##### [00:00:02.750] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton and you're listening to Harper Talks, a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio today on Harper Talks I'm excited to speak with Roberto Lopez. Roberto is a graduate of Harper College and a 2021 Outstanding Recent Alumni Award recipient. Lopez is a first generation college student and points out that it was Harper that believed in him first. Roberto joined me for Harper Talks over Zoom

##### [00:00:33.390] - Brian Shelton

Hey Roberto, thanks for being here. How are you doing today?

##### [00:00:36.530] - Roberto Lopez

Hi Brian, Doing great here in Chicago. A little cold over here. It feels like negative ten, but hopefully we can spice it up today.

##### [00:00:45.270] - Brian Shelton

Spice it up a little bit.

##### [00:00:46.460] - Roberto Lopez

That's right. It's absolutely freezing. It seems like in this area of the country, it's either hot or it's cold. There's not a whole lot in between.

##### [00:00:54.270] - Roberto Lopez

Chicago summers are great, Brian, but then the winters are really tough on us.

##### [00:00:59.430] - Brian Shelton

Really tough.

##### [00:01:00.180] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah, really tough.

##### [00:01:02.010] - Brian Shelton

So you came to Harper College in 2009 as a first generation College student. What brought you to Harper?

##### [00:01:09.130] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah, I think first as most students there, I grew up in a working class family, Brian, so I really had to work and go to school. And Harper really was flexible in their classes and resources as well. And that's one thing that really kind of drew me to Harper College was, hey, I can still work. I can also explore what I really want to do in the future. And at that moment in my life, I really didn't know what degree I was going to get into. So why go to a four year College and pay so much money, Brian, that I can just go to a great community College like Harper College?

##### [00:01:47.610] - Brian Shelton

That's a recurring theme that I have with all the alumni I speak to is that they weren't exactly sure that what they wanted to do. So they came to Harper and then they figured it out. And boy, are they glad that they did. And I talked about that with a lot of families when they're talking because they talk to me knowing I'm a Professor, Brian, where should my son or daughter go to school? That sort of thing. I'm like, well, have you thought about community College? Because I doubt your child knows exactly what they want to do right now. And sending them off to a four year school might not be the best idea.

##### [00:02:16.070] - Roberto Lopez

And the quality of Harper was at par with some four year University that I've been to, Brian. So even with the infrastructure that you guys have IT, you guys were fairly upgraded. So, yeah, Harper College is really a great community College, fully supported.

##### [00:02:33.950] - Brian Shelton

So what was your time at Harper like? What were you involved with? What did you do while you're there Besides take classes?

##### [00:02:38.930] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah, most of the time. I wish I was more involved at that time in Harper, but I worked a lot, to be honest. 30 hours probably. I worked at Walmart all the time. That was my first job. Like most students say, I got to pay for the bills, and my mother and dad were working, too. So most of my time in Harper, I was working. But really, I think I appreciated the teachers there a lot, Brian, because they really understood where I was coming from. So that kind of flexibility of the work wasn't easy. They didn't make it easier, but they understood that most of the students aren't working. So, for example, the tutor Center, I don't know if you guys still have it was open till 09:00. P.m. That was super beneficial for me, Brian. I used to go there for night, maybe the stats class that we have to take. So I was shop around and they always had part time students assistance, but they also had, like a full time professor there, which a lot of four year universities don't have that. So that was always a plus. And that big gap of window of being open till 09:00, p.m. It was really good for me.

##### [00:03:55.660] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. It's one of the best things about the community College is understanding the scheduling needs of our students. And so we offer classes in so many different modalities and offer our other resources in so many different times and modalities as well. It makes a big difference because unlike, I mean, students when they're going to four year schools generally have jobs and that sort of thing, too. But a lot of students, community colleges really are working fulltime jobs and going to school and supporting their families. And so it's a different animal.

##### [00:04:25.010] - Roberto Lopez

I wish I was more involved, but then when I went to four year schools, I was more involved because what I learned from Harper was, hey, I really like community, and I wish I was more involved with Harper. So that's one thing that I went back and corrected with my other institutions that I went to.

##### [00:04:45.960] - Brian Shelton

Yes. So you're a first generation College student. You went to community College, and then you went to DePaul to finish your bachelor's degree and then finishing a master's degree at the University of Chicago. I mean, these are not chump change institutions here, roberto, how did you manage to do this? You must have studied hard at Harper.

