

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Toni Kestenbaum, Class of 1963

Interviewed by
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 17, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history Toni Kestenbaum, who has attended every reunion since graduation, speaks of the affirming importance of this gathering. She also reflects on the changes she has witnessed over the years, including the diversity of the student body and an openness to sexual identity differences. She attributes her successful career in finance and business to the foundation she received at Smith.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Kestenbaum, Toni. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 17, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Toni Kestenbaum, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2013, with:

TONI KESTENBAUM

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: So my name is Annie Ames and I'm conducting an interview with Toni Trobe Kestenbaum on May 25th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project.

KESTENBAUM: Right.

AMES: Thank you in advance for agreeing to participate with us.

KESTENBAUM: My pleasure.

AMES: Why are you attending reunion this year?

KESTENBAUM: I've attended every reunion since I graduated. I find the Smith women fascinating, affirming – life affirming. My friends do not generally come so I do not come back for, you know, to reunion with people I knew that much in college.

AMES: Absolutely. Why did you choose to attend Smith back during your undergrad career?

KESTENBAUM: No. No, actually and that's quite a while ago, or 50 years ago. I think there was an expectation in my family to go here because my mother went here and my aunts went here, and I resisted that. I don't think we used to say, you know, so you're going to Smith as my uncles were going to Yale, and I said I don't know, I don't know. And what happened was that I was persuaded that a liberal arts education would be really good for me, and I took that sort of on faith. But I was really interested in a music major, and so this was the college with the best music department, it also had required travel abroad and that really interested me. I was scared, but I still chose Smith. I got in – you know, I got in and I said yes.

AMES: Wonderful. Was the fact that it was an all women's college, and still is an all women's college; did that factor into your decision to attend?

KESTENBAUM: Well, it certainly didn't factor in positively, but there weren't a lot of choices for my generation about single sex versus coed schools. I don't mean there weren't choices, there were plenty of big universities, but I wanted a more moderate sized school, and of the private selective colleges very few were coed. So I don't think I thought much about it. But I do – I was aware, I wasn't a hundred percent happy with that. But I had two cousins who were both a year and a year and a half older than I was, both of whom were at Yale at the same, so I didn't feel I'd be isolated.

AMES: Wonderful. What were your expectations for your Smith career as a freshman?

KESTENBAUM: Well, I can tell you my brother who is younger than I said I would be the first one to flunk out during orientation week. So luckily he was younger and you don't listen to younger brothers very much. But I was scared. I didn't know what to expect except that I'd have to work hard, and I am going to a very high powered high school where I was not at the top of my class and where a lot of kids were brighter or more advanced academically than I was. I don't think I knew I was smart, though I was.

So I came here just hoping to hell to be able to get through. I don't think I thought – I knew I had to have an education, it was just a given in my family and I didn't resist it, I mean I knew what was the right thing to do for me. But I mostly came to survive. The thing I didn't expect about Smith, and maybe a question I had for you, was that I had come – I'm a middle class Jewish – I was a middle class Jewish teenager who came from a public school. My class was the first class to be over 50 public, meaning it was 50.5 percent public. So it means that this is the first time that private schools were not at least in the majority, and yet a large percentage of the student body were what I call to the matter born.

You know had gone to boarding school, had gone to private school, they were bluebloods on some level or another and when they weren't I didn't know the difference. A lot of them were planning their coming out parties, and there was a lot of discussion, particularly because of the first house I was in about that, and I felt kind of isolated on that.

AMES: Absolutely. So returning to Smith as an alum for your reunion how do you find Smith changed?

KESTENBAUM: Oh, you know it's – I will answer that question. But the question I thought of was returning to Smith each year how have you found the alumnae have changed, which is a whole other question.

But how Smith has changed, I've been somewhat in touch with how Smith has changed because I am class fundraiser, and so I stayed probably a little more knowledgeable about the school. The major change that I see that excites me, I mean they all interest me, so nobody – nothing turns me off. But the thing that excites me is that the students do not automatically come here. They don't come out of families even like mine who said, you know, well, you know, you'll go to Smith or someplace like it. That from what I understand a much larger percentage of the student body comes from families that didn't have any college graduates, families who just are from a different social background from the general run of the mill Smithie that went to school with me. So that's the first thing.

I'm aware that just because of the interest of the students there's more emphasis, for instance there's interscholastic sports. We had only intramural sports so you only played with other Smith teams for the most part, that I know of. I was not good at sports. There was a negative in the one area I was involved in and that has more to do with society, not so much to do with Smith. And that is that when I was at Smith I was a singer and choral conductor and I conducted the glee club here some of the time, and there were lots of individual men colleges around. So we could sing, and then we could combine with a men's choir and, you know, we could have a social life and we could also sing, you know, SATB music, music for basses and tenors, and you can't really do that anymore and I think that's a loss.

