

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Kirstin Bridier, Class of 1996*

Interviewed by  
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

May 14, 2016

## **Abstract**

In her interview, Kirstin Bridier remembers her time in Emerson House and talks about favorite house traditions like convocation, and Medieval Banquet. An English major with an interest in vocal performance, she talks about the influence professors in both departments had on her time at Smith. Bridier also recounts her work in the Smith College Archives.

## **Restriction**

None.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCamformat.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Bridier, Kirstin. Interview by Millie Cook. Video recording, May 14, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Kirstin Bridier, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Bridier, Kirstin. Interview by Millie Cook. Transcript of video recording, May 14 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Kirstin Bridier, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Alumnae Oral History Project  
Sophia Smith Collection  
Smith College  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2016, with:

KIRSTIN BRIDIER  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: MILLIE COOK

BRIDIER: So I should just look at you?

COOK: Yeah. We're having a conversation.

BRIDIER: All right. (laughing)

COOK: So I'm Millie Cook and I'm conducting an interview with Kirstin Bridier on May 14, 2016 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you for agreeing to be part of the project.

BRIDIER: I'm happy to.

COOK: So what house are you staying in here for reunion?

BRIDIER: I'm staying in Tyler House, but I lived in Emerson House all four years when I was on campus.

COOK: And how is Ivy Day?

BRIDIER: Ivy Day was so fun. It's one of my favorite Smith traditions. So I was a junior usher when I was a junior, and then obviously during graduation. And this is the second Ivy Day parade that I've been in as an alum. And it's fun to see all the clothes that people wear. I feel like the clothes are really different this year. And it's fun to see everyone there with their kids.

COOK: That must be really nice. So where did you grow up?

BRIDIER: I grew up in Vermont, and then I moved to New York City when I was in high school. So when I was at Smith, I was going home to New York.

COOK: OK. And what brought you to Smith?

BRIDIER: My mother suggested that I apply, because she knew someone who went to Smith, and was very impressed by her. And I was not interested at all, because it was a girls' school. But as I was researching schools to apply for, at the time

there was a book called — I think Yale might have published it. It publishes very long narratives of what going to the school was like, so it wasn't just like this many students, whatever. And I will never forget. Before school one morning, I was just flipping through it on the couch, and I started to read about Smith. And it talked about houses around a beautiful pond, and they had tea every Friday night, and they ate dinner on china, and they had all these amazing traditions, and it was this community of women. It just appealed to me as soon as I started reading about it. So when I got in, I came to visit and stayed overnight in a house on Green Street, and loved it. And knew right away that that was the spot for me.

COOK: That's wonderful. So what house did you live in?

BRIDIER: I lived in Emerson.

COOK: And what was the house community like?

BRIDIER: Our class was amazing. I think, I would say like 85% of our class stayed in Emerson all four years. We were a really tight class. We had all kinds of crazy fun and traditions. It was really like a home to me. I had moved a lot growing up. I actually lived in, I think, 16 or 18 different houses before I got to Smith. And I realized just recently, about five years ago, that when I came to Smith, it was the first time that I had ever lived for four years in one house. So Emerson was really my home. And still coming back, after Ivy Day, we all went upstairs to the second floor of Emerson, where I lived for three years in different rooms. It was funny, because people from the class of 1966 were doing the same, so we were all standing outside of our old rooms that we had all been in in different years. And it just was really my home.

COOK: Yeah. What were some of those fun traditions?

BRIDIER: One thing that I remember, the summer before our senior year, they renovated the house. And we were really irritated when we found out this was going to happen, because we were very attached to the house. And the renovation, we felt, made it look like this generic hotel lobby. Like, it just lost all the realness, authenticity. And they had taken down the curtains we had, and left them in a pile in the corner of the living room. They weren't finished with the renovation when we got back to school as seniors. So we took the old curtains, which were a really bright yellow floral print, and we cut them up. And for convocation, we wore them like we were in *The Sound of Music*, as skirts and sashes and around our hats. And then, for Rally Day, we wore them all in our hair. And then for graduation, we made little ribbons out of the curtains for the seniors to wear. So that was like our thing in senior year. And we were always dressing up. I was looking at pictures to come for reunion, and we were always just goofing off. And I don't know how we got any work done, because we spent all our time in the halls joking around and dressing in silly costumes to make each other laugh. We would do interpretive dance in the bathroom, because we had these huge

bathrooms. And, you know, we'd be brushing our teeth together, and then start doing these weird song and dance performances. It was a lot of fun.

