

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Christine Boutin, Class of 1988

Interviewed by
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 18, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, recorded on the occasion of her 25th reunion, Christine Boutin speaks about the importance of lifelong friendships which began at Smith and remembers Smith traditions, including Thursday night candlelight suppers and Friday teas. She recalls social justice activism on campus, including participation in the College Hall divestiture sit-in as well as challenges like experiencing class differences in the student body.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Boutin, Christine. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 18, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Christine Boutin, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Boutin, Christine. Interview by Anne Ames. Transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Christine Boutin, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2013, with:

CHRISTINE BOUTIN

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: All right, so this is Annie Ames and I am conducting an interview with Christine Boudin on May 18, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History project. Thank you in advance for being part of this today. So why did you choose to attend reunion this year?

BOUTIN: Well, it's my 25th this year and it was one of the last opportunities we have to attend when it's on a commencement weekend, and another friend of mine, my college roommate, my freshman year roommate was going too, so we decided to come together.

VIDEOGRAPHER: Could you actually move the scarf?

BOUTIN: Oh, did it go over the thing?

VIDEOGRAPHER: Yes.

BOUTIN: What if I just take it off?

VIDEOGRAPHER: Is that okay?

BOUTIN: Yeah.

VIDEOGRAPHER: Sorry.

BOUTIN: We start over again now? There we go, all right, sorry about that.

VIDEOGRAPHER: No worries.

AMES: All right, shall I ask the question and go again?

BOUTIN: Okay.

AMES: So why did you choose to attend reunion this year?

BOUTIN: Because it's my 25th reunion. I graduated in 1988 and it was sort of one of the last times to attend the reunion that was on a commencement weekend and my

freshman year roommate lives near me, so we both decided to come.

AMES: How did you come to be at Smith for your undergrad years?

BOUTIN: Well, I liked the idea of attending a women's college and I wanted to go to college someplace that was relatively near my home. I come from Massachusetts because my family probably couldn't afford to pay for airfare back and forth, and I like this area so I applied to Smith and I applied to Mount Holyoke and pretty much every college in the area, but I didn't like Mount Holyoke at all and I just fell in love with the town of Northampton and with the college itself when I visited. It was such a warm atmosphere.

AMES: So you – why did you choose to come to a women's college? You said that it was – noted that was an attractive idea to you, why was that?

BOUTIN: Because academics was always something that was very important to me and I really – I didn't – sort of the social kind of dating aspect of high school or whatever that sort of emerges in high school, that really wasn't something I was looking for. I was looking more for a place where academics would be the focus and sort of exploring your own kind of creativity and your own sort of possibilities for the future and that's why I chose Smith because I figured it was – that was the focus here, you know, that was it.

AMES: What was it like when you first arrived?

BOUTIN: On campus?

AMES: Yes.

BOUTIN: So it was – so it was a real eye-opener because I came from a very – very homogenous sort of working-class small town in Massachusetts and, you know, you were either Irish Catholic or your Italian Catholic, and that was – those were the only two choices and sort of coming here, and just walking into my house for the first time and just meeting this wide array of different women from different cultures and different countries and it was – it was really amazing. It was a learning experience to, you know, just to sit down and talk for hours and hours and hours with other women about like where they came from and you know, what their previous schooling was like and it was an eye-opener.

AMES: What were your expectations?

BOUTIN: I expected to I think grow as a person and I wanted to have a life that was beyond sort of the little town that I came from and I wanted to get a good education so that I could go out and, you know, discover myself in the world.

AMES: When you think of your time at Smith, what comes to mind first?

BOUTIN: Friends. Having really good friends. And having experiences that I wouldn't have had otherwise. You know, having the opportunity to spend a semester away and really sort of coming to the realization that I could then take a step and become anything I wanted to and that my life didn't have to mirror that of my parents with their parents and it was going to be a new experience for me.

AMES: What were your favorite Smith traditions?

BOUTIN: The Thursday night candlelit supper.

AMES: We don't do that anymore.

BOUTIN: Oh, it was the best, because on Thursday you would come downstairs in the morning and your white linen napkins were rolled around your real silverware, real silver, in your mail slot and then when you went for dinner that night, it would be all dark and they would have candles and it would be like a little bit better dinner than normal. And everybody would just – you know it's just sit down and just talk and it would, you know, take more time than you would on a regular dinner when you would be rushing and eat and rush out and go to your, you know, evening activity. That and the Friday afternoon tea, with the tea and brownies or cookies or whatever and Mountain Day.

AMES: Were you involved with any extracurriculars of any kind?

BOUTIN: Yeah, I was a theater major, so I did a lot in the theater department, and did a lot of shows and productions.

AMES: How did you decide on your major?

BOUTIN: I was a double major French and theater, and my dad's family was French and I started had started sort of learning it from an early age so I just really – I loved French literature and I really wanted to explore that, but I also really enjoyed participating in theatrical productions and putting them on, so I decided to do a double major.

AMES: Excellent. How would you describe a typical Smithie?

