

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Deborah Heller, Class of 1961*

Interviewed by  
Bethy Williams, Class of 2013

May 21, 2011

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Deborah Heller discusses adjusting to Smith from Brooklyn, issues of diversity, the social pressures and her life after Smith, including her marriage, divorce, and coming out process, her involvement within the LGBT community, and her current work to establish an LGBTQQ alum affinity group.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by 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:** Heller, Deborah. Interview by Bethy Williams. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Deborah Heller, interview by Bethy Williams, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Heller, Deborah. Interview by Bethy Williams. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Deborah Heller, interview by Bethy Williams, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 21, 2011, with:

DEBORAH HELLER

by: BETHY WILLIAMS  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

WILLIAMS: Thank you for agreeing to be part of this project.

HELLER: You're welcome.

WILLIAMS: So, how did you initially choose Smith?

HELLER: I was given basically two choices by my parents: to go to one of the Seven Sisters, or to go to Brooklyn College. And (laughter) I therefore applied only to Seven Sisters, got into a couple, and came to Smith. And it was large, and I liked the idea that it was large, I liked where it was located, and I decided to come.

WILLIAMS: And you're originally from Brooklyn?

HELLER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And what was it like adjusting from the city to Smith? (laughter)

HELLER: Well, it was more than adjusting from the city to Smith; it was sort of adjusting from my life, and, you know, the other night, we were sort of talking about life-changing experiences, and Smith, for me, was a total life-changing experience. So, I came from a family that was educated but Jewish, sort of upwardly-mobile middle class, but not really quite there, from a very large public high school, with 1,000 students in each class. And before coming to college, places like Bonwood Tellers(?) and Lord & Taylor's had college shops, and you'd go in, and they'd – there'd be a student, and they'd tell you what to wear to go to college.

So, I arrived with kilts and circle pins and Peter Pan collars, and walked into a collection of women from places I had never heard of, like Miss Porter's and St. Tim's, and Emma Willard. And women who had – at least to me, seemed extraordinarily sophisticated and very, very different. And, you know, they were wearing their fathers' shirts and moccasins. It took about three years to wear out my wardrobe that I came to college with. (laughter) So, for me, it was culture shock: I was near the top of my class in high school, and I struggled my freshman year – mightily. I always felt sort of not quite part of the environment. It was an extraordinary learning experience.

The house that I lived in, in the very beginning, called Wallace, which is now that green part right in front of the library, they tore that down at the end of my freshman year. So, I needed to move to a new house, so it was again another kind of transition. So, it – it was an extraordinary four years.

WILLIAMS: What do you think the typical Smithie was like? You talked about kind of feeling like an outsider.

HELLER: Well, you know, there weren't very many women who were Jewish. There weren't very many women of color. We had one true African princess in our class, Florence Mwangi who went on to be a physician, and died a number of years ago. But it – The typical Smithie, at that time, to me, was way more privileged and had gone to the right schools, and their fathers were with General Motors, or with Coca-Cola, which usually translated into a Chairman or a CEO or a Senior Vice President. So, that was a whole new vocabulary for me. Ecumenical meant all Protestant, you know. So, it just was extremely different, and it was like traveling to a different world.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. And you mentioned Jewish women: are you Jewish?

HELLER: Yeah, I'm Jewish.

WILLIAMS: So, what was it like being a Jewish student on campus, surrounded-

HELLER: I'm not sure because I've never really been that observant. But at the end of my – I went – I actually went to France at the end of my freshman year, with the experiment in international living, and one of the things we did is that we camped out a lot in the south of France, and I came back with very curly hair and a very dark tan. And I was getting ready to go to services at the High Holy Days, and there was a young woman who was a freshman at that time, and she said, "You know, I've never met a Negro who's Jewish," because those were the terms at that time. And I said, "Huh?" And she said, "Oh, you're not Jewish?" (laughter)

So, it was just – you know, I think differences, this was not a time of lots of diversity and differences. What you did is you either fit in, or you found some other niche that perhaps you could fit into. But it always felt to me that there was clearly a majority. Whether there really was or not, I don't know, but it always felt like that.

