

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Lia Bischoff Brassord, Class of 1983

Interviewed by
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 18, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Lia Brassord, who has attended nearly every reunion since graduation, discusses the importance of that experience in her life. She reflects on the intergenerational bonds she has witnessed at Smith and the importance of the underlying qualities that cross those and other boundaries among Smithies.

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

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2013, with:

LIA BRASSORD

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: All right. So my name is Annie Ames and I'm conducting an interview with Lia Brassord on May 24th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project.

Thank you in advance for agreeing to participate. So why are you attending Reunion this year?

BRASSORD: Why am I attending Reunion, oh, what a great question. Why wouldn't I? I've been to every reunion since I graduated with the exception of my fifth because I gave birth to my firstborn on May 19th, 1988, and so it was very nice that my classmates were here gathering because they all came down to see me in the hospital, so I missed that one, but I would never consider missing any reunion.

AMES: How did you choose to attend Smith as an undergrad?

BRASSORD: Well, money was a big part of it because Smith financial aid was very generous with me. I had read a book by Rona Jaffe called *Reunion* which was about Radcliffe, and became quite enamored with this idea of this Seven Sisters school and the women's college experience and everything. And so when I was looking at colleges I was looking at some of the women's colleges and I just had that feeling of this tradition and this exciting place to be. And my mother – neither of my parents graduated from college, but my mother worked at a hospital as an administrative assistant – they were called secretaries then – and one of the doctors she knew who she really loved and respected a lot – maybe I shouldn't say love – but she held him in high esteem – his daughter went to Smith, and so that was the first time I'd ever heard of Smith, and she said, you know, Rosaline Mansey (phonetic) goes to Smith, and it was kind of example of a person that we would admire that went to Smith.

AMES: Let's see. So did you end up going to Smith during her four years? Did you ever–

BRASSORD: No. But her sister Claire was one of my best friends. My oldest daughter is Claire, not named after that friend of mine. But I always pictured that Claire and I would come to Smith together, so Claire and I came and visited Rosaline and stayed with her in Morrow House. So I believe she graduated when we were first–

years. But much to my dismay, Claire didn't come to Smith with me. She went to Swarthmore. So no, I didn't cross over with that girl.

AMES: Did the fact that Smith was a women's college, did that influence your decision to come here at all?

BRASSORD: I didn't realize it at the time, but like I said, when I read that book, I just had that idea of this place with this rich tradition and everything. And interestingly, I'd gone to an all-girls high school, and in retrospect I think I probably should have been taking into account the fact that I was continuing my single-sex education. I should have put that more into the equation. I didn't see it as kind of part of the equation. I just loved everything about Smith. But it was more of an adjustment I think for me coming to Smith than for some of the girls in high school that struggle with that idea of the women's college, because I hadn't given it all that much thought, and while I went to a girls' high school I happen to be in the middle of five brothers. I have five brothers. So I lived in a very male-dominated house and I have to say, when I came to Smith it was a little bit of a shock because I just kind of kept thinking, wow, there's so many girls here. So it didn't factor into the decision as much as maybe it should have and as much as I think girls today think about it.

AMES: Okay. That's fantastic. What were your expectations when you first walked onto campus?

BRASSORD: I was expecting a wonderful residential experience, and that was really what I got. I don't think that anything was different than my expectations because I already had this sense of the houses and moving in with the group of women that would really become a core part of my experience. So I think that that – it was my expectations, and it was the way it worked out.

AMES: Okay. Great. So because you attended and then you came back to work for Smith, you've had a very interesting experience and you've had different insight than say someone who's just coming back for their reunion after having left, you know, fifteen, twenty years ago.

BRASSORD: Yeah.

AMES: How have you seen the college change?

BRASSORD: It has changed – it has not changed as much as people think it has changed. And my classmates ask me that all the time every five years and people out, when I meet alums all over the country. The thing is that here we are in 2013 and we've got the Internet and we've got texting and cell phones, and the technology is obvious, but it is amazing how Smith remains that same kind of the culture of Smith and the personality of Smith. And I remember being at one of my early reunions or being maybe on campus, and maybe it wasn't even my reunion, and

seeing the older alums interacting with the current students or the most recent alums and feeling so proud to be part of this group where there's a woman who's 82 and she's got her white hairdo and her pearls and her pumps and all that and she's talking to a current student who's 21 and she's got her piercings and her tattoos and whatever, and yet they're both Smithies, and I think Smith women of all ages are so wonderful about that. And so I think that even if you're 80 and you graduated from Smith, you can be talking to somebody who's 25 and still understand that common experience that you had, because take away the technology, and it is this experience of being in the environment of smart women. And that was the same in 1979 when I got here as it is in 2013 when the incoming class arrives.

