

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Charity Imbrie, Class of 1976

Interviewed by
Olivia Mandica-Hart, Class of 2011

May 20, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Charity Imbrie describes her initial reaction to Smith, her involvement with choir and her work within the music department, the political and social atmosphere at Smith (particularly in regards to feminism and lesbianism), and her work within the legal field.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle 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: Imbrie, Charity. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Charity Imbrie, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Imbrie, Charity. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Charity Imbrie, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 20, 2011, with:

CHARITY IMBRIE

by: OLIVIA MANDICA-HART
filmed by: KATE GEIS

MANDICA-HART: This is Olivia Mandica-Hart and Charity Imbrie, class of 1976. The date is May 20, 2011, and we are in the Alumnae Gym at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Let's just start off: why did you choose to come to Smith?

IMBRIE: I came to Smith because my older sister had gone here, and I came to see here when she was a senior in college and I was a senior in high school, and I thought it was the most wonderful place I'd ever been to. And I really wanted to get away from home, which was in Bowling Green, Ohio. And it was the only college I applied to.

MANDICA-HART: So what was it like when you first arrived here?

IMBRIE: When I came, freshmen came a week early, and so the campus wasn't very crowded. It was just other freshmen. And I'm not even sure now what we were supposed to be doing, but we—(laughs) I guess we were supposed to get used to being in college or something. So I met the other freshmen in my house—I lived in a very small house, 150 Elm Street—and just spent the week hanging out, and then classes started I guess a week later. It was very exciting. It was a fun time, and it was also a little bit terrifying because I had come from a public high school in the Midwest, and my vision was that Smith was, you know, all these elite people from fancy boarding schools and private schools. And I knew my roommate was from New York City, and that was, you know, exciting but intimidating. But I loved it the minute I got here. I was not sad to be leaving home, I was not homesick, I didn't miss anybody from (laughs) Bowling Green. I was thrilled to be here.

MANDICA-HART: And what was the general campus atmosphere like once you started classes and got a feel for the campus?

IMBRIE: It was pretty intense. It was a lot of people. Spent a lot of time studying. And I was a music student also, and so I spent a lot of time practicing. I remembered being very intense and very academic-focused and a place where I had to learn to manage my time more than I ever had had to do that before.

MANDICA-HART: Were you involved in any clubs or organizations or...?

IMBRIE: Well, later on I was. As a freshman I joined one of the choirs. I was in Choir Alpha, and I think that we had rehearsals once or twice a week. And then I was a music student and I was studying the harp, and so I had to go to New York City every once in a while, once or twice a month, to take harp lessons, so that took me off campus quite a bit.

MANDICA-HART: What was the political climate like?

IMBRIE: The political climate had quieted down a lot from previous years. As I mentioned, my sister was here, and she was here from '68 to '72, which was quite, you know, upheaval, and student demonstrations and Kent State and all that stuff. That was all gone by the time I was here. And I would say it was a pretty—fairly peaceful political climate. It was just the beginning of, at least in my consciousness, women's rights, and *Ms. Magazine* had just been founded, so there was political action around women's issues, as I remember.

MANDICA-HART: So did you identify in a feminist or did you partake in those discussions at all?

IMBRIE: I don't know that I would have called myself a feminist my freshman year. I don't even know if that term was much used then. But certainly I had a feminist identity, and within two weeks of being here, I fell in love with my roommate, so that, you know, sort of (laughs) colored my politics, too. But she said she had a good feeling when she saw I had a *Ms. Magazine* with me. I had a t-shirt that said, "Bowling Green High School GAA," and she said, "Well, what does that mean, GAA?" Oh, I'm sorry, that's my microphone. (laughter) I said, "That's Girls Athletic Association." And she said, "Oh, in New York, it means Gay Activists Alliance." And I'm like, "No, this is not the Gay Activists Alliance." (laughs)

MANDICA-HART: So how did things work out with your roommate? Did you tell her?