I also think that there has been obviously a growing comfort level with lots of sexual options for student and I'm really thrilled with that. I know that my class had people who had the less common selections in terms of their preferences, and I don't think they felt comfortable revealing them for the most part. I mean I hadn't a clue. My mother knew more about her class than I knew about mine. But so that's another change. The engineering program is a big change obviously, and much more emphasis on science than there had been when I was here. A lesson in some areas I'm sure there is history, to some extent maybe English, art history may be less important, they were absolutely critical to Smith when I was here, I probably think that's not so true now.

But I do like the fact that there are more people who come here, that there are more kids who really, I would hope appreciate, not love Smith necessarily, but appreciate it when they're here.

AMES: Absolutely, that's very well put. So shifting gears a little to talk about your academic career, I know you've mentioned this before, but – or a brief – you've briefly mentioned this before. But what was the process of deciding upon your major?

KESTENBAUM: Oh, no, that's a really good story and it has a lot of long term affect for me, so well not choosing the major, but something along with that, I'm sorry, it wasn't my major. Choosing my major was very simple. I love music. I was scared of subjects that required a lot of reading because I read slowly. I had spoken not English, but Italian as a child and maybe that's the reason, but my reading has always been slow, I'm 71 and still slow. So wasn't going to choose history, I wasn't interested in history anyway, or sociology or whatever the big reading courses were. I liked English so I took the – I took – liked theater, so did more theater literature, it's shorter and easier to read.

But I majored in music because I'd loved music and I'd always wanted to know why I could recognize Beethoven, and I could tell Beethoven from – you know, from Mozart and I could tell Bach. And why were – why did forms change, really – and I must say that's what drove me to music. And I think I'm a bit of analyst type person so I liked – that's why I chose music, also had a very good music department.

AMES: Absolutely.

KESTENBAUM: There's another story about another subject at Smith that made important changes for me. So if you want me to tell it?

AMES: Absolutely. Yes, absolutely please do.

KESTENBAUM: Because that was really interesting. So my sophomore year in college – yes, my sophomore year in college, you know, we're here on the weekend and we don't always have dates, but so I decided I'd go to Wesleyan in Connecticut for the weekend because my cousin was a professor there and I could stay with him and hang out with guys because it was a men's school at the time.

And there was conference run by one of the – I don't know I forget, it wasn't students for – I wasn't a really activist group, but it was a sort of educational group and they had a conference and they had, you know, breakout sessions on various topics. And one topic I went to was called Economics of Taxation and the Schools. And my parent's had been very involved in the public schools at home and had been involved in raising teacher's salaries. My teachers were always very grateful and nice to me because my parents would talk about raising teacher's salaries. But the point is anyway that I went to this thing and I thought, wow, so it's – you

know, its real estate tax that provides money for the schools, it's not income tax. Real estate prices vary in a different way from the cost of education.

And I became fascinated so I came back and decided I really should take economics, and I was year behind to take the sort of introductory course, which was a sophomore course. But I did take that, and then I took some economics senior year, and I also took demographics about population studies, and I loved all this stuff.

One of the professors, Professor Ross, Stanley Ross (phonetic) sort of mentored me. He liked me; he thought I was a good student even though I wasn't an economics major. I went and had dinner at his house and met his wife. And he suggested that I get a PhD in economics. Again, you know, my writing is not so great either, like my reading and I thought, oh, you know, write a dissertation. But he said either that or you should get an MBA. And I thought well I like to work in structured environments, you know, maybe an MBA is a good idea. I had no idea what I was going to do. But I liked math a lot, I missed it while I was in college, but I love math, and so I started to look at grad school, and I could stop there because you probably have other questions about grad school, or should I go on with the story?

So I started, and my first instinct was to go to graduate school and to learn to be a choral conductor and the only school that did that was Berkley in California, and I thought about that. And then I thought maybe I'd like to get an MBA. And then I decided that if I wanted to go on and pursue a degree in music, I could do that easily two – three years from now. You know I could try something else if it didn't work. I have a big background in music I could go on and do that. But if I went on to music now and then had to change my mind and wanted to do an MBA it would look out of place. And so I decided I would try the MBA first and I applied. How I decided to do it this way, I have no idea. But I applied to Columbia and Harvard and I got in both places.

AMES: Not bad.

KESTENBAUM: Which wasn't bad, yeah, and they – and there's some other interesting things. One, Harvard didn't have a program for freshman; they didn't take freshman women into the Harvard Business School. They took them into a program called the Harvard Radcliffe Program in Business Administration, it was a one-year program and then you were done. And if you wanted to do a two program for an MBA you had to apply to Harvard Business School all over again.

