

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Tammy Baldwin, Class of 1984*

Interviewed by  
Grace Ramsay, Class of 2016

May 16, 2014

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Tammy Baldwin reflects on her time at Smith, including her favorite traditions and house community. She recalls coming out and the general campus attitude towards lesbians at the time. She also mentions the political controversies at Smith and beyond during her time here. Baldwin then talks about her journey to becoming the first openly lesbian senator and the shift from working with local Wisconsin politics to serving in the legislature. She talks about the experience of running for office as a woman and the difficulties associated with it. She speaks to her work on LGBT policy and offers advice to student activists and graduating Smithies. The interview ends with Baldwin offering ways to stay hopeful in the harsh political climate of the digital media age.

## **Restrictions**

Interview can only be placed online with press secretary approval.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Steve Thaw, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Baldwin, Tammy. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Tammy Baldwin, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Baldwin, Tammy. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Tammy Baldwin, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 16, 2014, with:

TAMMY BALDWIN  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: GRACE RAMSAY

GEIS [videographer]: OK, I'm ready when you are.

RAMSAY: I'm Grace Ramsay, and I'm conducting an interview with Tammy Baldwin, Class of 1984, on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. And thank you so much for coming and taking time out to be here.

BALDWIN: It's a pleasure, Grace, thanks.

RAMSAY: Yeah. So, I guess you can start off with why Smith?

BALDWIN: Why did I go to Smith?

RAMSAY: Yes.

BALDWIN: Oh, boy. I was — first of all, I was quite certain that I wanted to go to a school that was a little further away from home. I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, and I was raised predominantly by my grandparents. My grandfather was a professor at the university; my grandmother was on staff at the university. My mother was still finishing up her undergraduate at the university when I was young. (laughter) Everybody was associated with the University of Wisconsin–Madison, so I wanted to go somewhere else. And in my senior year, or about when I was looking for colleges, I got the chance to travel and see all of the campuses. And Smith was a really special visit. And in the end, I was choosing between Bryn Mawr and Smith. And I think a lot of it had to do with the experience I had visiting, and the experience I had meeting current students and alums. I wanted to be like them. (laughter)

RAMSAY: Yeah. So, what did you decide to study here? Like, the courses you took to figure that out?

BALDWIN: Well, I had lots of interests coming in, and certainly, public policy was one of them. And I took a pretty broad offering my freshman year, I think a lot of the folks who were advising me were saying, you know, try a lot of things out, expose yourself before you pin yourself

down. I remember taking what, at the time, was an infamous art history course that went the whole year, and I took, you know, all of the introduction to political science, a great English class, and I took math classes. I was pretty advanced in math when I came. And so, I was pretty certain that I was going towards a government major, but what was the twist, was that I ended up adding a math major. So, I was a double major in political science and math. And I get asked all the time, you know, that's a crazy combination, why did that happen? And to be really honest, I wanted to break up my reading load. It was so intense. (laughter) And I loved my math homework, so it was always a great — it was like taking a break from something that felt a little more rigorous to me, to do something that I enjoyed, and by, you know, junior year I was so close to my major, I'm like all right, I'm going to finish it. (laughter)

GEIS: Hold on, (inaudible) microphone rubbing on your shirt.

BALDWIN: Oh, it's curling over.

GEIS: (inaudible) I'll put this over here. Okay, I think it's gonna be fine. We're not seeing the microphone, anyway.

BALDWIN: OK.

GEIS: Thank you.

RAMSAY: I'd love to hear about your experience in the housing, and the house community here, and if you were involved with that, and where you lived.

BALDWIN: Sure. Well, it was interesting, you know, when I was an incoming freshman, I got this, sort of, questionnaire about what sort of — you know, was I a night owl, or an early-to-bed person, and just all sort of habits that would help, sort of, match you with an appropriate roommate. And I also selected an area of campus based on my visit before, and sort of the feel that I had the sense each living area might have. I also remember that there was an ad made about Smith housing when I was a freshman, because the matching was all done by a Honeywell computer, and so Honeywell Computer wanted to humanize what it was that they did. (laughter) And so, they did this advertisement about all of the lifelong friends they'd sort of matched up.

But the Honeywell computer apparently put me in Baldwin House with a fabulous roommate with whom I'm friends to this day, named Robin Swan. And I will tell you, having the last name Baldwin, and living in Baldwin House led to no end of speculation as to whether there was some link, like, a family member or whatnot, but there was — it was just complete coincidence.

