

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Ellen Kipnis Kanner, Class of 1967

Interviewed by
Kayla Ginsburg, Class of 2013

May 25, 2012

Abstract

In this oral history, Ellen Kipnis Kanner describes her experience at Smith as a Jewish student, her study abroad in Spain, and a love of Smith College that continues years later.

Restrictions

None.

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kayla Ginsburg.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Kanner, Ellen Kipnis. Interview by Kayla Ginsburg. Video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ellen Kipnis Kanner, interview by Kayla Ginsburg, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Kanner, Ellen Kipnis. Interview by Kayla Ginsburg. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ellen Kipnis Kanner, interview by Kayla Ginsburg, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2012, with:

ELLEN KIPNIS KANNER

by: KAYLA GINSBURG
filmed by: REBECCA RIDEOUT

GINSBURG: I am Kayla Ginsburg. I am sitting here with Ellen Kanner from the Class of 1967 for the Alumnae Oral History Project and it is May 25th, 2012. Thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of this.

KANNER: My pleasure.

GINSBURG: So I guess first question to dive in, is how did you come to Smith? How did you choose Smith?

KANNER: Actually it was a recommendation of a friend of mine. I had -- growing up in New York I had my heart set on Cornell, but somebody I knew said, you know, I think you would love Smith, and I came up here and just had the moment this morning as well. I stood at the corner in front of Seelye looking at the library and I remember thinking, I would be so lucky if I could go here, and I still get that feeling 45 years later. I love being here.

GINSBURG: And what house did you live in?

KANNER: Gardiner.

GINSBURG: Did you stay there all four years?

KANNER: Three years and I went junior year abroad.

GINSBURG: Oh, okay. Right, right, right. So how did you -- what was the house community like. How did you feel about that?

KANNER: It was -- it was -- it was great. I loved the house structure where we essentially back in those days, few people moved. There wasn't much moving around, so it did create a sense of community and we had a house mother. And we still laugh about it. I still have quite a few good friends who were either in Gardner or, you know, my classmates, and we still laugh about the fact that you couldn't have coffee at dinner. You've probably heard about this?

GINSBURG: You had to have coffee afterwards?

KANNER: You had to have coffee afterwards in the dining room and the house mother would pour it from -- so we would have coffee in coffee cups and play bridge.

GINSBURG: Demitasse?

KANNER: I don't think they were demi -- they might have been demitasse, yes, but anyway, coffee and bridge.

GINSBURG: And bridge. Mm-hmm.

KANNER: Yes.

GINSBURG: So you went abroad? Where did you go?

KANNER: I did. I went to Spain. One of my decisions, and this is a peculiarity to me, I think, I just knew I had to choose a college -- this is as a teenager, obviously, had to choose a place where I could go abroad to Spain. Spain was always -- and not because of any family -- I just needed to do it. And I did. I went abroad and it was fabulous and since have gone back to Spain at least once a year ever since. So in fact, indirectly it led to my parents -- directly, it led to my parents buying a house in Spain.

GINSBURG: Whoa.

KANNER: So and to my daughter being born there. So the Spain connection and junior year abroad has been really significant, significant. I counted -- I think I've been back there 54 times.

GINSBURG: Whoa.

KANNER: Yeah, it's been -- it's been significant.

GINSBURG: Yeah, yeah. And you grew up Jewish?

KANNER: I did.

GINSBURG: Okay, and so were there a lot of Jewish students at Smith while you were here or --

KANNER: Yes, there were. I remember -- I know this is being videoed so I have to sort of be careful what I say, but I remember -- obviously this is 1963 and I -- my sense is that access for Jewish women to Seven Sisters Schools or to kind of higher tier schools in general was somewhat limited. I don't know that they were still doing quotas, you know, but it was certainly limited, and there was an article in the Times in the Fall -- so that must have been in the fall of '62 to say that the Smith acceptance rate was whatever it was and that I think it was 25 percent of the class was Jewish,

and I thought well that's significant. I've got a shot. If one out of every four students is Jewish, then I'm just competing on my own, right, and I got in.

GINSBURG: Did you experience ever any anti-Semitism or anything like that?

KANNER: Okay, I never experienced any anti-Semitism overtly, and in fact it was fun and welcoming and -- I had a sense and this is my own personal sense, uncorroborated by, you know, any data -- anybody else's data that there were still, when we were here, some honorary roles in the college for like juniors. There was an Ivy Day, whatever. There were some things that I didn't see Jewish women represented, you know, 25 percent. There was something a little -- it wasn't lined up yet, as opposed to the fact that I -- I did -- you guys probably don't know that Rally Day was totally different. We wrote skits.

GINSBURG: Right.

KANNER: You know we had these elaborate fabulous skits. I wrote our sophomore show and our senior show. I was abroad obviously for junior show, so it was contributing some and sort of felt like, hmm, I wonder why, you know, maybe an active my own hubris or not, but I didn't -- I was looking at who they chose and I didn't see that many Jewish women, and so that's probably something some researcher could check and see, just plain old who was in the Ivy Day in 1966, 1965 -- well, whenever, whenever I was a sophomore.

GINSBURG: Right.

KANNER: Just --

GINSBURG: In 1965.

KANNER: -- 1965, right, just probably on a -- look at and see what the representation was.

GINSBURG: Yeah.

KANNER: But that was my only suspicion that it had a sense of being a little bit exclusive.

GINSBURG: And in the '60s Smith started accepting more women of color I think and how did you see people who may have been seen as outsiders. How did you feel like campus life either integrated them or didn't integrate them? Were there divisions?

KANNER: There weren't that many women of color or -- or Asian, actually. They seemed, you know, so it wasn't -- they seemed individually to be doing

just fine, but I think it was another five or ten years before -- before the college actually was more diverse than it was being in the '60s.

GINSBURG: And you were at Smith during the time of the Vietnam War and --

KANNER: I was.

GINSBURG: -- all these sort of social movements and civil rights movements --

KANNER: I was.

GINSBURG: -- and how did the campus interact with that

KANNER: Well, it's interesting. I -- I had my eyes opened when I was junior year abroad. Obviously we knew there was a war going on, but junior year abroad I got I guess radicalized in a way to what was really happening and when I came back senior year, I did actually participate. We had -- and again, my memory is a little vague on -- on what kinds of public demonstrations we had, but I remember collaborating on a couple of letters that we submitted, so -- so there was some stuff going on that I was aware of and that I participated in.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm.

KANNER: And then when I graduated, I went on to march in the marches on Washington and stuff.

GINSBURG: Wow. And I think Betty Freidan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* came out --

KANNER: I love this story about Smith. Betty Freidan's book, if I'm not mistaken, of course memory does, you know, memory has its way with your history, but I'm pretty sure Betty Freidan came to Smith in 1963, which would have been my freshman -- Fall of my freshman year. I'm pretty sure *The Feminine Mystique* had just been printed or at least it was really pretty new and she came and it was the first time she had come to Smith and she talked in what was -- I forget the name of the hall --

GINSBURG: John M. Greene --

KANNER: No, it wasn't John --

GINSBURG: Sage Hall?

KANNER: No, Sage Hall. Is that down by the bridge?

GINSBURG: Yes.

KANNER: Where the waterfall.

GINSBURG: Yes.

KANNER: Yes, it was Sage Hall, and I remember thinking -- I remember thinking, this is history in the making, that it was clear even at an early time that this was -- you know, this was a monumental change and here was the woman who was a Smithie who was going to talk about it. It was very exciting.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm.

KANNER: There was a good sense of history in the air anyway in the '60s, as I'm sure other people have commented.

GINSBURG: Yeah, yeah. And feminism was sort of just on the cusp at this time. Were there any -- what were the expectations for you as women when you graduated and how did -- how did you and your class interact with feminism while at Smith or after Smith?

KANNER: That question probably could take half a reunion and you know, the next week and a half. Some of where -- you know, I think people have described that we were the class or a couple of classes with one foot in the past and one foot in the future, and so the joke I will tell, and it's not a joke, it happens to be true is that I didn't want to be married right after college, so I waited until July. So on the one hand that sounds funny and is in fact -- for a variety of personal reasons, including the fact that I was crazy about this guy, we did get married right out of school, right after I graduated, but that there was no question about my role, about -- you know, that I would work, that I -- so it -- so it was both. I got married and of course I was going to have an interesting, smart -- you know, number of careers as it turns out. So the answer is both, and I was extremely involved in feminism as it developed in the late '60s and early '70s and was, in focus groups back when that was -- back -- really back in the day, and continued to have lots of connections with -- with the women's movement and its variety of incarnations. But I did get married six weeks after I graduated.

GINSBURG: Right. Right, right. So you dated while you were at Smith?

KANNER: I did.

GINSBURG: Okay, what was the sort of scene like?

KANNER: Well, as it turns out the guy I married is somebody I went to high school with who went, of all places to Lehigh, so I was schlepping down to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which was a long trip, much to my mother's chagrin. We would rent a car and drive, because you could rent a car in those days when you were 18 or 19. The scene itself, because I did date. I mean this was not an exclusive relationship, but the dating scene was about as artificial as you could dream up in a -- you know, and I just had

the occasion to look through my yearbook, you know, when I graduated in '67 and there are a couple of pictures of like -- there's a -- the heading was Christmas weekend, and I'm telling you, it makes madmen look like advanced. I mean very straight, forward, straight -- yes, and the whole mixer scene. I mean you -- I know people who met people, certainly, but it was really quite artificial. I don't know what happens now, but in any case it was very artificial.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm.

KANNER: And not to my liking.

GINSBURG: Yeah, yeah. So how did you see the campus changing while you were at Smith in kind of these tumultuous times?

KANNER: Well, I think the Vietnam protests, although I don't remember there being monster demonstrations, but there was a lot of stuff going on. I saw that. The push to become co-ed was a couple of years after we had graduated, but I think it had already -- well, maybe not, but it was -- you know, single sex education was being challenged, I think, and my -- the question you didn't ask me, maybe you will, is how important being at Smith in a single sex education, you know, how important it was to me. It was hugely important. I mean I'm having -- I'll get choked up right now. It -- it was incredibly important, and I would have been -- I was horrified to think it might go co-ed and I think President Mendenhall did a good job of sort of -- the way I see it, is he sort of maneuvered it, a delaying tactic here -- excuse me, a study there, so that in fact it did not go co-ed, but I'm hugely chauvinistic about Smith. Just ask any of my friends or family.

GINSBURG: Can you speak a little bit about what was so important to you as far as a single sex education went and kind of the Smith community at that time?

KANNER: I had the feeling today, this morning, which I've had, you know, in other times that I've been here. I am never -- I never feel as smart as I am when I am here on campus or talking to Smithies, or talking to women in general who are -- but I just never feel -- there's nothing I -- you know, I can be as smart as I am here, or talking to my friends and whether that's single sex -- I think it does. I think it has something to do with the fact that we are women and that nothing else gets in the way, whatever the else is and I don't even know that I -- but that -- that it's everybody shows up on a level playing field here and you can just be as smart as you are.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm, I think so too.

KANNER: And -- and that's invaluable to me. And you know, I -- I don't think everybody has to go to a single sex college. My daughter -- we lived in Pittsfield which is just, you know, over the mountain a little bit and I brought her here and although, you know, she had heard me being

chauvinistic and Smith this and reunions and all of that, and while she liked Smith, she felt this was too close to home and Northampton at that -- well, it was in the '90s, but anyway, too much like -- not enough different from Pittsfield and so she wound up going to Wellesley. Broke my heart. She says ironically. But she says the same thing, that there's -- I mean going to an all women's college gave her the space to be as smart as she was -- as smart as she is.

GINSBURG: Totally. So do you have any favorite Smith traditions that really were incredibly important to you then or now?

KANNER: Hands down, Rally Day.

GINSBURG: Rally Day?

KANNER: I loved -- there was a sense of bonding -- first of all, I wrote the music and a friend of mine wrote -- no, no, I wrote the lyrics, she wrote the music to both of the shows, and they were -- it was such creative, you know, as good as the academics could get, which was great. We were collaborating with somebody who was that good at the music side and we cooked up two really amazing shows. Amazing. To the point where one of -- you probably don't know that there was a tradition, a kick line tradition at the end of the Rally Day show?

GINSBURG: Uh-uh.

KANNER: We wrote a kick line song that people in my class are still singing. So I rest my case.

GINSBURG: That's awesome.

KANNER: It was like -- it was fabulous. It was really --

GINSBURG: So it seems like you were pretty active on campus.

KANNER: I was -- I was.

GINSBURG: Were you part of any specific clubs or organizations?

KANNER: Not except for Rally Day, formally, although -- I think Rally Day would be it.

GINSBURG: And can you describe sort of what a typical Smithie was like from '63 to '67 and how you either fell in line with that or were different from that?

KANNER: I don't think there was one. You know, I have -- you know, I have a memory of being on the floor -- fourth floor of Gardiner where I spent three years. I have a memory of seeing the first person I ever knew

carrying her skis down the hall. I mean I -- so there were people who in those days had their own skis. I -- you know, I never heard of that, versus people with much less advantage, privileged backgrounds. There was a huge -- huge, there was significant diversity, but the common denominator was everybody was really curious, general -- and hardworking and very smart and -- so no, I didn't see there was a typical Smithie at all.

GINSBURG: Interesting. So how do you feel like a Smith education has affected your life post-graduation?

KANNER: Well, a) I still have friends. So on a very personal level I am still close to quite a few people that I went to school with. So that would be number 1. Number 2 out in the world the networking possibilities -- you know, when I say I'm very chauvinistic, I mean it's like, you know, people will say well, do you know the secret handshake, Ellen? I mean it's like I'm very -- I just enjoy meeting other Smithies. Hard to describe but it's just -- there's an instant kind of connection, which in some cases has been good in the workplace, you know, has maybe gotten me jobs or if not directly -- if not directly -- here's what I am prepared to stand behind, but if having a Smith degree hasn't gotten me the job through the person I know, I think the prestige of the college itself does help, does help.

And then I'll tell you one -- what I think is a funny story. It's a Smith-Wellesley story, but I was interviewing for a job that shall remain nameless, but the woman who was the chairman of the board was a Wellesley alum and very active. Very, very active and I knew that I was interviewing for the job and I knew the interview was going very well, so at the end of the interview in what I -- what turned out to be an okay move, it could have been seen as incredibly cocky or whatever, I -- they turned to me and they said, "Well, Ellen, do you have any questions for us?" And I sort of sat back in my chair and looked at the chairman of the board and said, "I really only have one question. Do you think we'll ever get over the Smith Wellesley thing?" And she said, "Do you mean the Wellesley Smith thing? No." (laughter) So there's that kind of, you know, that's nice. I find that fun. I find that fun.

GINSBURG: So were there any specific -- what did you major in actually?

KANNER: I majored in Latin American studies, which is an interesting -- to me interesting -- I would have majored in Spanish, however, I knew that I needed, had to positively, absolutely had to go to Spain and the Spanish major in those days was rather defined in a way that I wasn't going to be able to -- I wasn't going to be able to take the other courses, some history - - so I majored in Latin American studies and it actually gave me more freedom, but it was really Spain I was looking at.

GINSBURG: Why? Why Spain?

KANNER: It's either a past life or -- I haven't gotten that far yet, but actually one of the things that I did when I -- since I graduated from Smith was to do a lot of reading on the 15th, 16th Century in Spain and the Spanish Inquisition and I took it into my head to actually research the life of a woman who was tried by the Spanish Inquisition and whose inquisition document I knew existed in the archives, and so in 1988 I went to Madrid and somehow talked myself into the Archivo Histórico Nacional and they actually brought me not a photocopy, they brought me the box with the old ribbon of the woman's trial from 1530. And I thought -- I went oh, my Lord and then -- my Spanish by that -- was and still is quite good, so I take this thing out, no gloves, nothing. And I see -- and I can read the inquisition documents in books and had been doing that sort of as a hobby for a long time, but here I am looking at this document. I can't read a word because it's in the script. So it took me about ten years in bits and starts, but I taught myself how to read the transcript.

And so now I'm here and one of the things I'm hoping I'm going to do, in fact I talked to Susan Van Dyne and maybe I'll be able to talk to her for a little bit as like a little quick consult, I spent years studying this document, doing timelines, doing the associational who -- who ratted on whom in the family. It's amazing, and it's time I did something with it because it's time I did something with it. And so I'm hoping that I will figure out -- and I've taught a lot. I've taught a lot around one of the things I love is the history of the Muslims, Christians and Jews in Spain. There were quite a few hundreds of years in which there was a -- a kind of a cross-pollenization of cultures, not always peacefully, but -- and I've taught elder hostels on the subject. I've taught continuing education stuff, so this is my avocation, you know, what I did as a career was mostly development in the non-profit world, development and strategic planning. And how did I get on this subject? I --

GINSBURG: Just what you took at Smith and --

KANNER: Yeah, what I studied at Smith, yeah.

GINSBURG: Yeah, yeah, interesting. So I know that in the -- in this time in the '60s. Well, I read something about this kind of like new morality craze and it seemed like there were more conversations going on on campus about sex and sexuality and I don't know if you -- if you noticed this or -- no?

KANNER: No. My sense is -- my sense is that there was plenty of sexuality -- sex going around, but that it wasn't a -- you know, Mrs. Kadoh wouldn't have been that happy to have it at the dinner table.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm. Mrs. Kadoh, was that your house mother? (Laughter.)

KANNER: (No audible response, nods affirmative)

GINSBURG: So were there any specific professors or mentors that you really connected with while here?

KANNER: The professor I was probably closest to and that wasn't that close, it was much more in the traditional she was my professor way, was Señorita Navarro (phonetic) who was the chair of the Spanish department.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm.

KANNER: There were professors, I just -- I don't know. That might have been as much -- that was probably as much me and my own comfort with getting close to a professor. In fact it never would have occurred to me.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm. So you come back to reunion --

RIDEOUT: Five minutes.

GINSBURG: Oh, okay, great.

KANNER: Every year.

GINSBURG: You come back to reunion every year?

KANNER: No, no, no, I mean every reunion.

GINSBURG: Every reunion, yeah. So what is it about Smith that like really keeps you coming back and how do you -- how do you like coming to reunion? What does it mean to you?

KANNER: It's a tremendous source of pleasure. I don't -- you know, that's sort of -- I just have a great time. Now what does that mean? It means I get to see people I know and meet new people. Just at lunch before I came over here was talking to Vanessa. I'm blocking her name. I find the women here fascinating, still fascinating, even the people I didn't know, you can sit down and have an interesting -- so -- all right, so one big heading, I come here because I always learn new stuff. I mean of course I love the people and I love the feeling of being here. I think it's beautiful, but I'm -- I love meeting the people.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

KANNER: And yeah -- at least those two things if not more.

GINSBURG: So do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

KANNER: Support the college in any way you can, which is both work and money, and referring students here, because that keeps -- that keeps this institution going. Other advice, let's all make sure it stays single sex. And -- and

maybe advice is as much fun as it looks like, when we parade at graduation, it's at least that much fun if not more. So in fact being out -- being down the road is really a wonderful experience.

GINSBURG: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. So do you have any last sort of true Smith stories that you really want to talk about?

KANNER: I don't think so. I think it's a miracle that I could still have the same experience standing on the corner between Seelye and the library as I did when I was 18 years old. I don't know how that happens. I think it's a miracle, but the place still has that much beauty and power to me, and that's -- I love that. I love that in a place.

GINSBURG: That's a great way to end. Well, thank you so much.

KANNER: My pleasure. Thank you, Kayla. Thank you, Rebecca.

RIDEOUT: It's beautiful. Thank you.

GINSBURG: Thank you. Great.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.