

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Sabine Jean, Class of 2011

Interviewed by
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

May 21, 2016

Abstract

In this interview, Sabine Jean talks about being President of the Student Government Association, and acting as an intermediary between students and administrators. A Government and Africana Studies major, Jean was also involved with the BSA, and co-founded the Smith Law Society.

Restriction

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Jean, Sabine. Interview by Millie Cook. Video recording, May 21, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sabine Jean, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Jean, Sabine. Interview by Millie Cook. Transcript of video recording, May 21 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sabine Jean, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Alumnae Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 21, 2006, with:

SABINE JEAN
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: MILLIE COOK

JEAN: OK, I've never been to Long beach yet.

COOK: You should it's really great. There's so many good restaurants there, and it's like, it's LA, but calm. It has that vibe of Northampton to it, it's like kind of hippie, very queer kind of place, but it's like beachy.

JEAN: OK, and my skirt is fine? Just –

COOK: Yeah. So we only see you from here.

JEAN: OK, perfect. No accidents, all right.

COOK: You're good. (laughs). Great. Are we good to go? All right, so I am Millie Cook and I am conducting an interview with Sabine Jean on May 21, 2016 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for agreeing to be part of the project.

JEAN: No problem.

COOK: So how has reunion been so far?

JEAN: So far so good. I came in yesterday and ever since then have been catching up with a lot of friends. Yeah, also the parade today was amazing. We won for the highest participation of attendees at reunion. Yeah, something like that.

COOK: That's awesome. So where did you grow up?

JEAN: I grew up in Brooklyn, New York.

COOK: And what brought you to Smith?

JEAN: Actually, my high school counselor — my high school guidance counselor, I think is what she was called. She allowed for myself a few other students to do the woman of distinction program, I think it's in the

fall of my senior year of high school, and she just kind of sent us the application on a whim and we applied at the very last minute, like probably the day before it was due. And that actually — We actually got accepted and we got a trip to come see what Smith was like, and then applied, got in. I ended up coming here, she — My other friend, she went elsewhere, but you know.

COOK: What was the women of distinction group like?

JEAN: It was good. I remember that they paired me up with someone who was also from New York, so that was helpful. She was from Queens; I was from Brooklyn. And I just remember the experience very like, Oh, wow, this is what a college campus looks like. Then realizing when I got here, that not all college campuses look like this. And yeah, it was a good time, I think they had professors and panels and different people talk to us. It just seemed like no pressure, just, Hey, look what we have to offer. I liked that.

COOK: Did Smith being a women's college affect your decision to come here?

JEAN: I think so. Looking back at it, I thought about whether or not I wanted to attend a women's college, but it wasn't necessarily, OK, I'm attending Smith because it's a women's college. It was, I'm attending Smith because it's a great college. More so, then it happens to be a women's college. I think that's the way I looked at it in retrospect, yeah.

COOK: So what the transition into Smith like?

JEAN: I think for me being from New York, a big city, and coming to Northampton I was a little homesick, I would say. I was, I don't know if I would say I was academically like behind, but I did feel the rigor of Smith when I got here in terms of that, but I think after the first three months or so I sort of got the hang of things, made my core group of friends, and it was smooth sailing for the rest of, I guess, three-and-a-half years from there.

COOK: What house did you live in?

JEAN: I lived in a different house every year at Smith. I lived in King House my first year. Gardner House, I did res life in Gardner House. Then I moved to Comstock my junior year. And then I finished off in Park House my senior year.

COOK: Did you do res life the three years?

JEAN: No, I just did it my sophomore year.

COOK: OK, and how was that like, switching houses every year?

JEAN: Difficult moving, but it wasn't too bad. I think that when I look back, I say that King is my house because that was the house that I had most of my friends from, the house that I would still attend their events, even though I didn't live there. And I also had a roommate in King House. It's usually only singles, but on the first floor they have suites, and I say I was lucky enough to have a roommate which I'm still in touch with today.

COOK: Well, that's good. Did you always feel comfortable on campus and in your house, in the communities there?

JEAN: Yeah. I would say I did. I think I formed, I guess my core group, probably within my first year and then added some people my second year. We're all back now, so yeah.

COOK: That's great. What did you major in?

JEAN: I was a double major in government and Afro-American studies.

COOK: So then why did you chose those?

