

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Sally Anderson Brush, Class of 1956

Interviewed by
Olivia Mandica-Hart

May 20, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Sally Anderson Brush describes the campus atmosphere of Smith during the early 1950s, the lack of diversity and issues of race, and the expectation that one would marry. Brush also discusses her involvement with the crew team, the Christian Association, Judicial Board, her experiences as a religion major, her interactions with Gloria Steinem, and how Smith has impacted her life.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Brush, Sally Anderson. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sally Anderson Brush, interview by Sarah Dunn, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Brush, Sally Anderson. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sally Anderson Brush, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 20, 2011, with:

SALLY ANDERSON BRUSH

by: OLIVIA MANDICA-HART
filmed by: KATE GEIS

MANDICA-HART: This is Olivia Mandica-Hart and Sally Anderson Brush, class of 1956. The date is May 20th, 2011 and we in the Alumnae Gymnasium at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. So just to start off, why did you choose to come to Smith?

BRUSH: I had a mother who came to Smith in 1922, I guess, maybe '21, from North Dakota — from Lakota, North Dakota, and she absolutely loved Smith. It was a life-changing experience for her. She actually — her high school had changed their courses so that [Marian] could go to Smith. So they taught different math classes and different Latin classes based on the Smith requirements and then she applied and didn't get in. Well, not only was she disappointed and her parents, but so was the whole town, who had counted on Marian going to Smith, (laughs) so she went to [Mary Burnham?] for a post-graduate year and had a miserable year. She just hated it, and then when she went to Smith, for some reason, everything was wonderful. And I think maybe it was the contrast of that bad year after college and then she did get in and she loved it and she loved it so much that I grew up sort of thinking that I really didn't have a choice about where to go to college. She said to me, "I don't actually care if you go but I would be very disappointed if you didn't get in." So that encouraged me to work really hard and be accepted at Smith. And I felt like I needed to please my mother. You know, what were we — the silent generation (laughter) — the silent compliant generation? (laughs) So that's why I came. My older sister came, too, and she was not so compliant and I am not quite sure why she decided to come, and she didn't like it. So that actually we came on the train from Cincinnati, Ohio and she wouldn't come a day ahead. The freshmen went a day ahead. She wouldn't come with me on the train a day ahead because she didn't want to be here one more day than she had to be. (laughs) So, but I liked it right away. I had a very good experience.

MANDICA-HART: So where were you from originally?

BRUSH: Cincinnati, Ohio.

MANDICA-HART: And was there — did you feel there was a difference in atmosphere when you arrived here?

BRUSH: I think I didn't so much feel the difference between the Midwest and New England because Smith was — I don't know if it still is but such a self-contained unit, but the idea of being in a women's college with some freedom we had compared to high school and the demands of the work and all of that made it seem like a very different atmosphere. But not so much because it was in a different part of the country.

MANDICA-HART: So can you describe the atmosphere a little bit more? What was it like?

BRUSH: Let's see. It seemed to me studying was very, very important. You know, we rode bikes, we wore Bermuda shorts, saddle shoes, you know, penny loafers (laughs) those kinds of things. It was all women. People were friendly. One of the things I think we loved was eating in the houses and the houses being four years where all of us were together and that kind of commitment was really very important to us. Many of — I have many friends that were in our house that are here this weekend together. I am not sure that's a very good description of the atmosphere. Very white, middle-class. There were certainly people in our class who were not, people in our class who were Jewish. Gloria Steinem talks about having never known that you could actually sit down to eat. I read her talking about that and so there were people who didn't grow up in a kind of calm, middle-class atmosphere, but most of us did or at least appeared to. I looked at our graduating class to see if there were people of color and not a one. There were two people who were Asian — one is my good friend (name unclear Ochechon Ashwin?) who came all four years straight from the Korean War and she was at Haven House with us. And then Suki Trotter who grew up here in the United States. But other than that, we were — I saw in the archives somebody talked about it being a white space and it was very much a white space at that time.

MANDICA-HART: Were you conscious of that at the time?

