism. And then came here and that was my undergrad. And so I started my undergrad at age 26.

Taylor Goss:
At Stanford.

Thay Graciano:
At Stanford, yes. That was nine years of grinding in London to help my family and also get here, find a way to get an education, which was always my dream. And so I've been here since 2019, and I'll be here for probably another four years. So I really love the place clearly. But yeah, I feel very lucky. I think my parents couldn't get a good education. My father didn't even go to school in London. He was cleaning toilets, working as a kitchen porter. Had a very difficult life and was always in pain. It's just very tough work. But being here, their dreams coming true and that means a lot. So that's basically it.

Taylor Goss:
What was it like starting your undergraduate career in your mid-twenties as opposed to your late teens? I think by any stretch of the imagination in terms of that entry point, I think you were traditionally counted as a non-traditional student at that point. And so what was it like to be a non-traditional student and navigating this place and space and all those things?

Thay Graciano:
It was very interesting. So I came in very much knowing what I wanted to study. At that point, I wanted to do political science, and I knew I'd become very, very engaged with policymaking or thinking about policymaking. All my peers seemed very anxious about figuring out what they wanted to do. In a lot of ways, I think I was able to mentor a lot of people and make friends because of this deep conversation that you have with people when they are really open to exploring things.

And the other thing is that it's never easy to be the odd one, out to be different. And I didn't live in undergraduate housing. So Stanford has graduate housing, undergraduate housing. And I only lived in undergraduate housing for a quarter, which was when I was a residential tutor for Burbank, which is the arts dorm here. All the other times I was in graduate housing. And so I had the life of my own. I was very much an adult. And it's odd because I look back and I remember being very sad and feeling like, oh, I wish I had started this when I was 18. I wish my life had been a different way. And I think eventually you get wise or old enough to realize that your story really is your own and it makes you into who you are and it makes you do things the way you do. And there is a lot of value in that.
Right now I just feel grateful that I was eventually able to come here and I feel just like it was a really wild but fun adventure. I made younger friends and I think there's this myth of people go to school with people of the same grade and the same age, and there's so much more that you learn from being around people who are different from yourself.

Taylor Goss:
Oh, completely agree.

Thay Graciano:
In terms of age and everything else. That was good. So I had friends of every age, you can imagine - transfer students and undergrads and graduate students. And I'm still friends with them. So yeah.

Taylor Goss:
There's something very cool about having a diversity of age in your friend group.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
I grew up playing music with people who were in general 15 to 30 years older than me and still play a lot of folks in that age range.

Thay Graciano:
That's super cool.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, there's a different temper to that relationship. There's a mentorship there that's not present in friendships, but it's still in other friendships. But it's still a friendship. And I think that it becomes this really unique exchange of teaching and learning at any given moment, more so than with peers, I think.

Thay Graciano:
For sure. Yeah, I totally agree.

Willie Thompson:
It's much more subtle.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah. And I think there's a certain anxiety that comes from being young, and when you have people who are older, have been through it, you can really be like, oh. You know.
That's such a good point.

Thay Graciano:
It'll be okay.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. Well, a through-line that that's emerging immediately, which is reflected in the work you do now, is your interest in politics and activism. Given that that was something that it seems pretty quickly you started throwing yourself into in the UK, what were the seeds of that interest in politics, policy, advocacy? You mentioned your uncle, was that someone that you debate with frequently?

Thay Graciano:
Yes. Oh my God, he still does it. Except we don't agree anymore. So that's really annoying.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Thay Graciano:
We believe in very different things.

Taylor Goss:
Take us back to those first formative years.

Thay Graciano:
Okay, well you can imagine little Thay probably 12 years old, and I'd be in the kitchen eating something and my uncle would come up to me and say, we really ought to think about communism and capitalism. Why is it that we should have communism? And we don't have communism in Brazil, but as an ideology, he didn't think it should even be contemplated. And so he'd talk about history and what it is about communism that was good or bad. Mostly bad because he really hates communism. And then, I don't know, he would just have these rants, but they were really interesting.

