

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Sheryl King, Class of 1971*

Interviewed by  
Olivia Mandica-Hart, Class of 2011

May 20, 2011

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Sheryl King discusses what it was like being Southern at Smith during the late 1960s/early 70s, the overall campus atmosphere (particularly in regards to activism and feminism), and her experiences after Smith.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Alyssa Christian 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:** King, Sheryl. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sheryl King, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** King, Sheryl. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sheryl King, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 20, 2011, with:

SHERYL KING

by: OLIVIA MANDICA-HART  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

MANDICA-HART: This is Olivia Mandica-Hart and Sheryl King, class of 1971. The date is May 20, 2011, and we are in the Alumnae Gymnasium at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. So, just to start off: why did you choose to come to Smith?

KING: I loved learning, and I was very frustrated in my high school with feeling marginalized, because I was so interested in academics, and I felt that that was the entire extent of anyone's perception of me, and I wanted to be somewhere where I could feel like a woman and a student at the same time. And, clearly, a women's college offered that opportunity, and I had a friend at Dartmouth, who suggested that I look at Seven Sister schools and it just really appealed to me.

MANDICA-HART: Where are you from originally?

KING: I was born and grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and when I came for the first day of my freshman year, it was the first time I'd set foot on campus.

MANDICA-HART: And what was that like?

KING: It was wonderful. I just felt happy, from the moment we touched down at Bradley Field in Connecticut. And I think I'd always fantasized about New England from seeing New England movies and I'm just very, very happy to be here.

MANDICA-HART: Did you feel as though the atmosphere was different from back home?

KING: Well, I was in a unique position, because I arrived in the fall of '67, and protests against the Vietnam War were blossoming all the time, and because I was from the South, people assumed that I was conservative, probably pro-war, and racist. But, in fact, I was liberal, I was anti-war, and I was not a racist. Some people sort of assumed those things about me. At the same time, when I went home to Tennessee during breaks, people there assumed that I was probably involved in the Columbia uprising, because after all, I went to school "up North." And they

assumed that something taking place in New York City I was very likely a part of. So, at the beginning, the first year was a little difficult. People would expect me to sign petitions against the war, addressed to the President of the United States using what seemed to me to be rude language, and I wasn't ready to do that. But, I was in Sessions, which was a small house and very politically active, and eventually I got involved with the student rights' movement, which people in Sessions and I think Haven were very active in. We actually went to different houses and spoke at house meetings, talking about changes—

GEIS: Can you look at Olivia?

KING: Oh, I'm sorry—talking about changes that we thought should take place in the system. At that point, everyone had to sign in and sign out if they were going to Green Street or downtown, and there were a lot of limits that we thought were unnecessary. And I have always remembered this, because one of the houses that I went to, we each got up and said our little piece, presenting what we thought should happen, and I said something like, "We feel like these are just simple rights that we should have." And one of the girls, who was also a member of the class of '71, said, "Who says we have rights?" And that just kind of stopped me, in terms of—there was really a wide variety of attitudes on campus, but obviously the more liberal voices tended to be the louder voices.

MANDICA-HART: So, campus atmosphere seemed sort of turbulent at the time—

KING: Well, I don't think "turbulent" is the right word for me. I think it was challenging, in some respects, but people had different perspectives. But I thought that was very exciting, because people were actually trying to do things, and clearly Vietnam was so important, and I think it was inspiring more than turbulent.

MANDICA-HART: Do you remember the student strike of 1970? Do you have any reactions to that?

KING: I think people were very divided in terms of—first of all, here are 2,000 women who are pretty much here because they're very committed to learning, and you're saying there's something you should put ahead of learning, and we should put our academic careers in a little bit of jeopardy to give up things and to turn our attention to something else. So I think that was difficult, and there are people who just get their heads down and just went about their usual responsibilities.

MANDICA-HART: What was the dialogue around feminism on campus at the time? Was that part of the dialogue?

