

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Kara Callahan, Class of 1988*

Interviewed by  
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 17, 2013

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Kara Callahan discusses the deep connection she feels with Smith and the importance of attending a women's college. She expresses a delight in traditions like Convocation and Rally Day as formative in giving students a sense of what it means to be a "Smith woman."

## **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:** Callahan, Kara. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 17, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Kara Callahan, interview by Anne Ames., transcript of video recording, May 17, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Callahan, Kara. Interview by Anne Ames. Transcript of video recording, May 17, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Anne Ames, interview by Carolyn Rees, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2013, 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 17, 2013, with:

KARA CALLAHAN

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: All right, so this is Ann Ames and I am conducting an interview with Kara Callahan on May 17, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you in advance for agreeing to be part of this.

CALLAHAN: Happy to.

AMES: So we are just going to start with some basic questions about your experience and why you chose to come here.

Video: And if you can remember to answer in full sentences.

CALLAHAN: Okay, yes.

AMES: How did you or why, more like, did you choose to attend reunion this year?

CALLAHAN: Reunion. For two reasons, one I just feel so connected to Smith. The people as well as actually this whole campus itself, and for me I get a double bonus because I also came back and worked here for a while. So I get to reunite with my classmates and then some of the friends and faculty I knew here. So yeah, I think you're always trying to capture those memories that you have when you're here and it played such an important role in my life.

AMES: Absolutely, yeah. So as an undergrad how did you choose to come to Smith?

CALLAHAN: Well, I knew that I wanted to study science, which is a very male-dominated area, and I thought well, typically women get called on less than men in the classroom, especially 25 years ago, and I figured well, I am going to be dealing with men for the rest of my life in my chosen field, so I would rather have four years just with women, focus getting the attention that I am supposed to get, studying what I want to study, and so I looked at pretty much all the women's colleges. I looked at had a couple of coed colleges, but really that was one of the main reasons why I looked at Smith.

AMES: So it sounds like you had a very clear definition of what you wanted to come into as an all women's space --

CALLAHAN: Yeah, definitely for the all women space and then what differentiated Smith from the other schools, my father actually gave me the very best advice ever. He said wherever you are going to go it's going to be a great school. Some are going to be better in English and then some are going to be better in physics, but they are all great schools, so don't worry about the academics, pick a place that you can call home for four years. So when I came in to visit and corresponded back and forth to some people it was just obvious that Smith was going to be a great place to be home for four years, so that's why I chose it.

AMES: So did your expectations coming in?

CALLAHAN: I would say for the most part, yes. I came in -- for the most part it met my expectations, but I remember thinking that I wanted to be a physics major and I wasn't exactly happy with the physics department at that time. But what was great was that it opened me up to looking at other things and I ended up being a math major and that was a great choice and has sort of led me what I wanted to go, so maybe it was meant to be, maybe it wasn't.

AMES: Excellent. I'm sure we have lots to talk about with your academics, but before we get there let's talk about traditions and Smith history. What were your favorite traditions at Smith?

CALLAHAN: Convocation and Rally Day. There is nothing on this planet that compares to Convocation or Rally Day. I don't care where you go. The sense of what it means to be not only a woman but really a Smith woman, there is just nothing that matches. The energy that runs through the 2000 students in JMG Hall during convocation is just unmatched and you get such -- not just a great sense of being part of the Smith community, but it's just such a celebration of women and I think that's one of the great things that Smith has is that celebration of women, and then Rally Day to see the women come back and see the metals and you see a look at what some of these alums -- and you feel this real connection, and it doesn't really matter like what you do afterwards but just having been here at Smith you have that same connection with these amazing women.

I think that's one of the memories that I bring back most from Smith is this -- you know, academics aside it's the fricking amazing women that you spend your time with here and you spend so much time out of the classroom, it's so vital. So that's probably like my favorite tradition is -- and all the craziness that goes with it, and what was great was when I came back to work here, I was with some -- with the engineering program which was just in its infancy, so I was there at the very first convocation that those professors had ever been to and these are professors who had been to, you know, Princeton and Stanford and all it that. And I knew --

AMES: Probably male-dominated environments for years.

