

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives

Northampton, MA

Theanne Griffith, Class of 2008

Interviewed by

Rachel Klinger, Class of 2015

May 18, 2013

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Abstract

In this oral history, Theanne Griffith speaks of choosing to attend Smith because of its neuroscience program, her involvement with the Black Students Alliance and the Smith Democrats, as well as the Underrepresented Science Students group on campus. She speaks of the overall importance of maintaining a diverse student population and how her experiences with issues of diversity at Smith prepared her for her future.

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: Griffith, Theanne. Interview by Rachel Klinger. Video recording, May 18, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Theanne Griffith, interview by Rachel Klinger, transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 18, 2013, with:

THEANNE GRIFFITH

by: RACHEL KLINGER

KLINGER: This is Rachel Klinger and I'm here conducting an oral history interview on May 18th, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So, could you just say your name first and last for the record?

GRIFFITH: My name is Theanne Griffith.

KLINGER: Perfect. Thank you so much for agreeing to be here.

GRIFFITH: Thank you for having me.

KLINGER: Yes. So, why did you choose to attend the reunion this year?

GRIFFITH: I absolutely loved my time at Smith, and I was very eager to be back on campus, as well as to reunite with a lot of friends that I may not keep up with on a daily, or even monthly basis. But, that when we see each other it's picking up as if no time had passed. And reunion is the perfect place to do that, so --

KLINGER: How lovely. How did you come to be at Smith?

GRIFFITH: I was actually in high school. I believe it was my junior year, maybe towards the end of my junior year it must have been. My guidance counselor recommended that I apply for the Women of Distinction Program. Now, I was a little lazy in high school, so I didn't. But, Smith got on my radar and they had a neuroscience program. And it was a small liberal arts college, and those were the two things that I was looking for. The whole women's college, it wasn't a factor that made me apply here or hindered my wanting to apply here. My mom was super excited about it. But, I on the other hand, was just like, "Oh, they have neuroscience and small liberal arts. Cool."

KLINGER: Cool. What was it like for you when you first arrived?

GRIFFITH: Oh, well the first first time I arrived was a visit, probably sometime my senior year as well, I think. And it was just beautiful. And I knew once I got here, once I had a tour of the campus, saw the rooms, saw everything, it was just I knew this is where I wanted to be. And then when I arrived here on campus moving in I realized, "Yep. I made the right choice. This

is exactly where I want to be.” It was beautiful and it just felt so homey, you know?

KLINGER: Cool. And what were some of the extra-curricular just like clubs or orgs, or anything you were involved in.

GRIFFITH: So, my first year I was involved in – actually all four years I was involved in the Black Student Alliance. And two of those years I was on the executive board. My first year I was also part of the Smith Democrats, and I actually went canvassing and stuff because that’s when Kerry was going against Bush. So, my efforts were a little bit in vain but what can you do? So, I was part of the Smith Democrats. I was also part of the Underrepresented Science Students. So they have a peer-mentoring group and I participated as a mentee, and also as a mentor eventually. So those were the main ones, I think I did other things but I don’t remember now so. Five years actually does stuff to your ability to recall these things. But those are the main ones that I was involved in.

KLINGER: Cool. So I’m assuming that you majored in neuroscience.

GRIFFITH: I did.

KLINGER: Is that something that you always knew you wanted to do?

GRIFFITH: Yeah. So ever since I was little I was interested in like doctor, I wanted to be a vet for a while. And then in 11th grade in my AP Bio class we did a neuroscience unit. And I was like, “This is what I need to be studying,” so, yes. I also majored in Spanish though. I did a double major.

KLINGER: Cool. Were there any professors or mentors that really inspired during your time here?

GRIFFITH: Oh most definitely. So there’s two. One is my advisor, who was my advisor all four years as my pre-major advisor, and then continued on. And that’s Adam Hall. And I worked in his lab all four years, I was able to publish two papers while I was – well, not while I was there, but my name were on two papers from the lab. And he’s awesome. I’ve seen him as often as I can. There’s an annual neuroscience meeting put on by the Society for Neuroscience, so every time he’s there I see him. Also, Mary Harrington. I took a class with her, it was Experimental Methods in Neuroscience, and she was just great. And I’ve also kept in contact with her. I see her at the annual neuroscience meeting as well. So, those two definitely have been great mentors, and continue to be mentors to this day. I’m actually just coming, not too long ago, from the Neuroscience Social that they had so I got to see both of them.

KLINGER: Cool. Do you think that your house community influenced your time here?

GRIFFITH: Yes and no. I wasn't the – like my first year I did want to be in a more communal setting and I wanted to have that experience. But I'm an only child, and I'm used to kind of being by myself so I enjoy the house community. I enjoy that like being an option. But at the same time it wasn't something that was very important to me, you know. I liked having it there, maybe that's really selfish of me. But I liked having it there when, you know, when I wanted it to be. So, yeah.

