

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Elaine Bennett, Class of 1981*

Interviewed by  
Olivia Mandica-Hart, Class of 2011

May 21, 2011

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Elaine Bennett discusses her initial reactions to Smith, her experiences living in Ziskind House, her work as a theater major. Bennett also describes the dialogues surrounding feminism during the late 1970s and early 80s, the lesbian community on campus, and what it feels like returning to campus for reunion.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Alyssa Christian 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:** Bennett, Elaine. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Elaine Bennett, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Bennett, Elaine. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Elaine Bennett, 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 May 21, 2011, with:

ELAINE BENNETT

by: OLIVIA MANDICA-HART

MANDICA-HART: —Elaine Bennett, class of 1981. The date is May 21, 2011, and we're in the Alumnae Gymnasium at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. So just to start off, why did you choose to come to Smith?

BENNETT: Because I didn't get into Harvard or Princeton.

MANDICA-HART: Uh-huh.

BENNETT: No. And actually, it was a choice between Smith and Bryn Mawr, and up until the time it was time for my parents to write the check, I was going to Bryn Mawr, and they were real happy about it because there would've been some scholarship money from my high school if I'd make that choice. And then the day came and I was like, "No, I'm going to Smith." And it turned out that my—the woman who became my best friend through four years of college—we met the first year orientation week—had made the same choice, had made the same decision. "Bryn Mawr, Bryn Mawr. No, Smith!" So, anyway—

MANDICA-HART: What caused you to do that switch?

BENNETT: You don't want this on tape. Because—well, OK, let me back up. I had come from six years at an all-girl school. I didn't know that I was gay at the time, but so I really—Smith was my safety, and so, when I figured, "OK, I'm going to either one of my safety schools, so I'll transfer out. I'll transfer out after a year." And I knew I really would have to, have to transfer out of Bryn Mawr, because they require you to take three years of gym and a year of lab science, and those were like deal breakers for me. So I figured it would, if I had—if I didn't get to transfer anywhere, and I had to stay somewhere, Smith would be a better place for me to stay because they didn't have a required curriculum. Sorry, Smith.

MANDICA-HART: And where were you from originally?

BENNETT: New Jersey.

MANDICA-HART: New Jersey. So, Massachusetts wasn't much of a—

BENNETT: No, I spent summers on Cape Cod my whole life, and I also had—there were five women from my high school who started Smith the same—in my class. So it was a very comfortable environment for me.

MANDICA-HART: So what was your initial reaction, when you arrived on campus?

BENNETT: Oh. Well I remember, during that first week, one of my new friends in the house decided she wanted to go buy some house plants for her room and so I said I would tag along, and it turns out we had to walk. And it was a really long walk, and we had to walk back too. And that was when I was like, “Oh my God, I’m really not at home anymore. I don’t have those conveniences that I rely on.” So that was kind of culture shock-y to me. And then we went to a mixer at the quad, and I’m not a very mixer-y kind of gal. And, fortunately, the evening was cut short by a torrential thunderstorm. And the woman who became my best friend and I were trying to walk back to Ziskind, where we lived, and we were walking around Paradise Pond. We had no clue where we were, or where the dorm was, or where anything was, and we couldn’t see—it was just torrential rain. And I thought, “You know, this is the end of the world.” No, I didn’t think that. “I don’t know how I’m going to—I’m going to be standing in the rain until the sun comes out, if I can’t figure out where I am.” But we made it back to the dorm, and that’s the night we became friends, like three days into our Smith experience.

MANDICA-HART: And what was the campus atmosphere like in general?

BENNETT: It was very preppy, and very, you know, green and pink, and Fair Isle sweaters and (inaudible) nightgowns. And I was none of those things. And I’d come from a New York City private school, so I could’ve had experiences with women like that, but there weren’t any women like that at my school, so really it was like being dropped into a country club. And I just didn’t quite understand what I was in for.

MANDICA-HART: Did you find a community of people that were more like you?

BENNETT: I did, when I became a theatre major. Basically, I spent four years in the theatre building.

MANDICA-HART: Yeah. And what was the dialogue around feminism around campus?

BENNETT: Oh my God. Huge! (phone making noise) Yeah, that message for you, (inaudible) is not gender-specific. It’s just the sound that comes out of my phone. But—no, see that kind of thing would’ve gotten you in trouble in 1981. It would’ve—you know, why do you have a thing that says, “Sir, aren’t you a woman, you know?”—“woman” spelled with an “o,” not an “a.” And it was very heightened. It was a heightened environment, and I had always considered myself a feminist, so I didn’t

really see what he problem weans. And I kind of guessed that I expected—I guess it was—I mean, I didn't really notice anybody who was like, you know, "I'm getting married to Johnny tomorrow, and I'm going to raise children." I don't think anybody said that out loud, not around me. But it was a very—I mean, that was—you were a feminist. That was it. And if you weren't, I don't know who you'd talk to.

MANDICA-HART: Did lesbianism ever come up in the discussions?

BENNETT: Yeah. You know, well, when I came out my junior year, I came out to my friends in two-part, so the conversation would go something like this, "Olivia, I'm dating a woman." And Olivia would say, "Oh, Elaine, that's wonderful. Don't worry, because, you know, it's fine. Don't label—it doesn't matter. You're great." I'm like, "It's Suzy." "Suzy! How could you be dating Suzy?!" So—not her real name. But—so—but then I was somehow not accepted by the lesbian community at the school at that time, and I joked that it was because I had long hair, but I didn't always long hair. And then the other joke is that, because I didn't sleep with all of them—and that might be closer to the truth. But it really—it's something that I've held onto for a long time, that somebody told me that I wasn't a real lesbian, and—or that I wasn't enough of a lesbian, or something. And, you know, 30 years later, there's still that little, little thing in the back of my head when I met a lesbian. Is she going to think that I'm "enough" of a lesbian? My girlfriend, who I've been with for 15-and-a-half years now, is like, "Elaine, let go of it already. I could tell you, you're enough of a lesbian. You want a certificate?" But it's funny, you know, how things that happen in your 20's sort of stick with you.

MANDICA-HART: Mm-hmm. So was there a strong lesbian community?

BENNETT: Strong. It was vocal. I—yeah, I think "strong" is a good word for it. I mean, it certainly made an impact on the campus, even though it was probably a lot smaller than the community is today. But everybody knew that there were lesbians, and knew who they were. And there were events and dances, I think, that got posted up around campus.

MANDICA-HART: Did you ever go to any of the events?

BENNETT: I did. I went to some of the events. It was one of those events that I learned that my high school history teacher was dating a woman who was then enrolled at Smith, because they were there. I was like, "Oh, hi."

MANDICA-HART: That's funny.

BENNETT: Yeah.

MANDICA-HART: Was there tension on campus between—

BENNETT: There probably was some tension. I don't recall, really, feeling it. I had a friend over for dinner. I had an apartment in Bedford Terrace with, you know, another woman, and I friend over for dinner. I had some books piled up on the windowsill, and one of them was a book called *The Lesbian Reader*. And my friend was sitting there eating dinner and she looked over and she did a double-take and she said, "I thought it said *The Lobster Reader*. *Lesbian Reader*, Elaine, really?" Like, "I've got to read about it, you know?" I want to do it right.

MANDICA-HART: All right. So you mentioned coming out? You want to talk about that process, or—

BENNETT: I think I did. I—after I broke up with the girl whose name shall not be mentioned—who is not gay anymore, while I still am—anyway, it took me a while to find another girlfriend, and I had some—maybe one or two crushes, but I finally found a girlfriend off-campus. And, you know, I remember—I mean, I was a theatre major. What's not to be out about, you know? So I don't recall it being a very torturous kind of thing. I mean, it was important for me to tell my friends, but everybody was cool.

MANDICA-HART: Do you think that Smith was an accepting place in general for—

BENNETT: I never felt—but, you know, Smith—I mean, the institutional Smith—

MANDICA-HART: Either one, both, or—

BENNETT: I heard about a young woman who was talked to by the dean, when it was discovered that she was living—that her roommate was actually her girlfriend. And she—the dean implied that her scholarship money might be at-risk. That never happened to me. Nothing like that ever happened to me. You know, I think young people can be pretty judgmental, to generalize wildly, but—so, I think there is a fair amount of that that went on, and I just maybe marginalized myself before anyone could marginalize me, you know? I was, like I said, a theatre major, and I was, you know, sort of at the fringes of the lesbian community. And, really, tried to get into community with the rest of my—not to be too judgmental, but I tend to refer to the rest of my classmates as "muffies and buffies." And it's funny—so, the last—after graduation, and we're in the circles and we're passing around the diplomas, and I was standing next to a woman I'd known from another—classes I'd taken in another major. And she passed me my diploma, and I realized—like, the very last moment that I would be seeing her, that I had a huge crush on her for like ever. And then, later on, years later, I found out she was gay too and had been then, and—if

I'd only known—but that wasn't your question. I don't remember what your question was.

MANDICA-HART: That's fine. That's great. Was there a lot of diversity on campus?

BENNETT: I met more of—a lot of diversity? No. There wasn't a lot of diversity. But, of course, people of color stick out in the all-white sea of Smith. So I did have a number of friends who were African-American, who were in the—in and around theatre department. And when I was back at my reunion, my 25<sup>th</sup> reunion, they were there and I found that they were the people that I wanted to spend the most time with. And I've spent time with some of them since then, if they're in the area. But no, I would say, you know, it was not an easy thing to be a diverse person at Smith in 1981.

MANDICA-HART: So what house—you said Ziskind—

BENNETT: I was in Ziskind for two years, and then I lived in 36 Bedford for a year, and then I lived off-campus for my last year. So, again, sort of taking myself out of the Smith community, which—I don't know. If I had to do it again, I might do something different, but it felt more comfortable to me.

