

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Ginna Rohan Hall, Class of 1985

Interviewed by
Rachel Dean, Class of 2013

May 15, 2010

Abstract

In this oral history, Ginna Rohan Hall discusses growing up in Northampton and how that impacted her time at Smith, her experiences living in Baldwin, Northrop, and Morris, and her work as a psychology major. She also describes issues of diversity at Smith, and the impact that Smith has had on her life.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Emily Crockett at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Rohan Hall, Ginna. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 15, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ginna Rohan Hall, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Rohan Hall, Ginna. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ginna Rohan Hall, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010, 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 15, 2010, with:

GINNA ROHAN HALL

by: RACHEL DEAN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DEAN: Are we ready? This is Rachel Dean and I am conducting an interview with Ginna Hall on May 15, 2010 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for being — agreeing to be a part of this.

ROHAN HALL: Well, you're welcome.

DEAN: What were the —

GEIS: Can I just double-check this, so it's not Rohan?

DEAN: Oh, Ginna?

ROHAN HALL: I'm using Rohan Hall here because it's Ginna Rohan Hall is my real name, and Rohan is my maiden name.

GEIS: Okay, great.

ROHAN HALL: So people look me up online or whatever. So that's —

DEAN: Okay.

ROHAN HALL: They'll look for Rohan. It's not, yeah.

GEIS: It's just a word.

ROHAN HALL: Yeah.

DEAN: Okay, thank you. What were the benefits in choosing Smith over other schools for you?

ROHAN HALL: I grew up in Northampton and there was never a question of, if I would go to Smith, it was always, when you go to Smith. I grew up playing in this— when it was a gym we used to bowl in the basement, and I would play basketball here, and we would run around on campus, and go to the

bulb show, I mean I just kind of grew up on campus and I always thought of it as my school even when I was a child, so I only applied to Smith. I applied early decision and luckily I got in. (laughs) So I think the benefits of coming to school here —you mean, over versus other schools? I didn't even choose any other schools; this is the only option for me. I loved it, and I wanted to come here.

DEAN: What were the reactions of your neighbors and friends and peers and your family in attending Smith?

ROHAN HALL: When I told my English teacher at Northampton High School, my AP English teacher, she said, of course, and that made me feel really good. And my mother worked on campus, she worked in the Development Office and so she was obviously very positive about Smith and a lot of my friends from school came here, there were five of us from my year who came. They were obviously very positive. And people who don't know Smith, they say, oh, is that the girl's school? And I say, no, it's a women's college.

DEAN: Were the older women in your family college graduates, and then did that influence you at all?

ROHAN HALL: Yes, all of the women are college graduates, and my grandmother was the librarian, my grandfather was Director of Development and I think it was always just assumed that I would go to college, not necessarily Smith or a women's college, but, yeah, that was part of our upbringing.

DEAN: Were you — how did Smith live up to your expectations or your hopes and/or fears?

ROHAN HALL: I think students here are taken very seriously here, and paid attention to because it's a small school, and I think that lived up to my expectations that we were — I was taken very seriously. I got to pursue a lot of different things. I got to take a lot of different kinds of classes. Everything is so small and, not customized, but it's a very, very nurturing environment I felt, and that lived up to my expectation. And I did very badly in chemistry and I got to meet with the Dean to talk about how badly I was doing in chemistry, and I thought that was actually great that someone was paying that much attention to how I was doing.

DEAN: What clubs and organizations and/or teams were you involved in, and how did that influence your experience?

ROHAN HALL: I didn't do very many activities, I didn't do teams. I had done a lot of running in high school and Peter (unclear) just really wanted me to run, and I just was so tired of running. (laughs) Thought I'd take a break. But I think most of the friends I made were through the houses, you know, I

lived in three different houses and those are the friends that I've kept. So it was more living than activities.

DEAN: So what houses were you in, and how did that house community affect your overall experience at Smith?

ROHAN HALL: I lived in Baldwin my first two years, then Northrop, then I was the Head Resident of Morris, and every house has its own personality. Morris is very quiet, very studious, which is very good if you're a senior. I think everyone worked—really, was working very hard and was actually very competitive in that house. Baldwin is more of a party house, that's how it was when I was there, and I did a lot of partying my first two years which wasn't so great. And then I got more serious about it, so—

DEAN: Were you involved with any activism at Smith?

ROHAN HALL: No.

DEAN: Okay. Did you go abroad, and if so—

ROHAN HALL: No.

DEAN: Why not, or why?

ROHAN HALL: There were so many classes that I wanted to take, I was a psychology major, and I plotted ahead, I was, like, how am I going to fit all these classes into the semesters I have left, and I was enjoying being on campus so much, and I wanted to stay. And now I wish I did go away, but, you know, it was fantastic for me to stay on campus then.

DEAN: So you're a psychology major. Who were your most influential professors and/or mentors and why?

ROHAN HALL: Jill and Peter de Villiers, fantastic, just so caring and brilliant and impressive in a classroom, and, I think those are my — those are the two that really stick with me, that had the most influence on me.

DEAN: How did they influence you in, like, after your college experience, do you still remember, like, certain experiences you had with them, or instances in the classroom?

ROHAN HALL: I remember speaking to them a lot outside of class. I have one of their books, Language Acquisition, and I still look at it. I really just treasure that time with them. (laughs) I don't think it influenced me career wise, like I didn't pursue a career in psychology. But I think the fact that they were taking me, as I said, very seriously and encouraging me was helpful.

DEAN: How would you describe the campus atmosphere while you were a student?

ROHAN HALL: People studied a lot, and people partied a lot, so it was that kind of, work hard/play hard mentality. And it was also very silly. Like, people— we had all kinds of theme parties, like boxer shorts parties, and nightgown parties, and, I don't know, leprechaun parties. And they just — we did all kinds of crazy things like that, that kind of broke the tension of studying so much. (laughs)

DEAN: How did you see President Jill Kerr Conway as a president and was— how did you see her as an individual or how did you see her react to or interact with the students on campus?

ROHAN HALL: I am really impressed by Jill Kerr Conway, I consider her a role model. I've read her books and I have followed her career because I think she's such an inspirational woman, and I think — I was glad that our time here overlapped. And I think that she's not — she's not warm and cuddly, but she is so powerful and inspiring.

DEAN: Did you see any issues of diversity on campus with gender, religion, sexuality, or class?

ROHAN HALL: My student — my freshman year roommate is African American, and I got to know a lot of her friends, and I think I had a different experience here than if I didn't have her as a freshman. I don't think I would have been able to make friends within that community because it felt very not integrated to me at that time. I don't know what it's like now. But there were so few women of color here at that time, extremely few.

DEAN: How do you think that impacted the Smith community that there was so few, and how did your roommate and your relationship with her shape your experience and your life?

ROHAN HALL: She taught me a lot, I think. I grew up — I mean, Northampton High School, we had two African American boys and there were no other students of color when I was there, it was so white. So for me to roommate — have her as a roommate was just such an eye opener, I just learned so much about my assumptions and how I thought the world was. It was crucial, it was a huge part of my being at Smith and just growing as a person. And I think there are a lot of other challenges on campus with diversity and sexual orientation and a lot of that was just sort of coming to the surface a bit and being discussed and people were being more open, but it was still like baby steps at that point. So I didn't really get involved so much with that.

- DEAN: How did you see the students and the administration reacting to those things coming to the surface?
- ROHAN HALL: I don't remember so much of that; it's just so long ago. (laughs)
- DEAN: Yeah. What were some of the challenges, if any, when you were at Smith for you personally while you were here?
- ROHAN HALL: Doing the work, doing all that work, so much work, and just integrating, I think, becoming part of the community and being a townie, you know. I had a little bit different perspective and people would look at me a little bit differently, oh, people really live here, and grocery shop, and go to the dentist. I was like, yeah, there's this whole world off campus, you know. But I could see both sides of that. That was a little bit challenging, I think. Also, to take school as seriously as it should be taken, because my high school is just down the road, so I went to high school and then I went to Smith, and I was like, oh, I know what this is going to be like. Well, it was so much more intense and it was like a big bucket of cold water on me, like, oh, man, this is not just high school down the road, this is like a whole different level of intensity. So I had to ramp up.
- DEAN: Can you elaborate more on, like, being from Northampton and being — integrating into the Smith experience?
- ROHAN HALL: It's interesting, because, if you're from Northampton — I don't know if they still do it, but we had to wait until everyone else was settled on campus before we got our room assignment if we wanted to live on campus. So every year I moved on after everyone else, so I missed all the, you know, beginning — just stuff that happens, you know, so that's a little bit challenging. And also just getting to know friends, because most of the friends you make are in your house and after class, so if you're only seeing people, like — before you've moved on campus — after class, it's hard to make friendships. So that was just like a little bit of transition at that time. And just being the odd duck, a little bit; you know, not huge, but just being a little bit different because you're from here. Yeah.
- DEAN: You said that you were adjusted academically— like it's a lot harder and stuff. How did your professors and your Dean, like, how did they help you and assist you? What resources did you use?
- ROHAN HALL: Oh, gosh. I don't know, or remember. I think I was just figuring it out, like working harder. Just working a lot harder. (laughs) You know, like, getting that stack of reading and thinking, oh, it's so much they can't possibly expect me to get— Oh, no, they do really to get through all of it, so (laughs) just like learning that. And I think like I mentioned being called into the Dean's office was like, oh, yeah, they're watching, I'd

better do this. No, really, I have to do this. So, I was like I got to do this (unclear).

DEAN: Did you — Do you remember your commencement address, or any commencement addresses you attended, and did they influence you and leave an impact?

ROHAN HALL: No. We were the only class that didn't have the Ivy Day.

DEAN: Oh, right.

ROHAN HALL: Because it rained. So going through that period this morning was so great, it was so great to see all the other women lined up and to see the graduates and how sparkly and like shiny these young girls are and they're going out into the world, it was great. But I don't remember much about commencement. I remember all my friends came over at my house, we had a little dinner party and all the people who were still in town with their parents came over and it was really fun dinner at my house, and that was wonderful. We still talk about that.

(laughter)

DEAN: What did you do the summer after you graduated, if you remember?

ROHAN HALL: Looked for a job. I looked for a job in Northampton, I thought I would stay in Northampton. And then I looked for six months and I couldn't find anything that I could do or was appropriate for me or that anyone was interested in hiring me for. So then I moved to Boston with another recent grad, we got an apartment and then I just made my way from there. But, yeah.

DEAN: So who have you become since Smith?

ROHAN HALL: I'm surprised at who I became, because I didn't really have predictions, like it wasn't like I wanted to have certain milestones by X, Y and Z, but I ended up getting married when I was 30 and now I have three little kids, and I found what I love to do as my career is marketing communications, I'm a writer. And I have four clients and I feel so grateful that I have all of this kind of in balance with the work and my kids and my husband, how it all came together. So 25 years later, I'm pretty happy with the way things are.

DEAN: Do you think Smith in its, like, we call it the Smith bubble, that you were led to believe that you could do everything, and— or that you could or couldn't, like, you were — had just the women-only environment and then going out into the real world, how do you think that —

