[MUSIC] You are listening to Tell Your Story where we connect to HLS staff on a personal level.

[MUSIC] Hello everyone. This is Edgar Kley Filho from HLS Human Resource department. My pronouns are he, him, his. Today we are talking to Lexi Ibrahimi from HLS development who'll tell us about her life, how long she is in this position at HLS and the work she does. Thank you for joining us, Lexi, and please tell me your story.

Hi. Thank you. I'm Lexi and I am a staff assistant in the Alumni Center.

When you say alumni center Development department.

Yes.

That is inside of the Alumni, right?

Yeah.

Tell us about you and how you identify yourself?

Just who I am?

Yeah.

I'm a 29-year-old woman. I am Albanian originally, but I was actually born in Greece.

Really? You're born in Greece.

Yes. Funny story, my name is Alexandra, but I do go by Lexi here in the US because it's easier to pronounce. Americans just say it in a funny way. My name is Greek. It's very important to me because it was given by my mother who passed away when I was 13.

Oh, I'm sorry.

The hospital I was born was named Alexandra. She loved the name and that's how I got the name because she didn't know what she was going to name me until then, I guess.

That's really, really nice. That's a beautiful story. Your mom was from Greece originally?

No, both of my parents were Albania, but they immigrated to Greece for better opportunities. They, back then in the late '80s, when my sister was about, I think three or four years old, my older sister.

The story is that my father was holding her on his shoulders and they crossed illegally from the border from Albania to Greece. That was common practice, I guess unfortunately but a lot of Albanians out of communism tried to leave the country because there was no opportunities and people just wanted better things. There is this like a funny thing among our community that there's about 3 million people that live in Albania, but there's actually 3 million Albanians all over the world spread out.

Wow.

There's a lot of Albanian immigrants all over the world. Like everywhere you go I'll find them.

[LAUGHTER] Well, I can tell you that I heard about Albanian folks when I was in Brazil. We have a big group there, including some big famous actress there in Brazil. Her name at the time Araci Balabanian

Wow, okay.

She's one of those most famous Albanians that you know, in Brazil.

Interesting. I didn't know that.

We have a good group there too. You said that you have a sister, how many siblings you are in total?

I have two siblings. An older sister and a younger brother, and then I have three half-brothers who are younger as well.

Your family went to Greece and then returned to Albania later on?

I was born in Greece and my brother was also born in Greece. Then a year or two later, that's when we returned back to Albania.

Back to Albania. I lived there until I was 18.

Then you moved to US.

Then I came here in Boston.

Boston you have of course, you would have siblings or relatives here.

No.

You came on your own?

Yep.

Wow, like me. I just came like uh, “I'm going to Boston”. That's good.

Exactly. There was a story I just got on a plane, I didn't know anyone. I didn't know anything, I'd never been to the US before.

You already spoke English?

Yes, because I started speaking English at this international school.

Nice.

My father enrolled me when I was about eight.

Really?

High school was English. Everything was in English.

What you can tell us about the Albanian culture? That's still strong in you and you still bring with you.

I've been doing a lot of thinking about that recently. I think something about Albanian culture and who we are as people has really that's stuck with me, is our generosity, our compassion, our positive attitude despite all the struggles that we've been through as a country. The most important is our honor. There is this word in Albania and it's called “besa”.

[FOREIGN].

It means that even when we don't have anything, completely naked, we have nothing, will always have our word.

That is the foundation of every single Albanian since we got our independence 500 years ago, that our word is the most important thing we have.

Oh, wow.

That means that when we tell you we're going to do something, we're going to do it.

You're going to do it. It's a loyalty and a commitment to your word.

Very loyal people, and I don't know, that has stuck with me because we literally have nothing but we will go out of my way to help anyone. Even a stranger. [OVERLAPPING].

Keep going.

Yeah.

That's beautiful. What year did you get to Boston?

It was 2011.

2011? You came on your own.

I came on a student Visa.

A student Visa.

I was 18 and I had to apply for college and got accepted at BU. That's why I ended up here.

You finish college in BU?

Yes, I did my undergrad, there in business management.

That's great. Harvard, when did Harvard happened? Or you had [OVERLAPPING] previous job before that?

