

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Roberta Walsh Boylan, Class of 1962

Interviewed by
Kirby Vasquez, Class of 2014

May 26, 2012

Abstract

In this oral history, Roberta Walsh Boylan describes coming to Smith from Montana, living in Gillett house, campaigning for laxer social rules, moving to San Francisco after graduation with Mary Ann Savage Habib, going to Law School, and being the first woman at University of Montana Law School.

Restrictions

None.

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kayla Ginsburg.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Boylan, Roberta Walsh. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Video recording, May 26, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Roberta Walsh Boylan, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Boylan, Roberta Walsh. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Roberta Walsh Boylan, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012, 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 26, 2012, with:

ROBERTA WALSH BOYLAN

by: KIRBY VASQUEZ

VASQUEZ: Kirby Vasquez and it is May 26th, 2012 and I am here for the Alumnae History Project. So would you like to start off by introducing yourself?

BOYLAN: My name is Roberta Boylan.

VASQUEZ: And what class are you from?

BOYLAN: 1962.

VASQUEZ: And why did you decide to come to Smith?

BOYLAN: Well, I had an ill-formed thought that I wanted to go to a good school that nobody I knew had ever gone to before, and I was in school in Great Falls, Montana at a small Catholic high school which had three orders of nuns teaching in it. And I had never heard of Smith College until my older brother happened to see the campus September -- or November of my senior year in high school and he came home at Christmas time and he said you really ought to apply to Smith. It looks like I do really good school. So I applied to two Catholic colleges in the east and Smith and I got scholarships to all three and chose Smith much to the dismay of my teachers and all those nuns.

VASQUEZ: What -- why did you decide Smith?

BOYLAN: Well, once I looked into it and did some research, I realized that it was a very, very fine institution and had no idea whether I could get in. And I had to get a scholarship in order to go out of state, according to my parents. So once I looked into it and saw what a good place it was, that's what really decided it.

VASQUEZ: And what -- what was the atmosphere when you got here, those first couple of weeks, how did you feel being here?

BOYLAN: (laughs) I had never been east of Chicago, and I came on the train, which took 48 hours. But from the minute I got off the train and was welcomed - there were people there to meet me and take my luggage and get me into

a car and get up to Gillett and everyone was very, very friendly and I loved everything right from the very beginning.

VASQUEZ: And how -- how was the house community? You said Gillett, you were in?

BOYLAN: Gillett.

VASQUEZ: How was the house community there?

BOYLAN: Well, I loved the location and the house. It's a very beautiful house inside and it was just the right size. There were 70 some in the four classes, and about 20 in my class. So it was a very small complete sort of family substitute. And of course, we had a house mother who was a very proper Bostonian and had never met anyone from Montana, and I discovered that Easterners are just as ignorant about the West as Westerners are about the East, so I was -- there was a lot of interest and I kept meeting different kinds of people -- people from all different places not only in the country, but there weren't a lot of foreign students, but there were a few.

VASQUEZ: And how was your relationship with your housemother? Was she very strict or --

BOYLAN: She was very proper. I don't think we were very rebellious the first year or two, and so she was not really much of a factor in my life. I wasn't challenging any of the rules or anything at the time. So I got along with her just fine. I did pull her leg occasionally. I told her when I got home on the train my father had to meet me with a sleigh and I piled on the buffalo robes and things like that.

VASQUEZ: That's really funny. And do you remember some of your favorite Smith traditions? Some --

BOYLAN: I just embraced everything. I thought everything was so tradition -- there were so many traditions and of course everything was so new to me that it was all just fun. So I liked Rally Day and House Dance and of course I didn't know any men -- young men, and so I had to blind date which was -- led to some very amusing and some very uncomfortable situations. But I liked everything. I really did. And of course, the academics included, but the social things. And I made good friends right away, and so I was immediately happy here.

