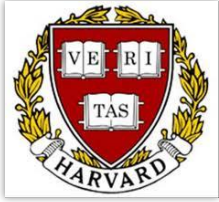




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GENERATION HOPE: AN INTERVIEW WITH VIROOPA VOLLA

“Even though it seems that students are friendly to one another, there is a great deal of competition hiding beneath the hood.”

– Viroopa Volla

By Ryan Luse, Freelance Writer



I had the extraordinary opportunity to interview Viroopa Volla and get a little insight on her journey to Harvard University and her perceptions there as a college freshman. I found her story to be unique, interesting and inspiring. I got the opportunity to interview Viroopa though Sue Luse, an Independent Guidance Counselor in Minnesota. When I asked Sue if she had any students that would make for an engaging interview for class, she suggested Viroopa without hesitation. After getting to know Viroopa a little bit via email it's easy to see why she made it to the heights of Harvard and I bet she has impressed probably everyone that she has come in contact with because she certainly wowed me.

Viroopa is a first generation Indian and had dreamed about going to Harvard ever since she was a little girl. She had a tremendous high school career at Eagan High School in Minnesota, excelling at both academics and extracurricular activities. Viroopa took classes at the University of Minnesota from an early age when she began UMTYMP, the University of Minnesota Talented Youth Math Program. Through UMTYMP, she finished Calculus III by the end of sophomore year. She continued to challenge herself in classes by independently studying for Advanced Placement tests. During her senior year, Viroopa explored careers in medicine by taking Organic Chemistry I and II at the University of Minnesota and working in two mentorships with St. Paul Radiology and HealthPartners. She also focused on her other passion of education reform as a high school representative for her school district's Gifted and Talented Advisory Council.

In addition to her academics, Viroopa was involved in many humanities related activities, including speech, debate, and Indian dancing. She represented her school in public forum debate at the 2009 National Forensic League Tournament and was a two time National Champion of Economic Research Project for the student business organization Business Professionals of America. Acting on her interest in business, she became executive president of the 3,000 member Minnesota Business Professionals of America organization and worked two business related internships at Thomson Reuters. Viroopa is a recipient of the National Teachers of English writing award, a Minnesota State High School League EXCEL award nominee, and a National Merit Scholar. She was not your typical high school student creating PowerPoint presentations. Viroopa learns computer coding for fun and always making sure to read TIME and Newsweek every week so that she is aware of what was happening in the world. When she had extra time, Viroopa rounded out her interests by playing tennis for the JV and Varsity teams at Eagan. She firmly believes that getting an hour of exercise will save you more time on homework in the long run.

She sought the help of Suzanne Luse, an Independent Guidance Counselor when her Dad's colleague highly recommended her. Her regular high school counselor was often helpful but Viroopa found herself wanting more to get into a reach school like Harvard. She found the experience with Sue to be highly valuable and an asset managing the stress that went along with the process. She also found great guidance on her college essay which Viroopa says was the most frustrating part.



Some of the other schools Viroopa considered during the search process included MIT, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, and Duke. It was interesting to hear how her perception of Harvard changed now that she is there and on her way to achieving more of her dreams.

It is rare when you really get a feel for a person by simply corresponding via email. I found her answers to be highly intelligent, someone who has purpose and depth behind every question she answered. She left me wanting to know more and how the rest of her college journey plays

out. I would love the chance to meet her in person someday and doubt it's the last I will hear about this inspiring student. I emailed the questions to her at Harvard and she was kind enough to answer all of my questions as well as some follow up. Here is my interview with Viroopa Volla:

I understand you just started at Harvard, congratulations! How did you arrive to the college of your choice? Was it your first choice?

Thanks Ryan! Harvard has been my first choice since Kindergarten because it was my dream school. As a first generation Indian, many have assumed that I was pressured to attend an Ivy League by my parents because of the prestige but I personally wanted to go to the number one ranked school to receive the best education that I could.

Although it was my first choice for many years, after I received my college acceptances I began to question whether or not my dream school would be a correct fit for me considering that I never visited before attending. I was divided between MIT, Princeton, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania's dual degree program so my dad and I planned a pre-frosh college trip. The week was well worth it because the trip allowed me to gauge the specialties of each school from the diversity of the class to the quality of education offered. I also spoke to many alumni and current students through contacts that I had made earlier about their experiences and how they would compare the schools. This helped me garner a focused decision based on the majors that I was interested in – economics, computer science, and pre-med.

What were some of the other colleges that you thought about attending during the process?

In order of rank – MIT, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, Duke

Why did you decide to go the path of an Independent Guidance Counselor rather than your high school? How

did you hear about Sue? Would you recommend it to others?

I sought the help of an Independent Guidance Counselor because I thought I would get more expertise in dealing with applications to reach schools. My high school counselor was helpful but she didn't know much about my applications to the Ivies and other reach schools. Sue was very knowledgeable when it came to these schools and the essay writers that worked for her made it easier for me to brainstorm essay topics and edit them. I heard about Sue through my dad's colleagues when they had enlisted her help for their children. I would highly recommend Sue to anyone interested in applying to high caliber schools.