BRUSH: I became more conscious the longer I was here. The — we had several lectures by ministers from New York — African-American ministers from New York. It was before the Civil Rights Movement so there was none of that, but they really broadened my mind; not so much the classes that I was taking in that way but the lecturers who were on campus. There were several who came from the East Harlem Protestant parish and at that time they had volunteers who worked at the East Harlem Protestant parish for a summer, and I just felt a strong pull to do that, so after college I did. I spent two months there living with four other white women on a block of 2,000 Puerto Rican and African-Americans, and I never would have gotten

that interest in diversity or that consciousness of what a white world I lived in had it not been for my experience at Smith.

MANDICA-HART: So, did you discuss race with your friends—

BRUSH: I don't think we did.

MANDICA-HART: (inaudible) And how would you describe a typical Smith student at that time?

BRUSH: A typical Smith student. Of course I would say that there isn't such a thing.

MANDICA-HART: Right. (laughter)

BRUSH: We — I think Smith and our college experience was more important to us than our dating and, you know, people talk about how in those days people went to college to get a husband and I don't know that I felt that, either for myself or for my friends. We certainly did have dates and they were different because often the dates were going to another place for the weekend and so you would go on a blind date with somebody that you didn't know and you would spend — you know you would get there Friday night and you would spend until Sunday afternoon with this strange person and sometimes it turned out pretty terrible. (laughter) And sometimes it was sort of fun. But I think there was much more commitment here to life on campus and each of us sort of got interested in different things and, as I think about it, I am not sure we came back and talked about those different things so much as we kind of lived different lives and then would come back and be social in the house. I don't know if you've heard the talk about the word 'gracious living' as something that came up fairly often and I think either consciously or unconsciously we were raised to be wives of successful men and that was the idea of what our education was about. And of course Adlai Stevenson's famous speech where that's what he said the year before we graduated just kind of reinforced that. But I think that was the assumption and we didn't fight with that. You know, you might work for a year or two after college, but that was what was expected of you and you would get married and have children. Your career would be sublimated to the career of your husband and you wouldn't even think of it in terms of a career.

MANDICA-HART: And you feel as though that was prevalent in your courses of study here?

BRUSH: In the way we were treated? Not in the courses because the courses were definitely about whatever the course was about — history or art or music or whatever. That wasn't — but it was just kind of the unspoken assumption that went along with everything.

MANDICA-HART: So were you involved with any clubs or organizations?

BRUSH: I was very involved in the Christian Association. And I was involved with a lot of different things. Well, I was the crew cox for four years, and that was great fun being on Paradise Pond in the spring and the fall. I was on the Swim Team and then my junior year I was asked to run for head of Judicial Board, which was the social honors board, so if people disobeyed the rules of the college, they were to report to the Judicial Board Chairman. So I had a phone in my room — well I was elected — there were three of us who spoke to the College and the College voted on for the four student council officers. And so I was head of Judicial Board, which is an amazing experience. And, as I say, I had a phone in my room — one of the few on campus — and people would call me and say that they had missed Chapel on Wednesday. We all had to go to Chapel, and if you didn't go to Chapel you had to report yourself to the Judicial Board Chairman. And then I would probably tell them — I don't know what I told them to do, but something — to say the offense and then the more offenses like smoking upstairs, or, you know, those people we would have, we would meet once a week. And Helen Russell had been called the warden, I think, up until that year, and her name was finally changed to the Dean of Students. But she and I would meet every week and we would talk about the different students who had told me what they had — rules they had broken — being late, getting in late, and things like that. And then some of them would come before Judicial Board, which was made up of eight members and we would decide if they should get a punishment like being grounded, or what. So that was an amazing experience. (laughs)

MANDICA-HART: Yeah, so how did that shape your sort of time at Smith if you feel as though it did?

BRUSH: I don't know — I think it changed me a lot, in that I think I found out I really loved working with small groups. It was a wonderful way of having a lot of responsibility and yet having someone that you really liked and respected, like Helen Russell, as your advisor, so you felt like you couldn't go off the deep end too far in what you were doing, and then working with the other students. So it was an absolutely fascinating experience. And then the seniors who worked in student government also became quite close. I had a funny experience, though. We all agreed that we would come back for our tenth reunion and I just assumed that of course they all would and I came back and not one other single one of them came back.

MANDICA-HART: Oh, no.

