

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Ravelle Brickman, Class of 1958

Interviewed by
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 25, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history Ravelle Brickman observes the changes she has seen on the Smith campus over the years, including the growing diversity of the student body. She reflects on her political activism at Smith and other highlights of her college years, including as a columnist for *The Sophian* and her role in founding of the *Greecourt Review* that published writers including Sylvia Plath.

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: Brickman, Ravelle. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ravelle Brickman, interview by Anne Ames., transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Brickman, Ravelle. Interview by Anne Ames. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ravelle Brickman, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

RAVELLE BRICKMAN

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: My name is Annie Ames and I'm conducting an interview with Ravelle on May 25th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. We'd like to thank you in advance for agreeing to participate with us today. So why are you attending reunion this year?

BRICKMAN: Oh, why am I attending? I've attended almost every reunion since the 15th or 20th, I'm not sure exactly when I began, I think it was the 20th. And I only skipped one because there was a conflict with my high school reunion. So, yes, I always come to reunions, and I'm mostly glad that I come because even if I don't see people I used to be close friends with I find new people I never knew before. And I'm always surprised at how wonderful, and how incredibly accomplished and intelligent Smith women are.

AMES: Absolutely. Absolutely. How did you choose to attend Smith back in 1954?

BRICKMAN: Okay. It was a number of things. One was that I was a very high achieving high school student, and so I knew I wanted to go to top school and so it was just a question of which one, and I applied to Wellesley, Smith, Cornell, Barnard, and I can't remember, but it was six schools. So I did not like Wellesley as much as Smith. I was coming from a very middle class Jewish background and felt very strongly that I would not fit in at Wesleyan -- at Wellesley, sorry. I had the feeling that it was -- they talked in their brochure about John Wellesley, I think the Minister, and I had a feeling it was -- it felt very, very Protestant. So I just felt that that would not be good for me. I was frankly scared of the coed atmosphere at Cornell, which seemed very aggressive; and I was a very innocent young woman and I didn't know how I would ever deal with that. And so I narrowed it down to Smith. I wanted to get away from New York, that made Barnard less attractive because in those days if you lived in New York you couldn't be in the dorm, so that's changed, of course. But I was going to say that there was a second factor that was very, very important and that was that the head of the New York City Scholarship Committee, it was actually Queens Scholarship Committee Alumni Association,

Queens Smith Club was in charge of selecting the scholarship candidate to come from Queens. And she was an absolutely extraordinary woman and she took a great liking to me, and so it was her personal endorsement of me that made me feel like I had tremendous link to the college already. And so I not only won the scholarship of the Queens Smith Club on top of the Smith College Scholarship, but I also had a woman who remained friends with me and my family for until she died.

AMES: Wonderful. So tell me about your first few days at Smith, what was it like for you?

BRICKMAN: What was it like?

AMES: When you stepped on campus?

BRICKMAN: It was dreadful. I was frightened to death. I walked into a dorm, it was Gillett and it looked to me like everybody was a debutant, and everybody was blond and very tall and everybody seemed to wear the same plaid skirt. At that time those were the uniforms of the girls prep schools. So even girls who didn't go to those prep schools wore the same kind of clothes so that they would look preppy, everybody looked preppy. And what I ended up doing, there were five of us from the High School of Music and Art who came here, and one young woman had been my close friend at Music and Art and she and I ended up holing up in her room or mine play gin rummy for the first week, I think and we just avoided everybody.

AMES: All right. So returning to Smith as an alumna for reunion, how do you find Smith changed?

BRICKMAN: Oh, enormously both for the good and the ill. I think that certainly the diversity and inclusiveness of the campus is just mind boggling. And I envy girls from ethnic backgrounds like mine who are going here today and who would not feel so terrified, and isolated and out of it as we did. I think there was a lot of self segregation in those days. I use to notice every once in a while I would look around at the dining table at dinner in the dorm and realize that everybody was Jewish, and that the Jewish girls sat with the Jewish girls, that Catholics sat with the Catholics. I found out many, many years later that the girls from Italian and Greek backgrounds were really miserable because there were so few of them and nobody apparently wanted to sit with them. In a class of where we had, I think 650 in the entrance class, we had 2 African-American girls and that to me is still the most terrible, terrible fact, and I certainly am thrilled to hear that it's now 30 percent. And I can see that looking around at the other classes today how wonderfully mixed up everybody is, and I mean integrated is the official word. But I really mean, you know, it's like everybody's with

everybody else, and they're not in separate ghettos. And the two African-American girls in our class were always together.

AMES: All right. So moving on to talk about your academic career a little bit, what was the process of deciding upon your major like?

