

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

*Jean Kabler, Class of 2000*

Interviewed by  
Maggie Kraus, Class of 2012

May 15, 2010

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Jean Kahler discusses her decision to come to Smith, her experiences living in Hubbard House, her work as a theater major, her process of coming out as a lesbian, and the overall atmosphere surrounding homosexuality.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Laura O'Regan 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:** Kahler, Jean. Interview by Maggie Kraus. Video recording, May 15, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Jean Kahler, interview by Maggie Kraus, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Kahler, Jean. Interview by Maggie Kraus. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Jean Kahler interview by Maggie Kraus, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, p. 3.

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project  
Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 15, 2010, with:

JEAN KAHLER

by: MAGGIE KRAUS  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

KAHLER: Not repetitive at all. Not inane. (laughter)

KRAUS: That's great. Just for the record, this is Maggie Kraus, and I'm conducting an interview with Jean Kahler, on May 15, 2010, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. First of all, thanks a lot for coming in and doing this.

KAHLER: Yeah. Happy to do it.

KRAUS: I guess we'll just start with your decision to come to Smith and how you got here.

KAHLER: Oh, wow, OK. I grew up in North Carolina. I guess probably how I first started thinking about Smith is that one of my eventual classmates, Christine (inaudible), then Christine (inaudible), who was my best friend from kindergarten to third grade, had an older sister who was eight years older than we are, and she went to Smith. She was in the class of '92. At the time, our big plan was that Christine was going to go to Smith and I was going to go to Bryn Mawr, which is where my mom went, and we were going to take the train, I guess, to New York, I think was our plan, to meet. I don't know. The train was involved. This was our plan. Then she and I didn't go to school together anymore after third grade. Whatever. We did other things.

I went to tour schools the summer after my junior year. At that point, I had spent the summer at Carnegie Mellon doing a summer pre-college theater conservatory musical theater thing. I had kind of decided I didn't want to go to conservatory based on that experience. My parents came to pick me up in Pittsburgh and we were going to drive around to all these Northeastern schools. I had no clue at all which ones I wanted to go to. Smith looked nice, Mount Holyoke looked nice. They didn't really look very different to me. I had asked an interviewer who came to my town to do an information session — I had been like, What's the difference between Smith and Mount Holyoke? She was like, Are you going to visit? I said yes. She was like, Then I'm not going to tell you. She's like, I don't want to sort of prejudice you. I was like, huh, OK. So

I came to visit and the difference became incredibly clear — what the difference between Smith and Mount Holyoke was.

But I went and visited a lot of places. I guess at the end of the week, I felt like I really liked Smith and I really liked Vassar. I have to admit that part of what I really liked about Smith was that my tour guide was really, really, really attractive, and wearing fairly transparent pants, which were often backlit as we walked around campus. That was probably, at least subconsciously, influencing my decision. (laughs) I also thought the bathrooms were very attractive. But I don't really — it's funny. My wife and I were talking about this on our train up. I remember all the things that I thought about Smith when I got here. I was like, This is the right place. But I don't really remember why I thought that before. I did an interview, whatever. I know why I felt the other places weren't the right place.

So I went back to my school, and my college counselor was like, What did you think? I was like, I liked Smith and Vassar, and I feel like I like Smith more, but I don't know why. She gave me this wonderful piece of advice that I always give all my — I give everyone this piece of advice. She was like, What you should do is spend the next three weeks deciding that you're going to go to Smith, but don't tell anyone. She's like, Just, in your head, tell yourself you are going to Smith. At the end of three weeks, you will know whether that was a good decision. And it was, and it was a brilliant way to do it, because I hadn't told anyone, so I hadn't embarrassed myself. I didn't have to go back. So I applied early, and it just felt like the right decision. Then I called said best friend from childhood, figuring she would have, at that point, fallen in love with Carleton or Stanford or something. So I called her and I was like, Christine, guess where I'm going to school, ha, ha, ha? She was like, That is my school. (laughs) I was like, Oh no. We ended up both going here.