IMBRIE: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yes. We became involved very shortly after I got here. In fact, I think I arrived on the Smith campus on September the 7th, and we started to have relationships September the 23rd. (laughter) So that's how long it took me. And I had no inkling that I was a lesbian, but I knew the minute I fell in love with her that that was just something that seemed right and that was something that had been missing, and I just didn't know what it was. But I didn't know. She identified herself as a lesbian when she came here, you know, which was—she was 17, I was 18, but she was from New York City and had a lot more experience than I did, so. (laughs) But it was actually kind of terrifying because it was not something that I knew anything about, and to the extent any of

us knew anything about it, it was not something that was spoken of or thought of in a positive light. So to me it was something to be kept hidden and, you know, it's not something we acknowledged to anybody else in the house. They just didn't know.

MANDICA-HART: So did you come out at any time during Smith, or was that something that was private?

IMBRIE: Selectively. Between the years 1972 and 1976, there were a lot of changes here, and it became obvious that there were a number of women who identified as lesbians or who were at least leading a lesbian life at that time. There was a group that started in 1973, I think, called Sophia Sisters. You've seen the—you did the display out here. And I did not go to their meetings. I was afraid. I just thought, Oh my gosh, I don't know who these people are going to be, but I'm not one of them. But Kate, the woman I was involved with, did go to the meetings and was one of the founding members of it, so through her, I then met a lot of people. And as the years went on, you just met more and more women who identified as lesbians, and it was sort of a pretty large group of people. And at the same time, there were also some cultural events. Have people told you about the Deadly Nightshade?

MANDICA-HART: No.

IMBRIE: Oh. I'll have to send you their album; I still have it. The Deadly Nightshade was a rock group, and it was three women, and one was from Smith, and one was from Mount Holyoke, and I'm not sure where the third was from. But they were lesbians, and they sang country and rock music, and they used to perform around the valley. And one time they had a performance down at the Gamut, and everybody was just sitting there politely listening to their music, and then at some point, people just got up and started dancing with each other. And the women in the band practically dropped their instruments because they were so shocked. They said, Oh my God, this never would have happened when I was at Smith. I can't believe this is happening. And they somehow managed to keep playing even though (laughs) they were shocked. I think that was the first sort of, at least to my knowledge, open event where women expressed physical affection to each other and sort of came out to each other. And then, you know, those of us who had girlfriends on campus came out selectively to people while we were here. Most of us were exploring. You know, we didn't know—I certainly didn't call myself a lesbian when I was here. It was years later that I decided, OK, you know, this is who I am. But, you know, some of us dated men some of the time. There were opportunities to meet other women from the valley. There was a women's resource center over at UMass, which may still be there, and they had consciousness raising groups, CR groups, they were called. And you could go, and sort of pop psychology; people would sit around and talk about things.

And they had several groups for lesbians there, and I joined a consciousness raising group and met some women over there. So that was interesting. It was life outside of the Smith campus, and you realized there was a much larger world out there.

MANDICA-HART: So it seems like on campus there was sort of an underground network of lesbians. Is that...?

IMBRIE: That's a good way to describe it, yeah.

MANDICA-HART: So did you feel that there would be consequences if it were discovered you were with another woman, or...?

IMBRIE: Yes. There was a dean of students named Helen Russell who was known to be or thought to be very anti-lesbian, and Kate and I had a friend in—I think she was in Hubbard House—and, you know, we knew this woman well, and she told us that the college office had called her parents and her lover's parents and they moved them into separate houses. We knew of women who had been, you know, sent packing, sent home, that kind of thing, so we definitely were afraid that if it became known, we might get kicked out of college; we might get separated, sent to some other house; and we would be stigmatized.

MANDICA-HART: Do you feel as though Smith was accepting of, you know, other minority groups or...?

IMBRIE: Not particularly.

MANDICA-HART: No?