RAMSAY: That's really great. So, what was the social life like here? Because I know there are still Amherst mixers, I'm pretty sure, so where did you fit in with the social scene?

BALDWIN: Well, I would say especially freshman and sophomore year, the college experience is one that just exposes you to so many new things. And so, I like — you know, I like that adventure. And I would say, if my memory serves me correctly, it was an awfully long time ago, that on weekends, probably most of the time, I would remain on campus, and you know, visit some of the other houses that were entertaining. I certainly volunteered in my house, in Baldwin House, on the social committee to put together our events. They were always theme parties, I don't know if that's still the case to this day, but it was always sort of fun to think up the themes, and be creative. And but we certainly took our fair share of road trips into Boston, up to Dartmouth, and just sort of getting to know the area, and many of the colleges that are in the area.

RAMSAY: Yeah. So, obviously, '80 to '84 was a very politically charged time, as every time is, but were you involved at all with student activism on campus, and what did that look like?

BALDWIN: You know, I got involved in student government my freshman and sophomore year, but I don't consider that the same as student activism in the sense that, you know, we were dealing with school governance issues, and representing the students to the administration. But usually, more on, you know, local issues, all politics is local, as I sometimes say. (laughter) I was — if there's an issue I was following really closely of national significance, it was the Equal Rights Amendment. I had several friends who had traveled across the country to work on trying to get the final states to ratify, and while I hadn't done that, it was a very timely topic. And being at a women's college, certainly, it was very relevant to our experience here, and the quest for full equality.

RAMSAY: Were there any controversies at the Smith campus that—

BALDWIN: During my time? Sure. It was a real early time for LGBT rights, and I would say, in particular, one of the things — I was just reflecting on with some friends that there was an article that came out in *Harper's* magazine. To this day, I could tell you very little about it, but just talking about, sort of, more activism on the part of lesbians who were in colleges across the country. But Smith was the one they sort of chose to focus on. And it created a real conversation, that's the understated way to put it, but a real debate. There were alums who were — alumnae who were very upset by this article. There were young women on campus who were saying, you know, this is the

beginning of a quest for full equality, and recognition, acceptance, etc. And so, I do recall some pretty strong controversies, and just to add context to the story, I was coming out at that very time, so it was something that, you know, I couldn't watch in a distant way. This was affecting me, and I was understanding through this debate how I might be accepted in the world after Smith too.

RAMSAY: Yeah. So, what was it like being introduced to the lesbian community at Smith? And did you — were you connected to that?

BALDWIN: You know, I came out my junior year, and I would say, you know, coming out is a process. (laughter) At first to yourself, and then gradually, to others. And I have to say, it was a largely positive experience, but I think also, back how different things were, and times were then. There were no highly visible role models, you know, you could count them on one hand. The community was still largely known by stereotypes that were largely negative. And so, I feel very lucky that my experience was mostly positive, because that certainly wasn't everyone's experience at that time.

RAMSAY: Right, right. So, obviously, Smith is always marked by controversy, and in 1983, Jeane Kirkpatrick was supposed to come and speak, and there were protests, and she didn't come, and so there's obviously a parallel with this current commencement. So, I was wondering if you had any thoughts about that.

BALDWIN: Yeah, you know, it's a struggle, because, you know, in both cases, we're talking about commencement speakers who are very intelligent, accomplished women who have sparked, in their own worlds, their own controversies, or run controversial institutions, if you will. (laughter) And yet, I just believe so fiercely in the diversity of opinions that ought to be present at an academic institution. And also, you know, that commencement's a special occasion that you want to remember fondly, as the end and the beginning of something new. And so, it is a quandary. I would've been very interested to hear her speak, but I haven't heard Ruth Simmons speak, so I'm going to be delighted to hear her.

RAMSAY: Did you have any challenges when you were here at Smith? Did you meet—

BALDWIN: Other than the normal ones when you're between eighteen and twenty-two years old? (laughter) I mean, actually, to be serious, I mean, obviously, that is a really formative time and for many, the first time away from home, and very much a coming of age experience, in addition to this incredible academic preparation, and the opportunity to meet people who will, you know, change your life, and influence how you look at things.

