

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Ali Harris, Class of 2008*

Interviewed by  
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 18, 2013

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Ali Harris speaks about treasured Smith traditions, including Friday tea, which provided a space for her and her housemates to detach from the pressure of academic life, pause and reflect, and enjoy each other socially. She speaks of the a commitment to community which she learned at Smith. She also recalls the mentors she met at Smith and the important role that mentorship played in her Smith life and beyond.

## **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:** Harris, Ali. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May18, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ali Harris, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Harris, Ali. Interview by Anne Ames. Transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ali Harris, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May18, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 18, 2013, with:

ALI HARRIS

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: This is Annie Ames and I am conducting an interview with Ali Harris on May 18, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. I'd like to thank you in advance for being part of this project.

HARRIS: Sure.

AMES: All right, so why did you choose to attend reunion this year?

HARRIS: I chose to attend reunion – should I look at the camera or?

AMES: You can look at me.

HARRIS: I chose to attend reunion this year because my experience graduating at Smith back in 2008 wasn't the most positive, and my personal experience really spoke to a lot of difficulty, relationship break up, my parents splitting up as well as some other interpersonal difficulties at that point in time, especially related to gender and that type of thing. So it was very difficult overall, and coming back was kind of like me feeling more centered, having more of a game plan in life and being able to re-enjoy my graduation in a way that was actually positive versus a more negative one, which I personally experienced and so it was actually really – it's really nice to kind of recapture that moment.

AMES: So how did you choose Smith as an undergraduate?

HARRIS: I chose Smith – oh, that's a hard question. So I grew up in Wisconsin. My parents are native East coasters and so they knew Smith, and they know a lot of the places. My mother is a Wellesley grad. And I was always expected to go to college. And my parents just kind of emphasized that was important and when my parents moved out of Wisconsin, I was 16 – 15, 16, and I ended up going to a girls high school to finish up. I was public high school the entire time, but then my parents were like you're not going to get into college, you know, it's so competitive now, and so I ended up going private in that route. And that was just a complete change in what my mindset was; and at that point in time, you know, I was talking about my sexuality and my experience about how I view myself, and at that point in time I had a really encouraging college counselor who said you know, maybe the Seven Sisters schools would be a good option for you. And I

just kind of went with that.

And between Smith and Mount Holyoke I actually ended up flipping a coin. And I'm very glad I did. I actually went to both schools. I came to Smith and Mount Holyoke both on the same day, and I remember very distinctly meeting the crew coach at Mount Holyoke and having no relationship with her and thinking I just can't deal with this person for four years, let alone for the next semester. And I remember at that point in time Karen Klinger, who was the coach still then and still now, she actually was on maternity leave. And I was thinking to myself, well, I can do something I don't want – I can go with somebody I don't want to go with, I can go with someone that I do, and Smith had this engineering program that was pretty much brand-new at that point in time but still established and I thought you know, I've been doing robotics throughout high school. I thought, you know, maybe it's something I really want to do. And so I emphasized the science and the robotics in my programming, and I thought I'll just go for it.

So I thought – the best opportunity is if I go to early admission and – it's funny because I was living with other people at that point because my parents had moved after my – or during my senior year and I stayed behind. I found out over the phone in my counselor's office, because I hadn't gotten my admittance letter yet or my anything like that and that was in time – that was pre-email admittance finding out in that kind of thing. I just recently applied to graduate school, and it's just – it was amazing how people can reject to or admit you based on your email. It's just ridiculous but I remember sitting there and just thinking to myself, you know, I'm sitting there with my college counselor who is very encouraging and considerate; and she said, you know, do you want to talk to the admissions people and I said okay. And I talked to I think it was Sabrina Marsh in admissions, and she goes, "We want to welcome you to Smith College." And it was just – it was like a really surreal feeling. I remember thinking to myself well, I guess now I have a place to go. And I didn't really know what I was getting into, but I just knew that I guess I was supposed to go there, and I was supposed to have this experience, and I was just hoping that things were going to work out. I know some people came to Smith and thought to themselves, you know, this is where I want to go, and I kind of thought I did but I didn't really fully understand it until I really got here how it was really a constructive and really great environment to be in, so – yeah.

AMES: Well, based on that, what you just said, what was it like when you first arrived?

HARRIS: I remember very distinctly I drove up with my dad. I came for pre-orientation. We were at this new pre-orientation for – it was the technology and society one. It was run by one – the math professor. Who am I thinking about? The logic professor who –

AMES: Jim Henley and Jay Garfield?