IMBRIE: No.

MANDICA-HART: Yeah.

IMBRIE: I think it probably was extremely difficult to be a woman of color here. Not that there were that many, but the ones that were pretty much hung out by themselves. You know, I think religious minorities were probably tolerated pretty well, and there were a number of women in my class or that I knew of that were disabled in some way or another, and I don't remember thinking at the time that they were given a hard time or anything like that. I think they were treated well. But no, I don't think it was a particularly welcoming, open community at all. You know, there was a template, and you were expected to fit within the boundaries of that template. It was still—even though, to me anyway, it doesn't seem that long ago—most women thought they were going to get married and thought they were going to have a husband who would support them and that kind of thing. It sort of came really as a shock to me when I was about a junior in college thinking, Geez, I'd better think

about a career; I might have to support myself. (laughs) So it's kind of shocking to think about it now, to look back. I mean, it's certainly not the way we raise our daughters now. But, you know, at the time, you just didn't think about a career; it wasn't that important.

MANDICA-HART: And how did you feel about President Conway?

IMBRIE: Well, I was here for three years with President Mendenhall and just one year with President Conway. And President Mendenhall was definitely just, you know, your sort of grandfatherly figure, and I didn't really have a sense of him at all; he seemed pretty aloof. It was really exciting to have a woman president. I mean, that just was unheard of and sort of groundbreaking. And I really liked her. I thought she was a good president, and I thought it was important that Smith had hired a woman president. But it was interesting looking at your display out here, because that one letter she wrote is just—the wording of it is just unbelievably—“allegations of lesbianism” and “charges” of this and that—I mean, it is so defensive. But, you know, it's pretty reflective of the time, because I remember even coming back after, you know, five or ten years, after graduation, and going to, you know, functions as a volunteer for Smith in my community and, you know, people talking about, you know, “the lesbian problem.” That's what was talked about, the lesbian problem. So that went on for a while.

MANDICA-HART: But do you feel as though President Conway's attitude—that that was explicit in her or it was sort of, you know?

IMBRIE: I don't remember the administration ever being explicit about it at all other than—well, and the stuff with Dean Russell, that wasn't explicit either, that was just underground things that you heard from people that you happened to know through the grapevine, that's all.

MANDICA-HART: Do you think students outside of that community were aware of—

IMBRIE: No, not at all. Not at all.

MANDICA-HART: So what expectations did you have for yourself when you graduated?

IMBRIE: Well, I had been a musician, and I came to the conclusion at some point in my junior year that not only did I not think I could make a living as a musician, I didn't really want to make a living as a musician, so I started casting about for what else I might be interested in, and I started taking more government courses and philosophy and that kind of thing. And then decided that I might want to go to law school, so I got a job right out of Smith in a law firm in New York City as a paralegal, interestingly, through my freshman roommate's father. And so I went to New York and worked as a paralegal for a while. And then I decided that I thought that would be a good career; that would match up well

with my skills. And it was much easier, then, I think, to make a decision like that, because everything was relatively so much cheaper. You know, you could go to law school, or one of the women in my class was talking last night about having gone to medical school, and I think she said it was (laughs) two thousand dollars a year or something, just unbelievable.

So I actually ended up in Pittsburgh because I had an aunt and uncle who lived there, and they said if I came and worked for their family business, they would put me through law school. So I took them up on it. And I can't say that I had any grand plan or vision for my life; it just kind of happened, and I made choices along the way, and went to law school in Pittsburgh and ended up staying there.

MANDICA-HART: And what has it been like being a woman in the legal field?

IMBRIE: It's changed quite a bit. When I first went to law school, I think my law school class was 25% female, 75% male, so I must say that going into law school was a huge shock after being at Smith—all these men everywhere. And they seemed to me to be kind of, you know, domineering and pushy. You know, you sort of had to really learn how to stand up for yourself. I had never felt that way at Smith.

