

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Sandy Nash Baldonado, Class of 1956

Interviewed by
Olivia Mandica-Hart, Class of 2011

May 21, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Sandy Baldonado describes the overall campus atmosphere, her experiences living in Hubbard House, participating in sports and theater, designing her own international relations major, her work at the CIA, and what a Smith education has meant to her.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Steve Thaw at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Baldonado, Sandy. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sandy Baldonado, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Baldonado, Sandy. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sandy Baldonado, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted on May 21, 2011, with:

SANDY NASH BALDONADO

by: OLIVIA MANDICA-HART
filmed by: KATE GEIS

MANDICA-HART: OK, this is Olivia Mandica-Hart and Sandy Nash Baldonado, Class of 1956. The date is May 21, 2011. We are in the Alumnae Gymnasium at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. So to begin with, why did you choose Smith?

BALDONADO: I didn't choose Smith. My father did. And I think from the time I was born, he made up his mind, that I was going to go to Smith. If I was a boy, I would have gone to Dartmouth, that's what he always told me. And he didn't go to Dartmouth, so I don't know what the attraction was there. But in any event, when it came time in my junior and senior year of high school, I had lived for a while in Montreal, Canada. And I had a lot of friends who were going to McGill, and I thought that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a physician at McGill, and at McGill Medical School. And my father told me well, that would be fine, if I wanted to go to McGill, I could, but I would pay for it. He would pay for Smith. (laughter)

So back in 1952, '51, when we were growing up, I think most of us didn't have the courage of our convictions to think we could do it on our own. And I am an only child, so I was sort of in a position to always try to favor my parents. And so I went to Smith. Fortunately, I got in. (laughter)

MANDICA-HART: How did you feel when you arrived on campus?

BALDONADO: I was, I think like most of us, a little overwhelmed, lonely. Although my roommate was a very good friend, we had both gone to The Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, New York, it's a women's prep school. And she, obviously, was going to Smith. We had quite a few from Dobbs, as it was called, who came here to Smith. Probably, I would say maybe as many as 12 or 13 out of our fairly small class of 70-some students that went to Smith. And her name was Peggy Dale, and she and I roomed together, and we were assigned to Hubbard House. So I wasn't totally alone, I had a friend.

My sophomore sister, you all had sophomore sisters in those days, kind of filled you in on where things were, and what you should do, was very accommodating to me. She was the daughter of Whittaker Chambers. Whittaker Chambers was a fairly well known person in the '50s, with the whole issue of spying, and I don't know whether you had, in your history classes, remember him. But she was his daughter. And she left after her sophomore year. She was my guide around campus.

MANDICA-HART: How would you describe the campus atmosphere?

BALDONADO: I think it was very friendly, very collegial. We had a wonderful house mother, Mrs. Wood. And she was very motherly, and made sure we were not lonely, and we had a very compatible group of freshmen, as well as upperclassmen. I think it was a very -- it was a good house. I stayed there all four of my years, and had a good place. It was like home.

MANDICA-HART: How would you describe a typical Smith student?

BALDONADO: I don't think there was such a thing. We were all extremely different. Came from all over the country, all pretty smart I would say. I think I'd be hard-pressed to describe a typical Smith student.

MANDICA-HART: And what did you study?

BALDONADO: Well, I started out wanting to be a doctor, and my advisor was a professor in the biology department. And I took chemistry my first year. And in those days, German was the language of the medical profession. And I took, wanting to get it over with, I took two years in one. You could take two units of that other class. And my freshman year was a disaster academically. The two years in one of German was terribly hard. I spoke Spanish, and a little French, and (inaudible) language so far in demand, it was really hard.

And I remember in my midterm, I had two D's in German. So I was on a restriction, and had A's in history, and in English, but I had a C-minus in chemistry, and a double D in German, so I was skating on very thin ice. And I remember my final exams, my mother came to pick me up, and I had to get my grades from the German teacher. And I remember going to her home, and getting a -- I got a C-minus, so I had two C-minuses. I was so thrilled, I ran out of the house. (laughter) And now I look back on that thinking that was pretty sad commentary on my freshman year. And I got a C-minus in chemistry, so that was the end of my medical aspirations.

And again, in the '50s, we didn't have the choices that you now have for classes, which looking back, I think was a good idea. We had to take certain classes. We had to take history, and I had to take the

government, musical art, math, and some -- you had a much broader two years to make up your mind what you wanted to do. I was very fortunate in having -- taking government my second year, and economics. And I liked both of my professors very much, and decided that I would major in the economics, and take a lot of history and government.

So I made, what was a really an international relations major, although there was no such thing in the mid '50s. So I took, concentrated on Asian history, and took Asian history, and Russian history. Took the minimum amount of economics that I had to, and a lot of government, international relations, and seminars in that. So I sort of fashioned my own international relations major, which was interesting.

MANDICA-HART: Interesting how?

BALDONADO: Well, it was interesting in putting it together and designing it. I was born in China, my father was an engineer with an American company in China, and my mother had been partially raised there. Her father was a judge in China, an American, when we had extra territorial rights in China. And I was born in 1935, and we left China in 1937 when the Japanese invaded Shanghai, and we went to Montreal. So I'd always been surrounded by Asian influences. And so that was my interest, in historically.

So I took Chinese history, and Asian religions, and tried to get as much in that area as I possibly could. I wrote my thesis on Burma, and had hoped to spend a year on a Fullbright in Burma, but unfortunately, I didn't get the Fullbright, but again, in those days, you could only go to the institution and country that you had selected. And so, at that time, there was a revolution in Burma, and all of the passports were cancelled. So I was kind of left to figure out what I wanted to do at that point.

MANDICA-HART: Were you involved in any clubs or organizations?

BALDONADO: I was active athletically. Hubbard House was a jock house. And we, I played a lot of soccer and field hockey, and swimming. And I really was most interested in the theater arts, although I didn't do anything in theater. But I was very involved every year in the rally nations that we did. And that turned out most in January and February, lots of rehearsals. I had done a lot of dancing in my early years. And so dancing choreography with Gloria Steinem. She and I were the choreographers of our three years in (inaudible). And really enjoyed that.

MANDICA-HART: So you knew Gloria?

BALDONADO: I knew Gloria, yes.

MANDICA-HART: And how did you react when she started to become a figure?

BALDONADO: I was very surprised, she was not that way. Well, none of us were, let's be honest about it. We were not really attune to women's rights, and it was somewhat surprising when she did a lot of the things that she did. She's been a remarkable person, and been a real pride for our class. She's come back for many reunions, and it's been great.

MANDICA-HART: What expectations did you have for yourself when you graduated?

BALDONADO: Well, I would've liked to have gone to law school when I wasn't able to go and continue my study in Southeast Asia. I remember telling my father that I wanted to go to law school, and his comment was this is all I'm spending on you, and you either get a job or a husband, which I think was pretty much the theory in those days. So I had no prospective husbands, so I got a job.

My first job was with the -- in the executive management department of Macy's in New York, in Herald Square. My parents lived in Manhattan for a long time, at this time, they were living in Westchester, in a town called Ardsley-on-Hudson. So I commuted on the train into Macy's every day. And I did that for a year.

I had also applied, in my senior year, for the Central Intelligence Agency. With my Asian studies background, I thought that might give me an entrée to go to Asia with the agency. And because I had lived, been born in China, and lived in Montreal, and also lived for two years in Mexico City, it took a long time for them to clear me. I got a top secret clearance. So it wasn't until mid 1957 that I was notified that the job was available. So I left the Macy's job, which was not -- I enjoyed it, but it wasn't what I wanted to spend my life doing. And I went down to Washington, and I worked for the agency for two years, until I married.

MANDICA-HART: What was it like at the CIA?

BALDONADO: It was very stultifying. We were in the old Foggy Bottom area, temporary buildings. And I was in the China and south Asia (inaudible). It was the beginning of our involvement in Vietnam, and my job was to read the intelligence reports coming out on what had been in Indochina, and now were Vietnam, and Cambodia, and Laos. And I was in a large room with many desks, and lots of elderly men who read Chinese newspapers, and there was very little intermingling with anybody else, other than that.

And so I put in for a transfer into the international sanction. But at that time, and I suppose it's true now, unless you had put in some

significant time at the agency, you were not sent internationally. And so I agreed to go as a secretary, which I had never done. I had no -- my typing skills were minimal, and I had no shorthand. So I came back to New York and took a six week course, and went back to Washington to -- they were going to send me to Bangkok. And as fate would have it, I met a young man, and fell in love with him, and didn't go to Bangkok. I went back to New York, and worked for the United States Committee for UNICEF. And I really enjoyed that very much.

MANDICA-HART: Did you feel like you experienced any gender discrimination?

BALDONADO: No, I didn't. As I look back on things, there were clearly -- I did graduate from Smith with honors in economics, and knew a lot of young men at Yale, and Harvard, and Dartmouth, and Amherst, and they were all being offered jobs in financial institutions in a training capacity, but I was not offered anything like that. Secretarial only, and that was not something I was interested in.

MANDICA-HART: And so what has a Smith education meant to you?

BALDONADO: Well, I think it is the best door opener I have ever had. When you go anywhere, whether you're going into a social situation, or a job, or academic, I had gone back to school twice. I have a Masters in education, and taught for about ten years. And then I did what I wanted to do. I came back for my 25th reunion. I had not come back prior to that, I had four children, and it was just not something I could do time wise. And I had just separated from my husband, and was -- came back here.

And I remember sitting on my porch and Hubbard House and thinking, you know, 25 years ago, I wanted to go to law school, so I made up my mind, and I came back in June to California, and called some law schools. I hadn't taken the LSAT or anything. And the fact that I had gone to Smith was a very, sort of a definitive statement of my ability. And I was accepted, and went to law school, and in two and a half years. And now I have been practicing law since 1984.

