

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Susan Elliott, Class of 1958*

Interviewed by  
Ellice Amanna, AC, Class of 2014J

May 25, 2013

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Susan Elliott, returning on the occasion of her 55<sup>th</sup> reunion, reflects on the importance of friendships formed through Smith's house culture and remembers house activities including playing bridge after supper with housemates. She recalls a meeting with a Smith advisor that lead to her to a new recruitment program that IBM had launched for women and how that became the foundation for her future business success.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Elliott, Susan. Interview by Ellice Amanna. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Elliott, interview by Ellice Amanna, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Elliott, Susan. Interview by Ellice Amanna. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Elliott, interview by Ellice Amanna, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, 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 May 25, 2013, with:

SUSAN ELLIOTT

by: ELLICE AMANNA

AMANNA: This is Ellice Amanna and I'm conducting an interview with Susan Elliott, Class of 1958. It's May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and this interview is for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you for agreeing to be with us.

ELLIOTT: Oh I'm delighted. Thank you.

AMANNA: Great. So you're back for reunion?

ELLIOTT: Yes, indeed.

AMANNA: Welcome back. Is this something you've gone to consistently?

ELLIOTT: Actually, no. But I came for our 25<sup>th</sup>. I came for the 50<sup>th</sup>. And each time the momentum has grown, so come this 55<sup>th</sup> I was really looking forward to coming back. And we have five of us from Comstock are here. So that's very special.

AMANNA: Great. Did you make a lot of friends when you were at Smith that you kept up or is it the reunions that have brought you back?

ELLIOTT: We from Comstock have all kept up through, if nothing else, Christmas cards once a year communicating what you're doing for the year. And they are very special friends. And I think I've often thought and said to other people that I think it's the house system that makes the difference, because they're small enough that you can really become good friends. And you gather around that, so I think that's a very special aspect of Smith College.

AMANNA: I'm interested in that. What are your memories of that house culture? What was it like, life in the house? Do you remember your house mother?

ELLIOTT: Oh, Mrs. Bond, yes. And we had a place where we'd have coffee after breakfast, and we did play bridge after lunch and dinner. I don't play it anymore, and it's a whole different game today than it was back then.

AMANNA: And were you there the whole --

ELLIOTT: I stayed the whole four years. And I think actually everybody in the house did stay for the four years. There wasn't a lot of changing in those days. You stayed put unless you had some compelling reason to move, but I don't think there was that much movement from one to the other.

AMANNA: So you had a long period of time to bond with those women?

ELLIOTT: Yes.

AMANNA: Yeah. So why did you choose Smith, do you remember how that happened?

ELLIOTT: I do, indeed. I applied to both Vassar and Smith. And in those days you didn't visit schools, it didn't occur to anybody. You would have to get on a train to come up here to go visit.

AMANNA: Where were you living?

ELLIOTT: St. Louis.

AMANNA: St. Louis, okay.

ELLIOTT: I had a counselor at a camp that I had gone to as a young teenager who was a Smith graduate. And so I was accepted at both and I really always liked that counselor so okay, I'll go to Smith. It was pretty easy.

AMANNA: So when you came to begin your college education that was the first time?

ELLIOTT: Had never seen the campus.

AMANNA: What were your impressions?

ELLIOTT: Well, first of all we had to come on the train. So it was overnight on a train with our steamer trunks. People who lived up here in New England could drive, but that wasn't the case for us. And I remember that very empty feeling going from total comfort to total unknown. But we were welcomed, obviously, fabulously and that was a great four years. At one point I remember, my parents had both gone to school in St. Louis at Washington University and they really wanted me to graduate from their school. And toward the end of my sophomore year they said, "You're

going to come back to St. Louis now.” And I said, “Well, if it’s all the same to you, I really want to stay at Smith and graduate.” And so I was fortunate to be able to do that.

AMANNA: Yeah. And so when you got here, what did you think of the campus and just those first days. Did you have an impression?

ELLIOTT: You know, that’s really interesting. No, that doesn’t.

AMANNA: That didn’t impress you?

ELLIOTT: I remember that a lot of the courses that I took that first year duplicated, in a sense, a lot of what I had had at my high school because I was very fortunate in the school that I had attended before I came here, which was also a girl’s school. And then, of course, I continued to be challenged. I chose American Studies, and there were only two schools at that time that offered -- Yale offered it and Smith. And I did that because there wasn’t anything, except math, that I was really interested in. And I didn’t want to focus on math and be holed up in a lab or something. And so American Studies was a good choice because it consists of something of everything, so it was really a non-choice. And it turned out, as I could tell you when I graduated what I did, that that ended up being a good choice.

AMANNA: Were you thinking about career at that time, because a lot of people who we’ve interviewed from your class were kind of marriage minded and it wasn’t a time when they were thinking about career?