It was funny, because we were growing up in the South, and at that point, Smith took eight percent of its student body from the South. Every college that I went to tour swore up and down that they didn't do regional quotas, and it was really obvious that they all did regional quotas, because there were eight percent from the South at every school. It was between seven and nine percent. She was like, I know too many people from our town applying. We'll never all get in. Then, actually, we all ended up going here, I think, or nearly all of us. So that was kind of fun. That's how I got here. I don't remember what else you asked.

KRAUS: I think that was it. You said your mom went to Bryn Mawr?

KAHLER: Yeah.

KRAUS: Did she have any influence in your decision to look at all-women's colleges or did she—

KAHLER: No, not really at all, actually. My dad went to Princeton at a time that it was all men. I think the first coed class was the year after he graduated. My mom, of course, went to a women's college. My sort of shortlist of schools included — I guess it also included Mount Holyoke, but it didn't include any other women's colleges. A lot of my friends in high school were boys. I was not — the all-women environment, at the time that I was applying, was something that I applied in spite of, not something that I was especially interested in. My parents were kind of like, Why do you want to go to a single-sex school? And I was like, Well, you did. They were like, Oh. It ended up being something that I felt was a huge strength, and that I felt was a huge strength almost immediately. But I remember the second half of my senior year in high school feeling really nervous. Being like, Oh no. The people who I could talk to are Matt and Mike. Oh no. Now I'm just going to be with — oh no. I ended up being extremely happy with that decision, but it was definitely not a — I don't know. It wasn't a consciously attractive factor.

KRAUS: How quickly were those fears resolved upon getting to Smith?

KAHLER: I would say almost instantly. One of the things that I was remembering on the way up here, and sort of weeping about, is what I felt like after my first convocation. I was happy with my decision, but when my parents dropped me off, I totally cried in the parking lot when they left. I liked the people in my house. I remember my friend Sara Pic, who I know you interviewed the other day — we were all sitting around. It's our first day there. I know she's from New Orleans. That's all I know about her. People were like, So, who's gay and who's not? I was like, Wow! I can't believe we're talking about this. And Sara was like — who's always very much more sophisticated than anyone else — I believe that sexuality is fluid. I was like, You what? How could that happen? I was like, Wow, my mind is being blown already. But I was still pretty nervous about the whole thing.

Then we went to convocation. It was cool that everyone was excited getting ready for convocation and trying to teach us cheers and make us wear whatever we were supposed to wear, but that, I was just kind of like, This is like a demented camp. Then I went to convocation. I remember being there. The fact that everyone was screaming and yelling and having a good time beforehand, I was a little — I was sort of a shy person and I was a little — not off-put by it, but it was a little scary. But the fact that when the faculty walked in in their regalia everyone got louder, and that it was so loud that you could — I'm going to cry anyway — it was so loud that you couldn't hear the pipe organ, I was like, This is amazing. The idea that people are that excited about scholars. Not just that they love an individual faculty member, but that they love the faculty. That's incredible.

I felt that whole — I remember that whole day — I remember after convocation, I went right up to my room and started writing letters

to my English teacher and my friends back home, just being like, Everyone here is so passionate about something. All different things. But there's not a single person here who isn't absolutely on fire about something. I was like, This is the right place. I've never even imagined that a place like this could exist. So I would say that my fears about it being single-sex weren't really about it being single-sex. It was about it being an all-female environment in a way that it wasn't. The kind of women who were here were not the kind of people I was necessarily expecting. They were not the same as just a cross-section of the female population of my high school. They were the people I wanted to hang out with.

KRAUS: What house were you in?

KAHLER: Hubbard.

KRAUS: Hubbard, all four years?

KAHLER: All four years.

KRAUS: Awesome. What was the house community like? What did that do for you as a first-year?