WILLIAMS: Right. So, you think issues of race and class and sexuality, all those things were very divisive, would you say?

HELLER: Well, I think that yes, of course, but they were non – that they weren't overt. They were overt, perhaps, in a sociology class where you would talk about race and class and education, and – but somehow, you never

talked about it – or I didn't experience us talking about it – in relationship to us, and sort of looking around the room and having the kinds of conversations that are real conversations about differences and diversity and inclusion, and race and class and status and color, and all of that stuff, you know, ethnicity. That wasn't – We didn't talk about those things.

WILLIAMS: Right. And sexual orientation was just never talked about?

HELLER: Well, for me, I – I came out when I was 30, so I really didn't – I wasn't conscious – of course I was conscious, but I wasn't conscious. You know, I was reading things like Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, and, you know, all the books that talked about how problematic it was to be homosexual. But I was trying to date men. I was being a beatnik, which was some sort of way of kind of rebelling a little bit, really trying to find out who I was, but being gay – being lesbian – just wasn't very much on my – on my radar screen at that time. Retrospectively, yes, a lot of things make sense, you know, as you get older. But it was so different, you know?

WILLIAMS: Right.

HELLER: You know, we – And I – I don't think we talked about that. At least, I don't remember talking about it.

WILLIAMS: Right.

HELLER: Yeah, maybe some other women did, but maybe it would be more derogatory.

WILLIAMS: So, do you think – I don't know if you think about it this way, but would you say Smith made coming out harder, or made it easier, or how do you think Smith factored into all of that?

HELLER: Well, I have to come at that laterally because it's not sequential: my college education here was probably, like I said, life-changing. It took a long time for a lot of the pieces to fit together, but it was a remarkable educational experience which gave me skills and capabilities in my life that made it possible for me to do a variety of things. And, you know, I got married, I had three kids, I worked for part of that time, I got divorced, I came out, I did a master's and a doctorate, and worked again for other people, and then built a business. And when – when you're able, intellectually, economically, socially, to be able to do a variety of things that give you sustenance in life, and position, and place, it's much easier to integrate that – being a lesbian. At least, when I was coming up. And that – that's a class issue, that's an economics issue.

And the years have just changed so dramatically. You know, in the early '70s, when I came out, I had three young kids, and I decided –

I was a little nervous, not so much about being me, but what would happen to the kids. And I went to see if I could find a group of women who maybe were ten, 15 years older than I and had gone to women's college and maybe had been married and divorced from physicians and had three children exactly my kids' age, who would say to me, Don't worry, it's all going to be OK.

And I went looking – and this was very much at the time of a lot of lesbian feminist politics – and I found a group of women who were debating whether or not to keep their male children because those children were their oppressors. So, it – it was a very political time. It wasn't a time where, like, you know, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, or a gay pride, or a dyke march, where you're out with your kids. It was just totally, totally different for many of us through that period of time.

WILLIAMS: Did it feel sort of extreme to you?

HELLER: Which part? The politics?

WILLIAMS: The – You know, the male children, the – all those things.

HELLER: Oh, yes, yeah, that part did.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HELLER: I've always been very political, so – but that – that part of the politics, the – the real separatist politics were uncomfortable for me, though I understood it.

WILLIAMS: Right. So you talked about, you know, you had gotten married. Did – Was that shortly after college?

HELLER: It was very close to after college. When I graduated, I was not one of the people with a diamond on my finger, and I don't know if you've – in the archives – if you've seen any of the senior class pictures on the steps of the – the houses in the late-'50s-and-'60s, and the seniors in their gowns, and some groups like that, with their engagement rings. And I was not one of them. And I had basically two choices: to go back to Brooklyn, which, for me, was going to be the kiss of death, or find something else that my parents would approve of – because young women didn't go live on their own at that time, at least according-

WILLIAMS: Why was Brooklyn the kiss of death?

HELLER: Oh, you don't want to know about my family.

WILLIAMS: OK.

HELLER: That's a whole other video. (laughter)

WILLIAMS: We don't need to go into it, sorry, yeah.

HELLER: No, we – we – that – no, it just would have been difficult at that time.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, OK. Sorry.

