

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Jo Deutsch, Class of 1982*

Interviewed by  
Kayla Ginsburg, Class of 2013

May 25, 2012

## **Abstract**

In this oral history Jo Deutsch discusses her house community in Baldwin House, the Northampton feminist and lesbian communities, President Conway, and her first relationship with a woman at the end of her senior year. She touches upon her work as a lobbyist for 27 years and her current position at Freedom to Marry.

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

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Deutsch, Jo. Interview by Kayla Ginsburg. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jo Deutsch, 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:

JO DEUTSCH

by: KAYLA GINSBURG  
filmed by: REBECCA RIDEOUT

GINSBURG: Okay, my name is Kayla Ginsburg. Your name is Nancy Deutsch.

DEUTSCH: Yep.

GINSBURG: We are here --

DEUTSCH: Jo.

GINSBURG: Oh my god. I am so sorry, Jo.

DEUTSCH: There is a Nancy Deutsch though.

GINSBURG: Is that -- okay? We were just talking about Nancy Davis who was, I guess Nancy Reagan before she was Nancy Reagan, so that's what it was. So anyway -- Jo Deutsch. Thank you so much.

DEUTSCH: You're welcome.

GINSBURG: On May 25th, 2012 --

DEUTSCH: Okay.

GINSBURG: -- for the Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for being part of this. So just to begin, how did you come to Smith? How did you find out about it? Why did you choose to come here?

DEUTSCH: So, I got the Smith College Book Award my junior year in high school. I am from Miami, Florida. That was my first introduction to Smith College and so when it came time to apply, I applied. I got accepted to a bunch of different schools. Came up for a walk-through with my father, had seen one college beforehand, and then walked onto Smith's campus and turned to my dad and said, let's cancel the rest of the trip. I knew instantly that this was going to be home. And he thought I was crazy and I said no, really, this is it. And we actually canceled the rest of the trip and I ended up coming to Smith as a result.

GINSBURG: And what house did you live in?

DEUTSCH: I was in Baldwin House all four years.

GINSBURG: Okay, and what was the -- did you like the house atmosphere? What was the house atmosphere like? Was it important to you?

DEUTSCH: We were actually just talking about it on the walk over. A lot of us really have in our personalities once we're in one place, we want to stay one place, and that was really true for most of the folks in Baldwin House. I think there was one or two people who came in at the end and most of us stayed. We liked the location. We became very close friends with everybody in the house, and I never considered moving to a different house. I stayed in Baldwin.

GINSBURG: And could you describe the typical Smithie during your time here?

DEUTSCH: For me, I had gone to a very large high school, a public school in Miami. We had -- actually my graduating class in high school was bigger than my graduating class from Smith, and so -- and it was coed. So coming to Smith and being in a circle of the smartest women I have ever been with, so I would describe us as very smart, but incredibly funny. I mean I think people heard me walking over from Comstock this morning with three of my friends because we still laugh all the time. So funny, creative, intelligent, and really wanting to figure out where their place is in the world and what would make them happy in life.

GINSBURG: And did you come out while you were at Smith or no?

DEUTSCH: Sort of. So I had my first lesbian relationship my second semester senior year, but then went home and kind of couldn't decide for about a year, and then eventually partnered up with my partner who we are celebrating our 29 anniversary this weekend, even though I am here and she is not. So it was bad planning, but yeah -- so eventually two years later I came out and have been out since '84.

GINSBURG: And what was the kind of talk about feminism going on on campus at the time, and how did lesbians sort of intersect with that? What was the activism going on?

DEUTSCH: I will do the kind of feminist activism part first. I joined NOW when I was 13, so I actually was really a baby feminist and that where's my political activism started, and part of the reason I really loved Smith because there were so many other feminists here and not that many in my high school, so it was quite a movement. And 29, 30 to 34 years ago was really the beginning of the lesbian kind of music culture starting. We had a lot of concerts on campus. A lot of the leading women singers at the time came in and had concerts at Smith, and while at the time -- I think I

probably would define myself as not sexual at all, but rooted in the feminist background, I went to all of those. I became very good friends with lesbians you know, in Northampton. But beyond that, I think it was only Tenney House or -- or you now, little pockets. I was not involved in the kind of Smith College lesbian community besides the music piece of it.

GINSBURG: What was Tenney House?