KING: Very much. That was related to the student rights' activities that I was mentioning earlier. It was a very crucial time and, I think, being at

Smith, having Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem as alums gave the whole movement sort of a special resonance here. We had speakers coming on campus. Once again, my nature—I'm a liberal, but I'm not a radical. Some of the speakers who came were way beyond anything I was interested in hearing at that time, but—I never quite understood that thing about the fish and the bicycle. That always seemed a little odd to me. But you know what I'm saying?

MANDICA-HART: Yes.

KING: Yeah. The famous quote. But all the inequities were very important to me because—one of the reasons I came here was because I felt that being in a co-ed high school, there were many inequities, and I always felt that it was very important that women who had equal capabilities be given equal opportunities.

MANDICA-HART: Do you feel like things at Smith changed between the time you arrived as a freshman and when you left in '61?

KING: '71.

MANDICA-HART: '71. Sorry. Excuse me.

KING: I think a lot of things had begun but had not yet been accomplished. The war was still going on. Obviously women today are still fighting to get equal pay for equal work. But I think I felt proud of what had been accomplished, and I was never on the front lines protesting the war, but I was definitely opposed to it and eternally mystified that it lasted as long as it did. By the time I graduated, I think I was getting more focused on my personal future, in terms of graduate school. And, I think, everybody took something different from the experience. I know I had a freshman year roommate who moved out of Sessions, and I think that it was really because it was such a political house, and there were some girls who were pretty radical and demanding. And she was a personally conservative girl, and she actually ended up going into the military after she graduated from Smith. But I think it's hard to say it was this way or it was that way, because there was a lot of diversity.

MANDICA-HART: It seems like quite a spectrum of—what expectations did you have for yourself when you graduated?

KING: Well, I had—I thought that I would finish graduate school, and eventually become a college professor, but I did not do that.

MANDICA-HART: And was that consistent with what your parents wanted for you?

KING: My parents didn't really have any particular expectations. I was the first person to go to college in my family, and being a girl, they didn't really

expect me to have a career or push me in one way or another. They were generous in paying for my Smith education, and they knew how much I loved school and that was sort of a logical extension to them of that.

MANDICA-HART: So, what did you study when you were at Smith?

KING: I was a Psychology major. I studied Social Psychology.

MANDICA-HART: So, where did life lead you after Smith?

KING: Well, I have had many different periods in my life. I actually lived for a time as a—I was for a time a faculty wife at a small liberal arts college, and I got—I should say, I had gotten disenchanted with graduate school, with the program that I was in and I stopped doing that. Got married, moved away. And during the time that I was doing that, I did a little bit of assistant teaching in the Psych department there, but mostly was a housewife. But I did—a little bit elaborately—we had a very large vegetable garden, and I grew my tomatoes and made my own ketchup and blueberries and currants and pears and apples, and all sorts of crops. So that was that phase. And then eventually that phase ended, and the marriage ended, and I moved back to New England, which I had missed very much, and started a business doing primarily writing for businesses, originally Public Relations, and then I moved into advertising. And I had my own business working as a sole proprietor. And then eventually, through business organization, met my second husband, and eventually the two of us joined our business together. And when we got married, we eventually adopted four children. And so, the last 16 years of my life, I've been mostly involved with raising them.

MANDICA-HART: Do you feel as though Smith had an impact on your later years, your time after your graduation?

KING: Yes. A lot of the things that I've done I don't feel that I could've done if I hadn't been here. Although I never studied Business here, and I never studied Business Writing, I had a very good grounding in a lot of things, which allowed me to move into that area. And I also feel that it gave me enough confidence to tackle things that I would've once been too shy or uncertain to try. I've written poetry and done readings and had a few poems published, and all those are small things, but they're meaningful to me.

MANDICA-HART: And you said you came here because you wanted to be in a place that believed in women's education and you feel as though Smith lived up to that expectation? So—

KING: Yes.

MANDICA-HART: Do you still believe that— I'm sorry.