BRUSH: (laughs) Whether they just didn't remember, and of course at that time I was so naïve it didn't occur to me that if I was expecting to meet them here, I might let them know that. (laughs)

MANDICA-HART: So you talk about Helen Russell. Did any other professors or mentors inspire you like Helen?

BRUSH: There was a religion professor whose last name — I think his name was William Miller, I'm not sure I have the name right — who was also really good at getting you to think and grapple with moral issues. I had another professor, Professor Clark, who was a philosophy professor. And at that point, I was used to getting A's and B's, and I got a C in her class. And I was kind of distressed and I thought, you know, some professors sort of if you begin getting C's they will keep you on that C track and I thought I wanted to find out if she was that kind of professor before I really invested a lot of time in studying. So I went to see her and I said, "It seems to be I am on the wrong track," and she looked me straight in the face and she said, "Miss Anderson, the only wrong track you are on is the serious gaps in your knowledge." (laughs) I thought that was just a really wonderful, wonderful statement of exactly what was going on. (laughs) So I set about to rectify it and I ended up with an A in her course, which I was very proud of. (laughs)

MANDICA-HART: So what was your major?

BRUSH: My major was religion, and there were only six of us who majored in religion that year.

MANDICA-HART: Wow. Was that — did you like that (inaudible)?

BRUSH: You know, at that time, I was very involved as I said in the student Christian Association, and I stayed that way in my life until the Civil Rights Movement. And when I found out the way the white Christian churches reacted to the Civil Rights Movement, I became so disillusioned and it wasn't at all what I thought religion was all about, that I very soon found myself drifting away from — so that I don't feel like my religion major has been a foundation of my life in a way that maybe if it had been another major, it would have been. But it certainly was stimulating, the courses were wonderful. I learned a lot.

MANDICA-HART: Do you feel as though other aspects of your time at Smith were life-shaping or formative?

BRUSH: Well, certainly as I mentioned, the increasing knowledge of how isolated white people are in this world and my interest in diversity, particularly in that year — the summer that I spent in Harlem — definitely shaped my

life and that wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for my Smith education and the contacts that I made there. My sister, who was a year ahead of me, decided to spend her junior year in India, and she and another woman were the first two who ever went to India as their junior year. So that broadened my life, just to think about that, and be with her and in her thoughts about that time. And, so I am sure there are other ways. You know, I like to think about the fact that I think Smith taught me to think and that's been very helpful.

MANDICA-HART: And how do you — do you think minorities were treated well on campus or isolated or-

BRUSH: Probably not. The minorities that we had contact with were probably the Irish people who worked in the kitchens of the different houses. And I think it was out of our consciousness.

MANDICA-HART: So when you graduated, what expectations did you have for yourself?

BRUSH: I thought I would probably work for a couple of years and then get married and have children. And I hoped at some point in my life to go back to work part-time. I didn't want to not be in the world of work at all but that was just sort of 'I hope so,' not that I would ever be able to do anything to make that happen or, you know, just be a happenstance later.

MANDICA-HART: So, was that consistent with your parents?

BRUSH: Yes.

MANDICA-HART: And with your — and what kind of — can you talk a little more about the pressures? Was marriage something that you wanted, or do you feel as though that was-

BRUSH: It was so expected there. In fact, I doubt if there is anything in the archives about this, but the YWCA asked me to chair a group of people who talked about the role of women in our society, so I think there were like eight of us that met with this course that they gave us over the course of a few weeks. I'm not exactly sure how long. And we couldn't understand the question of what is the role of women. And you know I remember it as a total loss — the whole thing — just because we didn't know what they were talking about. (laughs) It's hard to believe it. (laughs)

MANDICA-HART: So has your life after Smith strayed from your original plan?

BRUSH: Much. (laughs) I think when I came back to our 25th reunion, I said "We should be studied by Margaret Mead. We are a vanishing group of

women.” We were raised to be these genteel, gracious-living wives and mothers and we are now confronted with a world that has totally changed around us, and we have had to change. I was just talking to a woman. We did a questionnaire now that was based partly on a questionnaire we took 40 years ago, and she is not only analyzing the answers for what we answered today, but also comparing them to the answers we had. I think we’ve done four different questionnaires and she has copies of all of them. But I think she just told me that only 30 or 40 of us considered ourselves feminists at this point, which just blows my mind. I mean, you know, who knows what the people who don’t consider themselves think a feminist is, but it’s — and going back and we’re reading *A Strange Stirring*, which is the book about Betty Friedan’s feminine mystique, and how that impacted women. And Betty Friedan’s point — thinking back on it — lay a lot more on it than was really there, that women should also be able to have meaning in their lives outside their life at home. But she didn’t talk about all of the issues of women that are there for all of us now.

