

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Elizabeth Kessler, Class of 1991

Interviewed by
Rebecca York, Class of 2018

May 20, 2016

Abstract

In this interview, Elizabeth (Liza) Kessler recounts her introduction to Smith as a sophomore transfer student from Reed College. She talks about her time as a Head Resident, as well as her work with the Racism and Cultural Awareness panel and the Women's Resource Center. Kessler also reflects on her life after Smith, her surprising career trajectory, and what it takes to land on your feet.

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

Transcript

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

Transcript of interview conducted May 20, 2016, with:

ELIZABETH KESSLER
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: REBECCA YORK

YORK: So I am Rebecca York, and I am conducting an interview with Liza Kessler on May 20, 2016, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. And thank you for being able to come in so early.

KESSLER: My pleasure. I'm excited.

YORK: (laughs) So can you tell me a little bit about life before Smith, where you grew up, how you heard of and got to here?

KESSLER: I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the city of Milwaukee, and went to public high schools in the city of Milwaukee, and when I was in high school, I did not consider women's colleges at all. And I did my first year of college at Reed College out in Portland, Oregon, and was really taken aback by the gender dynamics in the classroom and some of the surprisingly overt sexism that I encountered. And I had gotten involved with a group that met there at the Women's Center on campus, and there was a woman who I thought was a nontraditional student who, at one point, said to me, "You should come talk to me during my office hours." And I was rather surprised to discover that she had office hours, and I was completely wrong about her role, and it turned out that she was the Dean of Students at Reed, and she had done her doctoral research on gender and higher education, and she basically said, "I really think you would probably be a lot happier at a women's college." And I sort of was very startled to hear that, but intrigued, and came out and took a look at Smith during my — it must have been my winter break. I had a friend who was a year ahead of me, who was a friend from Milwaukee, and really just fell in love with the place. So I applied as a transfer student, and I came in as a sophomore in the Class of 1991.

YORK: And how did it compare to Reed?

KESSLER: Well one of the things that I had complained about in particular at Reed was the curriculum there was extremely traditional, and if you wanted to

take any sort of classes where women were an explicit part of the educational focus, there was like a 300-level French class, and there was a poetry class where the topic changed every year, and that year it happened to be women, but it was like an advanced class that you couldn't take as a first year student. And they had a 12-credit Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages sort of foundation of humanities class there, and they asserted that, you know, We don't have women except for, you know, there are some vase painters and Sappho, and the letters of Abelard and Heloise. But there's just not enough material for a class in this. And the first semester that I arrived on campus, one of the course offerings was a "Women in Ancient Greece and Rome" class, and I thought, OK, well, I knew they were full of it. (laughs) But yeah, I mean, it was just a completely different dynamic, and definitely what I was looking for. And just to have that layer of stuff of the world that you have to deal with set aside for a window of time, I think, was a wonderful, wonderful opportunity and gave a lot of room for looking at other issues of inequality and social justice. To have, at least, that layer lifted was very exciting, and I think really offered a lot of opportunity to look at the world through other lenses.

YORK: That's great. So when you got onto campus, what house did you go into?

KESSLER: The first house that I lived in was Cutter. That was where I first arrived. One of the things that I didn't understand when I first arrived on campus is the role of the dining halls. And I had come from a campus where everybody ate in the same common dining space, and so I didn't really realize living in Cutter-Ziskind — where, at that time, it was Cutter, Ziskind, and Sessions ate there — and the Cutter people stayed in the Cutter side of the dining room, the Ziskind people stayed in the Ziskind side of the dining room, and the Sessions people ate in the middle. And I didn't get it. So I didn't follow the rules, and at some point, probably like October or November of my first semester here, I remember somebody from Cutter asking me if I was going to move to Ziskind. Like, Why would I move to Ziskind? I mean, if I'm going to move, I'm going to move somewhere pretty. Like, this campus has gorgeous houses. I'll either stay here, or I'll go to one of those. But that was when I started — I was like, Oh, I'm transgressing on the behavioral norms. Oops. I didn't stop. I had made friends, but it was really a very interesting thing to learn about what the expected dynamics were. And I tried to at least be a little bit more cognizant of it.

YORK: Were you able to find a community in Cutter?

KESSLER: Oh, yeah. I mean, I had great friends in Cutter. I just also had friends in Ziskind, and in Sessions. I didn't know. I had come in, and at that time, I had just come out, and I looked very dyke-y, in contrast to how I look now. So people perceived me as lesbian, and there was a larger lesbian

community in Sessions at that time, and maybe also in Ziskind. I'm not really sure, but I just sort of congregated to that community in the dining hall, and it was in no way an anti-Cutter anything. I had great friends in Cutter, but I was looking for different kinds of communities.