- ROHAN HALL: I think you're much — Smith is much smarter about it now, but at the time, it was very abstract. What we did on campus in school was very intellectual and very absorbing, but it was not career-oriented, no one had internships. Like, no one did the things that you all are going to do. And so we all sort of came to a screeching halt, like, what? Like, how do we connect what we just did for the last four years with a job? Like, what are even some real job that — we all applied to insurance companies, banks, investment management companies, you know, these sort of very traditional and structured positions because nobody really knew what else there was. So I think it took us awhile to figure out what else there was, and there's a lot, but it— I think that they're— I'm hoping that they're smarter now about that career development path. Because that was the missing piece.
- DEAN: Yeah, we have a whole office and everything, yeah.
- ROHAN HALL: Yeah, I mean we did but it wasn't— they didn't really do that much for us. That's my memory of it, anyway; they could have done a lot but in, you know, that's what it felt like at the time.
- DEAN: Looking back, would you— if you have daughters, would you encourage your daughters or other young women to go to Smith, and why?
- ROHAN HALL: Absolutely. I'm already planning— I have six-year-old twin girls and I'm planning on bringing them to the next Reunion when they're eleven because I just want to stay in the dorm with them, and have them march in the Ivy League Parade with me, and just see all the traditions and see all these women, and see the campus. I think it would be a great experience for them. And I'm always— my niece went to Mount Holyoke and I was like, come on, just down the road, so I always encourage anyone applying to school to look at Smith.
- DEAN: Why do you come back? Was this your first Reunion, or —
- ROHAN HALL: It's my first Reunion. I was nervous, I didn't know what to expect. I didn't necessarily want to come back. I just didn't know what it would be like. I'm very happy I'm here, yeah. I'll come back next time.
- DEAN: Why are you enjoying it so much?
- ROHAN HALL: I've run into so many people that I didn't expect to see, and my freshman year roommate— she was in Papua New Guinea for three years and before that she was in the Netherlands, I mean I have not physically been able to see her in 15 years. So to be able to spend hours and hours talking with her is incredible. Yeah.

- DEAN: That's great. What difference has a Smith education meant to you, and would you make the same choice if you had to make it again?
- ROHAN HALL: I would make the same choice, yes. I think it's — it really gave me a solid grounding for my (unclear). I think there are other great schools, of course, and it's not right for everyone, but I don't see how you could get a better education, I mean, it's unbelievable. This small with these resources that we have here, it's really amazing.
- DEAN: So what difference has it made in your life if you had gone to another school?
- ROHAN HALL: Oh. Probably everything would be different. Like I wouldn't have met the people that I've met through it, and after graduation I got involved with the Cambridge Smith Club and I was on the board for awhile and I met a lot of women that way, and just that whole ongoing community, I think it's really amazing. I think, not that it's a significant part of my life every day, but just knowing it's there makes a big — and it influences your choices, and it influences who you are and how you connect with the world.
- DEAN: How would you describe the alumnae network and life after Smith, and what Smith still provides for you?
- ROHAN HALL: I think it's there if you need it, but I don't necessarily take advantage of it. I just have my friends that I keep in touch with, or the people that I have met, you know, through the Cambridge Club or whatever. And I love meeting the older alums. Like, that's— We have an annual wine tasting at the Cambridge Smith Club and so it's always at somebody's amazing garden, and you get to meet alums from every year and that's fantastic to hear their experiences.
- DEAN: Do you have advice for current and future Smithies, and would you do anything differently if you had the option?
- ROHAN HALL: Current and future Smithies? Advice? (laughs) Oh, trust your instincts, you know. Just— If something doesn't feel right to you, don't pursue it, you know; pursue the path that feels right to you, but don't be afraid to challenge yourself, take some chances, try some things that you don't know already. I don't know. Advice. That's a hard one. What was the second part?
- DEAN: Would you do anything differently?
- ROHAN HALL: In life, or coming to Smith?
- DEAN: Both, an error in your Smith education or afterwards?

ROHAN HALL: Travel more! I mean that was the one — I think I should have gone away junior year, I mean that would have been amazing, but I did travel a ton after graduation so it all worked out. So, travel, travel, travel. Yeah.

DEAN: And is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't asked you?

ROHAN HALL: No. Thanks for letting me be a part of this project. It's a really great idea.

DEAN: Thank you very much.

GEIS: (Unclear). You kind of hit on some things that when we spoke with some other alums who have felt that there was a — they thought that maybe they could have it all, and then they got out into the world and they realized they were having a real hard time being a mom, being happy in a career, doing all those things. And some of them felt like maybe they should have been more prepared for that here in some ways, that maybe there was a role and that maybe they were being misled a little bit. And that's people in your class and you seem like you are quite content and that it's sort of been working out. Can you talk a little bit about your perspective on that, and — just something that would be a nice balance to some of the messages that we've heard, as well. (Unclear)

ROHAN HALL: Well, to talk about how to achieve that balance?