HELLER: No, that's all right. But it's a different interview, that one.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. (laughter)

HELLER: So, I actually applied to the Smith School of Social Work because I knew that they would send me away somewhere. And they gave me a scholarship, and I'm the last person in the world to be a social worker, and after about a year, we all figured that out. But I started social work school and met my husband at that point. Left social work school, and we ended up going – he got drafted – we ended up spending two years in Puerto Rico and I worked for the Peace Corps for a while there, and had my first kid, and then we came up to Boston. And then I was divorced about ten years after I got married.

WILLIAMS: And did you feel like, as a Smith graduate, you were almost expected to get married and have children, or?

HELLER: Well, it was very – Yes, as a – as a Smith graduate, but also coming from my family and the expectations.

WILLIAMS: And the timeframe?

HELLER: And – And the time period. I think so many of us, and I know that there have been lots of discussions, but those of us who grew up in the '40s and '50s, in 1957, there was a book called *The Silent Generation*, like, the Eisenhower years – and there was just – maybe for some of the other women, but I was totally unconscious. You know, I think I did all sorts of things because there was a script and it was what we were supposed to do. And the whole idea that people today, straight or gay or lesbian or however, are consciously choosing children or consciously choosing lives I think is just so healthy and so wonderful.

And I think there were so many of us who just kind of – despite being bright, right, because here we were with Smith women – and Restin(?), who gave our commencement exam – speech – talked about graduating as being now able to be very good wives and mothers with this education. So, there we were in '61, and then in the next ten years, the world turned upside down.

WILLIAMS: In '61, when you were sitting there, listening to that speech, did you think, That sounds perfect, or what – what did you think?

HELLER: Well, you're assuming I was conscious.

WILLIAMS: Right. (laughter) Right, right.

HELLER: I – I don't know. It was – At that time, it made sense. You know, you look at it now and it's so anachronistic, isn't it? You know, it just is sort of like, Huh?

WILLIAMS: Right. So, when did you sort of become conscious, or when did you sort of make this switch?

HELLER: Well, I think I – I started becoming conscious in my late-twenties and in my early-thirties, and you know, feminism was beginning, I had come out, there were lots of issues then as being a – sort of a single parent in a relationship with a woman, but still basically being a single parent. Working – I did my graduate work between '72 and '76 at Boston College, and taught at Goddard in the adult degree program, and opened a clinic. And I did a whole bunch of things, and then went to work at women's health clinic for a number of years, and then to running a bunch of ambulatory services for a department of psychiatry at one of the Harvard hospitals, and then started my own business. So, much of the time in a lot of the professional areas, I was the only woman in a senior role, and I was also the only lesbian.

So, that – it – if you don't discover that kind of consciousness, it comes and hits you in the face. (laughter) Because, you know, you're in the world and you need to manage it. And so, for a long time, just sort of being a senior woman was an issue, and then figuring out at what point I'd share who I was and my family with people. So, it – it's a very – it feels, at least, very different now. But of course, Massachusetts is a bubble, you know, and very different from other parts of the country.

WILLIAMS: Right. How was it, balancing work and family?

HELLER: Exhausting. I think it was a – a long – there's a period of time where I must have been in a prolonged manic phase. You know, I just – I worked, I earned a living, I was in school. I did a master's and a doctorate, I had these three kids. It was – It was a hard period of time, so – but even the concept of work/family balance, we didn't have a concept like that. Which is really interesting, when you think about it.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HELLER: And it's so much better now, it's really good.

WILLIAMS: Right. So, going back to Smith.

HELLER: Yeah.



WILLIAMS: Do you think it was an accepting place for those who might be, you know, outsiders, like Jews or racial minorities or lesbians or whatever?

HELLER: I don't think so. But I guess it would depend what you mean by accepting. You know, there's a social – there was a social life at Smith and there were groups of people who did things together and knew each other, and the mixers that would happen, and they knew them – the guys from other schools, and – I sang in the freshman and sophomore choir in the glee club. I'll tell you this story for two reasons.

One, during freshman year, when we did a performance, we all needed to wear long, white dresses – and I don't know if Anne August(?) is here still in Northampton, there was this store called Anne August(?), and they sold these white dresses which were very pretty, and you could go down and get yourself a white dress. And when I showed up for the first concert, what I was aware of was there was a group of us who had bought our dresses at Anne August(?), and all the rest of the women were wearing their debutante dresses. So it was very easy to sort of look around.

The second thing was that the choir director, the musical director, was an extraordinary woman whose name was Iva D. Hyatt(?), who I don't think was out at the time and I don't know if she ever was publicly out. Her world was – She's died, since – and her world was early music. But she ran the – the choirs and the glee club. And I was madly in love with Iva D. Hyatt(?). I would have gotten up at any hour of the morning to go sing, just to be around her. And of course, that made sense, you know, ten, 12 years later.

I think we found niches and places for ourselves. I was a sociology major, I – I've always felt a little bit marginal, and sociology, of course, gives you some way to look from the outside. My graduate work was in sociology and social systems. And I think that actually that marginality has been very helpful for me in the organizational work that I've done. I'm able to sort of step outside of a system and look at it and try to understand it, as opposed to being inside, or as they say now, just a fish in a water, you know? I think kind of being outside – And that – I think that's a plus, you know. That if it's a burden, it's probably a blessing and a curse at the same time.

WILLIAMS: But you think that outsider perspective has really been huge in everything you've done in life? Interesting.

HELLER: Well, I probably have one – I don't feel like an outsider anymore in my world.

WILLIAMS: Right.

HELLER: But maybe one foot in, one foot out, or the ability to move back and forth. I stopped being alienated – I sort of was at – when I was at maybe the beatnik phase and that alienation, and the existentialism and

the Jean-Paul Sartre of it all. Yeah. And the nihilism that sort of so natural, maybe that was sort of an intellectual and philosophical way of working on some of those issues.

WILLIAMS: But you don't feel like an outsider anymore?

HELLER: No.

WILLIAMS: Why not, do you think?

HELLER: Oh, for lots of reasons. One, my – Anne, my partner and I, have lived together for 26 years, in Boston, and now we live on the Cape. Before she and I were involved and while we were involved, we've been very, very active in all sorts of things. She in democratic politics – she was the mayor's liaison to the gay and lesbian community, the Head of the Human Rights Commission in Boston. I was on the Fenway Board – we started the Fenway Women's Dance, which just celebrated its 20th year and brought in over \$3 million for Fenway Health Center.

We've just – We have a very large community of friends, and my work life has been such that I'm able, in some places, to be exactly – everybody knows who I am. In other places, it's sort of been, like, not an issue. My children are grown. It's a – It's a very different way, at this point in my life, so I don't feel like an outsider. But, you know, I spend time in Massachusetts, in California, not in the middle of some parts of this country where it's very, very hard, still, for young women and young men to be who they are. And when we travel and we go places, you know, we're aware that for us, it's sort of blessed in many ways. So, I don't feel like an outsider now.

WILLIAMS: Right, right. And it sounds like you're trying to build sort of a community like that with Smith alums. Could you talk a little bit about that, what you're doing now?

HELLER: Well, I've been less involved than a couple of other people. A while back – Smith has affinity groups. There's a black affinity group and there's a – I think maybe it's black and lesbian – black and Latina, sorry. So, there are a couple of affinity groups, and we've been talking about trying to establish a lesbian affinity group, which is actually an LGBTQQ group, which has had interesting ups and downs around it. And I was asked if I could host one of the meetings today, but there are a couple of other people who have been probably way out more in front.

There's a woman whose name is Brooke Trent from Class of '57, who really started this and has put a lot of her heart into trying to develop it. And it, as we talked about today, it's sort of bumping along because – part because of the politics, I think, and the differences, and what the group should be and how it should be, and how people view themselves. And it's not surprising, but I think it's sort of, like, working its way out. It may take a number of iterations before it gets going.

WILLIAMS: But you think it will get going?