KLINGER: Can you talk a little bit more about your work with BSA?

GRIFFITH: Ah, sure. So my first year I just joined as just a regular member. And then I was – for two years I was the Mwangi Center Coordinator, or Mwangi Cultural Center Coordinator -- I forget what it was called -- which is basically, kind of -- I managed the house. So when people – because Mwangi is shared by all of the unity orgs and so, but because BSA kind of founded it, we have control – or I don't know if that's still the case. But we had the control over who would rent out spaces and when, and so I was kind of in charge of opening it and locking it and doing reservations, and kind of like the historian of Mwangi, making sure I took pictures and stuff like that. And you know, I had a great time with the BSA. In fact, all my friends now, not all of them but a lot of my friends now, are friends that I made while I was a member of the BSA. And put on a lot of parties and definitely did things we weren't supposed to do. And hid out in Mwangi, almost got shut down by public safety because we were having an after – it was like an unauthorized after-party, but we just turned off all the lights and they kind of moved on. So, yeah, it was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun. I have a lot of good memories from my time in BSA.

KLINGER: How would you describe on campus culture, and do you think it shifted during the four years you were here?

GRIFFITH: I can't say that it shifted. I think you come in – I think what shifts is how you – you come in as 18. You're kind of very young, and you leave at 22. And you're still young, but you're not so naïve or so, I don't know what the word is. Almost immature, I would say. And so when you first come in, like, you see things and things happen and you react very strongly to them. And you get really upset about things and you want to change the world. And not that you don't want to change the world anymore, but you realize that there's certain ways that you can go about creating change, and sometimes it's not always yelling, or you know, like egging. No egging of houses. But just, I don't know. I think that when I first got to Smith it was a little bit of a culture shock because while, you know, it's a decently diverse campus, you know I came from Virginia and the black population was 25 percent, 30 percent of my school. Whereas at Smith it's like six. So that was a little bit, just a little bit though, because my mom's white so it wasn't that much of a culture shock. But a little bit, you know.

And certain events took place while I was at Smith that I was not happy about and I think that – I wouldn't say that the culture really changed, I think it's just how you respond to those type of things, changes. And so your view on – or just kind of like your outlook, I guess, changes more so than the culture itself. But that is part of the process. That's kind of how the world works, and I don't even know if I would want to eliminate those bad things that happened, because then how do you respond to things when you go out in the world. Because the world's never going to be erased of conflict.

KLINGER: Could you speak specifically to what those – when you say, like, bad things?

GRIFFITH: Well, I know that before I got to Smith there was a lot of like, kind of undertone, kind of bad feelings because a woman had had – like she was gay and she was black. And so she had, like, a hangman with a noose drawn on her white board. And it said, like, “Die dyke bitch,” or “Die, nigger, die.” Yeah, it was pretty intense. It was really bad. And it's weird because I don't know who would do that. Like, I can't think of, like, who would do that at Smith. When I think of Smith, that's not what I think about at all. And then also, while I was here, I believe – I know she was Muslim. I don't know what country she was from, if she was Arabic or not. But I know she was Muslim and she had something similar on the white board like, “Take more showers Muslim something or other.” Things like that. I believe it was my senior year also, this incident wasn't so bad. I think this is more reflective of our society's ignorance versus an actual like aggressive hate kind of thing. But a young woman, it was like come as your favorite celebrity but it was --

KLINGER: I've heard about this.

GRIFFITH: -- like --yeah, it was a blackface. But it wasn't celebrity, it was like celebrity rehab or something like that. And she as Whitney Houston, she put on an afro and like painted her skin brown. And Whitney Houston didn't have an afro since like '84, and so it just – and that, I think that's one of those things where you look back and I feel like the situation could have been handled differently. Maybe people came at her more aggressively than they should have, because she wasn't trying to upset anybody. She was trying to be funny. And so things like that, you know. Those would be the main incidences that I can think of.

KLINGER: Do you feel like the administration or, like, Smith College as a whole kind of supported the student body --

GRIFFITH: I do, I do. I feel, like, it's very difficult because I think a lot of students demanded something – like, we want that to never happen again. And of course you don't want it to happen again, but people come in, you know, with their preconceived notions of how the world should be and what is

acceptable and what is not. And maybe for them homosexuality is not acceptable. I don't know why you'd come to Smith if that was the case, but you know, and there's nothing that Smith can do to control that.

Now, I think what Smith – I think Smith did a decent job of, you know, we had a sit down with a bunch of students in the campus center and everyone could kind of voice their opinion. But I think what Smith just needs to do, and I think what they, for the most part, have done is just, say, like that's not appropriate here and we don't tolerate that. And that's not what Smith is about. And I think that's more or less all they can do. You can have as many diversity required classes as you want to, but if someone's not interested in changing their point of view then they're not. And I think what is more helpful is just maintaining a diverse student body. And maintaining the fact that you have people from all types of races, all types of socioeconomic levels, sexual orientations, I think all of that is what's much more important because it's through interacting with a diverse group of women that my views on things – I wouldn't say they've changed, but more so matured. You know, like when I came to Smith I had friends who were gay, but they were my gay friend this and that, you know? It's like, "Oh yeah, I'm not racist. I have a black friend." You know, it was kind of that same thing. And now some of my closest friends are gay, but that's not what I think about when I think them. That's like the last thing I think about usually when I think of them. You know, so it's more so – and I feel like that might not have happened had I gone to a different or a less diverse environment.

So I don't even know if I'm answering your questions, I talk a lot so I'm sorry. I don't know what you actually originally asked me, so I'm sorry if I didn't get to that point or not.

KLINGER: You had a really coherent train of thought.

GRIFFITH: Okay.

KLINGER: It was totally right on with what I asked so don't worry about it.

GRIFFITH: Okay. Sorry.

KLINGER: Oh no, no. So, can you talk a little bit about, like, the political climate during those four years? You mentioned that you were canvassing for the Dems in sort of like Bush's second year in office -- second term.

GRIFFITH: Yeah. Yeah. I know people were definitely very upset when Bush got re-elected, and I was also very upset. I didn't expect Kerry to win because I just don't think – it was like expecting – who ran against Obama? Was it McCain? No, no, no. The second person. See? Romney. See, he was that like unimportant. I forgot who he was. It was kind of something like that. I just didn't expect him to win. So, politically speaking, I don't know. I think there was a lot of worry, especially among the gay

community at Smith, that things would be very unfriendly towards them with, you know, do-right because he was a bible-thumper, or whatever that's called. But generally speaking, I don't know. I'm not a super political person when it comes to politics. I think I'm more of a local activist kind of person, not big picture. Because big picture politics is all the same right, left to me, you know. Minor differences, but kind of all the same.

So I probably couldn't answer that question very well, besides to say that I remember my first year a lot of people being very upset about the whole thing. Now, I know people – ah, yes. I'm lying, I do remember. I'm sorry, all these things blend together. So, my senior year is when the primaries were. And it was going down between Hillary and Obama, so you had your Team Hillary and Team Obama. And I was definitely Team Obama and a good friend of mine was Team Hillary. And looking back, I'm not sure who would have done it better. I think I'm still Team Obama. I hope she runs next year, though. But that was a lot of fun. That was a lot of fun my senior year, kind of like, there were people who were Team Edwards and it's like good lord. Thank God that didn't happen because we found out later that he was not the -- I mean his ideals may have been okay on certain aspects, but he definitely had some morality issues. So yeah, that was a lot of fun my senior year kind of betting on who would win those primaries.

KLINGER: Cool. Did you have a really tight friend group while you were here?

GRIFFITH: I did. It definitely changed a little bit. I kind of -- I had a group of friends that I was very close with and then I went away and studied abroad and I think we begin ever so slightly more distant. And I also gained other friends, you know, I'm not the type of person who -- I don't form very deep connections very quickly. You know. Like I have one best friend from when I was 11 and other than that, besides my Smith friends now, so the people that I came here with are those friends that I had originally. But I definitely did a little bit of, you know, kind of moving and shaking, like I went to -- went abroad and I met a lot of cool people there and I got really involved in the Spanish language department, and so then I kind of had this other group of friends and I was kind of a little bit all over the place. But like I -- nonetheless, despite that, I feel like those -- at the time it felt like, "Oh, I've distanced myself so much from them, like it's never going to be the same," and that's so not true. It's so elementary. You know, those people that I was really close with my first year and my second year are the same people who I'm very close with now. In fact, I live, you know, serendipitously, I ended up moving five or six blocks away from my person that, you know, I was very close with my first year. We were in the same house and she's from Chicago and I moved to Chicago and not intentionally ended up moving five/six blocks away from her. So things come full circle, you know.

KLINGER: Could you talk a little bit about your abroad experience.

GRIFFITH: Oh, it was the best experience of my life, partly because I met my boyfriend who I'm still with to this day. So, but I ended -- I went to Chile. I wanted to go somewhere that was farther away than like Mexico, or let's say Dominican Republic. I know Smith has a Puebla program, but I really wasn't interested in going to a Smith program per se. I kind of wanted to branch out a little bit, and I also wanted to go further away. So I ended up going to Chile and it was fabulous. It was -- it's a beautiful country. I perfected my Spanish, met my boyfriend as I said. So I ended up using my Praxis money to go back to Chi -- so this was -- so I went to Chile the Fall semester of my junior year and I met him. I wanted to go back, but I didn't want to -- I was a Smithie about it. I didn't want to go back and just like kind of mess around. You know. So I got Praxis money and I ended up working in the Catholic University there for a summer internship, and the professor offered me when I graduated to come back and work and I was like, "Yes."