HARRIS: Jim Henley. Jim Henley. And also one of the other calculus professors, and they're running this, and I remember I was there and everyone that's from my original pre-orientation I am actually still – run with today, which is really weird but it's true. And I remember coming here and I met someone in my house, and I wasn't really sure if I was going to relate to this person, and I get my room set up. I was the first one there and I remember thinking I got a private room. My dad is like pushing this and this and this, and my dad – I saw my older brother go to college, and he understands, his experience of college and everything and I'm here, and he says, "You know," and he turns to me and he says, "You know" – just as I've – I've just put all of my stuff down and I'm about to walk over to this orientation meeting and he goes to me, and he says, "You know, I'm going to go. And I want to just tell you one thing before I go." And I'm like, okay, and this is – I was kind of hoping for him to stay for at least for like the meeting, and he goes, "You're here. And you don't know why you're here, but you're going to finish in four years and you're going to miss it your entire life," and then he gets in his car and he goes, which is a very odd, prolific thing to stay before someone is about to start this really crazy experience.

But you know, I don't know if he was just trying to be, you know, having this like larger thing, but I remember thinking to myself what did I just get myself into and why am I here? And then you spend the whole first year thinking that. And I just remember getting here and thinking to myself, it's beautiful, but I am, you know – I was a science major at that point in time in my life, and so I was thinking to myself, but all of my buildings are – compared to the people in Seelye Hall, this is pre-Ford obviously, but everything else just seemed very cold, and I didn't – I wasn't quite sure how to feel about it just yet, you know. And then at that point we were in the green monster, which I don't know if you guys still call it that still, but –

AMES: What is it?

HARRIS: Oh, the old engineering building, the – is it still there?

AMES: Is that the green box?

HARRIS: Yeah, the green box.

AMES: Yeah, the green box. The green box.

HARRIS: Yeah, we called it the green monster back in the day. That was also before the Red Sox won the World Series so so all the locals were really into that so, yeah –

AMES: What are your favorite Smith traditions?

HARRIS: I think tea is definitely one of those big traditions mostly because everyone just kind of – who is a part of the house community and very intentionally a part of it,

they all gather and they have that moment to really, you know, detach from the day, to relax, and they have this very social environment, to have this collective family kind of engagement, which is kind of nice especially since people come from different backgrounds and they have different experiences of how people come together socially, and you know, some people don't have a lot of support at home and so it's kind of nice to have this larger community that is fostered by this very intimate experience. I think there is something really significant about that moment because it's kind of like almost like having the Jewish tradition of Shabbat, you know, where everyone stops and they – they collect their thoughts, and they have that moment in the week, but it's just this moment where you stop.

I think there is something really beautiful about that, and there's something really important about having that type of time together. So that's like the – like the more common traditions, like in terms of the weekly routine. It's hard because a lot of my experience was shaped by the crew team, and so I'm – those traditions aren't the larger scheme of things, so I know those traditions personally very well too. I really enjoyed my sophomore year being in the software push and being one of those people that was a key person on campus. I think the idea of having a clear commitment to your community in some way shape or form, even if it's – there isn't and accountability by being on a board or student Government Association or being a leader in other ways or in your house community or something like that, and I think that the idea that there is this system in which we have I guess community accountability, which I think is really like a great tradition at Smith actually, that we are responsible for each other, that we are responsible for taking care of ourselves the best that we can, because one of the ways we sustain each other is by taking care of ourselves too and I think there is a lot about the idea of wellness through community. I think that's really important. I think there's a lot of ways that can be translated outside of Smith too and it's a huge life skill. And so I think that that's probably one of the biggest things – the idea of people having this larger interconnectedness. So it might not be like a tradition, so to speak, but it's an expected thing on campus which I think is really powerful.

AMES: Absolutely. I absolutely agree with you and it's not very often that someone will articulate it as well as you have, so it's nice to hear someone say it.

HARRIS: No problem. Well, I was the house president so –

AMES: Okay. That's where it comes from. I see.

HARRIS: So through the toils of going through the pain of being a house president, because I could speak still to that issue.

AMES: Absolutely. Absolutely. Were there any professors or mentors that inspired you during your time at Smith?

HARRIS: Oh, let's see here. I was definitely very inspired by the history department and the idea that I could be academically challenged in a field that doesn't really seem like it has a significant challenge. It's like a science or something that appears to be I guess more clearly difficult to the trade or the tool to use, but it required me to use my mind in different ways of interpreting history. And what's really interesting about the history department, in general, is that it has this larger stance where it's the idea of not necessarily seeing it from the American perspective of history, which is an objective standpoint, but it really made you think more or less about the trends in which create these – these things that happen in our lives, and it made it – it became much more applicable to how we experience our everyday lives, and there was something really transformative about that, especially through Darcy Berkeley's class who I still am afraid of. I'm sure she would come to me well, like, how are you doing – but you know, I mean she's just – I found that her experience of being in her class was very intense, and I was in her seminar and I just remember very distinctly how I only hoped that I could accomplish as much as she has, because she was someone who had such a prowess on the campus in terms of her respect and the work that she did from the students, and also in her – and the faculty in which she worked with too.

I remember when she was initially denied tenure and how all these students came together collectively, and they said, "How can you do this to our community by denying someone that was important to us, something that's so crucial." So I really have a lot – I really found her as being a very big role model for me. I also felt very nourished by the Russian department, because it's so small and intimate. The – Warren Doshkov (phonetic) combination, that contingent was very tight together and anyone that could – kind of became like the little Russian family mafia, whatever you would call it in the area. And – but no, we always got together. It was very – once again it was like family-like communities, so definitely that. But in terms of people – we were talking about professors though at this point.

AMES: Professors, mentors, anyone who really stood out as someone who was being a support system.

HARRIS: I mean the clearest person has definitely got to be Karen Klinger from the crew team. There's no one really like Karen at Smith, and as much as I respect anyone who wants to do anything here and they find someone they really appreciate. I mean there's something about Karen's mentorship that's just – it stands out above anything else, and she develops such an intimate connection with her athletes in a way that's not just about athletics. It's a way that's – it expresses something that it's more like she connects with you like on both like a Smith level because she's also a Smithie, but she also connects with you on a level that's challenging and difficult and raw, and there's something that's very connected about that. You know, it creates a certain kind of intimacy but also makes you reflect upon yourself and what you're doing and how you can improve yourself, and it makes you really concentrate on having those skills take care of what your – what you

need to do in life. You know, even if it's like very basic things like I need to get a job. Well, you know, you used to wake up at 4:40 in the morning to run down to the boathouse and you also did all these things, so clearly you're capable of doing something, and you clearly had someone who thought you were capable. So it creates this very interesting system of – of you know, interconnectedness and knowing that you can do – are capable of doing things. And there's something really phenomenal about that too. You know?

AMES: What challenges did you face during your time at Smith?

HARRIS: Let's see. Well, I mean it's hard because it depends on what kind of challenge you're talking about. When I came to Smith, you know, I was very lost in terms of what I wanted to do with my college career. I was also a bit puzzled in terms of how I would shape my time here in general, and that was very difficult to figure that out. I must've gone through six different majors. So many different classes. So many audits and all these different things I used to do and I remember that was very challenging for me to figure out because it felt like you had to figure out this larger, you know, personal question but really it had nothing to do with what you wanted to do later on but really how you wanted to learn. So learning about your learning style, admitting what you want to do and kind of having a better grasp, that it's really hard – there's a way of soul-searching that's difficult, even though it can be a smaller thing sometimes for some people, especially people who have like a premed track or something like that in line.

In terms of larger challenges, I know that I really struggled with being a house president and those responsibilities mostly because we do have this intense accountability at Smith and it's to the point of it being very sharp. And a lot of students are very much – I guess they are very much willing to criticize very openly and not in a constructive manner. So it's very much you need to develop a very much hard skin for that. You have to really have a better idea of, you know, how people are trying to talk to you in a way that you can work with them constructively, so it really teaches you that skill that you work with difficult people.

I think, you know, academically I was challenged, not in a way that I really struggled academically, which is – I am very lucky for. But I know that one thing I definitely felt very challenged about was, I guess just improving my sense of myself, which is really hard. Because college is a time when you're freaking yourself out anyway, but when you are going through like all these questions of like what is my major, what am I going to do with my time, how am I going to structure what I do in my day, like these things become very larger or habit-forming situations in your life, and so it is very challenging to figure that out. I mean there are moments in school as well that were difficult. I know the Ryan Sorba event was very difficult here at Smith, which was when a bunch of students protested, but also became this very big media phenomenon.



There were moments here at Smith that were really difficult. I remember the day after the 2004 election and that was – it was like a funeral on campus. No one spoke, you know, I remember the blackface incident at Smith. I remember a lot of different moments that were really poignant and talking about a lot of really interconnected problems on campus, which people don't realize until something bad does happen. Those discussions were hard, you know. And I think that those moments were very challenging, but also very important too.

AMES: Well, I as I would love to sit here and talk with you for hours about your Smith experience which is clearly rich in many ways, we have about five minutes until we close down. So I'm just going to ask you a few wrap up questions, if that's all right.

HARRIS: Sure.

AMES: So what difference has your Smith education made?

HARRIS: I mean Smith is very well known as a school, but I think it really shaped how I look at how I wanted to commit my time to things. You know, how I want to investigate what interests me, how I want to engage people, how I really, you know, want to go further. I think that's really important because that really shaped how I thought about things. Whether it's my world around me, my partner who I was with, you know, what I wanted to do professionally, it really shaped my way of thinking in terms of how I saw what was important in my life, so I really sorted through those things very clearly.

AMES: All right, and very briefly, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

HARRIS: Relax. I think we all focused a lot on doing it right and we don't focus on the journey it takes for us to complete something successfully. I think it's really difficult to really think about something in the larger scheme of things like I have to do this and this and this, but recognize it's not always going to be perfect, it's not always going to go well and some things are going to be really fantastic and some things are just really going to suck. And that's just how it goes and I think that that's the important thing is to relax as best you can, and I think what's also really instructive of that too is just making sure you take care of yourself because it's hard to get lost in a lot of different things and as much as you are able to stay connected to yourself, I think that's the most important.

AMES: Okay. Well, thank you so much for talking with us today and really getting your insight and contributing to the project as an alum.

HARRIS: Sure, happy to help.

AMES: We really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2013.*