Sue also helped me get through the tough times when I was too stressed from the process. She was a great resource to talk to and reassure me that everything was going to be okay and that I shouldn't give up when faced with the daunting task of finishing my college applications. I often couldn't prioritize and ended up taking harder classes that I should have, but Sue clarified where my time should be spent in order to ensure the greatest success.

Is Harvard similar or very different than what you perceived going through the college search process?

It is very different from what I perceived through the college search process. I always knew that the school's student body would be representative of the most qualified students, but I did not know that it would be so diverse. People here are very down to earth and nothing like the "elite" that people usually picture Harvard to be. However, I didn't think students would be so hard working and determined all the time. Even though it seems that

students are friendly to one another, there is a great deal of competition hiding beneath the hood. Everyone gets involved in both academics and extracurriculars.

I also heard of the myth that Harvard classes are easy. This is clearly not true. People receive good grades because no one settles for anything less than above satisfactory work. Each class has at least 15 hours of work per week if a student wants to get a grade in the B to A range. On top of that students still manage to do amazing extracurriculars. People don't sleep as much as they should here to accomplish all the things they want to do. Everyone has a high school mindset in that they need to be an all rounder and be equally good in a variety of things.

What was the most frustrating part of the college search process? The most rewarding?

The most frustrating part was writing the essays. I had nowhere to begin and I didn't know how my essays would convey my personality in a meaningful way. There were so many to write and each one had to be piece of the puzzle that represented my life.

The most rewarding part was visiting the colleges during pre-frosh weekend. After I got in, I was invited to a number of alumni parties hosted in Minnesota and to the colleges themselves. The colleges made sure to treat the accepted with special care, each trying to entice the student to pick that college. During these meetings, I met a number of great alumni and future friends and I really learned why I was accepted to the college. In my visits to Harvard, MIT, and Princeton, I could easily tell why the college thought I would be a good fit and as a result, why the admissions office accepted me.

What the campus/Cambridge is like compared to the Twin Cities and the student body like?

Cambridge is certainly more diverse with people from highly varied backgrounds. When walking through Cambridge, I probably hear bits of other languages more than English. It's really lively and nightlife doesn't stop until 3 am. However, the Twin Cities is more homely. People in Minnesota are nicer compared to people in Cambridge because they don't feel rushed all the time. Cambridge is perfect for young adults with all the

restaurants and attractions it had to offer while the Twin Cities is perfect for a family because of its atmosphere.

Have you thought about what you might like to do for a career?

I really wanted to go into Investment Banking and work on Wall Street, but now I'm not so sure. I might be switching to pre-med because after taking economics, I'm not sure if I like that subject as well as I thought I would. I would eventually want to work in a corporate setting and work my way up but that plan could always change.

What major would you like to pursue? Minor?

I was inclined to pursue economics, but once again now I'm not sure. I was thinking about computer science for a minor, but the classes here are really hard and time consuming if I want to minor in CS.

What are you most proud of academically? Co-curricular?

I'm proud of my involvement in UMTYMP (University of Minnesota Talented Youth Math Program) and successfully completing five years of the program.

My greatest co-curricular achievement is becoming President of the MN Business Professionals of America organization and becoming a two time National Economics Research Project Champion.

Who in your life has influenced your decision to go to college?

My parents have influenced me and with that especially my mom because she wanted me to do something big with my life, which is why, she wanted me to attend an Ivy League college.

Are you the first person to attend college in your family? If not, who has attended?

No, I'm not the first to attend. My father attended Andhra University in India and majored in Computer Science. My mother attended Srikakulum Community College and has an Associate's degree in Pharmacy.

Do you enjoy fraternity/sorority life?

No, definitely not. I'm very reserved. Partying is not my thing.

Would you like to work a job on campus?

If I had time, I would consider a job that involved research or working in a consulting firm. I'm not too worried about working because scholarships covered my term time job expectation.

Seeking any internships?

I'm currently seeking a January term internship back in Minnesota in a financial firm. I ran a LinkedIn search and

now I need to start contacting alumni to see if I can shadow them.

Do you plan to study abroad?

Maybe – a lot of Harvard students go on summer trips abroad with the Rockefeller grants rather than study abroad.

Are you happy with the path you have taken?

Yes, even though it requires a lot of dedication, work, and sleepless nights. I can't imagine myself in any other path. My beliefs in fate and destiny lend me to believe that no matter what I would have done differently, I would have ended up at my dream school one way or another.

SOME FUN FACTS ABOUT VIROOPA THAT LEARNED AS WELL THROUGH THE INTERVIEW PROCESS:

- She is a movie lover and film buff, especially film noir and sci-fi. There are plenty of times where she will see a movie and then go online to google more information about it and the topics they discussed.
- Her family bonds over food. *"We love going out to restaurants, trying out new things, and going to new places. I rather spend my Friday night going to the mall with my mom and bringing home a movie than going to a party. I have a group of close friends that I bond with and we usually plan trips to go into downtown Minneapolis to a French bistro, catch an arts festival, and do other things that come out of **Minnesota Monthly**."*

Questions?
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