GEIS: I think what your impressions were, what your future would hold and what you thought your path could be, and did you feel you had any constraints there? Your sense — It feels like it's a bit about expectations, it's about, like, what your expectations were for yourself and then what ended up happening, so where you are now, if you can give it that long look (unclear).

ROHAN HALL: I do feel that at Smith there are expectations that you're going to be able to pursue — that you will be able to pursue what you want to pursue, and I think for women of our generation there was a perception that you would be able to have the big job and the family. And I did have a big job before I had my children and was marketing communications director of a software company. And then I realized after I had Nicholas that I wanted to be with him, and I think that was a big change for me, because before I actually had him, I didn't understand why women didn't go back to work after they had their children. I just thought, you could have your child, and you could continue working, and it would be fine. And then I realized once I had Nicholas and then I had my twins that it's very different, and they need you in a way that I didn't understand before. And I— And the big job wasn't so important to me anymore. But I still wanted to maintain my connections professionally, and to be able to be able to continue to work, so I was able to pursue this, you know, the third path, if you will,

where a lot of women decide to stay home with their kids and a lot of women get the nannies and keep the big jobs and that seems incredibly challenging and I chose this way that is not, you know, earning me the acclaim or the salary that I would otherwise, but it's a really nice way to have this — stay in touch with my children, be there for them when they need me, and to keep my toe in the water, and to keep growing professionally, and to have a professional network, and to continue to do work that is very satisfying to me. But I think that way was not either — It wasn't discussed at all as an option when I was here, and it's sort of something that evolved for me and it has worked out well for me. But as far as expectations go, I think we are set up when we're here, and I'm sure that's still true for your generation, is they have pretty high expectations for you. And for what you'll be able to do. And when you have someone like Tori Murden [McClure] who is, you know, rowing across the Atlantic and skiing across the, you know, bar's like way up here. But, there is a happy middle ground, I think, that no one really talked about.

GEIS: Seems like that's part of letting go of some things, and that it's okay to do that.

ROHAN HALL: Oh, absolutely. It's that level of self-acceptance. And what I was talking about earlier, like trusting your instincts, like, my instincts were like, it's not right to leave Nicholas, it's not right to go to work 12 hours a day and travel and to try and fit all this in, and that's okay. It's really okay to not push yourself on that path when it just doesn't feel right, for anybody.

DEAN: Do you see that as a social construction of gender, and being a woman, and that wouldn't — if you were a man, that wouldn't be the same? That you'd feel —

ROHAN HALL: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I think it's— it might be hard also on the dads to go back to work when they have little babies at home, but it's not seen as being desirable for them. I mean, I'm married to someone who teaches and he has a really flexible schedule, so when the twins were infants he could go in late and come in early and, you know, if all heck was breaking loose and I had, you know— He had my back, I mean, we're just in it together. But I think for a lot of women who don't have that kind of partnership, like if your husband is traveling all the time or whatever, then it's just so— it's really, really challenging to try and manage all of that. But yeah, I mean, society's expectations. Absolutely. Who's going to do what? Yeah. Yeah. I just married a man who will take dishes out of the dishwasher and vacuum. Like, he's just a different breed, he's a modern guy, you know. So I'm lucky that way.

(laughter)

GEIS: The last question is, was KP your roommate?

ROHAN HALL: Yeah!

GEIS: Yeah? She was over here yesterday.

ROHAN HALL: She's great, yeah. She's one of a kind. I mean, what a person she is, she's amazing.

GEIS: Thank you so much.

ROHAN HALL: Thank you.

DEAN: Thank you very much.

ROHAN HALL: Yeah, my husband stayed on line, I can see what everyone else says.

DEAN: (unclear) for your work on that (unclear)

ROHAN HALL: I think that's kind of something, I mean, the school really needs to think

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kris Anne Hormann May 28, 2011