DEUTSCH: It was a house on campus that was all lesbians.

GINSBURG: Really? I thought that was Hover house? No?

DEUTSCH: Yes.

GINSBURG: That was different.

DEUTSCH: Hmm. I may be wrong. They were both very small houses with kind of the most liberal lefty of Smithies who I assumed were lesbians and they were all vegetarians. And that --

GINSBURG: It was a co-op, right?

DEUTSCH: Yes. So is that -- so I don't know -- I'm very old.

GINSBURG: (laughs) So was there a NOW chapter on campus or --

DEUTSCH: There wasn't. There wasn't. So I did really all my activism really when I got home and kept up here just by -- I mean we had speakers here that were -- you know, and Gloria Steinem came all the time and there was just a real sense of the feminist movement and a more progressive feel from my understanding then than maybe a 10 year time period after that or 20 -- I don't know about today how people would define it, but I found plenty of incredibly liberal lefty feminists. I also learned that while you may not define yourself that way, some of my closest friends really became much more liberal and really great sounding boards for me in all of those discussions as I kind of moved on into what ended up being a political career.

GINSBURG: So while you were at Smith, were you a part of any clubs or organizations or --

DEUTSCH: I did the radio show a couple of times.

GINSBURG: What was it called back then?

DEUTSCH: I don't remember. I don't remember. And then there was the quarterly, which I think is still published. It was the writing journal -- there was a

writing journal -- The Current. God, I just pulled out of somewhere so it was called The Current and it was quarterly and so I helped to -- I had come from a background of doing journalism in high school, so I did layout and -- but I really stuck to classes and hanging out with friends and -- and then again I had this community of friends in Northampton who were very active in getting speakers and musicians and I worked with them a lot.

GINSBURG: And what was the kind of relationship between Northampton and Smith at the time?

DEUTSCH: It still totally was split. There were townies and there was us. I think I was one of the few people who had any connection with people in town. We also had made very close friends, my group at Baldwin would spend way too much time eating sub sandwiches at Subway very late at night, and the two young men who worked in the Subway became very good friends. So we did a lot of stuff with them in town, but other than that it was really very Smith-centered.

GINSBURG: And did you -- besides your relationship during her senior year, did you date at all while you were at Smith?

DEUTSCH: I did not. Well, I -- my good friend John would probably argue that I did go to two socials with him at UMass, but -- and went to a couple of parties at Amherst. I was never much of a party person. I was never a drinker. We could drink in college at that point when it was still 18 and not 21. So my passion and my friend's was really just eating and gaining a huge amount of weight in the four years I was here and hanging out here. (laughter) We did a lot of stuff on campus. We did shows. You know, I -- I should have had them come, and they could help me remember things, but --

GINSBURG: So what did you major in?

DEUTSCH: I was an American studies major, because there was actually not a women's studies degree at that point. So it was American studies with a concentration in social -- women's social history during the Victorian period in America.

GINSBURG: And -- sorry, I just lost my train of thought. Were there any professors or mentors that you specifically connected to that you remember?

DEUTSCH: I took all of President Conway's classes. She did a lot of American studies, a lot of women's studies, and they were always interesting classes because they would be at the president's house, and so she is the professor I really remember the most, and she is the one who helped me figure out that when I went to graduate school that the focus would really be on

women's studies and how to do the women's studies and history and kind of move it into public policy as well.

GINSBURG: And she was the first female president.

DEUTSCH: Yes.

GINSBURG: Was there any talk on campus about that sort of excitement or --

DEUTSCH: You know, I think she came in the year before I started, so I would have missed that but it was a very exciting time to have -- be led by a woman -- for me as a historian, or perceived to be historian at the time, to have a historian leading the college. There was definitely a switch in how we perceived the administration and what was happening in the administration because of her.

GINSBURG: Do you feel like the student administration connection was stronger because of her, or how would you describe that?

DEUTSCH: I don't know, because all four years was president Jill Ker Conway for me, so I can't give a -- what it was like before or after.

GINSBURG: And how did you see the campus changing while you were there?

DEUTSCH: I don't know that I saw change. I don't know that I have a good answer for that question.

GINSBURG: Uh-huh.

