

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Cathy Kay, Class of 1981

Interviewed by
Rebecca York, Class of 2018

May 20, 2016

Abstract

In this interview, Cathy Kay talks about the powerful influence the Smith College Music Department had on her life, both as a student, and beyond. Kay was a History major, but found community and friendship through her participation in the Smith College Choirs as a singer and accompanist. Kay also remembers her favorite traditions of Washburn House.

Restrictions

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: Kay, Cathy. Interview by Rebecca York. Video recording, May 20, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Cathy Kay, interview by Rebecca York, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Kay, Cathy. Interview by Rebecca York. Transcript of video recording, May 20 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Cathy Kay, interview by Rebecca York, transcript of video recording, May 20, 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 20, 2016, with:

CATHY KAY
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: REBECCA YORK

YORK: Great. So, I'm Rebecca York, and I am conducting an interview with Cathy Kay, on May 20th, 2016, for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you for coming.

KAY: You're very welcome. I'm glad to be here.

YORK: I did not know you were a Smith grad. (laughter) So, how did you come to Smith?

KAY: Hmm. I grew up in Wheaton, Illinois, outside of Chicago; about 25 miles west of Chicago. And when I was looking at colleges, my parents suggested that I look at Smith, as one of those options. And my father had done history graduate work with a man at University of Chicago, [Lester Little?], and Lester Little then came to the faculty here at Smith College. So that was one of the pieces of connection to Smith.

I was—Smith wasn't the only school I applied to, but I had always been fascinated with early American history, and the idea of coming to a school in New England, and kind of in a part of the country that was older, and part of that early American history was really exciting to me. So—when I visited, it was raining, and I decided that, if I really liked the campus even when it was raining, it must be a good place (laughs) to come. So—

YORK: What house were you in?

KAY: I was in Washburn House for my first three years. And in senior year, I moved and was in Gillett House.

YORK: Why did you move?

KAY: It's a good question. And I'm not entirely sure I could really answer it, at this point. But one of the things that happened over junior year was, other people in Washburn House that were—Washburn is a pretty small house.

And a lot of people—some had gone away for junior year abroad, or some were going to be—had residence in other houses. So, kind of the—some of my friends were moving away, and I thought, You know, I'll just try another house. A different, a larger house, and in a different part of campus. So, I knew some people from Glee Club in Gillett, and so I moved there.

YORK: Did you like it?

KAY: I did. Yup. I never was as connected to Gillett, though, as I had been to Washburn.

YORK: So where did you find your community on campus?

KAY: Primarily in the music department. I was a history major. But I spent much more of my time in the practice rooms in Sage Hall than—or in the rehearsals. At that point, the choral groups rehearsed in John M. Greene Hall. So I spent much more time there than I did in history (laughter)—in the library, for example. But, so music was the main source of community for me, during my time at Smith.

YORK: Did you play, or sing?

KAY: I did a little of both. I—when I enrolled, I auditioned to be placed in piano performance lessons, and studied with Lory Wallfisch, who was on the faculty here as professor of Piano. And then I also auditioned to—for one of the freshman choirs. At that time, there were two freshman choirs: Alpha and Omega. And there was a—the Smith College Choir was for sophomores. And the Glee Club was for juniors and seniors. So I was placed in Smith College choir Alpha. And, uh—and really enjoyed that. At a Christmas party that year, I—people were wanting to sing Christmas carols, and because I played, I sat down and played some. And at some point, I decided to transpose a verse, (laughter) and the director, who was Rob Cole—but at that time, he wasn't the director of the junior choirs at that time—heard that, and said, "Would you be interested in accompanying for the choirs?" (laughter) So, it was the first time I'd gotten paid to do—that became a campus job for sophomore, junior, and senior year. And it was the first time I'd gotten paid to play the piano, and I thought that was pretty cool. (laughter)

So, I played the—so then I was the accompanist for the freshman choirs, and then later for the Smith College Choir, and then Glee Club, and Chamber Singers. So it was a great opportunity, and I got to sing when we sang things that were unaccompanied. (laughter) It gave me a lot of experience. I got to play on an incredible organ, in one of the big cathedrals in New York City, when we did a concert down there with Columbia University Glee Club. The Chamber Singers toured the—in

California. So I got to play on some great instruments there. And it really was a great experience, to do that.

YORK: Mm-hmm. That's wonderful.

KAY: And my music study with—with Lory Wallfisch was by far—by far the most profound— (voice trembling)

YORK: Yeah. In what way?

KAY: Um—(crying) (long pause) um—hm. She—well, it was the profound—clearly, it's profound. (crying) Excuse me.