AMES: That was very nicely put. I have never heard a response like that. It's refreshing to hear that. So shifting gears a little bit, let's talk about academics. What was the process of deciding your major for you?

BRASSORD: Well, I was an economics major, and I always viewed myself as going into business. I planned to be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. I could have been, maybe, I don't know. And so I was very practical and thought that economics would be the major – you know, it wasn't really the subject as much as it was the title on the degree, and, you know, I thought it sounded serious and businesslike. And I did, prior to – well, one of my careers was with the Stanley Works, which is a Fortune 500 company, and I was in employee benefits, so I definitely followed through on that plan. And interestingly, I think I took as many government classes as I took economics classes, so I was happy to still be able to take classes that I found interesting. I took a lot of studio art classes. So it wasn't that I had this burning desire to study economics. I thought it sounded good.

AMES: Fair enough. What were some of your favorite or most memorable courses that you took?

BRASSORD: My most memorable courses, huh. I'm embarrassed to admit how few details I remember about specific courses. And when I came back to work at Smith I really stuck my foot in my mouth when I mentioned to a current professor that I couldn't remember if I had taken a class with him, and I thought, oh, Lia, what a stupid thing to say. But I would definitely say the government classes. I mean Don Robinson was here when I was here and Professor Weinstein, so they were kind of – in my time I felt like they were legends, and I was very interested in American Government. At the same time, I loved my studio art classes even though I was unprepared for the amount of hours that it would take out of my schedule to complete assignments for studio art, so I had a real appreciation for the art majors. But I would definitely say government, some of my government classes, constitutional law, those kind of courses, were amazing.

AMES: Were there any mentors or professors that inspired you?

BRASSORD: I'm sorry to say no. I admired all of them. When I came back for one of my reunions there was a booklet on the table – I can't remember the name of it – it was review – a review of professors that current students do. And I know they have websites now like "Rate My Professor" and things like that. And I picked it up and was looking for some of the professors I had had, and some of the students were really so candid about them and saying, he's quite condescending or things like that, and I agreed on – you know, obviously also the glowing reviews. But when I came here it never, ever would have occurred to me to criticize every professor, and I thought they were gods. And I think one of the reasons that I didn't really feel in a mentor relationship was because I was so intimidated by them. I just felt like they weren't somebody that – I wasn't one of those people that had my professor over for lunch or anything. I just thought they were such figures of authority and I was just this tiny little student. Today I think students are much better about establishing relationships with professors than I was.

AMES: All right. Switching gears again, I want to talk a little bit about house community. What was your house community like?

BRASSORD: Unbelievable, unbelievable. And I have to restrain myself when I talk to current high school students about why did you come to Smith and what's the best thing about Smith, because it's very difficult to describe the house community without sounding so corny and so cliché and all this stuff. But, you know, I was looking at the list of the women from my class that are coming back for reunion today. I know most of them. There's only 150 that are coming back for this reunion, but I know at least 100 of them, and some were in my house and some were in other communities. But I actually lived in three different houses. I started in Ziskind House, the only modern house on campus, and I was not – I didn't even know about Ziskind House, so I pulled up with my mom and it was like, oh, I don't remember this house on the tour. And so I said, oh, I wanted one of these really charming houses with the Oriental rugs and all the bay windows. And so they put me on the list right away. Is that okay to say in this? And they moved me in the middle of my first year, and so for second semester I was in Talbot House.

So one of the reasons that I say this is that I had this house community in Ziskind that almost all the first-years that I started with graduated – stayed in that house, so it showed that it wasn't the architecture, it was the people, but I was already on the list to move. So I moved to Talbot House, and then I moved to Comstock House. And in each – I have remained friends with people from each of those houses and it did really enable me to know more people on campus. So Comstock House sophomore year and senior year, and I just can't even say enough about the house community. And going to a co-ed school for my junior year in college I had kind of firsthand experience of witnessing the female friendships that weren't quite as intense as the ones at Smith, you know, so I just feel that being at this women's college in an all-female residential house promotes that.

AMES: So were you involved in any student activism during your time at Smith?

BRASSORD: I was not. That was something very new to me. I don't even know if there was the word "activism" – I guess there was – in 1979, but I had not been exposed to any of those kinds of things, any, you know, protesting things or having opinions about oral politics, so it was all very new to me, and I appreciated being exposed to it. I wasn't involved in that many things on campus, and the main reason for that was because I had to work so much, and that was just a reality for me. And I still think it was worth me coming to Smith, but when other people had some time to commit to those kinds of activities and things I was cleaning houses, and I don't, you know, want to say it like, oh, woe is me, I was Cinderella, but that was the reality of me being at Smith.