JEAN: Government, I think I always had an interest in government. I eventually wanted to go into law, so I knew that having the government background would be helpful. And then Afro-Am because it was one of those things, you took one class out of interest, and the next thing you know, you're five classes in and you might as well major. So that was how that happened.

COOK: Did you have anyone who was important to your experience like professors or mentors?

JEAN: Yeah, I would say Professor Quashie definitely served as a mentor, counselor, important factor of just me, like thriving at Smith. I was able to talk to him as he was my academic adviser as well as a friend, someone that I was able to work with and push me to levels I didn't even know were inside of me. Definitely him. And then also, I think a good group of friends of mine helped during difficult times at Smith, so yeah.

COOK: Where did you meet your friends on campus?

JEAN: I think the first group of friends I made, we met at women of distinction actually, and it was one girl who was also from Brooklyn, so then she and someone else from her high school came to Smith, so now we have like three people from Brooklyn and it just kept growing like, I know this person. You know that person. And then, as far as when I got here,

I think my classes, I made a few friends from my classes, then as well as my house.

COOK: Were you active in clubs and orgs on campus?

JEAN: Very. I think too active sometimes. Yeah. I was pretty active in student government. I was a senator my first year. I was secretary of student government my sophomore year. I was the curriculum committee chair my junior year. And SGA president my senior year.

COOK: Wow.

JEAN: Yeah, then I was also a board member for, I don't even remember the position, for the Black Student Association. And then I also co-founded the Smith Law Society and I'm sure I did something else. Yeah.

COOK: What was being on SGA like?

JEAN: It was interesting. I think seeing that I was, I guess a cabinet member for three — three out of my four years here, seeing the different groups and working with the different people, I think I learned a lot about myself and how I interact with people through that experience. I don't think I would have ran fresh year president if I didn't think that it was really worth serving Smith in that way, and I enjoyed it, yeah.

COOK: And did you like being a communicator from both the student side and from the faculty side?

JEAN: Yeah, I think I did, especially in my senior year when I was constantly meeting with the provost, meeting with the dean of the college, meeting with the president of the college, I think that gave me insight more so into the workings of Smith and also prepared me to then serve on the board of trustees for two years. But I do think that having to be the person in the middle of the students and the administration, for me it was fun, I guess, because it was kind of like, I know things now. I can better explain them to students when they ask these questions. And I like doing that. I'm a talkative person and I like talking to people, so I guess that came in handy as well.

COOK: What was it like being on the board of trustees?

JEAN: It was interesting. I was one of two of the, I guess student trustees, I think that's what they were called as year presidents that transition onto the board. I liked it a lot. At the time, I was living in New York so it was an easy bus ride up. Living in LA now, I don't think I could have been able to do it as easily, but yeah, I liked it. I made, I think friendships that would last, friendships and network connections that would probably last a lifetime. I still meet regularly with a few board

members that I was on the board with, yeah, it was good. And obviously, deciding policy for the school was an added bonus. And getting to choose the new president, which is currently the president now, yeah.

COOK: What else did you do as a part of the board of trustees?

JEAN: I sat on a few committees. One of the ones I think was most important for me personally, was the Alumnae Engagement Task Force, and it was, I guess, an ad hoc committee of the board of trustees along with alumnae association and what that committee did was we basically brainstormed ways to get participation up, whether that be volunteering in your local community, whether that be raising funds for a certain campaign. I think I enjoyed that most because it was more what I envisioned the board doing, like reaching out more than just sitting in a room making decisions, and I liked that aspect of it.

COOK: That's really cool. What did you and your friends do for fun on campus?

JEAN: Wow. Probably, I think, I'm sure there's still a bus that goes to UMass, Amherst, that bus, (inaudible). We were on that bus every weekend for some reason. I feel like we went to UMass a lot, I might be mistaken, but I think in our first year, we went there a lot. And yeah, we would go out to eat locally. There are still a lot of great restaurants here. I'm trying to think. I think that bus ride to UMass was usually better than the actual party at UMass sometimes, so yeah, that was always a good time.

COOK: What was the environment like being at UMass versus being here at Smith?

JEAN: I liked being able to come back to Smith. I think that is the main takeaway I got from that. The environment was different, I mean, we would only be there about two or three hours at a time, so it's not like you get the whole big college experience, which I don't think we wanted to be with. It was kind of like a nice little escape and then a way to like, OK, saw that. Now I'm ready to come home.

COOK: Did you know any other people from the other colleges?