##### [00:05:04.980] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah, I know. Great foundation at Harper, but I think motivation and drive Brian. Where I come from they always told me UChicago was a school that was really hard to get into, and people like me would not get into. Usually the folks that get to UChicago are very technical, the glasses and very smart. And I always was very motivated. And I got in. But my degree with the DePaul was finance. So I actually started my career in the private sector. I went into banking as an investment banker for a Chicago bank downtown. Then I did a bunch of management roles fairly young in my career for an insurance company. But then you see this pivot in my career, and this pivot was also based on passion. There were a lot of things that were going on in our nation, Brian. I was like, you know, Roberto, life is too short, and I got to focus on what I'm really passionate about. Helping my community is something that I'm really passionate about. So I left the private sector, and I then hop into getting my degree in public policy from the University of Chicago. And then I focus everything on nonprofits, on social work, helping my community. So if you see most of my resumes, like, okay, he started in the private sector, then he jumps. Before jumping and pivoting my whole career, Brian. I actually went to Australia for three weeks because I think I was 26, 27. Now I'm 30, Brian, and everything's breaking apart. But I was like, 26. Like, I'm not really digging this private sector stuff. Great money, by the way, but it doesn't wake me up in the morning. And from that trip, I was like, Roberto, focus on your passion, helping out people. That motivates me, Brian. Ok. What's the next step? I think I need a Masters. I don't know anything about public policy. What's the best school in public policy in our state? UChicago. And always. I do a lot of mentoring and always aim high. Always aim high. Always aim high. I was thinking am I going to get into Chicago? I don't know. But the passion is there, and I got in luckily, and I did fairly well, too. So all the students watching is like, always aim high.

##### [00:07:35.710] - Brian Shelton

That's right. Aim high. Go to the school that you think? Yeah, absolutely. So you transitioned out of the private sector into the public service sector. What have you been doing?

##### [00:07:47.780] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah. So I worked first with the University, and then I did work with a nonprofit in Chicago, helping low income communities obtain energy efficiency. So that's what I did there, and it was really rewarding. I went out there and did a bunch of good outreach because now energy efficiency is kind of like a trendy word that energy efficiency. Everyone wants to talk about energy efficiency, but if you break it down is energy efficiency can provide you with savings on average, and especially when you're low income and you don't have a surplus of money that can really benefit you. Yeah.

##### [00:08:27.980] - Brian Shelton

I think most of us who are looking at our Nicor gas bills this month are realizing that energy efficiency would save us some money.

##### [00:08:36.310] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah. And it creates jobs, Brian. It creates savings, and also it makes our planet better. Wow. Beautiful. Right? So I got it. I got into energy efficiency, and that was good work. A lot of good work, especially in the south of Chicago, helping black and Latinos.

##### [00:08:54.310] - Brian Shelton

That's great. So speaking of that, you were actively involved in helping other first generation and immigrant College students at the University of Chicago. What was your role there with that or what currently is your role with that?

##### [00:09:05.520] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah. So now I have a different role as an alumni so I'm still very active with the Harris School and public policy so I am a board member of the alumni committee. My focus there as an alumni guy is diversity. So UChicago doesn't really have a good history and diversity so I'm there kind of providing insights on how do we engage underserved students and also how to make them feel welcoming. So now when I was a student in the school at U Chicago, I was part of the advisory board, I was a board member and I helped connect resources, first generation College students, for example, some first Gen students might have trouble paying for rent. So hey, can we provide some type of rent credits? I was out there how energy efficiency was also things that we provided them with energy efficiency, a lot of knowledge and resources for first generation College students because like myself, if there was an obstacle they had, they would call mom and dad but mom and dad wouldn't have an answer. Every time I was mum and dad I have what class should I pick next, mom? I don't know, I have finance. Mom, money is not good, what do I do? I was like I don't know, mijo. So they need resources. But the challenge is if you're rich you have a lot of resources. You talk to your mom and mom sends you a nice check. We didn't have that Brian working class kid over here we didn't have a rich mum or dad that I'm hungry sent you money. We had a really high resources allocation to the first Gen students and also this welcoming part was also very special, Brian. Especially a lot of times in meetings class, I'm Latino so you're the only Latino and you have very different experiences than other folks in that room. So making everyone welcome is very important. Your voice matters. So yeah, those type of dynamics. I worked as a board member.

##### [00:11:26.050] - Brian Shelton

That's great. Yeah, it's a different perspective and folks who didn't experience that. I'm a first generation College student myself. My dad went to College for two years and had to drop out to make money and support the family and stuff. So I'm the first person in my family to have graduated from College and just family knowledge isn't there. When you call your folks and say what do I do next? And they say, well I don't know, we haven't done this before, right? So being able to pass that knowledge on to other people and help them out is very important. So it's good of you that you're doing that. It's fantastic.

##### [00:11:57.880] - Roberto Lopez

Right now, especially when you're signing loans. I remember my mom, my school loans were I was just signing papers and oh, there's an interest rate. What is that? I don't know mijo just sign it. Interest rates are very important. All right, you're poor and then you're making us more poor with interest rates. Jesus.

##### [00:12:18.090] - Brian Shelton

Right. I don't think a lot of people understand that when they sign up for student loans.

##### [00:12:23.550] - Roberto Lopez

Also, I'm big in financial literacy since I come from the finance sector. I'm also big into that and let them explain, hey, loans are not free. You have to pay and they have an interest rate. If it's high, you're in trouble. Compounding interest. Watch out.

##### [00:12:40.570] - Brian Shelton

They never go away. So you were voted in as an outstanding recent alumni in 2021. What was that like for you?

##### [00:12:51.370] - Roberto Lopez

It was great. It was very special, especially to see my mom and dad. It's actually I think the first award I ever got, Brian. So it made it a little more special. But also seeing my mom and dad and a reflection that award was a reflection of their work. Boy, my mom and dad only had a third graded education from Mexico, but their work ethic is unbeatable and that's what I got from them.

##### [00:13:22.770] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. Hard work pays off.

##### [00:13:26.250] - Roberto Lopez

I'd rather die than quit. You never quit. You keep going an effort and no complaining. So their hard work really paid off. It was emotional but appreciate Harper for the award. But yeah, it's good to share that day and that night with my mom and dad. And that's the reward to them because they made me.

##### [00:13:50.410] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. So I like to ask everybody who's here and you've given some great advice already. But I always think about what would you tell a current Harper student? What advice would you have for a current Harper student? Or what advice would you have for someone who's maybe thinking about coming to Harper College?

##### [00:14:07.560] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah. So some advice. Look for your passion, Brian. Explore and experiment early on in your 20s. I did a mistake that I was looking for a role with the biggest monetary income. That was a mistake I really made in early my career, especially coming from a low income family. It's like you're looking for a job that pays well. However, I didn't look at the quality of my life as a millennial person is, I like to have good quality of life. Brian, about life is too short to just be working like a dog. So I would say first to the students is find your real passion, especially folks that really don't know what they're doing. I don't know what my degree. I can't figure out a degree, Robert. I'm on a losses. Try to figure out what motivates you, what makes you wake up on a Monday, what makes you smile when you find that go for it. So I would say that and by doing that is exploring travel early 20s. If there's a time like I mentioned, if there's a time you can experiment early twenties, Brian, I don't know if you would agree, but as I get out of there, try different classes, meet different people with different opinions, go to different I went to Europe, I thought that we were the best country in the world. Right. We have about. I grew up in Chicago and we have American number one. American number one. And then I went out to overseas. You got to get six weeks paid. What they call it holiday in Australia. We don't have that in America. Free healthcare. Wow. You know how much insurance is back home? Wow. Experiment. Learn like that's why I tell students, get out of your bubble and hopefully you can find that passion. So when you find that passion, go for it. The money will come after because if you're passionate, you're going to do that work. That role really good. Also, I would say, Brian, surround yourself with positive people and that's what I did in College. I always had a group of friends that were highly motivated, very ambitious friends. They were not the prettiest Brian, I tell you. They were not the football players, but they were bright. They were motivating. I learned a lot from them. Especially, for example, sophomore years when everyone's looking for internships. As a first Gen student, I had no clue what internship was. But then I heard my fancy friend, I'm in internship. What is the internship in a bank?

##### [00:16:49.930] - Roberto Lopez

Oh, what do you do there? We learn about it's. A six week program and you learn about banking. You get paid. Yeah, you get paid. That's really great. And that's how things get started. So surround yourself with positive people that are going to bring you up, never down. And that's very special. I'm all about good vibes, Brian.

##### [00:17:12.880] - Brian Shelton

Okay, Roberto, I appreciate all the great advice for our students and I appreciate you being here with us today and I wish you absolutely the best of luck in your future endeavors.

##### [00:17:23.860] - Roberto Lopez

Thank you so much.

##### [00:17:25.470] - Brian Shelton

Stay positive, right?

##### [00:17:26.940] - Roberto Lopez

Yeah. Meditate too. All right.

##### [00:17:28.940] - Brian Shelton

Take care, Roberto.

##### [00:17:30.170] - Roberto Lopez

Take care. Bye bye.

##### [00:17:35.350] - Brian Shelton

Roberto Lopez is a graduate of Harper College and a 2021 outstanding recent Alumni. If you're enjoying Harper talks, please subscribe and while you're at it rate and review us so that others might find us. Harper Talks is a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. This episode was edited by Brian Diaz. Our online content producer is Ashley Rosenthal. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening.