

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Joan Bouchard, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Grace Ramsay, Class of 2016

May 16, 2014

Abstract

Joan Bouchard begins by recalling her time living in Dawes House and the exploits in which she participated. She brings up the importance of listening to contrasting opinions in the context of both George Wallace and Christine Lagarde. She also discusses the importance of believing that one can change the world and having an activist attitude. She tells about her involvement in sports at Smith and her positive experience with the posture requirements and her basic motor skills class. Next, she brings up her enjoyment of work study jobs that others might have disliked. The interview concludes with Bouchard remembering how Smith professors helped her understand her own value and intelligence, which has helped her get through many difficult times in her life.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Charles Messing, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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

Transcript

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

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project
Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 16, 2014, with:

JOAN BOUCHARD
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: GRACE RAMSAY

BOUCHARD: OK. Glad I got a slot. (laughter)

RAMSAY: Happy to have you.

BOUCHARD: Thank you. I'm glad there's such an attention to gender studies and women's history, that practically didn't exist. We had Betty Friedan come and talk as a speaker the year that I graduated, and having her was controversial. There still were plenty of people who thought that there was nothing wrong with their gender roles, and she was about as controversial in her way as George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Arkansas, was in his way. So thank God times have changed a lot.

RAMSAY: Absolutely.

BOUCHARD: (laughter) Don't think Betty Friedan would — well, I have to take that back. Among the fundamentalist women's groups, I'm sure there would be lots of objection to having a talk from Betty Friedan. So maybe times haven't changed all that much. French have a saying. *Plus ça change, plus ça reste le même*, which means the more things change, the more they stay the same. (laughter) That's the good news and the bad news all at once.

RAMSAY: Yeah. So I'm just going to make this more official.

BOUCHARD: Just tell me when you start taping.

RAMSAY: Yeah. Sure. This is Grace Ramsay and I'm conducting an interview with Joan Bouchard, class of 1964, on May 16th, 2014 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. And I want to thank you again for coming.

BOUCHARD: This is great. I really like it. Thank you for inviting me.

RAMSAY: Yeah. Of course. So how did you end up at Smith?

BOUCHARD: Well, it was a lucky accident in a way. I needed a full scholarship. We were sort of a lower middle-classish family but from a really good high school area. I thought I wanted to go to Middlebury and study French, and I went there as a junior, and they let me know that there were no scholarships, and they weren't really interested in me. So that was kind of a shock. But I had a good guidance counselor, and she said, "Well, maybe you'd like to check out some of the Seven Sisters colleges." And I came to Smith, which I knew nothing about, and you could have just left me there and sent my baggage ahead. So I applied early decision and got in, full ride scholarship, that kind of thing. I joked around that Smith was the only school that I could afford to go to. (laughter) And that was really true, because if I had gone anyplace else I would have had to pay something. And we had four kids in the family, and two siblings that were daughters coming up who ended up at Smith the same way. So it really was by accident, but changed my life. So that was great.

RAMSAY: Great. What was your house community like and which house did you live in?

BOUCHARD: I lived in Sessions the first year, and my house community was nice, kind of ordinary, had a nice roommate from Minnesota who was much more wealthy than I — first time I had ever met a really wealthy person. But I was headed towards Dawes. So I was in Dawes for the next three years. That's the French house. We had a blast. And if there was a rule that we didn't break, I don't know what it was. (laughter) All of the returning seniors from junior year abroad came through. So we had lots of lively stuff going on. And senior year my room was in the middle of a passageway between one part of the wing of the house and the other. So when I wasn't working on my thesis in my carrel I was there as a passageway for everybody to come through, so they'd all tell me what their exploits and episodes for the day were, and also for the night, because if you put a telephone book in the back door of the main house you could get in after hours if you put it in after the Kingsman had — the watchman had checked. Then you could go up to a bathroom, you could go out the window, walk across the roof that connected the main house to the L, and I had a window on the roof. So people would come in through the roof. So that was a very exciting senior year, because once you've come back from Paris or Geneva, closing hours and three feet on the floor and the door open, they don't really cut it. So we got into a lot of mischief. (laughter) It was fun.

RAMSAY: Do you have a favorite night of mischief in Dawes?

BOUCHARD: I think maybe my favorite night would have been we're all dressed up in costumes like the characters in French pictures, and I was dressed like a Renoir girl in a picture called *Her First Evening Out*, and we had a couple of monkeys that were from a Rousseau picture, and we had the

absinthe drinkers from a Cezanne, and we had a lot of interesting — it was a lot of fun living there because it was a different community. We had a housemother that spoke French. And we had a faculty resident. And it was pretty neat. And we had teas on Thursday afternoon where anybody who spoke French was invited. And we had very good cooks, and they made very lovely little things to eat. And we invited professors as well as people we knew from our classes. And it was really like being in another place. It was kind of exciting. And I got very much to enjoy the feeling of living with one foot in one culture and one foot in another culture. And I live in Honduras now. I'm a teaching missionary for the Episcopal Church. I started teaching classes in bilingual schools, and then I went on when I married my husband, who's an author, to translating his books. We did a bilingual edition of one of his books, and I did a couple of translations just in English for the bilingual schools. And so I live with one foot in one culture and another foot in another culture. And living in the French house really meant a lot to me because of that.

Also, I took three years of Russian, and I ended up in a Slavic languages and literatures program at Indiana University after I graduated. And once again I was living with one foot in one culture and another foot in another culture. I got a chance to go to Russia twice. Of course they called it the Soviet Union then. And I taught Russian for three years after that. So it was exciting, but it set me on a really good road. And I was thinking about your question about how Smith affected my life before I came up riding in the car. Your mind goes into free fall and you are thinking about things. And right away when I graduated it made a difference, because I don't think I would have gotten that National Defense Education Act scholarship for two years and two summer travel sessions to go to Indiana University, because I still came from the same sort of middle-classish family. And at the end of it instead of accepting my Foreign Service appointment, which I had received when I was about to graduate here, they gave me a deferment, so I could go to graduate school. We had gotten involved in the war in Vietnam, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to support my country's position. So I had to figure out what to do with this kind of an education after I turned my appointment down.

And I think I had the confidence from Smith that I would be able to be OK with making a really quick 180-degree turn in my life and doing something totally different. So I took my curriculum and I submitted it to maybe about a couple dozen schools in the Midwest. I was in the Midwest, so that was a logical choice. And luckily enough I found a teaching position at a small university, Valparaiso University, near Chicago. And I didn't stay teaching Russian because I really was more interested in my undergraduate major, which was history. But I did come back to Wesleyan and get a master of arts in teaching, and then I taught history for another maybe ten years off and on between adopting kids. And I'm not sure if I had gone anywhere else that I would have had the confidence to make such a switch and know it was

going to be OK, because I had to get a job. If I wasn't going to go on in one way, I had to go on in another way. So I figured, Well, I'll just do the logical thing and see what happens. And I ended up really enjoying being an educator. It was never part of my plans, but I think maybe that was what I was supposed to do.

And I would have been a lousy Foreign Service officer, because I really am sort of counterculture in my views of American foreign policy. I don't think unfortunately it's all that enlightened and well thought out. So it was a good thing that I figured out before I even started that this wasn't the way to go, because I would have figured it out eventually. (laughter)

RAMSAY: You just mentioned you sort of see yourself as being counterculture. Did you experience that at Smith at all?

BOUCHARD: No, because I lived in the French house. And I wouldn't have because I live in Northampton, and Northampton was always sort of counterculture. We went out last night and we went to Sam's, and Northampton is about as countercultural a place as you can be. I mean like a time warp. I'm sure that places like Sam's haven't changed very much in 50 years. So I feel like I'm back where I belong here. And maybe more than anyplace in the world, because California has really moved on. But Smith is this place where the late '60s and early '70s activism still is alive and well. And it feels like coming home in lots and lots of ways, but that's one important way. No, I was right in the mainstream in a sense at Smith. I wore the round collar and the circle pin and so forth. I pretty much was under the radar. But my counterculturalism came out by living in Smith at Dawes and so I felt right in my own little side channel, but not swimming against the wind.

RAMSAY: You had mentioned George Wallace coming. And we researched that. We had seen articles about him coming in the *Sophian*. So how did you feel about that at the time?