BRICKMAN: That was very bad, that's one of the negative things I have about Smith. I don't know how much of it was me, and how much of it was the prejudices in the guidance counselors of the time. I decided to be an English major simply because I was a good writer and I liked reading. And my impression was that the smartest and most admirable girls like Sylvia Plath were English majors so I wanted to do the same. My guidance counselors were useless. My guidance counselor was someone who taught German and his only interest was in trying to get me to take German instead of French, which didn't interest me, and when he found I wouldn't do what he wanted he lost interest in me. So I had terrible guidance. Mistakes were made that had awful repercussions for me. There was a science requirement; I took calculus thinking that it was science. I thought math and science were the same subject; and I found out three years later as a senior that it wasn't. And so as a senior I had to take physics and I failed and got a D, and got dropped from the Honors Program and it really left me feeling like a total failure. And so I still to this day wish that somebody had been around to intervene and tell me, "Hey, this is not a science, why don't you take geology, or astronomy or something interesting, not physics." I had other bad advice along the way. If I had it to do again I would not major in English, I would major in history or philosophy.

AMES: Did you go abroad during your time at Smith?

BRICKMAN: No, that's another thing I have negative feelings about. As a scholarship student I was not allowed to. And I know other girls feel the same way. It was really wrong. It was a sort of punitive measure if you were on scholarship you had to stay here. You couldn't have a nice perk like going abroad and that's really a wrong thing. Do you want me to talk about the good things?

AMES: Sure, yeah.

BRICKMAN: Well, along with all these, you know, negatives I'm lining up, I'll line up the positives, which is that I was able through the openness of the college and maybe my own interest to become a very outstanding person on campus. I did become head of the political association; we had a Young Democrats and Young Republicans. And the year that I won the Republicans shrunk to something like three people so we merged and called it the Young Political Organization, YPO, and we had a mock

convention, and got Gene McCarthy to come and colleges from all over the New England area come. I was a reporter on the Sophian and had my own column every week. And in my junior year I started a literary magazine called the Greccourt Review, which still exists and that had Sylvia Plath and lots of other very well known poets and short story writers contributed along with students. So I achieved a great deal and the over all big picture is I'm glad I went to Smith.

AMES: Excellent. Excellent. What was your house community like?

BRICKMAN: Huh?

AMES: What was your house community like?

BRICKMAN: My house community -- Gillette, I guess in some ways very frustrating. It was a house, in which -- and I don't know whether this was true all over campus, it was total self segregation by religion and there was almost -- there was no social interaction. I had one girl tell me that prior to meeting me she had never met a Jewish person in her life, and she came from Greenwich, Connecticut and she was really regarding me as though I were some, you know, creature from another planet. There were a lot of very scary experiences. My general impression was that lots of the WASPy girls were Mayflower descendants, maybe that's not true. But I had the feeling that they all seemed to, you know, go way, way back. On the other hand all the Jewish girls were rich, and I was poor. So I felt that I was a minority in both senses and I dealt with it by using camouflage. I discovered that by dressing in jeans and an old raincoat people assumed I was rich. The secret was to stop wearing nice clothes, which weren't Bergdorf's, they were whatever. And the second thing was that I dropped out of Hillel and sort of separated myself from the Jewish girls at college because as I said they all seemed to come from Great Neck and led very different lives. So that was -- I had a lot of ambivalent feelings about my house. And then senior year I was transferred to Laurens House for scholarship girls, and that I also -- I disliked the idea of segregating the scholarship girls. And there were some girls who were very sanctimonious about being on scholarship. So I have all these very mixed feeling both very positive and very negative and it took years from me to sort them out.

AMES: Absolutely. Yeah, I'd love to talk with you about that in a bit after I ask you a few more questions. So you were involved in student clubs?

BRICKMAN: Yes.

AMES: Were you active in politics outside of Smith during that time, or was it just within the political club at Smith?

BRICKMAN: No, it was just within Smith, I mean there was no -- anywhere else. I mean I did, I got involved sophomore year and went out into the town of North Hampton and registered voters, and that was my first experience of rural poverty. I had never in my life coming from New York I had never seen people -- met people who worked in factories and mills and who lived in these ramshackle wooden houses that were firetraps with the staircase on the outside. I'd never known anybody who lived like that, and these people were, you know, Archie Bunker kind of people, but in the country, they were rednecks; is that what you call them?

AMES: At the time period. Yeah.

BRICKMAN: Yeah, mill hands, and very nasty and very anti Democratic Party, and anti Smith girls. So it took in retrospect an amazing amount of courage because some of these people, I think would have liked to kill us. We were not -- we were the forces they felt that were driving them into poverty.

AMES: Uh-huh.

BRICKMAN: And I got turned onto politics in high school, so before I came here. And I did go to a special high school in New York called the High School of Music and Art, and so that we all had very strong I would say left-wing.