AMES: Absolutely. What was your experience with dating and relationships at Smith?

BRASSORD: With dating relationships?

AMES: Mm-hmm.

BRASSORD: Oh, what a good question that was – that is. Sorry. Well, I think a lot of my first year and second year I was trying to create a co-ed social life for myself, and looking back, I wish I'd been more relaxed about it because I definitely wanted to date men, and so lots of friends and I, we were just always trotting up to Dartmouth and over to Amherst College. I had a friend at Amherst College at the time who was in a fraternity so it was all about going to those frat parties and everything. I was envious of the girls who came to Smith with boyfriends at home because they weren't trying – they weren't as interested in that or needing that, and I just kind of – even though I chose a women's college I still had in my head a co-ed social life, and I think that I wasted a little too much time going up to Dartmouth. I mean really, what was the point? So I did not – but then I went to Bowdoin for my junior year. And so I dated a little at Bowdoin, I came back to Smith, I was dating somebody at Boston College. You know, I had some dating relationships. But that's definitely a challenge at a women's college, if you're interested in dating men, trying to create or find those opportunities. Looking back, it takes too much effort.

AMES: Absolutely. So instead of going abroad you went to Bowdoin. Let's talk about that a little bit.

BRASSORD: Well, you know, my mother recently asked me why I went to Bowdoin. I said I had no idea. I think somebody told me, oh, Bowdoin's good. All right. My criteria was co-ed. I definitely was going co-ed. I took French my first year at Smith thinking I might go abroad for junior year. I was really bad at languages. And my youngest sister was only five years old when I came to college, and I really didn't want to be so far away from her. Going to Bowdoin -- I don't know how much I can say here – was such a blast. It was so fun. It was so different than Smith, and this may not be politically correct to say, but the academics were not as hard as Smith. I found the academic demands at Smith very intense, and it

wasn't that way at Bowdoin. I mean they're great academics. But I found that Smith just demanded so much of you, I was so exhausted all the time. And so I went to Bowdoin.

Interestingly enough, one of my best friends in my life came out of my year at Bowdoin, and she was a Smithie. I didn't know her, she was my roommate second semester. But Bowdoin had just declared that all their fraternities had to go co-ed, so I jumped from this women's college environment to being in a co-ed fraternity, and it was almost like going abroad. I basically felt like I went to a foreign country, you know. I was in school with boys for the first time since 8th grade. I don't think I'd ever been to a hockey game. I had no idea that hockey was so big. I thought basketball, and my brothers played basketball. First weekend of hockey everyone's like, oh, we're going to the hockey game. I'm thinking hockey game, really? And while I totally appreciate the women's college experience, the thing that the guys add to the college experience is they're not as stressed all the time, and so I appreciated that. I appreciated being more relaxed. I lived actually on a co-ed floor with freshman, so across the hall from my room were two freshman boys, so I just felt like talk about a change in your environment. Co-ed bathrooms right in the middle of the hall. I mean the whole thing was – you know, there were the kegs rolling down the hall on a Thursday night. It was a completely different world but a lot of fun, a lot of fun, and I made some very good friends, male and female.

AMES: That's great. All right. Well, as much as I would love to hear more about your experiences, we could go on for hours, we actually have to bring things down to a close.

BRASSORD: Okay.

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

BRASSORD: Okay. I probably answered those way too long.

AMES: Oh, no, absolutely not. (indiscernible) fantastic. What difference has your Smith education made for you in your life?

BRASSORD: It permeates every part of my life. The experience of building your self-confidence and of knowing how capable you are, I think that's what you get from your Smith education. That it is assumed you can do whatever you want to do, and what are the steps for you to do that. So I feel like I'm constantly aware – and it's not just that I work at Smith College – but I'm constantly aware of what I received from Smith College.

AMES: All right. And for one last question, I'm sure that you have been asked this many times as you work for admissions, but do you have any advice for current and future Smithies as a Smith graduate?

BRASSORD: Oh, well, my advice for all high school girls is to come to Smith. But for current Smithies, advice, I am not sure that I have advice. Maybe just cherish the days that you're here, but I think current Smithies do that, and be proud of the fact that you're a Smithie and you always will be. And you don't necessarily realize that as a sophomore at Smith, but thirty years later it will still be a big part of who you are.

AMES: All right. Well, thank you so much for taking some time to talk with us. This project wouldn't be possible without the alums who come back and tell us their stories, so we really appreciate it.

BRASSORD: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.