BOUCHARD: I felt that it was appropriate to listen to him. And I'm very sorry, as I am sure you may get some watchers that are interested in this, very sorry that Christine Lagarde is not coming, because I have heard interviews with her with Christiane Amanpour. She is very aware of women's issues. She is a feminist. I don't think the protesters know very much about her career or her views. They know enough to get them on a wrong foot I think about the World Bank. And the International Monetary Fund is supporting the Ukrainians. I mean I thought at first maybe this was political, and the people at Smith were taking the part of Russia, even though I figured they wouldn't have any interest in that. When I found out they thought that the International Monetary Fund puts down women, it was the farthest thing from my mind, and I don't think that's true, although some of the policies in effect — but I think it was important to listen to George Wallace. And that was the consensus

among the students here. Nobody asked him a heckling question, people asked him straightforward sharp-pointed questions, but nobody booed, everybody was respectful, even though most of us obviously disagreed with his position. My sophomore year roommate was a Freedom Rider. But we all felt that civility should be observed. And I'm very sorry that civility isn't being observed now.

But I know the president and her husband are trying to take this in a good way and trying to make something positive come out. I had a long talk with her husband actually at the Greccourt cocktail reception yesterday, and I really admire the way that she is reacting to it, because she is going to make something good come out of it. There's going to be a discussion about how do we protest and why. And the faculty and the students are going to be involved in this kind of dialogue. And I think that we have lost civility in our debate about politics from the Senate and the House on down to the town meetings in little towns in Connecticut, which is where I live when I'm not in Honduras. And I think that something good will come out of it. And maybe there'll be a ripple effect, because we need to sort of get that back I think.

RAMSAY: Yeah. Were there any protests when you were here?

BOUCHARD: Well, now let's see. It was before the African American — I graduated in '64. There weren't very many people that were African American. The only black student I knew came from Ghana. I think maybe there was another black student in my class, but I didn't know her. And I don't know even if I'm right that there was. And if so probably another foreign student. So there wasn't any protests about that. When Betty Friedan came, there were some people who weren't on board with her. But no one had signs, no one — it was not an activist culture at that point. But we all heard our commencement speaker, who was the secretary of state, give us a lot of words about how we were important in changing the world. And it was more a sense of we're empowered and we can change the world. And we have. And I know from talking with Bill Hagen yesterday he still feels that in his students. So that, thank goodness, hasn't changed.

And I was talking to two of the Adas, and they both said — they're older in their like maybe late thirties, one of them has children — they were mentioning that being with the Smith students gave them a good feeling that there's still a lot of enthusiasm and we can do it and all is not lost and so forth. And I'm really glad to see that, because students in Honduras — I have two grandsons, my husband's children, who are studying at the university there. And it's like OK, we get to be called licenciado, and then we get a well-paying job. There's no sense of the fact that we want to change the world, much less the fact of a liberal arts education. They wouldn't have the vaguest idea what that meant, and they wouldn't care about it even if they did. So education at Smith is still being done in what I feel is the right way. And I'm happy to see that, because I don't see it anywhere where I live now. I give long

answers. (laughter) You're not going to get through all your questions I know.

RAMSAY: When you think about your time at Smith, what first comes to mind?

BOUCHARD: Absolute satisfaction with everything. It was the only time in my life that I have been paid for four years to think. And I thought a lot. And not just about what I was going to write in my thesis and so forth, but what was my life going to be about, what were my values, what were the values of my professors, the other people that I was surrounded with, that I would like to emulate. I was lucky enough to have Klemens von Klemperer, a fine scholar on Eastern European history, and Jean Paris, who was a visiting scholar expert on French modern literature, as professors. They encouraged me a lot. Louis Cohn-Haft was another professor of mine who encouraged me a lot. I used to babysit for Klemens von Klemperer and his wife — she was also a faculty member — their kids. And their dedication to scholarship and their approachability and ability to take us as people on the same level as them, I never felt that much of a barrier between me and my faculty members. We were all sort of different age-wise, but we were all heading for the same place, trying to discover what the facts were and what the truth was. And it was just a great place for me.

I was an ice-skater, and I went and I skated at the pond after lunch until Art 101 lecture began, to try to wake up, because Art 101 was in the dark, and that was my biological nap hour. But I also loved to skate, so that is a great memory.