BOUTIN: I don't think there is a typical Smithie. I mean –

AMES: It's kind of a trick question. We kind of use that question to kind of, you know – prod you guys, each one of you has had a very different response. It's been great, so –

BOUTIN: I mean everyone is – is just so different. And I think the reason that everybody comes to the school is so different that I don't think there is a typical one. I think we are all great.

AMES: Good answer. Did you go abroad?

BOUTIN: That is a painful question because I applied to go Junior year to Paris and I was accepted and I was all excited about going, and then I got in the spring before we were supposed to leave, my financial package, and I was on – work-study was a big component of my financial aid and that gave me – that was basically my spending money for the year, because my family couldn't afford to send me, you know, money during the year. And when I got that, there was no work-study component there, so I went into the financial aid office and they said, well, I'm sorry, but that doesn't transfer. And I said well, how can I go then because I can't – I need money. And they said well, your family will give you money. And I said no, they can't, so I couldn't go. I had to drop out. And they said that is the only portion of the aid that they couldn't transfer, and they couldn't sort of make it up from another source, so I couldn't go. And that's been painful, but I am going to France in two weeks, so –

AMES: It's a happy ending.

BOUTIN: It's a happy ending.

AMES: Are you going with a Smith program?

BOUTIN: No, no, just – with my family, yeah.

AMES: Okay, so that's even better than.

BOUTIN: Yeah.

AMES: Is – what goes around comes around. Were there any professors or mentors that inspired you while you were here at Smith?

BOUTIN: That so hard because I had a couple of theater professors that were very I think important because I spent a lot – when you're theater major he spent – not only do you take the classes there, but when you work on shows, you are there like a long, long time, and I did have a professor Deborah Lubar (phonetic), she was really good and she really – I took some acting classes with her and she was very good about sort of breaking me down and getting down to your core so you could really kind of open yourself up to your character, and that was kind of very hard for me because I was a very guarded person and I think that really help me, not only in acting but in life to.

AMES: Are there any stories that you feel compelled or feel you can share about your time at Smith here?

BOUTIN: Just you know the things that sort of stick in my mind are just sort of funny things that like, like pranks that we would play on each other. I remember one time it

was freshman year and there were a group of us who were in Washburn House and we were all on the same floor, it was a very small house, so you get to know each other very well, and two of our friends down the hall were – there were two girls down the hall that my roommate and I were friends with and one of them got her brother one night to call us on the phone and say that – oh gosh, it was the stupidest thing, I can't believe we believed it, to say that he was her friend and he was – he was like a U.S. Navy pilot or something flying a mission over Cuba and she asked him to call and say hi, and my roommate picked up the phone and she's like, "Really? You're Elaine's friend? And you're a pilot and you're flying over Cuba?" And she was all excited talking on the phone with him and then she ran out into the hallway. She tripped on the phone cord and she like fractured her ankle. And then my – and then our other friend came out of the room and she felt so bad. It was awful.

AMES: It's a rough story. Oh man.

BOUTIN: Yeah, and it was just endless pranks like that. And then in – and then another time the girl who did that prank, she was sick and she kept saying, "I have mono, I have mono," and we said, "You don't have mono. You're fine." "No, I have mono." And she went to the doctor, so we took her bed when she went to the doctor and we stuck it in the bathroom, and then she came back and she was all sick and she really did have mono. So we had to put her bed back and we all felt bad. So that silly kind of stuff.

AMES: Oh, all right. What was your house community like? I feel like that's a good segue to go from tripping over phone cords to stealing people's beds. What was your house community like?

BOUTIN: It was great. It was really great. I mean the first few years I was in Washburn and it was a small house, and you know, all classes were mixed in there, and you really got to know everybody really well and people played sort of pranks like that on each other all the time, and, I mean there was no drama, there was no, you know, it was just a very warm house and we socialized a lot together, and the next two years I was in Gardner which was a bigger house, and it was a different kind of feeling, yeah. So I liked Washburn better.

AMES: How did your experiences in both Washburn and Gardner shape your career at Smith?

BOUTIN: Well, I think definitely at Washburn more because for me anyway the freshman year was the most formative year and the women I became friends with that first week at Smith I'm still friends with today and we're still like a very tight circle, and even the ones who live away, we're on Facebook all the time, and my college roommate, she lives in the next town over from me, she is my son's godmother, we see them all the time. And you know, as we went through Smith and I moved to the bigger house, I didn't feel that there was that real same sense of community

there because it was just so – so many people, it was impossible to kind of have the same sort of family like feel, but I really – I think Washburn was the more formative house.

AMES: Were you involved in student activism at all during your time here?

BOUTIN: You know, I – it was the 80s. And I do remember a sit in at College Hall for South Africa and we –

AMES: Divestiture.

BOUTIN: Yeah, it was a divestment and there was a bunch of us who were in there for a long, long time sitting on the steps inside. And we did that as a – like a group of my friends and I did that together, but you know, I wasn't really what you call like a sort of political activist person though, you know. The big issues.

AMES: Let's see, what challenges did you face during your time at Smith?

