

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives

Northampton, MA

Margaret Miller Greer, Class of 1978

Interviewed by

Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 24, 2013

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Abstract

In this oral history, Margaret Miller Greer speaks about the critical role that the self-confidence she acquired during her Smith years played in helping her meet future challenges. She recalls favorite Smith traditions, including tea and vespers, the importance of lifelong friendships she formed at Smith and wise words from Jill Kerr Conway.

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: Greer, Margaret Miller. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 24, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Margaret Miller Greer, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 24, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2013, with:

MARGARET MILLER GREER

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: All right. So my name is Annie Ames and I am conducting an interview with Margaret Miller Greer, on May 24th, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. We'd like to thank you in advance for agreeing to participate.

GREER: You're welcome.

AMES: Why are you attending reunion this year?

GREER: I needed a hit of Smith. It had been ten years since I was here and I was ready to come back again, and one of my really best friends is here, so that's why.

AMES: Excellent. Excellent. How did you choose to attend Smith during your undergrad career?

GREER: This is going to sound really old, but they had a big library, lots of volumes. But mainly because once I stepped foot on the campus it fit my visual image of what my college should be like, and then I came up here after I was accepted and stayed with someone and I liked the whole house concept and eating breakfast in your pajamas, and it was exactly what I wanted.

AMES: Wonderful. Wonderful. So you had mentioned that your mother went to Smith as well?

GREER: My mother in-law.

AMES: Oh, your mother in-law. All right.

GREER: Yes.

AMES: All right. Well, how were your experiences different than hers?

GREER: Just I think for us the main difference was just the accessibility to men. You know, she had rules about when she had to be back in the house, and if she was going to be late they had to sign out and stuff. And we were pretty much open 24/7 to coming and going as we wanted to and, you know, if guys came to visit,

you always saw people over the weekend sleeping on the floor or whatever. So I think that was a significant difference. And she was on the cusp of the women's movement, where I was sort – when I came in '74, women's movement had already pretty much started.

AMES: Uh-huh, absolutely. Let's see, what were your expectations for your Smith experience?

GREER: Getting educated, but to be honest with you, I think that was secondary. I just wanted to meet new people, and experience new things and grow as an individual. And what I didn't expect, but what I got was this huge – make me cry -- dose of self confidence, which I didn't think about. I thought, oh, you go to college, you get educated, but it was such a powerful – I had great friends. I didn't have any sisters, so I found wonderful people here and I just felt like you felt like you could do anything coming here.

AMES: Yeah, absolutely.

GREER: I'm sorry.

AMES: Oh, no, we have a box of tissues right here conveniently.

GREER: Yeah.

AMES: Conveniently. All right. So I'm curious about your first few days at Smith. What were you thinking when you got here?

GREER: I was just telling this story to my friend. I did a very careful geographic search when I came to – before I came to Smith. I drew a circle where I lived, and I drew a point and I drew a five hour radius around it. I was not going to go to college any further than five hours from my home so that I could get home on the weekend if I needed to. And then I accepted at Smith, and my father moved everybody in my family to London. So my parents literally dropped me here at Smith and flew to London the next day so my plan sort of exploded. But my roommate, who is not here this weekend, unfortunately, was from Hawaii and so she was very far from home and two of my – like there were six of us that were very good friends. The other two that we initially met were very far from home too, California and Virginia, so we were all sort of in the same boat so I didn't think too much about it. I felt pretty good that I was able to negotiate around campus. But I must have been upset internally a little bit because I dropped like 20 pounds in the first two weeks I was here. But, I don't know you just go, you just get in and get going right away, and I had a great RA so I think that made it easier.

AMES: Yeah, wonderful.

VIDEOGRAPHER: Could you put the wire over to your side so you don't play with it?

GREER: I know, sorry.

AMES: Every single person has done that.

GREER: I'm a fidgeter. It's out of my hands. Yeah, I'll try to be good.

AMES: That's okay. So returning to Smith as an alum at reunion what have you seen change?

GREER: Buildings, a tremendous difference in the buildings. I think the thing that made me sad today is the realization that the houses don't all have dining halls in them anymore. But then when I was talking to a couple people that work at the new student union, what do you call it?