DEUTSCH: I mean again, you know, partially it's difficult because when you start talking about this, you realize all the opportunities that you didn't do when you were in college that you should have thought about doing and branching out; and yet my experience here, I wouldn't change anything about it in some ways. So there was probably a lot more going on, and I think I was a pretty sheltered Baldwinite that hung out in Baldwin with her friends and went to classes.

GINSBURG: What you mean though, what kind of things do you feel like you didn't do?

DEUTSCH: Well, I think there was a lot more extracurricular activities I could have done. I think that you know, when you come back for these reunions, and you're standing in line to register, and there are these women around you and you look at them and go I never knew you. I think we led a very sheltered existence staying in one house. Again, that's hindsight. So I think that there were so many more people that I could have known and so many other things that I could have done. I also think that there is way more that I could have done in Northampton and in the area. We very

rarely went to see what was going on at Amherst or Holyoke. I mean I don't think I ever went to Hampshire. And I think that that's changed a little bit from talking to seniors now that the world has opened a little bit more. You know, our big bus trip was to the mall I think. Or maybe to Amherst.

GINSBURG: And did you go home during the vacations? What did you do during the summer?

DEUTSCH: I went home -- Miami was far, so I would go home Christmas and summer, and then usually would spend spring break and Thanksgiving with friends who were closer to Smith.

GINSBURG: And how do you feel like the Smith education affected your life?

DEUTSCH: I think it totally affected my life. I think that, you know, when I'm talking to my colleagues and they are overwhelmed by my excitement, you know, how do you get excited about going to reunion? I don't think anybody really understands how deeply and inherently Smith becomes you. I mean I see -- I see myself as a Smith woman all the time. My -- my assertiveness, my sense of self, what I have done politically, my friends are all based on Smith. I have not missed a reunion. Most of my friends have never missed a reunion. You know, I was joking with them this morning, you know, I got -- I finally decided to get a tattoo last year and I got Smith on my ankle. You know, there is just this connection that I felt that day that I came on campus with my father, and I just knew that this was the place that would be part of me forever.

GINSBURG: Can you describe -- I've heard that in those early classes, convocations began to become more boisterous than it had before, and can you talk a little bit about that and the first sort of impressions --

DEUTSCH: This is another one, and I don't know that it's because I'm getting really old or just that you can only remember so much. I don't remember that much about convocations. I don't remember that much about Rally Days. I don't remember that I dressed up. I don't remember what we did senior year. I also took a semester off, first semester senior year to do the program that they had just started, we were the first year, in Washington DC, not the Government program, it was the American studies program. I don't know if it still exists or not. So there was a real split in some ways for me because all of my friends and everyone had been here for that whole semester, and then I kind of showed up again. It was an amazing experience. If I had to do anything over again, I probably wouldn't have done that, because it really was a disconnect that never seemed to connect again. So the Rally Day rehearsals had started already before I had gotten back and the planning for what we were going to do second semester had

already happened, so a lot of that I missed because I was in Washington, D.C.

GINSBURG: Right, but did you have any specific Smith traditions that really you connected with or that were your favorite?

DEUTSCH: Every -- every -- no specifics that I can give you but every piece of the tradition is a favorite. You know, how often do you wear all white? Never, every five years one -- two hours I wear all white, and you know those now are incredibly important to me, but something specific that I did or Baldwin did, I don't remember.

GINSBURG: Do you remember Mountain Day or any of those sort of things?

DEUTSCH: Mountain Days -- of course. You know, Mountain Days were different for someone growing up from Miami, because the first Mountain Day we -- I had never seen fall colors, so I did bike riding one year with friends, we went to the mountains one year. There's -- and as an alum, the college does now notify alums when it's Mountain Day, and it's so much fun to watch Facebook now, because everyone is complaining -- it's Mountain Day and I'm at work, and some people actually skip out of work. I tried to this year, but I couldn't. So Mountain Day -- again, you know, Mountain Day, who thinks about it anymore? We think about it all the time and -- or on really bad days at work, God, if today was just Mountain Day I could just stay at home. It was great. And I remember -- I'm kind of anally organized -- how impressed I always was that the bells would ring and then the box lunches would show up. I mean the whole magic of all of these traditions was always amazing to me.

And snow. One of my favorite things that I did that I don't know that that many people and again it was because I grew up in the south, I spent a lot of time in the botanical gardens in the wintertime when it was really snowing and cold, and I was really missing home. There is a room of palm trees in there and you can go in and just sweat it out for a while and then I could go back out again, and so -- and most of my friends never did that, but I was a regular in the botanical gardens.