KING: No, I was going to say— I was thinking today that there were a few professors who definitely fell short of the mark, that I ran across when I was here. But I had wonderful teachers here, overwhelmingly, and people who were very creative and motivating. And I think it's very rare to have a institution of higher learning where undergraduates can work so closely with a professor. And that was tremendously positive for me.

MANDICA-HART: Do you still believe that single-sex education is important?

KING: I think it's hard for me to answer the question. From my perspective, I believe that it is, but I can't— I haven't been in a co-ed high school for 44 years, so I don't know how things might have improved. And, clearly, I was never in a co-ed university, but I felt that it was absolutely necessary then, and it still seems like a very good idea to me, let me put it that way.

MANDICA-HART: Would you encourage your children to attend Smith?

KING: None of my children would have. I have two boys and two girls, and my daughters would not have been suited for Smith. And I have a granddaughter. I would encourage her to go. And I have encouraged nieces and I've worked—it hasn't been for a number of years, but I had worked with Smith clubs and talked to potential applicants and encouraged them. I still think it's— from all that I know as, now, an outsider, all these many years, it still seems like a fabulous program. I think it's a beautiful setting. I think it's a very peaceful place to be able to study and progress.

MANDICA-HART: If you could describe a typical Smith student when you were here— I know that's sort of a difficult question, and maybe there wasn't one. Is there anything that comes to mind?

KING: Well I think— I'll put it this way, one of the things that attracted me to Smith was going to a Smith club meeting in Memphis, Tennessee and seeing all these women, some of whom were the mothers of people I went to high school with, who were, at that point, in their 40's, and just so energetic and so interesting and so positive. And that made me want to go. Now, I'm at reunion and I'm seeing that—even though we're all around 60 now, I'm seeing that same kind of intensity and enthusiasm, and I think that's wonderful. And I think, although we were dealing with a lot of heavy things, in the period of time that I was here as a student, I think everybody had that intensity and that energy. Some people had it carefully funneled into academics, and some people took a broader worldview.

MANDICA-HART: Do you have an image of what the current Smith student looks like?

KING: You know, I haven't met many. I spoke to an Ada Comstock Scholar today, and I think it was clear that she had the same kind of enthusiasm for what she's studying, that people did when I was here. I hope that that's true of all the undergraduates.

MANDICA-HART: And do you have any advice for current and future generations of students?

KING: Yes. And something you would probably agree with as an archivist—I would encourage them to keep their calendars, and write journals, even the simple things that you did. It's really amazing, when you look back, how things change over ten or 20 or 30 or 40 years. And things that used to be on the tip of your tongue may not any longer be on the tip of your tongue, for your memories. So I think it's really nice to have a record of some of the things that happened. I wish I had more detail like that.

GEIS: That's great. I just had one quick question, regarding—you had talked about wanting to become a professor when you were finishing up here. That was your expectation. Is that something that you're—do you feel like you still resonate with that? Is it something that you regret, or is it something that—your life went on a path that was as fulfilling or different, or anything that you could talk about regarding—

KING: Well, I think part of it is that—I think I wanted that because I was so inspired by people here and I think, also in some ways, I've never known anything except school that was my major focus. So I think I wanted to sort of extend that as long as possible. But I eventually fell into an opportunity working with a non-profit, Historic House Museum, where I had an opportunity to work with the docents developing scripts and doing public relations. And I really, really liked it. So when I then made my big move from Pennsylvania back to New England, that's the Business course that I went in—is doing Public Relations, and eventually into advertising and direct marketing. So it's been sort of an organic process. It's not exactly been a straight course, and then when you have children, at the beginning, you never know exactly all the things you'll be called on to do. And that's been a very sort of all-consuming part of my life.

MANDICA-HART: Is there anything else you wanted to share?

KING: Well, I was just trying to think. No, I think that's pretty much it. I think it's nice that you guys are doing this.

GEIS: Thank you for—



MANDICA-HART: Thank you.

KING: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Alyssa Christian, July 25, 2011.*