ELLIOTT: I bet 50 percent of the class was getting married. That was the thing you were supposed to do, but that leads me to what actually lead me to the rest of my life, is I went to the college counselor and I said, “There has to be a job in this country that I do not now have to go to typing school.” Because women could be teachers, nurses, or secretaries. And they said, “IBM is actively recruiting women. If you have the analytical, logical ability that they’re looking for, which they test you for, they basically will teach you everything you need to know.” So with my math interests I was able to pass their tests, get the job, and I went back to St. Louis in the Fall. They had just decentralized their training and that was the regional training center, and that was perfect because women wouldn’t go to New York and get an apartment. I mean, that was unheard of. So I took my training in St. Louis, it was eleven weeks of training. Eight hours a day, homework every night. And one week, the tenth week, they told us about computers and said the average person wouldn’t need to know more than that because there weren’t going to be that many. IBM in 1958. So, I’ll just fast forward real quickly. In ’66 I was pregnant, and their policy was to send you home at six months because you were so fragile you would have to stay at home for three months. Well, that wasn’t acceptable. I

loved what I did, my husband was just out of law school so we needed me to work. The bank in downtown St. Louis wanted to hire me, but they had the same policy. So my husband, with his new law degree, incorporated me. The bank felt protected, they could hire a corporation not a pregnant lady. And so I kept working, but I also founded my own business and basically did that for 50 years, and now my daughter runs the business. So mother to daughter is unusual and she's doing an extraordinary job.

AMANNA: Excellent. She wasn't a Smithy was she?

ELLIOTT: No, actually no. She went to the University of Vermont. But, it all started here.

AMANNA: So just looking back on it, clearly you had a lot of self confidence it sounds like. Is that something that you can trace back at all to your experience here?

ELLIOTT: Well, I think both here and my high school. I went to an all girls school. Well, K through 12. And I had a headmaster there who used to say you can as far and as wide and as high as you want to. All you have to do is put your mind to it and do it. And then I get here to Smith and everything about your whole environment here is, "You can do it, you're capable, you can achieve to your highest potential, you can be a leader." I mean, you just go away thinking, "I can do whatever it is I want to do." And so no, I think there's no question about the fact that the environment here basically just communicated you can accomplish whatever you want to.

AMANNA: Do you think that is, in any way, part of being in an all women's school?

ELLIOTT: I think it definitely was then.

AMANNA: Because had it been a mixed classroom it might have been different?

ELLIOTT: Well, mixed classrooms were only in the public universities. You couldn't go to a Princeton, or Yale, or Harvard. And I think that was also, and my secondary school, the same thing. Since it was all for women, you were just empowered because you could be the leaders in school. And so you can continue to be leaders. So, yes, I think that is a big factor.

AMANNA: And you were also American Studies, so it sounds like the kind of major that you did a fair amount of writing in, and you have written a book.

ELLIOTT: Right, I have.

AMANNA: Did you become writer at Smith, do you think?

ELLIOTT: No, I don't think so. No. I think of myself, since I worked for IBM as a programmer, I think of myself as much more of a nuts and bolts, detailed, factual, specific person. Probably my husband would tell you the same thing. But as far as writing the book was concerned, and of course that's a whole other story, I had a friend who was a marketing and PR person for our company actually. And she liked to also do books. So after I wrote it, then she read through it, and I like to say she helped make it a little more user friendly. So it was a combination of the two.

AMANNA: Okay. And just for the purposes of the tape, can you say the name of your book, when it was published, and what it's about?

ELLIOTT: Sure. The title is *Across the Divide: Navigating the Digital Revolution as a Woman Entrepreneur and CEO*. And I started writing it the summer of 2010. Now my daughter is running the company and we were talking about what kind of a project can I do that would be helpful to the company, but the most important thing was so that I stay out of her hair. So we thought why not write a book. And the background to it was in 2008 we celebrated 25 years of my having revived the business, 50 years from my Smith graduation, and so we had a big gala. And she asked me to go through my notes so that we could have great big boards with key milestones. So I went through every single file and documented from 1958 every year with bullets of everything that I -- had happened and I that I knew. So in 2010 looking for how can I stay out of her hair, the homework had all been done. So I wrote it and published it in 2011, was blessed to come meet here with Carol Christ and some students in the fall of 2011. And was also complemented to be the keynote speaker last night because of the history of the digital age.

AMANNA: Okay, great. Can we talk about the company a little, too? I don't know what the company is.

ELLIOTT: Oh, the name of the company. Well, its full name is Systems Service Enterprises, Inc. But it's also my initials, SSE. And we go by SSE because way back when I founded it IBM was just transitioning from calling them International Business Machines to calling themselves IBM and branding that. So I thought, "Well if they can call themselves IBM we can call ourselves SSE." So that's what it is today.

AMANNA: That's great. Thanks for telling that story.

ELLIOTT: It all started here.

AMANNA: So we're coming to the end of the time. Can you just say something about your feeling about your identity as a Smithie, how important, you say

that's kind of increased in importance as you've become more attached and come to reunions. Is that an important part of your identity?

ELLIOTT: Well, I think it is, but I never thought of myself as being -- I didn't think of myself strictly focused as a woman. I'm a person who was out there accomplishing something, which I think is really important. Now, I was blessed to be a token woman on boards, and obviously Smith gave me the confidence to be able to do that. I was even a Chairman of the Federal Reserve in St. Louis because I was a token woman, at that point in time they needed a woman. And so it's all the heritage from Smith, but I don't think I walk around saying, "Oh, I went to Smith," because I don't want to be focused just as a woman. I think you're a person accomplishing things in this world, and I've been very blessed to be able to accomplish a lot and I go back to. But I was empowered here with that feeling that I can go out and do anything I want to do so I've been very blessed and very fortunate, and being back here and revisiting all that has been very special.

AMANNA: Well have a great weekend. I hope you enjoy it in spite of the weather.

ELLIOTT: I know, in spite of the rain. Exactly.

AMANNA: Thank you for sitting with us.

ELLIOTT: Well, thank you very much. I enjoyed the opportunity.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Debbie Shea, July 2013.*