COOK: That's great. So what did you major in?

BRIDIER: I majored in English, and I minored in music. Yeah.

COOK: And why did you choose—

BRIDIER: Well, I majored in English, I think, because I loved to read. I will say, the one regret that I have about Smith is that we didn't have a lot of guidance when it came to picking classes. And that was sold as a great thing. You can take whatever you want. There's no requirements. But for an 18-year-old, I had no idea what I was doing. So I was like, I like to read. I'll take some English classes. I took Art 100 in my sophomore year after I had declared my major. And I submitted my final paper, and my professor wrote on it — I got it, you know, probably the week that school got out. She wrote, You should major in art history. You have a real talent in this. And I thought, What? At the end of my sophomore year? I'm not going to change my major. And I wish that I had. I mean, I wish that I had taken more advantage of talking to professors or getting advice from them. So I loved being an English major. I learned a lot. It helps me every day. I write a lot for work. But I definitely didn't take advantage of all the different courses that were offered here.

COOK: What are some of your favorite Smith traditions?

BRIDIER: Well, in Emerson House, we did Medieval Banquet in the fall. So I don't know how they do it now, but when we did it, we had in the attic old gym uniforms from the 1950s. They were like green jumpers, short jumpers. So all of the freshmen had to wear them. And we were pages. And the seniors would pick a professor to invite to Medieval Banquet. And it was the freshmen's job to burst into the professor's classroom and read a proclamation inviting them to Medieval Banquet. So we'd dress in these little jester outfits and invite these professors to Medieval Banquet. And then, the seniors would all wear Medieval costumes that we got from the theatre department. So I had this amazing dress. And I remember I had seen a senior girl wear it one year. And I was like, That is going to be my dress. And it was this very heavy brocade, and it had this beautiful neckline and poufy sleeves. And some people dressed like men or popes or, you know. It wasn't all dresses. But they had big hats. And the seniors ate without utensils. We ate with our hands. It was a banquet style. And the sophomores and the juniors had to provide entertainment for us. And it was just so fun. It was fun when we were underclassmen, because we got to do the shows. And it was fun to bring your professor. I brought my voice teacher. [Jane Briden?], came as my guest. And we all had professors with us. Then after they left, we did a big dance party in the dining room. And we were doing the limbo.

And it was just— So I loved Medieval Banquet. We always got totally into Rally Day. I mean, what's better than a pep rally for Smith? Like, we had an

Emerson House song, which I will not sing. But I don't know if they do it anymore, because there was a movement when I was at Emerson to change it to a cheer, because they felt like the song was offensive. Because we'd disparage some other houses, like Martha Wilson and Cushing. And so they wanted to be more sisterly, so we changed it to just a plain old, Go Emerson! cheer, which wasn't as fun. But— (laughing)

COOK: So were you active in any orgs or groups on campus?

BRIDIER: I did a little bit of theatre. I did *The Crucible*, and I also did an opera. It was a premier, an opera that my voice teacher was in. And some professors were in it, too, and then students. So that was fun. But I really focused on my job here. I worked at the college archives for three years as a work-study student. And then my life at Emerson. That was really, yeah.

COOK: What was working in the archives like?

