

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Nancy Davis, Class of 1982

Interviewed by
Kayla Ginsburg, Class of 2013

May 25, 2012

Abstract

In this oral history, Nancy Davis describes falling in love with Smith and the importance of house community to her experience. She talks about racial dynamics on campus, her participation in the Bridge program, student activism, feminism, the changes she has seen at Smith, and her experience as a class officer for her reunion.

Restrictions

None.

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kayla Ginsburg.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Davis, Nancy. Interview by Kayla Ginsburg. Video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Nancy Davis, interview by Kayla Ginsburg, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Davis, Nancy. Interview by Kayla Ginsburg. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Nancy Davis, interview by Kayla Ginsburg, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2012, with:

NANCY DAVIS

by: KAYLA GINSBURG
filmed by: REBECCA RIDEOUT

GINSBURG: My name is Kayla Ginsburg. I'm sitting here with Nancy Davis O'Hara, Class of 1982 on May 25th, 2012 for the Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you so much for being a part of this.

DAVIS: You're welcome.

GINSBURG: So just to start out, how did you come to Smith? How did you choose it?

DAVIS: Smith actually chose me. So I would have started in 1978, and the year before we took our SAT's and then got notices from various colleges, Smith was one that sent me a letter and invited me to come up to a weekend and stay with a senior and I think of the handful of colleges I had applied to, Smith was the only one that had invited me to come up. So anyway, I came up, stayed with a senior, really fell in love with it and then made my application, got accepted and here I -- or there I was. Yeah.

GINSBURG: Yeah, so how did you feel about the women's college aspect?

DAVIS: You know, I didn't really even give it any thought. I went to a public coed high school, and I think at the time I was looking at just the college and the reputation. I didn't really think single-sex, coed, one way or the other.

GINSBURG: So what else did you live in while you were here?

DAVIS: Lamont my first year. Gillette sophomore and junior years, and then I was the head resident of Haven senior year.

GINSBURG: Okay, okay. So was house community an important part of your Smith career?

DAVIS: Absolutely, and I sort of always brag to people about the freshman house I had, Lamont, we had 81 people in the house and 40 of those were freshmen.

GINSBURG: Whoa.

DAVIS: So -- because will say now, oh, you know a lot of people. I say well, I started in a house with 40 freshmen, so I knew a good number of my classmates. And you figure with 40 people you know, you know one or two of their friends, and so over the years, you know, it just picks up. But I love the house setting, dinner in every house, and then when I found that they got rid of the dining in every house, I said well, the people here now, that's going to be their experience. I can't impart my experience on them, but I enjoyed it while I was here.

GINSBURG: Right, right. So what would you say the typical Smithie was while you were here and if you kind of fell into that or diverged from that?

DAVIS: I'd say completely diverged. You know, sort of everything I thought of when I came to Smith as far as who the typical Smithie was, generally white Anglo-Saxon, blonde hair from Connecticut wearing fair aisle sweaters, and you know, having a lot of money. And so I just really didn't fit that mold at all.

GINSBURG: Right.

DAVIS: And I had some friends who were of that persuasion and I had some other friends. So I mean -- I think what happened with us is that we -- you know, we did tend to be a very open class, and in the dorms or houses I lived in, we had a chance to talk to people probably more than a lot of houses and we got air cleared about issues we -- or I should -- not so much issues, but maybe misconceptions we might have had about someone of that persuasion may have had about African Americans and vice versa, so I think things worked out just fine. But I didn't think I was -- still don't think I was the typical Smithie.

GINSBURG: So you guys were having conversations about race on campus?

DAVIS: Back then, yes.

GINSBURG: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

DAVIS: I came to Smith too on the Bridge program. I don't know if you're aware -
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GINSBURG: We still have that.

DAVIS: -- still have that and that was a program started in -- I believe it was 1970 and originally started for African-American students, and now I understand it's for all --

GINSBURG: All students of color.