So, I mentioned earlier that I was raised by my grandparents. And my grandfather passed away between my junior and senior year at Smith. And that was hard, because most of my peers had much younger parents, and losing somebody that close was unfamiliar to them. And so, I didn't have a ton of people who, you know, could say I've gone through this, and this is what it looks like. And I was also very worried about my grandmother, who ended up — actually, she lived to 94 years of age, and got to see my career launch, etc. But I was worried about her at first being widowed, and my being so far away for my senior year. That was one of the many reasons why I returned home right upon graduation, because I wanted to be there. You know, the sacrifice a grandparent makes to raise a grandchild after they think, Oh, we're now retired, the kids are all out of the house. (laughter) So, I really felt I wanted to give back to her.

RAMSAY: Yeah. Do you have any favorite memories of your time here?

BALDWIN: Oh, so many. Well, Mountain Day, and I am so pleased now that the college reaches out to all of the alums to tell us when it's Mountain Day, because I work with a couple of Smith folks, and so I always go spread the word as soon as I get that morning email. I don't have a life that allows me to just take the day off, but it does remind you to treasure those moments you get. And so, I even have memories of certain things I did on particular Mountain Days. A bunch of my best friends and I jumped in a car and went to Cape Cod, it was the first time I'd ever been to Cape Cod, but to spend a day, you know, on the beach, in the fall, and it was just lovely. I took, like, a whole roll of film, because it was pre-digital age. (laughter) Just a reminder. And several of my friends decided that some of the pictures that I had taken should be their yearbook photos. And so, I felt really excited about that.

RAMSAY: Yeah. I was wondering what the typical Smithie looked like in 1980 to '84.

BALDWIN: There was no typical then, there's no typical now. I mean, it's just such a range. I mean, I know that probably there's ways in which the university — or the college has changed since I was there, in terms of maybe percentage of international students. I don't know how it's changed, I haven't studied the statistics in terms of geographical range within the United States. But, you know, I was a Wisconsinite coming to New England. And yet, I was surrounded by people from all — literally, around the world, but also, certainly, mostly around the United States. And very different backgrounds in terms of, you know, whether they went to public school, or private school, whether they came from relative affluence, or in some cases, significant poverty. And, you know, just getting to know this group of people

that a Honeywell computer put into one house was really fun.  
(laughter)

RAMSAY: So, you had mentioned that you did feel obligated to go back to Wisconsin after leaving Smith, but what else did you feel was expected of you once you graduated?

BALDWIN: Well, I will say, I felt I wanted to come home to take care of my grandmother, and see that she was doing OK. And she ended up — she was doing OK. She's a strong woman herself. And, you know, I love Wisconsin, I love where I grew up. And I was really interested in putting what I had learned here to work. But also, taking it out of the classroom, and seeing it impact us as soon as I could. And so, immediately, I actually started using the alumnae network. And I called up a Smith graduate who I had never met before I graduated, who had been on the Madison City Council. And I asked if she'd get together with me for lunch, and give me advice on how to be more involved in local politics in Madison. And she spent a generous amount of time with me, and just gave me some really great ideas. But it was — I was so interested in public policy. You know, a variety of areas, and just really wanted to jump in.

And also, you know, was thinking about what sort of further preparation I might need to succeed. So, law school was in my mind, but I did kind of jump into the world a little bit first, and took some time off, not long, but just a little bit of time between college and law school, and worked in the governor's office in Wisconsin on the issue of pay equity, or sort of the follow on to the equal pay for equal works laws. So, I was using my great — my advocacy for equality right out of my experience at Smith.

RAMSAY: Yeah, going off of that, so, obviously, there was an LGBT presence at Smith, and also a very strong feminist presence.

BALDWIN: Yeah.

RAMSAY: And I was wondering if you felt that at all, or if that influenced you?

BALDWIN: Yeah, you know, and I don't know that I would point to any sort of organizations, but much more the role of my classmates, my housemates who were proud feminists themselves, and whom I admired greatly. There was quite a transformation for me in college, although I certainly would've probably called myself a feminist walking into Smith. I certainly felt — you know, felt the obligation to, you know, sisters of my generation, and generations to come to carry opportunity even further.

RAMSAY: So, did you have a sense of the campus's attitude towards lesbian women at the time?



BALDWIN: You know, I think it was in formation, I think that's the best way to describe it. I remember having workshops — I remember that throughout campus, houses had the opportunity to sponsor workshops, have a guest panel come in and talk about racism, talk about homophobia, talk about struggles, the contemporary struggles. And then, you know, discuss. So, it was voluntary attendance, people would come.