So I think that Smith gave me a certain (inaudible) I guess. Thinking that I could just about anything I wanted because of that. Got into graduate school, stayed in graduate school, got a Masters. Most people that were in the program that I went in just got their teaching credential, and that was it. But I think as a Smithie, you're never satisfied until you really finish the job. And so I think it's been a huge amount. Socially, it has allowed me to move into almost any social situation anywhere that I've been. And I think the confidence that it gives you is a very important thing that Smith has given us.

MANDICA-HART: So the decision to come, the first time around, was not your own, but if you had the chance -

BALDONADO: I desperately wanted my daughter to go to Smith. I remember taking her here in her junior year in high school. As most California girls, or many I should say, maybe most, they don't want to leave California. But we did come back, and we came to Smith, and she was taken around, and I'm sorry that she wasn't here during the school year, so she could actually go into a class. But she, I remember we got in the car, and she said -- I said well, I have to admit, this is a pretty terrific place. So she applied, but she did not get accepted. She did get accepted to Berkeley, and to Santa Cruz, and that's where she went, which turned out to be a good choice for her.

MANDICA-HART: Did you still believe that single-sex education is important?

BALDONADO: I do, I'm a very strong advocate for it. I think that it gives women a unique opportunity to be valued, and respected for your contributions intellectually. And I think that often, in a coeducational situation, women, even now, tend to stand back a little bit. Not all, but many. And I (inaudible) very strongly. I'm (inaudible) in the years when Smith was considering going coeducational, and felt very strongly it's important to stay single-sex.

MANDICA-HART: Do you feel like most alums felt that way, get that same sense in general?

BALDONADO: At the time that was happening, I think most did. And I don't know, I haven't heard too much since, as I know that my class, very strongly, it's important. As younger women feel, I don't know. But I would think that the fact that we have such amazing young women choosing Smith, that it must still be an important draw for many.

MANDICA-HART: Do you have any advice for current and future Smith generations?

BALDONADO: I think that you need to stay attached to Smith. I very much regret that it took me 25 years to come back. I have stayed in close contact with, certainly my house members, having been there all four years. And that has been a real strong support system for me. We've gone through the deaths of husbands, children, and it's been a very close knit supportive group. I suppose that would be true of other places, but I don't know, I think the bond that you have here, whether you are somewhat isolated, and you really do achieve enormous and deep friendships here. So I would urge all of you who are leaving now to stay in touch, and stay bonded with your classmates.

MANDICA-HART: Do you have anything that you'd like to add that we haven't touched on?

BALDONADO: No, I think that what you're doing in archiving memories of various classes is a really good idea, so that I know that I've had some experience in Claremont, where I live now, where there are many colleges. Scripps College is a women's college, and I'm very close to them. And I know that there has been a movement to do oral histories, and I think that they really do speak of the time for the person who is giving that history. So I would encourage you to continue to do this.

GEIS: Thank you.

MANDICA-HART: Thank you.

BALDONADO: OK, great, that was fun.

GEIS: If you could just tell us what you were just telling us, and direct it to Olivia.

BALDONADO: Yeah, you didn't ask about health and things, and I have had a very serious bout with cancer. I had throat cancer, which can be very virulent and problematic. I had it in 1979, and I didn't do anything about it for a while, a sore throat, that kind of thing. But I thought, well, I have four kids, and I do a lot of yelling. But finally, I did go in, and it was to a friend who was my ENT doctor, and the first thing he said is, you know, swore at me and said you have cancer. And you know, that is a life changing statement. I had surgery, and a lot of radiation. So much so that I was really almost burned to a crisp. And when I had color in my hair, I was a redhead, and so I burned terribly.

And I had a very experimental process, what was called an [interstitial?] implant, where they put radiated gold directly into where the tumor was. It was a horrific experience, and I had a lot of support from friends and family. And I am now 31 years a survivor. And so on my birthday in February, I celebrated my 76th and 31st birthdays. I learned, after 20 years, that all of my doctors figured I had six months, and so they gave me everything they could give me, and for that, I'm grateful.

I have friends who had cancer, and it is a horrendous thing, and when I think of how much we spend killing people in Iraq and Afghanistan and how far that would go in beating this stuff. It's tough.

GEIS: Can you talk about anything that speaks to your own ability to get through this? Or anything you learned?

BALDONADO: I think that you make the decision that you're not going to be beaten by this. And you keep a very positive outlook, and I know that there's

been a lot written about that, about your attitude, and your sense of humor, and your ability to last long. For about two months, I couldn't eat anything, because it hurt so much to get something down my throat. So my doctor devised a little ability to do -- well, it's the stuff that you use when you're having your teeth worked on. But it can be liquefied, and we get food ready, no salt, no nothing, no flavoring whatsoever. Lots of tofu got me through. And lying down and gargled with this stuff, and then get it down really quick, and had no sense of taste for about four or five months. And so it was not easy. But I think with the help of your friends, and your own just determination that you get through it. So I would encourage all of you to hang in there with people who are going through this, and be there for them.

GEIS: Thank you very much.

MANDICA-HART: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed July 25, 2011 by Steve Thaw