CALLAHAN: I knew what they were in for, but they have no idea what they're in for. There is

nothing that can prepare you for that, and it was just wonderful to see them -- I was sitting in the audience so I could see their faces as they like experience this for the first time, and it was just like -- but then after that, they were just like so into it, you know, they totally got into what it was. So that's the kind you know, sort of the great part. But then also the -- you know, I'm back here for Ivy day and that's another time where you just feel so connected. I remember being here on campus and -- when we had all the classes come back. They hadn't split up the reunion, and you would sit there and I remember watching Laura Scales being wheeled down, you know, and again it's that connection with the history of these women, and I don't care what age they are from and what they did afterwards, it was still -- they are still so remarkable that such a breakthrough. You have so many women who were the first to go to college and so many who did interesting things, and I don't know -- it's one of those great things, so yeah, almost traditions around graduation. The illumination is very nice too, and honestly, I don't know if you consider it a tradition, but tea.

AMES: I would consider that a tradition.

CALLAHAN: Tea and -- I don't know if they still do candlelight dinner but -- I thought those were great, but tea, tea was just again, a great time where -- especially when faculty could come, but even if they didn't come. Again, it was this connecting with women and appreciating all the education that goes on outside the classroom. I mean I learned so much from the conversations that I had sitting around at tea or sitting around after dinner, and those were probably as important or if not more important than some of the academics for sure.

AMES: Okay, so a little bit more about your academic career at Smith. How did you decide on a major when you're here?

CALLAHAN: So, I decided to be a math major because originally I came in thinking I would do physics, and wasn't that excited -- it was a very small physics department at that time, and I didn't think it was going to meet my expectations or needs, and then I realized -- I started to take some math courses because math and physics are so closely related and the more I got into the upper level courses, the more I realized for me it was the language of the sciences, and to me -- this will sound very liberal artsy math person, to me math is like the poetry of science, because it is so refined and so clean, and that had a real attraction to me, and then there is of course there always plays in the part of faculty members and two in particular were sort of key in becoming a math major and that was Marjorie Senna Schall (ph.) and Jim Henle who were both really wonderful, wonderful professors.

AMES: I guess you kind of -- this is a great segue into one of the next questions I wanted to ask you. Of those two professors who inspired you what experiences you have in your mind is kind of being lightbulb moments or really realizing that they were really critical your education?

CALLAHAN: I think for -- well, Jim Henle is -- the amount of enthusiasm and excitement he brings to the classroom. He is very animated and to see someone get so excited about math, which often gets a real bad rap, that was again, you know, just so energizing in thinking, you know, hey, it's okay to really get excited about math. And then Marjorie was just -- she's just so remarkable. She has interests that run so deep in just purely mathematics, but also silk and weaving and crystals and somehow she was able to bring this all together and still relate it back to math and the history of science and she's just so fascinating that -- how could you not be interested. I mean I remember with her I was taking -- I minored in geology at the time I took a class -- I was in mineralogy and I was also taking crystallography with Marjorie Senna Schall (ph.) and for me all of a sudden I had two things that were looking at things very differently, one from the mathematical and one from the physical, scientific, and they really met, and Marjorie actually out of her own free will spent lots of time just talking about this. I still have a set of -- sort of a molecular construction said that she gave me and -- so that I could play with and think about crystals and the mathematics of it. To this day I still have it in my office.

AMES: That's fantastic. Okay, so shifting gears a little bit, what was your house community like when you were here as an undergrad.

CALLAHAN: I had a great house. I lived in Haven House for three years and Sessions as head resident my senior year. I remember, gosh, I just loved my houses. I loved that we had all four years students in the house, because at the first year when I came in, the seniors actually were -- kind of took me under their wing which was great, because I know in a lot of schools the first-years are just sort of sent off on their own in their own dormitory, and having the integration was amazing. Gosh, what was the house like. I loved Haven because we chose not to have a TV in the house. I love that the self-governance. Our house also at the time -- I don't know what it's like now, but it was almost completely doubles. There were hardly any singles, which I thought was great, you know, we knew a lot of other houses might have a lot more personal space, but somehow it all worked because people chose to stay there and I think that was the other thing was people who were in Haven stayed for four years. There were -- you know, few people moved, but not a lot and then coming into Sessions was just funny because I originally had turned down been had resident at Sessions because I knew too many people who live there, and I thought that would be too difficult trying to be -- take a sort of leadership role, but it actually worked out great, and one of my favorite memories is as a head resident having the first years come in and seeing it from that perspective trying to help them integrate into the house and house personality and, I don't know -- it all -- it all has worked out well. What else would you like to know about like the houses?

AMES: Was living in one house for -- you said you lived in Haven House for three years?

CALLAHAN: Haven for three years, yeah.

AMES: Okay, and then you moved your last year to --

CALLAHAN: To Sessions.

AMES: I'm sorry, did that alter your perception of the housing system at Smith, or --

CALLAHAN: No, I mean -- it's, I guess -- I love that each house has a personality and some people may think that's not good or maybe it makes people feel more isolated. You know, we -- I don't know if this still goes on, but you called people in the Quad, Quad bunnies and all the people on Green Street clearly must be clearly must be, you know, science geeks, and you know, all the lesbians live in Haven and Wesley and Sessions -- at least when I was there. And therefore, you know, you must not be -- you know, if you are lesbian, then there is no way you're living in the Quad, or if you're Republican, there's no way you live in Haven House. It is absolutely not true. You find people across the board in all those houses, but you know, definitely there is an overriding personality or character, but it doesn't mean you still don't have people who, you know, across the board. And the fact that they choose -- if they don't fit into the stereotype of the house, that they still choose to stay there, it means there is something deeper going on there. You know? And so -- and that was the interesting thing with Sessions house, because at the time it had a big reputation as like the lesbian house on campus, and so the first years come in and then they're like -- they find out from other friends like, oh my God, I live in the lesbian house. And then -- and they have the choice to stay or leave, and by the end of their first year, most of them, straight or gay, it didn't matter, most of them stayed and that's the kind of thing I just loved seeing, you know. The same thing like -- you know, and friends of mine who were, you know, didn't fit the stereotype of the Green Street house, or the Quad house, but they still -- you know and if it doesn't work for them, they do move, but I don't know -- I love that the small sense of community of the house within a larger context of college and it's so much better than having an anonymous dorm room. Which, you know I have a stepdaughter right now who is at a big university, and is -- the character that you get in the house and living there for four years, even if you move around to different house each year, that adds so much to really feeling a sense of Smith, of what Smith is, and Smith is the women, and it is very tied to your feelings toward your house.

AMES: And it also sounds like the house community is kind of a way to tap into the deeper root system of the cultural atmosphere at Smith as a whole?

CALLAHAN: Goal, absolutely. You know, I think that's one of the strengths of Smith is the house system. Again, because you have these small -- even the largest house is small compared to a lot of dorms and other places in the sense that you are self-governing -- I don't know if you still are, but you were, you know, it's hard to know what's changed in 25 years and that you graduate with your house, you know? You graduate -- most schools graduate with their major and I think that speaks a lot to what Smith housing is about, is that you feel a real connection to

these women. They are not all studying the same thing you are and it just enriches things. I mean I was a total science nerd, proudly so, but it was those conversations after dinners with the anthropology majors and sociology majors in English majors that -- and you know they heard aside from the math major, that was -- that's what it's about. I mean that's truly part of the liberal education that's especially important, because Smith doesn't have the distribution requirements. So let's say I chose -- I could've chosen to only take science and math courses, but I still would have had that liberal arts education because of those conversations I had with those women. So I mean you don't find that anywhere else I don't think.

AMES: That's one of the beautiful things about Smith as a the community as a whole. Switching gears a little bit let's talk about the social climate Smith when you are an undergrad.

CALLAHAN: Yeah.

AMES: Did you -- were you involved in student activism of any kind?

CALLAHAN: I was, yeah. So of course back in -- whatever year was it. God, it's so sad that I can't remember. We took over college hall and demanded the divestiture out of South Africa.

AMES: That's right, yeah.

CALLAHAN: So that was probably like the big thing campus wide, which again was just amazing to see the commitment of the women to force the administration to do something, to come together to do that, and also the support -- the amazing support of the faculty they got during that time. I was also in charge of the -- the Women's Center, I don't know if they still have a women's center on campus, which sounds funny because you're at a women's college in there like the head of the women's Center, what does that means? You go to a women's college, what's the difference? But you know at that time it was a real space for -- well, we had lectures and things like that on various topics, but it was also a great space for women just to come and have a place to hang out and where they could talk about various issues. I helped draft the sexual harassment policy when I was here, which was -- you know, it was amazing to think that that was 25 years ago and they didn't have one.

AMES: Yeah, that's a pretty glaring issue, really.

CALLAHAN: But no one did really, you know? So that was interesting. And what was weird and great and horrible was that I actually had a friend of mine, senior year, come to me and she said you know, I'm having trouble with harassment, and now I need to know what to do and we went to the steps and -- and so I saw it in action and that was just sort of, like I said horrible because here this poor thing is dealing with this but great in that it had an effect. You know?



AMES: Yeah. So how did the student body diversify during your time at Smith, I know you were very involved in the inner working politics of society are but how did you see the diversify?

CALLAHAN: Yeah, how did it diversify while I was here. I'll have to think about how it diversified, because I think the change happens over a longer period than four years. One thing I will say when I first started, there had been the closing of Hover House and the whole -- this is the -- do people still know this history.

AMES: I am -- oh, I lived in Parsons house so I -- when we were doing research for this project, I had a nice little surprising shock but Hover House and the Annex became -- you know they were renowned houses on campus, which was exciting to hear about.

CALLAHAN: So there was -- when I first came there it seemed like there was a sense of someone is against all -- first of all there is all of these lesbians on campus, and they've been kicked out of Hover House, and then definitely by the time I graduated, you know, I was very involved with student education on lesbian gay - - at that point it was just lesbian bisexual, and we hadn't gotten to transgender, queer -- you know we cannot -- but back then it was just lesbian -- actually we had added bisexual when I was there.

AMES: LBA

CALLAHAN: So it used to be the LA when I first started, and then it became the LBA had so I guess you can see that change and also the -- by the time I left, there was -- it was just such a big contrast to everyone being really upset about Hover and then by the time I left, having more acceptance. It's funny looking back now -- I don't know how it is on campus, but certainly generally -- you know, in society everything is so much more open that to think back 25 years just seeing that little bit of change was different. And then you know, diversifying -- one thing I am still think it's a problem at Smith, I don't know how you address it, is -- you know, I came from a place where being a white woman I was a minority, and so I came to Smith and I was just like oh my God, I've never seen so many white women in my life, and it's gotten better so far as the more diverse, but I definitely -- that's one place where I wish I had seen more diversity.

AMES: That's fascinating -- it's interesting to see the progression of Smith as a whole and how, you know, as an undergrad right now that we take this climate for granted because we don't necessarily recognize the work that upperclassmen like yourself have done to create this environment to be the way it is today. So we are kind of winding down and we have about five, six minutes left and I wanted to just kind of ask a few closing questions.

CALLAHAN: Sure.

AMES: So who have you become since you graduated from Smith?

CALLAHAN: Who have I become? I have become -- gosh, well, when I came to Smith I was very scared of my own shadow kind of person, so I definitely found my voice at Smith. So now I am a much more vocal person that I was, as you probably can tell just being here. I've become a mom, and I don't know. I may be less of an activist than I was, or activist in a different -- in a more quieter way, but I think that happens to almost everyone between college and their midlife.

AMES: What difference has your Smith career made on your life?

CALLAHAN: Oh, my Smith career made a huge difference. Again, without my Smith -- I'm convinced without my Smith experience, because of the person who I was before I came here who was so introverted and shy, and going into the sciences, there is just -- I would not have ever found my voice, and I would never -- I ended up going into a very male-dominated industry. I ended up going to graduate school at a very male-dominated school, and I no longer stood in the background and I wouldn't stand in the background and that's -- yeah, that is what Smith gave me, the strength to stand up and be heard, absolutely.

AMES: Which -- this brings me to my last question and that is do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

CALLAHAN: One thing of advice I would say is definitely don't worry so much about your academics, because you are smart and that's how you got here. And do take advantage of what you can learn from others and from being involved in something. I don't care what it is. And then don't be intimidated by professors. Some of them may seem intimidating but seen -- having worked here and seen it from the other side, there is most of the professors here are here because they chose to be here, they want to teach women, and there is nothing better to like about someone who is interested in what they do and I wish I had taken more advantage of that when I was here.

AMES: Well, we thank you so much for your contribution here today.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2013.*