No, this was four years ago. [LAUGHTER] Between that and college a lot of thing happened. Obviously before we can even go into talking about that, I can tell you that it was hectic, it was crazy. I finished college in three years because of just complications. I knew that the money was going to run out and eventually my father wasn't going to be able to pay anymore, so I had to make sure I finished on time so I could get my diploma. At a certain point, my father just refused to help me out. This was the last year of my studies. It was very stressful, but somehow I just manage to pull all my savings and my family was able to help me and so I could pay off the rest of the tuition. Because otherwise it would have not given me.

But your finished your degree, and then after that? You…

After that I was pregnant while I was finishing school and I had my baby girl when I was 21. I remember when she was six months old that's when I was able to finish my last semester. It was crazy but we did it because again, it's something that had to be done. But yes, I had my baby girl and then I was trying to find jobs remotely because I couldn't work anywhere, I had a newborn and I really wanted to stay with my baby. I remember I worked part-time and I found a few jobs remotely. I did that for a couple of years and then two years later I had my son, and when he was about one that's when I started working outside of my house.

I remember I got in contact with staffing agency, and they helped me get different positions. It was just contract jobs in different offices. I did there for a while, but then at the same time while I was doing there, I was also applying to jobs myself, not through the agency. I did there for a couple of years, and finally 2019, that's when I got the job here.

At Harvard, 2019?

Yeah, after searching for so many years, but it just worked the way it did.

What was the first position for the job that you got? Was working as staff assistant? Was it front desk?

It was front desk.

Already for Development, or different?

There was a couple of development offices that I was fundraising. But they were non-profits but different fields. It was in education, so one was a non-profit for the environment, and then the other non-profit I worked for was getting donations for refugees.

But this is already at Harvard?

No.

No. Prior to Harvard?

Yeah.

But your first job at Harvard, was already in development?

Yeah, this job that I've had.

This one that you are right now. If you can tell us a little bit, what development department does. What's the main scope of the work that they do?

Of course. Where I am right now, that's mostly the fundraising office.

The fundraising.

That's our main team that I work with. Obviously there's other teams and aspects of development, but I am in the fundraising office. I'm actually in the donor services team, which is another subset of the office and I'm not that involved with fundraising, but what we do supports all of the teams, all of the gift officers, class officers, the people who actually work and reach out to alumni, they rely on us, and there's also a gift-processing members like my coworkers and I also help out sometimes with a gift processing, especially during year-end. We just manage everything like the technical side. Some database expert, so I do a lot of just clean up and maintaining records, making sure that things are up to date, organizing different codes on advance. It's a lot of that type of work, I'm always in advancing the database.

That's what I do. Then what our office does, obviously, it's a lot more complicated.

I imagine. Many divisions inside as well, because they have a different groups that worked for a specific targets, but always related to the Alumni area. For all the students and folks that were at Harvard before. That's really interesting. Let me ask you, Development, of course, it was not something that I assume that you have done before. You start to working in that position, and you start learning everything. How different was from what you studied, and what you are doing? Was the learning process completely different learning process?

Actually, not really. What I studied is very different from what I do right now. What I studied was business management and marketing. That involves a lot of different things. In college I learned about accounting, and finance, and operations, marketing. Pretty much everything. We had an introduction to everything. It's almost like an MBA, but an undergrad level and BU is one of the few schools that actually has this.

This kind of program?

Yeah, degree for undergrads.

It's good knowledge to have. It's very good, and with that degree, I feel like you can go anywhere.

Sounds like a good preparation for MBA.

For sure. Exactly. It's almost very similar. I think the way I ended up just doing what I'm doing is because I'm very good with details. Just making sure that everything is perfect.

You invested in your own career and tried to learn. The reason I'm asking is, sometimes even for new folks that are just starting to feel like overwhelmed by whatever they are doing, or sometimes even if they are doing something for a long time, and thinking about change to a different department or different school, even if it's inside of our Harvard University, they feel like, I'm not sure if I wouldn't be able. I think if you put your mind into it. It doesn't matter what kind of a, well, of course we cannot say that in terms of a surgeon or something like that. But in terms of the administration, you can start over. You can relearn whatever it is that's their. Something that I have said here in the past, sometimes if you were two courses, or you graduated in something that's related to what you are going to do, I think it will depend on where you are as well, because they have their own culture, their own system there, and you have to learn from that as well. You have a base, yes, but you are going to re-learn, and that's the main reason that I was asking you that. It's a good example of, was it different to what graduated from? But you managed to learn, and you have qualities, you have intelligence to figure out things that were put in front of you. That's a good motivation for people who need to learn about that as well.