AMES: Oh, the student union.

GREER: The modern building next to Chapin.

AMES: Oh, the student center or the campus –

GREER: Yeah, it used to be Davis. And we were talking about how like the lunch has changed and how people go, I thought, oh, you can probably meet more people than you could when you were always dining at the same house. I think there is probably more outward lesbianism. I think when I was here it was here, but I don't think people talked about it. You know it wasn't that it was anyone was against it, I think it was still more a private thing, and I guess I'm glad that it's more public now because I feel like that would be a lot to hold in. And Northampton is amazingly busy, when we were here it wasn't that busy. So I guess that's it. I didn't get – you know, the students aren't here so I don't get to talk to the students, you're my first student. So but when we were here the last time it was graduation, so you got a chance to talk to them a little bit more. But I feel – I still sense that there is a strong sense of woman here and that makes me really happy.

AMES: Absolutely, that's great. So what was the process of deciding on your major?

GREER: I think I just took some psych courses and I liked it. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I like the courses. I thought I wanted to be a teacher. So I was a psych major and I was all set to do student teaching and I realized that I didn't want to do student teaching. So I thought probably a good sign that I don't want to be a teacher.

AMES: Absolutely. Absolutely. Did you have any mentors or professors that particularly inspired you during your career here?

GREER: No, I didn't. I mean it's funny to say that I really didn't.

AMES: All right. Let's see, did you go abroad?

GREER: I did not.

AMES: Did not. How did you decide not to go abroad?

GREER: I didn't really want to. I wanted to stay here my junior year and see what it was like when everybody else took off, I think I was a little bit afraid. But my parents had lived in England so I had had the opportunity to be over there, so I didn't. I don't think I regret it either, I thought I might, but I don't, at least not right now, maybe later.

AMES: Good enough. Good enough. Were you involved with any extracurriculars?

GREER: Uh-huh. SOS, is that still here?

AMES: What does it stand for?

GREER: Service Organizations of Smith, it was volunteer.

AMES: Yes. Yes. Yeah.

GREER: I did that, quire, mostly SOS I think that was the main one I did.

AMES: Okay. Great. Let's see. What was your house community like?

GREER: My house community?

AMES: Yeah.

GREER: We were an odd community because we had – we were three houses eating together as one. 150 Elm Park Annex had 15 people in it, so it's tiny. But then we came together with Park House, so there were 70 for dinner. We were a pretty diverse group of people, but yet we seemed to get along and we weren't – I mean my RA freshman year lived with her boyfriend the whole year and it was like okay, didn't seem to bother anybody and it didn't bother me. And then our RA for Park House was a married couple, which sounds absurd now, but at the time that seemed normal.

AMES: Yeah, absolutely. What were your experiences with tradition at Smith?

GREER: Tea, tea, tea, tea, snacks for exams, Thursday night cloth dinner tables. We all had our own napkin ring box, which you guys don't have anymore.

AMES: I think the boxes are still there.

GREER: Where are they though, we went to Park House, we couldn't find it?

AMES: I don't know about park house, but I have been to several houses where they still – they look like little mailboxes now.

GREER: Yeah. Well, we would have mailboxes and napkin boxes.

AMES: You had it all.

GREER: Yeah, I did – we did. The – I forget what you call it now, but the concert at Christmas time when all the chorus' sing.

AMES: Oh, it's called like vespers.

GREER: Yes, vespers, that was wonderful. I love the traditions, I mean that's, I think why I liked it, Ivy Day with the chain and stuff. But I'd say probably tea and snacks were because that was so repetitive.

AMES: Yeah. Yeah. Let's see, how would you describe a typical Smithie during your time here?

GREER: I don't think I was one. I mean there was some super-duper preppies. There wasn't – I can't think of typical description to be honest with you. I mean we had women that smoked at the dining, you know, when you ate, which is now I'm sure not allowed. We had people that were older coming here. We had people that were from private school and public school. I just – I think my experience was my house and my house was very diverse. So I guess I can say I don't have a typical Smithie description.