MANDICA-HART: And how did that shape your—the rest of your time here?

BENNETT: Well I—you know, it allowed me to be more independent, and I'm a fairly independent kind of person. But it also allowed me not to make friends with the—you know, the country club members. So when I come back to reunions, I know two people. Everybody else seems to know lots of people.

MANDICA-HART: Can you talk a little bit more about what it feels like to come back now?

BENNETT: Oh, I keep coming back because—well, I have a free place to stay, which helps. And I—honestly, I think if I didn't have friends in the area, and I had to pay for the housing, it'd probably be the straw that breaks the pack. But, what's it like to come back? It's a little scary, because I don't know who I'm going to know. I go to the cocktail party last night, and I walked in, I did not know a single soul there. And I—and then one person I knew came in and a couple of others came in. But also, I end up connecting with some people I didn't know, or re-connecting with people I haven't seen in 30 years. So it's a good—I would say it's a good thing to come back, because I've been widening my circle of Smith—also, Facebook has been a good thing. I've been Facebook friended by some people I didn't really know when I was here, but I guess they see that I'm from Smith, class of '81. So they—and then, you get to know people a little bit. They make you laugh or they don't, you know?

MANDICA-HART: So you've kept in touch with—

BENNETT: Kept in touch? I would say I've kept in touch regularly with maybe two people, of my whole class. It's really sad. And—well actually, one of the theatre majors—my theatre major friends just came to see my show that I did in New York a couple weeks ago, so that was fun. And she was sitting with a woman who was in the class below me, and another woman who was in the class above me, so it was this little table—they didn't—well two of them didn't know the third one. But they all got introduced.

MANDICA-HART: And do they come back for reunions? Do you—

BENNETT: No.

MANDICA-HART: —know why?

BENNETT: Theatre majors—they're all too cool for reunions. I don't know. Or maybe it's the cost that—I don't know why. I wish I did, because I try and correct it, because they're people I would really like to see.

MANDICA-HART: Mm-hmm. So when you graduated—

BENNETT: Yes.

MANDICA-HART: —what were your expectations for yourself?

BENNETT: That I would move to New York City and live in an apartment building on 72<sup>nd</sup> and Central Park West. That didn't happen. I mean, I did move to New York City. Yeah. I graduated, I was a theatre major. I was going to become a director, and I discovered that there's not a big market for 21-year-old directors in New York. So I had to sort of learn to make my own way, and did some theatre stuff for awhile. And what I'm doing now, and for the last 20 years, I've been a corporate speech writer. So that's allowed me to have my own career. I, you know, work for myself, and I'm doing cabaret singing in addition. I won't say “on the side,” because it's part of my life.

MANDICA-HART: So what has going to Smith meant for you?

BENNETT: You know, I wish I could say something really wonderful here. But, the truth is, that the really transformative educational experience was my high school, because it took me out of where I was, showed me a wider world, brought me into a wider world. Now, that said, that is exactly what Smith did for my partner, who was an Ada, and came here in her 30's, and we met well after—well, as she was about to graduate. So I



know that what my high school did for me Smith does for other women. I'm just not one of them.

MANDICA-HART: Mm-hmm. So do you think Smith failed you in some way?

BENNETT: No, no, no. I think I just—I had a really peak experience before Smith. And, if I hadn't had that peak experience, Smith might've been my peak experience. But I was really fortunate to have that experience, and Smith did the best it could.

MANDICA-HART: And if you had to make the decision again, do you think you would still come to Smith?

BENNETT: I think Smith was the right place for me. I do. I think that, if I'd been at a co-ed college, I might not have come out, or maybe not as early as I did. I think Smith opened me up in that way to worlds that I hadn't thought I wanted to explore. No, I think—you know, my girlfriend's a Smithie, you know? I was held up in theatre building on Green Street my whole four years at Smith, while she was living in the lesbian boarding house on Green Street, just two doors away. We never met each other—

MANDICA-HART: Wow.

BENNETT: —until we were supposed to meet, in 1995. So, you know—and that was how we met, was through another Smithie, who said, “You both went to Smith. You should talk to each other.” And we haven't stopped.

MANDICA-HART: What is it like being with another Smithie?

BENNETT: It's just nice having a smart, funny woman in my life, you know? I'm sure that there are other women from other colleges who are smart and funny but, you know, it's nice that we share this thing.

MANDICA-HART: Can you—obviously, I know that you didn't live there, but do you—can you talk a little bit about the lesbian boarding house, or you don't have to if it's not—

BENNETT: I didn't live there.

MANDICA-HART: Right.

BENNETT: I mean, I heard stories, but I don't think they're stories I want to repeat in front of the camera.

MANDICA-HART: Right. Understandable. Understandable. Well, is there anything that you'd like to add?

BENNETT: No, I think it's a great thing that you're doing this, and I have no idea what contribution I've made, but I'm glad to sit down with you.

MANDICA-HART: A great one. Thank you.

BENNETT: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Alyssa Christian, July 26, 2011.*