And I think as a young person to have someone want to speak to you and take you seriously and want to engage you in something that they believe in is really cool. And it doesn't happen often, I don't think. So I think that was it really. I was always thinking about ideology and policy and things that he would be criticizing. Look at the economy right now. Look at the unemployment rate. No wonder we're doing this badly or something like that. And of course Brazil was going through a lot of, there were quite a few corruption scandals when I was growing up. I remember my parents just being so mad, why are they stealing our money?

Why don't they care about the people? And when you're in Brazil, you see a lot of inequality. It's unfair. I think anyone who sees inequality can see that it's terrible. And inequality in my country means people not having enough food to eat and that... It just goes against everything that I think society should be. That's the first seed. And then in the UK, so I know that Sandy, my very, very good friend from London
was very active in politics because oh, we're both immigrants in London. And I think the rhetoric about refugees and about people from other nationalities was getting pretty bad. And when Brexit happened, it was hard not to feel like you were unwanted. And to feel unwanted just because of where you are from and to have a lot of ideas about who you are, which are founded on no evidence other than a narrative that's going on on the news or because of a political commentator not liking refugees. It's really strange.

It's even more strange when that suddenly seeps into your everyday life. When I was working at the bar, at the pub, you could see these really cool people that I was meeting suddenly become kind of extreme and they would get drunk and start shouting at the BBC and say, how dare they be storming our country? It was hard not to take that personally, but I didn't. And I think that's the thing, the narrative or the dehumanization of people because of just political narratives is really interesting. Or political rhetorics is really interesting to me. And of course I wish that wasn't the case. I wish there was a narrative of bringing everyone together. That's how I was brought up and that's what I believe in. So that's the work that I try to do and that's what I believe in. I think that we have a lot more in common than we imagine.

Willie Thompson:
That makes a lot of sense. And even I remember being in college when Angela Merkel opened up the borders to migrants at the time and-

Thay Graciano:
Syrian refugees.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, Syrian refugees. And I remember how contentious that was in terms of the narrative and then seeing, I think it was a couple of years after, people feeling like she had made the right decision about doing that at that time. But even then, the switch in that narrative wasn't immediate. And so I definitely even crossed the pond as they say, I was able to see at least how some of those narratives were playing out compared to the narratives in the U.S. which were also fairly anti-immigrant at that time as well. And so, even going into that, I wonder if what you said really ties well to your imagine a world statement actually. Because what I hear in your imagine a world statement is a world where there's sufficiency, there's fulfillment, there's merriment, things of that nature. And given your lived experience, I'm wondering what would it take for the world to look like what you imagine in that sense?

Thay Graciano:
There are many ways to approach this question, but I think the main thing coming from the example about Germany and about the EU, the European Union, around that time was that clearly people from those countries or from the UK have a fear which is founded on reality, which is we have a public health system, that was a lot of what was being said at that time. So the UK has the national health system, NHS, and a lot of people were saying, we're not going to have enough money to fund the NHS. So it's very hard for someone who is from that country to say, "Oh my God, we need to take more people in, but I need my health system." So you have this balancing act, right? You need to make the citizens remember that the NHS can be funded and we can still help other people if that's the case. And usually it is the case. The problem is that political narrative or rhetoric is used to say that it's a give or take. You can't do both.
Willie Thompson:
Either or but not both.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah, either or. And it's very easy for politicians to do that. Because it's much easier to blame this invisible enemy than to actually be honest and say, we're actually privatizing the NHS because we don't believe that it should be free. And I think that was what was happening at the time. Other than the many other lies that were said about how the EU was being funded by the UK or the amount of money that was going in. But to answer your question more directly, I do something called deliberative democracy. I think we're going to get into that.