Also something to add with it. Even when somebody is hiring, let's say HR people, when you're hiring, don't focus so much on the education, it's more about the skills. Again, the resume, there's so much they can tell you, but I think that even, let's say a person who has not done a certain job at all, if they have the skills that are needed, and they have demonstrated those skills in a different area, those skills are transferable. It's really about knowing who you are and what you're comfortable with. If you are, let's say, a social people person, and you're very good at talking with others, and you're comfortable with it, those skills are transferable in so many different fields. It doesn't even matter what you went to school for. You could have done pretty much anything, but those skills are going to help you be the best you can get the job.

You are going to end up, one way or the other regardless, like we just mentioned, what you learned before, you are going to still have to learn the process, regulations, policies, and everything in the new job that they're going to have.

Yes.

That's valid, yes. Difference in terms of when you came to study at Boston, if you go back a little bit, how was whatever level that you can compare in terms of a high school setting in Albania and setting here, in talking about cultural aspect and level, how did you feel?

Actually like I mentioned before, I actually did high school art, it was an international high school, which means that all the classes were the same as in an American high school and we had foreign teachers and also Albanian teachers. We also had students that were foreigners.

Very diverse?

It was a very diverse community already.

That's very nice.

That prepared me a little bit for here, because if I went to a full Albanian school in high school, I think there would have been a huge shock for myself, getting adjusted to the way classes are organized there. Then culturally speaking, that was the biggest shock. The biggest difference was the taste in the food. Even to this day, it's just unbelievable, whenever I go back home, I just eat so much [LAUGHTER] and I'm like, this is what food I suppose, it is. [LAUGHTER] I came here and there was a dining hall at the dorm I was staying at. I remember, I tried the milk, and the eggs, and even the meat. I was like, what is this? The milk tasted like water. [LAUGHTER] I was used to drinking like, we bought actual cow's milk fresh from the market, like the farmers, and my grandmother had to boil it because it's not pasteurized milk. We had to go through the whole process of making sure that the milk was good. We obviously did have supermarket milk.

Of course.

My grandmother, she stayed with us for a little bit off there. We didn't have our mother, so she stayed and cooked for us, and took care of us for a lot of years until she couldn't anymore. I remember, my gosh, and the eggs, the basic stuff, and the meat had no flavor.

Oh my gosh, the fruits, the vegetables.

[LAUGHTER] See, it's funny Lexi when you're saying that, and it's so relatable but here is the difference. You are talking that you are a young person, and you are talking the same thing that I went through when I was a kid in Brazil. Look how many years back?

My God, that's so long ago. We had to milkman coming on a chariot with the horse and stuff and delivering those bottle of milk. Mom had to boil them too and reached a point that she would say “hey, pay attention to the milk or it will spill over”. Then you have that layer on top that was delicious, the smell of that is fantastic. I have commented that right now we go every year back to Brazil to visit my family that's very Center West of Brazil. You still notice, my husband when you go there, he knows the difference too. The meat tastes different because it's grassfed, and the fruits are different because the tropical fruits right from the area. But there is already a process changing because I know that the big centers, everything is following the same system as the canned food or whatever it is that industrialized and thing. Even in Brazil, you can see the difference between whatever you eat locally in certain countryside,

but I just think that's interesting that you noticed that. In Albania, you still can think about when you go home, the smell of everything and the food is great. I personally don't know much about, what's the famous food, for example, in Albania, that's I can tell you in comparison Brazil rice and beans every day, lunch, dinner. [LAUGHTER] Then you have to have, for example, some meat prepare whereas chicken, whatever, and as more salad or boiled vegetables, for example, but you don't have the rice and beans.