And I would say, when our house had a panel, I think it was — I'm trying to remember if it was my sophomore or junior — it's junior year. And boy, I remember it pretty strongly, of opinions of — a broad spectrum of opinions, but including quite heated, I wouldn't say hatred, but certainly, misunderstanding that sort of came out in the dialogue afterwards. And it sort of took me aback. And I think I just expect today that it would be completely different. And yeah, but I think that those were new conversations, I think that those conversations hadn't happened, maybe, five years before, or even ten years before, certainly not. I really feel like that was the beginning of, let's have a conversation on campus about these issues.

RAMSAY: Were you involved at all with Hover House, had you heard about that closing?

BALDWIN: Yeah, in fact, dear friends to this day were very impacted by that, because it closed my senior year, and I think that there was a deep mistrust about whether the administration was telling the truth about the reason for closure. There was certainly anecdotal information that there was a sizeable waiting list of people interested in living in Hover House. And the administration, as I recall at that time, was saying we're closing it because there's just not enough interest in keeping it open and having people live there. And, you know, if that misinformation was indeed the case, that's really inexcusable.

RAMSAY: Yeah. So, we know where you've been since Smith, you're from Dane County to the Senate. But I was wondering if you wanted to talk at all about your journey after graduating?

BALDWIN: Yeah, well, I referenced just a short while ago that the Smith network, and utilizing that. So, this one alum that I spoke with, following graduation, as I said, we had lunch, and she sat down with me. And she brought this — oh, there's this weekly free newspaper in Madison called the *Isthmus*, and every summer, they put in an insert called "The Annual Manual" and it just lists every resource you could imagine. And she turned to some of the non-profit and political organizations that existed in our community. And she opened to that page, and she said, "You know, if you're interested some day in running for office, start exploring these groups, start getting to know the leaders in these groups, and, you know, there aren't that many

folks who commit themselves to activism, and you'd get to know a huge percentage of them just by being involved in your community. Do it." You know, and she just handed it to me.

And I started looking through, and I got involved with the National Women's Political Caucus, and the National Organization for Women, as two of the first organizations. Started working on this pay equity and comparable worth issue in my internship before I started law school. And then, I just started working on people's campaigns. And it was this idea of, I'd studied electoral politics, I had a great seminar on, you know, who is the electorate, and how are they changing. And all of a sudden, I took it out of the classroom, and I'm knocking on doors, and I have my clipboard, and I'm talking to folks. So, it was really a lot about putting into action what I had learned here in the classroom.

And, in short order, I was a first-year law student running for the Dane County Board of Supervisors against the strong advice of most of my professors. (laughter) Saying that I should apply myself to my studies. But I did it, and boy, again, taking the law that I was learning in law school, and writing my own ordinances, local ordinances, on — fair housing was one of the ones that I worked on really early on, just an incredible experience to be able to do that.

And I had this strange, rare experience of when I was a freshman member of the Dane County Board of Supervisors, I was twenty-four years old, and in Madison, we had the same district for the county board and the city council, and my city council representative got a job offer out of state. And so, she quit the council, and they needed to find somebody to fill the post temporarily until they could put together a special election. So, I got to serve on both the county board and the city council for about six months.

That was a dramatic exposure to, you know, what's the difference between county politics and city — boy, there's a lot of differences. You know, it's sort of, fix my pothole, noise complaints, no one picked up the trash, that's all the city stuff, and then the county board is much more, like, human services, which was one of my interests, health and human services. But very different type of constituent calls that you get.

And I will say something about my path that I think may ring familiar with some other women, especially in politics, is EMILY's List, the organization that helps elect Democratic pro-choice women, say that most women need to be asked to run. They don't just sort of wake up one day and say, I'm going to run for office, but they need to be invited. And that was actually my experience initially. I had managed somehow to get on the county board and win my race, but I had never thought of myself serving in the state legislature. And my state representative decided he was going to run for higher office, and he came to me and he said, "Tammy, I think you should run for my seat." I was like, Me? Work in the State Capitol? Do this? I just hadn't — I couldn't picture myself there. And so, I put together a

campaign, very hard-fought campaign, mostly in my primary, but I won it, and ultimately won the seat.