VASQUEZ: Was it easy to make friends or were they like --

BOYLAN: Very easy. Very easy, and not only in my own class in my house, the -- you know, the upper classes where -- with one or two exceptions were very friendly.

VASQUEZ: And were you part of any clubs or organizations?

BOYLAN: No. No. I didn't really partake of the non-curricular -- extracurricular things.

VASQUEZ: And did you go abroad or --

BOYLAN: No.

VASQUEZ: Did you --

BOYLAN: I majored in English so I couldn't go abroad.

VASQUEZ: Oh, really. How was majoring in English? Did you enjoy that?

BOYLAN: I wouldn't do it again. Had I known more about -- I think if I had to do it again, I would have majored in political history, but I didn't know anything about political history, and I had never had a good history teacher, so I wasn't very interested in that either, but I always liked anything I read, so it was just the most obvious choice, and I wish I'd had had a little more guidance perhaps from the guidance counselors and people like that.

VASQUEZ: Did you have a good relationship with professors here are mentors?

BOYLAN: The one thing that I think is very different is there were -- there were opportunities for many people to do that, but it was not the norm, to have personal relationships with professors, and I was just listening to the panel at our class meeting of the current undergraduates, our ambassadors, and they all have mentioned that they go to dinner at the professors houses and they get together for Christmas parties, and they know their kids and -- it's -- that was not part of my experience at all. And there were a few people who took a lot of seminars -- there were a few professors who did that, but it was not the norm. I think that's a vast improvement, to have more close relationships, and there were no students doing research for their professors. And again there probably were a few exceptions to that for over the summer research and things like that, but it wasn't part of people's normal classwork, so that has developed over the years.

VASQUEZ: And do you think that Smith was a very like -- had lots of rules and was very rigid during your time or do you remember?

BOYLAN: It had -- yes. The thought -- that was expected, so at first that was not -- my first couple of years, that wasn't a problem. We later marched on the administration to get smoking in our rooms, men in our rooms, things like that. You know, it was -- we weren't major rabble-rousers, but we didn't -- we didn't really have any need to overcome the hours. We had to be in at midnight on Friday and Sunday at one o'clock on Saturday. All the bars

closed at one o'clock on Saturday -- or at 12 o'clock, actually, because there were blue laws. No liquor could be sold in Massachusetts after midnight. So -- and if you were away for the weekend, you didn't have any rules. You just had to sign out. But if your campus, it really wasn't that hard to comply, because there wasn't that much to do after midnight and after one o'clock.

VASQUEZ: And was Northampton part of your social scene?

BOYLAN: No. No.

VASQUEZ: No?

BOYLAN: No. Northampton was a -- was in kind of decline. It has been a factory town at one point but the factories have closed. I believe it was some kind of apparel making or fabric -- and so it was really a pretty much blue-collar community and did not have a lovely shops and it's way more yuppified at this point, and that started I would guess oh, 25 or 30 years ago. I have a daughter who went to Hampshire so she actually lived in Northampton her last year and by then it was definitely looking up in terms of being a desirable place to shop and eat and things like that.

VASQUEZ: And did you live in Gillett all four years?

BOYLAN: All four years. Mm-hmm, and I was on the fifth floor in the old maids rooms the the first year.

VASQUEZ: Oh wow.

BOYLAN: But the second year I drew number one in the selections and there were two, two-bedroom and one bath suites and so I got that, so my friend and and I were there for three years -- the next three years --

VASQUEZ: Oh wow.

BOYLAN: With our own bathroom, and we turned one room into a bedroom and the other into a living room, and then we got phones. We weren't able to have our own phones until that year, so ten of us went together and had one phone put in our living room. Well, I think all the other eight girls had boyfriends and Ann and I didn't. So we were always stuck in the bedroom because they were always talking to their boyfriends on the phone in our living room.

VASQUEZ: How was it living in Gillett all four years? Did you enjoy that?

