

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Neelum Amin, Class of 1986

Interviewed by
Rebecca York, Class of 2018

May 13, 2016

Abstract

In this interview, Neelum Amin talks about her introduction to Smith, taking advantage of a liberal arts education, house community, and Smith's social and political climate during the 80s. Amin lived in both Washburn and Talbot House, and was a member of the International Students' Organization. Since graduation Amin has stayed connected to the Smith community through participation in the Smith Clubs.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Amin, Neelum. Interview by Rebecca York. Video recording, May 13, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Neelum Amin, interview by Rebecca York, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Alumnae Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 13, 2016, with:

NEELUM AMIN
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: REBECCA YORK

YORK: So I am Rebecca York and I'm conducting an interview with Neelum Amin on May 13, 2016 for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. And thank you for making time in what sounds like a very busy day.

AMIN: So, no, it's my pleasure. Absolutely.

YORK: Yeah. So I guess we'll try the, what have you been doing post-Smith? In a bio I read, you've been traveling a lot.

AMIN: So I have been traveling a lot. So what did I do post-Smith? So I came from Pakistan — so I was an international student — so I went back to Pakistan, and it was the '80s — actually we just had that conversation over lunch — and there were so many of us who went into banking. I was an econ major as well. And so I went back to Pakistan, and joined American Express Bank, and was in the training program, and it took me six or seven months to figure out that I did not like it. And the only thing I loved about it was at that point I was the only corporate female banker in Pakistan. I mean, at the bottom of the rung, but it just — women just didn't go into that field, so that part I liked.

And within two years I met and married my husband, who is Pakistani but wasn't living in Pakistan. And so we lived between Europe and the United States back and forth, mainly for his job. So it was a lot of corporate moves and in the — early on, after I had two kids, I discovered what my passion was, was history. So I went back to school and got a history degree, and then ended up teaching at what I call my gig, my love, is community colleges. And so wherever we moved I would do that. And then, of course, was very involved in education and a lot of NGOs to do with education. So that basically has been my life post-Smith. So it evolved and changed, and what I loved about our moves to different countries is every three years or so you have to sort of reinvent yourself. It allows you to do it, but if you enjoy doing it then it can be very cool. So I did a lot of that and met some really — did some interesting things along the way, met some very interesting people.

YORK: Had you explored history at all while at Smith?

AMIN: I had taken one course. I did take a lot of very different courses. I had a minor in — they had just started it, which you guys have now, is that five-college certificate of international relations. So I think '86 was the first year they had that. So I did do that, but it was much more about — my interest was much more about political than just history. So I had taken one course, there was a visiting professor from Oxford for a year, and the course was great, but it was also really different, because he taught in a very Oxford way where we barely wrote papers for him. It was, like, super. Nothing was due for, like, three weeks at a time. It was so un-Smith. And so that was my only exposure to history. But, no, the passion became really after Smith that I really discovered I really loved history. I wish I'd done — could I say I wish I'd done more at Smith? Not really, because I love the courses I took here, but, yeah, complete change.

YORK: So other than econ courses, like—

AMIN: What else did I do here?

YORK: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) government or?

AMIN: So a lot of government and then my — when I arrived at Smith I was coming from Pakistan, where there wasn't, you know, the concept of liberal arts education doesn't exist. And so I was with my first-year advisor — it was Kiki Smith, actually I've talked to her about this before — and so she said, "No, you can take anything." What a concept. So I took an anthropology course, and an astronomy course, I took an econ course, and then a government course. And as things progressed, I took a lot of art history courses. I think I took, like, five or six of them. I loved that. I took some philosophy. So, no, I really enjoyed that you could take so many different courses and explore. You know, there was no such requirement and I had so much math behind me that I really didn't have to do much of that for my major. So I had room to—

YORK: To really branch out.

AMIN: To really branch out. And then I spent all my years here at Smith. I didn't go for a semester or whatever, so I could really — I mean, I was already abroad as far as I was concerned, so I did do a lot of different courses and different things.

YORK: So is that your motivating decision to staying here? Like, that you were already abroad, this was your new experience?

AMIN: I don't think I gave it much thought. I think so. And the second part of it was it was such a — at that time it was such a leap of faith for my parents to send me here for school that to have the conversation like, Well, you know, I might be in France for a semester, seemed a little bit of a big ask. So I thought, It's fine. I'm here, it's good. So, no, it didn't really occur to me to do that.

YORK: So before when you were off camera you were talking about how you were in Washburn and then you moved to Talbot.

AMIN: Talbot.

YORK: Did you find communities in both of those houses? And what prompted the move from Washburn?

AMIN: So, yes, absolutely. Washburn's a small house. I remember when you could choose the location, and I chose Green Street, because I knew how lazy I was, so I knew I could roll out of bed and be in classes quickly. And that ended up being true, like, 30 seconds later you can be at Seelye. And, no, we had a great community of friends at Washburn. So many of them are — I'm going to see in 45 minutes, who are back for reunion. We've kept in touch. I think a couple of girlfriends from Washburn are still really close friends of mine, who have come to vacation with me, and come over, whatever. We keep in touch. I just felt Washburn was a little small, so that's why I went off to Talbot. And by then I was really, really involved with the ISO, which was the International Students Organization. And the international student presence at Smith at that time was I think 6% of the entire class. I mean, now it's up to 16. So it was very small, so you got to know each other quite well. So I was really involved in that and I had a lot of friends from that organization that it felt, you know, very cool to be in a different house and, yes, and I do have Talbot friends and they're here for reunion too. So I'll be going back and forth between my two groups of friends. But, no, I found the houses really welcoming, especially Washburn, because I think we were a smaller community, that we all really knew each other. I mean, 30 years later I can tell you who was in which room on my floor. So, but, it was, I guess, 15 women?

YORK: Yeah.

AMIN: So it was a very close-knit community. And at Talbot I got exactly what I wanted. I had more space to myself. I made friends there, but I was happy running around campus seeing my other friends.

YORK: So you were doing ISO, but what other — were you doing other, like, working in other organizations? Or I know that in the '80s Smith was going through a lot of student activism movements. Like, were you involved in any of those?

AMIN: So I think the big one is divestment, right? South Africa. And I wasn't at all a leader in it or anything, but I got involved in it because a couple of my friends were involved with it. And it was an interesting time. So we took over — the first thing that happened — now you're bringing back memories — the first thing that happened was these two gentlemen came to give a speech, which was right near College Hall. And so went to hear that, and then this whole movement on campus started. And then the students took over College Hall and shut College Hall down, so nobody could work there. And so you took turns going in and out, so was part of that. And then a lot of professors, some who were against it, were holding classes, and you missed a class, you missed a class. Others had their classes right outside College Hall, so you could attend their class on Seelye Lawn and go back in. And it was a combination of passion and, quite frankly, group dynamics and fun. And then — at that time the dean of international students was Mr. Tamzarian, who actually just retired, so he had just started at Smith a couple of years before me. And so he called three or four of us in who were leaders of the ISO and said that, "You guys need to be aware that it's not quite the same if you guys get arrested for a demonstration on campus rather than someone who is a United States citizen." So that was food for thought. So we thought about that. But then, you know, the campaign was successful and nothing like that happened on campus, thankfully, but that was — yeah, that was a big learning curve, too.

YORK: How did ISO students react to hearing that it was different? Did you have to gather everyone together or?

AMIN: I think a lot of the international students were so much more aware, as I recall, after the apartheid situation. And I think the reality of it really struck them more than other students on campus, who were being educated about it. And at Washburn what was really interesting is I think it was the first time — I recall it was the first time, I'm not quite sure, but I'm pretty sure it was — we had two South African students who were at Smith on a scholarship. And it was — I mean, their stories were amazing of what it is like to be black in South Africa. So I think that was — I mean, you know, they were just living in the same — and Washburn is small. So that was a big change and I think it really educated us. But I think the international students was, in my recollection, we were just so much more aware of this, where coming to Smith I felt people were getting educated about it, but we were already educated about it.

YORK: So was it interesting? It sounds like at least from *Sophians* that it was the, like, students who were US citizens were the ones, like, mobilizing the main, like, efforts in College Hall. But is that even true?

AMIN: No. One of the—

F: Can you just move your—

AMIN: Oh, yup.

F: Perfect.

AMIN: Thank you. No. One of the major leaders of this — and I forget her name, and I think she's my class, or was she a year ahead of me — was an Indian student, was one of the major leaders of this movement and I think one of the major organizers in the beginning of the movement. I can't say she and I were close at all or I knew her really well, but, no, there were international students very much part of the organizing of this movement.