DAVIS: -- all students of color. So, I came on that program and it was a nice opportunity to get to know who my other classmates were going to be in some of them are here at reunion now, some African-American classmates. I came from a pretty mixed area, so I didn't really have a sense of what the issue was with race. I mean, I didn't grow up in an area where race at least was an obvious issue, and some of my colleagues who would come up to bridge also were from areas where they were not in integrated situations with whites or others and then there were certainly whites on campus who had no experience with people of color other than maybe in a role as a servant at the house or something. So initially I think it was a shock for us in Bridge to see this might be what we are facing and so I think again, Bridge -- the idea of Bridge was to kind of give us a support system for each other and that worked out fine. At least for me, because again, I didn't come from a background where this was a big deal, so I don't think I had any particular problem getting along, integrating with the rest of the school.

GINSBURG: How did you feel like women of color on campus at the time, were they -- were you guys visible or did you feel marginalized or what was -- did you feel like you left a big mark on campus? What was your kind of experience with that?

DAVIS: Our class -- I'm trying to think of the number in our class of '82. We were -- we were a good-sized class of women of color. I think the -- I want to say the class of '80 was larger than our class and I think honestly some of those prior classes had smoothed a lot of the way for us. By the time we got here, I mean we were still having issues of race and racism, which I think are still going on today on campus, but I think it was a lot better for us than it was for the class even two years, three years, five years -- certainly ten years earlier.

GINSBURG: So can you describe the campus atmosphere in general while you were at Smith?

DAVIS: In any particular context like --

GINSBURG: Just what you noticed about it, what you liked about it, what you didn't like about it?

DAVIS: You know, honestly I can't -- I can't think of anything I did not like. Probably -- and this is -- it has nothing to do with the campus or anything, but probably the biggest dislike I had was the distance between my house and the science center because I was a science major, and you know, schlepping across there in the winter time but -- I -- I don't -- I can't really say anything that I did not like. One thing -- or several things I did like were, you know, again the house atmosphere, having lunch at home every day, having dinner at home every day with our housemates, because I

think a lot of strong bonds -- at least with me and other people were formed in the house situation.

GINSBURG: And what are some -- what are some of your favorite Smith traditions?

DAVIS: Tea. Tea and cookies on Friday. Candlelight dinner on Thursday, it was okay. It was no big deal to me. I know some people when they're talking about it it's like a favorite memory. It doesn't stick out tremendously in my mind. I look back though sometimes and say, I maybe should have taken more advantage of it to invite professors over for Thursday night dinner or do something, but I think tea -- tea would probably be my favorite.

GINSBURG: And you came to Smith kind of right at the time that feminism was really exploding and how -- was there a conversation on campus about feminism? Did you identify as a feminist earlier at Smith?

DAVIS: Yeah, and I remember the -- the big movement -- it somewhat divided the campus because there were a lot of people who identified the feminist movement with lesbianism and said, "Well, you know, I'm not a feminist and that's just for lesbians," and dah -- and I remember trying to explain to people -- and I mean, I said, I don't know everything about everything, but, I said it's -- it's not about any particular sexual orientation. At least in my mind, it was about women's rights, and I think I could speak more as a person of color coming from what we had fought for to get African-Americans rights, and looking at women, I just kind of saw as an extension of that and sort of -- African-American, whether you were gay in the African-American community or not, you are still African-American and these rights apply to you. So yeah, that's -- that's the one thing that stuck out with me.

GINSBURG: Do you think the campus was particularly homophobic at this time?

DAVIS: I think like anything there were probably pockets of homophobia because I would hear people make comments about -- oh, this is -- this is an unnatural school because there are no men, or so and so is a lesbian -- whether they knew if the person was or not -- I think there was still -- there was still a perception that -- I don't know if they say all women who came to Smith were lesbians but there were -- there were definitely pockets and I'd say those pockets who were homophobic were probably -- you know, anti-black, anti-Jewish, anti-everything, so --

GINSBURG: Right.

DAVIS: Yeah.

GINSBURG: So do you feel -- how accepting do you feel the campus was in general at this time?

DAVIS: On a scale of what? Maybe zero to ten?

GINSBURG: Sure.

DAVIS: 10 being -- ?

GINSBURG: The most accepting.

DAVIS: -- most accepting? I'd probably say somewhere between a four and a five.

GINSBURG: Okay. And was there a lot of student activism going on at this time?