And so I went back and I ended up working there for two years afterwards. So study abroad definitely -- definitely 100 percent changed my life. Like I -- I'm not exact -- I couldn't even begin to describe like what my life may or may not be if I hadn't studied abroad, because it just kind of took me in a whole other direction, personally and professionally, you know. Because I ended up, like I said, working in a lab there for two years, and that's not something that's very common, you know, for an American student to go abroad, so -- and work in a lab. So it definitely -- it was a blast. I was drunk a lot. I went to class most of the time, but definitely not all the time, which was great as well. No science classes. Travelled. I went to Argentina. I took a 24-hour bus ride like an idiot, to -- from Santiago to Buenos Aires. It was cheaper, but it was hard. Partied in Buenos Aires, did Machu Picchu, climbed up Machu Picchu, which is also kind of -- it was a good decision, I'm just not that athletic so it was a little challenging with the thin air, but it was fun. I had a great, great, great experience. I wouldn't change a thing. If -- that's one thing that I think in my life if I could do it over, just exactly the same way, not changing, no regrets; I would do it again. It was amazing. It was so much fun. So.

KLINGER: That's cool. What kind of work are you doing now?

GRIFFITH: Currently I am a -- in my third year, just kind of middle towards the end of my third year as a PhD student in neuroscience at Northwestern. So I'm in -- like I said I'm in Chicago. I just did my thesis proposal and that was challenging, but I'm glad it's over and things are going really well. I like my lab and I like the people I work with and I like Chicago. So.

KLINGER: Cool. Well, do you have any advice for future, or current Smithies?

GRIFFITH: Yes. Do things that you don't want to do. Like what I was telling you earlier. Go sit by the pond for ten minutes of your day. Stop and realize how beautiful the area that you are in is. Take classes that you might not think you have time for but you're interested in. Study abroad. Definitely study abroad. Doesn't matter if you don't speak another language. Go to England. Go to Australia. A friend of mine actually -- we have very similar stories. She was '07, she went in the Fall of her senior -- or excuse me, the Spring of her senior year to Australia and met her current boyfriend there as well. So they've also been together seven years. So definitely -- not that you should go abroad to find a boyfriend. I'm just saying that going abroad could potentially change your life in unexpected ways.

KLINGER: I actually just interviewed her earlier.

GRIFFITH: Oh, really? Who?

KLINGER: The woman who met her boyfriend in Australia. I don't remember her name though.

GRIFFITH: Oh, I didn't know she was here. I don't think she's here. It might be another one.

KLINGER: There's another one.

GRIFFITH: I'm telling you, Smithies have a lot of luck abroad. It's a really -- you know, it's a very -- it's a fun time.

KLINGER: Well, there you go.

GRIFFITH: There you go.

KLINGER: Are there any other particularly memorable moments or stories that you want to share?

GRIFFITH: Oh, there are a lot. Okay. I don't know if I -- whatever, I graduated; they gave me my diploma. I got -- I never did anything illegal while I was at Smith, except during senior week or whatever I definitely got high in my dorm and then we went down and stole all of the food from the -- the class of 1955, because we had the munchies really badly. And so that -- I mean, there are -- that's probably like the stoner, like in me, moment, or whatever. But that was -- I was very good. I didn't do -- like I drank and stuff, but I didn't do -- I never smoked weed or anything like that. But man, we were high as hell that night and then they just left out all these pretzels and Cheetos, and so we went down and took the bags and went up to my room and so -- that was definitely a memorable moment.

Another memorable moment was obviously streaking in the Quad. Everyone kind of has to do that, especially if you live in the Quad. And

then just generally speaking, those are kind of like fun, silly, memorable moments, but I just had great professors while I was here. You know, and so all of those little times were for me at the time they may have been like, "Oh, God. I want to shoot myself because this is really hard," you know. Ended up really being just -- they were all -- it's really hard to pick out one of those like memorable moments in terms of academic-wise because I just had such. I was so lucky. I really had great, great professors, you know. Made a really good choice coming here. So. If I do say so myself.

KLINGER: Do you have any like favorite Smith traditions?

GRIFFITH: Primal scream is a lot of fun and then tea. I had to be careful though because I did tea faithfully my first year and I got really fat, and so I kind of like, I told myself, "Okay. Tea is only going to be once a month and you're going to have one cookie and that's it." So tea and primal scream are a lot of fun. Definitely.

KLINGER: Cool. Is there anything else you want to share?

GRIFFITH: I love Smith. Yay! My daughter is going to come here whether she wants to or not and I hope and that's about it.

KLINGER: Well, thank you so much for taking the --

GRIFFITH: Thank you for having me. This was a lot of fun.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, August 2013.