YORK: Were you involved in any of the orgs organizing around sexuality, like the Lesbian Bisexual Alliance, or anything like that?

KESSLER: Somewhat. I was more active — at that time, race was a real issue on campus, and there had been some incidents of anonymous notes and nastiness. And I had gotten very involved with a peer education group that would come and do workshops at different teas in different houses, around racism and cultural awareness.

YORK: Do you remember what the group was called?

KESSLER: I think it was called the Racism and Cultural Awareness panel. (laughs)

YORK: Awesome. Great. (laughs)

KESSLER: And as it turns out, I'm not really good at being that kind of facilitator/moderator. I'm probably better at that now than I was then, but it's not really my skill set. I'm more analytical. I'm more of a writer, but that was a clear path to trying to make a difference in an area that was really important to me. And so I took that path even though it wasn't, maybe, the right path for me. And so for me, my experience of it was, I was a white woman willing to get yelled at a lot, and that was really OK, because I could completely understand why people were frustrated and angry and had the need to express that frustration and anger, and I could take it. But in terms of as a person who was good at facilitating dialogue with other people and trying to have people have, maybe, less confrontational conversations, I did not turn out to have that skill set.

YORK: So who was yelling?

KESSLER: Well that was really interesting, actually. The people who were the most visibly angry on campus were primarily international students. I think a lot of them came from class backgrounds where they had probably not experienced discrimination before coming to the US, and I think they were just outraged by the idea that somebody would treat them in a second class kind of a way, or react to them in this way. And they had no hesitation that I could see in terms of expressing that frustration and anger. And I think certainly the US native women of color on campus at that time were also frustrated and angry, and some of them were also very comfortable expressing it, but it felt like the lead was really taken, or the sort of people breaking the ground were primarily international students, or at least

heavily influenced by the international student community. That was the year — let's see. There was a takeover of College Hall my senior year that led to an expansion of the multicultural center, that was definitely built out of several years of people's frustration and upset and anger with all of that. I think there was also a student panel that met monthly with the dean of the college at the time to talk about issues around not just race and racism, but also sexuality and sexual orientation issues, and I think we talked about class issues to some extent in that context also. So just trying to make sure that there was an open communication between the college administration and the students, and that students' voices were clearly being heard.

YORK: Did you — well, do you remember any of the specifics of the workshops that you were running?

KESSLER: They were usually at tea, and I think what would happen is there was somebody who was sort of the coordinator of our group. It was not me. I don't recall who it was. And the head resident would organize when they were going to have a workshop at tea, and there were other groups. I think there was a Rape Awareness peer education group that also did tea workshops, and I think there was also a group from the Lesbian and Bisexual Alliance that did similar workshops. There had been some issues around homophobic slurs and nasty notes, and sort of the same kind of behavior as well. Those are the only three that I remember doing these workshops at tea, but I was a head resident in Gillett, and so I remember being on the other side of, like, OK, let's have a workshop. (laughs)

YORK: What was it like being an HR and hearing, like, post-tea what the murmurs in the house were?

KESSLER: I don't think people talked about it in front of me, actually. I think — I don't know how it is now, but at the time, it felt very separate from the house. So you had your suite on the ground floor. People got very nervous if they saw you upstairs. And I had some very close relationships in the house, but I also had some less comfortable relationships in the house, and so I think the people who were less comfortable with me in the house would maybe also have been the people who, you know, Oh geez, another workshop. (laughs) So I don't really remember hearing much in the murmur universe.

YORK: So you also mentioned earlier that you were in Tyler House?

KESSLER: Mm-hmm.

YORK: Were you there as an HR?

KESSLER: No. No, I lived there my junior year. That's probably the house where, like, I think of as having been my house at Smith, you know, where I was probably the most comfortable and really felt like that was fully my community. If I had not been hired as an HR, I would not have moved. I would have happily stayed there.

YORK: Why do you think that it was so comfortable for you?

KESSLER: That's a good question. A couple of people that I knew from Cutter had also moved there, so I had a few ongoing relationships. It was a pretty diverse house at that time. There was a nice mix of both US-born women of color and also a fair numbers of Ada's, so the house had a really interesting dynamic, and it just felt like a very supportive place. Cutter had a strong skew towards the freshman and sophomore class because people mostly didn't necessarily want to stay there, and it was great to have a single, but, you know, a lot of people want to live somewhere really pretty. If you come here, you want to live somewhere pretty. So it was better integrated in terms of the range of experiences at Smith. I don't know. I had a room that I loved. It was on the side of the building that overlooked the waterfall, and there was, like, a faculty little house there, the Virginia Woolf (laughs) — the Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf house. It was just peaceful. Like, I'd open my window and I'd hear the waterfall, and it was just happy.

