Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Joan Gass, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Nina Goldman, Class of 2015

May 16, 2014

Abstract

In this interview, Joan Gass recalls her journey to Smith and her two years here. Feeling like an outsider compared to the "typical" Smithie, she has a different perspective on social life and traditions on campus. She reflects on the political climate at Smith and her own political canvassing she did here. Joan talks about transferring to Brown her sophomore year after marrying her husband, because Smith only allowed single students at the time. She speaks to the sexism she experienced at Smith and at Brown as a married student. Joan ends the interview by remembering how women in her class either married or aimed for more degrees after Smith, because a Smith education did not guarantee a career.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Kelly Hourihan, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Gass, Joan. Interview by Nina Goldman. Video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Joan Gass, interview by Nina Goldman, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Gass, Joan. Interview by Nina Goldman. Transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Joan Gass, interview by Nina Goldman, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 16, 2014, with:

JOAN GASS
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: NINA GOLDMAN

GOLDMAN: OK, and I'm right here.

GASS: Mm-hmm.

GOLDMAN: All right. Great. So this is Nina Goldman, and I'm conducting an interview with Joan Gass, class of 1964, on May 16, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So Joan, thank you for agreeing to participate.

GASS: It's my pleasure, Nina.

GOLDMAN: Wonderful. And I guess we can start off with, how did you end up at Smith?

GASS: Well, I am the child of immigrants, and neither of my parents went to college. My father didn't believe in — my father, who was born in 1907, so a long time ago, didn't really believe in women's education and was willing to have me go to a local school. My mother was deprived of a college education because she grew up in the time of the Nazis and she was not allowed to go to college. So she made it her mission to be sure that her twin daughters would get the education she didn't get. And she drove us throughout the Northeast to various interviews. When we came to Smith for our interview, my brother, who was with us, had a severe sunburn. And when we were being interviewed — and I have a twin sister who was in our class — the people in the admissions office were so solicitous of my mother and my brother that when my sister and I were admitted to all the colleges to which we applied, Smith was the obvious choice, because the sense was they would care. And that's how I came to Smith.

GOLDMAN: And so I guess I'm wondering — while you were here, was there a sort of a typical Smithie personality?

GASS: Well, you know, you have wonderful questions. So we were talking about this last night, some of my classmates and I, and we decided that all of us were outsiders, even though — we sensed that we were

outsiders, even though if you look at us now, we're all white: there was not a black woman in our class that I can remember. There were one or two Asian women, and I think they did not come from the States. So if you look at us, we seemed like we were all a group, but all of us felt that we were not — we were the Jewish girls, and there were not that many Jewish girls. We were the scholarship girls, and there weren't that many scholarship girls. They were the affluent New Yorkers; we weren't the affluent New Yorkers. We all — at least among the women with whom I spoke yesterday, we all felt that we really had to struggle to belong. And yet now, you know, life has evened the playing field and education. So I think we all — obviously if you come back, you feel like you belong and you've been — you know, you identify really strongly with the school. But at that time, no. And interestingly, even the women who I thought were on the inside were — made a graceful transition, claimed that it was difficult for them. So.

GOLDMAN: Well, do you have any thoughts as to why that was?

GASS: You know, I think that's really important. I think that — this was 1960. We were in high school in the 1950s. It was a very different time. We were the best of the women in high school, and we worked — most of us worked hard to achieve that. But there's tremendous insecurity in America, in so many different ways. And I think it translated it to us. I had a high school student teacher in American history, and he disappeared over the weekend. We found out that there was a concern that he might be a communist. He probably wasn't — who knows. But I think that was — you know, part of that sense of lack of security: yes, people were doing better in the late '50s than ever, but I don't think the comfort was totally there. And I think when women came to school, we were still a little uncomfortable. And you know, Smith helped us. I think if you made your way through, you did very well. But at first we weren't sure of ourselves — or at least, I'll talk about myself that way.

GOLDMAN: And what did sort of your social life look like, or — I guess the college's expectation of you?