But deliberative democracy is basically bringing people together from very different beliefs or people who believe in completely different things, who Democrats, Republicans, or whatever. And you get them together, put them into small groups and get them to talk about issues that are very important to the nation. So they might talk about taxation, they might talk about funding health publicly or anything like that. And usually when you put people together into these small groups, you see that people tend to agree. Or they move in a direction that brings them together.

And that's because you're not hearing a rhetoric that is making things black and white. You're hearing a rhetoric which is, hey, I would love to have public healthcare because while my husband had cancer, it was really difficult for us. So you humanize people. So I think for us to achieve policy or to have a world where people's needs are met, we need to let the real people, so common citizens, to be a part of policy and to be a part of policy in a way that isn't heated, that isn't combative.

Taylor Goss:
One way that you have advocated for policy discussion that is not adversarial in nature is through an organization that you co-founded, Skaped that we mentioned earlier. Skaped is essentially an arts-based policy activism organization. Correct?

Thay Graciano:
I think it has been changing a lot, but essentially in the beginning it was, yes. So the UK government around that time when we founded it, they were trying to get rid of the Human Rights Act. Which is basically the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the UN came up with. But it's made into law, which means that if the government isn't doing certain things, you can go after the government. And it also-

Taylor Goss:
I can't see any benefit to that. I see why it's gone.

Thay Graciano:
It forces government to be good, to be efficient, to serve the people, and there's a lot of things that inspired that becoming law, but they wanted to get rid of it. And so around that time, we're doing a lot of arts workshops to deal with that.

Taylor Goss:
Where did that come from for you? Why start with Arts workshops?
Thay Graciano:
It's democratic, I'm going to say that word, but everyone can get art. I think I can tell you lots about political jargon, which is what we are taught here.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Thay Graciano:
And that's very important. However, policy and politics is about everyone, and it's about common people understanding it. And you shouldn't have to have a political science degree to be engaged in politics. And indeed, I think a lot of people are engaged in politics and they don't know the jargons and they don't know, cost benefit analysis and all that. And the arts are open to everyone. They're open to interpretation. So one thing for me is to say to you that the rate of refugees coming in from Syria at that time was low in comparison to the other countries and considering the budget, whatever. And the other thing is for me to show you a painting of this refugee child was stopped at the border and was attacked by someone with a dog. And it's a terrible image. But maybe when the narrative or the rhetoric is so negative about refugees, we need to be reminded through art, through the arts that there is a human being there. So anyone can get art. And that's the main thing.

Taylor Goss:
So how did those arts workshops evolve into Skaped and what it is today?

Thay Graciano:
So right now it's all about creating community. Sandy does a great job of that. It's going into different neighborhoods or communities in London and reminding people that they have things in common. I think a lot of the reason why people get angry politically is because they don't have a voice or they don't have a community or they're always alone, or the only way they engage with others is online. And online you're going to see things that are likely polarizing or polarized or will make you really angry. And Skaped right now goes to different communities and helps them. Basically talks to people, especially people from marginalized identities. When I was involved with Skaped, it was about going to youth groups and talking to young people about the Human Rights Act and talking about why it is that law works in this way, what it is that you can do with that law, and why it was important for us to get the government to keep the Human Rights Act alive. Mainly that.

Taylor Goss:
I love the discussion of the intersection of arts and policy action.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, we've actually had a number of scholars.

Thay Graciano:
You would.

Taylor Goss:
I would.
Willie Thompson:
It's funny. Well, it's interesting because well, clearly, because Taylor's an artist and that probably appeals to some of his sensibilities as an artists. And I also think there've been a number of people we've had this season on the pod who've used arts as a means to achieving some type of social change.
Yes.

