

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Ann Christensen, Class of 1956

Interviewed by
Bethy Williams, Class of 2013

May 20, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Ann Christensen discusses how Smith shaped her as a person, what it was like adjusting to Smith coming from the South, issues of race and diversity, her experiences living in Haven House, and who she has become since attending Smith.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Rachel Schein at 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: Christensen, Ann. Interview by Bethy Williams. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ann Christensen, interview by Bethy Williams, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Christensen, Ann. Interview by Bethy Williams. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ann Christensen, interview by Bethy Williams, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, 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 on May 20th, 2011, with:

ANN CHRISTENSEN

by: BETHY WILLIAMS
filmed by: KATE GEIS

GEIS: OK, whenever you're ready.

WILLIAMS: OK. This is Bethy Williams, and I'm here with Ann Christensen doing an oral history for the Alumnae Oral History Project. It's May 20th, 2011. So how did you initially choose Smith?

CHRISTENSEN: I chose Smith out of -- I only applied to three colleges. Smith, Vassar, and Sweet Briar. Sweet Briar was my safety school, and it was beautiful and interesting and half my friends went there because I grew up in Kentucky. But I chose Smith because -- well first of all, my mother went, though she did flunk out of Smith. And all my life I had heard about Smith and how special it was. And I visited all three schools, and to me there was no question in my mind that Smith was the right one. It was the largest, it seemed to offer the most, be the most exciting. I didn't see anything exciting about Vassar at the time, and Sweet Briar wasn't as good a school, as far as I was concerned.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. So given the options, why did you choose a women's college?

CHRISTENSEN: I had no other choice in those days, unless I wanted to go to a university. I never considered -- there was nothing wrong with -- everything -- everybody I know, practically, went to a women's college. I think I had one friend who went to a university. But I came out of a girl's school. I had nothing but girl school education after second grade.

WILLIAMS: And do you feel like having that girl's school education has shaped you as a person? Do you think--

CHRISTENSEN: I think it was wonderful. I was a very shy, innocent, naïve southerner. And I think that it was the best thing that could've happened to me. I think it was good for my prejudices and everything else. I was very prejudiced, brought up to believe that black people weren't as intelligent, that they didn't smell good, that -- you know -- they only worked for you. And when I got to Smith, the president of the student government was a black woman.

CHRISTENSEN: And when I got to Smith, the president of the student government was a black woman.

WILLIAMS: Wow!

CHRISTENSEN: Wow, isn't that great? I probably didn't say that then, isn't that great. I probably was just surprised. I can't remember, but I -- but it was something that hit me immediately, and uh -- so it was the beginning of my edu -- of my broader education. I'd had a good intellectual education up till then, because I went to a good girls school. But things in Louisville, Kentucky in 1952 were very narrow. Even -- we were separated by gender. There was a male high school and a female high school and the public school, and then the rest of us went to the small girl schools or the religious girl schools.

WILLIAMS: So coming to Smith was like an exposure to all sorts of diversity for you.

CHRISTENSEN: It was big, yes. It was big.

WILLIAMS: And what was that like, being a Southerner, coming from Kentucky to Smith? Was there a culture shock?

CHRISTENSEN: I don't remember it as culture shock. I do remember that having been in a small school with 20 girls in my graduating class and I was valedictorian and school was reasonably easy -- you know it was pretty easy to follow the path and get good grades -- that when I came to Smith, everybody was on the same level and I had to work harder and figure things out. It was a challenge from that standpoint, and balancing everything. You know, it was a bigger world.

WILLIAMS: Right. And since you were here in '56, there was sort of the very beginnings of the civil rights movement were happening when you were in college. Do you remember hearing about that? Like, what was that like?

CHRISTENSEN: Oh, absolutely! I remember sitting on the floor of the Haven House living room and my friend Mimi [Millard?] reading *Life* Magazine. And this was probably in '53 or '54, and op -- and throwing the magazine down, and she said "I hate your terrible South!" because she was a New Yorker and she thought she was totally liberated and understood everything, and she thought we were very backward. And of course we were very backward! I came from a place where the waiting rooms were colored and white and the water fountains were and everything. So she was right. And, you know, I understood this, and -- we had Brown vs. the Board of Education was decided I think what, '54? Well I was in college. So we were very aware of this, but I in a

CHRISTENSEN: way thought it was funny that they desegregated black and white in Kentucky before they desegregated female and male. So (laughter).

- WILLIAMS: Yeah. So was it strange being away from home for all of that?
- CHRISTENSEN: I had been to summer camp in Vermont for eight weeks every summer so -- and I had loved every minute of it -- so no. It wasn't -- it didn't seem strange to be away from home. I was ready to be away from home.
- WILLIAMS: But I mean, while you were hearing about civil rights and everything happening in the south, and you were up here at school.
- CHRISTENSEN: You know, this is the curious thing. I think I was so naïve and unaware, and I'd been totally brainwashed to believe what I believed, and I think Smith was the beginning of opening up, and it took me quite a while. It took me until I probably moved to California before I really started thinking about all of these things. I had a really easy upbringing. I didn't -- I didn't have struggles. So I didn't understand struggle very much, I don't think.
- WILLIAMS: And Smith was just the beginning for you, right?
- CHRISTENSEN: It was the beginning, yeah, it was the beginning.
- WILLIAMS: So do you think -- from your experience -- do you think Smith was an accepting place for those who might be outsiders? Like Jews, or blacks, or--
- CHRISTENSEN: I certainly did! Yes. There were lots of Jews, more than I had ever run into (laughs). And yeah, some of my best friends were Jews, and we had what, Mr. Weinstein? Was he the -- was that the name who taught government? He was one of the best -- you know, everybody thought he was the best, and Katie [Weinburger] was a really, really good friend of mine, and Renee [Brown] I roomed with for a year, and she thought it was funny 'cause my name sounded more Jewish than hers. Our parents never knew (laughs) that we had one who wasn't, and one who was.
- WILLIAMS: And was there, like, with African-American students, do you think there was sort of an unspoken segregation, or do you--?
- CHRISTENSEN: I never felt it, but we had very few African-American students, and just -- you know, knowing that they had a student government that first year -- so I didn't see any discrimination at all, but I didn't have any friends who were African-American. I was in Haven, there were no African-Americans in Haven. I don't know how many we had at that point, but not very many.
- WILLIAMS: Right. So you said you lived in Haven House. What was your House experience like? How did that influence your experience here?

CHRISTENSEN: It was wonderful! It was comfortable, and easy, and Haven was a beautiful house. I went back there this weekend, and loving it, though it's been *completely* remodeled since they took out the dining room. That was -- that's the sad part. No, we had a wonderful time. It was great! It was great being with all four houses -- well, all four classes, and I can see nothing negative about the experience. It was just -- it was a small house, basically, and so it became our family and made the rest of everything easy, being at a big place.

WILLIAMS: Right. And are you still in touch with any of those people?

CHRISTENSEN: Oh yes, very much so! I'm rooming with my junior and senior year roommates--

WILLIAMS: Oh that's great!

CHRISTENSEN: [Sally Anderson Brush?], and we actually -- they had us -- she's -- I'm class President, and she's Vice-President and reunion chair, she did that for me which was a noble effort (laughter). She's already been class president by the way, a few years ago. But they put us in Chapin because of our offices and gave us the nicest rooms, but we wanted to be in Haven because our other friends were in Haven and because it was our house, and so we went and got changed and went back to Haven house, and she gave up a huge beautiful -- I guess it was the housemother's suite -- but one of our other friends moved into it immediately when she saw what Sally was giving up with the private bathroom and the living room (laughter).

WILLIAMS: And you said you were really involved with the alumni association now, and you're class president. Why have you decided to stay so involved with Smith?

CHRISTIAN: Because my daughter was class of '91, and it was the best thing that ever happened to her. And I didn't do anything with Smith until then. She was a freshman in '87, '87-'88, and she was boy crazy. She was voted the biggest flirt in her high school class, and I knew that she had a good brain but I didn't always see that she used it. And (laughs) so she wanted to go to Princeton, and she didn't get in. She thought she was going to because they told her to go to Boise to -- for an interview, and she didn't get in. And so of the schools that she got into, she decided Smith would be the one that she would be most likely able to transfer to Princeton from. And after three months at Smith, she said I'm never going any place else, this is perfect, I love it. And it absolutely made her as a person. I mean, she may become a little too assertive, but (laughter) she -- and she taught me all about feminism that -- anything I

CHRISTENSEN: hadn't learned, she filled in all the holes. So she's -- I've been recruiting since her freshman year for Smith, and I was on the alumni admissions committee for the national alumni for what, I guess is it a

six? I don't know, I can't remember. It was three years -- I guess it was just a three year term, maybe. Whatever it was, way back, and loved it. And other than that, I really haven't -- I recruit. I still recruit, even though I think we need younger recruiters. But they aren't available. They're either raising children or they're traveling someplace out of town. And so I've just -- I've done some class stuff. I have succumbed to being class fund agent the year that she graduated because they knew that I was so indebted to Smith that I would do anything, but unfortunately I talked our -- a friend of mine whose daughter had just graduated as an [aid?] in to being my co-fund agent, so when she asked me to be class president after she finished being class president after the 50th, I had to say yes (laughter).

WILLIAMS: That roped you into it!

CHRISTENSEN: That's how those things happen a lot, yes.

WILLIAMS: So what was it like to have all these conversations with your daughter about Smith and about feminism?

CHRISTENSEN: You know, I think having my daughter go to Smith was one of those very special blessings that mothers get occasionally. It's been wonderful, because we share so much in common that way, in fact we're both upset by the way the split the reunion weekend. So -- cause we reunion on the same five years. So they messed us up this year! Yeah, it's been marvelous. It helps us to have a lot in common. We have a lot in common in many ways anyway, but it's just one more special thing. I feel very blessed. Now my older daughter I also tried to get to go to Smith, and I left her in her room filling out the application, and when April came, I said why haven't you heard from Smith? And she said "Oh Mom, I never sent that thing in." (laughter) She wanted to go to a co-ed school.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Who have you become since Smith?

CHRISTENSEN: Oh boy. I have become -- well, I started out in a very conservative republican household in the south. I am now in a very radical, democratic household in the west (laughs). It's totally different! I am an activist, I am an active environmentalist, and I work mainly as an environmentalist but I do some social justice stuff, so I'm trying to save salmon and wolves and I'm on the board of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and have done a lot of stuff like that.

WILLIAMS: Wow!

CHRISTENSEN: And I love every minute of it (laughs).

WILLIAMS: Was that kind of hard for your family to see the switch happening?

CHRISTENSEN: You know, I think by the time I became really noisy and active, my mother probably was dead, and my father had Alzheimer's. So I do remember the last -- trying to tell him that giving money to Green Peace *and* to Jesse Helms at the same time didn't make sense, but I was his legal (laughs) -- legal caretaker, or whatever. I had his power of attorney. And so I saw what he was doing and it didn't make sense, because he -- he was an environmentalist. He helped me learn to love nature. I was the oldest of three girls and we were all supposed to be boys, so I had to learn to fish and hunt and all that stuff in the beginning. And he did take us out into swamps, and beat down the bushes and the snakes in the Florida swamps so the girls could go to the bathroom safely, and things like that. So he had his good side, but he was very narrow, politically and philosophically. So they -- all my friends who stayed back in Kentucky, except one, have remained exactly where we all were when we were growing up. It was the fashionable way to be, and we were. And most of us who left town -- at least those who went north -- have radicalized.

WILLIAMS: So what do you think the typical Smithie is like now?