YORK: (inaudible) So aside from, or maybe on top of, like, what were you doing for fun? Were you sitting around (inaudible)—

AMIN: (laughs)

YORK: —heady, intellectual debates about these things or going getting coffee? (laughs)

AMIN: Yes. It was — in the '80s it still was we ate in the house, and I remember still being on that dining table long after dinner was finished, or in the common areas, and your social life was very much the house. Davis was, you know, when you wanted a hamburger or — the drinking age was 18. So if you wanted to have a hamburger, or you were 18 and you wanted to get a beer, you could go to Davis Center, but, no, we hung around the house a lot. I remember ordering a lot of pizzas — or in my case it was usually a slice of pizza — or when I discovered a sandwich was called a grinder, which I just thought was hysterical. But so it was a lot of eating late, a lot of hanging out together in the house, and, yes, having those conversations. Sometimes a little uninformed, sometimes a little too passionate, but, you know, we were all young so it was a lot of fun. So we did do a lot of that in the houses. The other thing we did so you're asking for and it just came back to me, we had bridge tables. I'm not sure if you still have bridge tables in the house.

YORK: I don't think so.

AMIN: I think it was left over from way back when, and in my case it just so happened that I did play bridge. And so I remember playing some bridge at Smith, which seems surreal now, but, yeah. But my fun was really hanging out with my friends and the house. Did we go out for dinners or, you know, hit the town? Not — I think it was a lot of ice cream, sometimes going out for dinner, but I think — sometimes cooking together with the international students. But as international

students, you know, just we were so constrained with exchange rates and how much monies could be coming into the United States that it wasn't one of those situations at all that I was in that I could just say, you know, "Want to be at Fitzwilly's tonight," not at all.

YORK: Yeah.

AMIN: So.

YORK: So, like, houses and traditions, traditions are a huge part of both Talbot and a little less so with Washburn, at least in my understanding, but are there any that stick out?

AMIN: Well, tea for sure. And I would say the Washburn tea was better. We had a better cook. Tea for sure. Talbot was all about the moose and the parties, and they were unbelievable, unbelievably great parties. And at Washburn I was actually the social chair of Washburn and we spent a lot of time figuring out how to get people to Washburn, you know, how to make them attend the party. And then I go to Talbot and it is like, How do you limit the number of people who can attend? So it was — but, no, the social life was really good fun and Talbot was a very serious social house. And whenever I have time I do go back to Talbot and check on the moose and see if it's all good, and it seems like all good and all the same.

YORK: (laughs) Yeah. And favorite place on campus? Like some people prefer to say houses, but is it a house or is it a common or?

AMIN: No, for me it would be the house, because I think — yeah. It would be that. Another one would be my — one of my girlfriend's, Dale Robinson, my senior year was the head resident for Lamont, which was right next-door. I think I may have spent more time in her suite than in my room that year. So we hung out, because there was a fireplace. So there'd be a lot of comings and goings and gathering there. But I think, yeah, my social life really revolved around the house.

YORK: Were there any mentors or influential presences or people who stand out in your memory?

AMIN: My advisor, Mr. Brown, who's in the economics department, who's not with Smith anymore, and he was wonderful. I think — and then I worked with Mr. Tamzarian. So I worked in his office so I saw a ton of him, and he was fantastic. I really couldn't believe that there was someone like him to look after us, and there was a lot of looking after. And he was new. I think this whole international student dean thing was quite new on campus. The international student orientation started then. So that was new. As far as other mentors across campus, no. I wouldn't say there were just — you know, there was Mr. White in the

astronomy department that I really liked. So there was a variety of very good faculty. I think in my life if I really needed something that was non-academic — I think that's what you're asking me — the faculty would be, advising, would have been Mr. Tamzarian. But I think I was a pretty independent person who really didn't — I think it was the other way around. I think a lot of people came to me rather than me going to somebody else to ask what to do, so—

YORK: Yeah. Why do you think that was that they were open to you?

AMIN: I think because I was in his office and I knew quite a bit of it. And then this girlfriend of mine, (inaudible), who was the president of the ISO, and I think — I don't know what my title was. It was vice president or treasurer. I don't know what we did. But we did a lot. We did a lot for this community. We started the international student orientation and, you know, so it was fun, but I think it was a lot of leadership. Both of us were — my memory of Smith is within ten days I was really comfortable here. So I — and I wasn't homesick. I was so grateful that I was here that I wasn't going to waste my time being homesick. So, no — and maybe I'm a minority — but I really didn't have any issues like that.

YORK: And did that feeling of comfortableness carry throughout your four years?

AMIN: Absolutely. Absolute— and beyond.

YORK: And beyond?

AMIN: And beyond.

YORK: You mean after you graduated and were faced with, What do I do now?