AMES: Okay. That's fair. We've asked that question every time, I have made a point to ask that questions of everyone who I've interviewed and it always warrants a very different response.

GREER: Really.

AMES: Absolutely.

GREER: Anything age wise, like the older women have a more –

AMES: No, it's more – it's everyone says there isn't a typical Smithie, you know?

GREER: Yeah.

AMES: And that is a timeless answer, you know, regardless of whether I'm interviewing someone, you know, Class of '58, or 2008, it's a similar response, which is very, very interesting.

VIDEOGRAPHER: And they say confident.

AMES: Yes.

VIDEOGRAPHER: But well spoken.

AMES: Confident and well spoken.

GREER: But I think that is what this place fosters, you know, you're – or least nurtured in me the sense that it's okay you are what you are.

AMES: Absolutely. Absolutely. Let's see, how would you describe the campus atmosphere during your four years here?

GREER: It was interesting, freshman year I don't think I stepped foot off campus. Our social life was here. I didn't even know what the busses were. And all of a sudden we met some people at Amherst and started taking classes there so then it was a more diverse experience, and we had some friends at Holyoke so we were going over there riding the busses, going to school there. But yet, this still always felt like home base and there was always something going on here. I had never seen *Gone with the Wind*, okay, so Christmas week or the week before *Gone with the Wind* as a freshman I'm – you know their house they're like come on we're going to see *Gone with the Wind*, because it was showing down at Sage, I think, the big auditorium, not downtown, but on campus. I'm like I don't even know what that is. Oh, you're kidding me, you know, it's like you have to come. So I just remember sitting in this auditorium packed with women watching *Gone with the Wind*, people are watching it and they're crying and I thought where have I been, you know, and it just sticks in my head 45 years later.

AMES: Absolutely, that's really an interesting image to think about, you know, so many people together in one place.

GREER: Yeah, and my RA from freshman year was a big swimmer, she wasn't on the team, but she thought that swimming was very important, activity was very important stress wise. So she said to all of us little, you know, beanies, "You need to swim and I'm swimming and this is where it is if you want to go." And I remember coming up the pond walk on a fall night, so it was dark or getting dark, having been swimming and Park House was all lit up for dinner and I thought I belong here, this is perfect, and I only went swimming because my RA said to swim. You know but it's something I did for four years.

- AMES: Absolutely, yeah. Yeah. So continuing with the theme of social activities and social life, what was the dating culture like at Smith?
- GREER: I don't – we use – you know, we would go down to Yale to see friends there, but mostly we hung out at Amherst. We lived across the street from Sessions Annex, which at that time was – had guys in it. So the guys would come over and hang with some of our upper classmen, so there were men around. But none of us really dated very seriously in college, I mean we had lots of guy friends, but I don't think – I look at my closest friends and say uh-huh, we didn't. We knew lots of people, but it was more like going to a mixer.
- AMES: Okay. Let's see, did Smith foster an environment where discussions regarding sexuality could take place?
- GREER: I think it probably did, I wasn't exposed to it, do you know what I mean, it wasn't really in my world at our house, but I think some of the other houses it was.
- AMES: All right. Were you involved in student activism of any kind?
- GREER: No.
- AMES: All right. Were you aware or involved in the political climate at all during that time?
- GREER: No, and I'm still not. Sorry, I just think we should work together. I don't care if you're Republican or Democrat so my husband would say I'm politically apolitical.
- AMES: I like that, that's good. All right, did you face any challenges while you were at Smith?
- GREER: Nothing significant, I mean other than, you know, learning to balance your time, and do your laundry and organize yourself. I was pretty lucky.
- AMES: All right. Did your Smith education, and subsequent self confidence and – I guess I'd just say self confidence, did that help you deal with any challenges that have happened post Smith?
- GREER: Uh-huh, everyday pretty much that's why I said I needed to come back because you come back here and it's sort of like infuses you with this sense of, you know, you can do it. As I said to you, my only daughter was born with Prader-Willi Syndrome, which is a very rare disability, and I think it just gave me the sense that I can take care of her, and we can do this and we can get through this. And Jenny has very low muscle tone, and very – and no metabolism, so she's got this odd combination of a desire to eat all the time, which is the Prader-Willi, but no coordination to do running and all of that very easily. And so I signed her up for

piano lessons and my – we sat at her first recital and my husband turned to me and he goes, "I would have never signed her up for piano lessons, you know, she doesn't have muscle coordination and all that." She's sitting there playing, you know, her piece and it was a lower piece than maybe someone her age could play, but she had memorized it and all that, and I thought this is just because of Smith, you know, like just try it, see if it works so.