GINSBURG: So tell me a little bit about what you have been doing since Smith. What you have been doing after you graduated, and what do you do right now?

DEUTSCH: After Smith I went home. I had a very sick sister, so I went home to help my parents with her for about a year and a half, and then I moved to Washington, D.C to get my masters degree at George Washington University. And again that was in public policy and women's studies. I did a fellowship that got me a job on the Hill while I was in graduate school with a women's organization -- a women's research organization, and then after finishing school just realized that I needed to do something up on the Hill to be a lobbyist, and my very first job -- well, not my first,

my very first real job was with a labor union with the Association of Flight Attendants, and I actually spent 27 years lobbying for three different unions. I lobbied for flight attendants, which was a perfect and logical job for a feminist activist, because it was a predominantly women's workforce who really did need a huge amount of help, and so that was remarkable and I stayed with them until a year after 9/11, and then it just really became too difficult to work on those issues anymore; moved on to two other unions and then a year and a half ago, left the labor movement after my whole lifetime of working for them and started working as the federal director for freedom to marry. And so as federal director, I built the federal program for Freedom to Marry in Washington, D.C. Most of the staff is in New York, and I am working to overturn DOMA and pass the Respect for Marriage Act and try to get freedom to marry for everyone in the country.

GINSBURG: So you've, I guess, gone to a lot of reunions. How do you feel like Smith has changed since you've been here?

DEUTSCH: In many ways I don't think it has changed at all. You know, there is the kind of pragmatic parts -- there is not a lunchroom in Baldwin House anymore. I mean there is -- there's things that we treasured as students that don't exist and that has been a constant conversation. There are things like that huge big giant monstrosity building that we didn't have, the --

GINSBURG: The campus center?

DEUTSCH: Yeah, the campus center. Most alums don't really -- aren't that thrilled with the campus center.

GINSBURG: So I've heard.

DEUTSCH: Yeah, so you know, we talk about that a lot. So that's a major change. And that's a major difference and a feel on the campus in two ways. In terms of education, the professors, the commitment to women learning -- the commitment to women's minds, that has not changed in the however many, hundred and whatever years of Smith College. The connections students make has not changed. I actually am going to have a summer intern who is a junior from Smith this year, and you know, I'm hoping to get a lot more information from her when she gets to D.C., but just in conversation -- the initial conversations, the friendships, the institution, I think, has not changed and that's a good thing.

GINSBURG: I would agree. Yeah. Yeah. So what were the expectations for you when you graduated as a woman, as a feminist, what did people sort of think that you were supposed to do and how did that -- how did you do that or not do that?

DEUTSCH: You know, I think that having become a feminist and a member of the National Organization for Women at 13, there was not a lot of question on how I would end up and what I would end up doing. I mean clearly I had politics in my blood and a passion for these issues. Since it took a couple of years after I graduated to actually come out, you know, there was always the -- my closest friend at Smith is a wonderful -- grew up devoutly Catholic woman who really expected to get married as soon as she graduated and have seven or eight kids like she was. And didn't marry until really late in life, and ultimately adopted one child, and in the course of watching how she expected her life to kind of lead and realizing that there was no path that any of us were really supposed to be on, I was actually the first one to have kids. I have three kids with my partner. The oldest one --

GINSBURG: Of your class or --

DEUTSCH: Of my close friends.

GINSBURG: Of your friends.

DEUTSCH: Second or -- second person who really started having children, and so in some ways this was a real educational experience for my closest friends who did not know me as a lesbian. Most of them didn't even know about this relationship I was having my senior year, which was with a younger person in Baldwin house. Yeah, stop.

GINSBURG: (Laughs)

DEUTSCH: And -- yeah, I saw the eyebrows.

GINSBURG: (Laughs)

DEUTSCH: And so the coming-out -- they had to rethink me a little bit. I don't think I ever had to rethink myself. I don't know that I changed, and actually what's really the most fun about reunions is none of us have changed at all. The people who drive us crazy still drive us crazy. You know, the people we avoided, we still avoid. I mean it just -- this amazing -- we get older, we can't see anymore, we are all going through menopause and yet we are all the same people. And so for my own expectations I -- I'm not surprised where I ended up. I'm not surprised that I ended up in a 29 year relationship with three amazing kids and doing LGBT issues in the end. It's great. It's where I should be right now.