BRIDIER: It was so fun. It was a lot of photocopying. Yeah, I've probably been exposed to all kinds of toxic rays from how much time I spent in front of the photocopy machine. We were filing downstairs in the stacks all the time. And every time you opened a folder to photocopy something for someone, it was this amazing treasure. And then when you'd go to file things, you'd get distracted by other amazing things in the stacks, and start looking through those folders. For someone like me, who is so attached to the tradition of Smith and this idea that, you know, you're continuing in a line of these women before you, it was amazing. We felt real ownership over the archives, even though we were student workers. One day, there were three of us from Emerson who worked in the archives. We just decided to totally redo the workspace. And I don't know what the actual staff must have thought of us, but we were like, This is inefficient. And we cleaned everything out. We moved the tables all around. And they kept it that way for the rest of the two years that I was here. So I felt like (inaudible). (laughing). But we just felt like we really took pride in our work, and we were very attached to this place.

COOK: Do you remember some of the things that you were working on?

BRIDIER: We were doing a lot of with the Margaret Sanger papers. There was a special project here at the time about them. And I think there may have been someone writing a book about it. One of the projects that I worked on that I loved was Margery Sly, who was the college archivist at the time, had me do a little exhibition on the history of Seelye Hall, because it was the one hundredth anniversary of Seelye, the classroom buildings. So I got to research all these photographs of when it first opened, and a little bit about the history of the building. And right around the same time, I had read a book by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz called *Alma Mater*, which is about the architectural design of the seven sisters colleges, and how the buildings were really influenced by the philosophies of the people who founded the schools. And doing those two things together really opened up this whole world to me of architectural history,

and actually working in this building that was an adaptive reuse project. Every time you're coming in, you're walking into history. Really made an impression on me. And actually, my masters degree is in historic preservation. That's what I did my graduate work in, and that's what I continue to do as a career. So the little exhibit on Seelye really made a big impact on my life.

COOK: That's awesome. Was there anyone who was very important to your Smith experience, like professors?

BRIDIER: Yeah, Jane Briden was my voice teacher. She was very important to me. It's almost like therapy when you go to a music lesson. You're with them one on one for an hour. So she was really someone that I came to know very personally, and really connected with. Jefferson Hunter was my advisor in the English department. Was just an amazing scholar, but also really kind and thoughtful and helpful to me. I had sort of a panicky moment before my senior year, because some of my financial aid didn't come through. And I was maybe not going to be able to come back. And he was really supportive and helpful for me. In the art history department, John Davis was a star. I mean, he still is to me the epitome of an art historian. And then, working here at the archives with Margery, and she had an assistant archivist named Joanne, who passed away right after we graduated. And I still have notes that Joanne wrote us here. Her handwriting was the most beautiful handwriting. And she would draw little faces when she'd leave us work to do, to photocopy. She'd write us little funny notes. So those were the people, yeah.

COOK: Did you know people from other colleges, or spend time using the consortium?

BRIDIER: Not really. I think our first year, we tried to socialize a little bit at some of the other schools. But we quickly realized it wasn't for us. And we spent a lot of the rest of the time just here.

COOK: Going back through some of the archives [and finds?], it seems like campus was very interested in elections, with President Dunn telling students to exercise the right to vote during convocation. Were you aware of politically active things on campus?

BRIDIER: A little bit. When I started, it was an election year. And I remember there were t-shirts for the Smith Republicans and Smith Democrats. And I remember Michael Kennedy came to campaign on behalf of his brother once. And he spoke at JMG, and we went to hear him speak. And he was like, it was this weird experience where it was like this charisma that, even in this huge JMG, he was there speaking. And you were like, Oh my God. This is what politics is. I don't think I had been exposed to that before. Yeah.

COOK: Were there any other things that you were politically active on campus?

BRIDIER: Well, I think when we were there, I don't know if it's just my perception of it, but I feel like I was there at a real transition point. I always felt like the women

who were above me in Emerson House were very much like, their bedrooms were Laura Ashley, all matching. They had headbands and pearls, and it was very proper. And then, a lot of the women under us were very politically active and very out and, you know, just much more vocal and comfortable. And we were kind of in the middle of these two generations. Like, this isn't me, and this sort of isn't me, either. So I think, for a lot of us, like I said, I came to Smith because I had this idea of candlelight dinner and Friday afternoon tea. And then I got here, and it opened my eyes to this whole other world that I had known about, but not really known about. And I think it transformed who I became as an adult.