YORK: Were there any traditions in Tyler that you — either Tyler-specific or campus-wide — that you [remember?]?

KESSLER: I don't remember anything specific from Tyler. The campus tradition that I really remember, and that I certainly missed in graduate school, was the campus scream. I have no problem making myself heard, and it was nice to be able to really just full throat let it all out. And there are certainly not very many opportunities in life where you can really just let it all out. That is a wonderful, wonderful tradition, and one that I definitely wish that I could come back and participate in from time to time.

YORK: When was that? Was it still after finals?

KESSLER: I seem to remember it being right before finals, as people were freaking out with stress. Maybe during finals? I'm not exactly sure, but definitely tied into finals.

YORK: OK. That's good. So, were you a part of — other than the awareness group that did teas, were you a part of any other orgs or community groups?

KESSLER: I was active with the Women's Resource Center, which we would bring speakers to campus. We had a library in the upstairs of Davis, and we had dances. And I think we tried once or twice to have concerts, but we really had no idea what we were doing, and I seem to remember that we had, like, 11 people in Sage Hall for a concert at some point. We were like, OK. We are bad at this. (laughs) But we did better with more academically oriented speakers. I think we might have also been involved with organizing Take Back the Night marches.

YORK: So was there communication with other orgs too for Take Back the Night?

KESSLER: There must have been. (laughs) I don't really remember that part, but there must have been. We were clearly better at that than we were at putting on concerts.

YORK: So what did you major in?

KESSLER: I was a sociology major. I came in thinking I was going to be an English major, and there was a sociology class that fit into my schedule my first semester, and it was definitely one of those "Ah," kind of, like, Oh, there's a whole way you can study why people do the strange things that they do. Now I've found what it is.

YORK: SWAG was also — or, Study of Women and Gender was also starting.

KESSLER: It was called Women's Studies at the time, and I actually minored in, it was called Afro-American Studies at the time. I believe it's now called Africana Studies. There had been something where, like, all the faculty had left the year before I got here, and some other controversial something-or-other, and so there were some faculty from UMass Amherst who came and taught a couple of classes here. They rebuilt the program, but actually probably one of the best classes I had at Smith was that very first semester, this UMass faculty member. The course was called something like "19th Century Feminism — African American Women and 19th Century Feminism". So I mean, like, some really obscure-sounding course, but it had been added late because of the craziness with the faculty leaving, so there were, like, eight people in the class, and there was a Liza, me, a Lizza, and a Lisa, of the eight of us, which I'm sure was very stressful for the poor professor. But it was just fabulous, fabulous. We read *When and Where I Enter*, and this was long before — I'm now blanking her name, but I know she came here.

YORK: Professor Giddings. Paula Giddings.

KESSLER: Yes. Before Paula Giddings came here, and I was just fascinated. I didn't know anything about the club women movement before that. I didn't

know about the history of black sororities. Sometime around that time was when Spike Lee's *School Daze* movie was made, and that had a focus on the black fraternity and sorority movements and some of the issues around class and color in that community. And I just got completely fascinated. I lived in Washington, DC for a while, and I read all of these other books on the early history of black fraternities and sororities, and I did a walking tour of Howard, and got into actually a disagreement over some of the early history stuff, where I really thought that they had some of the dates wrong. I remembered them pretty clearly. So, yeah, I mean, that was a huge course for me, and really a wonderful one. I don't remember what we were talking about before, how I got onto that tangent.

YORK: That's so interesting. So do you think —

KESSLER: Oh, you had asked me what I majored in.

YORK: (inaudible) Do you think that all of these ideas from your courses and, just, generally being in Smith and being in these orgs, were you able to use that after you graduated, like the skills of the really interpersonal mixed with the analytical, [in that?] theory about the club women and the movement and how that really became-

KESSLER: I would say yes and no. It's definitely had a huge impact on my personal interests, and the way that I engage with the world and, you know, politics and organizing and that kind of — in that way, yes. Absolutely. I haven't really translated that into professional interests or work, but I'm certainly still very politically engaged and politically active and consider myself somebody who works hard to be an ally, to confront when I see inequities and racism. I mean, that's personally very important to me. I've lived in a number of different parts of the country since graduating, but I'm back in my hometown of Milwaukee and have been since 2008, and I live in the city. My children go to public schools. I feel like those kinds of values are still very central to who I am and how I engage with the world.