Taylor Goss:
I think of Emily Russell, what she was doing with Playwriting for Peace. Krishna Baghani does this literally because she's doing a PhD in TAPS.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
Kay and Lydia. There's definitely a through line there when it comes to what the arts can do in terms of changing minds and hearts.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah, I think it just breaks down barriers. There's only so much you can put up when... Art just connects you to something. Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, yeah. It's not cure-all something we talked with Emily about. I really liked the complementary nature that you talked about of the news report, a sober reality, and the emotional immediacy of a painting or a work of art. It makes me think of emotional immediacy. That's right.

Willie Thompson:
Emotional immediacy.

Thay Graciano:
That's a good word.

Taylor Goss:
It makes me think of protest anthems or the idea of collective action, collective motivation built through a rallying cry. There's this Bob Dylan song "Only a Pawn in Their Game" about the murder of Medgar Evers. And he sang it at the March on Washington. And just the images of him and people like Nina Simone, Harry Belafonte, marching with people and singing and leading a chorus of chants. That's always been extremely moving to me.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
And to take that at what seems at such a large scale and a associated with such a momentous thing, but to do it at a local level with children. To sow the seed of the value of arts-based activism. And it seems like something that might be beneficial for the people that are in that program is also not just the collective action building, but also just understanding their own identity and understanding their own place in the society in which they live. So I think it's a lovely program.

Thay Graciano:
That's very kind.

Willie Thompson:
I wonder when it comes to deliberative democracy and reducing polarization, which I know are things that you're researching through your PhD, just when you think of effective polarization, and I'll just say right now, there are people who much more astute than I who've talked about this with nuance around how it seems that people are increasingly having positive feelings towards their co-partisans or their in-group and more negative feelings towards people from opposing parties. I'm wondering, what do you think is their role of the academy in all this as a conduit for addressing some of the things that seem to happen in the broader culture?

Thay Graciano:
Well, I hope it's a large role because I'm trying to play it. Well, you know, you are right. Effective polarization is on the rise. And I think it's because of this tribalism, this thing of wanting to protect yourself by finding people who agree with you. And the thing is, the more we do that, the more we don't allow our own in-group to have nuanced views about things. And I think it's because ultimately we want to belong to a group. We want to be accepted.

But academia can get in the way of that or can improve matters by basically providing examples of how to counter it. And so with a deliberative democracy, we always have pre- and post-event surveys. We have exactly an effective polarization question, which is great. And it basically says rank from one to 10, whether or not you think that people who disagree with you politically have a reason for doing so. Basically what you're being asked is whether or not you think that someone, so if you're a Democrat who being asked whether or not someone who is a Republican is a crazy person.

Taylor Goss:
Yes, absolutely.

Thay Graciano:
No. Or if they're simply different from you.

Taylor Goss:
Right. Yeah, yeah.

Thay Graciano:
And that's the basis of democracy. Democracy is sustained when we believe that other people who disagree with us, they should also have a say, somehow. And so before deliberations happen in small groups, people tend to be like, "no." And then after they're like, "Yeah, you know what actually..." And it's huge, it's a huge thing. I think the American one room experiment and listeners do check it out.
American One Room 2019, which brought 526 Americans from all over the country together to talk about policy. And so I think it was a 30% increase in that measure. So people became a lot more welcoming of someone different. And individuals, you could see people, Democrats and Republicans hugging, which is like when do you ever see Democrats and Republican hug? Never.

And so you give people an opportunity to speak and if we keep doing these experiments, which I am trying to run a few in Brazil, one about the Amazon and how to protect the Amazon. And hopefully we can show government that bringing real people, common citizens into policymaking can guide their decisions.

So the idea is, okay, so people have now come together and they really agree with this issue, or this one thing should be legal or whatever. Then policy makers kind of have to accept it, or there is a legitimacy for passing a law if you base it on the people. And so some people suggest that this exercise should be a chamber in government or these meetings should be something that informs policy-making. I believe in that. And so I'm very lucky that my program tries to do something that really has real life consequences.

Taylor Goss:
Sure.

Willie Thompson:
Absolutely. Did you go on a trip recently over spring break to do some of this research?

Thay Graciano:
Yes. But I was doing it for my international policy program. So we have a capstone, yes. But I was working with public defenders in Brazil and we are trying to create a governance body for the use of AI in the justice system or for public defenders.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Thay Graciano:
And of course there's a huge... so many cases they have to deal with and AI can help them. But also there are many dangers with AI, and so they should be aware of that. And so we will be running a deliberative democracy experiment with them and seeing what they think should be the regulations and things related to AI and how it should be decided.

Taylor Goss:
Okay, so deliberative democracy as a method to make the decision about how to use AI in public?

Thay Graciano:
Exactly.

Taylor Goss:
Oh, wow. Great. Okay.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah, yeah.

Willie Thompson:
One quick question I have as a follow-up is, what is it about the small group that is so effective in lowering people's rate of effective polarization? This is something like, this is I a dynamic that cuts across experiences. Even at the GSB, I find that the conversations tend to be much more nuanced when we do a 10, 15 minute breakout. And then we come back to a large group and debrief. I don't know if you've felt that before in other classes you've taken here, Taylor.

Taylor Goss:
Sure.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah, totally. Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
That's just very interesting to me that there's something about the small group, where it has a very distinct role in playing and having some of these nuanced conversations.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah, I've definitely seen it in classes. I think honestly, when you give people a chance to speak, they don't feel like they need to scream and shout at other people. They don't feel like they need to scream about politics. And the small groups allow people to listen to one another. They allow them to see the humanity in the other person. It's really hard to be mad at immigrants or refugees when there's an immigrant in front of you who's a perfectly nice person speaking to you about their struggles. Same thing about someone who may want something very, let's call it libertarian. And then you realize, oh, I understand. They pay a lot of tax and that really is eating up all their money.
So it's hard to dehumanize people when they're right there in front of you. And the small groups with the moderator, there's always a moderator. They really ensure that everyone speaks and they ensure that people listen to one another.

Taylor Goss:
Well, you mentioned of course, your work that you've done going back to Brazil, and you've mentioned a little bit about some of the economic problems and social issues that you've seen in Brazil, but I'd love to hear your thoughts on do you want to return to Brazil in the long term to work? What's the balance for you in theory versus practice in working in Brazil? And what do you love about the place and what do you hate about it?

Thay Graciano:
Well, people have a five-year plan usually at Stamford.

Taylor Goss:
I don't.

Thay Graciano:
Honestly, I hate... Oh, thank God. Okay,

Willie Thompson:
I too do not have a five-year plan.

Thay Graciano:
Okay. We can remain friends. No wonder we get along. But I used to have a very detailed plan, to be honest. And then eventually I was like, oh my God, if you're making a plan, you're just asking for the universe to be like, haha, let me show you.

Taylor Goss:
That's so true. That's so true.

Thay Graciano:
Let me show you what I got. I think the luckiest thing about being at Stanford is that I get to go back to Brazil all the time, and I do work there. And to be very honest with the Stanford name, you get to do impactful things and people listen to you

Taylor Goss:
Stanford.edu email. Sounds crazy.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah. Honestly everyone replies. It's very odd. It's very odd. And so that helps a lot. I do want to be involved in Brazilian politics somehow either making policy or just getting people to work together to make good policy. I'm always going to be doing that, and that likely looks like going back, and so I'm excited for it. What I love about Brazil is that Brazilians are wonderful people. I'm not just saying it because I'm Brazilian, honestly. I'm like a fake Brazilian. Because I spent so long in London. But there is a warmth and a beauty that's found in sadness.

Not in a weird way either. It's more like, okay, life is hard and yet there'll be beauty at some point. At some point things will be okay. I think there's this hope. We are very self-critical in Brazil. We're always complaining about the government. We're always saying, no, Brazil could be doing better. And it's because we desperately want to be doing better, and we're there... If you go to Brazil, you're like, oh my God, this is an amazing place. It's beautiful. People work really hard. There's so much potential. There's beauty not only because of nature and people being warm, but also this huge amount of economic potential to be more policy minded here is something that really gives me a lot of hope. But mainly the people. It's always the people.

Taylor Goss:
Always the people.

Thay Graciano:
And then a thing that I hate about it is that we are too self-critical. Is that we always think that other people are doing it better. Sometimes they are in some aspects, but we also do a lot of things, right. We are getting a lot of things right, and I think we need to value that.

Willie Thompson:
Absolutely.

Taylor Goss:
I love that little nugget that you dropped right there. About the beauty and sadness. We actually came across an article that you wrote for the Stanford Daily. Which is... but no, no.

Thay Graciano:
That's good research.

Taylor Goss:
You're recoiling.

But, no, sincerely, it's... I think we'll try to include this in the show notes because it's a beautiful reflection on grief and change. And I'm really glad that you decided to share it back in 2022. But I just wanted... There's a passage that's so connected to what you just said.

Which is, "I am here to tell you that it's okay to feel sadness and that sometimes sadness will mask itself as anger, self-hatred, righteousness, or pretending to be something you're not and making mistakes that you will regret for a very long time. But you're allowed to make mistakes. You should always come back to yourself, whatever that means for you."

And I read that and I was really moved by it. It's a lovely piece. Highly recommend that y'all read the rest of it. But for you right now, it's been a couple of years since you wrote that. How do you come back to yourself these days?

Thay Graciano:
I write. I think there's a lot of beauty in writing, and I sing. I write songs. Taylor and I will be jamming next week.

Taylor Goss:
Yes, we will at the Calendar.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah. I come from a place where my mom has always made music. And so through struggles in Brazil, every weekend we'd go to her friend's house and she'd be playing Bossa nova on the weekend or MPB, which is Brazilian pop. And so I think the way to come back to yourself is just to not do the thing that is killing your soul. And sometimes that’s stress or doing things which are ultimately connected to trying to prove to the world that you’re good enough when you don’t have to. You are good enough and you don’t have to be doing a billion things. And it's so funny to be saying that. I'm doing two degrees at the same time like, come on.
Heard, heard.

Willie Thompson:
I will be hearing you next.

Thay Graciano:
I think that's the thing. We do things sometimes because we want to prove to ourselves and to others that we're good enough. Or that we're doing enough, that we're clever enough. But ultimately coming back to yourself is realizing, I'm good enough. I deserve to be here no matter what I'm doing. And it's really hard to feel sorry for yourself when you're at Stanford. And yet I manage, and I'm sure we all manage because it's really tough being here.

When I wrote that article, my dad had recently passed away, and this wonderful relationship that lasted seven years had ended. And I was very grateful for the relationship and very grateful for everything that had happened in that relationship. But also very sad that it had ended and very sad about my dad.

I think when you're going through a lot of difficulties or sadness, you tend to view yourself as either not capable of doing the things that you have to do, or you view yourself as deserving of those things that happen to you as guilty for it. We all have responsibility for some things, but I think self-compassion is the only thing that will make us kind people. And God knows we need kind people in the world, otherwise we will become bitter. And so coming back to myself is writing, because writing allows me to see that I'm just a human being. I'm going to make mistakes, but I'm also going to do some nice things.

So to see your own humanity is the thing that reminds you that you are you. That you are someone worthwhile. It's important.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, it really is. Thank you for sharing that. That's definitely important for me to hear right now, just today and any day.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
And I think important for everybody listening, because I think we have a demographic which is considering grad school and considering putting themselves on paper. And that's a scary thing to do. It's very self-exposing, and you're immediately, as I did, scrolling through the Knight-Hennessy biographies and seeing all these incredible things.

Thay Graciano:
No. Don't do that.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, right, right.

Thay Graciano:
That's the word.
Taylor Goss:
It's doom scrolling to some degree.

Willie Thompson:
It is doom scrolling.

Taylor Goss:
But to recenter yourself and remind yourself that your unique experience is valuable and the act of self-reflection is productive. Is such an important reminder. So thank you.

Willie Thompson:
Going off of that vein. There are, in my estimation, probably thousands of people every year who want to go to Stanford and be a part of Knight-Hennessy. What advice would you have to those folks who are applying?

Thay Graciano:
Apply, but don't attach your well-being to the outcome. I think everyone says that, but-

Taylor Goss:
Easier said than done, but yes. Yes.

Thay Graciano:
It is very...

Willie Thompson:
That was good.

Taylor Goss:
It's great.

Willie Thompson:
That was good. It was apply and don't attach yourself-

Thay Graciano:
Apply, but don't attach your self-worth to the outcome.

Taylor Goss:
Wow.

Thay Graciano:
Anyway.
Great.

Thay Graciano:
And it's so easy to say that once you get in to Knight-Hennessy and you're like, yay.

Taylor Goss:
For sure.

Thay Graciano:
But also, if you're applying, it's because you believe in the mission, right. And that in itself is valuable. Keep doing that regardless of what happens. Keep believing in the mission and keep being humble, kind. Things will work out in some way, and you will find your path. No matter what the end result of this particular scholarship is.

Taylor Goss:
How has KH supported you or helped you in your professional or personal endeavors?

Thay Graciano:
Gosh, it's a wonderful place. It really is. I think the main thing is that I get to meet people who are wonderful, different interests. And that I would not... probably wouldn't meet if I were just in my department every day in my cubicle doing work. I get to come here in this beautiful place, and I talk to you guys, and we have so many different ways in which we can create community and feel welcomed and feel like beautiful things are valued.

It's really strange because kindness is one of the things in the KH statement, and it's true. I have yet to meet someone who isn't very nice and thoughtful when, you know... It's very, very strange. And it's nice to be reminded of that when you are in graduate school because it's really tough. It's really, really tough. And people can be really... they can be in not a good space, which is probably what causes unkindness. But I think when you have a place where other people pull you back to being kind, it's very centering.

Taylor Goss:
Amazing. And I know we have to get through improbable facts at some point as we're wrapping up the conversation, but we've mentioned music. We've mentioned the fact that you sing and Taylor plays guitar. Are we going to get a performance at some point before the pod is over. I think we can play out the episode with a little performance that makes me super excited. All right Thay.

Thay Graciano:
I didn't warm up.

Taylor Goss:
All right, get into your improbable fact situation and then I can't wait for this performance.

Willie Thompson:
Okay. Yeah. So something that we always end up with, speaking about Knight-Hennessy and the community and the application, is the fact that everyone who fills out the Knight-Hennessy application provides eight improbable facts. Things that-I forgot about that.
... That's right. Things that someone would not expect to be true about you.

Thay Graciano:
Right.

Taylor Goss:
Everyone interprets this differently. Everyone spends a varied amount of time. I spent probably the most amount of time, percentage wise.

Willie Thompson:
As did I.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, yeah.

Thay Graciano:
I did too.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. So yeah, tell us about how that process was? And would you be comfortable sharing one of your improbable facts?

Thay Graciano:
I can't remember all of them to be honest. I know one that was really odd that I shared that I was like, I shouldn't put this. They're going to think I'm crazy. Then I was like, you know what? They might as well know. I said that I talk to trees sometimes, which is true. I sometimes go into nature and I just say, hi, you're so peaceful. And it's this idea of being present and just being aware of the things around you and how wonderful they are. So that was the more hippie one.

Taylor Goss:
I love that.

Willie Thompson:
I feel like you should go on a hike with Will or something like that.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Thay Graciano:
Oh yeah, totally.

Taylor Goss:
There's also a passage in that article that we were talking about where you talk about walking into nature and asking permission to enter.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
I love this anthropomorphization.