And exactly the same thing happened after a few years with regard to my Congressional run. A former candidate for Congress who had lost said that he thought the Republican incumbent was probably likely to retire shortly, and he came up to me and he said, “Get ready. Get ready.” Again, it’s like, OK, if I was mortified and sort of awestruck to be invited to run for the state legislature, imagine how it felt to be asked to think about running for Congress at age 35. And I did. (laughter) You know, and each time, evaluating could I have — could I be more impactful at the higher level on the healthcare issues I was working on, and the civil rights issues I was working on. And when I decided the answer was yes, then I decided to do it.

But I would say a striking memory of very recent years is that I didn’t need to be asked to run for the U.S. Senate. (laughter) By then, I felt like I had the confidence. I could, perhaps, in my mind see myself there, obviously, after getting through a really hard-fought campaign that I had — I was expected to lose. Actually, most of my races, I was expected to lose. (laughter) Yeah, for the first time, I knew that my Senator, Herb Kohl, was probably thinking about retirement, he put out a few little hints to that regard, and then indeed, he announced that he was going to retire with, you know, about a year and a half before the election would be held. And I said, I’m going to do this, I’m just going to take that risk. And so, but yeah, I would, maybe, say I invite all Smith women to think about taking a risk — you know, taking a risk, running for office, don’t wait to be invited.

RAMSAY: Yeah. You had mentioned you were working on civil rights issues, and other issues. And I had noticed that you included transgender people very early on in healthcare. And I was just wondering, sort of, where that inspiration came from.

BALDWIN: You know, being involved in the LGBT movement for as many years as I have been, sometimes I think even that’s too narrow, that the civil rights of everybody is important, and we’re stronger, first of all, as a movement as we create alliances and support one another. And within the LGBT, and we can add a Q, or we can add — (laughter) we have to stick together, and there’s been — I had a moment in my time in the House where we had an opportunity, perhaps, to advance legislation that protected gays, and lesbians, and bisexuals, and not transgender people. And yet, it was a moment where I thought we could have it all. And indeed, within a few years, you know, that’s become the reality in certain pieces of legislation. For example, passing the hate crimes law, the Matthew Shepard/James Byrd Hate Crimes Law, it is LGBT-inclusive. And then, this last year, for the first time in U.S. history, one house of Congress, the Senate, passed a gender identity and sexual orientation inclusive employment non-

discrimination act. And it just — you know, it just to me seems like the way we have to move forward.

RAMSAY: Right now, Smith is in the midst of another scandal of not being transparent with their admissions status on transwomen. So, I was wondering if you had any thoughts on that.

BALDWIN: Well, I notice that the students of this generation are speaking out, just like the students of my generation did, and that makes me proud. It also keeps the issue very visible. And therefore, those who are entrusted with changing policy can't escape that responsibility. Sometimes, we want things to happen very quickly, and they don't, but keeping that spotlight on the issue is going to be what ends up moving it in the right direction.

RAMSAY: And you've also been consistently been sort of voted as one of the most progressive members. And I was wondering, sort of, where you would trace that, where you would trace your more radical or progressive side.

BALDWIN: Well, let me start with family, but also add in a little bit of Wisconsin history on that. So, I was raised by my grandparents. My mother was always a part of my life; she was divorced when I was two months old and moved back in with her parents, and then they ultimately raised me. My grandparents were very traditional with regard to their politics. Traditional, when I say that, I mean, they always voted. They would write letters to their Congress people, or they're — you know, Congressmen at the time. (laughter) You know, they would make their voices heard, but in very traditional ways.

When I was born, my mother was nineteen years old, she had not finished her undergraduate, she quit school for a little while and then went back. And she was finishing up her undergraduate degree during the Vietnam War, during the very beginnings of the women's move— the feminist movement. I don't know, you know, it was consciousness raising back then, or whatever words they used to describe. But I was a toddler, and she would sometimes take me over the weekend to get to spend some time with me. And so, she'd bring me around campus, and I would see all of the students who were insisting that the Vietnam War was an illegal war, and protesting, and making their voices heard, and doing teach-ins, and all sorts of things like that.

So, I had this — you know, these two sets of role models of, sort of, the traditional politics, as well as the — you know, we're going to take it to the streets, we're going to do sit ins, we're going to insist on change in a very different way. And I saw them both being impactful. And both, arguably, progressive too, but just a different set of tactics. But I'm so glad that I had an upbringing that was touched by both of those, because as somebody involved in public policy

making, and in politics now, I understand the value of each. And still suggest use of all of those tactics at the right moment, with thought. But that's important.