AMES: Were you musical?

BRICKMAN: I was art.

AMES: Okay. What kind of art?

BRICKMAN: Graphics mostly, and I actually came to Smith -- the third reason I came to Smith, I forgot that, was Leonard Baskin was teaching here, and I wanted to study under him.

AMES: Okay. And did you get to pursue the arts while you were here or?

BRICKMAN: Only one year of taking graphics, woodcut, and discovering that I was not very good. That whereas at Music and Art I was sort of a big fish in a small pool. Here, there were people who were much better than I was.

AMES: Okay. And when you say woodcut, did you mean like woodblock carving?

BRICKMAN: Yes. Yes. Yes.

AMES: Okay. Very nice, I'm a fan of that.

BRICKMAN: Oh okay. I did some beautiful work which is now on the walls of my children's homes, but I'm very impressed with what I did at the time, but it wasn't as good as what some of the others were doing, and I wanted to be best. So I took up writing poetry instead. I wrote short stories and poems, and play -- I won the playwrighting award and I won the Shakespeare Prize.

AMES: Wonderful, that's very impressive. Did Smith prepare you for the world after graduation?

BRICKMAN: Not at all.

AMES: Can you elaborate on that a little?

BRICKMAN: Yes. One of my favorite stories is of -- freshman year the wife of a supreme court justice addressed us at John M. Greene, and said, "The great thing or the important thing about a Smith education is that you would be able to speak to your husband's friends." Just as she was able to speak to the other justices on the supreme court. And I nearly threw up or ran out of there because that was not why I went to Smith. And all four years that I was there, there were a majority it seemed of girls who wanted to get their MRS, who had a very strict plan which was not to have a career at all, but to be pinned and then married the day after or the month after graduation. And then be able to make delightful small talk about T.S. Eliot at dinner parties for their husband's colleagues. And the career side was just sort of a blank, to this day I am amazed at the number classmates who somehow got through this and went on to medical and law school. Or who went on to fabulous jobs at IBM or places like that, where I would have dreamt of looking. I instead went straight into book publishing along with other Smith girls, where we worked for a pittance and it was understood that Ivy League girls work in book publishing. That's what we did until we got married and had babies and then we never worked again.

AMES: (indiscernible)19:33

BRICKMAN: No. I got very disillusioned and started talking back to people and got fired, and so I got on a boat and went to Europe and traveled a lot and worked while I traveled, and ended up in Israel teaching English and met my husband on a boat and went with him back to London and we got married in London, and then we came to America, and fast forwarding I ended up going into public relations and then from there destined to being a straight writer, which is what I do now. I still work and I'm 76 years old.

I teach at NYU. I teach writing and I do a lot of writing for clients about technology and stuff like that.

AMES: Excellent.

BRICKMAN: Medicine is the other subject.

AMES: So in about the five minutes that we have left.

BRICKMAN: Oh.

AMES: I would love to hear a little bit more about what you mentioned earlier when you talked about how it took you many years to kind of reconcile the idea of Smith being (indiscernible)20:48 experience for you?

BRICKMAN: It -- I think it took till the 20th reunion and I, wild horses couldn't have gotten me back to the 5th or 10th because I was still suffering from this sense of negativity. And of the feeling that Smith had been a totally wrong place for me. And overlooking the good things. And it was not until we were approaching the 20th reunion by maybe three years, so it was after the 15th reunion, and I was approached and asked if I would be willing to work on -- to write a survey for the class. And that idea fascinated me. So I joined forces with two other women, one taught at Barnard and another one went to my high school and was at that time a high school teacher, but she became a PhD in education for the arts. And we formed a terrific team and I did the questionnaires -- the -- of the students and then wrote up the results, every five years after that. So from the 20th on I started going to reunions, and the minute I went to the first reunion and I realized, "My God, these were the smartest women I'd ever met in my life," and somehow I had forgotten that.

AMES: Excellent. That's a wonderful way to put it. All right. I have just one question left for you in the time that we have together today. So in closing, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

BRICKMAN: Really do a lot of research about the courses you take. One of my great regrets is that I not take a lot of wonderful courses while I was here that I should have done because I got blindsided by this English major idea, and so I ended up, you know, kind of studying a lot of things, like 18th century literature, which I could have lived without. And I don't know as much about history or philosophy as I wish I did. I would have been, I think, much better off if I'd taken different courses. So that's my only advice is do a lot of research, don't follow the herd. Don't do economics because everyone else is doing it. Really look into what Smith has to offer. Remember your not likely to have a chance like this ever again in your life.

AMES: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much.

BRICKMAN: Okay.

AMES: Appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Debbie Shea, July 2013.