

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Erin Fray, Class of 1984

Interviewed by
Grace Ramsay, Class of 2016

May 17, 2014

Abstract

In this interview, Erin Fray recalls her experience living in Dawes House for her sophomore and senior years (she spent her junior year abroad). Mostly reflecting on the specific house activities and cultural community Dawes had to offer, Erin also speaks to the friendships she made at Smith. She concludes by describing Smith as an empowering place that celebrates diversity.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Grace Ramsay.

Transcript

Transcribed by Scott Ramsden, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Fray, Erin. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Erin Fray, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Fray, Erin. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Erin Fray, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, 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 17, 2014, with:

ERIN FRAY
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: GRACE RAMSAY

RAMSAY: OK, so, just for the record, I'm going to say that I'm Grace Ramsay, and I'm conducting an interview with Erin Fray, class of 1984, on May 17th, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. And thanks for taking time out of the reunion to come. I really appreciate it. So, what brought you to Smith? Why Smith?

FRAY: Well, I grew up in Seattle, then La Jolla, which is in California. And I'm the youngest of five kids. And it was very important in my family to have academic excellence, and the pursuit of academic excellence. So always worked hard. I've always enjoyed the pursuit of learning. And I knew I wanted to go east because I was a rower. And I have — I was in national rowing championships, and had a pile of gold medals and silver medals. And the east is the penultimate, kind of, rowing playground. So when I looked around a lot of the colleges, I really liked some of them. And my choice was between Smith and Yale. But at the time, I — and once I visited Yale, I realized that it was very male, and women there were just kind of new. Actually, one of my sisters went there. And I really liked that Smith was for women. And another one of my sisters went here — had already graduated. And so, I just — this was the place for me. It had the academic excellence, and it had the river, and I stroked for the varsity A from day one.

RAMSAY: Great. So, you had a big — you had a community with the crew team?

FRAY: Community with the crew team? I would say, actually, while we were rowing together, respectfully. That wasn't my primary community. My primary community was more my house community, and people that — my junior-year-abroad community. But when we were in the boat, we were all on the same team.

RAMSAY: Right. So do you want to talk a little more about your house community, and what that was like?

FRAY: Sure. OK, so, my freshman year, you get assigned to a house. So, I was in Lawrence House. And I — we just had lunch right now with a group of women from Lawrence House, who were great. And so, one's from

Maine, one's from California, one's from New York City. My roommate's from New York City. And here, I'm from, you know, a beach town in California. And one's from Texas, and we're still, you know, sistahs.

But then, I was — in sophomore year, one can change houses if one wishes. And I moved to *la maison française* — Dawes House. And that is a house that has no adult supervision, if you will — where there's no kitchen inside. So we were all autonomously in heaven. And in Dawes House, you have to speak French in all of the public rooms. So, it lent itself to people that had a very wide view of the world — more international group. And that really was a community for me. I've had the good fortune of traveling a lot in my life, and I spoke different languages. And I — my mother always taught me to seek what's different in people. And so, for Smith, there is a diversity, but there is also some areas of groupthink. And so, this house was — everybody was an individual, and we liked the juice of what was different. So we would have the most marvelous times, where we ate in a different house, and then we'd come home, and we'd prepare a pot of coffee, and have — sit around, with coffee, and talk, all in French, you know?

And then, my — as a matter of fact, my — I went — then I went to Paris, junior year. But my senior year, I met — I ran *salons*, so, like a Gertrude Stein style. And I was also, then, taking intensive Italian, so on Friday nights, turned the house into a *salon*. Any people could come and talk about poetry, and paintings, and literature. And we had — I made different periods of time. And sometimes people would come, kind of, with their beret and pearls and a cigarette holder, type thing. And I would make, for example, Matisse — if you read his biography, and he was so poor that they would have, when they were in Paris, this thing called *balle du riz*, which means “rice ball.” So they would have wine and rice, because they didn't have anything else to eat. So one night, for example, I had a *balle du riz*. And people came, and we recreated the history of culture, you know what I mean?

RAMSAY: Yeah.

FRAY: It was so wonderful.

RAMSAY: That sounds incredible. So did your academics also reflect that sort of cultural diversity?

FRAY: Well, in terms of my curriculum — well, in those days — and I don't know how it is now, but we did not have distribution requirements.

RAMSAY: Mm-hmm.