JEAN: I think I started meeting them probably around my sophomore year. I don't think I regularly visited after my sophomore year, but yeah.

COOK: So you were on SGA, were you also politically active at the time?

JEAN: I don't think, no. I believe Obama was elected when I was at Smith. Yeah, that was my first year here. So I don't think – yeah, my first time

voting was for Barack Obama, I do recall that, but I don't think I was politically active in a sense that I was part of any organization that was pushing any type of political agenda. I think I just – within my group of friends, we just made sure that everyone was registered to vote and voted. I think that's about it in terms of engagement with politics.

COOK: What was it like on campus when Barack Obama was elected?

JEAN: I mean, it was amazing personally. I remember, there was the Black Student Association, we hosted — not hosted, a whole bunch of us just gathered together in Mwangi [Mwangi Cultural Center] and kind of just watched as the votes were coming in, and like this could really happen. And then I remember getting on the phone with my parents afterwards and just crying, like, Oh my gosh. And my father's like, You're witnessing history. This is a big deal. And I was like, I know. So yeah, there was a lot of that going around. I think the whole week we were just like, Yes, and then I was here for the inauguration. I was, what was I doing? I don't know why I was here, but I was here rather than being at home. And then I remember we were watching it in I think, Wright Hall, and you could just see everyone's faces as they were just tentatively listening to every single word, and it was a powerful moment.

COOK: What was — what do you think the most significant part of your Smith career was?

JEAN: Probably being SGA president. I think I made a lot of connections, especially my connection with [Cal was?] definitely and how our relationship evolved from being a student to being a board member, I think that for me was probably a bigger deal now that I'm looking back at it, but at the time it was kind of surreal and it was a cool thing, but at the same time, I thought this was just another activity, another thing to put on your resume, but it was more than that, and [so the states?] it was more than that.

COOK: From being a SGA president to being trustee to now being an alum, how have you seen Smith as a growing institution?

JEAN: I think now, I guess, I was around when the campaign first started, the campaign Women for the World, and even being in a room when we were coming up with that phrase, so it's interesting to see that and seeing the banners and seeing how much momentum it has gained. I think for me, that is kind of the thing more I guess, that started when I was on the board and now it is continuing. In terms of being a student to the board, it's – I don't know, I felt like I was still a student at times, and you're a little shy to say certain things, then you're like, OK, no they want you to speak up. That's why you're here. So my first year, I was kind of like, Let me run this by someone else, so I don't sound

stupid in front of all these important people. And then by my second year, I was just saying everything and anything, and I think it was well received. Not any and everything, like within reason, and giving my input and being an active member I think. In terms of being an alum, now that I'm out in LA, I try to participate in the Smith College Club out there. When I can, I go out to events, and yeah, it's interesting seeing no matter how far away you are, there's always going to be a Smithie there that you can have lunch with, have tea with, whatever you want with.

COOK: Have you taken advantage of the Smith connections?

JEAN: Yeah. Definitely. There was a former trustee, well I think she's on the board actually, a trustee that was there when I was there, and she's out in LA right now, and I think we have lunch. We try to have lunch or tea about maybe twice a year since I moved out there, so yeah.

COOK: That's real nice. So what have you been doing since you graduated?

JEAN: So when I graduated, I actually did Teach for America in New York. I received my master's degree from Ford University two years after, yeah, in 2013. I continued teaching. I taught for three years. I taught ESL at the elementary school level in East Harlem, and then after three years, I applied to law school and got in, and I'm currently going to be starting my third year of law school – my third and last year of school ever, hopefully, in the fall at UCLA.

COOK: What kind of work were you doing for Teach for America?

JEAN: I was a teacher, so I was a corps member and I taught ASL to little, like five- to twelve-year-olds. It was enjoyable, I would say. I still love working with kids and I try to volunteer every now and again.

COOK: And you said you were wanting to go into law school since you were here at Smith, what are you hoping to do with a law degree?

JEAN: That's a good question. At this point, I think, I'm going to be working in employment law this summer, actually I'm heading back to LA tomorrow. I'll be working at a firm that specializes in employment law and doing plaintiff-side litigation. I think, long term, I would see myself doing that, or possibly working for the governmental capacity.

COOK: OK. Do you have any favorite Smith memories that you keep with you?

JEAN: Wow. Favorite Smith memory. I'm trying to think. There are so many, I'm trying to like pick one.

COOK: You can do a couple.