GASS: Hmm. Well, on — speak about myself, I was a scholarship student. I have a twin sister who was in school. We finally paid for essentially one student, and we had a half-scholarship. So we were driven to do very well in order to maintain our scholarship. What that meant for me and my sister was that our college life was completely dedicated to academics. And I did nothing other than attend school, study, really pick up my head, and date a little bit. So the richness of the school — I never observed, really. And that's too bad. And I hope students don't feel that way now. I imagine there's still pressure on students and certainly still pressure on scholarship students, but my college experience was almost solely an academic experience. If that's why you go to school, I got that.

GOLDMAN: And I'm also curious — you talked about being part of a small group of Jewish students. And looking over the yearbooks of 1964, there's a huge emphasis on Christmas and sort of talks from Catholic organizations or Christian organizations. I'm wondering if you could speak more to that — just the experience of being Jewish at Smith.

GASS: OK. Well, you know, as I look at the reunion book, I'm really surprised at how many Jewish students there were in my class. I think there was a significant number. But I think interesting things happened to us. I was given a roommate, she was Jewish. My sister was given a roommate, she was Jewish. So I think the university maybe was sensitive to the fact that here are some Jewish students on campus, we'll group them together. I doubt if the university would do that now; in fact, I would really be surprised if they do anything like that now. But I don't recall ever feeling — you know, offended. This was largely a Christian society. I don't recall ever feeling marginalized. I think the university thought it was doing — you know, the college thought it was doing the right thing by putting students together. It's only in hindsight that I say, you know, that wasn't necessary. It was a little bit too much *in loco parentis*. But you know, the Christmas activities didn't offend me.

GOLDMAN: OK. And then in terms of — I guess, as you know, Smith has a ton of traditions.

GASS: Right.

GOLDMAN: And I'm wondering sort of what the traditions — how you saw the traditions, and if you participated or felt engaged with them or–?

GASS: Well, the interesting thing is I heard the new president briefly at lunch today; I'm looking forward to hearing her later. And she said that the best part of being at Smith is after you've left, because you start to be a group of people with a shared experience for the rest of your life. And so a lot of those traditions are that you get through the alumnae magazine and you — having reunions, and the constant contact with people from Smith, and whatever you learn about the school and participate in and enjoy by reading about it. But again, as I said before, while I was on campus, I didn't partake in many of the traditions. I would hardly call it a tradition, but at my time, after meals, everybody played bridge, all right? And I did that. I learned how to play bridge. A fair number of women smoked, and there was actually a smoker in our dormitory; I didn't participate in that. We all knit, and we knit in classrooms, and I still, fifty years later, still have sweaters that were knit then. So if that's an image of Smith and some of the things that the women were doing, we were conscientious in taking notes, but we were also knitting all the time. So those were the kinds of things that I did.

GOLDMAN: And in terms of the, like, larger, I guess, campus life, I'm wondering what — how you saw the political climate on campus.

GASS: Well, it's — OK. My first almost immediate exposure to the politics on campus — we came in in September, and November was the national election. And this was the election for John Kennedy. And I will never forget that we all gathered in the living room of our dormitory to watch the results. And that was the most profound experience for a young woman, especially if you look back at 1964, when we could not — I was not old enough to vote and couldn't vote anyway. So almost immediately, I was exposed to the excitement of — will this man from Massachusetts — here I am in Massachusetts with this young, handsome Catholic man — be elected? And that was very much a part of our experience. I think most people at Smith were overjoyed at the results. And the results — you know, it wasn't, quote, a "slam dunk." I mean, it was a very close election.

And then I became heavily involved in working for a really fringe candidate, H. Stuart Hughes, who was running to replace Kennedy in the Senate. And Teddy Kennedy won that seat, and I thought that was carpetbagging and I wasn't interested in that. So Stuart Hughes was a Harvard professor, and he received fewer than five percent of the votes. But I was involved in that and wrote a paper on Stuart Hughes. So that, you know, was after Kennedy was elected — that was in 1961. And then after that, you know, we had — Martin Luther King, Jr. came to campus. There was a lot of exposure to very liberal politics that I assume was not in the background of a lot of students. But it fit very well with Smith, which was kind of interesting. So we had — it was a great place to be. If you wanted to start to — if you didn't have any prior political experience, you had the opportunity. And I continued with that afterwards. So this was really my starting point in working for candidates, so the question's a great one for me. Thank you for asking me.