KAHLER: As a first-year (laughs), my roommate and I really hated each other a lot. There was kind of a war of the first-years in my house our first year. There were two sides. There was my side and my roommate's side, but we were definitely the flash point, and how you felt about our disagreements with each other determined which side you were on. Our side, and we must have been just obnoxious as all hell, we were mostly theater majors. We did things like walk to the grocery store on King Street late at night and acquire T-shirts and Sharpies and make our own T-shirts. They didn't all say the same things, but it was clear that we all matched. We stayed up until a trillion o'clock every night and rearranged — there would be {inaudible} there. The HONS or whoever would make a sign of construction paper letters that said, "Welcome to Hubbard." You would stay up in the middle of the night and you would stare at it until some anagram occurred to you. Then you would take them down and rearrange them. The only one I remember is, "Watch our elbow." I remember that one. Because the "M" and the "W," you could use either way. So I'm sure we must have been incredibly irritating.

My roommate's side of the divide, on the other hand, they were — my roommate was in ROTC. She hated the fact that she was at a college full of lesbians. It really weirded her out. I had not come out at that point, but I was definitely thinking that this was not a problem. I was sort of in the process of coming out, which did not make her like me more. I don't know. She had this huge — we only had one closet in our room. I had half of that closet, and she had half of that closet, and

then in addition, she had this huge clothing rack that was full of things that were plaid, and this sweatshirt that she wore for the whole Christmas season with this huge, sequined Santa's head, and big Santa's head earrings. She was — well, other people in our house called her the ROTC Nazi. (laughter) She was later — much later, she was the head of Honor Council, and I was extraordinarily terrified that someone was going to accuse me of something, because I knew I would be kicked out. So she moved out at Christmas. She moved to somewhere in the quad. Everything was happy and joyous after that. I don't wish to say that I behaved perfectly, either. But it was — I don't know. It was an interesting environment.

KRAUS: Outside of your house, and that dynamic going on, how would you describe the campus atmosphere? At least your first interpretations of it.

KAHLER: Well, definitely the big thing that stuck out to me is what I said before. The notion that everyone was really passionate about something and that there was no predicting what that something could be. It might be medieval art, but it might be sweatshop conditions. Everyone, including staff — I felt like every person I interacted with just had some topic that you could get them on and they could just talk to you about it for hours and tell you about how exciting this thing was. I loved that. That was maybe the biggest thing that really, really stuck out to me.

And then also the sense of a really kind of playfulness, both that — to me, I interpreted part of the passion about a certain subject as also a kind of playfulness. A mind that was curious and interested and playful. But also things like when we'd have the Coming Out Day Dance, and everyone would chalk the campus all night. It wasn't just the gay people chalking the campus about being gay. It was the straight people chalking the campus about whatever. I remember my friends Liz and Margo, who had chalked, like, I love my gay roommate, and I love my straight roommate, and I love my parents even though they're straight. That kind of — childish is a difficult word, but that energy that is like the way a child is about things. Yet coupled with this incredible seriousness.

The other thing that really struck me — I don't remember if this struck me right away or if it was something I kind of came to think about — was that I was a pretty competitive person, but I feel in a lot of ways that I was raised not to be competitive with other people, just to be competitive with myself. So it was very important, for instance, that I get high grades, but it didn't have to do with my beating other people. I felt that that was true at Smith as a whole as well when I was here. Everyone felt that way. They very much wanted to excel, but not to beat you. When I tell people about the way exams run, which I assume they still do, that you could take them anytime, people are always — their minds are blown. I'm like, You have to understand that it was an environment that cheating was just sort of not built into. Because how could I — it would be one thing for me to show you my work, but for

me to have to ask you for it, how could I do that? That, I thought, was really unusual as well.

KRAUS: It sounds like you thought that the campus was a very open, accepting, safe place for the gay, lesbian, queer community.

KAHLER: Absolutely. I remember — I don't know whether just my older friends were a little over-dramatic, which they certainly were, or whether it had changed a lot in the sort of period that they were there and I wasn't yet. But I did feel like — I know that Celebration of Sisterhood wasn't really that old at that point, and that people talked about the period leading up to that as having the people in pearls versus the people with rainbows, and then this person who was in both, who we know and we just think is so cool and whatever. There wasn't, to me, that atmosphere at all. There was — OK, so there was my roommate. But mostly, I don't really think that that was an anti-gay thing. I think she was a little uncomfortable, but I think that really we just — it was an anti-kind of freedom thing or something. That sounds terrible. Her aunt worked for Lockheed Martin, and she was always telling us that if we sucked up for her, she would get us jobs at Lockheed Martin, which was just not really the ethos. (laughs)

I remember when I was on campus, there was one weird incident that happened in, I think, Comstock. I don't even remember what it was. Something unpleasant was written on somebody's door or something. The response was that the whole house put rainbows in their windows. I thought that that was — yeah, I don't remember — I remember maybe feeling that individuals were a little weird, but that that was very much not only not the norm, but also frowned upon as a group. That these were the people who were going to be kind of cast out.