FRAY: And so, you could pick your own — your own curriculum. And I, most certainly, went and studied the history of the world through art, through

language, through a number of things, in addition to economics and the standard type things.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

FRAY: I definitely — and I remember taking classes at Amherst — an art history class, which was the study of Buddhism as it migrated from India through China into Japan. And so, you're studying history — Asian history — but you're also studying it through the eyes of a different religion — well, it's not — it's actually a spirituality — spirituality, and then through the changes of country, and then the changes of time. And I follow the teachings of the *Dharma* to this day.

RAMSAY: That's incredible. So—

FRAY: It's so wonderful.

RAMSAY: So it sounds like Smith really impacted you. So what would you say — what comes to mind when you first think about Smith?

FRAY: I think of empowerment.

RAMSAY: OK.

FRAY: Yeah.

RAMSAY: Yeah. And so, what did you feel, like, was expected of you when you graduated? Was that different from what you wanted to do, or—

FRAY: Expected of me? No, I actually think — well, certainly there are expectations that you have to have game, and you have to have spine, and you have to work — it's given that you have critical-thinking skills, you know, and how to read, write, and make a decision. But the expectations are our own.

RAMSAY: Mm-hmm. So another tradition that Smith has is—

FRAY: Yeah.

RAMSAY: —being controversial. So (laughs) were there any big controversies during your time?

FRAY: Well, yes, well, we had the Cold War. The Cold War, where we are at odds with a nuclear threat, and the Eastern Europe versus Western democracies, and the Soviet Union and the — versus the Western democracies. So we had real threats of what could be nuclear holocaust. And that affected some of my students, some of my colleagues, in a

very negative way, with the anxiety, and how — some had to withdraw from school and that kind of thing.

RAMSAY: Mm-hmm.

FRAY: I remember going — when — my junior year abroad in Paris — and so, now you're in France, and if you know — when you look at maps, and it's always the United States in United States education. And the United States is in the center, and then, kind of, Europe's in — is broken apart on both sides. But in France, the United States is cut in half. And it's on the outsides. And you — you know, so you see the different view. But, so, studying the Cold War was a big controversy.

RAMSAY: Mm-hmm.

FRAY: There were some other elements around apartheid which, again, is more of a race fight. But Smith is always about, kind of, rights for all, and the right of living, each of us, a full life, and not oppression. So it's kind of the same sentiment that carries through the time.

RAMSAY: Yeah. Do you want to talk a little bit about your life after Smith, or —

FRAY: Well, yeah, sure, a little bit. When I got out of Smith, being a liberal art — art history, French literature — I think to myself, OK, what now? Now what, you know? And so, my first job — I had three job offers right away in San Francisco: hat girl at I. Magnin's, office manager at Ketchum Advertising, or sales assistant at a stock-brokerage company. And so, basically, I could — basically, I'm a 360-degree direction. So anything I wanted to do, I could do, because I said — they said, "What are your skills?" I said, "I can read and write and make decisions. And I went to Smith College." So, I — they just — I got a handful of offers like that.

RAMSAY: Mm-hmm.

FRAY: And so, fast forward. So I went to the stock-broking thing, and then I went back to the art world. And I, you know, zigs and zags. But I have a graduate degree from UC Berkeley, Haas School of Business. And there were five Smith women in my class of 200. And what I do now is, I'm self-employed. I have my own company called Luminous Brands. And I grow companies. I do strategy and branding and positioning and new-product development and how to raise money, and all this kind of thing. The only way that I can do this, as an individual woman, is that I have an educational pedigree. And when I say Smith College, and UC Berkeley Haas School of Business, they immediately say, I've got a problem and I need you to help me. So it gives me a — them a predisposition to believe.

RAMSAY: That's incredible. So—

FRAY: It is incredible.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

FRAY: And — but we earned it.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

FRAY: But it shows we've got chops.

RAMSAY: Mm-hmm.

FRAY: And I'm really proud of it.

RAMSAY: Yeah. Do you have any advice for the Smithies about to graduate?

FRAY: Be true to yourself.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

FRAY: Yeah.

RAMSAY: That's great. And let's see, one more question.

FRAY: OK.

RAMSAY: Was there a typical Smithie when you were there? And what did she look like?

FRAY: Well, that's a kind of trap of a question. There was, in terms — there was a large — there was a set of the population that was from New England, that was white, kind of WASP-y, and that was a certain set. And they — and generally there was more — they kept closely together. And then, there was everybody else, which were one-of-a-kinds, broke the mold, full-spirited woman. And I think that that was — that's more the Smithie.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

FRAY: Yeah.

RAMSAY: Great. I think that's a great end to this.

FRAY: OK, great.

RAMSAY: So thank you so much.

FRAY: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Scott Ramsden, June 19, 2014.