AMES: Absolutely. Yeah, that's a really beautiful story thank you for sharing that.

GREER: Oh, you're welcome.

AMES: What are some of your richest memories of your time at Smith?

GREER: Just sitting and talking with the girls, taking care of each other, making sure everybody was back off the bus, or making sure if anyone had had a little too much that, you know, they were safely tucked in. But just this sitting and talking over dinner, or whenever. Sitting on the porch at the Annex back in the day, this is going to sound really dated, you had to get one phone and then it had a 40 foot cord on it. So if you wanted to make a phone call, you had to drag the phone into your room. So even though the door was shut you can't help but hear stuff and so you were thrown into this immensely personal, interpersonal environment and I loved it. You know and just what are you wearing, can I wear your dress, or, you know, what about this, and what exams are you taking and what courses and it just – I loved it. I don't remember hardly any of my classes. I don't remember hardly any of my professors. But I don't forget the time I spent with my friends and that's horrible to say because probably nowadays, I think people are probably closer to their professors. But for me it was all about the women.

AMES: Yeah, and everyone's Smith experience is different and community is something that Smith fosters here and it's – you're an example of how it really, really mattered.

GREER: Yeah, it did.

AMES: It really mattered and it carried over. How did Smith prepare you for the world after graduation?

GREER: You know it's funny, I think you probably have a bigger career development office now, and a bigger career push and all that, and we had it at the time, but I just – I graduated from here, ripped off fifteen copies of my resume and went to Boston for a week and just went door to door, filled out applications, turned in a resume and I had a job in like two weeks. It was such a different environment, now you can't do that anymore. But Smith's just like yeah go do it, you can do this and I don't I just felt confident. And I never worked in my field, I never worked in psychology. But I thought it was a good liberal arts education, which is why I came here.

AMES: Absolutely, yeah. Were there ways in which Smith didn't prepare you for the world after you graduated?

GREER: I was lucky because I didn't have anyone around me really in my house have a trauma or anything like that while I was in school. I mean one friend at Amherst lost his dad, but most everyone else started and finished with their family intact, and no one got really sick or anything like that, where now you hear stories of cancer and all of that. So I think in a way I was little naïve going out of here thinking that life was a bowl of cherries, and it isn't always a bowl of cherries. But Jill Ker Conway said at our baccalaureate that you should never let dust bother you and I have embraced that fully. You know like there is more important things than dusting and so I try to remember that when you get bogged down going, oh, job, house, family, dust; let the dust go so.

AMES: Yeah, absolutely. All right, well we're starting to wind down here and we've got about, you know, five or six minutes left so I'd love to ask you a few closing questions.

GREER: That would be fine.

AMES: All right. When you think back to your time at Smith, what comes to mind first?

GREER: Lifelong friendships.

AMES: Yeah. Okay. What keeps you coming back for reunion?

GREER: Memories, I think to going back to when you were a youth, but also just to see the continuation of the college.

AMES: Who have you become since you graduated Smith?

GREER: Caring, somewhat funny sometimes, empathetic, I think those would be the three, and cute as a button.

AMES: What difference has your Smith education made?

GREER: I met my husband, he went to Amherst, only because of one of my roommates so that was significant. But I also think it just – I have a lot of self confidence.

AMES: Yeah, absolutely. All right, and for our closing question, as an alumni do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

GREER: I think you need to be able to roll with the punches, best laid plans do not always come to fruition, and that it's incredibly important to laugh every single day because life can weigh you down.

AMES: All right. Well, thank you so much.

GREER: Thank you. It was lovely to meet you.

AMES: Absolutely, thank you so much.

GREER: Cherish your time here.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, August 2013