KRAUS: In talking to a lot of alums, it seems that dynamic on campus has changed tremendously over the years, in a fairly short period of time, from '85 to '95 to 2000. That's really interesting. Were you a theater major?

KAHLER: I was a theater major.

KRAUS: Is that something that you came into Smith with a background in?

KAHLER: Yeah. I had intended to either be a theater or music major. I went to — I guess it was the thing at the ITT, where all the faculty — there's this thing at the ITT where you could meet the faculty from different departments. The music department just seemed really weird and the theater departments seemed really fun, and so I just sort of hung out with them. I ended up doing a lot of lighting, which I hadn't been interested in, or I hadn't known anything about. I enjoyed it a lot, but I think a lot of it was just that that was what the cool kids did. The lighting professor at that point and the master electrician were both so



cool that those were the really sought-after jobs and that's what interesting people did. I sort of fell into doing that.

KRAUS: Where else did other academic interests come into play in your—

KAHLER: I ended up — sort of on paper, I ended up being a women's studies minor, which was more or less accidental. I had been taking Italian. I had sort of thought I might minor in Italian, and then I kind of didn't. I was looking at the catalog and I was like, Oh, look, if I take the intro class, the senior seminar, and two more credits, I have a double major. So I took the intro class. Then my senior year, I was supposed to take the senior seminar. It didn't really work out. I was mad at them for some reason. I was like, Wait, I don't need a double major. So I did that. That was sort of incidental. It was almost an entirely interdisciplinary department at that point. There weren't very many department-offered courses. I took horticulture, which I really loved. I took music theory and I took some other music classes. The music theory professor was fantastic. I took philosophy classes with Meredith Michael, whose book is all over the place now. I don't know. I took tons of things. I took comp lit classes. I didn't do cum laude, only because I didn't feel like taking a math class, because I had already done two years of calculus and I felt like that sucked. But I think otherwise, I had all the requirements. I surprisingly took a lot of gym courses, and I had chosen Smith partly because there was no gym requirement. I guess that was another reason I chose Smith in the first place, is that there were no distribution requirements, which I appreciated. I felt that I was already well-rounded and wanted to make my own decisions. I actually took this very well-rounded curriculum.

KRAUS: Usually how it ends up happening. In coming into your own identity, in terms of coming out or being surrounded by this really supportive queer community, what were relationships, what was dating like? I presume you met your wife here? You guys both graduated from Smith.

KAHLER: Yes. I did. She was the really hot senior that everyone had a crush on. Thank you. (laughs) We got together days after she graduated. Hours before she was leaving for a whole other part of the country, which I then moved to on — not all impulsive decisions are bad, but it was definitely an impulsive, frankly ill-advised, decision that happens to have worked out extremely well for me. I would say, otherwise — I don't know. I talk a lot about people, and I think this is not just true of Smith. I think it's sort of true of coming out. For people who come out when they're older than 14, I think there's this quality of having your whole adolescence suddenly happen. Because I think a lot of us had pretty staid adolescences in certain ways. At least with regard to sexuality things, it's like, I didn't have the drive to go out and do wild things with boys. I had a couple of boyfriends, but that was sort of to be

socially normal, not because I sort of had any interest. It's sort of like there was this — when I came out, but I feel like when a lot of people came out, there's this feeling of, oh my god, the whole world just changed! Now I can go be wild. This sort of crazy year, which I would say I didn't really act on in terms of relationships, because I was a shy and awkward person. But I feel like there was a lot of — I don't know. There was a lot of that kind of sense of explosion of craziness.