I've always been interested in being outdoors. I took sailing and crew as sports. I took skiing as a sport. Scholarship students could get skis to use. I loved all of them. I even learned a lot in basic motor skills, because I had some posture issues that could have become fairly serious, and I took what — do you even know what basic motor skills is? I'll bet you don't.

RAMSAY: No.

BOUCHARD: No. OK. When you came in you had to get a posture picture nude, and I don't know whether it was true that the Amherst guys got hold of the posture pictures, but it is possible. Those Ivy League guys are pretty clever. But the idea was to see if you have any posture events or issues that have to be worked on. And I had what was known as a forward head and also lopsided shoulders from carrying my books. You don't get to be top of your class without taking a lot of schoolbooks home. So they put me in a class where I was doing exercises, that's basic motor skills. People that were already good, they could just go on and get regular classes, for phys ed, that is, but they also put me in fencing class. And if I weren't sitting in this chair I would show you some of the exercises that — have you ever fenced? You have to keep your back straight and you have to lunge out to the side but the keeping your back

straight from here to there is really important. And I still do those exercises. And it has made a big difference, because I do have some sciatic things. But unless I've done something stupid it doesn't act up, and I've never needed surgery. And I'm very very grateful. Most people hated that, but I really got on board, because I knew I had some issues, and I'm not the one to sweep them under the rug. I figured, as long as I have to take this, I may as well do what needs to be done. And really made a difference.

So I could probably tell you a million things about why every instant here was great for me, but one of them is that I had a bike, and I was able to get all over the campus on my bike. And when you were a scholarship student you had to do work study. I think that's probably still true now. So I got a chance to deliver the bulletins, and I had a chance to go into the faculty club, which was there, see what it was like, have conversations with all the people in the offices at College Hall, because I had to deliver to each of their offices. And for me that was really great. I mean, what's wrong with going out on your bicycle and driving on this beautiful campus and meeting interesting people? I might have wanted to do it even if they weren't paying me for it. One year I washed the dishes at what is now Dawes House, and that was where the foreign graduate students were. And it was great to be able to meet them. I wouldn't have been able to meet them in any other way.

So even the stuff that people might have thought was — well, that just comes with the package, you got to put up with it. For me it wasn't like that. It was like, this is great, I can get something out of this. And I was never bored, never disinterested, always had something interesting to think about, people that talked my language and were willing to talk about the consequences of what we're doing now fifty years out.

I don't find that kind of person in my day-to-day interactions. I find them here and I have three really good friends, two of which are at reunion now, and one of which lives in England, and her health is not the greatest, so she's not here. But those people are the ones that really understand what I'm talking about and know where I'm coming from. And I wouldn't have found those kinds of people, I don't think, in other places. I might have found it at Wellesley, and might have found it at Mount Holyoke, and maybe I'd be saying the same things about them. But I don't think either of those places had a French house. So for me it was Smith or just bury me now, because there wasn't any doubt about where I wanted to be. And luckily that's where I ended up.

RAMSAY: Thank you so much. Do you have any advice for graduating or current Smithies?

BOUCHARD: Well, now let's see. First of all, listen to people, because their point of view even though you may think it is uneducated or perhaps not thought through or just plain wrong, maybe there's something you can learn from them. And if you learn it from them, then in that case you and they

have found something in common. And that's a building block for peace, and peace does not come from the top down. Peace comes from the bottom up. And so I've tried to learn to do this, even though when I graduated from Smith I wasn't good at it. But I tried to do it. And I found it was useful.

And the second thing would be don't be afraid to be different, because first of all, if you're you and everybody else is different, but you're supposed to be you. And that would go for gender orientation, that would go for political, that would go for what you do in your garden or what you buy in the store, career. There's all kinds of ways that that could be applied. Don't be afraid to march to your own drummer. I remember sitting underneath a tree out near the oxbow of the Connecticut River with *Walden* and reading that and thinking about marching to your own drummer, and that I took seriously, and it's really worked for me. So I think those would be the two most interesting.

Oh. Maybe the third would be, be careful about thinking that you're entitled, because if you think you're entitled, you have put a big barrier between you and the other people in the world. And sooner or later you'll probably be sorry that you put that barrier up, because maybe there's somebody on the other side of the barrier that would give you just the answer you're looking for but they won't even talk to you or you won't even talk to them because they think you're not one of us or you think they're not one of us. And that's too bad.

RAMSAY: Does this seem like a good place to rest?