AMIN: Yeah. In my case I wasn't going to, as my son's have done, like, you know, find a job, live in an apartment. I was right back at my parents' house and working in an environment I knew so well. But the What do I do beyond happened when I was married and we moved. And I think it was move number one, two, three, I must have been in my late twenties, new mom, and we moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. And it just so happened a colleague of my husband, his wife was a Smithy and asked me to join the Smith Club. And it — I actually didn't know how intense they were. I interviewed for Smith when I went back to Pakistan, so that was my Smith work. So I joined it and then became — I don't know what I was. I was on their committee, their council, whatever, and got really involved, and it occurred to me what a big commonality it was. You know, there were women who were 50 years older than I was and we belonged to the same book club. And so I had a wonderful time and since then, then wherever I went, I was involved with the alumni,

the Smith Clubs. And I was president of a couple between Greenwich and I think it was Dallas, Texas, or whatever. So I was really involved with Smith and that's what I mean by it stayed with me, because I found the women, regardless of where they were coming from, or their age, or what they did, invariably there was this intellectual commonality that was exciting. It reminded me of being here.

YORK: How would you characterize that commonality?

AMIN: I think there is this inner self-confidence that I can do it. I think reinventing yourself is almost sort of expected. I think there's a lot of — because you've lived so closely together for four years, I think there is a lot of mutual respect and it starts from that place. And so it's very easy to relate to somebody when they've already — honestly, maybe not a great analogy, but could be used is it's a club. And so you already have this expectation that, OK, if I talk about this, the other person's going to understand it. I don't have to explain myself. And that's a great starting point to make new friendships, or relationships, or just be involved in something. I loved the fact that whenever I did stuff with Smithies it was — it's so much faster. You know, and I worked with a lot of people, and it's just, things happen. Right? It's just we get it done. So, no, it's true. And I've just moved to Chicago two years ago and it's 1,000 alumni live in Chicago, and yet again wherever I go it's the art institute, or a school, or the board of whatever, it's the Smithies all over the place. So it's great. It is really good.

YORK: And so you said — (pause in tape) Thank you.

GEIS: Whenever you're ready, Rebecca.

YORK: OK, cool. Do I need to reintroduce it or—

GEIS: Oh, no. Go ahead.

YORK: Awesome. So, yeah, how did you come to Smith?

AMIN: How did I come to Smith? So I am from Lahore, Pakistan, and at that point a lot of boys were sent abroad to study, not that many women, and the other tradition was usually it was England, because of, you know, the old relationship there. And I had in my group of whatever, ten, 12 girlfriends in the school I went to, we had a couple of girlfriends who had a tradition of going for university to England. And it must have been, like, ninth or tenth grade when it just occurred to us, like, If they can go, why can't we go? And in the end we all came abroad. I think it was 14 of us — which was completely unusual and now it's not unusual at all — came. And so I remembered having a conversation with my father that I'm just going to apply, and I was positive that I'd apply, you know, whatever happens he'll never send me. And so he said to me that

I can apply, but I can only apply to the Seven Sisters, and out of which I wasn't allowed to apply to Barnard, because it was in New York City and it's just too dangerous. And so that's my story. That's how I applied. I really — you had to go to the American council. There was this glorious office with these big, thick books on colleges, so that's how you found out about stuff. There weren't that many alums, obviously, at least in my town, in Karachi, there still were some. And I applied and I ended up at Smith, because Smith wrote me the nicest acceptance letter. I mean, just the way they phrased it was like, All right, this sounds good. I can go there. And so that's how I ended up at Smith.

YORK: Yeah. So it was the effort that they really put into the acceptance letter.

AMIN: It was really that letter. Absolutely. It seemed different. It seemed more welcoming and I don't remember — I wish I'd kept the letter. But what I remember about it is, like, yes, that's the decision. I'm going to Smith.

YORK: Yeah, that's great.

AMIN: Yeah. And ten days into it, it was obviously the perfect match, because I had a girlfriend at Wellesley, my best friend was at Mount Holyoke, so we came together. Her father came with us to drop her off at Mount Holyoke and me at Smith, and, no, Smith was me. It was perfect.

YORK: Yeah. Did you go and visit Wellesley and really get a sense of what—

AMIN: I saw — I think I went to Wellesley once, but I was at Mount Holyoke a ton, because she was there and it's close by. And then one of my cousins was at Bryn Mawr, so I went to Bryn Mawr quite a bit. And no, no, no. I was in the right spot. I was in the right spot.

YORK: Yeah, that's great. Well, I mean, I think we're good. We'll give you some time to run over to your next place.

AMIN: Well, thank you. You are lovely. You're really good.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 2016.