GOLDMAN: OK. Of course. Yeah. I was going to ask if you were sort of involved with any of — sort of student activism, but it sounds like —

GASS: I did. I guess, you know, your question reminds me that I was probably not studying all the time. (laughter)

GOLDMAN: (laughter) Were you — did George — Governor George Wallace visiting the campus — he visited in, I think, '64.

GASS: OK, I was no longer at Smith. I transferred to Brown during my undergraduate years. My story about George Wallace is that — so I wasn't affected — I clearly didn't — would not have agreed with him. I clearly would have been demonstrating if there was that opportunity, but I wasn't here. My family moved to Alabama, and by the end of Wallace's career, my sister actually voted for him. After he had been so

severely injured and handicapped, he became a different person. So — but in 1964, he was not the person that I would have agreed with. No.

GOLDMAN: Can you tell me about transferring to Brown?

GASS: OK. I recently reread a letter that Dean Robinton sent to the class of ’64 on our twenty-fifth reunion. And it was a very telling letter. She said that our class was the last class that had very severe rules about behavior and what the deanery needed to do to keep us in place. Well, one of the things they needed to do was to make sure that if you were a Smithie, you would graduate as a single woman. So I married midway through my junior year, and I could not stay at Smith. There were some possibilities, but it basically meant that I would have to live on campus four or five days a week, and then I didn’t have to be on campus.

So I presented myself to Brown and I was admitted to Brown, and that was not a problem. And I had some opportunities to compare the classes, and that was interesting. My sister also married as an undergraduate, and she left at the end of her junior year and went to Stanford. Stanford gave her a degree in one year. Smith — she had asked Smith: “I’ve been here three years, it’s like doing a junior year abroad, people go off-campus. Can I get a Smith degree if I complete a year at Stanford?” And Smith said no.

I think — the tension in the administration, I think, was great. And they represented parents at the end of this very sort of conservative time period, just as we’re heading into — you couldn’t foresee what would happen, but after — well, with Kennedy’s death and after the beginning of civil rights, the control — the deanery was going to start to lose some rigid control over students. And so they were at a point that they needed to reinforce what they thought were the standards that parents wanted and society wanted of women. And they reinforced it very strictly.

There were 710 women who entered my class; 540 graduated. So I was not an unusual person for leaving; there were many women who left. Many women left for the same reason I left: they were getting married — very young, but they were getting married. Others left for other academic opportunities, for psychological reasons — a large — a big range. But you can imagine what was going on in the dean’s office at that time, when essentially twenty percent of your class wasn’t going to be graduating. They must have been meeting, they must have been discussing, What are we going to do? And I think their discussion pretty heavily landed on, We have to reinforce our rules; otherwise this whole place is going to fall apart, or what we stand for is going to change. I — now, looking back at the time, I can understand what they were doing. At the time, you know, I wasn’t sure of the implications of what I was doing. I had a wonderful education here and an outstanding education at Brown. And my sister obviously had an outstanding education at two different places. But, you know, I can see the tension that was going on at the school.

GOLDMAN: Wow. So while you were here, it wasn't — were you sort of ready to go along with the–?

GASS: Oh, you know, there were all those little minor things that every girl knew, that if you weren't inside the dorm by midnight or whatever the time was — on the weekends it was midnight and during the week it was 10:00 — if you weren't inside the door, there was going to be some house punishment. We — at our time, we did a lot of the work: we set up the dining hall, we did the cleaning, and so — we manned the front desk, where there was a telephone. And so you were given more hours, you were given later hours, you were given more dining room duty. That's the way it was, you know? (laughter) So I guess if you got back here a little late, which I did once or twice, that was — you know, it was a house-imposed system. And you did it — if you violated one of the parietal rules, then there was a consequence.

GOLDMAN: Yeah. I guess — sort of as one of our closing questions, could you tell me sort of the stuff that you — the person that you've become since leaving Smith?