Here not rice country, fortunately, because I'm not a huge rice fan. Albania is a mix of seafood in the South, and we also have a lot of Turkish food influence because we were under Turkish rule for years, so a lot of our language is based of Turkish language, even though we do have a different language from them. Religion, and the food, the culture, so those are the Turkish influence, so it's very Middle Eastern which means a lot of meat involved and stews that's what we love to eat then. Now the younger generation is becoming more vegan and vegetarian even in my country.

Even there.

But the older generation is still like if there's no meat in my plate, it's not considered a meal.

Exactly.

There's a lot of meat, but the way we do it is we stew it up. It's always boiled up and just in a nice delicious stew and that's what we eat, a lot of beef.

You wouldn't have as a comparison as well. Brazil is Brazil, and Argentina, Uruguay, of course, we have the gauchos and barbecue that's huge there. You don't have a barbecue style, would be more a stew, soup interesting.

Then in the South again, the seafood is amazing. Oh my gosh. Fish, especially just freshly caught fish the morning of 5:00, 6:00 AM, the fishermen go out, get the fish, and then it's cooked in the restaurants or you eat it fresh right away. It's amazing. For example, the Greek salads, that's a big thing among us, but we also always have something green with our meal.

That's really nice.

But then definitely never know processed food.

On that, not famous, but any suggestions of Albanian restaurant here in Boston or not that you know of? I know a lot of Brazilian ones.

The thing is in Boston no, even though there are a lot of Albanians who own the restaurants, but they don't cook Albanian food because you have to adapt it. Even before I came, there were more Albanian cuisine, like specific restaurants, but because they don't resonate with the people here, they're not going to prosper as a business unfortunately.

Oh, they don't have the population.

A lot of them closed down. Now I know there's this Albanian person who actually owns a diner, so it has diner food, which is not Albanian at all, but that's what's going to sell. [OVERLAPPING] That's the unfortunate thing. I can give you suggestions of where you can get certain pastries maybe or certain foods.

But not a specific location that is still open.

Yeah.

I assume that you are right, it's based on population. If you don't have a big population that's going to make that business to success, but well, in the opposite end would be, for example, Brazilians and the Spanish folks, we have them in a bigger amount here, so they can have their own community. They have their own food, and that would be an easier process.

That's true.

You are still planning to take on studying for the future or not, you are going to be more focused on job right now, in terms of development, what are your thoughts for the future?

I never stop learning, I learn every day. I do take classes even now.

Nice.

Lifelong learning is one of my passions. Classes and specific studies I did, social work, I did a paralegal certificate.

Nice.

Right now I'm trying to finish my, it's called human behavior certificate at the extension school.

Oh, here at Harvard Extension School?

Yeah. I'm trying to finish that certificate, but I have a few certificates under my belt already and I plan to do more. [LAUGHTER]

One curiosity. Your kids, they learn Albanian too or they are pure no interested in learning the language?

Yeah. They didn't have an interest, but I told you I was all alone here, and when I first had them, it was very difficult, and I don't know. Everybody kept telling me speak to them Albanian, but I'm like there's nobody here. I should have just done it, it shouldn't have matter.

It's not easy. I'm telling because my grandfather, German, the other side, Italian, everybody in that time that I remember hearing them or watching them talking, speaking their own language. None of my uncles and my father or mother in their respective families learned how to speak either German or Italian, so it is not that easy. I'm asking just for the sake of sometimes you see people say, you're going to teach them to speak Portuguese and English, or Spanish, it's not that easy. You mentioned before that in terms of your studying, what's your interest in psychology or the course that you're taking?

I just find it very interesting to just study about the brain.

Any case specific that you will have motivated you to start or not? Just curious in general.

Yeah. I think I just want to know and then these skills that you can use in any field. Because psychology just helps you become a better leader of others, and wherever you are, you're always working with people. Whether it is teamwork or you're working on a project or you're just working with your coworkers, it's always good to know how to be empathetic, how to be understanding. That's why I learned that, but then also because of personal reasons I have, I just want to know more about different brain disorders.

In the aspect of psychology, when you're saying the intrapersonal skills that you can learn and your capability to read the room analyze conversations and folks' situations also very helpful.

Yeah.

That gives support. To keep going and learning.

We started Harvard 2019?

Yeah.

It has been almost three years already?

Yeah. It's been three.

Has it been a good experience? Are you happy?

Yeah.