YORK: It's OK.

KAY: Um—um, hm. She was an amazing woman. I mean, she was an incredibly talented musician on her own. And piano, and harpsicord. And was part of a—and her life was part of—and her music experience was part of an era that I think has—is no more. I mean, I think she and her husband, Ernst, who was professor of violin and viola, I hear, also—they performed as a duo. And they would attend the—you know, they teach here, year-round, and—or in the school year, and then they would attend these festivals, and play with Casals, and all of these other amazing, amazing musicians in Europe, and it would just be—they were—I mean, their lives were just immersed in music, and musicians, during the summer. And they would record, and perform, and all of those things. But she asked for a lot. She wasn't a warm and fuzzy teacher, but she wasn't—she wasn't at all harsh or mean. She just was—she asked for a lot, and she gave you exactly what you needed, to achieve that. So, even though I wasn't a Music major, I was able to give a junior recital that I shared with [Katy Walton-Day?], who was a flute—who studied flute when she was here. And then a senior—a full senior recital. Which were incredible opportunities that I'm not—I don't know what I expected when I came here, in terms of my piano study, but what I received was a really deep and rich experience.

YORK: Mm-hmm.

KAY: Yeah.

YORK: Yeah.

KAY: Yeah.

YORK: It's OK. So—so you were a History major also.

KAY: Mm-hmm.

YORK: Did you ever find a way to make those two areas of study and interest overlap? Like, did you—

KAY: That's a good question.

YORK: —for your recitals, and stuff, did you focus on periods, or—

KAY: You know, I didn't really. I think they were pretty separate worlds. It was very hard for me to decide what to major in. I—When I came in, I didn't know. I was thinking about, I—you know, thinking about majoring in music. Thinking about majoring in history. Maybe government? And so, I shut myself in my room one day, sophomore year, when we had to write the card down, you know, whatever we—would declare that major. And I just thought—I think I thought that history was something that would be harder to explore. I didn't have as much background in it. I mean, I'd taken history classes in high school, of course. But not any way near kind of the depth I'd already felt like I'd explored with piano. So, I felt like history was my more unexplored area. And so I wanted to kind of push myself and do work in history, and that that might lead to some different options. It might open up additional doors. Music felt like it was a little more narrowly tailored. So that's what I ended up doing. But I don't think they really overlapped, so much. Yeah.

YORK: Did history end up opening more doors?

KAY: Well, it did, yeah. It sure did. After—again, I was really not sure what I wanted to do after graduation, and made a lot of lists, and thought a lot, and talked to people. But I thought, perhaps I would go ahead and do graduate study in history, or perhaps I would do graduate study in music. Or, you know, maybe I would go to law school. I did apply to law schools that year, and then decided not to go. And I took a year off.

Our commencement speaker for 1981 was Betty Friedan. And in 1981, the Equal Rights Amendment was still an alive option. One of the states—Massachusetts had ratified early on, and so it wasn't something that here at Smith you really—you know, there was a lot of opportunity to be active with, because Massachusetts had ratified. But my home state of Illinois had not yet ratified, and was a battleground state for the passage of the ERA. And Betty Friedan spoke at commencement about that. In her speech, it really compelled me to go back to Illinois, and work on the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. So that's what I chose to do. And we didn't get it passed in Illinois, (laughs) sadly, despite our valiant efforts. But it was a really fabulous experience of my first real immersion into grassroots political advocacy. I met a lot of amazing women, primarily, and did a lot of door-to-door work, a lot of rallies. And that was really due, in part, by the message the Betty Friedan conveyed in our

commencement. And then I also volunteered for a legal aid office in Chicago that year and reapplied to law schools and then ended up going to law school.

So the answer to your question is, history opened that door. Whereas, I think, if I'd ended up majoring in music, I probably wouldn't have gone in that direction. So, and then I practiced law for 15 years with Western Mass Legal Services—Southeastern Mass Legal Services first, and then Western Massachusetts Legal Services for 15 years. And then I taught music for 15 years. And now I'm getting back into the world of law.

YORK: So, were you involved while you were at Smith, in any of the organizing that was going on on campus, around women's rights, or there were some LGBTQ rights (unclear)—

KAY: Yeah, I was not very involved in that, no. I wasn't. I, uh—my one—I think my one political involvement, while I was here, was doing a little bit of campaigning in New Hampshire in the republican primaries in New Hampshire, for John Anderson, who was a candidate battling against eventually Ronald Reagan, for the nomination initially of the Republican party. So I did a little bit of door-to-door work in New Hampshire for that. But otherwise, no. I was not very politically active on campus.