GINSBURG: So that relationship senior year, did you feel like you couldn't be open about that in the house? Did you feel there were tensions around that?

DEUTSCH: Yeah, I don't -- well, I think it was two things. I think one, not open in the house. You know, again, I really saw myself as totally asexual in college

until that moment, my last semester. And so any discussion about people having sex in the house, whether it was with other women in the house or with men who were coming in, I just didn't -- I was really naïve completely. It's only in retrospect that I've heard of -- well, you knew about A and B. No, actually I was totally oblivious and obviously a total moron for four years at Smith.

So I don't think I kept it a secret because I was afraid of people's reactions, more than this -- this is just kind of fun having this secret thing going on. And she was -- you know, she was a freshman, I was a senior, so there was that gap. And then you know, we stayed together for a little while after I graduated, but you know, I think it was part of being here at Smith. Of course, she would probably be really pissed that I just said that, but hopefully she won't watch it.

GINSBURG: So, I guess one of the sort of final questions is do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

DEUTSCH: I would say enjoy every moment. Do take advantage of everything here, because it goes really fast, and this is your only chance to do all of this now without having to worry about rent and kids and getting your degrees. Take the classes that may not be the classes that you would have thought to take. I mean really use this as the widest experience you can possibly use. Make those connections with your friends and they will be lifelong. Both your connection to the college and your connection with the women that you meet here, and it will bring you lots of joy.

GINSBURG: That's good advice. One last question that I actually forgot about.

DEUTSCH: Yeah. Is the hard one? Is this is the one that I'm going to blush or something, yeah, okay.

GINSBURG: Well, do you feel like Smith was an accepting place for people who may be were seen as outsiders at the time, either racial minorities or lesbians, do you feel like Smith -- well, I guess speak a little bit about that.

DEUTSCH: I don't -- I don't think so in my four years. I think that there was a real clear, this is what a Smith woman looks like. I mean I -- my daughter is 11. I bought her a Lanz pajamas for Christmas last year just to see what she would say, and it became very clear to me, I mean that's -- we all dress the same way. I was sort of an oddity because I was from Miami and I bought all of my winter clothes from the Sears catalog, because I didn't have any. And so everyone knew there was something kind of quirky about me, because my boots were a little different and my jacket was different, and I didn't have the right scarf and they weren't mean, they weren't condescending, but there was clearly -- I didn't have the pearls and I didn't have the Lanz pajamas, and I didn't have the L.L. Bean jacket, and those things that kind of the typical Smithie had.

I do want to get in as sort of an aside, but the same, my junior year I had three suite mates. I had a single and then the freshman suitemates in that room were Tammy Baldwin, who -- well, soon -- soon-to-be senator, we hope, from Wisconsin and her roommate Robbyn Swan, who just got a Pulitzer Prize nomination. Three very different women in this cubbyhole of space and when I tell people outside of Smith College that story they are like really? The three of you were together? Of course, I don't think I am anywhere in the league of Robbyn and Tammy at this point, but that's a remarkable thing about Smith College, and when I talk to -- you know, I just walked over with one of the leading radiologists in Maryland, you know, a real business woman, I mean this is the remarkable part and even if you are not a remarkable -- you've got this amazing career, these are remarkable women -- every single one of us. And I do regret that I didn't branch out and meet more people at the time. In terms of kind of white and African-American, there was a huge split.

GINSBURG: Really?

DEUTSCH: There was a massive split.

DEUTSCH: I think quite frankly we had one African-American woman in Baldwin house when I was there, who I think left after our freshman year to go to a different house because she was all by herself. I was amazed watching the graduation ceremony last week because I watched Baldwin, and Baldwin was actually half African-American, Indian, I mean it was an amazing, really clear, much better dynamic than when I was there when it was really white. Really, really, really white.

GINSBURG: And was that how many of the houses were?

DEUTSCH: Yeah.

GINSBURG: Okay, okay. Interesting. Well, thank you so much. This was great.

DEUTSCH: Okay, I hope so.

GINSBURG: Yeah.

DEUTSCH: You're welcome. You're welcome. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.*