BOUCHARD: Pardon.

RAMSAY: Does it seem like a good place to finish?

BOUCHARD: Yes, I think so, unless you have something else that's important that you want to ask.

GEIS [videographer]: I just have one follow-up, just along what you've already been saying too. Seems like the whole experience you had at Smith was very formative in terms of making who you became.

BOUCHARD: Definitely.

GEIS: If you could talk — because you've been giving us these pieces and stories along the way. If you could talk about that in terms of was there any moment along the way where you really felt like you awakened to something. Any particular moment or realization or something where you just realized, I have just — I'm becoming someone different than who I was when I arrived.

BOUCHARD: Yes. I am going to give two examples if that's all right. The first one was I took general lit with Jean Paris in junior year. And I wrote a paper

on *The Tempest* and he told me at the end of the class — you know, there were a bunch of freshmen in the class, they took that for their requirement. I took it because I really wanted to read the books. And he told me I should publish that paper. And I was floored, because I wasn't interested in writing, in English. I was interested in being a foreign service officer. But he was a writer, and he was a critic of writers, and obviously he knew what he was talking about. So I realized that I was a good writer. And I have used that. That's been a major part of my career.

When I was a financial planner for 24 years — I did that after my kids had gotten in school full-time, because it's like education, you're teaching the people that you're working with what they should do with their financial lives — I did a lot of writing. And then when I retired and became a missionary in Honduras, I met my current husband when I began at a school in the town where he lived. And he gave me a book. And I read his book, and I thought, Oh, my Lord, I have to really get to know this person, because he's great as an author. And whether I ever get to know him that well or not, I really want to translate this book.

Well, as it turned out we did manage to meet, and we did get married at the end of a year, and I did translate two of his books, one of them is a bilingual edition, the other two are just English translations. Then I wrote a book on my own.

And I don't think I ever would have realized that I was a good writer. I mean, my cousins have always told me that. But what do my cousins know? They love me. So what the heck? What are they going to say? So that was one.

The other one actually took place later, and I had to go to an interview, Greenwich, to see if I was going to be able to get the part-time teaching job that was offered to me at Wesleyan, when I was a student. You had to do one semester where you were teaching in a school. And then you had two summers and one academic semester of classes. And I had my letter of reference from Leona Gabel, who was my professor for the unit that I took on Renaissance studies, in an unsealed envelope. And I thought, This is the only chance I'll ever have to see what anybody has to say about me as a person they might recommend.

I opened the letter and she said that I was one of the most thoughtful and insightful scholars she had ever taught. And once again, I was totally floored, because I didn't think about myself that way. I'm just me. But this was a very experienced professor who writes a lot. She had written a wonderful book on Pope Pius XII I think it was. She must know what she's talking about. So I must be some big deal, not just some idiot who's sort of bumbling along, and an overachiever. And that I've managed to keep through a lot of hard times in my life, because I went through two divorces and some family abuse to my children as well as myself, and finally ended up in the right place with the right

man. And then he passed away. And I had to sort of begin all over again.

Went through various careers, had to support my family as a single mom after the adoptive father of my kids was so ill he couldn't work before he passed away. And if I hadn't had that feeling about who I was, I might have just sort of thrown in the towel and just said, "OK, my kids aren't going to college, and I'm going to just sort of make it through life as best I can," or maybe I would have decided life just isn't worth the struggle, maybe I'll just check out early, God is waiting for me with open arms, and so is my deceased husband.

So I think that it really was tremendously important because I was the first child in my family, and my mom wanted a boy. And quite obviously I'm not a boy. So I didn't get that much reinforcement for what I might have been from that angle, so I had to get it from somewhere else. And thank God, somewhere else happened to be Smith, and I got it. So long answer to your short question.

RAMSAY: Thank you so much. It was great speaking with you.

BOUCHARD: You're welcome. It was very great too. Now I am going to get a copy of this. Only my interview, I assume.

RAMSAY: Yes.

BOUCHARD: Right. I would be very interested though in knowing at some point or another how you use some little fragment of what I said. Will I be able to find that out in any way?

RAMSAY: I can give you Kelly Anderson's e-mail address. And you can be in contact with her.

BOUCHARD: OK, that sounds good.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Charles Messing, June 24, 2014.