In terms of campus things, I remember being in line in the dining hall — well, at Hubbard, so in the dining room — the first day the upperclassmen were back. Somebody behind me, I heard their conversation, and I heard someone say, “So-and-so is such a BDOC.” And I thought, BDOC? I was like, B-D-O-C. I was like, That can't stand for what I think it stands for. And it did. It was Big Dyke on Campus. That was a big thing. There were a few couples that everyone was just in awe of. [Hilary Hartley?] and [Molly Cornbloom?]. They were like the star couple when I got to campus. They were both in the Notables. They were really beautiful. They were amazing together. (laughs) So there were always couples like that. It's like, Joy and [Shante?], oh my god. So that was kind of a funny — I think that had — I teach college and I see that happening with campus couples, or I hear reports of it from my students at my college, too. But I think the idea that these were gay couples added this extra level of kind of glamour to the whole thing. That you could be this glamorous, amazing gay couple was extra exciting.

KRAUS: How did that work out in terms of your life outside of Smith? How was that with your family or your friends back home? Was that something that was well-received or something that was—

KAHLER: It was what it was. I don't have a really dramatic, and then I was kicked out of the house, or stoned from my church kind of a story. When I came out to my parents, it was very awkward. I would say that none of us were at our best. I don't think they really handled it very suavely, but I didn't do it very suavely. In terms of my high school friends, mostly it was fine. My high school best friend then of course assumed I wanted to sleep with her, which I wasn't really very interested in doing. I remember accidentally implying to a group of my high school friends who were guys, who were still in high school, that I was having these wild orgiastic heterosexual — we had a history of saying outlandish, hyperbolic things to each other, but I had actually not even meant to imply that. That sort of spiced up my reputation for a while, because I was this very, very nerdy person. (laughs) Then, actually, while I was at Smith, during my sophomore year, my parents moved overseas, so I didn't really go back to my hometown after that. I didn't have any family to go see there. I didn't really stay in very good touch with most of my high school friends after first year. But they were generally accepting and cool. We were a bunch of nerds from a liberal town — a liberal town in a conservative area — so we were very proud and

conscious of our liberalism. It wasn't just the thing that you did. It was the thing that you did that you were different about.

KRAUS: Do you want to talk a little bit about your impulsive decision to move—

KAHLER: Yeah. You've got to ask her about it, too. I'd be very interested to hear. It goes a little something like this. I had this terrible crush on her forever. Like, from my making a complete ass out of myself the first time I met her. She had this necklace, and we're sitting in the living room. I was sitting on the floor and she's sitting up on the sofa. She was this big, amazing senior, and I was this total wreck, hick first-year with my bare feet and my sundress, which is also how I walked in today, but it was worse. (laughs) And my no idea that sexuality could be fluid. All of this is very new. I had no idea that — I remember there was a girl that I saw, or woman that I saw, early on, who lived in our house and who hadn't shaved her legs, which was a concept I was familiar with, but I was from the South. People don't do that unless they're definitely gay. But I was sure that she was straight because she just looked straight to me. She had long hair and she was wearing a dress. I remember consciously thinking, like, Wow, so here it's OK to not shave your legs and be straight. That's really interesting. Of course, she was totally gay. I just had no — I had such hide-bound assumptions.

Anyway, so here I am, this kind of moron, and this very cool senior, who most of her friends have already graduated and live off campus, and they were part of this very cool scene that I know now to be a disaster, but anyway. So she's up there, and she was wearing this necklace that was clearly a number two and kind of a one that was overlapping it, but it also sort of looked like a number two that was turning into a number four. So I thought I was being very clever, and I was like, So, does your necklace mean 21 or 24? And I was like, Yes! She was like, It's the symbol for Sagittarius. Which is also my zodiac sign, so I was like, Oh! She luckily has no recollection of this. Then I didn't talk to her for like eight months.

Then my second semester, I spent a lot of time around her because she lived right by the stairs. I would just — I was doing this play that involved all these Japanese training techniques, so my legs were really tired, to be fair. I would get to the second floor and sort of artfully collapse against her door, and then come in for the next four hours and talk about anything, and sort of burn with longing. She was dating this other woman, and they had the same first name, and it was so ridiculous. Then they broke up, but of course she was really upset, and of course I was very comforting. I was burning with longing. I remember one of my friends — we were taking the bus to Mount Holyoke to go to (inaudible). She was like, So, you have a crush on Jess Rowe, don't you? I was like, Yeah. She was like, Everybody does. So that was that, and I hung out in her room all the time, burning with longing.

And then this is the part of the story that could only happen when you're 18 and sort of a nitwit. Then I spent — senior week, I was supposed to live in some other — I was going to spend the summer here, working. I actually spent senior week sleeping in her room, in bodily contact with her, with no sexual anything going on, except insane desire on my part. I assumed that she was very unaware of any of that. I wasn't going to spoil it by mentioning it. I was like, I'll just have these precious moments to remember when I'm old. (laughs) So she graduated. I met her parents, whatever. They were nice. She was going to go to Chicago for the summer and live with her grandparents, and then go to L.A. in the fall and go to film school. This was all very dramatic, and she was going to leave.

The day after graduation, she picked me up. She had spent the night at her friend's house off campus. She picked me up and we were going to go to brunch. I remember driving in her car down to Sylvester's, and I was staring at her hand on the gear shift. I was like, Her hand is so beautiful. (laughter) She was talking about how her friend, who she had had this terrible crush on for many years but then didn't anymore, had made a pass at her the night before, and how gross and weird it was to have a pass made at you by someone who you had only thought of as a friend. And I was like, Yes, this is the universe being like, No, don't fuck this up. Keep it together. Burn with longing. Go get your eggs.

So we did that and then we went for a walk around campus. And then we were standing over by the pond on this particular rock. We were sort of like (inaudible) hugging and whatever, and I was burning with longing. And I'm a very physically demonstrative person. I think — well, we disagree on which one of us did what here, but I'm going to tell the story my way, since she's actually completely wrong about where it happened, too. So my recollection is that I kissed her in that totally misinterpretable zone, where you're kind of on the cheek but kind of near the mouth. It could kind of go either way. It was like — but then, after that, she actually kissed me, in this totally interpretable way. Very clearly interpretable way. I was like, Oh my god, my brain just exploded.

Then she left. I think she had to go L.A. first. We were having these impassioned phone calls. She was like, I'm going to convince my grandmother that you should live with us for the summer. She did. I told my parents that I had to go to Chicago, instead of staying on campus the way I'd said I would, because it was a big city and they had such interesting things there, like the opera. (laughs) I got on a train and moved to Chicago. And we had not discussed anything. There was no, Let's be girlfriends now. None of this. So I got on a train and moved to Chicago. She picked me up. We went and walked by the beachfront. I was like, This is totally awkward. I've totally misinterpreted everything and whatever. Then we moved into her grandparents' house, to the top floor. Her grandparents and her great-grandmother, who was 99 at the time, were living in this house.

Her grandfather was a lifelong psychotic — like, actually psychotic — and at that point, senile and really weird. As a lifetime trait, he thought that all women had some terrible, terrible secret you just had to find out. His wife, for instance, who didn't learn to drive because she was in her late seventies, actually had been carrying on an affair with an Italian vacuum cleaner salesman for years. He believed this seriously. This is a man who was committed many times. He was Polish and so racist against Italians that he wouldn't allow his wife to eat pizza. Now I should say that, sort of coated to that is that, now that he's dead, all she wants to eat is pizza. She eats pizza all the time. That was the summer that Ellen DeGeneres was coming out. So even though the only television he watched was McNeil/Lehrer and he was way not in touch with the world, he became fixated on this idea that we were lesbians, which happened to be true, but we'd been very closeted and very appropriate in our behavior. I was very good at charming old people. I grew up in the South. I know how to do that. It was like, How did he hit on that? What? Of all the things. So then that caused a lot of family drama. We went on this very long road trip that kind of gave everyone some time to cool down. It was a magical summer.

Then I came back to Smith and then she went to L.A. and went to film school. We were in this long distance relationship, which was very dramatic, for a long time. Then she dropped out of film school and moved back here.