BOYLAN: I did. And we had a French woman who was our cook, and she was a wonderful cook, so our food was very good, and I was not as diligent a student as I should have been. I learned to play bridge very well, and

spent a lot of time doing the New York Times crossword puzzle and in the afternoon I would play bridge and I didn't study as much as I should have, but I made wonderful friends. And I did fine. I never was -- I was never any academic star, but for the -- I was never in any trouble either. I was one of those B-, C+ students. I don't think they have those anymore. Everybody gets A's and B's no. They don't offers C's or D's, but no, it -- I never did try to be at the top of my class or anything like that. That would have been way too much competition, and I'm not sorry I did it that way because I have these lifelong friends that mean a lot to me.

VASQUEZ: And during your time here did you feel that Smith was an including space for different minority groups, whether it was religious groups, class groups, or color?

BOYLAN: Well, definitely not for blacks. In terms of religion I had under -- I'm Catholic. I have understood that there was a quota on Catholics and Jews, and I'm to believe that that was probably true. The civil rights movement was starting during those years that I was an undergraduate, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress for Racial Equality were trying to recruit people on campus to go down and help integrate lunch counters and things like that. And at the time we had, I believe, six American blacks on campus. I think there were 19 foreign blacks, and six American blacks and it was my view that we needed to do more here before we went to anybody else's state to try to improve their racial progress.

VASQUEZ: During your time here, Martin Luther King also -- King Junior came to speak. Do remember that or --

BOYLAN: I did not go to see him and I don't even remember that he did come, but Mary Ann did go to that. He spoke in the chapel. And I had forgotten that. But I didn't see him and I don't remember even knowing -- I don't remember making a decision not to go see -- I'm not sure I knew he was coming when he came and I was not, you know, my consciousness wasn't very high in those days. Certainly as time went on it was.

VASQUEZ: My next question some alums like to talk about it, some don't. So I know that also during this time there was a lot of controversy over firing a professor named Newton Arvin. I was wondering if you would like to speak on that or if not we can move on to another question.

BOYLAN: Well, there were -- there was a scandal involving three professors. And it involved pornography -- a pornography ring of some kind. And there was a classics professor, an English professor and Newton Arvin, and all three of them were fired. So I don't -- didn't know anything about sexual preferences or anything, so my understanding was that was the reason he was fired. I've since then heard differently that he was gay and that that

was the reason he was fired. And I truly do not know. I didn't follow it carefully. I didn't look into it. This all happened over a summer. When I came back, I had to have a new advisor because it was my advisor for my major who is the English professor who was no longer around. And that's all I remember about that. It didn't create a buzz on campus that I was aware of anyway. If there was, I was not a part of it.

VASQUEZ: Smith tends to work on getting rid of stuff over the summer. We're facing some more things right now.

BOYLAN: Really?

VASQUEZ: Mm-hmm. So why did you decide to come back for reunion, aside from it being your 50th. Is that --

BOYLAN: It's mainly because to see my friends.

VASQUEZ: Have you been back before?

BOYLAN: I've been to -- I came to the 20th and 40th and now this one.

VASQUEZ: Do you think you'll be coming back for more?

BOYLAN: I'd like to. I'd like to. I enjoy it and even though I don't see much of some of the friends in between, I -- it's a good time to get together.

VASQUEZ: And have you noticed whether it is physical or just like the way the campuses, have you noticed many differences?

BOYLAN: Oh yes. Oh yes. The buildings are impressive and I am particularly impressed that Smith College developed an engineering program and it looks like it's a huge success and I'm delighted. I'm delighted about that.

VASQUEZ: I have lots of engineering friends and they love it. They've got a great program here. Yeah. And what did you do after college?