Columbia had a certification program they just eliminated, but they did have a two-year program that women could be in and so I applied to – so I got in both. But Harvard gave me no money, oh, and Harvard switched me over to the regular program because that that year. But Harvard gave me no money, and Columbia gave me a fair amount of money to go there. So I went to Columbia. Also Columbia did not require a major paper. So that economics and that professor mentorship meant it a huge amount and it was largely by chance.

AMES: Absolutely. Okay. During your time at Smith were you involved in any extracurriculars aside from, you know, the things that were tied into your major like glee club.

KESTENBAUM: Well, I that wasn't tied to my major, and I would say I was very involved in music and pretty much only music. My involvement though was more than just – first of all you aren't required to sing in the glee club. In fact, my voice teacher didn't want me to because (indiscernible). I like the way I sing whatever.

But I was the – basically I was the assistant to the professor director of the glee club, and so when she didn't feel like conducting rehearsals, which she didn't on Wednesday mornings because they were at 8:00, I did them, and so did them all senior year. I did – we had something called in term, which was a short three week term in –

AMES: No, we still have that. Yeah.

KESTENBAUM: You do. Okay. In January.

AMES: We call – and you call it J term. Yeah.

KESTENBAUM: Okay. And would could not be here, or be here, it didn't matter, you know. But we had to do a project, and my second – the second year it was there. I think it was the second year I did – prepared a concert of music by 14th and 15th century composer named Dunstaple, and I got, you know, I selected the quire and I rehearsed them. And I hand copied (indiscernible). I hand copied all the music out with, the mistakes. I had never known how to copy before. So that's what I did, and I put that together.

I ran – you know, I ran some sight-reading sessions for musicians. I also had played violin. I would say that aside from that I'm not sure I had any activities; that was it.

AMES: All right. Well, it sounds like you were kept very, very busy.

KESTENBAUM: Well, I did two tours, one of Europe and one of Mexico, would have done a third one. So, yeah, those were pretty big.

AMES: All right. You were very busy to say the least. So what was your house community like, to switch gears a little bit?

KESTENBAUM: No, that's a good question. Well, they're all good questions.

AMES: Thank you.

KESTENBAUM: But the first house I went to and this is – it wasn't a tradition. The tradition was you go to a house, you stay there. But I was in this – I was registered at birth. So that means that some member of my family must have been up here in 1941 or something, and they registered me and it didn't cost anything, right. So Toni Trobe was registered at Smith and another classmate was too as it turns out. So I got admitted to Smith and then you get this form, you know, and it says are you coming, and you say yes. And then says – in those days it said send \$25 at this time and, you know. But if you were preregistered that was registration. I just said yes, and sent the card back, and it gave me first choice of housing for whatever freshman were – and, you know, this school has lots of singles.

And I was afraid that I wouldn't get along with roommates that I was too difficult and too insecure, which is probably true and so I wanted a single room. So I got a single room. I did not get a choice of house, and one or the other, and I ended up at Haven House, which is a lovely house, but it had problems and I was only there for a year. The problem was that the – I think the previous housemother had had some kind of trouble, maybe alcoholism. They had gotten a new housemother, but as a result the women who went abroad – junior year abroad and most of them did, didn't come back to the house. So the house had no seniors, it had something like three juniors and then it had all sophomores and freshman who were very immature and most of them were dealing with their coming out parties.

And so all of the discussions at lunch were about the cotillion and who your partner is going to be, and that left me cold, I didn't have a clue. So I just dug into music. So the next year I went into the housing lottery and was able to move to Tyler with a friend from Haven who was also a musician. With the idea that I would live across the street from the music department, which was Sage Hall, and I would practice, which I hadn't done and I didn't really practice very much. But Tyler was a much better house for me. The atmosphere there was, first of all it was more normal. I had a full range of classes that – kindergarten through, you know. It had freshman through seniors and it was a rather intellectual house. So there was less horsing around. There wasn't much of the social stuff going on.

There were a lot more individualists. It was a good house for me.

You know some of the people I connected with, some I didn't, but that was probably as much my thing as anything else. I learned some – We had a classmate who died over a period of time in the house, I mean she had cancer and she stayed at school and eventually she died, and so that was an experience that all of us shared. We had one housemate who was black, who was African, that was not an American, and we had – I think we had in our class two African-American women. So but I would say the housemother was a bit of an idiot, but it was okay.

I also loved singing grace before meals; you can imagine how different that is. The other thing that's different today is the eating patterns here in the home that has very much changed. I did like the house system, and I didn't have much money so I didn't go out to eat. And every time they put liver up, you know, it was on the menu for the evening there would be this mass exodus and I would eat the liver.

AMES: Yeah.

KESTENBAUM: Yeah.

AMES: All right. Excellent. So moving onto the social aspect, the social world of Smith during your time there, what was the dating culture like for you?