KRAUS: Wow, that is probably the most incredible story I've heard all day. That was out of control. That's awesome that you guys were able to stick through everything, through the ups and downs.

KAHLER: Yeah. I would never advise anyone to behave in the way that I behaved. That's why you shouldn't always take advice.

KRAUS: Totally fair. We only have about five more minutes, but I would love to know a little bit about what the rest of your time at Smith was like and how—

END OF AUDIO 1

KRAUS: You took your Smith experience into the real world, and how that was for you.

KAHLER: I would say that in terms of what I took into the real world, besides some actual skills that I learned — I've been working in fields that are very different from what I studied. I really felt like learning to handle myself is something that — learning to handle myself in a professional way is something I learned at Smith that I don't see that women necessarily otherwise are taught. Learning that you look people in the eye when you have meetings, and that you shake their hand, and that

you have a good handshake. I grew up as a girl who didn't like being called "Honey" in the South, so I already had a good handshake. But that notion that you sort of took yourself seriously in that way and how to put yourself forth in a way that encouraged other people to take you seriously, as opposed to being nice or sweet. That's something I definitely feel I learned from Smith and I value a great deal, and I often talk about as one of the things I thought was valuable about a women's education. (break in audio) felt that I went from — in high school, I liked my teachers, by and large. I didn't love everything about my social experience, but I was well-respected. I did well in my classes, I won awards, whatever. But I still felt that, in high school I was a smart girl, and at Smith I was smart. That was an experience that I've been able to take out of that. Just the experience of having been in a place where to be a woman is hegemonically dominant has been a really valuable sort of memory to have in other places. To not defer.

Doing lighting is — for instance, I did a lot of lighting design. That's very physical work. The things that you lift are heavy. We had a very good professor here, so people from the Five Colleges would come and take classes here. And we took classes at UMass a lot, too. So we would have men in our classes, and so we'd have men working with us. They would say, "Oh, let me lift that for you." It was really empowering for us to be like, This is our theater. I'm perfectly capable of lifting that light. Then when I worked in professional settings, even if I wasn't, frankly, as good at what I was doing as the guys there, the notion that my first goal should be to do it myself rather than to ask one of them for help I think was really useful.

KRAUS: Do you think that that was kind of out of your Smith experience?

KAHLER: I definitely think it was out of my Smith experience.

KRAUS: What do you think, in terms of this Smith atmosphere being very supportive, being very open-minded in a lot of ways, how did that prepare you, or how didn't that prepare you, for life outside of Smith being—

KAHLER: I think, for me, it prepared me very well. I understand the idea that of course you then move into places that aren't as accepting or aren't as supportive, but for me, I find — in a lot of ways, I was a very kind of anxious and timid person, and still am. But the idea of having been in a place that was so supportive and so — not accepting, but just expecting, in a way — that it was not you were being tolerated. It was that it wasn't an issue. You were being respected, and you were being loved, and you were being seen as more than the gay person over there. Or the really nerdy gay person. (laughs) I feel like having had that experience means that I expect that experience. To a large degree, I think that — I don't want to say that bad experiences are people's fault, but I think, to some degree, you do get the experience you expect. It's easy, because I've

been in a relationship for a long time. That's a very easy way to come out to people, especially now that we're actually legally married. I use the word "wife," so there's no misunderstanding. When I say, "My wife and I will be doing this," no one can be confused what that means. I think that being at Smith led me to behave that way, which then gives people a social cue. Oh, she's treating us as a normal, non-threatening thing, so I need to figure out a way to do that. Not that nobody ever says anything stupid or that nobody's ever hurtful. I think when that happens, I'm just like, Well, that's you being an asshole, instead of like, Well, that's me being socially wrong. I find it was very empowering.

KRAUS: Great. OK, well, I think we're out of time, but thank you so, so much for that.

KAHLER: It's been a pleasure.

KRAUS: That was wonderful.

GEIS: You're a great storyteller.

KRAUS: Yeah, you are a great storyteller.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Laura O'Regan, May 2011.*