YORK: So that really came—

KAY: Later.

YORK: —with Illinois.

KAY: Yeah, it really did. Yes.

YORK: Yeah. That's great. So, let's see. (laughs) Um—So what were any favorite Smith traditions? So while Glee Club has quite a few, I imagine Washburn also has some.

KAY: Sure. Well, at Washburn—and this was still the era of where we had our dining rooms—each house had its own dining room. And we had Thursday candlelight dinners, which you've probably heard about, which I think were wonderful. And we each had our linen napkin, and our boxes. And all of that, I think was great. One year, we had a head resident, who got us all chopsticks, and we all learned to eat with chopsticks. And I don't know if there was a particular night we did that; I don't remember that. But that was kind of fun, kind of interesting.

Washburn had been this Spanish House, at one time, which was fun. I was in Washburn house when—I guess it would have been the 1980 Winter Olympics. We invited—we decided we should invite the entire US

Men's Hockey team to a party at Washburn House. They—you know, they'd won the miracle Olympic gold medal against the Soviets. And so we—I don't know how. Someone extended an invitation. They didn't show up. We were severely disappointed. (laughs) But we had some fun with that. Yeah. Yeah, Washburn House was a great place to be. Lots of good people there.

YORK: Yeah.

KAY: Mm-hmm.

YORK: That's wonderful. So I guess, to close up, what—or do you have any words, sage words of advice for recent grads, or current Smithies?

KAY: Mm. Get to know your professors. Take advantage of their open office hours. I think—I kind of wish I'd done a little bit more of that, with some of the professors I had. And take—just take advantage of as much as you can. And even while you have your special small groups and communities on-campus, it's really good to kind of explore other things. One of the—a really interesting thing that I did while I was here, was—I don't know if it was junior or senior year, but I stayed on campus during spring break, and there was a theater-sponsored—Theater Department sponsored a trip down to New York City, to—for—well, for any student. So I said, Well, I'm not in the Theater Department, but I'll sign up for that.

It was the most amazing thing. We got to see all sorts of shows, number one. We got a full and—full backstage tour of the Metropolitan Opera, because some Smith alum had a connection there. The Smith department faculty member had a connection there. That was amazing. We had a little—just our group. It was—I don't know, maybe two dozen of us, or something—and question-and-answer with Stephen Sondheim. We had another little brunch with someone who was launching a musical off-Broadway. Got to ask lots of questions. It was amazing. And you know, this was just something I just signed up for. So you nev— I mean, you never know what opportunities will be presented. And you all have so many opportunities now here, it's probably hard to decide what to take advantage of. But to really—to do that. Those would be things I'd advise people.

YORK: Great. Well, thank you—

?: [I have some?] questions.

YORK: Yeah.

GEIS: Obviously, music was an important part of your life here. Can you talk—are you still singing? How has that been a part of your life, after graduating? And (unclear) look at (unclear) is fine. (laughter)

KAY: Thank you. One of the things I'm most grateful to Smith for is the education I was able to receive in music, even though I was not a music major. And that's translated directly into paid work, for me. Additionally, it's translated into amazing opportunities to build community since I graduated. So, while I spent the first 15 to 20 years after graduation really looking at, and working in the area of law, I was able—without an actual credential (laughs), to teach music, to accompany in lots of settings, to conduct choruses, to be the music director for six or so musical theater productions at a private school; things I never imagined I would do. And while I didn't have a—you know, I certainly didn't have a graduate degree in music, and I didn't even have an undergraduate degree in music, the fact that I was able to take really good music theory classes here, really good music history classes here, an amazing piano—education in piano performance. And the experience I received as the accompanist for all of these music ensembles set me up to succeed in the paid workforce, as a musician.

I don't know that that happens now, in Liberal Arts colleges, that there's—it's harder, I think, to do now, because some Liberal Arts music departments have had to shrink, in order to respond to the needs of other interests and academic endeavors. But it was an enormous gift, that the—an opportunity that Smith gave me, by having that. So I have had a 15-year, you know, career, basically, around music, even though my degree was in history, and then my graduate degree in law. Beyond that, the ability to work—to just participate in other musical organizations. And I direct a small women's vocal ensemble that's become really important to me, and to the members of that ensemble, over the last 10 or 15 years, because that's a little community. And we do sing together. We learn music. We sing and perform together. But we also have a lot of shared experience over the years, that has really supported and sustained us, because we've come together around music.

YORK: Yeah. Great.

KAY: Mm-hmm.

YORK: Thank you so much. Thank you.

KAY: OK.

GEIS: (unclear)

KAY: All right.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Taylor Maurand, June 20, 2016.