And then, I was saying that the other part of my progressive roots just really does have to do with the state that I'm from. I have this honor of sitting in a Senate seat that was once held a century ago by a man named Robert M. La Follette, Sr. In Wisconsin, he's known as Fighting Bob La Follette. And he was drawn to run for office because he felt like the monopolies of the day, the big powerful corporations, had drowned out the voice of the people of the state, and that that had to be changed. That we were heading toward oligarchy. And he was a Republican — that meant something different a century ago, but he founded the Progressive Party, and founded a progressive movement in the country. And I have always been moved by the body of work that he contributed to. I mean, he was in power in a time that ushered in, you know, ways to regulate monopolies, ways to give a stronger voice to people, just incredibly important policies came about during that progressive era, including at the tail end of it, the creation of Social Security, which had some Wisconsin roots to it, very significant Wisconsin roots to it. But I believe in that populism, and that progressivism, and I believe the times we live in today are strikingly similar to what he was fighting against back then, and they motivate me.

RAMSAY: Yeah. I was wondering, I know you had sort of mentioned you weren't directly involved, but if you remember any protests, or sort of more charged events that happened at Smith when you were there, some of the issues at the time.

BALDWIN: Well, I certainly remember issues around the LGBT community, and the Hover House controversy that we were talking about earlier, including sit-ins. I certainly remember some protests against the college with regard to the accessibility of the college to people with disabilities. And in terms of global issues, well, let's see, during my entire — or almost my entire time at Smith, Ronald Reagan was President. (laughter) And so, there were fans on campus, and there were detractors on campus. (laughter) So, certainly, there were some national politics that got us into some fierce debates. And then, there's a great awareness and discussion about South Africa. And I think that's sort of the — those were the headline controversies, both international, national, and very local that I remember that at least immediately come to mind about my Smith years.

RAMSAY: Yeah. What would you say you carried with you most from your time at Smith?

BALDWIN: The friendships I built here. That's so precious to me. Some, I've been in very close touch with over the years. Others, not as much, but

I can still see — well, my freshman year roommate, it's hard for me to see her often, she lives in Ireland, and I, you know, jostle back and forth between D.C. and Madison, Wisconsin, and the rest of the state of Wisconsin. But, you know, once every few years, she comes to the U.S., and we'll sit down, and it's like the first day that we met each other in our little suite in Baldwin House. (laughter)

RAMSAY: What would you — what's it like being back for reunion this year?

BALDWIN: Oh, it brings back memories. Now, I'm a person, I guess, with my work who's — you know, I think I find my mind always turning and thinking about something that's in the future. Am I ready for the hearing that's next week, am I ready for the big speech I'm giving, and I really love the chance to just reflect, and breathe, and be back here, and just enjoy that moment while it lasts.

RAMSAY: Do you have any advice for current and graduating Smithies?

BALDWIN: Well, I offered advice already that I guess is probably more large — you know, more broadly applicable, which is, you know, don't wait to be invited to do what it is you want to do, risk something to achieve something, to be adventuresome, adventurous. Yeah, don't wait for an invitation. Sometimes, that invitation's not going to come, you've just got to do it.

RAMSAY: Yeah. And I guess, let me just check out—

GEIS: I have a couple questions.

RAMSAY: Yeah?

BALDWIN: And I'd just say, around the time that I decided to run for Congress, a dear friend of mine was looking at the developing Democratic field for Congress, and was, I think, worried that I would lose. Also just — well, anyways, I remember her coming over and saying, can we talk, and she said, "You know, maybe — have you just thought maybe this isn't your time? You know, you're young, you could do this when this other person retires." And I just remember bristling and saying, "No one is ever going to come and hand me a Congressional seat on a silver platter." You have to take the risks. And that it's so true, that, you know, if you always wait for the invitation, and if, as women, we feel like we have to be invited, we're not going to take all of the risks we really need to take, whether it's a calling to give back to a community, or, you know, a calling, or a passion about doing almost anything.

RAMSAY: OK, thank you. Yeah, if you have any questions.

GEIS: OK. So, this is very valuable advice that you've shared. There's a piece that — I think everybody relates to that piece of advice, and then there's always the other part, which is the part that nobody sees, which is, you have to still summon the courage to do it, right? So, could you talk about that, and just sort of, like, where are those pieces, what's in you, partially it's where you come from, and who raised you, and in an environment, but when do you need to really, you know, stand up straight, and really get down and do the work, and get, you know — be strong.