YORK: So what have you done post-Smith? What is your career, your life like? (laughs)

KESSLER: There was definitely not a clear path. (laughs) It's kind of gone like this. Or maybe more — I thought, at Smith, that I wanted to stay doing sort of these human services kinds of work, and my first couple of jobs out of Smith, I actually went back and worked at Reed in residence life, and finally had the vocabulary to explain what it was that did not work for me, and that did not work for me. Then I went to law school, and I practiced for about 12 years, I think, primarily privacy and First Amendment issues, and then ended up in house at Earth Link, the internet service provider, back when we used to have dial up internet, back in the old days. And in

2008 when that ride really ended, (laughs) and the whole economy collapsed on top of it, I had a toddler and was seven-and-a-half months pregnant when Earth Link let me go. It sounds so horrible to say it that way, and it was horrible, but they actually handled it very compassionately, and they extended my layoff date to two weeks after my due date and made sure that I was eligible for short-term disability, and they gave me a decent package, and that was the time at which I decided to move back to Milwaukee, where my family still is.

And I really thought that it would be easier to find a job in Milwaukee, where my law license was valid, but that did not turn out to be the case at all. That was a year when large law firms were laying people off and paying the summer associates they'd offer jobs to to not take those jobs, and the economy was just in the tank. And I could not find a job to save my life. I think I earned, in 2009, like \$5,000. It was just exhausting and insane. And I was volunteering some at the school that my children went to, and I was looking for a class because I felt like I was in a little over my head trying to salvage their school library, which had no school librarian. And I discovered that my local university, the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, was just launching a PhD program in Information Policy. And, like, wow. I'm privacy and technology and information — this is perfect. So I enrolled in that, and I was enrolled in that for four years. Academic life was not for me. I've found it really soul killing. It was such a grinding experience, in terms of they really want to sort of break you down and build you back up, and I didn't take well to being broken down. It really, really didn't work for me. So I started really desperately searching for any kind of other job that I might be able to find. And one of the things I had done separate from being in school but while being back in Milwaukee is I had gotten appointed in a very, very, very part time role to a city government board called the Board of Review, which is the appeals board for if you get your property tax valuation on your house and you think it's wrong. You can go appeal the city's assessment of your property to the Board of Review.

And the people who work as city assessors are a very aging group on the whole, in the whole country, and a very white and a very male group, and it seemed like every three months somebody was coming before the Board of Review and saying, "OK, well, we're retiring, so it was great working with you. Goodbye." And after about the fourth time, I was like, You know, I think I get what these people do now in their job, and it doesn't really seem like I could do that job. Like, it's an analytical job. I could do that. So the next time somebody came and asked that, I went on the city website and applied, and now I work for the city assessor's office full time, and it's a complete left turn from anything I've ever done. It's a statistics job, which was a little intimidating. Fortunately, I survived that course in graduate school, and never, ever, ever would have imagined that I would have a math job, but it's a nice mix of the sort of analytical work and then also of going out and asking people nosy questions about when

they bought their house or their condo and nosy questions about their kitchen remodel. So, you know, I feel like it's a radical switch from anything I could have imagined myself doing, and it's not as colorful and exciting as some of the things that I was able to do earlier in my career, but it's a very straightforward job, and it gives me a nice, stable base from which to do what I want to do in terms of my political work and my kids and anything along those lines. Writing. I'm working on a book.

YORK: Oh, really? About what?

KESSLER: On getting unstuck. So sort of a workshop-y, coaching kind of.

YORK: I bet a lot of millennials will buy it.

KESSLER: I hope so.

YORK: So if you could, like, pass on one word of advice or some wisdom, I guess, from this amazing journey that you've been on since Smith, what would you say to a current Smithie who's either just graduated or facing the prospect of going out?

KESSLER: I think the biggest thing is probably it's going to be OK. It probably will not look at all like you thought it was going to look, or maybe there will be moments that look like you thought it was going to look, but mostly it will not look like you thought it was going to look. But it's going to be OK. And, you know, you just have to get up and brush yourself off and try again. And, I mean, reinventing yourself is the name of the game. Almost nobody gets to do what they thought they were going to do when they grow up, at least not in a consistent, long term way, and you can do it. You just have to keep getting up and trying again.

YORK: Great. Thank you.

KESSLER: Thank you. This was a lot of fun. I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 2016.