CHRISTENSEN: I don't know that there is a typical Smithie. I think it's very varied, from what I've seen. I think they're very intelligent, I think they're interested in making the world a better place and in getting out of their small environments. At least this is what I see. The ones that I recruit from Idaho want to go on and do something big, they want to make a difference. They want to experience more than a small town in the mountains of Idaho, for one thing, and I recruited my grand-niece from Red Lodge, Montana some years ago, and she's doing -- she's at the University of Michigan Law School now doing wonderful work with very poor -- probably mostly black -- people in the ghetto of Ann Arbor? I don't know if Ann Arbor has a ghetto. But I know she's doing that work. And my daughter, when she went to law school, did that work down in Palo Alto when she was at Stanford Law School. So I see that from those two who -- the ones I know the most closely -- others, you know [I have no one?]. Just trying to think of all the different ones that I've known. They're all doing different things, but they're all out there and they're not sitting in some valley having children.

WILLIAMS: Right.

CHRISTENSEN: And being married (laughs).

WILLIAMS: And as a woman in the 1950's, wasn't that sort of the expectation?

CHRISTENSEN: It was expected, that's why we went to college (laughs), was to find a husband, as far as I knew.

- WILLIAMS: But at Smith, that wasn't the expectation. Would you say that?
- CHRISTENSEN: I would -- it was still the expectation. It was the expectation, absolutely. I mean, I was an old maid because I didn't get married till 26. I worked for four years afterwards, and nobody thought I would do that, so.
- WILLIAMS: So you were kind of being a little rebellious, maybe.
- CHRISTENSEN: Yeah, both my younger sisters were married. I wasn't being rebellious, it was just -- I didn't find a husband! I think if I had found a husband, I probably would've gotten married but--
- WILLIAMS: You were being yourself (laughs).
- CHRISTENSEN: Yeah, I was just doing -- I had to be doing something. I didn't want to go back to Louisville, I wanted to go find something to do, interesting.
- WILLIAMS: Right. So looking back, would you come to Smith again?
- CHRISTENSEN: Absolutely.
- WILLIAMS: Absolutely. And what -- if you had to sum it up -- what would you say - - what difference has a Smith education made for you?
- CHRISTENSEN: A Smith education has given me self confidence, it's made me know that I can tackle most anything I want to tackle. Go any place I want to go, talk to anybody I want to talk to, and given me life long wonderful friends.
- WILLIAMS: So it's sort of a final question, I guess. Do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?
- CHRISTENSEN: Take advantage of this place as much as you can. Do it all. Just go for it, and do it, and know that it'll all be good. Yeah.
- WILLIAMS: Yeah.
- CHRISTENSEN: And take -- I guess it's Art 100 now -- it was Art 101 when I was here. The history of art class -- I thought that was one of the most important classes that I took.
- WILLIAMS: Everyone talks about this class! (laughter)
- GEIS: That's the second time we've heard that!
- CHRISTENSEN: Is it? OK.
- WILLIAMS: Can you tell us about that class a little bit?

CHRISTENSEN: Well it just exposed you -- unfortunately in those days, it was mainly European and American art, but now I think it's world, probably. There's more Asian and African art. I just think that it helps to broaden your experience when you travel! You -- you're more likely to appreciate, or to find museums in those -- all parts of the world, and understand the cultures maybe a little bit better.

WILLIAMS: So it gives you sort of a world view?

CHRISTENSEN: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Do you think that was true of other Smith classes you took that -- it had the sort of global outlook on things?

CHRISTENSEN: Yeah, and I didn't take some that I wish I had. I wish I had taken -- I think it was Miss Carter -- who taught a course on Africa, and you know, Africa was really happening and things were changing, and I'm sorry I didn't take that class. I did take a seminar from her, but that was on Renaissance and Reformation which was fasc -- I love that part of history, so that was fun. Whether the other things were global? Well certainly, my history wasn't global because it was European and American, basically. We didn't -- I had to take ancient history, but I didn't take anything in Latin America or Africa or Asian. So I think that's a loss. But I think that's much, much better now than it was.

WILLIAMS: Definitely.

CHRISTENSEN: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Do you have anything else you want to add?

GEIS: No, I think you did good!

WILLIAMS: OK.

GEIS: Thank you, that was great!

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Rachel Schein, July 2011.