Did it change how you were before, and did you give some solid ground at least to keep conquering or learning more in future?

I'm definitely very happy because.

That's great.

I found myself in a great team which is just so difficult to find. I work with amazing people who are all so capable, so smart, so hard working, and they are supportive people.

That's really good.

It's not negative micro management, for example, or no trust between each other. We have complete trust among each other, we are a small family and I think that is very important for me. Then I started expanding that family by going around the HLS community and involving myself in different events and different opportunities because I just wanted to get to know more people and just learn more. Because when I started it was still normal times. When I started with the one year.

You have one full year that you're all here.

I took advantage of that year from the moment I began.

That's nice.

It was exciting because it was my first full-time job, I was out of my house for the whole day and that was really exciting for me.

That's great.

I was with my kids are 24/7 and I was like, I wanted to talk to people [LAUGHTER] and get to know everyone.

Wonderful. What I was going to say is you were mentioning about having a good support team where you work, which is a great thing, and also going around and trying to learn more and participate in events and everything else, which I think is also great. That's one of the reasons for this podcast is to try to see if you can reach some other folks and see if you promote some sort of engagement for our community here. One thing that I can say, and I want to ask a question follow up with that. We met when you went to that.

The community servings volunteer. The volunteer.

In Jamaica Plain.

I obviously I knew you before that but you didn't know me. I was like I knew who you were. Oh, okay.

How did you feel about that experience in the communist serving?

Oh, it was amazing. I've lived in fear all the time, and I'm just so happy that our HR actually organize that.

I loved that. I had never done that before. I always tell Brian we should do something, volunteer. I think there's so many places that needs some help and it doesn't take much. I was really happy. My time that I was there was paired with Heather Williams, that's from Clinical and Pro Bono, who's a good friend, and we spent four hours there that went so fast.

I know.

Folks were really, really nice as well.

Even if you go by yourself without HLS, when I went on their website, it was full.

Really?

It was literally full maybe until February. They are definitely very, very good when it comes [OVERLAPPING] to getting the volunteers.

Because they do a phenomenal job.

[OVERLAPPING] They've been there for a while and I think they have like, when you have a set volunteer base, those people are reoccurring, so they always come back.

That's fantastic. I think that's it Lexi. Unless you have something else that you want to point it out.

I think that what's important to just make sure that it comes across is that more of us should do this, get to know one another. I think that if you have the chance to just make somebody's day, do it. Always choose kindness and compassion. Always choose that first and always consider other people first before yourself when there is a hard situation, ask yourself, besides work, what is important to you? What is going on with you? I think that let's just all embrace asking each other those questions and we don't need to share if we don't want to share something, but be available.

Be open.

Be open. I just feel like that's very important because we are all people and we all go through things and work is work. It's not more important than who we are.

As human beings, right?

Exactly.

Our capability to interact with each other. That's wonderful. That's really, really important. I think that's the main goal that you should have to create our community and make it stronger in terms of relationships. Like you said, you have a work to do but more than anything else, you are human beings, you are people who can relate to each other and you can say, good morning, say hi. It doesn't need to take much because that makes it different in everyone. You don't know, like you said, what each one is going through life at that moment, and what a moment they are. Hi, good morning, or good evening, whatever it is, good afternoon. Always it's going to sound as a motivation somehow, a good energy coming towards that person and it's going to make a difference. Because of that, in that segment, I want to thank you very, very much. I think is interesting because one of the books, The Little Prince, now, because of you, I would think more about Albania and your culture and everything. The smile that you brought to my face about the food and tastes of food and everything else.

What I told you about Albania, just like remember what I said that, we have nothing but our word. I think that that's something that's very important to keep in mind, don't lie. It's fine people do live but what I'm saying is like, don't give out empty promises.

Yes.

If you're going to keep your word for something don't overextend yourself. Funny story, that's my favorite book.

The Little Prince?

Yeah.

I think that's in a certain level when you'll read, that one touches everybody.

Just be a real and honest person. Always tell your truth, do not be afraid to be who you are. I think that's something that we just need to keep practicing.

That's true. With that, we can wrap up. Thank you very much, Lexi.

Thank you.

Thank you very much for participating. For everybody at home, I'll see you next time. Bye bye. [MUSIC]