And then when I graduated from law school, I went into what was in Pittsburgh a big law firm, 50 lawyers. And again, this was 1980, which, you know, it's not that long ago. The law firm had 50 lawyers; 49 were men. One woman. I was the second woman. And it was really hard. I mean, it was a very sexist environment. I didn't have the same kind of sports training and background that all the guys had, although I will also tell you that some of the guys would take me aside and, you know, teach me things, you know, about how to play the political game and all that kind of thing, which I knew nothing about. And in the beginning, the practice of law was extremely unappealing to me because it was very tedious and—well, the first thing that happened to me when I went in the firm was they said, "What kind of law do you want to practice?" And I said, "Well, I want to be a litigator. That's what I studied in law school. I want to be a litigator." And they almost literally said to me, "Girls don't do litigation." And there was a guy who came in in my class, and they said, "What do you want to do?" and he said, "I want to do corporate law," and they said, "We want you to do litigation." So they put him in the litigation department; they put me in the corporate department, but what they really wanted me to do was estate work. And they wanted me to go out and sit with these little old ladies and have tea with them and be nice to them so they would, you know, designate our law firm as the executor (laughs) of their estates. (inaudible) ridiculous. I hated that kind of work. And practicing law seemed like a bunch of old men who seemed to enjoy these people that they were working with, but I couldn't understand, you know, why that would be because these people just didn't seem appealing at all.

And also, I don't know how much you know about the structure of law firms, but large law firms are very structured, and so you come in as a first-year associate, and there's certain kind of work you can do, and then you're a second-year associate, and then you're a third year—you know, you don't get to work on anything very interesting until you're, you know, three or four years out, and you don't get to be the first chair on a case or a merger, you know, some big corporate deal, until you're a senior associate or junior partner.

So I decided this just was not for me. I was very ambitious, and I didn't want to, you know, go through this whole stepping stone thing forever. So I decided to go with a corporation. And I was referred to a corporation that we had done several transactions for where I was the young associate, one of the young associates working on the job, and made a move into corporate America. And that was much better for me. It was much less sexist. The people who owned the company that I went to work for, it was founded by five Jewish families, and it was in the third generation, and it was still owned—it was a big grocery store chain. And I felt like they were much more cognizant of what it might feel like to be a woman in a man's field because of their Jewish background. And I was very successful there and built up a big legal department and branched out and did business things and found that to be very interesting. But the law is still a pretty sexist place where men, you know, run a lot of things and call the shots, but it's not nearly like it was, you know, 40 years ago.

MANDICA-HART: Would you say that Smith helped prepare you for your career?

IMBRIE: Absolutely, yeah. Yeah. I got a good education here. I learned how to write here, which was very important. I wasn't timid. And although I said earlier, you had to learn how to stand up for yourself. I mean, I knew how to do that because of Smith, but I never felt like I really needed to be so pushy about it. But I thought Smith trained me very well.

MANDICA-HART: So if you had to make the decision to come again, would you still choose Smith?

IMBRIE: Yes, I would. I couldn't convince my daughter to come here, but—

MANDICA-HART: You tried?

IMBRIE: I tried. (laughter)

MANDICA-HART: And you still think that single-sex education is important, then?

IMBRIE: Oh, absolutely, yeah. Yeah, I think the women that come out of here are amazing, and I think it has something to do with being in the single-

sex atmosphere, and particularly at this time in your life, when you're 18 to 22, I think it's important.

MANDICA-HART: And do you have any advice for current and future generations of Smith students?

IMBRIE: No, I really don't.

MANDICA-HART: No? (laughs)

IMBRIE: No, I really don't. I mean, I think people have to make their own mistakes, have their own successes, and I think people should just try to be proud of who they are and accept who they are and embrace the changes that come, but it's a journey we all have to make for ourselves. So.

MANDICA-HART: I think that is good advice. We good? Great.

IMBRIE: Good? Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle, July 26, 2011.