BOUTIN: I think the hardest one for me was just coming from kind of a background where I didn't have a lot of the sort of financial privileges that other people did, and I didn't really realize that when I was younger, because you know, when everyone else around you is in the same boat, you don't realize with the other boats look like. But then coming here, I you know – I really did realize that there was, you know, wide sort of gap between where my family was and where other families were. And I think that sometimes made me – even though I never wanted to admit it to my friends, but it just made me feel like not quite as – I don't want to say not as good, but just not sort of in the same league as them. Like everybody else would go away for spring break, but I couldn't because I couldn't afford it, so I had to go home. And so you know, the other kids just had a lot more sort of financial advantages, but I don't think that they realized it. I did. They didn't sort of act differently toward me, but I was the one who felt differently and I wish I had been able to sort of rise above that. But when you're 17, you know, it's hard.

AMES: Absolutely. Do you remember any campus wide issues regarding race, class or sexuality why you were an undergrad?

BOUTIN: Well, I think – I'm trying to remember. I mean there were, but I don't think that I was sort of heavily involved with that. I mean – yeah I mean – there definitely were, but I remember – yeah, it's hard to say. I mean I remember things going on, but I wasn't, you know, actively involved in that, yeah.

AMES: Let's see. Does the student body and faculty, this is a diversify at all in your four years? Did you notice any kind of diversification in terms of race?

BOUTIN: Well, I think – they definitely tried – they tried to make sure – you mean from the beginning through to the end?

AMES: Yeah.

BOUTIN: I remember when I was – was a freshman or sophomore? When I was – I think I was a sophomore, they – into Washburn house there moved two or three girls from South Africa that hadn't been in the house the year before. They transferred in, and that was interesting because, you know, I didn't know anything about South Africa before then and I certainly had never met anybody from there. And just sort of the stories they had to tell were really, really interesting. And I think that kind of probably led to us going over to the Seelye Hall, I mean the College Hall sit in. After we were influenced by the stories they had to tell what their life was like there. And I do think, you know, that they did try to sort of diversify the houses so that you had, you know, people from all sort of countries in there. So I guess that.

AMES: What was the – your experiences, or what were your experiences with dating and relationships within the context of Smith as an all women's college?

BOUTIN: I did not date. I was not a dater. You know, basically we'd have parties on the weekends. I mean at Washburn not so much, because it was a small house, but in Gardner you'd have parties on the weekend and yeah – and I remember like, you know, the Yale WhiffenPoofs or whatever, you know, coming to sing and they'd like bus these guys in and you know, and they would come and sing, and then they'd just drink and drink and like pass out in the bushes in front of, and I was like, ew, I don't want that. Go away. Or taking the bus to Amherst are going to Amherst College for a party, but – I was not like a, you know, both social dater. Yeah.

AMES: How would you describe the campus atmosphere during your undergrad career here?

BOUTIN: I think it was a positive one. I – I think – the thing that I really liked was – I mean to me anyway, it seemed that you know, if you were here, you were here for a reason and it wasn't that you wanted to party or it wasn't that you, you know, wanted to, you know, waste your years here while mom and dad pay for it and do something stupid. You were here because you had a goal in life and you were going to work to achieving that and I – I think everybody here is really focused on making the most of their four years here, and not wasting any of it.

AMES: Very well put. Very well put. All right, well, we've got about five minutes left before we need to wrap up. While these interviews could go on for hours and hours, we have to cut them off at half an hour, so –

BOUTIN: That's good.

AMES: I'm going to ask you a few closing questions.

BOUTIN: Okay.

AMES: Who have you become the Smith?

BOUTIN: Who have I what?

AMES: Who have you become?

BOUTIN: Oh, who have I become?

AMES: Yeah.

BOUTIN: An attorney, a mother, a wife. All those things. Somebody who I think desperately tries to balance what I want in life and what I still want from my own life with being responsible for raising another little life, and I think somebody who has a really full life and I don't think I am quite where I wanted to be, but I am definitely on the way there. So I am almost there.

AMES: What difference is your Smith education made?

BOUTIN: It's made a huge difference. I don't think I could've gone to school anywhere else. I think – you know, it's certainly taught me to be able to stand up for myself and open my mouth when it needed to be opened, and it showed me that I didn't have to take typing classes and become a secretary like my grandmother wanted me to do, and she said that the most you can hope for. And I thought no, there's more. And it taught me that, you know, if you are – if you do it right, you can do pretty much almost anything that you want. I mean, you know, everybody has limits, and you know, I think just hearing other alumnae stories and talking to them and meeting them at other reunions, it shows that you – you can do pretty much anything, you know, if you want to, and I don't think I believe that before I came here.

AMES: And as my final closing question for today, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

BOUTIN: Just enjoy every minute that you're here, because it seems like a long time, but four years isn't and it goes really, really fast and take every opportunity that comes your way. Don't say no to anything, because you never know where it might lead you and hopefully it will lead you somewhere good.

AMES: Okay, well, thank you so much for contributing to this project. It would be possible for us to continue with it if alums like yourself didn't come and tell us your stories.

BOUTIN: It's been fun. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2013.