BALDWIN: OK. Well, so this is interesting, because it's a strength that's grown over time. Taking a leap and running for the Dane County Board of Supervisors for the privilege of representing ten thousand people, almost every one of whose doors I could knock on and get to know in the course of a campaign, and I wouldn't be seeing attack ads on TV. (laughter) Summoning the courage to do that is very different than summoning the courage to run for the United States Senate. But I also — because I took that stepladder approach and ran for state level office, and then the House of Representatives, and then the Senate, I got to get a tougher skin, you know, along the way. And so — and I got to make a lot of mistakes before there was a big spotlight on me. And I think this advice would probably be comparable in other professions where you don't start at — you don't usually get to start at the top, you sort of make your way up there. And you learn lessons along the way, and you get stronger for the mistakes you made, and yeah, and there's practice involved, because practice makes perfect, you know? (laughter) And even when you practice a lot, you're not perfect.

But I also, in my particular case, in running for office, you know, if I were giving advice to somebody who was, say, running for Congress or the Senate, I would say to not watch commercial television for the entire campaign, because why marinate in this negativity that are today's elections, you'll be much lighter about you if you haven't seen what they're saying. And now that we're in the digital age, if you want to read a little article that's been written about your race, or about your candidacy, or the ins and outs of the campaign, do not read the posted comments below. (laughter) Because they say nasty, horrible things. And as long as you do that, I think you can maintain a positivity, even if somebody's spending fifteen million dollars to try to make you lose an election. So, you know, and I'm sure there's analogies in other areas, but yeah, part of summoning the courage is just saying I'm not going to expose myself to all of the negative side of doing what it is I do.

GEIS: And I'm just going to add onto that too is the sense of having hope, you know, in your political life and for the country. How would you encourage us to feel about our political landscape these days?

BALDWIN: Yeah, well, it is interesting, I was elected to the U.S. Senate at a time when people's regard for the Congress is as low as I think it's really ever been. We see gridlock, we see heightened partisanship, we see campaigns that are so enormously costly. And people who consider themselves average folks think that these people couldn't possibly hear my voice or understand my struggles. And so, that's sort of when I entered this stage called the U.S. Senate. I wouldn't have run if I didn't have hope, I wouldn't have run if I didn't feel like we could make these institutions work again. I wouldn't have run if I didn't believe that we could strengthen our democracy again. But I think I'm pretty clear-eyed about some of the problems we're going to have to overcome, and how long that's going to take.

So, I am a huge detractor of the *Citizens United* decision that has put secretive money from billionaires into elections. I want to get rid of it, but that takes, probably, a Constitutional amendment, or several more retirements on the U.S. Supreme Court, and good new replacements on the Supreme Court. I don't see it happening quickly, so we have to have a sort of short-term and a long-term strategy.

And certainly *Citizens United* isn't the only contributing factor to this gridlock, to this heightened partisanship. I think the way the media has changed has a lot of consequences. You know, at a time when news was delivered at five o'clock, six o'clock, and ten o'clock in the Midwest, I don't know, I think it's eleven o'clock on the East Coast, you know, you didn't have people who serve in Congress saying despicable things about their colleagues on live cable television. That 24/7 — and I wouldn't even call it always news, but sort of just cable network and some of the other mediums for getting out messages, many have been enormously positive for society, in terms of democratizing the media, and some have been powerfully destructive, in terms of collegiality, and the ability of people from very different ideologies to just sit down together and just say, Let's work this out. You know, we agree on the problem, now we have to find a way to agree on the solution.

I will say, with a little pride, that I've noticed in my year and a few months in the U.S. Senate, that it is the women of the Senate that seem to be the most constructive in breaking through the gridlock, in sitting around a table and saying, All right, we agree on a problem, we can find a solution. There's twenty of us now. When I graduated from Smith, there were two, I think, if my memory serves me correctly. And so, that's still only twenty percent of the United States Senate. But it is a group of women who are there to get stuff done, and not — it's not about themselves as individuals, it's not about egos, it's about saying, you know, I want to be a voice for the people who sent me here, I want to fix problems, I want to get things done.

RAMSAY: Do you have any last words, or—

BALDWIN: You've covered a really broad spectrum, I think it's good.



RAMSAY: Great.

BALDWIN: Yeah.

RAMSAY: Well, thank you so much.

BALDWIN: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Steve Thaw, June 2014.*