BOYLAN: Well, I didn't want to go to graduate school, and a friend -- actually Mary Ann, that you're going to talk to next, was engaged and her fiancé was teaching at and going to graduate school at the University of Oregon. So the two of us went to San Francisco and we both got jobs right away, but they were not very interesting jobs, because in those days most jobs were not open to women. They still had help wanted male sections in the paper and help wanted female. And I had this brother who went to Catholic -- he was in law school in San Francisco, and his fiancé joined us and he started coming over every night for dinner and what he was doing in law school sounded more interesting than what I was doing for work, so at the very last minute in August of 1963 I called Smith and had them send a transcript to the University of Montana Law School and I called and sent a

check to the educational testing service. They were giving one last LSAT that Saturday and they said even though -- if they had the check, even though it hadn't cleared, I could take it. And then I wrote a little note to the Dean of the Law School and said, I'd really like to join the class that starts next month and then I went off for all these weddings of my roommates and while I was gone, I got in. So I went to law school and it was a totally male law school. I was the only female student for two years.

VASQUEZ: Wow.

BOYLAN: So that was quite a switch, quite a switch.

VASQUEZ: That was.

BOYLAN: And another thing I'm very glad that I did -- it was very interesting and of course I love the social life and was very glad that I had gotten additional education, and then I heard about -- two of my brothers were going to be practicing law in my hometown and I thought I wanted to do that too, but I heard about a bank regulatory agency in DC and I thought it would be good to have a little specialty, so I went there just to stay a couple of years and I stayed there 25 years and in DC another 10 years, so it was very -- I thought it would be boring, but it was very interesting and again I liked the social life and then I met my husband, and then I became the first pregnant attorney they ever had and then the first attorney who wanted to work part-time.

I was ahead of the big wave of women going into professional schools, so people didn't consider me a threat like they did when half the class started -- half the class became female and it wasn't just a passing phenomenon. And of course the civil -- equal employment opportunity act was passed in 1964, and I was looking for a job in 1966, so they were looking for professional women. So the timing was really good and I'm sure that had something to do with my getting hired and having the eastern credentials. My Smith credential didn't hurt at all, because the guy who hired me was a Yaley.

VASQUEZ: And did you ever face any pressure to get married before you got married, like going to law school was not --

BOYLAN: No, I never had -- no pressure from my family or anybody else. I had an elderly distant cousin who came one time when I was in law school in the summer and she said, Well, aren't you educating yourself out of the marriage market? And she had never gotten married. She was still (inaudible)-- and I said, Well, I hope not, because I'd like to be married and I'd like to have children. So all that happened, so I feel very fortunate.

VASQUEZ: Great. And -- okay, did you -- so do you feel that having the Smith education made a difference in your life?

BOYLAN: Very definitely. Very definitely, and I believe all of the research that shows that women who have gone to women schools do better. Now that may not be so true in the future, but during these first -- this first generation or two of women in professional and business ranks and the ability to rise above, they do very well.

VASQUEZ: And so you said your daughter went to Hampshire College?

BOYLAN: I have two daughters. One went to Hampshire and one went to Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, and my children grew up in DC, because I was there for all that time. But they are both now living in the West. One is living in Montana and was living in Colorado.

VASQUEZ: And how did she enjoy Hampshire College?

BOYLAN: She loved it. It was the perfect school for her, but then when she decided to go to law school, she had never had a grade or an exam in college, so she was a little nervous. She didn't have any problems. She went to the University of Montana Law School also. We're the second mother-daughter combination of graduates from law school.

VASQUEZ: Well, that's great. So I guess my last question for you would be do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

BOYLAN: The thing I would hope is that they would have to take as little out in the way of loans as possible. If there is one thing that really restricts your choices when you get out, especially in this -- in the new economic era is having to bypass jobs you might love because they don't pay enough to pay back your loans. And we -- my husband and I saved money from the minute our children were born and they didn't have any loans, and they still say that is the best thing that ever happened to them was getting their college educations without having to take out a lot of loans. Even if you have to go more years and work in between, I think that's -- it's very easy to take them out. It's very hard to pay them off, very hard.

VASQUEZ: All right, well, I think we're done here.

BOYLAN: Okay.

VASQUEZ: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.