DAVIS: Yeah. There was and in particular I'm remembering the push to get the colleges to divest from South Africa at the time. That was probably the biggest issue I remember because we had several sit ins here and at UMass, Smith finally divested. I don't know if they divested 100 percent at that time, but made a big push for it. But that was one thing -- one big thing that was going on at our time.

GINSBURG: And were there any clubs or organizations that you were specifically a part of?

DAVIS: Black Student Alliance.

GINSBURG: Okay.

DAVIS: Yeah, there was a -- I think there was a minority student alliance. I don't think I was involved in that here at Smith. I'm mixing up here with law school. I was with the Minority Student Alliance there, but I don't know if I was here, but Black Student Alliance.

GINSBURG: Great. So where did you go to law school?

DAVIS: New England School of Law in Boston.

GINSBURG: Okay, cool. And how did you -- when you left Smith, I guess what were the expectations for you from your family, from the world, as a woman, as a woman of color?

DAVIS: Well, I would say more the expectation was probably from my family, because my parents are both PhD's and I -- you know, they sort of expected -- never said you have to, you must or anything, but it was sort of implied he will go on for further education. I did go on -- I was a geology major here at Smith and went on and got a master's degree in geology. I didn't go to law school until much later. I was 35 when I went to law school, so I worked for many years as an environmental engineer before law school.

GINSBURG: So how did you feel like the Smith education affected your life once you graduated?

DAVIS: In -- in a kind of surprising way. I always kind of fall back on this feeling I had when I got out of Smith and would go places, whether it was to interview or to meet people, and people would say (cough), excuse me, "Where did you go to school?" And I'd say -- as soon as I would say, "Smith College," I'd say that was almost the end of the inquiry about, you know, your capabilities, your qualifications as a -- people -- I would say, made assumptions, and I said and I never tried to dispel them, they'd assume you're rich or you're very smart or that -- and it just seem to open doors that -- again and people would just make automatic assumptions that you were qualified for whatever it was you were there for because you said you went to Smith College.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm.

DAVIS: And I'd say, okay.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm. So you were a geology major and were there any specific professors or mentors that you really connected to that influenced you?

DAVIS: My advisor at the time was Bob Newton and he -- he did influence me to go onto grad school. When we were coming along, the oil industry was kind of the big market for people who majored in geology and by the time I graduated, that market had kind of dried up and they were going more into environmental -- environmental studies -- environmental engineering maybe. I did a lot of groundwater work with Bob, groundwater chemistry, groundwater flow work and that's what the environmental engineers were doing, so again, you know, he gave me encouragement to go on, get my Master's degree and get -- pursue the field.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm. And how have you, I guess, stayed in contact with Smith since you've left. Are there friends that you're still in contact with or --

DAVIS: Friends, I came to my first reunion was my 20th reunion. Don't ask me what year it was -- well, ten years ago. It must have been 2002, and came to the 25th. And at the 25th I signed up to be one of the class officers. I'm co-secretary with one of my other colleagues and that keeps me very involved and I try to come back every couple of years when they are offering a program. One was Smith women in the practice of law. One was having to do with -- oh, and maybe it was a business model. I think they had three different sessions on -- maybe that was a couple of years ago, but you know, basically just trying to stay involved with the class.

GINSBURG: And I think that Jill Ker Conway was your president while you were here, right?

DAVIS: She was.

GINSBURG: And was there still sort of an excitement about the fact that she was the first female president?

DAVIS: At our time?

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm.

DAVIS: You know -- it's funny because she's speaking at our dinner tonight, and we've all kind of commented that we didn't fully appreciate who she was and what she was doing when she was here with us. We knew there was something magical and mystical about it, but we couldn't quite put our finger on it, until -- you know, ten years later, 20 years later, you get out, you work in the field and you see what it was like or what it might have been like for her breaking new ground as the first woman president. So I think while there was an excitement, to answer the question, it probably wasn't really focused -- we were excited, but we really didn't know why, and now -- you know 30 years later, we're saying this is why -- you know it was such an important time and such an important breakthrough.

GINSBURG: And were there discussions while you were on campus about Smith going co-ed?

DAVIS: I remember a few discussions, I don't think they ever took off in any serious direction. In fact one of the last discussions I remember was we're not going co-ed. That was just -- that was the end of the discussion.

GINSBURG: And do you feel like the woman's college aspect is important to Smith and how do you feel about coming here having gone to a woman's college?

DAVIS: I would do it again. I left Smith and I went to Boston College for grad school and then went to New England School of Law, both co-ed schools and Boston College being a big -- I call it kind of a big loud football beer-drinking co-ed school, and I remember when I was there and thinking, I'm glad I went to Smith undergrad, because I said I think I would have gotten lost in all of this hoop-la -- I mean it was just -- it was really just, I thought, a man's world there, and I just -- I just remember always thinking how glad I was I was at Smith and I would still say I would do Smith again, given the chance.

GINSBURG: So tell me a little bit about what you've been doing since leaving Smith? What kind of law do you practice? Where do you live now?

DAVIS: I -- I would say I left Smith in '82, went to Boston College and got my Master's degree. Again, majored in geology here, got my Master's degree in geology. Worked for a couple -- worked for the US government, worked for a private firm in environmental engineering where we were

cleaning up hazardous waste sites, worked -- basically worked in the environmental engineering firm until 1995. That's when I started law school. Finished law school in '98, got married in '98, moved to Rhode Island in '98. That's where my husband was, and that's where I am now, practicing in Cranston, Rhode Island. Primarily I do real estate law and mostly residential real estate, title exams, closings, and I've been saying to some people unfortunately right now a lot of landlord tenant work, a lot of eviction work. That's a very big part of my practice now.

GINSBURG: Right, right, of course. Of course. So do you have any I guess advice for the current and future Smithie?

DAVIS: (laughter) I'm laughing because one of the students who is helping our class with the reunion said, you know, she wanted to come up and see if she could get some advice about, you know, what to do after college. And I thought about it and I said, wow, it's so different -- 30 years later, and I -- you know, I gave her some suggestions, but I said, you know, you may want to talk to somebody who is like five years out because I said, we came out at such a different time, you know, and the things we were told to do might not apply. In fact, one thing I'm hearing now is companies -- a lot of companies rarely even look at the hard copy resumes.

GINSBURG: Right.

DAVIS: And that's what we did -- you know, when we came out. You know, have your resume ready, have it professionally done, blah, blah, blah and a lot of us still do. We still have a resume ready, but they're saying, no, these companies want to see what -- your Facebook and this, that and the other and they're literally not looking at resumes. So for me to tell someone now go get your resume, I mean it may make no sense, just like them telling me to do Facebook. I don't do Facebook. You know what I mean? We're just -- so I say, you might want to talk to somebody who is out, say five years, ten years, who has got their finger a little bit more on the pulse of what's really going on. But I guess as a general comment I'd say take advantage of the fact that you went to Smith and, you know, make sure you let people know. Because I think Smith -- the name Smith still carries a lot of weight out there.

GINSBURG: And just to go back to kind of your experiences at Smith while you were here, did you go abroad at all or --

DAVIS: I did not.

GINSBURG: Okay, okay.

DAVIS: And I didn't do junior -- I did all four years here.

GINSBURG: And what influence -- did you just -- were you not interested or?

DAVIS: You know, I -- it just didn't occur to me. I did have some friends who went away and I guess I thought more of the junior year abroad program for people who were doing foreign languages or more esoteric studies, but I had friends who were geology majors who didn't even go that far. You know, one went to -- I think she went to Wesleyan for her junior year. But I liked Smith, so I said well, you know -- I think again I wasn't really focused on it, so I just didn't give it much thought to go away.

GINSBURG: And what was your social life like when you were here?

DAVIS: In --

GINSBURG: Like you know, with your friends, what did you do, did you go to the -- visit the Five College option or --

DAVIS: I didn't -- I wasn't a -- you know, one of these people running to keg parties every weekend. You know, it's funny, looking back same -- what did we do? I think we had hung around the dorm a lot, even on weekends. You know, you might go away. One year -- I can't remember what year it was. One year I was dating somebody, so I was spending time with him, and that was between here and -- here and Boston. But for the most part I was -- I think we just hung around campus. And the crowd I hung out with wasn't a big drinking crowd. You know, I just don't remember anything other than kind of sitting around listening to music, just kind of hanging out.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm. So I don't know if you have any questions or --

RIDEOUT: I don't. I like your question of why she came to Alumnae Weekend. We could wrap up on that. Other than that, I think it's been great.

GINSBURG: Yeah, why did you choose to come to reunion this weekend particularly?

DAVIS: I'm a class officer, so I had to.

GINSBURG: Oh, that's right. (laughter) You organized it!

DAVIS: No, I was laughing when somebody was saying, you know, our classmates -- or some of my other officers were feeling like, you know, people weren't very enthusiastic. We've -- out of 700 people in the class and I think we got about 130 or so to come back. Which in the scheme of things is good number, and I said, but you have to remember, you know, we're the officers. We're excited kind of 'cause we have to -- we may sort of be, but we have to be, you know. Not everybody is looking at this as, you know, the be all, end all. Plus people who live far away -- I'm from Rhode Island. A lot of the people are from right around here, so it's a lot easier to kind of mobilize and say yes, I'm going up for a weekend, as opposed to I'm out in California or Oregon or somewhere. Yeah.

- GINSBURG: And I don't know if you have a sense of this, but do you -- how do you think Smith has changed since you graduated?
- DAVIS: Well some of the -- some of the obvious aspects would be the physical campus. The student -- I don't know what you call it now --
- GINSBURG: Campus Center?
- DAVIS: -- Campus Center where it used to be Davis and now it's the kind of fancy metal and --
- GINSBURG: Glass.
- DAVIS: -- structure, glass. That's very different. A lot of other new buildings up. So on that physical and. A lot of rehab to existing houses. I know they have done an awful lot of work in Gillette. They put elevators in some of the buildings. They've consolidated some of the dining. So those are sort of some of the obvious physical things, but I think also one of the -- well, I think it's obvious to me to I've noticed, I think over the years Smith has been making a much greater push for diversity and to get a diverse student body in and -- it's evident on campus. Now, coming back and seen, there are just a whole lot more different faces on campus.
- GINSBURG: Do you think that the school has done a good job in attracting and supporting those students or --
- DAVIS: I would say attracting and getting -- I can't really speak to support, because I'm not sure what retention rates have been or financial package offerings have been, but at least the times I've been up here, and again immediately two, three days max at a time, it appears to be just a much more diverse campus.
- GINSBURG: So do you have any last stories that you really want to, you know, have on record about your time here at Smith, or how Smith has affected your life?
- DAVIS: No, I think just -- again, to reiterate, I would absolutely do it again. I think if I did do it again, or could do it again, I think one regret -- or a couple of regrets I take with me from the time I was here that I didn't take full advantage of a lot that Smith had to offer in terms of the courses, or delving into a senior project or a senior thesis and thinking back to my advisor in geology who told me to do a senior thesis and I -- I was a head resident at the time, and I was just afraid, I was afraid I couldn't take it on, I didn't feel like I could do it, dah, dah, dah. So long, in short, I wish I had taken more advantage of what there was to be had here academically. That's -- and one of the things I always think of is as taking art history, 101 -- I probably would have had a miserable time trying to memorize all that, but that's the kind of thing I wish I had been able to branch out a little bit more, because I stayed pretty strictly geology, chemistry. Geology,

chemistry, math and, you know, a few side classes here and there but there -- Smith just had so much more to offer and it looks like now they have even more to offer.

GINSBURG: Yeah, it's overwhelming.

DAVIS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, but I think in a good way.

GINSBURG: Do you feel like Smith supported women in science while you were there?

DAVIS: I think to the extent that they could, kind of as I'd say with the technology they had at the time.

GINSBURG: Right.

DAVIS: I think we were as well off as any other science department at any school. It's just been amazing to me over the last 20 years to see where the school has come with developing an engineering program and the new buildings that have been put up and in support of the whole environmental and energy and what you are doing to buildings for energy efficiency, it's just - - it's just amazing, and so I think Smith keeps up -- or makes an attempt, and it looks like a pretty successful attempt to keep up with the changing teachings of science.

GINSBURG: Okay, well, thank you so much.

DAVIS: You're welcome. Well, thank you two both. I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.