Thay Graciano:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
I didn't pronounce that.

Thay Graciano:
That's very-

Taylor Goss:
Anthropomorphized.

Willie Thompson:
Anthropomorphization.

Taylor Goss:
Anthropomorphization.

Willie Thompson:
That's seven syllables ... that's crazy.

Thay Graciano:
Now spell it. I'm joking.

Taylor Goss:
I hope I said that right. I'll rue the day I decided to say that word, but yes. I love this humanization of-

Thay Graciano:
That's safer. Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
Of nature. It's really beautiful.

Thay Graciano:
Thank you. I like nature. I love nature and more... Do you want another fact?

Taylor Goss:
Sure, go for it.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, go for it.

Thay Graciano:
The other one was a very obvious one. Which I told you about already. Which is I started my undergrad at age 26.

Taylor Goss:
Oh, okay. Yeah.

Thay Graciano:
Gives context. I don't know what they look for honestly in those facts.

Taylor Goss:
Neither do I.

Willie Thompson:
It's about... It's a... Yeah.

Thay Graciano:
Nobody will ever know.

Taylor Goss:
Nobody will ever know. It's about you deciding what improbable means to you.

Thay Graciano:
True. True that. Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
I remember, I don't think I've told this story on the pod before. But early on in Knight-Hennessy, we had a group meeting to welcome us to the program. And Luke Pena was an Admissions Director at the time for Knight-Hennessy.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah.
Taylor Goss:
And he was reading.

Thay Graciano:
I love Luke.

Taylor Goss:
He was reading off, you know, not attributing them, but reading off people's improbable facts. And you know this person learned PI to the 198 digit or whatever. This person has the key to the city of their hometown.

Thay Graciano:
Oh my God.

Taylor Goss:
This person started their nonprofit. And then he says, and this person, he didn't say a name. But he says, and one of our scholars here wanted to be a professional bull rider. And I was like, that's the fact you choose from me.

Thay Graciano:
I didn't know that about you.

Taylor Goss:
Because when I was about, I don't know, six years old, I loved professional bull riding.

Thay Graciano:
That's so sweet.

Taylor Goss:
There are all these amazing facts and this one guy who wants to be a professional bull rider.

Thay Graciano:
Oh my God.

Taylor Goss:
Thanks y'all.

Thay Graciano:
It's different.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. Well, I might save that story for my episode actually.
Willie Thompson:
You should keep it and then we'll refer to it.

Taylor Goss:

Thay Graciano:
It will always be the way we think of you, Taylor. It will always be brought up.

Willie Thompson:
Taylor, the bull rider.

Thay Graciano:
That's a good band name.

Taylor Goss:
Taylor and the bull.

Willie Thompson:
Taylor and the bulls.
Well, Thay look, this was a fantastic time. Really enjoyed having you on the pod today. Learned so much about you. Also, I definitely feel so much appreciation for the experiences you had and how they show up in this community. Because I think a lot of times people tell themselves stories about what it's like to be a Knight-Hennessy scholar and the experiences people have before they get here. And I think your experience is but another thread in the beautiful tapestry I think we're trying to weave with the podcast. So, amen.

Thank you for taking the time and being here with us. We really appreciated it.

Thay Graciano:
Thank you for having me. That was really fun. I really love being here with you guys.

Taylor Goss:
Amazing. It's been such a pleasure. Thank you Thay.

2, 3, 4.

Thay Graciano:
Your sweet loves addictive. Your sweet love is kind. And when you are with me there's always sunshine. You call me your flower. Fill me with delight. My sweet bumblebee, you enchant me. You enchant me.

Yeah. Go Taylor. Go Will.

Willie Thompson:
Go Thay.
Thay Graciano:
Go Thay.
Go bees.

Taylor Goss:
Go Bees.

Willie Thompson:
Go bees.

Thay Graciano:
Save the bees.

Willie Thompson:
That's a wrap.

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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