MANDICA-HART: Do you feel as though her book had an impact on you at the time it came out?

BRUSH: I didn’t actually read it, but I think the whole feminist movement had a very strong impact on me, very much so.

MANDICA-HART: Can you talk a little about that?

BRUSH: Just taking a look at the idea that men and women are equal in many ways. My mother used to say if a woman worked, she is taking away a job from a man. And so when I went to work full-time when my youngest child was in kindergarten, you know, I know she felt that way about me working, and that that was not a good thing, or the right thing for women to do. And what I ended up doing, was starting a program for divorcing parents. I went to work in Domestic Relations Court, and so I started a program for divorcing parents to show them that divorce didn’t have to devastate their kids and spent 25 years doing that and it was wonderfully enriching. And through that, of course, I found out how important it is that we treat men and women equally, both for men and for women. And, you know, there is still so much oppression of women, certainly in other countries worse than here. But even in this country, we don’t treat men and women equally. So-

MANDICA-HART: So do you still believe that single-sex education is important?

BRUSH: I think it is an absolutely wonderful thing that Smith is here and that for many women it seems to be really rewarding and important. One of the things that I certainly had an opportunity to do here was become a leader in ways that I never would have in a coed college. And I think when you

think of all the leadership positions in any college, and that here they are all taken by women, and that just isn't true in coed colleges. I have never thought about whether or not, you know, I know that law schools now have more women than men, and medical schools have a lot, probably half and half. But I don't know about the leadership positions in those schools. And here that can happen and flourish.

MANDICA-HART: So do you feel as though your leadership training here helped you later on in life?

BRUSH: Very much.

MANDICA-HART: And if you had to make the decision again, do you think you would still come to Smith?

BRUSH: (laughs) I probably would look at a lot more opportunities but I would hope I would end up coming back here.

MANDICA-HART: And would you encourage your children and grandchildren?

BRUSH: I have a daughter and I didn't encourage her to come to Smith and in some ways I am disappointed that I didn't encourage her to look at it. She went to Wesleyan and had a wonderful experience there. But, you know, now I would certainly encourage her to take a look at Smith, and I will with my grandchildren. I won't push them, though, like my mother did. (laughs)

MANDICA-HART: So what do you think the current Smith student is like?

BRUSH: The ones I have talked to are fascinating and wonderful and interested and it is fun for me to see that they are interested in people our age, which I think is just really great fun. I think their dreams are so different from ours. I love thinking about that and I find them challenging and intellectually stimulating and fun to be around.

MANDICA-HART: Do you have any advice for current and future Smith generations?

BRUSH: (laughs) One thing I have thought a lot about is I have looked at the number of divorces that people have, because that was my career for 25 years. I think that it is very hard to start both a career and a family, and I think that it is probably easier if you start one or the other in your 30's and then — or in your 20's — and then start the other one in your 30's. I think you can have both and have it be balanced.

MANDICA-HART: Did you face challenges in trying to-

BRUSH: Well, I didn't. I stayed home and raised kids first and I didn't go back to work until I was almost 40. And then I went back to work and ended up getting a Masters Degree. And I found out I was very depressed when I turned 40 and it took me three years to figure it out, that I had expected that I would have gotten a Masters Degree before that, and I hadn't, and so that's why. But I got my latest job when I was 72, and I thought that was a hoot, so I work half-time, not full-time but that's fun.

MANDICA-HART: So what are you doing now?

BRUSH: I'm working for a dispute resolution center and I manage the small claims mediations in a county in Michigan and we go to five different courts and I supervise about 70 mediators and-

MANDICA-HART: Do you still see-

BRUSH: -and I work on diversity, which is just great fun because we mediate with a lot of people who are different from us and we are diversifying our pool of mediators, so we have to learn how to get along and that is still my passion.

MANDICA-HART: Going all of the way back to here, right?

