

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Linda Charles, Class of 1974

Interviewed by
Nina Goldman, Class of 2015

May 17, 2014

Abstract

In this interview, Linda Charles discusses a wide range of her experiences during and after Smith. She discusses attending Smith during a socially tumultuous time especially around racial diversity, and the student activism that occurred on campus in response. Charles speaks highly of friend, mentor, and student activist Phoebe Haddon, and recalls having meaningful discussions with her professors about being a student of color. Charles describes her professional life after Smith and attributes her success to some of the skills she learned in college. Towards the end of the interview, Charles discusses her position as a trustee and her current perspective on the commencement speaker controversy of 2014. Charles closes with thoughts on the future of Smith and advice to current students.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Steve Thaw, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Charles, Linda. Interview by Nina Goldman. Video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Linda Charles, interview by Nina Goldman, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Charles, Linda. Interview by Nina Goldman. Transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Linda Charles, interview by Nina Goldman, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2014, with:

LINDA CHARLES
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: NINA GOLDMAN

GOLDMAN: All right, let's get started.

CHARLES: You ready?

GOLDMAN: OK, so, this is Nina Goldman, and I'm conducting an interview with Linda Charles, Class of 1974, on May 17th, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So, Linda, thank you for agreeing to participate.

CHARLES: Thank you.

GOLDMAN: And, I was just wondering if you could start us off by telling us how you wound up at Smith.

CHARLES: OK, an interesting story, I like to tell people this story, because I believe I am the poster child on why you don't go to Wellesley, let me tell you. (laughter) I actually only applied to women's colleges. And again, this was 1970. And I narrowed my choices — I got into all, I applied to every single, you know, Seven Sisters school. And also, the Connecticut College for Women. And University of Connecticut was my safety. I got into all, narrowed my choices down to Smith and Wellesley. I had visited all of them and decided that I was going to Wellesley. I'm from North Haven, Connecticut, so academically, I thought the schools were about the same. So, it — for me, it was, coming from North Haven, Connecticut, I wanted to be close to Boston. And my parents wanted me to go to Smith, but that wasn't important to me. They said, you know, Make up your mind, we just tell you where we want you to go.

So, it was interesting, in 1970, there must've been a total of maybe about thirty black women on this entire campus at Smith. And the women who were here in the sophomore, junior, and senior classes decided they really wanted to do whatever they could to increase the representation of black women on campus. So, what they did, very astute, they had what was called pre-freshman weekend, and invited all of these black women who were admitted in the Class of 1974 to visit. There were, oh, about a hundred black women who were admitted to that year.

And so, I came to Northampton, had already been here and visited, of course, but came for that weekend, and it was a wonderful weekend. Classes, we attended classes, we, you know, met faculty, we met other students, we stayed in the dorms. I was still leaning towards Wellesley, but I have to laugh, because if you talk to any of the black women from the Class of '74 who were at that event and came, what really did it for us, they were very clever, (laughter) the nineteen-year-olds, you know, visiting, there was this party, and we call it the Party of Life, at the field house. My brother, who was a junior at Wesleyan, I looked, he was at that party, the women I visited at Wellesley were at this party. You know, Dartmouth, you know, Yale, Wesleyan, Williams. And, truly had a good time that weekend, made lots of friends.

And again, I felt the schools were the same academically. But that effort that the women of color — and they were black women, put into making us feel welcome, making us feel that they needed us here as a part of the community is really what won me over, and that was my decision. I know I called my parents on Sunday, still up here, and said to my dad, “Did you send that check to Wellesley?” And he said no. And I said, “Don’t, I’m going to Smith.” But again, it was that feeling that the women here on campus conveyed to us, and how they embraced us, and really made us feel that they needed us here to help them, and to help this campus, really, understand the real value of having black women on campus. And that was how I wound up here.

GOLDMAN: Did that party also give you a chance to connect with some of the other black students who had been admitted but hadn’t decided to attend yet?

CHARLES: Well, it was that weekend, you know, we — again, there were, like I said, about a hundred black women who were admitted, and there were a number, I mean, quite a few women here on campus. We met during then. So, of course, the relationships I formed that first week didn’t happen to be the relationships with women who ultimately wound up coming here. So, it helped, definitely, coming to Smith, knowing that I had — or realizing that that one weekend in April, you know, I met Denise from Queens, or you know, Michelle from Queens, or Amy from, you know, Boston, and we wound up here together. So, you know, I think that was a very clever idea, to really do what they could to increase the yield. And it’s interesting, those relationships that we formed that April 1970 are still alive and well today. So, it was, again, just, I think, a very, very astute move on the part of the women who were here.

GOLDMAN: That’s great.

CHARLES: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: So, when you, I guess, began your career at Smith, what struck you? Did those connections sustain you thorough your time here?