GASS: Ah, OK. Well, I received a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree in history. I taught history for a few years; I taught English for many, many years — I was a high school English teacher for many, many years. Along the way I also lived on an Indian reservation at San Carlos, Apache reservation. My husband was with the Indian Health Service, so that's where we lived. And I'd just come back from a weekend of a girl's coming out ceremony, and — just last weekend. I've continued my association with that reservation. For fifteen years I ran an exchange program, and I brought nice Anglo kids from a nice middle-class community to live on a reservation, and in return brought nice Apache youngsters to live in the Anglo community. And that was an activity that I thought was very, very important, and spanned from the '70s through the '90s. So that was a highlight of one of the volunteer things — I did a lot of volunteer work.

I worked for a candidate when she ran for school board and she's been in Congress now for years and years. So I've had some political activities, helped write a community master plan, and did a lot of community-based activities and teaching. So that's the richness of my life. I have three sons, and the same fellow I left Smith to marry has been my husband for 51 years. So that's my story.

GEIS [videographer]: That's great. I'm curious about — since you've come back–

GASS: Yeah.

GEIS: –you haven't come back since 1962.

GASS: Never came back.

GEIS: Yeah. It's really interesting to me — can you talk a little bit about just — when you left — I mean, I am curious about what was the college's philosophy, thinking of what would happen if you got married? And what was going — what didn't work for them about that? And then if you could take that into just talking about coming back here now, and what's — the time that's passed, and how does it feel to be back here?

GASS: Well, I love being back here. But I have come back several times, but not at a reunion time. I think the college had an image of itself as a community of single women who were — if women were to move forward, that cadre had to single-mindedly pay attention to its education, while at the same time being surrounded by these men's colleges, with mixers and dances and so forth. And several of my — I probably was — hyperbole — but many of the women in my class, if they didn't leave early, as I did, were married within a month of graduation. So the college was, I think, worried that a married student would start sort of crumbling the base of what they felt the school existed to do, which was primarily education. Although, as I told you, you know — all right, maybe I mentioned it outside, President Mendenhall, the president of our time, read the *New York Times* every day, but every Sunday he would read the Style section to see which of the women were getting married. Because that was one of the goals. One of the — in my day, the objective would be to be very well-educated and be someone's spouse, and be the supportive member of a team. And for me — so I think that — you know, that was going on. But that didn't leave for me when I left here.

When I went to Brown, the one class that I took that was both at Smith and Brown was a constitutional law class. And when I took it here, the professor was ill, so they taped his lectures. And a group of women were sitting in a lecture hall knitting and taking notes off a tape machine. And so we had no real interaction with the professor, and you looked to the left and you looked to the right and you assumed, well, you know, these women are going to be marrying lawyers; they're not going to become lawyers.

I went to Brown, I took the second semester of that class. Obviously there were no people knitting; most of the students were men. There were women. I mean, everybody was going to go to law school. And it was almost an adversarial atmosphere, because people were testing their ideas out with one another. In my senior year at Brown, I was trying to decide what was going to happen with my life, so I went to the counseling office, and I said, "You know, I have an interest in law." And they said, "Well, we know you're a married student. What does your husband intend to do?" This was at Brown, you know? And I said, "Well, he's going to medical school." And I was told by the counselor, "You needn't worry. Law school's not for you."

And it turned out that he went to the University of Rochester medical school, and there was no law school there at all. And I did graduate work in history and became a teacher and was very happy to be a teacher. But I'm saying — that was just the zeitgeist. Women were not expected to stand on their own two feet. Many of my classmates here at Smith did become lawyers, did become doctors, but many more of us became teachers — not social workers. A few nurses — my roommate became a nurse. We were kind of well-educated ancillary people. But if you talk to them now, you know, I think everybody made their way along with the time. People returned to school, got Ph.D.s, Master's degrees, Ph.D.s in disciplines that they hadn't prepared for at Smith — became doctors, became attorneys, became civic leaders, became, you know, bright, well-dedicated teachers. But it wasn't quite in the mix when we were here. So. Does that help you?

GEIS: Definitely.

GASS: Oh, OK.

GEIS: Thank you very much.

GASS: Oh, thank you. This was terrific.

GEIS: Thank you (inaudible).

GASS: Nina, it was wonderful to meet you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kelly Hourihan, June 2014.