BRUSH: Exactly.

MANDICA-HART: Do you still see challenges for women in the workplace?

BRUSH: Very much so. I think part of it is kind of the unconscious attitude so that competence in women is looked at differently than competence in men, and if a woman shows her soft side, then that's what is seen and emphasized. And if she shows her more ambitious side, then that is — she's looked at as that's not particularly feminine. So it is that kind of getting over those stereotypes and I think men have a hard time with that, too. We stereotype men and don't allow them to have their whole selves emerge. I am lucky to have been married very happily for 53 years to a man who is very supportive of me and I of him and he is right now not working and he does the laundry and all of the cooking. That's just great fun for both of us. (laughs)

GEIS: I think we're in good shape. Is there anything that we haven't talked with you about that you think would be important to share from — obviously these interviews are about sharing your life and what you have learned.

BRUSH: The only other thing I would say is that the importance of the friendships that we started at Smith. My college roommate and I have stayed in touch and she lives in Idaho and I live in Michigan. We don't see each other

very often but we were assigned two separate rooms here and we went to the Alumnae House and we said, “We want a room together. We want to lie awake at night and talk until midnight,” (laughs) so we changed our rooms and after our 45th reunion, six of the classmates got together. I didn’t come to that one because my grandson was born the day I was supposed to board the plane. I didn’t know which I would choose, but when push came to shove, I chose the grandson over my reunion. But they decided that five years was too short a time — too long a time — between getting together, so the six of us got together every year and a half for a long time and just continued to develop those friendships and they are really very — still very meaningful.

GEIS: There is one other question I do have. Actually the woman’s whose office this is mentioned that you were in the same class as Gloria. Could you, maybe because you have already touched on that you guys should be studied by Margaret Mead, that you’re part of a group that had to go through this incredible transition culturally, can you talk a little about both your experience of that and what it fostered in you and then your classmate, Gloria — what you saw in her at the time. Was there — did you have any connection to her? ‘Cause people all around you kind of respond to life obviously differently in the paths that they are going to take but obviously the group of you — there is both the culture and there’s the-

BRUSH: Personal.

BRUSH: Sure. I knew Gloria at Smith. I didn’t know her well and I thought of her as an incredibly smart person. Like if you had to pick out the three brightest people in our class, she would have been among them. She was not particularly attractive, so when she began to emerge as the voice of the feminist movement, it was really kind of fun to say, you know, “I know Gloria Steinem.” When I first — when feminism first kind of came on the scene, I remember saying to someone that I didn’t feel caught up in it, because my husband had always made it so easy for me to be a woman, and our relationship was so much more equal than my parents’ relationship or any other relationship that I saw. So it wasn’t — so I guess my understanding of the tremendous need we have to support the rights of women was kind of slow in emerging. I have been incredibly proud of Gloria and everything she has done all along the way. She — when I was a charter member of *Ms. Magazine*, you know when it first came out, and I remember at our 25th reunion — I don’t know if anyone has told you this story — Gloria and her friends put together alternate signs that had to do with abortion and coat hanger abortions and some other radical female ideas and then they brought them, and our poor parade chair person, who knows that all signs have to be cleared by the Alumnae House and had been, and they had even asked classmates if they had any ideas, didn’t know what to do about it, so they forbid her walking in the parade with the

signs, and the Class of '66 said "Come join us," so Gloria and her friends with their signs joined the Class of '66. (laughter) So there has been a whole lot of ambivalence in our class about whether or not we are happy that she is here or not. I think at this point, we are mostly happy that she is here. I was walking down the street one day and a homeless person was walking beside me and asked me where I was going and I told her I was going to register to vote, or whatever it was I was doing, and she said, "I should get involved in politics." And she said, "I should learn more about Gertrude Stein and Gloria Steinem." And I thought that was so funny and I said "You know, I know Gloria Steinem." "You do — you know Gloria Steinem?" So she got all excited. And at that point I had Gloria's email address, so I emailed Gloria and I told her the story and she said that's pretty funny because, she said, there's a doorman who says a lot of people come up and say they would like to meet Gertrude Stein because they understand she lives in the building. (laughter)

GEIS: That's pretty good. Thank you very much.

MANDICA-HART: Thank you.

BRUSH: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW