

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Deborah Davis, Class of 1976*

Interviewed by  
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

May 13, 2016

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Deborah Davis remembers finding community at Smith, both in Lawrence House and beyond. She also talks about how she came to double major in Molecular Biology and English, while still having time to found the Smith Prank Committee.

## **Restriction**

None.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Davis, Deborah. Interview by Millie Cook. Video recording, May 13, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Deborah Davis, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Davis, Deborah. Interview by Millie Cook. Transcript of video recording, May 13 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Deborah Davis, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Alumnae Oral History Project  
Sophia Smith Collection  
Smith College  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 13, 2016, with:

DEBBIE DAVIS  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: MILLIE COOK

COOK: It's recording, it could be ready.

DAVIS: Great.

COOK: So this is Millie Cook, and I am conducting an interview with Debbie Davis on — wait, what's today's date?

DAVIS: May 13th.

GEIS: The 16th.

COOK: Thirteenth, May 13th, 2016, for the Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you for coming and agreeing to this.

DAVIS: You're welcome.

COOK: So what's been your favorite thing about reunion so far, just coming for it?

DAVIS: Just reconnecting with friends that I knew before, and meeting new, interesting people that I never knew when I was a student on campus.

COOK: That's great. So what brought you to Smith? Why did you —

DAVIS: Money.

COOK: Money?

DAVIS: To be frank. I mean, it was a great reputation of a school, my mother grew up in Holyoke and knew about Smith. But I was pretty poor growing up, and Smith provided the best financial package. To be frank with you, that's the reason why I came.

COOK: Hmm. Very great. So did you — did it being a women's college change anything about your decision to come here? Or was it just the —

DAVIS: Both. I would say the quality of the education, whether it was a woman's college or not didn't matter. It was a fine school.

COOK: Mm-hmm.

DAVIS: Women's college was not a factor, but primarily it was just the quality of the education.

COOK: OK. So what did you major in when you were here?

DAVIS: I double majored in Molecular Biology and in English.

COOK: Wow. And why did you choose those two?

DAVIS: I'm a schizophrenic — no, I don't — well, I have pretty much science brain, but the English department was very strong at the time. And I was — took one English course and fell in love with the professor and decided to stay in that field as well. And it's been a nice contrast to the science element of my brain, I guess I would say.

COOK: Mm-hmm.

DAVIS: So it was good.

COOK: Yeah. And you were talking earlier about houses. What house did you live in here?

DAVIS: I was in Lawrence House on Green Street.

COOK: Yeah. What was that like when you were here?

DAVIS: Oh, good. Fun, all different types of women there. And just a great, great time. I stayed all four years because of the proximity to the Science Centers. And I was running experiments all different times at night, so it was easier for me to just run back and forth.

COOK: Yeah. And were you part of the community of Lawrence House?

DAVIS: Part of the what?

COOK: Part of the community?

DAVIS: Oh I think so.

COOK: Yeah?

DAVIS: Yeah. I mean, you mean in our little microcosm of Lawrence House?

COOK: Yeah.

DAVIS: Oh yes, in many ways.

COOK: Yeah?

DAVIS: Yeah. I was the big prankster. I was pretty — I led my fellow Lawrence students to some pranks along the campus way.

COOK: Yeah?

DAVIS: Yeah. Am I supposed to say anything more? I can disclose it now, 40 years later. No, we — I'm the proud founder of the Smith Prank Committee, which I think a lot of the Lawrence House women were in then. And we didn't let the college know who we were until graduation, but we did a lot of bad things — I would say, I guess bad is a wrong word choice, but a lot of fun things during our time here. A lot of them were Lawrence students with me that—

COOK: Yeah?

DAVIS: Yeah.

COOK: What did you do with bad pranks?

DAVIS: Bad things. Not bad. Well I would say — you guys don't have it anymore, but some of the things was, there used to be white cement balls, or whatever, that lined all the driveways. And we would, around Easter time, we would spray paint them with different kinds of Easter eggs. And we would take a mess of them up off, out of the ground, and you know where that owl or eagle or whatever that bird is over by Wright Hall—

COOK: Yeah?

DAVIS: —we put a clutch of them together and made it look like it were his eggs. (laughter) One was a really — we organized a few lectures with sham speakers that had a double entendre to them at the time, and, ooh, a variety of other things that the campus was decorated by our bad doings, let's just leave it like that.

COOK: (laughs) That's great!

DAVIS: It was a stress reliever at the time. It was pretty fun. And then when we graduated, on our mortar boards, we put SPC, so that students — so that other people could finally figure out who we were. But it was pretty bad back then, fun, back there in the '70s.

COOK: Yeah.

DAVIS: Mm-hmm.

COOK: Do you have any favorite Smith traditions?

DAVIS: I would say honestly, for me as a relatively underprivileged kid coming up, the candlelight dinners with tablecloths, linen napkins, that was something that I wasn't exposed to in my upbringing. And being able to have the faculty over, that was probably one of my favorite things. Tea was nice. I mean, obviously everybody, (unclear) and all that kind of stuff. But I would say some of those other kind of subtle nuances of class, I really appreciated and was happy to be exposed to.

COOK: Yeah.

DAVIS: Yeah.

COOK: Was there anyone who was very important to your Smith experience?

DAVIS: Absolutely. Pat Skarda, the professor of English who just recently passed away. In fact, I spoke at her eulogy and delivered her eulogy a year or so ago. Tremendous support to me, and also just really opened my eyes to a lot of ways of thinking, critical reasoning, stuff like that that has served me quite well over my career, I would say.

COOK: Yeah. Did you have any other mentors that you looked up to during your time?

DAVIS: Mrs. Olivo in the Sciences, various — I would say those are the key points. And then I, you know, the dean helped me a great deal, and those kinds of people were very supportive to me along the way.

COOK: Did you still have house mothers and house (unclear)?

DAVIS: Our first year. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

COOK: And how did you feel about that?

DAVIS: It was all right. I mean, we — I think we probably gave that lady a heart attack a few times.

COOK: Especially you being on the Prank Committee.

DAVIS: But we were really close to them, they took care of us. It was a nice transition for some of us who missed our mothers or what have you, so that was good. We just felt we had little old hens taking care of us.

(laughter) And the dining women, you know, they would make, back in those days, there were certain women who had certain special things that they liked, and they would cook them specialty things, and the dinners and stuff. And it was—

COOK: Yeah.

DAVIS: —very individualized care for us in Lawrence House, I'll say.

COOK: That's nice.

DAVIS: Yeah.

COOK: What were the students concerned about at the time, like, political issues that were going on?

DAVIS: Oh well, Jesus, it's the '70s.

COOK: Yeah.

DAVIS: Early '70s, everything. You know, that was the time when Billie Jean King won the tennis match against Bobby Riggs, so we were going crazy with that. Watergate was occurring. In fact, one of my house mates was — her dad was involved in that, and we learned a lot about that. You know, Martin Luther King's daughter was in our class. I learned a lot talking to her. So there was a lot of issues with civil rights, and women's equalities, and we were just getting the right to vote. There was some racial stuff on the campus, which we worked through in some ways. And those were the primary issues.

COOK: Were you ever personally involved in any of this?

DAVIS: I was in some ways, as a mediator and trying to help some of the race stuff. We — turned out where I grew up was where I was one of the few white kids in a black neighborhood outside Philly, and part of my growth experience was interacting with — it was kind of like the first kind of discrimination stuff. So I kind of saw stuff from both sides. And hopefully was able to mediate some of that and help in that regard.

COOK: Do you feel like you made the most of your time at Smith?

DAVIS: I don't know. Retrospectively as an alumni, I will say to myself, Geez, I should have done this or that. But I tried to maximize it. I was on financial aid, so I was also pretty involved with, with one of the five college bus drivers. And so some of the things that some of my classmates, junior year broad, and other opportunities I just couldn't take advantage of given my financial circumstance. But in terms of the education, I took a lot of stuff. I used to study in the — I never would

study with any of the science jocks. I would either go over to the music library or somewhere else and just hang with women that weren't all stressed out about their GPA and their physics class, or this, that and the other. So—

COOK: Yeah.

DAVIS: —I kind of got exposed to a different type of student body, and that was good for me.

COOK: Yeah. So what did you do after graduation?

DAVIS: Went to medical school.

COOK: What medical school did you go to?

DAVIS: Well I went to Hahnemann University in Philadelphia, and did most of my training at the University of Penn, and went into pediatric cardiac surgical work with — taking care of kids with heart disease.

COOK: Wow.

DAVIS: So that's what I did. That's what I still do.

COOK: Wow.

DAVIS: Yeah.

COOK: And what has your life been since you left Smith?

DAVIS: That's open-ended, isn't it? Wild. I wouldn't say wild. Rich, busy, fulfilling.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

DAVIS: Interesting. I don't know where to go, I mean, it's just been chock full of stuff you never thought was going to happen.

COOK: Yeah.

DAVIS: But happened.

COOK: Do you think being one of the Smith women has prepared you for—

DAVIS: Absolutely.

COOK: —everything that—



DAVIS: No doubt about it.

COOK: Yeah.

DAVIS: Particularly for me in medicine. Back then I think there was 17 percent women in medical school, 13 or 17 percent. And I was the first woman president of a medical school class, which people were blown away by, but I said, you know, I came from a circumstance, you know, a women's college where somebody was the president, or somebody was the treasurer. You know, we didn't know from — that women just shouldn't be doing that, or what have you. So I just assumed that was no big deal when I went to med school and became the president. But for some, they thought that was a big deal. So Smith definitely prepared me.

COOK: Yeah. And do you have advice for any Smithies that are going out into the world?

DAVIS: Oh gosh, what can you say? Just rely on the close friendships that you've made here. They're going to be the ones that support you throughout the rest of your life. I mean, it's — my daughter's the class of 2006, and she's got lots of friends that she's met along the way. But she said to me once the last — a couple of years ago, "Why is it, mom, when every time I pick up a phone to my Smithies, I feel like I've never left the campus and we can pick up right after we started, like we never separated?" And I said, "That's what Smith does." And you just make incredible supportive friendships that never leave you.

COOK: Mm-hmm. Great. Well thank you so much for—

DAVIS: You're quite welcome.

COOK: —all of this.

DAVIS: All rightie.

GEIS: Thank you.

DAVIS: All right, then, so then you'll send —

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Sheila Elliott, June, 2016.*