JEAN: I would say, graduation was definitely up there and one of my favorite Smith memories, having my family there and seeing what I had been working so hard for four years. They got to witness that, and that was amazing. I would say getting elected even for SGA president, in my junior year, I still remember like literally sitting in the SGA office at the computer refreshing my email because I knew it was coming out. That was amazing. Yeah, just the time I spent with my friends, I think, like, moments that you can't like — we even we can't even though we try to relive them now, we're a little older, but yeah.

COOK: So do you have advice for the Smithies that are still here or have just graduated this year?

JEAN: Advice.

COOK: It's OK to say no.

JEAN: I guess, find what you love doing and never let go of that regardless of whether it's work or school or whatever else gets in the way, just whatever you love doing, just always keep that in your life, I guess, yeah.

GEIS: Great. I'm interested in sometimes when you're in the middle between administration and the student body, as in your position seeing both worlds, what do you think students can — What insight do you have from being in student government and seeing how the administration works and boards that would be valuable for students to know about how that process works, and then what do you think your voice was contributing to the conversation from student government?

JEAN: OK, yeah, I think I remember this coming up a lot when I was, when I was SGA president. A lot of the time, it's kind of like you're caught between a rock and a hard place, right? But I would say like even from my meetings with administrators, just understanding that they hear us in some way, shape, or form, and whatever we say or do is translated into their meetings whether we know it or not, and then also, it's kind of like, I don't know, it's almost, for me I would say it was kind of, it was OK for me to go back and tell students the board is working on it and it takes time and there's a process to things, it's not just said and it's done. Like having to explain that, I guess, when it came down to like certain changes that might have been happening, I think I understood them more when I graduated and I was on the board than just being a student and hearing it. Now it was like OK, I understand why there needs to be a process and why we have a board of trustees and why they meet and when they do meet, you have to be in a room for hours on a day discussing issues. Because at the end of the day, when people leave that room, they are doing things and there are definitely different like I guess

avenues through the committees that things can get basically funneled through, and a lot of delegation I would say happens on the board level. It was interesting seeing it and then being a part of it, right, because on SGA, we met with the board, but meeting for an hour versus sitting there and actually participating in a board meeting, like a full board meeting for the entire weekend is different. And then, yeah, does that answer?

GEIS: Yeah, so it seems like during your time here, you probably got to a certain comfort level because you mentioned that. When did you start feeling like, I feel comfortable with my voice and being able to say what I think. Do you have any recollections around when you started speaking out and what felt good about that?

JEAN: I think it was when some of the administration of the school that knew me as a student would ask me questions or ask me for my opinion, and that was kind of, "OK, you're putting me on the spot." But they weren't putting me on the spot, they really just genuinely wanted to know my thoughts, and they — It was like, it's OK for you to voice your opinion or say what you want to say. Because that's kind of why you're there, right? You were elected into this position for a reason. There's people that believe in you, whether or not you believe in yourself and yeah, it was kind of like for a me a growing experience, because yeah, being talkative and then being able to I guess voice what I want to say in an educational way that is just translated into board of trustees talk, I guess. Yeah, I learned that through my first experience of observing, then when I did find my voice, I definitely used it.

COOK: There's a lot of rhetoric going around now a days on campus about how there is a divide between the students opinions and political ideas versus the board and how still the school is going to go for what the board wants versus what the students want, how do you see the board and that kind of idea of social change being slower on the administrative level than on the campus?

JEAN: Yeah, I think this also is a recurring issue as well, especially from when I was at Smith. I would say one thing that I did learn is that being a student I'm here for four years and the board is kind of looking at the longevity of the college and what's good in the long run for the school. So if I was a student and I wanted to see X happen before I graduated, and it didn't happen, I can't really get upset about that because I'm sure there was a reason that it didn't happen. Or as SGA would present to the board, I think we would always have like three big topics that we presented on based on conversations with students, and you know, they might take up one that year. And realistically, looking back, the fact that they even were able to take on one was probably a good thing because they're looking at the school as an entire institution, not just as the students are here. We're just one part of that. We're there for that

four years, but the alumnae association, for example, and the countless alums that we have across the nation and beyond, I think that's what they were looking at, like how does this one thing fit in with the larger work that we're trying to do?

COOK: Yeah, that's great. Do you have any other? Well thank you so much for being part of this.

JEAN: No problem. I said Black Student Association, I think it's Black Student Alliance. I'm not sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 2016