CHARLES: You know, it was an interesting time, and you know, I look back now, I mean, I've been engaged with Smith as an alum, I think, from the day I left here in different — you know, different committees and different capacities. I look back over those years, I mean, we're forty years out, and say to myself, I wish I could do it differently. And again, it was the times, it was the '70s. And I have to say that I regret that I did not take advantage of all that Smith could have provided to me. Again, the '70s, we, for the most part, only associated with black women on campus. So, I mean, there was this whole world of Smith women that we didn't affiliate with. You know, you would run into women in class, of course, but there's class, and then there's the growing and learning that you do outside of class through the relationships, the affiliations, the bonds that you form. But again, we were separate, pretty much, by choice on campus. And again, it was — again, because of the times.

And I look now, look back, and over the years, I've seen something very different on, not only Smith's campus, but I know campuses across, you know, this nation, I look at my son, and how he lives his life, very, very different than what you saw out of that time, and there was a need, though, here on this campus to be that quote — and I hate the word, “minority,” but we were that minority of students. You know, my class, large though. My class was more than ten percent of the Class of '74, but still, the percentage, the representation of black women on this campus was still very small, when you look at a population of 2,700 students. So, if I had it to do all over again, I would've done it very differently, most definitely.

GOLDMAN: Yeah, that makes sense, it was — the '70s were a lot different than now.

CHARLES: Absolutely, yeah.

GOLDMAN: Could you just describe what you, I guess, remember or, like — yeah, how Smith was in the '70s?

CHARLES: You know, it was interesting—

GEIS [videographer]: Can I move you just a little bit, because the sun is coming in onto your shoulders. (laughter)

CHARLES: Good!

GEIS: Thank you.

CHARLES: Good.

GEIS: Very good, yeah, great.

CHARLES: Great.

GOLDMAN: All right, so, I think I had asked you with your — what Smith was like during the '70s, if you — if there were particular experiences.

CHARLES: Yes, what was Smith like during the '70s? You know, it was — let me back up and just say, part of the reasons — one of the reasons I wanted to attend a women's college, and the reason I applied to only women's colleges was, again, this belief I had that women needed to be given the opportunity to be the best they could be. I can sincerely say that in the '70s, that truly was the mission of this institution, to truly educate women and prepare women to be the very best that they could be. Of course, we didn't have the fields of study that they have today, but again, that was the mission.

So, what was it like here in the '70s? This place was, you know, rich with tradition. Today, I was having lunch with some friends from the Class of '74, and we were just remembering all of the tradition, and asking students if they do that today, and they don't, and we felt very sad about that. That, too, in addition to the strong education we received, that exposure to the dinners on Thursday with faculty, with the linen table cloths, and the candles, you know, the candelabras, and that meant something to us, you know, as Smith women. So, that part of tradition was very important in the '70s.

The '70s, again, it was a time of change, takeovers, building takeovers, radical movement, Black Power, and that, I know, was a little troubling to Smith. But it was the times, again. You saw that going on on campuses around the country, and Mendenhall, I believe we even — someone — I think we locked him in a room, or barred a door (laughter) and wouldn't let him out or something. You know, we certainly wanted to make sure that the institution understood our needs as black women on this campus as well. I found the — I found Smith, in hindsight, really doing its best to try to accommodate the needs. They didn't know what to do, but were certainly willing to listen to what we felt we needed on this campus to be successful. It was difficult for some women who came from backgrounds that were so unlike this world of Smith. I grew up in North Haven, Connecticut, so it wasn't — the transition into Northampton wasn't that difficult for me. It was for some other women who came from other parts of the country. But I did find Smith willing to listen and support, to really try to make life here, understanding the times, I would say, you know, plausible, and really, they did their best to try to be accommodating in some regards.

That said, we had some other things too, that really offended students here, students of color, Latina women, black women, as they

tried to fit into this culture. Statements, like, you know, you're only a guest here, or you know, you people — you people, that kind of terminology. (laughter) Again, coming from administrators as well. So, Smith really represented what was going on in the world at that time.

But students were determined to make Smith understand that we belong here, and we were admitted, and rightfully so, this was our Smith as well. So, it was interesting times, I've said that, you know, multiple times here. But, again, I think the campus really represented the world at large, it was truly just a microcosm of what was going on out there across this nation. Yeah.

GOLDMAN: How did you or other — I guess, the group of black women or students who started the BSA [Black Students' Alliance] for, or demand, more acknowledgement or space in this community?

CHARLES: You know, I really credit the women who were ahead of us when we arrived on campus in 1970, BSA was already established, and I look at the women who were the leaders of BSA and I've got to tell you, they were true leaders. They're very strategic in their approach, very well organized in terms of their desires and their demands, always applying rationale behind the "ask" or the demand. And again, keeping in mind that the view and the vision, it was our Smith, too. It was our Smith, too.

So, the approach, there were, as I said, and this is before I arrived, there was a takeover in College Hall. (laughter) But while I was on campus, there were, you know, organized demonstrations, there were organized protests. And what I learned is that you can accomplish and achieve what you're looking for through some type of organized and strategic approach. So, I also, you know, want to — I think back to forty years ago, and current times as well, what's consistent there in terms of the approach was this recognition of civil discourse. Even then, this idea of this — a peaceful protest, a peaceful demonstration, but not compromising the values or the expectations, and working to negotiate, negotiate to yes. So, even back then, that was a strategy that was used, and we actually learned that from the women who were there ahead of us. Good lessons to learn back there at such an early age, and really, to apply throughout our career here at Smith.

GOLDMAN: That's powerful.

CHARLES: Yeah, yeah.

GOLDMAN: Yeah. Are there any mentors, professors or other students, that stand out to you in particular from your time here?

CHARLES: Yeah, there's a student, in fact, she was two years ahead of me, a junior when I came in, Phoebe Haden, I don't know if you're familiar with Phoebe. Phoebe was just amazing. As a freshman, I was in awe of her, fabulous woman, she's from New Jersey. And just kind of took me under her wing when she came in, truly became my mentor. She actually was the president of BSA when I came in as a freshman, and again, I just learned so much from her in terms of this approach that I just described to you, this art of, really, strategically thinking through those things that you want, and pursuing your objectives through a real strategic and analytical approach. She was my mentor, then, my mentor after she graduated. She had really good friends, she was on the Board of Trustees, and on the Board when I joined the Board of Trustees as well, when, really, one of my primary supporters went on the Board. Once I joined the Board of Trustees, again, nothing changed, there was still that mentor/mentee relationship between the two of us, and we're friends to this day as well. So, she stood out, truly, as a really good friend.

In terms of faculty, I was a psych major, and there was a professor, Peter Pufall, who was my advisor. And I've got to say that back in the '70s, I mean, I could talk to him about my feelings, about what it was like to be a black student here at Smith, and I mean, we would have really good conversations. Again, just expressing those feelings. And it was, I think, learning for him, but also learning for me, as we shared our differences of opinion, and shared some of our similarities of opinion as well. But a really, really strong mentor, and someone who helped me really think through, kind of, navigating Smith, navigating this institution. So, I would say that those two really stood out for me as real powerful mentors.

GOLDMAN: They both sound really wonderful.

CHARLES: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: And I'm just curious about your, I guess, friendship and mentorship from Phoebe.

CHARLES: Oh yeah.

GOLDMAN: Were there issues that — or situations that arose that you would — that you observed her, like, sort of thinking through, or was it just sort of an everyday kind of—

CHARLES: Pretty much an everyday, however, again, during that period of time, the '70s, when there were some issues, Smith learning to adapt to having this large number of black women on campus, and Smith, you know, kind of feeling itself as well, just watching Phoebe navigate that, along with the administration, watching Phoebe help administrators understand the things they would do that offended, you

know, some black students. And helping them really resolve some of those differences. She was truly an advocate, not only for us as students, but she was an advocate for the college as well. So, this whole idea of negotiating to yes, for the students as well as for the college, Phoebe did that.

Phoebe is a lawyer, she actually just left — she was dean of the law school at the University of Maryland, just left that, and now she's chancellor at Rutgers. But even back then, we knew this woman was going to be great. You know, just watching her effectively negotiate. And again, it was her sensitivity to us as black women, her living in our shoes, you know, as a black woman as well, but also understanding the administration, and also understanding that we needed to learn how to live within this environment. And we needed to learn how to negotiate, and navigate this place as well. So, you know, again, just watching her pretty much every day, but watching her deal with some of the specific issues that came up, that confronted some of the students, and Smith's readiness for dealing with such a large population of black women. It was new to them, most definitely.

GOLDMAN: So, her particular style of negotiation, communication?

CHARLES: Oh, absolutely. Her style, just, you know, fabulous, very calm, very rational, very analytical. And, you know, again, everything backed up with real, you know, rationale, backed up with facts. So, yeah, just a great role model. Truly a great role model.

GOLDMAN: Was that sort of the dominant style of negotiating with the college?

CHARLES: I wouldn't say so. (laughter) It was for her, most definitely. But again, keep in mind, it was the '70s, and it was—

GOLDMAN: Right, right.

CHARLES: —you know, there was a great deal of activism around the country. There were, you know, organizations that were so much more vocal, and took on different approaches. So, Phoebe — what Phoebe — what I really credit her with, at least for me, was inspiring a different kind of approach. You can achieve certain things, but achieve them in a different way, and it was pretty powerful, pretty powerful, the way she was able to move between worlds, really, you know, here on this campus. So, really, a great role model, a great role model, most definitely.

GOLDMAN: Mm-hmm. Very cool.

CHARLES: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: So, she could go from a more politicized, like—

CHARLES: She was an activist, most definitely, she was. But she knew how to work the system, and again, it was just a great learning for all of us to watch someone like her. And it wasn't just Phoebe, there were other women, you know, as well. I mean, Kathy Abernathy, Maddie Peterson, I can just name others, you know? Angie Noel, you know, Marilynn Davis, women who were ahead of us who lived this environment, lived in this environment, and wanted to impart some real knowledge to us, so we too could be successful, and share with people who come behind us as well, how to effectively negotiate here, and again, how to really pursue those things that you felt were right, and to stand up for those things that you truly, you know, felt you needed to be successful, and that others would need to be successful as well.

GOLDMAN: And I'm just wondering, as you know, it seems like every year at Smith, there's sort of a controversy.

CHARLES: (laughter) I know! I know!

GOLDMAN: Which I'm sure you're very well aware of, as someone that's been involved for so long.

CHARLES: Yes.

GOLDMAN: What were the controversies that you remember during your time here? Maybe that's—

CHARLES: Well, I was — and you know, you're talking, it was, like, the Nixon era when we were here. (laughter) Yeah, we're dating — I'm dating myself here. So, I mean, you know, oh my gosh, it was that, it was, you know, oil, it was, you know — gosh, I remember most vividly the whole rationing of oil. I remember, you know, Watergate. So, again — and again, women's rights, most definitely, were issues, but not only women's rights, but for those people—

GOLDMAN: Can we pause for one second and wait for the applause?

CHARLES: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: It's loud.

CHARLES: Oh, that's the honorary degree recipient.

GOLDMAN: Mm-hmm.

CHARLES: Oh my God.

GOLDMAN: OK.

CHARLES: OK. Women's rights, there were also — I mean, civil rights issues going on at that time. And again, those played out on this campus as well. I can recall — and this is one thing that's really, I think, troubling to me, and I look at the campus today, too, and say some things just haven't changed. But I think it's reflective, again, of the world in which we live. I mean, I keep saying Smith is a microcosm of this world, of the United States. But even back then, issues of race, and when you look on this campus, the issue was not gender, I mean, we were all women here. But there were clearly some issues regarding race.

I can recall Yolanda King, Martin Luther King's daughter, was two years behind me. And in our dorms, we would all post things on our doors, you know, that was part of the décor, the decoration. And Yoki, we called her Yoki, Yolanda King, Yoki, you know, had a flag, it was a red, black, and green, which was, you know, the black flag, posted on her door. And someone actually burned that flag, you know, off her door. And you say to yourself, oh my God, this is Smith College, how can that happen? But again, Smith reflected, you know, what the United States was going through at that time. No difference, there was no difference whatsoever. So, those were some of the tensions and issues that we experienced on that campus — on this campus, during the '70s as well. The same kinds of tensions, the same kinds of issues that, you know, were plaguing the United States at that time.

So, but — and this is a time, too, when the voices of black students were so important, and it became so important to learn how to effectively deal with those issues, how to challenge the institution on some of the treatment that students experienced here, the marginalization, the lack of value, a desire to have certain kinds of programming, the desire to have more faculty, more black faculty, to have Afro-Am Studies, to chair — you know, to endow chairs. I mean, there was so much that we wanted, again, and it was all kind of colored by what was going on in the world at that time.

So, and nothing's changed. (laughter) Nothing's changed, I look at students today and say, OK, the same issues are still plaguing us, as we — everyone tries to find his or her home, really, here at Smith today as well. So, the journey continues, nothing has changed, but I think women come out of Smith much more prepared to deal with what they're going to have to deal with externally once they leave this place. They'll find that nothing's different externally as well, you're going to deal with these very same issues. And I hope that once you have the experience — the opportunity to experience here on this campus gets you ready, you know, for what the world's going to be like for you as a woman, whether it's a woman of color, you know, or whatever, you know, coming out of this institution.

GOLDMAN: And I'm just curious to know if you could, sort of, take us through how your experience here at Smith has influenced your life since — since coming?

CHARLES: I have to laugh—

GOLDMAN: Since graduating.

CHARLES: Yes, I have to laugh about that, I left here in 1974, planning to go into a Ph.D. program in clinical child psychology. And I — but during '74, it was very interesting, different companies would come to campus and interview. I interviewed with Bell Laboratories and said I need to take some time off, I need to work for a while. And I go this job with Bell Laboratories in what was called personnel in those days. Now, I didn't know the first thing about this, but obviously, there was something about me that they liked, and they felt that I would be good in that field.

And I do have to sit back and say I do believe it's because of Smith, it is because of Smith that I was actually positioned, very well positioned for that first job that I ever had, not knowing the first thing about human resources or personnel, and I was, you know, quite impressed with myself, you know, coming out and having my own big office, my own "secretary." And it was Smith that really opened the doors for me.

What I found, though, coming out and going into my first, you know, working experience at Bell Labs, I believe that my colleagues, probably, perceived me as this cocky, arrogant woman, and I wasn't cocky or arrogant, that was their perception. I believe what I was demonstrating to them was this, is what I learned at Smith, which is a certain level of confidence, because you knew you were the best, you knew that you learned how to think critically, you knew that you were going to be successful coming out of this place. And I believe that was a little difficult for men, whom those were my colleagues, a little difficult for them to stomach, that you had this person who was, like, 21, or whatever I was, you know, coming out of an undergraduate experience, a black woman in 1974, and in a job that they probably felt a man should have, and probably a white man, you know, should have, and really holding my own in terms of thinking, and challenging them on certain issues.

So, I do believe, and I credit my family, because they've always reassured me that I can do anything that I want to do, but I also think Smith, too, gave me that experience and gave me — and reinforced that whole idea, as I said, about critical thinking, and helped you understand that you, in order to be successful, you need to be able to push back, and you push back in a very tactful and understanding way. So, you know, I do think Smith definitely prepared me for that.

And I actually stayed at Bell Labs and the whole AT&T family for 24 years. I had many different positions during that 24-year period, and you know, many different successes. And left there and went to the Ford Foundation, which was more in alignment with my own mission, and my own goals.

But along the way, I always think back, in all of my career moves, the experiences and what I learned in this institution, particularly as it relates to the confidence. The confidence to be able to speak your mind, and also knowing that I deserve this, I deserve this opportunity, and basically, I'm going to get what I want, and I'm going to work for what I want. But knowing too that I definitely had what it took. So, I just, you know, cannot — I just have to acknowledge this place for what it does to really prepare women for the world. And really put you in a position to where you believe in yourself, and that you are — you know that you're going to be successful because of the things that you learn here, and this was the place where you learned that fundamental. That fundamental about thinking constructively, and thinking critically, and being able to articulate and challenge. So, you know, this is such a wonderful opportunity for women, it truly is.

GOLDMAN: Absolutely.

CHARLES: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: But I wanted to ask you about this earlier, but you mentioned some of the traditions that—

CHARLES: Oh, the traditions, oh my gosh!

GOLDMAN: And it sounds like some of them are no longer in tradition, but—

CHARLES: I know.

GOLDMAN: I wanted to hear your—

CHARLES: I know, it's — you know—

GOLDMAN: Your feelings on traditions and what you remember.

CHARLES: Yeah, it is, and I know we can't live in the past, but we get teary-eyed when we think of, you know, Ivy Day. I mean, that tradition, I mean, what a wonderful, really, an experience. What a wonderful opportunity to see all of these trailblazers, and to see these women who came ahead of you, and to see them come back to this place that we truly love.

We sat around today talking about the china we had when we were here, and how special that china was. The tea we would have,

we'd have tea on Fridays, and how wonderful that was. We would actually, in my day, actually use, you know, real teacups, and saucers, and you know, cookies and tea on Friday. So, and it's interesting, we've carried that tradition on, periodically, a group of us will get together at each other's homes, and we'll have tea. (laughter) So, that's very important as well. Again, just the whole — again, the meals in the house, you know, just another real tradition.

And it's interesting, I have to share this, I mentioned that I wanted to go to Wellesley, that was my thought until I spent that weekend here and said no, no, no, I'm going to Smith. But I was still curious about Wellesley, so I spent my junior year at Wellesley. That was my "junior year abroad" in Wellesley, Massachusetts. And I did that because I was still curious.

And, you know, did I make the right choice. And I've got to tell you, I enjoyed myself tremendously, you know, being outside Cambridge and Boston, but there was something missing for me. And when I tried to put my finger on what was it, I came back, of course, you know, senior year, and it was some of that tradition. It was that sense of community that tradition really helped to inspire. It was that, you know, getting together around the candlelight dinners, the Friday afternoon teas, the convenings that we would have just in the houses, very different at Wellesley. And it wasn't that I was an exchange student at Wellesley, I fit well into the community there, there was just something lacking that Smith offered and Wellesley didn't.

And again, it goes back to, again, I think, tradition and how important those convenings, those opportunities for women to come together and just exchange ideas, whether it's over dinner, or whether it's over a cup of tea. So, that's very important. Meals in the houses, you know, another tradition that's a little different now. I know we have combined housing now for dinners, but to be able to kind of roll out of bed in your pajamas, and run out, and run downstairs and get some breakfast was so important. You could always eat in different houses, of course, but there was something about your own house, and being able to just dine right in your own house. Yeah.

GOLDMAN: Isn't it the case that during the time that you're at Smith, that the change from house mothers, or to Head Residents, or—

CHARLES: Actually, yes. In fact, my senior year, when I came back from Wellesley, I was the Head Resident in Emerson House. When I came as freshman, we had house mothers. And the house mother, you know, lived on the first floor. In fact, we actually, at that time, men could not be upstairs. I don't know if you knew that story. Men — I think it was after ten o'clock, no men could be upstairs at all. And the house mothers would enforce that. Of course, that was September, 1970. By October, 1970, that was all gone, you know, the 24-hour parietal's something that, I think, we take real credit for. But, yes, so that changed.

And students were given these opportunities. And I think they were great developmental opportunities, to really assume that kind of responsibility in a house, to really be there, pretty much, as mentors, coaches, guides, supporters, the “mother” of the house, and we were merely children ourselves. But, you know, to be that person that someone looked up to. So, real leadership and developmental opportunity. I, as I mentioned, was in Emerson House, and it was quite an experience to be there, and actually feel that kind of responsibility for students coming in, and the person that they looked up to for some guidance. So, and that carries on today. We still have the — I think they’re no longer — they aren’t called house mothers, they’re called resident somethings, resident advisors, I believe.

GOLDMAN: Yeah.

CHARLES: Yes, right. Yeah, yeah.

GOLDMAN: So, it sounds like that shift—

CHARLES: That occurred during our time, yeah, it did.

GOLDMAN: Yeah, and that was an important shift for you?

CHARLES: It really was, I think it was, again, as I said, for the — I think a developmental opportunity for students. And plus, it also helped financially. I can recall my senior year tuition was a whopping \$5,000, you know, a year my senior year. And my tuition, room, and board pretty much was taken care of with that “campus job” of being the head resident. Yeah, yeah.

GOLDMAN: So, that was a shift in—

CHARLES: Very, very different thinking.

GOLDMAN: Yeah, and it sounds like also in social life, at least from what I was reading in the archives, that just sort of opened up more opportunities, or—

CHARLES: Well, it certainly did, I mean, that was an opportunity on many levels, I think, in terms of financially, definitely for the individuals who were lucky enough to get those positions. Developmentally, because I think it taught you some real skills. And again, a lot of responsibility, you know, as well. Not to have a house mother, you know, of the house who was there, kind of, overseeing everything you were doing was a shift as well. And I’m trying to remember, I guess we still had a house mother, at least through my sophomore year, I believe there was still someone there. And maybe the year I was away at Wellesley is probably when they introduced this whole idea of Head Residents, my

junior year. So, again, I was fortunate enough to assume one of those positions when I returned, a really great opportunity.

GOLDMAN: Great, great.

CHARLES: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: I'm wondering, because of your position and continual involvement with the college and administration, sort of, how commencement is feeling this year, because I know it's a loaded topic for you.

CHARLES: Yeah, that's interesting. When we were here in March for our board meeting, we discussed this idea of — well, at this point, we knew we were going to have Christine Lagarde as our commencement speaker. I believe Kathy made that announcement in February. When the announcement was made that she was going to be our commencement speaker, I was pleased with that. I had the opportunity to hear Christine speak a couple of years ago in Washington, when we launched the Women In Public Service initiative along with Hillary Clinton and the State Department. And I thought she was a powerful speaker, and I thought she had a powerful message for women with regard to women seizing opportunities when it comes to leadership.

One of the things that stuck with me that she said, because I've always used that line, and I had to laugh, I said, "She's stealing my line," but she talked about opportunities for women in leadership, and how men will always say, "I can't find any." And that she would always say, "Well, I would always have a list." She said, "I always have a list." And I would always say, "Well, here's my list." And I thought that was so powerful, I had to laugh, though, because that was always my line, when people would say, "I can't find a person of color to do something." And I had always said, "I'm going to give you a list."

So, I had laughed, and I said, OK, Christine, good, she's got it. So, I was very, very happy about the fact that she was going to be our commencement speaker, and thought that she could impart some real lessons for students, some real learnings for students. I had not really focused on IMF [International Monetary Fund], though. So, when students started expressing some concern about IMF, I had to stop, I had to step back, and I had to say, oh my gosh, you know, this is what Smith really trains women to do, and I have to acknowledge women, and really congratulate those women for really thinking that critically about that relationship. Christine is a powerful woman, she really is. IMF — students definitely had some concern about IMF and what it represents, particularly to populations in developing countries. And again, when you're looking at income levels, and you're looking at women, and you're looking at marginalization of women, so again, I have to give the students credit for thinking about that.

I also think back to the '70s, and us achieving what we wanted to achieve through civil discourse, really, constructive, "protest" or demonstrations, and that's fine, that's fine, too. So, in March we met with student government, and again, we talked to them about civil discourse, really. We talked to them, we listened to them as well. And again, conveyed to them that as trustees, we really stood behind the decision to invite Christine, and truly did.

I learned something else that weekend, though, I learned that students were concerned that we hadn't had a person of color as a commencement speaker in more than twelve years. And I really hadn't paid attention, and I should have paid attention to that, because that is very important. We actually, in 1974, did have a woman of color as our commencement speaker, Patricia Roberts-Harris was ours, in 1974. And it was very important to us as well, because again, we had such a large population of black women in that class.

So, I did — you know, I listened to them very carefully, and listened to what Kathy said as well. Kathy was not aware that we had not had representation in so many years, and she hadn't been advised, and I'm sorry she hadn't been advised of that. But she did say to students, you know, I hear you, and I'm definitely going to seriously consider that, and she did. I mean, she talked about that in our board meeting, how we really do need to do something about that. So, it's — so, we left in March, after our March board meeting, I think, agreeing to disagree, you know, with student government. They were still very adamant about the opposition, but I think they heard us saying that you really do need to listen. And I do believe, at least though, that small population of student government understood the value of listening, and that you do value different perspectives.

So, I was a little surprised when we came back in May for a board meeting, and there was still concern — maybe not too surprised, because we are Smith women, still concerned about Christine as the commencement speaker. And it was — and the same messages, real concerned about IMF, and the fact that she represented IMF, and also concerned about the lack of diversity in terms of commencement speakers. To which I said, "I'll give you a list, I have my list for you." (laughter)

So, but we left that meeting, I know the students — there was a protest outside the president's house. We actually were having dinner one night. Peaceful, I thought back to the '70s while the students were doing that, organized. You know, they spoke about the things they were concerned about, and Kathy, and Betty Eveillard, who's the chair of the board, and a couple of the trustees, were outside, and listened, you know, listened to them very carefully. And we left that board meeting understanding that Christine was still going to speak.

So, I must say that I was dismayed to learn last weekend that she withdrew. And I think it's — we have to be very clear about what happened. It wasn't — there are so many misrepresentations and so

many misinterpretations about what happened, and people really need to understand that Smith did not say we're withdrawing our invitation, it was her decision not to speak, whatever that decision — you know, whatever the motivation. We saw with Condoleezza Rice at Rutgers as well, it was her decision to withdraw, Christine made this decision. Am I disappointed, yes. I'm very disappointed that she made that decision, it was a small population here that, you know, at least signed a petition, I understand. And I just wish she had taken the opportunity to come and speak, and I think we grow, we all grow, from diverse perspectives. It's a lost opportunity for Smith, it's a lost opportunity for students to be able to hear another side, to listen and to learn.

I mean, I'm happy Ruth's going to speak, I'm sorry that she's doing so as a default speaker. I think Ruth is a powerful woman, a powerful president. I mean, under Ruth — I mean, we wouldn't have this engineering program if it hadn't been for Ruth, we wouldn't have [the] Praxis [internship program] if it hadn't been for Ruth. There is so much Ruth accomplished for this institution. I would've — I loved the idea of her speaking, I just am sorry that it's as a result of a default situation, I think she is a fabulous woman, and would've made a fabulous commencement speaker, had an invitation been extended to her to do so. So, I am so proud of her, and happy that she's there to step up and do this.

You know, commencement is so important, it really is, it's important for the students, it's important for the students' families, it's important for the alums, it's important for this community. And maybe, to Christine's credit, I mean, what we've heard her say is that she didn't want to really tarnish that experience for anyone. So, truly, if that's the rationale for withdrawing, I understand it. It kind of left us in a little lurch, but thank goodness, we had someone like Ruth, who was going to receive an honorary degree anyway, who's here to really pick up. And Ruth is fabulous.

So, you know, I think this is one of those make lemonade out of lemons situations. But there are a lot of issues that have surfaced as a result of this, and I think there's a lot that we need to continue to talk about, and we need to address this as an institution collectively. Students, faculty, staff, alumnae, we all need to really talk about these issues, because there's some very critical issues that are confronting this institution. And I think everyone's voice needs to be heard, we really need to truly do what we talk about at Smith, which is we talk about the fact that we value diversity in all forms. We value diverse perspectives, well let's just do that. Let's make sure we're listening and hearing each other. And again, let's do some of the things that I saw Phoebe do when I was here, help us all learn to negotiate to yes on some of these real critical issues. So, you know, the lemonade example, definitely, I think it's going to turn out OK for us, but a real learning experience for all of us.

GOLDMAN: Absolutely.

CHARLES: Yeah, right.

GOLDMAN: Where do you see the future of Smith from this point?

CHARLES: You know—

GOLDMAN: That's a big question! (laughter)

CHARLES: I'm one of those diehard women who believes in women's education. But, you know, we do need to look at this very critically. Let's see where we go. I mean, our applications are up tremendously, so we do know there are still women out there, definitely, who want this kind of education, women's education. I think we have to really look hard at cost. It's scary to me, I mean, I look at, you know, just this whole cost of tuition and just wonder who on earth can do this. There are people, yes, who can write those checks, but if — but you're only certain populations that can do this.

And the beauty of this place, when I have been so proud of this place, is this, is when I talk about valuing diversity, the fact that opportunities are funded, and I don't know if people really understand that, and definitely, alums need to understand the need to give to this institution, and one of the reasons I've been so involved is because I want Smith to be the place I want it to be for (laughter) women, and women of color. I want women of color to have the opportunity, but we need financial support to do that. And Smith has done that, Smith has, through gracious alums who give, been able to really support financial aid. So, I want us to continue.

I want us to continue to do that, but you're looking at some tuition costs that are just exorbitant. And so, we really need to think about what we do about cost, yet maintain the same caliber and quality of education that we provide to women. We're looking at, you know, the cost of our faculty, I mean, to retain the very best faculty, I mean, that takes dollars, to ensure that we have the kind of technology to support education, it takes dollars. The curriculum. So, we just — you know, we're at a critical point right now, so gosh, anything we can do to get alums, or any other constituencies to understand the value of this kind of education, and to support it, is what we need to do, and I'm certainly committed to talk that until I'm blue in the face, you know, about Smith. So, yeah, I definitely think there's a real future for us, but I think we're really going to have to be really smart about how we deliver the education, and at what cost, really. Yeah.

GOLDMAN: Yes.

GEIS: (inaudible) just one question (inaudible) that's, again, sort of in this genre of talking about advice for students today, your life experience, has this amazing arc of coming here as a student, and having the

experience of needing to agitate and strive for what you felt needed to happen to change this community. And now, you're in a position of power at the same institution, and over that time period, with all of that knowledge that you've gained over your life, could you speak to either the student that you were then, or someone today who might feel powerless, a little disenfranchised, like, what do I do? Think about that student, and how do they find their inner strength, and what do they look for in the world around them, in terms of what's here at Smith, and to find that sense of power and strength as a woman?

CHARLES:

Hmm, OK. You know, I've got to say, when I was here, I don't think I ever felt powerless, and I credit my family, my mother and my father, most definitely, for that sense of self, that sense of who I am. What Smith did was provided the kind of intellectual stimulation and experience, they provided the reinforcement that I am a woman, and the kinds of things that I would experience as a woman, and reinforced in me the fact that you have the smarts, and that you have the ability, and that there is no limit to what you can do as a woman.

So, my advice to students, and I do mentor a lot of students, is just that, is to think of that self. And to say to them, you're here, you belong here, you got into other schools as well, take advantage of everything this place has to offer. I do say to students, if I could do it all over again, I would. I'd come back here and I would take advantage of everything, I really would. Because this place offers so much in terms of learning, and it's that learning, that learning that's really going to propel you, it's going to take you where you need to go.

But for anyone who feels marginalized, who feels, you know, devalued, again, I just want people to kind of really take a look at themselves, and take a look at yourself at this place, and say to yourself, I belong here, I'm here for a reason, this place is mine. Smith is going to provide me what I expect it to provide to me.

And that's my attitude now. I mean, I tell you, I wanted to be on the board, I was on the Alumnae Association Board, but I wanted to be on the Board of Trustees. And the reason I wanted to be on the Board of Trustees is just that, I wanted Smith to be the place I wanted it to be for women who come after me. And in that "position of power," you know, if you want to call it that as a trustee, that's what I strive to do. This place, I want it to be that place. I want it to be that place where women see themselves, where women see themselves as powerful women. Where women see themselves as those women who can go out and conquer, and do anything. I want this place to build in women that kind of self-esteem.

I want this place to prepare women, not only in the humanities, you know, liberal arts, but I want this place to start challenging women to think about those things that many of us didn't want to think about. We've all got to come out of here understanding things about business, we really do. We all have to come out of here

understanding the qualitative, as well as the quantitative aspects of challenges, those challenges that will confront us in the future. We need to really beef up, you know, the curriculum. We've really got to prepare women, give women the tools they need to be successful, because I want women coming out of here understanding that, yes, they can do it, believing in themselves, and understanding there is nothing, there is nothing that they can't tackle and take on. And I believe in this place, I really do, and I believe that this is something that Smith can do, and I want students to, if they don't feel they're getting it, I want them to say I need that, I want that.

And think back to those of us who were in the '70s who said, I demand this. I demand this because this is going to help me be the person I need to be going forward. So, that's my kind of radical advice, and again, we're products of the '70s, and that is exactly what I do think students need to do, is really, you know, let's hold this institution accountable for shaping us. But again, that says that we do something, too, we do something, we give to this institution, to help get that institution in a place where it can provide that kind of support to women. Because out of that, I think that will give all women the kind of reassurance and sense of self that one needs to be successful in life.

GOLDMAN: Excellent.

CHARLES: Yeah, good.

GOLDMAN: Well, thank you so much.

CHARLES: Good. Great.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Steve Thaw, June 2014.