COOK: Do you consider Smith a feminist space?

BRIDIER: Yeah, yeah. I'm just thinking. This isn't the best example, but when we'd have men in our classes from other schools, the first week, they would be answering all the questions and shouting out answers. And by the second week, they'd be sitting in the back of the room, not talking for the rest of the semester. And I just feel like I personally came into myself so much, because I had this safe space to make mistakes and figure out who I was. When I graduated, well, it was an internship. It was before my senior year. I had a funny experience as an intern at PBS [Public Broadcasting Station] in New York City. We were working on a documentary that CBS [Central Broadcasting System] was helping us with. And we went into a meeting with someone very high up at CBS. And the producer of the documentary was a woman. And her right hand woman was a woman. And then, the lowest person on the staff was a guy who had graduated from Yale a year before. He was literally wearing overalls and a baseball cap to this meeting at CBS. And the executive came in and said, "Alan, I understand you went to Yale." (inaudible, laughing) Totally ignoring this award-winning producer, who was there to talk about the project they were collaborating on. And I had this, Aha moment. Like, this is the real world. I had not been exposed to that, because Smith just assumed [competence?] in everything.

COOK: What was the most significant part of your time at Smith?

BRIDIER: I think the friendships that I made. Well, there were two things. I definitely think the friendships that I made. They're still my best friends. Coming back for this reunion, it's like not a day has passed. We have been laughing nonstop. We got in trouble last night in the house we're staying in, because we were making too much noise in the hall. And one of the graduating seniors was not happy. And I wanted to say, "This is college. This is what we do." The other thing is, it really raised my level of cultural literacy. So in terms of— I think about this a lot. I took a lot of art history, English, and music. And it helped me understand the historical periods through time, and how all these things intersect. So even though I came from a single-parent household, I was here on total financial aid. Now, in my job, when I'm talking to donors to give money to museums or historic properties, I know how to talk to them about art and literature and



music and the world. And it just gave me this level of cultural competency that's been really helpful to me.

COOK: Do you think you made the most of your time at Smith?

BRIDIER: In some ways, I do. There's definitely things I regret. I should have joined an a cappella group. I don't know why I didn't. I think I thought I wouldn't be able to get my homework done, so I didn't do that. I stayed on campus all four years, and I'm really glad that I did that. I didn't go away. I felt like, I'm only here for four years, and I want to spend them at Smith. And I'm glad I did, because it was such a short, perfect time. And just like I said before, I would have taken different classes and maybe majored in something different. Yeah.

COOK: And what has your life been like since Smith?

BRIDIER: So after Smith, I moved to Paris for a little while, because I hadn't done junior year abroad, and I wanted to have an international experience. I moved there to work as an au pair. Then, when I came back, I decided to get my masters in historic preservation, which I did at University of Pennsylvania. And since then, I've been working in historic site management at history museums, and then in fundraising at art museums. Right now, I'm directing a historic preservation nonprofit. It's an American friends group of an organization in Scotland. So we raise funds for castles and battlefields and historic sites in Scotland.

COOK: Very cool. So just to wrap up, what advice do you have for Smithies, and the ones that are graduating tomorrow?

BRIDIER: I think I've gotten every job that I've ever gotten because I went to Smith. I'm not exaggerating. The Smith network is incredible and strong. And take advantage of that. You know, when I'm working with donors, once they found out that I went to Smith, and a lot of them have gone to Smith, and it's like this instant connection. And I've tried to help people who have graduated after me. I just think, you know, even though the world has changed since I graduated, it hasn't changed that much. And we had this thing when I was here called Celebration of Sisterhood. And even though it sounds really silly, I think it's true, this idea of supporting other women, mentoring them. Especially as you get further along in your career, and you have families and you're trying to balance that. You know, my Smith friends are the ones that have helped me negotiate that. And Smith alums are the ones that have helped me forward my career.

COOK: Great. Thank you so much.

BRIDIER: Sure. Thanks for having me.

COOK: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed Audio Transcription Center, June 2016.*