HELLER: I'm a strong believer in that. I think as more people begin to think about it, if we could put a little more pressure on the College around doing more than what they do, around the affirmation of women in the class, lesbians in the class. But I think a lot of it is generational, you know? I bet when you come back for your tenth or your 20th or your 30th, the world around you is just going to look totally different, and I don't know what the issues are going to be, but I would guess that we will – you know, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," nobody will even know what that was, and it will have been passed. Same-sex marriage will be hohum. That for gay and lesbian people, it'll be very much sort of blending in, and it's interesting, because there was a period of time where identity really was being separate from.

And whether we're getting suburbanized or something like that, I think – You know, you open up *The New York Times*, and on a given day, there can be four different stories about somebody who's gay or somebody who's a lesbian, and they're positive stories. And I think that's this generation. You know, I think if you look at the stats, people in their twenties and thirties and forties, it's just not a big deal, and it's people of my generation and older who are still struggling with some of these issues.

You know, we are the last group who you can say nasty things about, or make sure that you have on a panel a balance, you know, somebody who's for and somebody who's against, which you could absolutely no longer do with somebody who's Jewish or somebody who's black, or you know, or some other kind of ethnic minority. You know, can you imagine having a panel where if somebody who's for East-Indians and against East-Indians? You know, for balance? So – But this is the one group that's left, and I think that's going to change. I'm convinced it's going to change; probably not in my lifetime, but I think absolutely in your lifetime, so.

WILLIAMS: And what do you think the benefit of uniting all these alums of various generations at Smith would be? What would the benefit be?

HELLER: Well, I could – One, I think it would be just sort of connection among themselves because for some of the women, like, talking today and others that I've spoken to, I think many of them still feel like they're the only one, or it's hard for them to talk about their partners. And maybe this is the older group. And I think some of them are still actively managing it, so to have a sense that there's more than one or two or then or 20 or 30. I think that the – to the extent that there's any kind of financial impact, if there are ways, you know, and this is not to say anything bad about the College, but the College has lots of different pressures from alums.

And there are – I think it would be a difficult balancing act, working inside the alumnae office and the development office, trying to think about how do you work with loads of different constituencies and continue to build the kinds of donor base that the College depends on, and is essential. So, to the extent that we could also be a group with some financial impact, that might create some more places at the table, and I think that would be good.

We were talking earlier about whether there are roles for some of the alums to be available to students – I don't know what the issues would be that students would be interested in now because it is so different, but maybe undergrads are interested in what it's like to be somebody, like, a woman there who's a minister and lived with her partner, has a 13 year-old son. You know, what's it like to make a family? What's it like, maybe, to – in a work world, how do you manage some of these issues if you're in a place that's a little less welcoming than Northampton? You know, I don't know what the issues are that undergrads now are thinking about, but if there are ways that we could be resources, that would probably be – for some of us – something that we would like to do.

WILLIAMS: OK. So, we're running short on time, but as sort of a final question, what advice would you give to current and future Smithies?

HELLER: Oh, wow. (laughter) When I was much younger, I had advice for everybody, so (laughter) I'm not sure that I have a lot of advice. What would I say. I'm sorry?

WILLIAMS: We get wiser as we get older. (laughter)

HELLER: I don't know; I think what we do is we get older, we realize how less – how little we know. It's hard to give this particular piece of advice because when you are between freshman year and senior year, you're really focused on a unique time in your life that's developmental, both educationally, and sort of personally and emotionally. But I guess I would talk about sort of the context, that the education and the experiences that you're having here, as marvelous and sometimes as challenging and dreadful as they may be, sort of sort themselves out over time.

And this is a unique place: it's an incredibly welcoming place, when you think about it, and its diversity and what it's become, in terms of the population and the commitment to differences – albeit sometimes not perfectly – is really unique. And what it gives you is it just gives you incredible resources. You go out and do your life. And I think you'll find that out, you know, you'll find it out five years out, ten years out, 15 years out, 20 years out, and you'll say, "Oh, my God, I never realized that." I think it's an incredible opportunity for women to have, and I hope that single-sex education remains. I'm still very committed

to a community where women can thrive. And I just love seeing it, and I don't know if I have anything more to say about that. OK?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HELLER: OK.

WILLIAMS: Thank you very much.

HELLER: You're welcome very much.

END OF INTERVIEW