KESTENBAUM: Well, first of all you have to know the restrictions, and we were – we had a pridal (phonetic) hours they're called, so I think at 1:00 maybe Saturday maybe we had to be in, or maybe 12:30, and then it was an hour earlier on Friday, right, and then the rest of the week it was 10:30 you had to be in the house, doors locked, you know, that was it.

I didn't – you know, I tended to accept rules even though I'm a pretty independent sort, but they seemed reasonable enough. When you went – when you dated locally you couldn't stay overnight anywhere. So that meant your date ended at whatever the pridal hour was and that was limiting. So you tended to go away if you possibly could anywhere outside of, I think it was 30 or 60 miles and then you could stay overnight there. That didn't mean necessarily you're sleeping with anybody, it just meant that you could stay out later.

So I think the draw back, one of the reasons I don't know a lot of my class, which is true with all Smithies is that we spend our weekends away from campus, you know, we were mostly somewhere else. But my dating was never satisfactory to me. I was dropped more by men than I dropped them. My cousin, well particularly my older of the two cousin at Yale would help. He came up and he taught me to drink and taught – we tried

different drinks and see what I could handle. And he came up a number of Saturdays for my first semester and did that with me, and I went to Yale and hung out with him and my cousin at Wesleyan. But I would say that I was never – I was never – I wanted to date, I wanted guys to like me, but I wasn't that (indiscernible) wasn't very easy. And the restrictions made it hard, and you didn't have a car.

And the other thing is guys would drive from someplace, they drove quite a ways. If you put six guys in a car, right, you could have six dates, but you couldn't all go in the car anywhere. So you had to have three guys in the car and three dates and then you could. It wasn't so bad for us, but Mount Holyoke women were in a dry town with no liquor and so they definitely had to be driven out of town in order to do anything they wanted to do, and so that meant three men in a car. So I mean, you know, the weekends were sometimes here. There was also a very good 60mm film thing on Sundays that I really liked, and so there were things to do. And also I studied a lot.

AMES: Yes, absolutely. All right, well this interview unfortunately has to come to a close as we are jam-packed for the rest of the afternoon. But I'd love to ask you a few closing questions with about the five minutes we have left.

KESTENBAUM: Yeah, could I just add one or two quick things?

AMES: Sure, absolutely.

KESTENBAUM: Okay. I did go to business school; I found it an adjustment from being all women to being all men basically. The men did not like me in class, and when I graduated – I mean not all did. Some professors loved us. But when I got out it was also – this is sort of for posterity, it was also a world where, particularly in my field in finance there just weren't women.

And so when they were interviewing you sometimes they were curious to see how this would work and sometimes they were just plain resistant, and it didn't give me a huge amount of trouble, it probably should have. But I didn't have the sense that they were wrong, I just had the sense they wrong in my case. So and Smith gave me some of that, they gave me that sense that I should be able. Combined with my parents who also felt I should go to law school or business school and they were very supportive. So I just wanted to add that because it was part of my Smith experience that enabled me to do all that stuff.

AMES: Absolutely and thank you so much for sharing that. All right, let's see here. What difference has your Smith education made?

KESTENBAUM: Oh, I am a really good thinker, and I have a sense – and I don't mean I'm brilliant. I have a sense that if you think hard enough or look hard enough you can solve a problem and that's partly because I'm a positive person. But it's also because nothing seemed – you were always given the sense that you could get the tools or figure out a way to solve – to figure something out, and that has done terrific good for me.

Also I had gotten a lot of this from my mother who was a Smithie. But that no one had said to me really a woman can't do such and such. My mother went to grad school after she was at Smith during the depression and so, you know, I didn't get that, but Smith reinforced that. So I think those were the two primary things. Yeah.

AMES: Excellent. All right, and for my last question for you today, as an alumni who has gone through Smith, and had a set of fantastically wonderful experiences base on what you told me, do you have any advice for future and current Smithies?

KESTENBAUM: I do because of something said a lot recently. I want to back people off the idea of following their passion. I don't mean they shouldn't be passionate about things. But following your passion usually means that you should do what your – what you really love to do most in the world, and I say you should do that, but it may not be the right – completely right guidance for a vocation. So you may love to be an artist, and maybe because I wasn't going to be an artist it didn't matter. But you may love to be an artist, you should do art. If you can manage to teach art or do art and make a living, that's fine. But you shouldn't count, and particularly because we're still women, shouldn't count on being able to make that a sole source of your support. So yeah, that's not what people tell – at graduation follow your passion, but I'm not sure that's a hundred percent correct.

AMES: Absolutely, wonder. Well, thank you so much and we appreciate you coming in and talk with us.

KESTENBAUM: It was a pleasure really.

AMES: This project wouldn't be possible with out the alums contributions, so thank you.

KESTENBAUM: Oh, yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.